Chapter 14

Conceptualizing Network Politics following the Arab Spring

Ashu M. G. Solo
Maverick Technologies America Inc., USA

Jonathan Bishop
Centre for Research into Online Communities and E-Learning Systems, UK

ABSTRACT

This chapter defines a new field called “network politics.” Network politics refers to politics and networks. These networks include the Internet, private networks, cellular networks, telephone networks, radio networks, television networks, etc. Network politics includes the applications of networks to enable one or more individuals or organizations to engage in political communication. Furthermore, network politics includes government regulation of networks. Finally, network politics includes the accompanying issues that arise when networks are used for political communication or when there is government regulation of networks. The domain of network politics includes, but is not limited to, e-politics (social networking for driving revolutions and organizing protests, online petitions, political blogs and vlogs, whistleblower Web sites, online campaigning, e-participation, virtual town halls, e-voting, Internet freedom, access to information, net neutrality, etc.) and applications of other networks in politics (robocalling, text messaging, TV broadcasting, etc.). The definition of this field should significantly increase the pace of research and development in this important field.

INTRODUCTION

Technology has brought about many changes in the realm of politics. The Internet is having an extreme impact on social and political systems that is unparalleled in the history of humanity.

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This is no truer than in the Middle East and North Africa where citizen lead and technology enabled revolts have led to the overthrow of brutally repressive dictators. The revolts in the Middle East and North Africa that started after the beginning of 2011 were largely driven by social networks
and are often referred to as the “Arab Spring” (Shavitt & Zilberman, 2012). The Arab Spring involved widespread anti-government protests in many Middle Eastern and North African countries including Syria, Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia (Bruns, Highfield, & Burgess, 2013). The debate about the Arab Spring is embedded within a complex of wider theoretical debates about how new media might affect political outcomes (Aday et al., 2013).

Recent revolutions in many countries in the Middle East and North Africa have started in large part due to social networking Web sites like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. YouTube is an important tool of the Arab Spring, particularly in Syria where the absence of professional journalists has created a need for citizen video (Youmans & York, 2012). Much of the world was able to see the Arab Spring through photographs and videos made by anonymous local citizens with mobile devices such as cellular phones (Cox, 2011).

The whistleblower Web site Wikileaks has had a tremendous impact in exposing government corruption (Corneil, 2010). Politicians and candidates use their own Web sites and social networking profiles to get their message out. The mainstream media no longer has a monopoly on political commentary as anybody can set up a blog or vlog and post opinions online. Political activists can network together online. Voting is often done using electronic voting machines, which has created many problems. In the future, voting will likely be done over the Internet, but there are many issues that need to be worked out. Internet freedom and equal access are important issues that have many facets.

The Arab Spring wasn’t the first technology transformed political struggle. The printing press challenged government ideologies too. In the past, the only political engagement for many people involved voting and following news. Now because of the Internet, there is much more direct participation in politics (McBeth & Robison, 2012). Therefore, it is necessary to develop new paradigms to understand the changing world. Therefore, in this research paper, the authors define a new field that they are initiating called network politics. This field was first originated and defined by the authors of this research paper in (Solo & Bishop, 2011).

**NETWORK POLITICS**

The authors have coined the term network politics, which refers to politics and networks. These networks include the Internet, private networks, cellular networks, telephone networks, radio networks, television networks, etc. Network politics includes applications of networks to enable one or more individuals or organizations to engage in political communication including expression, organization, or voting. Furthermore, network politics includes government regulation of networks. Finally, network politics includes the accompanying issues that arise when networks are used for political communication or when there is government regulation of networks.

The term e-politics (Romm-Livermore, 2011) just refers to politics and the Internet. Therefore, e-politics is a subset of network politics. The term e-government refers to the use of information and communication technologies in government operations, access to government data, interactions between government agencies, interactions between government and citizens, and interactions between government and external organizations (Reddick, 2010). Only those e-government applications in the realm of politics, such as e-voting, are in the domain of network politics.

The domain of network politics includes, but is not limited to, e-politics (social networking for driving revolutions, social networking for organizing protests, online petitions, online political videos, political blogs, political vlogs, whistleblower