

# SOCIAL MEDIA AND USER GENERATED CONTENT

## LESSONS LEARNT FROM THE ARAB SPRING

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This paper studies the lessons learned from the usage of social networks and User Generated Content (UGC) in the Arab spring and related events in 2011. We depict the positive impact of the UGC and social media, the extra notes which can benefit an international readership and the side effects issues of privacy, surveillance, credibility and reliability of UGC and the strengths and weaknesses of Social Networks for advocacy.

This paper will also underline the possible policies to be adopted by international regional and non-governmental organizations in the empowerment of youth through social media and about social media and the role of social media and UGC in building the new democracies in the Arab World.

### **An important note about UGC**

The recent protests and uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt have both been called “Twitter revolutions” and “Facebook revolutions” due to the widespread use of user-generated content disseminated over social networks like Facebook and Twitter by protesters, activists and supporters of the protests, as well as by those following the events around the globe.<sup>1</sup>

User-generated content (UGC) refers to internet content (text, images, videos and sound clips) that is created and uploaded to the internet by users usually for no explicit financial gain, but rather for enjoyment or passion. UGC is created usually by amateurs, rather than professionals. It includes blogs, video clips, audio clips (podcasts), as well as comments on internet forums, or status updates on social networks like Facebook or Twitter. UGC played an important role in the recent protests and uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa. And UGC created on mobile phones was particularly important as it allowed those involved in or witnessing the protests to upload content during the protests and report on events live. Mobile phones also allowed protesters to communicate with others and spread their message. Social networks like Facebook and the micro-blogging platform Twitter were the primary online tools used to disseminate this content.

UGC and social networking websites have been used and continue to be used in protests in other countries throughout the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.<sup>2</sup>

### **Social Media in numbers and MENA history**

#### **Enemies of the Internet<sup>3</sup>**

In November 2005 Reporters Without Borders (RSF) listed fifteen “enemies of the internet”, four of which were in the MENA region: Libya, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Tunisia. In 2010, RSF listed twelve enemies of the internet, which included Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Syria and Tunisia. In March 2011, just Saudi Arabia and Syria were listed as “enemies of the internet”, however Bahrain, Belarus, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates were listed as “under surveillance”. In 2011 Saudi Arabia, Syria and Egypt are listed by RSF as having netizens in prison.

The Open Net Initiative reports that Bahrain, UAE, Qatar, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Yemen, Sudan and Tunisia use Western technologies to block internet content, “such as websites that provide sceptical views of Islam, secular and atheist discourse, sex, GLBT, dating services, and proxy and

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<sup>1</sup> Twitter revolutions and cyber crackdowns - Alex Comminos- *Association for Progressive Communications (APC) June 2011*

<sup>2</sup> See previous

<sup>3</sup> See previous

anonymity tools.”<sup>8</sup> Restrictions on internet freedom also happen in internet cafés. In Tunisia, internet cafés were required by law to monitor customers' access and to register their identity card numbers.

According to a 1997 study of Arab media, “the impact of censorship across the region is mixed.” Despite persistent censorship, “governments have not been able to silence dissent on the internet or prevent activists from increasing their use of the technology to communicate and coordinate among themselves.”<sup>9</sup> The study also points towards vibrantly growing use of UGC as well as internet activism throughout the region.

### **Transitional numbers**

In 2009 in Tunisia and Egypt there were only 34.1 and 24.3 internet users per 100 inhabitants respectively. Furthermore, in Egypt only 7% of inhabitants are Facebook users, while 16% use the platform in Tunisia. Facebook use is highest in the United Arab Emirates (36%), Bahrain (29%), Qatar (24%) and Lebanon (23%). Of these countries, only one (Bahrain) experienced significant protests.

In 2011 Egypt's Internet penetration rate was 24.5% and Tunisia's was 33.9%.<sup>4</sup>

### **Lessons learnt:**

#### **Social Media is not only Facebook.**

There are alternatives to social networking platforms such as Twitter or Facebook. Pligg is an open-source software that allows one to create self-hosted social networks. The Diaspora project hopes to create multiple, overlapping social networks with a social networking platform called Diaspora which is self-hosted, nodal and peer-to-peer. Users can host their own identities or “pods”, and choose from a range of hosts to host their pod on. Status.net, developed by Canonical, offers a micro-blogging client that offers an alternative to Twitter which can be used to create open or closed micro-blogging networks.<sup>5</sup>

#### **“ The most important lesson i learned from the arab spring is... “power to the people” just got an operating system upgrade.”<sup>6</sup>**

It is essential to note that Information and communication technologies (ICTs) such as mobile phones have played a significant role in struggles for democracy and human rights in MENA, however many feel that the role of ICTs should not be overstated.<sup>4</sup> ICTs were not the causes of the protests and uprisings in Tunisia or Egypt, or indeed in any other MENA country. The causes of the protests involve a combination of non-technological factors including: decades of repression, political and economic marginalisation, the long-term structural decay of the effectiveness and legitimacy of state institutions, and soaring food prices. This was combined with a long-felt yearning among the general population for political representation, and the recognition of their rights. On the streets, a variety of factors including popular sentiments, grass-roots organising, and the strength and allegiance of the security apparatuses of the state ultimately determined the outcomes of the protests.

