

## **Dynamics of social media, politics and public policy in the Arab World**

By

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The proliferation of social media, such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, presents new, powerful communication tools capable of influencing political opinions and policy decisions. Mainstream news media attempt to document the scale and speed of the social media revolution with little systematic analysis of its outcomes and effects. The breathtaking growth of the phenomenon and the sheer number of users are highly impressive, but less interesting for policy purposes than are the consequences of the medium on politics and public affairs.

Mainstream media analysts suggest that the upstart social media have influence over politics and policy (Gross, 2011; Shane, 2011). In this paper social media are defined and their public affairs functions are examined drawing on empirical evidence. Social concepts, decision processes and developmental constructs are measured against the medium's current and possible future uses in public affairs in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

Social media are tools for social interaction, using highly accessible and scalable communication techniques -- such as web-based, mobile technologies -- to turn communication into interactive dialogue. Scholars will ascertain more about how design features of particular social media (such as Twitter's 140-character limit per message) encourage -- or alternately discourage -- political speech and foster open and inclusive -

- or alternatively, closed and restrictive -- public discourse. Our objective is to develop a framework for social media in MENA public affairs into which these more specific research questions may be rooted.

Although “social media” and “social network” are used interchangeably, this presentation should not be confused with social network analysis (see, for example, Wasserman & Faust, 1994) which develops models of relationships among groups of individuals and pathways of information flow. This is an exploration of the values and strategies of those who generate and use social media content for political and public policy purposes in the Arab World.

### **Impact on politics and policy**

There is a sense of community among users of social media. A reader of an article at Al Jazeera mobile is not necessarily part of a network involving other of the channel’s website visitors; if the reader posts a comment about the article on Al Jazeera’s blog (or on another blog or on the microblogging platform Twitter), he or she has entered an electronic community where user opinions and values are shared.

Values and opinions are shaped and shared because digital posts spawn commentary, sway views and spur action. Between 2005 and 2011, Internet access in the Middle East and North Africa expanded from 13 percent to 40 percent of the population. Blogging became a popular form of political activism and mobilization as it grew in popularity from 2005 onwards as new social media platforms emerged. Social media use in the region expanded exponentially with the introduction of Twitter and Facebook in 2007, which Egyptians immediately adapted for political activism. By the time the January 2011 uprisings took place, Facebook pages and Twitter hashtags were

an integral part of any political protest. There were then more than 16.8 million Facebook accounts in the region representing about 13 percent of the population, and more than 40,000 Twitter users, of which Egyptians accounted for about half (*Arabic Knowledge@Wharton*, 2011).

Even so, because the percentages of the total population online remained relatively small in the Arab world, analysts and observers often discounted the importance of blogging and online social networking without acknowledging that official connectivity figures tend to discount the impact of public access points or pirated connections, while simultaneously ignoring the fact that youth, the middle class and the politically active were highly represented. Mobile phones, on the other hand, were ubiquitous, with regional penetration rates surpassing 100 percent by late 2008. When coupled with Twitter, Flickr and YouTube, these became the most powerful tools for political activism, yet were largely outside the censorial regimes that governed the Internet (Boughelaf, 2011).

Some 75% of Facebook users in the Arab world are youth between the ages of 15 and 29. This group feels particularly empowered by the social media platform to engage in political activism. But there is a ‘virtual’ gender gap. Globally, it is about a 1:1 ratio between the sexes on Facebook, whereas in the Arab world it is closer to a 2:1 ratio in favor of men (*Arab Social Media Report*, 2010). This discrepancy appears to reflect the more limited educational and employment opportunities and political participation for women in the region (*Arab Social Media Report*, 2012).

There are also indications of increasingly important public policy functions performed by social media. For example, although the role of social media is much

lower in Syria's protest actions than countries like Tunisia or Egypt, individuals have risked their lives to use cell phones and small cameras to film atrocities of President Bashar Al-Assad's crackdown on the protesters and upload these images to Facebook or YouTube, fanning international pressure on Assad to back down. In response Assad has used propagandist websites like [Bashar al-Assad](#) and social media to assert that protest videos are bogus and that he has hundreds of thousands of loyal supporters. Although only 15% of Syrians are online, activists claim that without social media, the Syrian revolution would have been successfully repressed at an early stage and notes that the government complains more about the media than the protests (*Social Capital Blog*, 2012).

