

The Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted

Judging by the popular press, in January 2011 Twitter and Facebook went from being simply engaging social diversions to become engines of political change that upended decades of Arab authoritarianism. It is tempting to be swept away by this narrative, which suggests that social media prompted hundreds of thousands, and then millions, of Tunisians and Egyptians to pour into the streets and peacefully demand change. Brittle authoritarian regimes had little choice but to comply, and in this way, social media irrevocably changed the future of the Middle East. Following the logic to its conclusion, it would suggest that the Middle East is on the brink of a period of democratic consolidation, as the ideals and tools of revolutionaries lead the region forward into a period of anti-sectarianism, liberalism, and hope.

Such a narrative glosses over much of what is important about what has happened in the Middle East in early 2011. First, despite loose talk about Arab revolutions this past spring, we still have not seen one. Revolutions, after all, are judged not by what they replace, but what they replace it with. Merely changing personalities while leaving the pre-existing political structure in place may be a coup or revolt, but it certainly does not qualify as a revolution.

Second, what is striking about the political movements of early 2011 is not so much the power of 21st-century media, but rather the power of 20th-century media. Social media certainly played a part in the Arab revolts of 2011, but they played a sometimes surprising one that was intimately related to traditional media. It was not Twitter and Facebook, but television that was absolutely

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fundamental to the unfolding of events, playing a decisive role in expanding protests of thousands into protests of millions. Television isn't sexy to Western audiences, but it is both ubiquitous and powerful, and most analysts have systematically downplayed its importance.

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Third, among the most important roles of social media is one that has been little commented upon: the way in which they allowed a large number of people to see themselves as activists because they were creating content. That is to say, while there has been considerable concentration on the role social media played in allowing people to *receive* content, analysts have not placed enough emphasis on the importance of social media's enabling people to *send* content,

transforming them from observers of activism to activists themselves with a greater stake as leaders, not just followers, of unfolding events.

As we look ahead into the post-protest period, however, the limitations of social media are becoming even more apparent. Social media are not evidently helpful in facilitating political bargaining in constitution-writing processes, and social media have only played a limited role in helping form new political parties. In both cases, old-fashioned political horse trading and solid field operations seem to be decisive. Getting the analysis right on what has happened will help observers and participants think more clearly about what might yet happen.

Revolutionary Frameworks for Thinking

Part of the problem of comprehending what has happened in the Middle East is that so much of it is so new. For the most part, academic work in Arab media, social movements, and networking has concentrated on evolutionary trends. In the new field of Arab media studies, there simply had been no Arab revolutions to consider. For example, when Professor Marc Lynch wrote in 2006 of Arab satellite television prompting "revolutionized political behavior," he was referring wholly to popular protests over foreign policy issues that Arab governments had been able to manage with little difficulty.¹ My own work on Arab media 13 years ago barely talked about domestic politics at all, so hard was it to imagine then that the gathering winds of regional unity would lead to sweeping calls for political change.²

Social movement literature has often concentrated on formal organizations that have existed for years, if not decades, such as those included in the civil rights, women's rights, environmental, and anti-abortion movements. There is

also a literature about riots, but this tends to explain why spontaneous crowds turn into disorderly mobs, which was not the case in Tunis or Cairo. Similarly, the literature on revolution is unsuited for the speed of change that we saw in January 2011. In Charles Kurzman's analysis of the 1979 Iranian revolution, for example, he talked about how quickly the Shah fell—only 100 days—and how it was so fast that it strained extant models of revolutionary behavior.³ Hosni Mubarak, by contrast, endured just 18 days of protest before he resigned, despite the fact that his resignation was not even an early demand of the crowds, and there was no Khomeini-like alternative lurking in the wings. It may not turn out to be a revolution in the end, but whatever it is, it altered the status quo faster than anyone could have imagined previously.

Finally, there is an extensive body of work on social networking that examines real-life connections between people, but its applicability to the electronic world is speculative. Consider how people are indoctrinated into the military: there is a long process of socialization that begins with enlistment, continues through basic training, and is sustained throughout one's career. It is very hands on and very personal, which might be expected because soldiers are asked to surrender their freedom and put themselves in harm's way. The stakes can't be much higher. On a broader level, religious organizations emphasize personal ties between members, clergy, and the divine in order to generate donations. Even the modest act of donating cash requires a sustained personal touch. University fundraising is also highly personalized.

