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Political Activism 2.0: Comparing the Role of Social Media in Egypt's "Facebook Revolution" and Iran's "Twitter Uprising"

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Abstract

Social media, particularly blogging, Facebook and Twitter, have played a key role in instigating, accelerating and even organizing some of the uprisings and revolutions that have been taking place all over the Middle East. This role has been effective in galvanizing the youth and empowering them in their fights against repressive regimes and their plight for more freedom and independence. This study looks into the social media role in the so-called "Facebook revolution," which took place in Egypt in January 2011 and the so-called "Twitter uprising," which took place in Iran in June 2009. The Egyptian revolution did succeed in toppling the regime, while the Iranian uprising failed. Why did the calls for political change that started in the virtual world lead to actual change in the real world in Egypt but not in Iran? This study addresses this question by providing a critical analysis of the available literature and interviews with online activists in Egypt and Iran. The authors used the SPIN model (Segmentation, polycentrism, integration and networking) as a theoretical framework and concluded that the model helped social media succeed in Egypt, but not in Iran.

Keywords

public sphere, democracy, social networks, activism, Iran, Egypt, social media, information and communication technology

Introduction

The Middle East has been witnessing a tremendous growth in digital communication technologies in a way that has made it possible for political activists to get their message across through social media to different segments of the youth in a fast and efficient manner. "These social networks inform, mobilize, entertain, create communities, increase transparency, and seek to hold governments accountable" (Ghannam 2011:4).

The Internet has allowed large masses of Middle Easterners to solidify their efforts and organize protests in a short amount of time. "It also provided a platform for people to express their solidarity, both within...[their respective countries] and with others in the region and beyond" (The Arab Revolution and Social Media 2011).

According to *Time* magazine, close to one-third of the Middle Eastern people are under the age of thirty with high educational levels, but with no clear prospects for the future. Many of them turn to the Internet to express their frustrations and dissatisfaction with problems that they face on a daily basis, such as unemployment, tough economic conditions and government corruption. They have utilized the Internet "to rally the populace to their cause" (Tung 2011).

Thanks to the Internet, a new category of "online citizenry" or "netizens" has started to surface in the Middle East. This category of young and politically aware citizens, who are technology-savvy, has set a new vision and a more promising political map for the region (Kuebler 2011).

However, this optimism should be calculated rather than exaggerated, and there needs to be some caution in assessing the new technologies' abilities to initiate political transformation in a region like the Middle East, which has been subject to decades of suppression under various dictatorial regimes.

There is no question that different forms of social media have served as a venue for average Middle Easterners through which they joined efforts with human rights organizations and mobilized larger segments of the public (Tung 2011). But the outcome of utilizing social media for political purposes is not always going to favor the proponents of political freedoms. In fact, the impact of social media in this context is closely tied to the socio-political circumstances in individual countries.

This study compares the role of social media, or cyberactivism, which Philip Howard (2011:145) defines as: "the act of using the internet to advance a political cause that is difficult to advance offline," in the so-called "Twitter

Uprising," which took place in Iran in the aftermath of the controversial presidential elections in June 2009 and the so-called "Facebook Revolution," which took place in Egypt on January 25, 2011 and led to the ousting of President Hosni Mubarak's regime after approximately thirty years in power. Despite the fact that social media, particularly the forms of microblogging such as Twitter and Facebook, played an integral and visible role in both uprisings, their outcomes were completely different. Therefore, it is important to ask whether social media were "the key enabler of...[the Iranian uprising and the Egyptian revolution], or [were they] more of an accelerator?" (Himelfarb 2011).

The study addresses the abovementioned question using the SPIN model (Segmentation, polycentrism, integration and networking) as a theoretical framework.for comparing the role of social media in Iran and Egypt. Kuebler (2011) argued that "the comparative method is...best suited [in these types of studies] to avoid the danger of conventional wisdom and instead acquire a systematic vision of the phenomenon by putting it into the concrete political context of the country in question."

Social Media: Between Cyber-Utopianism and Political Realism

Social media, which rely on computer-generated content, can be defined as "the set of tools, services, and applications that allow people to interact with others using network technologies" (Brussee and Hekman 2011). Since the introduction of social media, there has been a debate "between the polar opposites of cyber-utopian and cyber-skeptic-where one side hailed social media and the Internet as liberators, and the other as tools used increasingly by authoritarian regimes to attack and intimidate dissident voices" (Himelfarb 2011). However, the social media role in the recent uprisings in the Middle East has shifted the debate to "a more nuanced discussion around the characteristics of...[social media]: enabler or accelerator" (Himelfarb 2011).

