

# Egypt: The First Internet Revolt?

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*The Egyptian Revolt<sup>2</sup> was both the old story and a new story*

"What brought Hosni Mubarak down was not Facebook and it was not Twitter. It was a million people in the streets, ready to die for what they believed in," *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman recently proclaimed.<sup>3</sup>

Friedman appears to have had an either/or dichotomy in mind when assessing the Egyptian revolt that started in January 2011. That's an oversimplification, ignoring not only the lack of opposition from the elites, military, and US government, but also the role of social media and the organized groups and informal networks that brought people to the streets. It's clear that social media such as Facebook played important roles in transforming organized groups and informal networks, establishing external linkages, developing a sense of modernity and community, and drawing global attention. Their impact suggests that those concerned with the quest for democracy and peace should pay more attention to the explicit and implicit effects of these social media.



Protesters recharging their mobile phones in Tahrir Square during the revolt, January, 2011.

Source: Karim Marold, used by permission.

The ways in which the revolt played out more subtly suggest that, much like Western societies, parts of Egyptian society are transforming away from traditional groups and towards more loosely structured "networked individualism."<sup>4</sup> There is less group control—and more autonomy—in networked societies. In Egypt, we see the same manifestation of the "triple revolution" that has happened in Western societies:

- 1) the turn to *social networks*,
- 2) the proliferation of the far-flung, instantaneous *internet*,
- 3) the even wider proliferation of always-available *mobile phones*.

## TRADITIONAL THEORIES OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

When the oldest author of this article—Wellman—grew up in the 1950s and 1960s, Americans were taught that Third World rioters were rootless individuals who had lost traditional norms and were vulnerable to following political agitators. Daniel Lerner's 1958 *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East* and James C. Davies's "Towards a Theory of Revolution" were canonical statements of this outlook.<sup>5</sup> It took only a little systematic scholarship to show that Third Worlders—like Westerners—were immersed in important social networks and organizations that shaped and sustained their social movements. Charles Tilly's 1964 study of the French counter-revolution in *The Vendée* awakened scholarly awareness of this and became widely known when the 1969 Kerner Commission Report on American inner-city riots of 1968 published Tilly's "Collective Violence in European Perspective."<sup>6</sup> Other research by Tilly and others soon fol-

lowed, de-emphasizing individual pathologies and showing that some degree of formal organization and informal networks is necessary to mobilize communities of protest and structure social movements. This became the new orthodoxy, known to all scholars and thoughtful policymakers.<sup>7</sup>

## SOCIAL MEDIA JOINS SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Recent scholars have incorporated the role of information and communication technologies (ICTs) into the studies of collective action. For example, the internet has served as an important channel for American political mobilization, in conjunction with face-to-face interaction and organizational membership. The internet, personal networks, and organizational networks account for mobilizing many participants.<sup>8</sup> Writing before the Egyptian revolt, Philip Howard's research in Islamic countries found that the internet helped to maintain strong and weak network ties for political mobilization, and was more resistant to state control than the traditional media of TV, radio, and newspapers. Moreover, social media's swiftness and international reach can help amplify local conflicts to a global level.<sup>9</sup>

The interaction of organized groups, networks, and social media was crystallized in the Egyptian revolt. Of course, Friedman is right: it wasn't just the internet (and mobile phones), but at the same time, Friedman is wrong to downplay their importance. And he is wrong to use the image of "millions of Egyptians" presumably disconnected. The protesters were very connected in groups and networks. Although we focus on Egypt, what we have found ap-

pears to have happened in Tunisia and in Libya—albeit with a quite different outcome. Much of the Egyptians’ social media connectivity was via texting or accessing the internet on mobile phones rather than via personal computers. Their mobile access to Twitter and Facebook was particularly precious when the regime blocked access from personal computers. For example, Yara Adel El Siwi (@YaraElSiwi) tweeted on January 26, 2011: “*You who have Twitter and Facebook workin on ur phone, use ‘em to spread words of hope. We won’t let this end here #jan25 was just the start.*” These mobile phones could easily be carried and concealed, and by tapping into streetlights, recharged.