Much of electronic networking, by contrast, is built on vast numbers of people taking small-stakes action. As Malcolm Gladwell pointed out in October 2010, the Facebook page of the Save Darfur Coalition had more than one million members, each of whom donated an average of nine cents.⁴ While we are still struggling to understand the relevance of virtual ties for real ties, we haven't even begun to grapple with the ways in which virtual ties can provoke people to take high-stakes action, if they can do so at all, and surely taking to the streets against a repressive authoritarian regime is a high-stakes gambit. Blithely assuming that electronic networking was able suddenly to overcome its inherent limitations is not supported by the evidence.

Despite a weak analytical toolkit, there was a rush to ascribe events to the Internet and to social media in the days and weeks after political change began to rock the Middle East,⁵ almost immediately contested by more sober analysts.⁶

What is striking is not the power of 21st-century media, but of 20th-century media.

The most important role may be enabling people to see themselves as activists *creating* content.

In pointing to the internet as a key instigator of public unrest, authors fell prey to at least five logical fallacies:

- 1 The wide-scale diffusion of the internet in the Middle East is new, many of these movements are new, and these movements used the Internet. Therefore, the advent of the Internet caused these movements.
- 2 The internet is in English, or at least a lot of it is, and that helps outside observers get a quick handle on what's going on. We can empathize with English speakers, and they're appealing for our help, so we should pay attention.
- 3 Our cutting-edge social movements use the internet, and if it works for us, it should work for everyone. It's flattering that others are following the path we have blazed.
- 4 The Arab internet narrative has attractive heroes. Not only do they speak English much of the time, but they also are youthful, full of energy, and they wear jeans. After being terrified by the menacing glares of Osama bin Laden and his team of middle-aged gangsters in robes and turbans, here are some smiling young Arabs who connect with us and with whom we should connect.
- 5 We deserve credit. After all the complaints that we have coziered up to autocrats in the Middle East, this narrative relieves us of our burden, clarifying that we have given the people the tools to rise up against tyranny. Seen this way, we are missionaries of the gospel of freedom. As a nation, we love having a mission and preaching a gospel.

If these fallacies were true, one could be extremely optimistic about the future of the Middle East. But in fact, they are not, and the region's future is much more uncertain.

To understand why, it is useful to think about the metaphor of how one starts a campfire. If one relies on traditional methods, starting a campfire requires four things: The first is a spark, often created by striking two hard objects together. The second is tinder, meant to catch a spark and turn it into a gentle flame. The third is kindling, nurturing that small flame and growing it, until the fourth element, fuel logs, can be added to create a roaring fire. It sounds simple, but it isn't. It is hard to get a spark to catch. Good tinder is so hard to come by that people used to carry it around, giving rise to the expression "tinderbox."

Kindling is easier to find, but still represents a vital step. And then a small fire needs fuel to grow into a steady flame.

The Spark

There is no question that Tunisia was the spark for the changes sweeping the Arab world in 2011. The flight of Zine el-Abidine Bin Ali was not merely a leader's fall from power—it represented the failure of a repressive regime to triumph through repression. For decades, Tunisia was the exception to the common mantra that economic rights engender political rights, and that the best way to promote democratization in the Arab world would be to create a middle class which would fight to protect its interests. For more than 20 years, Bin Ali hung on doggedly to his authoritarian ways, unbowed by the George W. Bush administration's push for Middle Eastern democracy, and reveling in his country's relative prosperity. Bin Ali had no reason to think that repression couldn't work because it always had, for him and for his fellow Arab leaders. Arab politics had quieted down since the tumultuous 1950s and 1960s. His neighbor Muammar Gadhafi was the last Arab leader who was able to ride to power on a call for change, and that was more than 40 years ago. Elsewhere, the bureaucrats had come to lead the Arab world, serving until the end of their days and enriching their families along the way.

