The Tunisian and Egyptian Revolutions of 2011, which resulted in the overthrow of the governments in those countries, brought the world’s attention to the potential of online communities, using social media, to effect change in significant ways. Yet, online communities existed long before the Arab Spring, operating more quietly and out the spotlight of international news, and bringing together people with common interests who believed, correctly, that they could accomplish more as a community than they could as individuals. The purpose of this book is to bring to the forefront recent research that addresses the role of online communities as agents of change and social movements.

ONLINE COMMUNITIES

The word “community” elicits various images and meanings. If you ask people about their community, they are likely to describe their neighborhood, the people who live near them. They might tell you that they belong to a community center where the neighbors can gather to celebrate occasions and use shared facilities, such as a swimming pool. Others might think you are referring to their religious community, to people with whom they have feelings of kinship because they worship in the same location and at the same time. Those who belong to a social club might think of its members as their community. In all these examples, the sense of community is created by proximity and, to some extent, shared interests.

The concept of “community of interest” broadens the definition of “community” to those who share common interests and viewpoints without the need for proximity. Before the Internet existed, creating such communities was challenging. Members of a community of interest could, perhaps, gather once or twice a year at a conference, and they could publish journals or booklets to share ideas. But, maintaining such a community was expensive, and without frequent interactions and the deep interpersonal knowledge that results from them, any sense of belonging to it was undoubtedly tenuous.
The arrival of the Internet made it possible for members of a community of interest to exchange ideas without ever having to meet in person. The ability to interact online dramatically simplified the processes of forming and maintaining such a community. In the early days of the Internet, the medium of choice for establishing connections was email and the medium for broadcasting ideas was the blog. But, the arrival of social network services (SNS), such as Facebook and YouTube, deepened and enriched the interactions that could take place, allowing for a sense of community among a community’s members. According to McMillan and Chavis (1986), a sense of community has four elements: membership, influence, fulfillment, and shared emotional connection. Jenson (2012) and Koh and Kim (2003) conclude, in separate studies, that online communities fully fulfill the criteria for community.

Online communities that do not meet in a physical space are sometimes called “virtual communities” (see, for example, Tsai & Bagozzi, 2014), which is a bit of a misnomer since they are as real as neighborhood communities and often more active. The places where members of these online communities “meet” are sometimes called “virtual spaces” (see, for example, Craig et al., 2016), which is a reasonably accurate description. Unlike physical meetings, meetings in virtual places are not necessarily synchronous. But, the exchange of data, comments, and images is effective because community members know where to go to find them.

Online communities form around all sorts of interests – academic, entertainment, political, and social among others. This book is about online communities, but only, or almost only, about those whose purpose is to make a change in the world or advance a social movement. The one exception can be found in Chapter 11, which addresses how an online community created for quite another purpose, football fandom in this case, can nevertheless be a source of energy for social change.

**CHANGE AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS**

There are many definitions for what constitutes a social movement. For purposes of this book, I draw on Jamison (2010: 813), James & Seeters (2014: xi), and others to define a social movement as the mobilization of human, material, and cultural resources in networks linking actors in pursuit of a common cause. Some definitions require that a social movement must oppose an elite, authoritative, or powerful force (Tarrow: 4). For this reason and because this volume explores the role of online communities in effecting any sort of social change, its title incorporates the word “change” in addition to the term “social movement.”

By almost any definition, the Protestant Reformation, the American Revolution, and the Suffrage Movement in the United States are all examples of social movements. These movements predate by tens to hundreds of years the existence of online
communities. Although, as these examples show, online community support is not needed for a social movement to achieve success, some researchers believe online communities can be effective agents of change, making success more likely and accelerating its pace. In support of this hypothesis, researchers have claimed that online communities are effective in organizing and coordinating protests (Segerberg & Bennett, 2011), creating a collective sense of identity (Oh et al., 2015), generating a persuasive call to action (Haug, 2013), obtaining the attention of mass media (Parmelee, 2014), creating awareness in the external community (Reuter & Szakonyi, 2015), and obtaining resources, especially funding (Hara & Huang, 2011). However, others argue that underlying economic and social conditions, not social media, are the cause of social movements and revolution (Mellen, 2012). Skeptics also note that opponents of social movements can exploit and have exploited the public nature of online discussion to identify and persecute movement leaders and neutralize their threat (Morozov, 2012). This book contributes to both sides of this debate.