One survey found that 29% of Egyptian adults had some internet access, mostly at home, although disproportionate surveying of affluent neighborhoods may overstate the percentage.<sup>10</sup> And if people did not have their own internet connection, it is probable that among urban Cairo men, they had friends and relatives who did.

### ORGANIZED GROUPS

The movement towards the Egyptian revolt did not happen overnight; rather, it came after years of preparation both offline and online. A number of political organizations have been set up against the Mubarak regime. The Muslim Brotherhood—the underground political opposition organization founded in Egypt in 1928—played a role in fighting the riot police during the protests that soon ousted then-president Mubarak. Afterwards, the now legal Brotherhood has been distributing daily necessities and medicines and participating in the upcoming election.<sup>11</sup>

Social media came more directly into play with The April 6 Youth Movement, a more recently established political group that contributed to the Egyptian revolt. For example, Ahmed Maher—a 30-year-old civil engineer and one of the cofounders of the April 6 group—had engaged in political movements as

early as 2005.<sup>12</sup> The young activists employed mobile phones, digital cameras, and the internet to extend their anti-autocracy movement to the blogosphere.<sup>13</sup> After a strike in the Nile Delta city of Mahalla in March 2008, Maher and others created the “April 6 Youth Movement” as a Facebook group to promote a national strike on that date. Although security forces suppressed the event and arrested Maher, the Facebook group continued to be widely followed.<sup>14</sup> Following the success of the Tunisian uprising in January 2011, representatives from the youth movements, the youth wing of the Muslim Brotherhood, and other political activists and parties cooperatively plotted the nonviolent anti-Mubarak protests. They announced the protest sites online and used Facebook to mobilize the demonstrations.<sup>15</sup> Social media offered affordable access to social movements by reducing the costs of mobilization and organization and accelerating the dissemination of information.

### INFORMAL NETWORKS

Informal networks of friends and relatives have also been important in initializing and sustaining social movements. One survey reports that word of mouth from family and friends was widely used (by 72% of Egyptians) to get information about “the events of January 25,” with only television (97%) being used more widely. The importance of mobile phones in Egyptian life is seen with SMS (texting) being the third most widely relied on for information (28%). Internet sources were less widely used: Facebook (15%), internet news sites (13%), email (2%), and Twitter (1%). Moreover, the social media percentages may be high due to disproportionate sampling.<sup>16</sup>

But, this doesn’t mean that Friedman was right in scoffing at the internet. Once we get past either/or thinking, we find that social media has expanded the traditional word of mouth to inform a



A protester holding a sign during the protests at Tahrir Square on May 27, 2011.

Source: Zeynep Tufekci, *Technosociology*. <http://technosociology.org/?p=448>. Used by permission.

range of people broader than the kinship and friendship networks. For example, Amr Bassiouny, a young activist in Cairo, wrote on his Twitter feed on May 26: “*Starting points for tomorrow’s Rallies! All Head to Tahrir! http://on.fb.me/mgez1d SPREAD SPREAD SPREAD RT PLZ #Egypt #jan25 #tahrir*” (The link refers to an Arabic Facebook page to promote the protests on May 27, 2011). This tweet was broadcast directly to his more than 3000 followers and indirectly to a larger audience when 26 of his followers forwarded it to their own followers.

### EXTERNAL LINKAGES

The Egyptians did not act in isolation. Just as Western contacts encouraged the Russian move to democracy in the 1980s-1990s,<sup>17</sup> Egyptian activists used social media to form linkages with kindred networks and organizations elsewhere and took these connections offline. A few months after the founding of the April 6 Youth Movement in 2008, a group of young online Tunisian activists set up the Progressive Youth of Tunisia following a strike in Tunisia. Facebook became the channel of communication between the two groups in two countries. “We shared our experience with strikes and blogging,” said Maher, the leader of the April 6 Youth Movement.<sup>18</sup>

The Egyptian activists also communicated via the internet and in person with



Self-organized checkpoint on the Qasr Al-Nil bridge area to Tahrir Square on May 27.

