EGYPTIAN REVOLUTION THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract

One of the most important layers of the popular struggle from a totalitarian regime towards a democratic political system depends on the freedom of expression and the responsibility of delivering credible information. In contrast with traditional media, digital media with its sum of components allows an uncontrolled flow of information, lacking hierarchy and making collective action easier. Dominated by a series of anti-governmental protests, starting from late 2010, numerous regimes from Middle East and the North Africa region misjudged the importance of social media in this regard. Thus, using this specific mass information tool in the context of a collective popular action, it becomes a vehicle for breaking the monopoly of the use of information, knowledge and expertise. Through a series of qualitative and longitudinal analysis, using the case study of community building before the Egyptian uprising and the ousting of President Hosni Mubarak, this paper aims to offer the proper context regarding the impact of social media on the political developments.

Keywords: *communication, Egypt, revolution, social media.*

1. INTRODUCTION

W. Russell Neuman argued that we are witnessing the evolution of a universal network of audio, video and electronic text that will clear both the distinction between interpersonal and mass communication and the one between the public and private one (NEUMAN, 2011).

If not long ago, traditional media had the monopoly of informing the public, this monopoly was broken by the emergence of the Internet and the development of other technologies: cameras, high performance mobile phones with multiple multimedia applications, phablets, tables and other types of recording devices. Due to the relatively low price, this technology becomes accessible to almost anyone and can be easily used, both to create content or to distribute and consume. Moreover, through social networking, community building emerges through a powerful tool, ensuring cooperation and social action of, in some extent, related individuals or groups. In this context, I refer to the definition of social media offered by Kaplan and Haenlein in which they have encapsulated "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content" (KAPLAN & HAENLEIN, 2010). Thus, a social media platform consists of a network of relationships between users which are connected through various degrees of common interests, in order to maintain the shortest paths to others without reporting to a higher authority.

The "protestor" was chosen the *Person of the Year* by the editors of the 2011 Times weekly magazine, who decided to pay tribute to all 2011 protesters who invaded the streets of cities in many countries.

The editors argue their choice judging by the potential of capturing and highlighting a world sentiment – "the natural continuation of politics by other means." (ANDERSEN, 2011). One of the most important characteristics that were used to shape the profile of the global protester was the ability to travel freely through the social media vehicle. Changing the course of history or at least deviating it underlines a capacity of these types of networks, one of the main pillars of the protester, to spread awareness and reconfigure closed societies, by propagating the revolutionary message capable of configuring the profile of the global revolution.

Professor Tiberiu BRĂILEAN, in his study (apud Hume, 1955) picked up a defining quote in this regard that underlines that although people are largely driven by interest, however, this interest and all other human things are governed entirely by opinion.

In the last decade, the interest of activists and researchers in the new ways of communication has increased, with the hope that they will revolutionize how people relate to governance.

Many of them predicted that these forms of new media will force authoritarian government regimes to take more account of the wishes of the population they represent, taking into account that inside social media platforms the relationship between a potential consumer and the content producer content is often interchanged, offering the circumstances of information exchange, identifying users with similar interests (BRĂILEAN, 2004).

2. PREMISES OF CHANGE IN EGYPT - 2011

The uprising in Egypt at the beginning of 2011 faithfully reflected a political reality of the Middle East. If Tunisia was the first country to have witnessed a revolution starting from late 2010, in Egypt a strong online activity on social media platforms has also been increasing in that direction.

It is not only the sole popular uprising against the regime's changes in that particular region, but also an essential tool in shaping a specific pattern of thought and it could be identified as common in terms of modus operandi. Moreover, the effects were dominoes, serving as an example for other dictatorial-governed societies in the area.

Although there have been many attempts and movements over the years to overthrow the Hosni Mubarak regime, it was only in 2011 that this plan took shape. A relevant reason in this case is the fact that the technological development of the information domain raised a dominant consequence of globalization. Thus, among the factors that led to this revolution - the growing dissatisfaction of the people, the poor management of state resources, and the systematic oppression of the party in power against the opposition, as well as ordinary people and so on, the development of new ways of communicating, the importance of the online environment in Egypt can be added, all of which have roots at the level of a closed society. In contrast, the open society, is described by Soros as "freedom and the absence of repression (...)