The chapters of this book illustrate the many ways in which online communities have acted as agents of change in a variety of contexts. But, they also make clear that achieving change is difficult and success is not guaranteed. The following section describes the organization of the book and provides a brief description of each of its chapter.

**ORGANIZATION AND CONTENTS OF THIS BOOK**

The chapters of this book have been grouped into three sections. Section 1 consists of five studies exploring the role of online communities in promoting and supporting protests and demonstrations. Section 2 addresses the socio-political concerns of online communities in two very different environments, one in Mexico and one in Iran. The chapters in Section 3 explore the role of online communities as agents of another type of change that reflects personal growth and development, ranging from older adults in long term care settings discovering new ways to communicate, to the anti-consumption movement’s opposition to consumerism, and the open-source publishing movement’s desire to provide freedom from copyright limitations.

**Section 1: Online Communities, Protests, and Demonstrations**

**Chapter 1: The Road to Egypt's Tahrir Square: Social Movements in Convergence, Coalitions and Networks**

This chapter, by Marwa Maziad, Norah Abokhodair, and Maria Garrido, uses the context of the Egyptian Revolution of 2011 to develop and support the concept of
“nodes of convergence.” The authors define nodes of convergence as shared political and economic grievance as well as shared virtual and physical space. They argue that such a convergence has to be created before mass mobilization for a collective action can ensue. The authors support their contention with a detailed recounting of the events leading to the January 25 protests in Tahrir Square, Cairo, that eventually resulted in the overthrow of the Egyptian regime. Central to their case are the posts, activities, and leadership of two very different online communities, whose names, translated into English, are the “April 6th Youth Movement” and “We Are All Khaled Said.” In addition to developing the nodes of convergence concept, this chapter offers a case study for how to mobilize a community in a repressive environment.

Chapter 2: Social Media Users Collectively Speak Up. Evidence from Central Asian Kyrgyz Republic

Using a collective action theory framework, this chapter, by Bahtiyar Kurambayev, presents and analyzes several examples of online community actions in Kyrgyzstan. Despite significant constraints on the media and a repressive environment, online communities were able to organize protests to successfully oppose costly projects that had been approved by the country’s lawmakers. They also were able to spread information about abuses of power and government incompetence, leading to protest-inspired revolutions in 2005 and 2010, that resulted, in both years, in the abdication of the president. The chapter concludes that the success of online communities in Kyrgyzstan has positive implications for other areas of Central Asia where freedom of speech and expression are heavily restricted.

Chapter 3: Social Media Support for the Occupation of Public Schools in São Paulo, Brazil

In this chapter, Cynthia Corrêa analyzes the protests and occupations that arose in 2015 after the São Paulo State Secretariat for Education announced the closing of 94 public schools, affecting 311,000 students. Based on an in-depth case study of the first school occupied, it addresses the role that information and communication technologies and social media tools played in generating and sustaining a successful occupation protest, which then spread among the public schools in São Paulo. This study extends the findings of prior research on other occupation movements that have been initiated online by analyzing what occurred in relation to Latin American social norms and the educational environment in Brazil at the time of the occupation.
Chapter 4: Information and Communication Technologies as Drivers of Social Unrest

In a statistical analysis of time series data from 138 countries between 2005 to 2014, the research presented in this chapter, by Martha Garcia-Murillo, Moinul Zaber, and Marcio Wholers de Almeida, finds that contrary to popular belief, when controlling for economic factors, governance, and population size, the communication and information technologies used by online communities not only fail to increase social unrest, but they might actually decrease it. Interestingly, this effect is found to be greatest in those countries having the most restrictive regimes. The authors posit that this is because these technologies can help alleviate some of the problems a country may be facing by opening opportunities to people. The policy implication of these findings is that governments should increase the availability of broadband, mobile, and other networking and communication technologies to reduce social unrest and provide a better environment for its citizens.

Chapter 5: Protests, Social Movements and Media Legislation in Mexico 2012-2014

Not all online communities are successful in opposing an entrenched and powerful status quo. This chapter, by Tonatiuh Lay, describes how several online communities failed over an extended period of time to keep proposed Mexican legislation from concentrating, or at least failing to dilute, the already concentrated de facto powers of the Mexican broadcast media. This case study shows that the alliance between the State and traditional media can be extremely difficult to overcome. The chapter concludes with a positive outlook, noting that the State and its allies could not prevent the development of online communities nor the use and appropriation of technology for their current and future projects as a civil society.