Source: Zeynep Tufekci, *Technosociology*, <http://technosociology.org/?p=448>. Used by permission.

the Centre for Applied Nonviolent Action and Strategies (CANVAS): an offshoot of the Serbian youth movement, Otpor (“Resistance”) that had participated in overthrowing the Slobodan Milosevic regime in 2000. Members of the April 6 Youth Movement had traveled to Belgrade to learn how to organize peaceful protests, and Serbian activists had reciprocally traveled to Egypt to train protest organizers. While protesting, organizers leveraged their networks and resources, and received practical advice from experienced activists in Tunisia and Serbia, such as sniffing lemons, onions, and vinegar for relief from tear gas.<sup>19</sup>

### SENSE OF MODERNITY

In addition to being involved with organizational and social network activity, social media distinctively contributed to the revolt by stimulating the growth of a sense of modernity. Although only 24 percent of Egyptians used the internet in 2010<sup>20</sup>, this percentage was not randomly distributed. The internet users were predominantly the young adult Cairo men who were at the heart of the revolt. The young activists recalled that social media was naturally integrated into their movement.<sup>21</sup> They pronounced themselves as “the Facebook generation,” signifying that they were no longer the non-modern Egyptians of the past.<sup>22</sup> A widely distributed picture during the revolt showed a Tahrir

Square revolutionary holding a sign saying “Facebook” for both local and Western media to see,<sup>23</sup> and months after the revolt, Facebook T-shirts in English and Arabic are widely sold by Egyptian street vendors quick to respond to popular trends.

Social media also helped to establish an alternative public sphere where young Egyptians could bypass the state control of information and discuss politics and democracy. For example, Karim Marold (@karimmarold), a young activist in Egypt, tweeted on February 21, 2011, “*The parliament should be able to remove a president and not be removed by one. The president should not be able to change the constitution at all. Governors and mayors should be elected by the people in each circle instead of them being assigned by the president.*” On May 27, 2011, youth activists again mobilized tens of thousands of people and self-organized a festive, peaceful protest at Tahrir Square, demanding “respect for law, constitution, and an end to the military tribunals of dubious legality and transparency.”<sup>24</sup>

### SENSE OF COMMUNITY

In a repressive society, there are dangers that each person fearfully thinks that he or she stands alone. Social media helped to build a sense of community and minimize this feeling of isolation. Social media became platforms where discontented Egyptians could voice their frustrations, share relevant exper-

tise, spread hopes, and overcome the fear that comes with living under the oppressive regime.<sup>25</sup> When police officers beat to death Khaled Said, a 28-year-old Egyptian businessman, in June 2010, cries of police brutality and public outrage erupted online, especially after someone created a Facebook page called “We Are All Khaled Said.” Several people, who apparently did not initially know each other,<sup>26</sup> posted photos taken from a mobile phone of Said’s beaten face and created YouTube videos depicting Said as a happy individual prior to his death. This Facebook group later helped to promote the anti-Mubarak demonstrations. As of June 2011, it has more than 1.3 million supporters on its Arabic page (and more than 100,000 on its English page), widely disseminating updates about the revolts in Egypt and the Middle East-North Africa region.

Communities are also strengthened by spreading news, hope, and help on Twitter. Thus Farah Wael, an Egyptian living in Paris, wrote on Twitter on January 26: “*In case of arrest call those numbers for legal help : 0123112420 0106574724 0122222672 25310027 Retweet please #25jan #jan25.*” This message was been retweeted by 65 others to offer legal help for more people.

### GLOBAL ATTENTION

Wael’s tweet shows how social media outside of Egypt played a significant role in the revolt. Egyptians, other Arabs and those living abroad were involved. The realities of dictatorships are often underreported in countries with state controlled mass media and restrained freedom of speech. While local media dare not report, foreign media are often not interested. Karim Marold’s tweet, on January 27, 2011, illustrates the local underreporting of the Egyptian revolt before Mubarak’s overthrow: “*boycott: do nt buy the national newspapers for the nxt 3 days, since they r nt covering the whole truth (al ahram, al akhbar, al gomhooia)*”.

However, social media enabled citizen

journalists to circumvent the monopoly of state media, resist state censorship, broadcast personal experiences worldwide, and access alternative news sources. In addition to writing in Arabic, many used English to reach audiences outside the Arab world. The English in the signs we show in this article illustrates this prevalent use. Many protesters wrote in English on Facebook and Twitter, and held up signs in English during protests. For example, Karim Marold sometimes summarized and tweeted reports from CBC News and sometimes broadcast news on his own. On May 27, 2011, he tweeted from his BlackBerry at the site of the Cairo protests, “Rally going to #tahrir from mostafa mahmoud [square] #May27 #Egypt,” and attached a photo of the rally to his tweet.