Looking ahead, the limitations of social media are becoming even more apparent.

Bin Ali was caught by surprise by a movement that started when a fruit-seller in a provincial town set himself on fire in mid-December after his humiliation by police. The young man's self-immolation sparked a series of protests in the Tunisian hinterlands that over a period of three weeks made their way to Tunis. Bin Ali's moves were always too little too late, lulled into confidence that he remained in control. In the end, he fled into the night, and one rumor had him chiding his wife for her excesses as he boarded the plane out of Tunis, saying his fall was all her fault.

Tunisia was not an earthquake in the region, but it did start a series of conversations. Arab satellite stations—especially al-Jazeera—covered the protests extensively, and the protests made good television. Seas of protestors filled people's screens, and their unimaginable courage in standing up against one of the region's nastier autocracies got 24-hour exposure.

It remains unclear what role the internet played in Tunisia's political turmoil. Bin Ali's government in Tunisia was certainly internet-savvy, carefully monitoring use, blocking sites, and punishing those who exceeded its limits.

When Tunisia hosted the World Summit on the Information Society in 2005, the irony was not lost on attendees, who noted that freedoms in Tunisia ended once one stepped outside the conference hall. At the completion of the conference, the U.S. delegation noted Tunisia's obligation toward openness as the summit's host, and dryly added, "We are therefore obliged to express our disappointment that the government of Tunisia did not take advantage of this important opportunity to demonstrate its commitment to freedom of expression and assembly in Tunisia."⁷ Of all the countries in the Middle East, Tunisia's online censorship had long been among the worst.⁸

Moreover, the protests began in an area with relatively low Internet penetration—Sidi Bouzid, a semi-arid farming town almost two hundred miles from Tunis. While internet advocates highlight the role of Facebook—a channel that the Tunisian authorities did not shut down—to spread images of protest in Tunisia, there were two other important channels of information for Tunisians. The first was the rather unglamorous Tunisian General Trade Union (UGTT), which poured members into the streets from the earliest days of the protests.⁹ The second was al-Jazeera, which found out about events in Tunisia early from trawling through user-generated content, and brought images of swelling protests to a Tunisian—and regional—audience.¹⁰

It may be that small pockets of activists, both in and connected to Tunisia, relied on the internet. Perhaps dozens of people, known to each other in person and electronically, were able to coordinate and share information. But there is little evidence that the internet played a vital role in scaling events in Tunisia into the hundreds of thousands, or that it inspired activists in other countries through Facebook or email. In reaching that regional audience, the key action was on television, where tens of millions of Arabs watched events in Tunisia unfold. One of those places was Egypt.

The Tinder

For the last several years, the broad narrative of the Egyptian economy had been impressive growth—seven percent in normal years, and approximately five percent during the 2009–2010 global recession. Even so, tens of millions of Egyptians struggled with tight labor markets and rising prices. By January 2011, Egypt's youth unemployment rate was 25 percent, and many young Egyptians waited years between when they finished their education and got their first job.¹¹ Annual inflation in 2010 was running at approximately 10 percent,¹² with food inflation almost twice that amount—the highest of any country in the world.¹³ Tomatoes, long a staple of the Egyptian diet, became an unaffordable luxury for many, and the price of meat climbed out of reach.

Labor strikes became increasingly common in Egypt, with more than 600 labor actions reported nationwide in 2010.¹⁴ Other protests rippled throughout the country, on issues ranging from foreign policy to domestic detentions to the management of state-run corporations. Even to close observers of Egypt, it was unclear throughout 2010 whether the rising tide of demonstrations was a manifestation of growing discontent or a consequence of the Egyptian government being more permissive of public protest.

Another factor adding to unhappiness in Egypt was the direction politics in Egypt seemed to be moving. The government steered the November 2010 parliamentary elections heavily toward the ruling party, boosting National Democratic Party representation from 318 (out of 454 seats, or 70 percent, in 2005) to 420 (out of 508 seats, or 83 percent, in 2010), while Muslim Brotherhood supporters in Parliament dropped from 88 to one.¹⁵ The secular opposition parties remained feeble at 15 seats among them, while independents filled out the balance. Few observers saw the election as anything but a power grab. In addition, Mubarak was growing older and frailer, and the government was growing frailer with him. Everything seemed to be in limbo. The potential succession of Mubarak's son, Gamal, was widely disparaged, although many feared it was becoming the default position. Few would argue that Egypt was headed in the right direction; the best face one could put on it, and few did, was that Egypt would be better off after succession. Egypt was a tinderbox by January 2011.

