Chapter 12

Twitter Frames: Finding Social Media’s “Influentials” During the “Arab Spring”

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reports preliminary findings from a larger investigation of the role of social media and communication technologies in the “Arab Democracy Spring.” The goal of the study is to analyze how Egyptian activists used Twitter during the 2011 protests. This stage of the project specifically outlines ways of identifying and classifying some of the most influential Egyptian Twitter users during these events. In addition to profiling the “influentials,” this study applies a framing perspective to understanding Twitter’s use among Egyptian activists.

INTRODUCTION

The classic tension in the scholarship surrounding the primacy of communication technologies or human agency in social change was in full display during popular protests in the Arab world culminating in the overthrow of Egyptian and Tunisian regimes. In a fashion reminiscent of the Iranian post-election protests in 2009 (Grossman, 2009), western media’s celebratory coverage of these popular uprisings may have exaggerated social media’s power as a driving force behind these strong winds of change. Still, this article argues, emphasizing the human factor, agency and social movements in social change should not obscure a significant development in Arab
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societies: young activists’ demands for social change have found resonance and sustenance in social media. Cyber activists have become potent in demanding genuine political reforms from their autocratic governments.

Simply put, the “seeds of change” are both “human” and “technological.” In other terms, Arab political protests have been fuelled by a potent convergence of these two forces, a convergence personified in the young Google executive, Wael Ghonim, who became a prominent global face of Egyptian protesters. Mr. Ghonim had set up and managed a Facebook page, “We Are All Khalid Said,” to protest the Mubarak regime’s oppressive police tactics (Zetter, 2011). The Facebook page later announced a march on the “Friday of Anger,” January 25, to demand political and social reforms in Egypt. Following the eruption of the protests, Egyptian authorities arrested Mr. Ghonim only to release him on February 7 after 12 days of incarceration (BBC News, 2011). Subsequent media profiles and emotional interviews with global media outlets such as CNN and Al Jazeera, have anointed Mr. Ghonim as the public face of a new Arab generation. More significant than the media attention, Mr. Ghonim’s youthful character and his association with an international technological powerhouse perfectly illustrate how these protests have been an affair largely driven by technologically savvy young people. In this story, social media have seamlessly meshed with human agency.

The list of political revolutions in which communications media are professed to have constituted an influential factor is predictably illusive and contentious. From the Samizdat to fax machines, communications technologies were credited with speeding up the collapse of the Soviet Union (Downing, 2001). Modern social media, such as Twitter, are claimed to play a similar role (Gaffney, 2010). Twitter’s renowned as a tool of dissent grew out of the disputed Iranian elections of 2009 and the clamp down on Mir Hossein Mousavi-led opposition. The U.S. State Department, media pundits and outlets declared Twitter to be a “liberation” technology encapsulated in Clay Shirky’s claim that “this is it: The big one” (Gaffney, 2010). A few months before the Iranian protests, Molodova had witnessed another “color revolution” that was branded the first “Twitter revolution” (Mungiu-Pippidi & Munteanu, 2009).

As a social media platform, Twitter, a microblogging system, was launched in 2006 with the goal of allowing people to find “real-time” information to follow and take part in public discourse and “conversation.” Subscribers and users can tweet by posting short messages of 140 characters long that Twitter also describes as “small bursts of information.” Twitter has marketed the length constraint of its tweets as one designed to instigate “creativity” and capture interest similar to a newspaper “headline.” By September 14, 2010, Twitter has claimed 175 million registered users to author 95 million tweets per day from all parts of the world (Twitter, 2011). Twitter’s international (i.e., non-U.S.) traffic stands at more than 65% of the system’s overall activity (Fastenberg, 2010). Researchers found that people tweet for a variety of social reasons that include “keeping in touch” with friends, raising awareness about issues and topics of potential interest to one’s social network, or emotional stress releasing valve (Zhao & Rosson, 2009).

The technical lexicon and conversational features of Twitter have been subjected to frequent analysis elsewhere (Boyd, Golder and Lotan 2010; Honeycutt & Herring, 2009). Twitter users have adopted the @user (e.g., @WaelGhonim) and @ replies syntax to address and post replies to specific users. The hashtag (#) and a keyword indicate the tweeted topics, as well as unique short URL help hyper-link the social community to outside material. Twitter’s unique brevity, the 140-long character cap on tweets, status updates features, and the network of followers extend users’ social networks in “creative” ways (Gruzd, Wellman, &
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