If maturity for social media platforms is reached once these technologies begin influencing politics and public policy, then tools like Twitter, Facebook and YouTube are growing up fast. None of these portals were specifically designed for collecting or disseminating information on politics or public affairs. But much as the Internet's current functions exceed the purposes it was originally designed for, social media -- even Twitter's deliberately cramped messaging platform -- are increasingly important to public communication.

MENA cyber-activists are particularly shrewd at using digital media tools, the most important being their mobile phones, to build networks with transnational advocacy organizations and journalists around the world. Twitterers are especially likely to connect with media, perhaps explaining the fact that most users tweet in English even though the Arabic platform became available in 2009. A survey that year found nearly

60 percent of respondents said they interact most often with media and journalists, coming in just after friends at 70 percent (*Arabic Knowledge@Wharton*, 2011).

These new, “open” communication channels -- accessible by virtually anyone with an iPhone, smartphone, or dial-up or high-speed modem -- appear to pose a challenge to official and journalistic channels of communication. The traditional purveyors of domestic and international news and of official policy communication were comparatively few and were professionals as opposed to the seemingly limitless field of potential contributors to social networks.

But we are less interested in examining various elements of the act of communication than in viewing it as a whole in relation to the entire social process. Such an approach requires attention to the probable outcomes and effects of social media in the Arab world. Further, it requires a careful interpretation of what precisely is revolutionary in the social media revolution (Carvin, 2009). The social and decision processes are our lenses, starting with the social process.

### **Social process**

Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and various i-reporter sites reduce the significance and influence of professional journalists and government officials. An i-reporter can post messages to blogs, Facebook and other social media platforms without interference from editors or censors. Government officials who tweet may have their messages modified by “followers” who send their own tailored version of the tweet to a social network. Such transmissions are altering the balance between centralized, top-down government systems and smaller, more distributed processes capable of faster, more agile adaption to rapidly shifting conditions.

For public policy purposes it does not matter whether government officials, journalists and other communicators remain relevant as conventional occupational categories. The obsolescence of particular jobs is immaterial. In fact, the functions performed by these jobs continue to be executed by other actors or institutions. What counts is how systems of communication, and the actors who participate in them, perform in functional terms and to what effect.

As for young people's ascendance through their use of social media, there are synergistic possibilities inherent in youth and the communication revolution. The millennial generation appears to have the potential for collective action on the massive scale necessary to break down many debilitating perspectives and operating arrangements, including autocratic regimes in the Arab world. They are entering into positions of power and using social media for instrumental purposes related to power. Now and in the years ahead, policy analysts might explore how a younger, socially networked generation justifies its accumulation and application of power, including coercive power.

Whether policymakers who use social media are young or old, decisions they make about the uses of the medium have consequences for political power and pro-democratic regime change in the Middle East and North Africa. We are in the early stages of social media and the cat-and-mouse interplay between dissidents and despots. In second-generation revolutions, the state is becoming more sophisticated about Internet controls, making it look like the Internet is active, but slowing speeds dramatically so video is ineffective or blocking certain words from appearing on trending lists or in search queries. Repressive governments have learned from Egypt's inept full-

frontal blocking of the Internet. Regarding the use of misinformation, Muammar Gaddafi's attempt to claim that a protest rally video was actually a pro-government rally looked foolish. Will other more sophisticated misinformation campaigns succeed? Will there be bogus groups that form in an effort to flush out activists for persecution? Will governments become more active in social media to try to direct protesters to incorrect locations where police are waiting?

Many MENA observers maintain that unless autocratic regimes obstruct or heavily restrict Internet access, they will be subverted by technologically savvy activists. This belief suggests that vast social networks such as Facebook allow users to mobilize so stealthily and in such large numbers that they have a better chance at successfully changing oppressive regimes than those employing more conventional methods of protest. But another perspective holds: "Given the impersonal nature of Facebook and the extensive authority available to autocratic rulers, it is more likely that not only will Facebook style campaigns fail to achieve desired results, they will also make it more difficult for advocacy groups to coalesce over the long term" (Collins, 2011).

If a tyrannical leader is willing to brutally suppress dissent as in Syria and if outside countries don't intervene as they did in Libya, social media may have less impact than one would expect in helping bring about democratic reforms in the Arab world. Notwithstanding the sense about the openness and accessibility of social media and the disempowerment of government censors and the media establishment in the region, authoritative forces are very much part of the scripting and dissemination of influential pronouncements and news and information messaging (*Social Capital Blog*, 2012).