The Kindling

Despite the presence of a spark and tinder in Egypt, there was no certainty of conflagration. The chief problem of political movements is scaling upward. Cells of five are not hard to form; with creativity and energy, groups can grow to 20 without a vast amount of effort. But scaling into the hundreds and thousands, especially over a short period of time, is difficult. It is especially difficult to encourage people to engage in high-risk behavior, particularly with people one doesn't know.

Egypt had its own experience with such movements. The Kefaya movement, active from 2004–2007, sought to bridge many of Egypt's divides, especially between secular liberal youth and their Islamist counterparts. The movement was able to hold protests, and even called for the downfall of the government, but it never expanded beyond a few hundred activists. When Kefaya took the protest to the popular neighborhood of Shobra in May 2005, for example, residents viewed it as an oddity—noisy kids in t-shirts and long hair, far outnumbered by police and curious bystanders. Over time, Kefaya petered out. The April 6 Movement was able to organize an impressive strike in the spinning town of Mahalla al-Kubra in April 2008, but it had limited success after that.

Subsequent efforts to organize protests were duds, and while the organization remained active, it was not able to consolidate its gains.

A more recent effort, which we now know was led by Google executive Wael Ghoneim, created a Facebook group named after a young Alexandrian internet activist who was apparently beaten to death by police. By the time the protests in Egypt began on January 25, the group had almost a half-million members, but what they could be counted on to do was very much in question.

As has become an important part of internet lore, the internet activists carefully planned a protest for Police Day, January 25. They encouraged people to attend, posted appropriate chants, and hoped for the best. What is not widely acknowledged is that, with all of their organizing and all of their followers, they were only able to draw a few hundred of their half-million followers into the street.¹⁶ What turned out to make all the difference was going to poor neighborhoods and raising economic grievances. The first chant of the protesters was “Change, Freedom, Social Justice.” Not very inspiring stuff, and it had limited appeal. Within hours, the chants shifted to pocketbook issues, with chants such as “Hosni, Your Excellency, a hundred pounds for a kilo of meat.”¹⁷ By abandoning talk of freedom and instead talking about pocketbook issues, the protests went from the hundreds to the thousands, and from the thousands they began to constitute a movement.

When the protests went to the thousands, two things happened. First, they became a bona-fide media event. Al-Jazeera had tried to turn coverage of Egyptian

protests into media events before, but the tight shots of perhaps a hundred people shouting did not make for a compelling story. There is something validating about a wider shot showing a sea of people that makes clear what is being portrayed is not merely an event, but a movement.

Second, al-Jazeera rushed to frame the pictures as the signs of an incipient revolution, and as the protests grew stronger,

so too did the revolutionary overlay. While al-Jazeera didn't call what was happening in Tunisia a revolution until January 11—three days before Bin Ali's departure—it began referring to Egypt's demonstrations as a revolution on January 28, just three days into the protests. Al-Jazeera also gave consistently generous headcounts to the Egyptian protests. Through its words and images, al-Jazeera and many of the other stations sanctified and validated those protests as revolutionary when they were still in their early days. In this way, television helped to frame and give meaning to the events in Tahrir Square (and

Al-Jazeera and others validated those protests as revolutionary in their early days.

simultaneously in Alexandria and elsewhere), legitimizing public participation and giving it an air of support that it did not yet enjoy.