The meaning of open society is obvious to those who lived in a closed society." (SOROS, 2007).

In a dictatorial society, Egyptian citizens turned to the only environment in which they could talk, consult and organize without being persecuted - at least in the first instance. Thus, communities were set up to draw attention to the rights that are being violated, the system they are part of and the abuses they suffer. International cooperation could be reached much faster in finding these facts through online publications, particularly those relating to serious violations of human rights.

Social networks had an important contribution and this aspect should not be disregarded. On the other hand, it should not be considered the main reason for the success of this particular revolution. It has to be perceived as a factor inside a systemic variable, along with many other social, technological or political elements that contributed to a whole, which led to a political shift. It is also possible to observe the profoundly human need of those oppressed by the authoritarian regime to group themselves into communities in order to make a stringent change. Novelty consists only in their ability to organize themselves in these communities through online social networks.

In the years before the uprising, the Egyptian government largely ignored the online activities of dissidents and focused on the rather physical manifestations of the opposition. With few exceptions, there was almost no censorship or webpage blocking in Egypt. Instead of blocking sites, the government turned to other repressive methods: arresting journalists and bloggers, harassing family members or friends. In 2009 the Committee to Protect Journalists listed Egypt as one of the 10 worst countries for bloggers because of the tendency to arrest critics.

Such activities were emphasized in numerous reports published by NGO's that defend human rights:

> Freedom of the press is restricted in law and in practice. The state dominates the broadcast media and exercises influence over all privately-owned publications through its monopoly on printing and distribution. The

three leading daily newspapers are state controlled, and their editors are appointed by the president. Foreign publications and Egyptian publications registered abroad are subject to direct government censorship. Foreign journalists are sometimes harassed or expelled. In October 2009, authorities at Cairo airport prevented Swedish freelance reporter and blogger Per Bjorklund, who often reported on Egypt's labour movement, from entering the country. […] The New York–based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) has documented the detentions of several bloggers, including that of Dia Gad, who was detained for weeks without charge in February 2009 over his critical reporting on the situation at Egypt's border with the Gaza Strip. A number of previously arrested bloggers remained in detention at year's end. (FREEDOM HOUSE, 2010)

Therefore, the new media started playing a critical role in this extended context of building a political consensus, coordinating concrete actions aimed at creating links with the human rights coalitions, aiming at putting pressure on the regime.

The shift towards participative media and social networks drew the value and influence from the active participation of several users.

3. SOCIAL MEDIA DEVELOPMENTS – THE CITIZEN IS THE CHANNEL

A longitudinal study on the developments in Egypt underlines various moments in which social media had managed to build a community united under the same interests and approach towards the ruling power.

In Egypt, matters escalated starting from the same triggering event like in Tunisia. When the Egyptian police beat 28-year old Khaled Said to death, on June 6, 2010, for posting a drug activity of several law enforcement officers on YouTube, the premises for social media message multiplication were layer.

On June 10, 2010, four days after the death of Khaled Said, Wael Ghonim, Google marketing executive, Internet activist and computer engineer, created the Facebook page in Arabic – "We are all Khaled Saeed".

Half a year later, the account already had about 40 updates with photos, messages, newspaper articles, videos, and more. On February 15 this year, the page had 820,000 likes. An English page was created one month later by an anonymous administrator from the original page in order to make the situation of the Egyptians known internationally. The video for which the young man was supposed to have been killed, in which the police had illegal drugs - was made public (PRESTON, 2011).

Wael Ghonim released the video on YouTube on June 10, 2010, which demonstrated the brutality of Egyptian police forces, accompanied by texts on the Facebook page. The video attracted more than 20,000 views. A second video, which gathered over 55,000 views, can no longer be viewed today because of repeated YouTube warnings as "offensive" or "inappropriate". The Facebook page of this case began an anti-campaign, focused on police brutality and it widely grew into a call for the establishment of democracy in Egypt.

It is relatively hard to imagine whether these social media actions in relation with the revolution would have had the same development in the absence of the initial demarche of Wael Ghonim.