Morozov (2011) calls the attempt to assign too much power to new media "cyber-utopianism" or "Google Doctrine," which is based on the strong and

unquestionable belief that cyber technology has almost unlimited powers and that it can eventually liberate any people from state repression.

But the social media powers are not unlimited. Cyber-utopians tend to downplay the governments' role in censoring social media or even utilizing them to serve their purposes. The Internet's open nature allows governments to track down their opponents. "Governments create cyber-armies of hackers to discern possible enemies and send secret police to abduct these people during the night...Though many believe their comments online are safe since they are anonymous, what they do not realize is that the government has many ways of ripping off the 'protective' mask of anonymity to reveal the speaker of any comment" (Tung 2011). Many governments are trying to cope with the political dissidents' use of sophisticated cyber technology by developing new, advanced and up-to-date techniques to closely monitor and intercept the opposition's interaction and communication in the online world. In a way, social media have strengthened rather than weakened the status of several authoritarian regimes (Shirky 2011).

Morozov (2011) argued that it should not be a given or an automatic assumption that social media, in and by themselves, will eventually push for political changes, introduce transformations to societies and liberate them from repressive regimes. The belief in this deterministic scenario, according to Morozov, is a form of "cyber-naïveté" and "slacktivism," which exaggerates or overestimates the Internet power and ability to change at a time when this may not be the case in reality.

Echoing the same thought, Hands (2011:38) criticized technological determinism as a "fatalistic resignation to technology. Instead, he called for a more effective, non-deterministic approach to studying technology, which he described as a "critical theory of technology." According to this theory, Internet technology is "a product of human society and culture – as socially constructed" (Hands 2011:23). This social-constructivist theory highlights the continuous interaction and coordination between technology and society.

In this context, El-Nawawy and Khamis (2009:55) argued that "the virtual community is an extension of the real community, and the meaning

and values of a virtual community are derived from the participants in that community. In other words, virtual communities do not function as isolated entities, but they are the reflections of human cultural and social values."

Studying the environment in which social media operate is part of what can be described as "cyber-realism," which rejects the notion that "radical shifts in the value system of the entire policy apparatus could or should happen under the pressure of the Internet alone" (Morozov 2011:319). Along the same lines, Shirky (2011) argued that the use of social media, such as blogs, SMS, Facebook and Twitter "does not have a single preordained outcome." It depends on the political and social circumstances in each individual country. The potential of social media to initiate political change is dependent upon the activists' motivation to utilize the conditions in their societies in a way that makes change viable (Bennett 2003).

The SPIN Model

The theoretical model that best explains the political movements' ability to organize and initiate change on the ground is the SPIN model, which was introduced by Gerlach and Hine in 1968 and updated by Gerlach in 2001. This model explains the structure of organizations that are "segmented, polycentric, integrated, networks" (Bennett 2003:22).

Segmentation

Segmentation refers to the open boundaries between diverse civil society groups, "which grow and die, divide and fuse, proliferate and contract." (Gerlach 2001:289). Activists can be members in more than one group or segment simultaneously, and "may join and separate over different actions, yet remain available to future coordination" (Bennett 2003:22).

Polycentrism

Polycentrism means "having multiple, often temporary, and sometimes competing leaders or centers of influence" (Gerlach 2001:289). The polycentric

groups are "many headed," and they "are not organized in a hierarchy; they are 'heterarchic.' They do not have a commander in chief. There is no one person who can claim to speak for the movement as a whole, any more than there is one group that represents the movement" (Gerlach 2001:294).

Integration

Integration refers to "the horizontal structure of distributed activism...The integrative function is provided by personal ties, recognition of common threats, pragmatism about achieving goals, and the ease of finding associations and information through the Internet" (Bennett 2003:22). The awareness of a common enemy "helps diverse movement groups to unite and to expand...As 'underdogs,' they must put aside their differences and work together" (Gerlach 2001:299). Social media, with their openness and non-hierarchical structure, can give a boost to horizontalism within politically-oriented networks (Mason 2011).