#### **International waves of Arab e-activism**

The USA: “ So, why the concern from DHS? Simple. What happened in the Middle East could happen in the States as well. Anyone remember Timothy McVeigh from the Oklahoma City bombings? Or the Unabomber? That's precisely the type of activity DHS is worried about. The Arab Spring showcased the power of social media and it opened some eyes at DHS. Social networks can be a treasure trove of intelligence information, and now DHS is keen to leverage social to keep tabs on potentially

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<sup>4</sup> Internet World Stats <http://www.internetworldstats.com/africa.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Twitter revolutions and cyber crackdowns - Alex Comminos- *Association for Progressive Communications (APC) June 2011*

<sup>6</sup> -[Jim Moriarty](http://www.meta-activism.org/2012/01/map-arab-spring/) (CEO, Surfrider Foundation + MAP Network) <http://www.meta-activism.org/2012/01/map-arab-spring/>

dangerous elements and threats in society.”<sup>7</sup>

China: Chinese push for 'Jasmine revolution' A month on from the moment President Ben Ali fled Tunisia to Saudi Arabia, Chinese officials have cracked down on the spread of online dissent by apparently escalating internet censors.

Searches for terms such as "Egypt" and "Jasmine revolution" - coined from the Tunisian revolt - have been blocked on Chinese micro-blogging sites such as Weibo.

Web blocks on other sites such as Twitter and US-based news site Boxun mean only Chinese people using proxies would have been able to see a recent anonymous statement posted online calling for people to take to the streets.

### **The profound amplifying impact of a martyr/catalyst when combined with the viral force of technology (amplifying personal stories).**

One of the success keys of the Arab online activism is using the tactics of info activism, of which amplifying personal stories.<sup>8</sup> Due to the high amount of violence used by the governments on the protesters (Mubarak's Camel battle, or Bahrain's Lulu square snipers etc.) activists published online content revealing personal stories of victims and martyrs to attract not only supporters to their cause, but mostly a media which might have been in blackout (Al Jazeera on the issue of Bahrain) or to correct the false news of national TVs (Syrian revolution).

### **The importance of humor amidst violence and repression**

The speech of Mubarak preceding the resignation speech, witnessed a very funny and creative hashtag #ReasonsMubaraksLate which trended above all hashtags internationally on Twitter. This hashtag allowed frustrated youth protesting in the streets and their supporters in the Arab world to express the frustration they were feeling because of all the casualties and martyrs and violence that the Egyptian revolution endured.

Funny comments displayed examples such as "#ReasonsMubaraksLate he's glued to the chair (next time the chair will be made from stainless steel)".

### **No need to have every member of the community using social technologies for massive impact to occur<sup>9</sup>**

1. The usage of the internet in developing countries is often disproportionately urban, thus there can be an urban bias in reporting on events. Throughout the Arab spring the world's attention was generally drawn to urban protests, for example Cairo and Alexandria in Egypt, and Tripoli and Benghazi in Libya. This may have been amplified by the intensive urban use of UGC.

2. Also reflected in the use of UGC and social media are income and literacy biases, with smartphones and computers being used more often by literate individuals with higher incomes.

Nonetheless, many protesters did use UGC to represent popular demands, and there were clearly demonstrated linkages between mobilising demonstrators by social media and the mobilisation of demonstrators on the streets.

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<sup>7</sup> Blog Actiance – Lessons Learned From the Arab Spring <http://blog.actiance.com/2011/11/16/lessons-learned-from-the-arab-spring/>

<sup>8</sup> Tacticaltech.org

<sup>9</sup> [Amy Sample Ward](#) (Membership Director, Nonprofit Technology Network + MAP Network)

## **Problems presented by the use of UGC in the youth revolutions for freedom and democracy<sup>10</sup>**

USG and mobile phones are not unequivocally tools for the benefit of protesters, but rather a contested terrain used by both the regimes and the protests movements in the societal conflicts around the uprisings in MENA.

### **1. Instrument of surveillance:**

In addition to being effective tools for communication and coordination by protesters, social networking have also been used by governments in response to these protests, often to crack down on protesters and have been used to track and locate protesters and content creators.

As Wikileaks' Julian Assange recently noted, the internet is not only a force for openness and transparency, "it is also the greatest spying machine the world has ever seen."<sup>19</sup> The capabilities of such a surveillance machine can be amplified by social networking platforms like Facebook that link an online identity to (most often) a user's real name, place of residence and work, interests, pictures, and network of friends .<sup>20</sup>

Information on Facebook made available to a user's friends or the general public may potentially be mined by third-party applications and advertisers. Facebook's API,<sup>21</sup> which is a language or set of commands for retrieving information from Facebook, is openly accessible by anyone turning their account into a developer account. The API makes it particularly easy to obtain and analyse such information through the writing of basic query scripts which can then be imported into almost any kind of database and then analysed with a variety of different software. Facebook "viruses" (they are operating system viruses or "malware", usually running on Windows) can be disseminated through UGC and spread to other users through links, while constantly mining for information from Facebook accounts and sending them to command and control centres. Mining of such information does not need advanced "hacking" skills, but can be done by "script-kiddies," running preassembled scripts and code.