In the virtual political sphere, a disturbing new trend has developed in the Arab world. Intelligence operatives are not only using social media to achieve various propaganda ends but also are permitting terrorists and informants to use the medium to intimidate political enemies. In conflict-ridden Syria, rogue opposition groups, many of who are aligned with al-Qaeda, use Facebook to post the names, phone numbers and residential addresses of pro-Assad government supporters. At the end of these messages, the terrorists instruct opposition members to “go and kill them” (Henningesen, 2012).

### **One-way communication**

Competition among users of social media to convey messages and the varying motivations of these users are characteristics of the social process. It is part of a larger framework that policy analysts use to identify participants who interact in particular situations and who use strategies to obtain desired outcomes. A major participant is the state which makes use of a communication platform that millions of followers consult.

Some MENA governments recognize they need to reach out to their constituents and engage them proactively. A number of Arab leaders and nearly every major public figure have a Facebook page. Similar to political leaders in other parts of the world, however, they often use the medium more as a way to appear contemporary and to obtain and demonstrate support rather than as a means of two-way communication.

It is also possible to watch some YouTube channels for regional figures including Queen Rania Al Abdullah of Jordan along with government departments such as the Bahrain e-Gov Authority, ICT Qatar and many in the Iraqi government (Grannam, 2011). Despite these advances, governments continue to be challenged meeting the

expectations of constituents who are familiar with social media and expect to engage in interactive communication. MENA government leaders and cabinet ministers are still experimenting with this dimension. Their attempts to post their views on government portals and forums and to retrieve notes and questions from citizens remain ad hoc at best. And they may have concerns about raising the expectations of their audience regarding the scope of discussion and their own ability to respond to the few posts and questions they currently receive from the public.

This probably explains why on Twitter where continuous, near real-time interaction is the norm, there is a presence for newspapers, commercial enterprises, industry associations, think tanks and universities but little involvement from MENA government leaders. Interestingly, a few Middle Eastern embassies are present on Twitter. Examples are the Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates embassies in the United States.

A few exceptions to one-way communication include the ruler of Dubai who engages in real-time dialogue with citizens and residents in the emirate. Several cabinet ministers in Bahrain interact in discussions around predefined subjects in an e-government portal (Grannam, 2011). Even though these attempts remain limited in scale and impact, they are a positive step. The next step might be to involve people in public affairs. MENA governments could take advantage of social media to get the public engaged in decision and policy making, if not democratic participation.

## **Decision process**

A comprehensive application of the decision process that covers the full range of interactions among social media, politics and policy is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, we consider the decision process as a means for classifying social media's public policy functions in the Middle East and North Africa.

Whether people in the Arab world recognize their favorite Twitter and Facebook personalities as politicians, public administrators, pundits or entertainers, they are networking in ever increasing numbers and obtaining information about public issues that is important to them. A communicative strategy is in play. An outcome, which is an endpoint in any specific policy context, includes their feeling empowered and enlightened as never before. Effects might involve institutional resources and value outcomes, consisting of for example, a recent U.S. State Department decision to increase political pressure on the Assad regime by funding initiatives designed to protect bloggers from the gagging of social media sites in Syria (Lee, 2011).

However, some observers believe the State Department's Internet Freedom policy backfired. It alarmed regimes throughout the region by suggesting that the Internet was not simply a forum for free speech but a foreign policy tool of the United States (Morozov, 2011). Indeed, support from the United States risks "tainting even peaceful opponents as being directed by foreign elements," particularly given widespread disdain for and suspicion of its agenda in the Arab world (Shirky, 2011).

The cofounder of TuniLeaks and the Tunisian dissident site *Nawaat*, Sami ben Gharbia, scathingly characterized the State Department policy as "hypocritical," designed to use activist bloggers and their causes for the United States' own agenda "or simply for domestic consumption." He does not see its Internet Freedom policy as

“independent from the broader and decades old U.S. foreign policy, which has been based on practical rather than ethical or moral considerations such as the support of Human Rights (Gharbia, 2010).” After all, the United States clearly is not a consistent supporter of democracy in the Middle East and North Africa, preferring in many cases the “stability” offered by allies such as Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and, previously, Mubarak in Egypt (Chick, 2011).