Networks

And finally, networks are the natural consequence of the abovementioned aspects. These networks have "overlapping membership, joint activities... and shared ideals and opponents" (Gerlach 2001:290-291). "Networking enables movement participants to exchange information and ideas and to coordinate participation in joint action. Networks do not have a defined limit but rather expand or contract as groups interact or part ways" (Gerlach 2001:295-296). "Since the social network linkages are nonhierarchical, information exchange is relatively open" (Bennett 2003:22).

The movements that share the aspects included in the SPIN model have the ability to avoid government's suppression, to stand strong in the face of opposition and adjust their strategies to cope with any changing conditions on the ground. Moreover, these movements, which emanate from the civil society, "will survive and even become more active...when others are removed, retired, or co-opted" (Gerlach 2001:303).

The SPIN model, which has the ability to generate and instigate socio-political change can help explain the course and outcomes of the Iranian uprising that took place in 2009 and the Egyptian revolution that took place in 2011. The political conditions and organizational structures in Iran are very different from those in Egypt. These differences can be highlighted and clarified in light of the SPIN model. In this context, it is worth highlighting the fact that the SPIN model itself cannot create political change. However, the model helps explain and contextualize the circumstances that lead to political change.

Assessing the SPIN Model in the so-called Iran's "Twitter Uprising"

In June 2009, major Iranian cities, particularly Tehran, Isfahan and Shiraz, witnessed street protests to complain about the allegedly fraudulent presidential elections in which the incumbent candidate Mahmoud Ahmadinejad beat opposition candidate Mir-Hossein Mousavi, who served as Iran's prime minister from 1981 to 1989 (Kamalipour 2010). These demonstrations, which took place despite an official ban on political activism and public protests, "reflected a growing gap between what observers referred to as Iran's 'hardliners' headed by the current Iranian government and the 'reformists' led by Mousavi" (El-Nawawy 2010:4).

The protests, which were part of what was described as the "Green Movement," started out as peaceful, but became bloody after the regime opened fire on the demonstrators. These protests attracted the world media attention (Kamalipour 2010). The Iranian government imposed a media blackout after the elections' results were announced on June 12, 2009. Despite this blackout, social media particularly YouTube and Twitter, were flooded with amateur images and videos of the victims of police brutality on the Iranian streets (Sabety 2010). One such video was that of Neda Sultan, a young female Iranian activist, who was shot to death by the Iranian police. Videos of her bleeding to death overwhelmed social media, turning her "into one of the most well-known images of the [Iranian] regime's brutal repression" (Milani 2009). The killing of this young woman, who became a household

name inside and outside Iran, further galvanized the demonstrators who carried slogans such as "We are all Neda" (Afshar 2010:247).

Iranian officials tried to discredit the claim that Neda Sultan was shot by the police. Instead, the regime circulated another claim through social media that Neda was fatally shot by one of her fellow protesters (Malek 2010). This reflects the Iranian regime's effective use of social media to counter the opposition's online activism.

In general, social media mobilized the Iranian activists and provided them with a forum through which they could express their views. In this context, Fatemeh Keshavarz, an Iranian professor and activist who runs a blog called "Windows on Iran," said (personal communication via e-mail, April 20, 2011) that "social media made the Iranian citizens feel empowered and in some way in control of their lives. It also helped the western world, particularly the United States, to see that the Iranian society was far from the machines of ideology blinded by faith and ready to blow up the world."

The protests lasted for several months, and despite the graphic images of dead and injured protesters that were circulated through social media, the protests failed in achieving their objective [of changing the course of the elections and ending the rule of Ahmadinejad], and the regime "eventually regained control of the political sphere" (Sohrabi-Haghighat 2011).

The increasing social media role in Iran is a reflection of the tremendous growth of the Internet, which was introduced in the country in 1993. Between 2001 and 2009, Internet usage in Iran saw a 48-percent annual increase. "Recent statistics indicate there are more than 33 million Internet users in Iran amounting to 43.2 percent of the population...Reports indicate that there are about 700,000 Iranian bloggers and that 60,000 blogs are updated routinely in Iran" (Sohrabi-Haghighat 2011).