### **2. Auto-located or geolocation**

Facebook and Twitter, as well as third-party mobile phone applications offer geolocation functionality, which may add location to a users' content (e.g. a tweet, Facebook update or a picture). In addition to this, all mobile phone users are constantly having their position triangulated (and often recorded) by their mobile operator. If there is an unregulated or corrupt relationship between the state and mobile operators, the usage of the mobile internet can actually enhance the surveillance capabilities of repressive regimes.

### **3. Removal of UGC with no prior warning**

Facebook policies can often result in the Facebook pages of political activists being shut down. The We are all Khaled Said Facebook page, which played an important role in the cyber-arena of the 25 January revolution in Egypt, was opened in June 2010 but was shortly afterwards closed down by Facebook because the user who opened the account El Shaheed was using a moniker rather than a real name. Whilst this should come as no surprise –Facebook makes it explicitly clear that the use of fake names or monikers is not allowed on the platform and are a violation of the terms of service– many have questioned whether Facebook closures of certain pages have political motivations.

### **4. Social Media is not LaLa Land. UGC is controlled.**

Of the many Facebook pages for protests and "days of rage" that were made to call for protests in the MENA region, there have been few reports of profiles, groups or pages being shut down – other than in Palestine, where the page calling for the Third Palestinian Intifada

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<sup>10</sup> Twitter revolutions and cyber crackdowns - Alex Comninos- *Association for Progressive Communications (APC) June 2011*

was shut down. The page was flagged as hate speech and reported to Facebook, which responded to what had been argued as a breach of their terms of service. Many Palestinians as well as sympathisers around the world wondered why all other Arab countries were allowed to have pages dedicated to a "day of rage" against their governments, but one was not allowed for a protest against Israeli occupation. Facebook and Twitter have on the whole not interfered with the use of their platforms for protests in the MENA region. These examples however serve to remind activists that, at the end of the day, it is the social networking platforms or content platforms on which the content is hosted that has ultimate control over their online content.

#### 5. **Reliability and veracity of UGC**

As well as for covering protests, UGC can also be used for misinformation and propaganda. The use of UGC to cover political crises raises important problems with regards to the reliability and veracity of information. Social networks can very quickly become mechanisms for spreading rumour and falsehood and, as there is usually no moderation of this content, it becomes the responsibility of the user to critically examine the veracity of claims made on these platforms.

## Social Media & Youth in The New Democracies

### Networks Can Topple Old Regimes, But Can They Form New Ones? <sup>11</sup>

One of the more interesting lessons learned is whether and how decentralized and networked activists can come to power within centralized and hierarchical institutions (governments).

This is actually a historic collective action paradox. In his recent book, [The Origins of Political Order](#), Francis Fukuyama notes that historically loose tribal networks were successful at mobilizing but not ruling.

In a discussion of military strategy in the first millennium AD, Fukuyama notes, "rulers found they could not rely on tribally organized forces to hold onto their empire. Tribal levies could be quickly mobilized and scaled up for rapid conquest.... But... could not achieve sustained collective action. "

Will networked activists be able to "sustain collective action," to lead (or sustainably influence) government? Or was their success only in their ability to "quickly mobilize"? Clay Shirky notes that networked actors have not been able to control the levers of government in countries where they staged successful revolutions.

David Faris, a scholar of Egyptian digital activism, is more optimistic. Though he acknowledges that traditional political parties have been the immediate beneficiaries of the revolution, he believes that networked groups like We are All Khaled Said and the April 6th movement have the staying power to influence Egyptian politics in the long term. Although they are loose networks, they have become stable mobilizing structures with the ability to, in Fukuyama's terms, "achieve sustained collective action."

### How can youth cyberactivists and revolutionaries have a more stable mobilizing structure to achieve sustainable collective action and ambition of freedom and democracies?

- **The need for new laws understanding the online freedoms as constitutional rights.**
- **The need to educate young activists on e-privacy and safety**
- **The need to push the education from "Media literacy" to "Media development"**. Arab youth have proven capacity and enthusiasm to adopt social media and use it effectively. It is time to develop a generation that is Tech-Savvy and that can develop all sort of network and platforms.
- **The need to "democratize the social media"**. Circulate Human Right and democracy education through different non formal e-education tool: create e-contests, e-libraries, e-courses, e-trainings, e- seminars, e-masters, e-debate etc about democratic transition.
- **Encourage Arab ICT innovation** by creating a funding program or an annual award for creative Arab networks/applications or e-projects for development.

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<sup>11</sup> The Meta Activism Project – Arab Spring +1 <http://www.meta-activism.org/2012/01/map-arab-spring/>