And al-Jazeera mattered. While we often think of al-Jazeera as a regional station, it is certainly more than that. According to a recent study funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development, upwards of 70 percent of Egyptians have access to satellite television in their homes (95 percent have televisions), making al-Jazeera's content widely available.¹⁸ When the Egyptian-owned television satellite Nilesat shut down its al-Jazeera broadcast on January 30, it constrained the audience somewhat. In response, al-Jazeera publicized ways to access alternative satellite feeds, and the act of circumventing the government ban presumably transformed some viewers into activists in the process. The fact that al-Jazeera was able to broadcast throughout the events in Egypt demonstrated just how difficult it is to shut down media in a highly-networked world. Based on Eastern European examples, much has been made of the importance of independent media to foster political change. In fact, pan-Arab media demonstrated that it fills many of the same roles that independent media do in other authoritarian countries, providing a counter-narrative to those of ruling regimes.

As a medium, television has a tendency toward strong story lines that integrate words and images. Television is emotional and engaging in a way that few media can be, and despite being heavily edited, television gives the impression of spontaneity and verisimilitude, giving it even greater impact. While al-Jazeera conveys a wide range of views, a sustained hostility to the Mubarak government—in part carried out by expatriate Egyptian reporters and editors, and in part a result of decisions from the Qatari owners—had long been clearly discernable. But just as countless reality television shows carve strong story lines out of unscripted moments, al-Jazeera did the same while arguing that it was merely covering the news, projecting a powerful narrative to create a strong impression among tens of millions of Egyptians.

In part as a consequence of the news coverage, an increasing number of Egyptians began to create their own content and post it online. They filmed events with their cell phones, they created photo montages, they swapped songs, and they combined them and recombined them in countless ways. In many ways, this was the true transformative effect of social media. The conventional way to see social media in the months since the Egyptian revolt is to note how they helped activists find an audience. Perhaps even more important, though, is the way social media helped many in the audience to become activists, prompting them to cast their lot with protesters in the streets. The tantalizing results of a poll (conducted via Facebook) by the Dubai School of Government suggests one way this worked: 56 percent of Egyptian respondents said that government efforts to block the Internet and Facebook were actually positive for protestors,

because they made people more determined, pushed undecided people to be more active, and prompted people to find creative ways to organize and communicate.¹⁹ In other words, social media's dramatic impact was not merely or even principally in expanding an audience, but rather the way in which it swelled the numbers of participants at a critical time.

Consider, in this regard, the work of Ziad Munson, a sociologist who examined why people became active in anti-abortion organizations. What he found is surprising: that the strength of people's belief does not drive their level of activity in these organizations; rather, people's level of activity drives the strength of their belief. Many people feel strongly about abortion but do not become active; more commonly, people who do not feel especially strongly about abortion become active in these movements, which then drives them to take stronger views. Among Munson's sample, a quarter of people active in the pro-life movement were actually pro-choice when they got involved, and another quarter were ambivalent. Building individual ties to other activists makes one's ideas conform more closely to those of the activists.²⁰

Traditional social networks rely on building personal ties, but the speed of events unfolding in Egypt and elsewhere didn't allow for that. That should have made it hard both for people to become acculturated as activists and also for the numbers to grow. Yet, social media and user-generated content lowered the threshold to become an activist, making it easier for people to see themselves as activists within a movement they saw sweeping the country.

The Fuel

Mass protests are telegenic, but Egypt's were especially so. From the colorful images of thugs on camels charging crowds to shots of row upon row of Egyptians praying in unison, the Tahrir Square protests were not a made-for-television event, but they certainly looked good on television. The presence of multiple hotel balconies ringing Tahrir Square ensured that journalists had easy access to images which captured the sweep of the crowd. As the Mubarak government tried desperately to get ahead of the protests by shutting down the Internet and texting services, and suspending al-Jazeera's operations in the country, social media again played a role in keeping the story growing.

To a large degree, social media supplied the rolling coverage of the television networks with new material. Cell phone images gave a certain "cinéma vérité" quality to the protests, and let the viewers illicitly see images the authorities wanted to prohibit. Abundant images from social media also freed news organizations to air analysis divorced from images, liberating them from the normal requirement of integrating sights and sounds. Sites such as the blogging platform Tumblr allowed the rapid aggregation of a wide variety of material, so

news organizations and others could easily browse and broadcast to wide audiences. From the perspective of international pressure, it was most important that these sites allowed for an easy identification of English language sources, not only allowing reporters in the field, but also editors in home countries, to feel they were following events closely without the necessity of understanding Arabic.