After more than a year of unrest and violence, Syria’s political crisis is characterized by “dilemmas and contradictions.” An array of imperfect choices confronts State Department officials, amid fears of continued violence, a humanitarian crisis and regional instability. The potential spillover effects of continued fighting raise questions with regard to neighboring Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon. Violence in the northern Lebanese city of Tripoli and in Beirut in May amplified fears that Syria’s conflict could lead to sectarian confrontation in Lebanon. Larger refugee flows, factional conflict or transnational violence by non-state actors are among the contingencies that policy makers are concerned about in relation to these countries. The unrest also is creating new opportunities for al-Qaeda or other violent extremist groups to operate in Syria. The security of Syrian conventional and chemical weapons stockpiles has become a regional security concern, which will grow if a security vacuum emerges. Many observers worry that an escalation in fighting or swift regime change could generate new pressures on minority groups or lead to wider civil or regional conflict (Sharp and Blanchard, 2012).

This brief discussion of the social process of social media in public affairs -- and, more specifically, of the social network-driven decisions of MENA leaders and U.S.

policy makers -- underscores what is at stake for political elites and their constituents. Internationally consequential effects of this process should inspire policy analysts to think carefully about how policies, strategies and decisions affect value outcomes, measured as accumulations, or alternately, deprivations of political power and democratic reform. In choosing to correlate public policy with social media, MENA politicians and State Department officials underscore their recognition of the medium's capabilities that both enable and rely on a culture of openness, participation and empowerment.

### **Intelligence and appraisal**

Virtually anyone with policy analytical training who owns a smartphone or has access to a web browser can collect and study information on digital platforms, post opinions on blogs and, at least conditionally, evaluate policies. In contrast, the successful execution of intelligence in official policy making arenas involves specialized capabilities dominated by professionals.

The effects of social networks in public affairs are perhaps most obvious in the execution of the intelligence function. Intelligence is defined here as the gathering, processing and dissemination of information for the use of anyone who participates in the decision process. For testing the adequacy of social media for intelligence purposes we will consider the criterion of reliability. Tests of reliability include whether qualified experts can vouch for the facts and whether first-person observation is involved. One may conjecture that the reliability of digital communications weighed against these standards often fall short. At a minimum, fact-checking and accuracy are not inherent expectations of social media outlets such as Twitter and Facebook.

To date, there is little available scholarship either supporting or challenging conjectures about the reliability of social media for policy-oriented intelligence purposes. Although the accuracy of information on the Internet has received attention (see, for example, Economist, 2010; Sunstein, 2006), social networking tools like Facebook and Twitter have not been subject to comparable tests.

Politically motivated users of social networks in MENA popular uprisings may appraise the reliability of social media content using a decidedly different measure than that used by policy analysts, namely, is the information reliable in the ideological sense (for instance, is it ideologically pure and consistent with the participants' dominant belief system)? For ideologues, reliability might be determined by gut-level sensibilities and appeals to impulse rather than fact-based persuasion and appeals to reason.

Ideologically driven messaging makes verification vitally important with citizen media reports. For content that is submitted via email, such as Your Media or Sharek, Al Jazeera tries to get in contact with citizen journalists to determine where the information came from and when it was recorded (McAthy, 2012). Checking snippets of information posted on Twitter is more difficult. Andy Carvin, a social media strategist at NPR who has become known for his monitoring of Twitter during the Arab insurrections, does not attempt to check the accuracy of every tweet before publishing it. Instead, he asks his followers to help assess the trustworthiness of individual tweets (Ulbricht, 2011). A role clearly exists for journalists and everyday citizens to select filter and analyze the flood of information posted on the Internet.

It is unquestionably openness where social media's strengths are most apparent, including in policy arenas. The ever-present i-reporter buttons, blogs and comment

fields on news websites are indicative of the potential advantages these portals offer to publicly minded citizens and lay reporters compared with traditional news gathering and official intelligence institutions. However, it is the very openness of these tools that create their reliability problem, and no less urgent, a blurring of intelligence and promotion outcomes. Promotional copy on social networks is ubiquitous and occupies a continuum from ordinary advertising to unadulterated information leaked --or stolen -- from the hard drives of the ruling elite.