People outside Egypt followed the revolt and communicated with insurgents inside to collect stories. An analysis of more than 3 million tweets containing six popular hashtag codes relevant to the Arab revolts, such as #egypt and #sidi-bouid (Tunisia), found that the major spikes in usage were driven by tweeters living outside of the Middle East,<sup>27</sup> although our study of some tweeters suggests that they were expatriates. Internet-connected Egyptians were aware of this global attention and, thus, strategically voiced their concerns.

### ELITE ACQUIESCENCE

Although presence is generally more noticeable than absence, the lack of overt opposition from Egyptian elites and the military to the revolt is as important as the activities discussed above. Unlike in Libya, the tanks sat quietly in Tahrir Square without shooting; the air force did not strafe or bomb. As Michael Schwartz argued in the April 2011 issue of this magazine, the mass protests threatened the Egyptian economy by disrupting core industries such as tourism, communication, and transportation. The options of either a military repression or outwitting the revolt

would have worsened the economic paralysis and resulted in more losses for the business elites and the government officials associated with them. The elites thus took the side of the protesters to pressure then-President Mubarak to resign, and the Egyptian military decisively did not intervene violently in the protests.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, the US government announced its support of the protesters. As the US has been providing sizeable funds to the Egyptian military, the military followed the money, did not overtly oppose the revolt, and maneuvered to remain in power after the downfall of Mubarak.<sup>29</sup>

### CONCLUSION

The success of the revolt should be credited to Egyptian people, but the impact of social media is undeniable. Social media played an important role in the mobilization and organization of the Egyptian revolt. It intertwined with the development of formal organizations, informal networks, and external linkages, provoking a growing sense of modernity and community, and globalizing support for the revolt. However, the impact of social media should not be overestimated. According to the aforementioned Williams survey, only about one-fifth of Egyptians acquired news and information through social media—and this may well be an overestimate. Yet, these Egyptians had friends, relatives, and friends of friends, and the news spread quickly via mobile phone texting, old-fashioned phoning, and even more old-fashioned face-to-face conversations. Strong ties convinced friends and family to join the demonstration; the more abundant and diverse weak ties bridged communities and spread the news widely even in the face of government manipulation of mass media and shutdown of the internet and



“Facebook” printed t-shirts commemorating January 25, the first day of the 2011 Egyptian revolt.

Source: Zeynep Tufekci, <http://twitpic.com/53ufir7>. Used by permission.

mobile phone networks.<sup>30</sup>

The integration of social media into social movements illustrates the turn towards networked individualism among the young urban men. The Egyptians in Tahrir Square do not appear to be the traditional members of densely knit, self isolated villages and neighbourhoods. Rather, the young men were able to use social media and mobile technologies to access large and diversified networks, reach beyond physical and social boundaries, and exploit more resources to potentially bring about social change.

As we write in early June, 2011, the future of Egypt is unclear. Will the revolt become a revolution? Will the “Arab Spring” produce blossoms and fruits? We are unsure of how the Egyptian revolt might develop. The military still rules, at least until the forthcoming September 2011 election, and they seem uneasy about the turn to democracy. Although none have been arrested yet, the Egyptian military has called in for questioning the activist bloggers who have been an important part of the revolt.<sup>31</sup> As journalist Mona Eltahawy has noted, “We got rid of Mubarak, but with the generals in power, we have many little Mubaraks.”<sup>32</sup> ■

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*See page 10 (overleaf) for endnotes.*

**"Egypt: The First Internet Revolt?" cont. from page 9**

1 We thank Bernie Hogan, Katy Pearce, Lee Rainie, Yu Owen Song, and Zeynep Tufekci for their advice. We dedicate this essay to the memory of Charles Tilly.

2 We conservatively call what happened in Egypt the "Egyptian Revolt" because as of our writing in June 2011, the alternative terms – "Arab Spring" and "Egyptian Revolution" – we do not assume that the events were a fundamental change in Egyptian society: elections are imminent, but the military and other elites retain much power.

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