In terms of audiences, then, the social media and user-generated content had a supportive role in each instance. On the local level, social media and related content allowed television to go into rolling coverage of the protests. The constant stream of images (and reinforcing narration) validated not just that a revolution was underway, but also that it was national in scope. Showing constant images from Suez (in turmoil), Mansoura (under the control of the Muslim Brotherhood), Minya and beyond demonstrated to both protesters and government officials how much disorder had spread. In turn, this encouraged those in the provinces to become information providers and get their content to a regional audience, thereby making them participants. The protests of organized labor came toward the end of this wall-to-wall coverage, before the military put an end to things. While there is no proof, it suggests the possibility that the television coverage was what helped flip organized labor into an anti-regime position, and that labor's flip helped prod the army to decide to push Mubarak from power.

On the international stage, the content provided a front-row seat to hundreds of millions, drawing attention to Tahrir Square and validating the protesters' narrative of a peaceful revolution of global import. While the effect of this validation is hard to measure, few Egyptians could have lost sight of the fact that their country was at the center of a huge international story, prompting many to take a role in that story. The international coverage also constrained the Egyptian government's ability to use force.

And so, the Egyptian government fell. From a spark striking tinder, kindling nurtured the flame until it was a fire. But what becomes of that fire?

The Embers

While growing circles of activists blew on the spark that began political change in Egypt through a post-modern reliance on peer-to-peer networking and grassroots innovation, the transition to modern politics is hard. The Facebook kids have only slight numbers outside of Egypt's largest cities, and they have no large-scale field operation. Lacking either a leadership or legions who will take action on command, it is hard to use leverage to extract concessions from the powerful, or to negotiate at all. When the message was simple and negative—"The people want to bring down the regime"—unity among the opposition groups was simple. When the message becomes complex and positive, it becomes

Television drove events, framed them, legitimized them, and broadcast them to a wide audience.

harder to sustain both unity and participation. This is not to blame the idealistic groups that helped usher in political change. The absence of political discourse in Egypt for decades, the vacuous politics of Egypt's opposition parties, and the ways in which bureaucratic repression paved over any sort of charismatic or ideological leadership has taken its toll.

We should be clear about this, though: while the activists were a catalyst for the

events of January and February, they did not drive them. Television drove them, framed them, legitimized them, and broadcasted them to a wide audience. There is no question that activists benefitted from social media—one activist told me that the strategy of courting the army long before its intentions were clear was taken directly from contacts with Tunisian activists—but social media do not seem to have been at the heart of the transformation from the ineffectual Kefaya and April 6 Movement protests to the sudden jolt of January 25.

Looking forward, the coming phases of Egyptian politics lend themselves remarkably poorly to television. Complicated story lines, made even more incomprehensible by a raft of new political actors with unclear levels of support, will make it hard to report on what is happening. Meetings behind closed doors do not generate powerful images, and the very amorphous character of the activists, which made them such a formidable and entrepreneurial foe of state repression, will make it hard for them to navigate a world of political deal-making and coalition-building. As noted above, the revolution has not yet happened. The events of January and February 2011 only opened the door to possibility. To shape Egypt's future, activists will have to find a way to move forward in some semblance of unison, and they have not yet found a way to do so.

The coming months are unlikely to be kind to the Facebook kids. Conventional politics and a worsening economy will sap the energy from their movement, and make it hard to sustain the spirit of January 25. The status quo powers in Egypt remain powerful, and their interests remain dear.

Over a longer period of time, there is more cause for optimism. The creativity and dynamism of this group, combined with the effects of near-term failure, pave the way for longer-term success. But to have that success, they need to remain in Egypt, nurturing the human capital which they put so boldly on display in January and February. In the near term, Egypt faces a problem with capital flight, but the strategic threat to Egypt, and to all of the political transitions underway in the Middle East, is human flight. There is not yet a new phase in the political

life in the Middle East, but we can see it taking shape from here. Technology will play a role, but even more important will be more conventional organizations of people and ideas.

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