To illustrate the latter, consider a powerful, graphic video transmitted by WikiLeaks a couple of years ago of an U.S. military action against suspected Iraqi insurgents who, apparently unbeknownst to American forces, included Iraqi journalists. WikiLeaks used Twitter to seek help in decrypting this video (Cohen & Stelter, 2010). But its full context is not revealed. The viewer does not know what decisions preceded the order to engage the suspected militants, and the rules of engagement are not explained. This exemplifies the contested boundaries between the intelligence and promotion functions of the social media.

Other values at stake include well-being and rectitude. In another recent WikiLeaks case, the organization posted approximately 92,000 secret and classified materials dealing with U.S. military involvement in Afghanistan. In some of the documents were names of Afghan informants who, conceivably, could become targets of reprisal (Schmitt & Savage, 2010).

In appraising the credibility of the WikiLeaks material, the *New York Times* declared: "It is sometimes unclear whether a particular incident is based on firsthand observation, on the account of an intelligence source regarded as reliable, on less

trustworthy sources or on speculation by the writer. It is also not known what may be missing from the material, either because it is in a more restrictive category of classification or for some other reason” (New York Times, 2010). These disclaimers underline the difficulty that a mainstream media organization has in relying on non-mainstream outlets for information, and also, the *Times*’ ambivalence about the lack of comprehensiveness in its own intelligence function.

Because uploaded material is disparate in its origins and reliability and is unfiltered, there are likely to be mixed promotional outcomes. Whereas an integrated approach could forge broad understandings among competing interests about particular problems or solutions. In promotional processes, social media could serve to coalesce interests, strengthen voices that otherwise might be diffuse or poorly organized and create a sense of dramatic tension, such as the effects of Twitter and Facebook in MENA revolutions. However, an integrative tact can lead to over intensity; promotional activities can become so wrought that they provoke coercive responses either by the aggrieved or by powerful actors who feel threatened.

Much as platforms like Twitter and Facebook are especially adept at documenting and disseminating people’s immediate impressions, conceivably these same technologies are most salient for invocation during times of crisis when response times are short. The challenge for the invoker, then, is sorting critical information from junk on social networks. Despite enthusiastic praise for Twitter’s role in helping coordinate MENA anti-government demonstrations, it is not clear whether and to what extent the insurgents and other key actors were able to efficiently filter out low quality information. Skimming the contents of hundreds of tweets is probably not adequate for

the task at hand. It is still the case that professionals in the communication process are needed by users of these technologies, particularly in moments of great social upheaval.

## **Conclusion**

Our objective is to contribute insight on the social process and on policy decision making to document the emerging influence of social media on public policy and value outcomes in the Arab world. Appraising the content of communication carried on social media was aided by criteria such as reliability and selectiveness -- where social media tend to be at a disadvantage -- and openness -- where social media show more potential. We found that social media are used now and likely in the future in the region to enable protestors to quickly mass organize, provide an alternative outlet for information and to amplify a voice for regime change and political activism.

We provided analysis of the role that social media plays in empowering MENA politicians and other policy-oriented professionals. We considered the influence of such actors in the developmental constructs of contemporary and possible future political order in the region. For instance, the Arab League might persuade the owner of a popular microblogging platform to postpone site maintenance, thereby allowing microbloggers in Syria to apply pressure on the oppressive regime. In contrast, the military junta in Algeria might hire hackers to infiltrate email accounts of dissidents or search for and block messages containing symbols deemed threatening to state legitimacy and one-party rule.

We learned that when considered in functional rather than conventional terms, communication professionals remain as relevant for analytical purposes now as in the

Golden Age of newspaper correspondents and nightly network news. The assumption unfiltered intelligence or advocacy flows directly from the uploader to the user is challenged by the intervention of powerful intermediaries. The likelihood of increased collaboration among political elites and policy-oriented professionals anticipates recruitment of skilled creators and users of social media -- collaborations that may or may not advance MENA experiments in democracy. It is important to probe the value dispositions of users of social media and illuminate the outcomes of processes arbitrated by social networks.

A better understanding of the role of social media in the Middle East and North Africa will be valuable to policymakers and researchers alike. Even if increased knowledge does not allow us to predict the future, it provides us with a far better grasp of the forces potentially shaping politics in the region, as political actors struggle to use these media for their various purposes. But it is important to get the empirical analysis right because there has never been a better chance for such research to make a real difference, not only for public policy, but for the spread of democracy and the suppression of violence in the Arab world.

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