Section 2: Online Communities and Socio-Political Concerns

Chapter 6: Political Participation in Mexico Offline and Through Twitter

In this chapter, Julio Amador and Carlos Adolfo Piña-Garcia present a study of political participation of online communities in Mexico against a backdrop of political events and political participation by the general public. It uses Twitter data as the source for quantifying the participation of online communities by region and political movement. Data gathered from other sources provide insight into the general public’s electoral participation by region, interest in politics, and sources of
political information. While political participation in Mexico seems to be decreasing overall, participation through Twitter seems to be increasing. In this regard, this research points towards the emergence of Twitter as a significant platform for political participation in Mexico, and illustrates how online communities, as agents of social movements can enhance political participation.

Chapter 7: The Formation of Consensus in Iranian Online Communities

This chapter, by Ali Honari, challenges the common perception that the members of online communities are predominantly oppositional users with political democratic motivations. Using a variety of online data sources, it reveals that, at least in the case of Iran, this view overlooks the diversity of users and the broad range of issues frequently and intensively discussed among them in online communities. The failure to examine a broader range of issues means that scholars have neglected how consensus forms and develops among online users on other issues. This study broadens our understanding of the current social issues and possible areas of change in Iran. It also proposes fresh methods and techniques for gathering data from online communities and analyses data extracted from the Internet to study digitally mediated social movements in repressive societies.

Section 3: Online Communities in Support of Personal Growth, Development, and Self-Actualization

Chapter 8: Connected Living for Positive Ageing

In this chapter, Helen Hasan and Henry Linger explore the value to ageing citizens of being a part of an online community. Observing that isolation is detrimental to the wellbeing of citizens as they age, this research shows how, with suitable devices and ongoing support, older people who have not previously used a computer can develop the digital capability to remain connected to family and community. This research shows the importance of taking an individualized approach to meeting the needs of each older novice user who is motivated to learn. It also demonstrates how mastering just one or two digital applications can not only enhance social wellbeing but also enable citizens to have more control of their lives and be less reliant on help from others.
Chapter 9: The Impact of Social Media on Social Movements: The Case of Anti-Consumption

Anti-consumption is the rejection of consumerism, the modern notion that satisfaction and happiness can and should be achieved through the acquisition and consumption of goods and services. This chapter, by İrem Eren-Erdoğan and Sinem Ergun, analyzes the role of online communities in supporting the nascent anti-consumption movement. Case studies of online anti-consumption communities in the United States and Turkey provide examples of how these communities use social media in pursuit of their goal and serve as a means for comparing and contrasting their roles in developed and emerging markets.

Chapter 10: Free and Open Source Software Movements as Agents of an Alternative Use of Copyright Law

Copyright law grants exclusive rights to the copyright owner to control how copyrighted works are shared, sampled, remixed and incorporated into new derivative content. Unfortunately, the restrictive exercise of such exclusive rights may hinder the implementation of online platforms envisioned to facilitate access to knowledge and to enable the creation of new works. This chapter, by Pedro Pina, addresses how online communities of practice are using free/open source software licenses like GNU, GPL, and Creative Commons Licenses, to act as agents of a less rigid exercise of the powers granted by copyright law in favor of a freer system of creation and dissemination of creative works in the digital world.

Chapter 11: A Social Influence Perspective on Uses of Online Football Forums: The Case with Turkish Football Fans

This chapter, by Anil Sayan, Vehbi Gorgulu, İtir Erhart, and Yonca Aslanbay, shows that apolitical online communities that exist for reasons unrelated to social movements can, when the circumstances warrant it, become forums for social action. The focus of this chapter is online forums used by Turkish football fans. It shows that the constructs of social identity and “uses and gratifications” can predict the existence of joint-intention formation among the online community. Findings reveal uses and gratifications of football forum participation as maintaining interpersonal interconnectivity, generating entertainment and purposive value along with affective social identity construct determined we-intention among forum users. Examples are provided to show how this joint intention has been turned towards political and social action.
CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The studies in these chapters shed light on the role of online communities as agents of change in contexts ranging from highly repressive environments to supportive ones, from actions in conflict to those in play or in comfort, and from those that succeeded in their goals to those that failed. The stories are interesting and the lessons learned instructive. The authors and I hope you enjoy and profit from reading it.

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REFERENCES