We can observe that the same pattern was the subject of another uprising which started in Iran in 2009, where a 26-year-old girl, Neda Agha-Soltan, was shot dead in the heart by the Iranian government's security forces while taking part in the protests in Tehran on defrauding presidential elections at the re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The 40-second movie, shot by another protest participant, capturing the last moments of the young woman's life, was then posted on YouTube, blogs, and social networks. The brutal way in which the young woman, whose first name means "voice" in Arabic, lost her life, became a symbol for the struggle of the Iranian people for freedom; tribute accounts were created on Twitter and Facebook in its name, where people could leave messages.

In Egypt, before the days of the protests, a number of 32,000 Facebook groups and 14,000

Facebook pages were created; after a 5-day blackout, on the day Internet connection was restored in Egypt, social media platforms, including Facebook, saw its largest number of active users ever in the nation (apud Ali, 2011, pp. 186-187). The first street riots in cities across the country were reported on January 25, 2011. In contrast with the demonstrations in the Tahrir Square in Cairo, Faheem notes that one of the two state-owned television stations had its cameras focused elsewhere, capturing the steady flow of traffic on a Cairo bridge (FAHEEM, 2011).

After the protesters' online activity became visible, the government made an unprecedented ruling in the history of Internet, namely that it had stopped access to any webpage in the country. China, Iran, or Tunisia and other countries involved in recent years in riots or revolutions are known to have blocked access to media websites or online press agencies, but by comparison, their position was not as radical as Egypt's.

The initial phase constituted blocking access to social networks two days after the start of the revolution, demonstrating the obvious role they played in organizing the demonstrations and facilitating communication. Facebook and Twitter were the first locked sites, along with all instant messaging applications for mobile phones and smartphones. After this measure, all services were banned on January 28, leaving Egyptians unable to communicate, inform, use websites or services, send emails, or use other services such as Skype. Arthur reported that the voice-to-tweet software provided by Google and Twitter allowed citizens to send news from Egypt despite the Internet blackout (ARTHUR, 2011).

The events that led to the ousting of President Hosni Mubarak in Egypt reflect the different roles of social media, Facebook beings useful for organizing events and reaching high levels of engagement, Twitter aiming to amplify, giving people the opportunity to share information and comment on it and Google providing off-line communication solutions.

3. CONCLUSIONS

Although they cannot replace traditional journalism, social media are an important source of information when classic channels are censored or when the latter are virtually impossible to cover all aspects. As a method of alternative information, and as a viable option of distribution and dissemination of information, knowledge and expertise of all kinds, there is a systematic use of a wide range of interactive communication processes and methods, all through the social form variable.

People are more connected than ever and virtually they are part of the same community. The monopolization of information by autocratic and dictatorial ruling regimes in order to preserve power, as it was the case in Egypt, shows the tendency to control the sources of information and means of communication.

During the events in Egypt, in early 2011, social networks had numerous contributions, helping Egyptian citizens to communicate with each other, to communicate with the rest of the world and helped the rest of the world communicate with both Egyptians and their supporters who could be found in various locations (ALAIMO, 2015).

While the national authority's strategy was keen especially in arresting journalists or sending them home, controlling newspapers and TV stations, ordinary people who took part in protests were able to send updates, photos and videos in real time using Internet resources, networks and social platforms. Even when the Internet service was shut down, Egyptian citizens found off-line ways of communication provided by the existing social media platforms.

Encapsulating an initial story that showed a high level of empathy among the population, - Khaled Said's death - the initiator of the Facebook page, Wael Ghonim, triggered the means of political change through social media, presenting an alternative way of seeing social developments, reflecting the emergence of a popular awareness and instrumentalizing it towards mass protests. Despite the Egyptian government's extensive attempts to censure online space, new media channels have proven to be more difficult to control than traditional ones. In times where the freedom of expression and the freedom of the press could not be legally exercised, social media platforms came to fill the gap, an opportunity for people to express themselves freely, to present to the world the injustices and abuses of the ruling power and

to some extent, to offer the premises for a socio-political change.

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