While Google and Yahoo are popular in Iran, Twitter was the medium of choice for covering the 2009 protests throughout the summer of 2009, and the hashtag "#IranElection" became very popular among Twitter users who

mostly came from the global community outside Iran. This could be attributed to Twitter's flexibility, simplicity, openness and ability to get around government censorship (Carreiro and Hirji 2009). "Hopes [in Twitter] were high to the extent that commentators were calling the uprising a 'Twitter Revolution'" despite the fact that the protests did not lead to a full-fledged revolution (Sohrabi-Haghighat 2011). The high expectations regarding Twitter role prompted the U.S. State Department to ask Twitter to postpone a scheduled upgrade in the server so that Iranian online activists can utilize Twitter without interruptions (Burns and Eltham 2009).

Despite its advantages, Twitter had a downside. "As an organization tool, it is far too public a forum to plan out protests or any anti-government activity." That is why, it was easy for Iranian officials to use it to spread fake information about the protests and to track down and arrest protesters through their Twitter accounts (Carreiro and Hirji 2009).

While it was hard for the Iranian government to completely block Twitter because of its "open-ended design" that allows access from various locations, the government blocked other forms of social media. It is known that "Iranian government operates what has been described as one of the most extensive filtering systems in the world" (Yigal 2009). In this context, Golnaz Esfandiari, an online Iranian activist and senior correspondent for Radio Free Europe based in Washington, D.C., said (personal communication, March 12, 2011, Doha, Qatar) that:

> Iran has one of the world's toughest filtering techniques after China. Iranian government officials proudly announced that they filter tens of thousands of websites. Even blogs belonging to conservatives get filtered. If you look at Facebook, you will see some fake accounts that belong to government people who created these accounts to publicize for the government. They want to make friendships with the average Iranians through these pages to check what they are writing and who their other friends are. Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei has a Twitter account, and those people who work on his account are

> really good. Whenever he has a speech, they start tweeting his speech very fast in three or four languages.

The Iranian officials also sent out text messages to the protesters to warn them against taking to the streets. In addition, the regime "formed a high-level twelve-member cybercrime team and tasked it with finding any false information – or, as they put it, 'insults and lies' – on Iranian websites. Those spreading false information were to be identified and arrested" (Morozov 2011:10).

The Iranian government's sophisticated and organized efforts in utilizing the new media to its advantage and co-opting social media were complemented by the religious foundation in Iran, which relies on the *Shi'a* clerics' rule, emanating from the "*Velayat-el faqih*" or the "Guardianship of Islamic Jurists" that controls most forms of Iranian politics and society. In his explanation of the religious foundation's impact on the Iranian uprising, Mohammed Ali Mohtadi, a researcher at an independent think-tank called the Middle East Center for Strategic Studies in Tehran, said (personal communication, March 13, 2011, Doha, Qatar):

> The religious foundation and ideology of the regime made this uprising seem against religion. In other words, it was easy for the Iranian regime to frame any such uprising as anti-religious and anti-Islamic. Most of the Iranian protesters were secular, and they were highly affected by Western culture. That's why they failed to gain the sympathy of the rest of the Iranian society, which is mostly religious.

In Iran, "there is little independent basis of organized opposition that can emanate from within the state... [Any possible source of opposition is] heavily infiltrated by the secret police and monitored closely by the *Basij* militia [which are affiliated with the clerical regime]" (Acuff 2010:229). In 2010, Iran's hard-line officials affiliated with the clerical regime launched a social networking site that included videos, images and cartoons making fun of the 2009 protests. "The site's members seem to be united by little else than the highly ambitious goal of fighting 'evil,' although there is also space to

discuss more prosaic issues like 'the rule of the supreme jurist' and 'women and family'" (Morozov 2011:134).

This clerical regime in Iran has succeeded in gaining public support because of its anti-Western message. "There is nothing that can rally people even behind unpopular governments more than the fear of a foreign threat... [This fear] has provided greater space for the [Iranian clerical] regime to consolidate its rule" (Telhami 2011).

This fear of Western hegemony might have worked against the process of cyberactivism (Howard 2011) associated with Iran's "Twitter uprising." This is because western support of the demonstrations tainted the uprising and gave the regime the opportunity to blame the protesters for conspiring against Iran's national unity. Moreover, several pro-regime media accused the West of "trying to foment a revolution via the Internet" (Morozov 2011:12).

The censorship and scare tactics operated by the Iranian regime might not have been the only reason for the failure of Iran's "Twitter uprising." Several observers argued that the lack of planning on the ground had weakened the social media's potential to mobilize the public. In this context, Morozov (2009) casted doubts on Twitter's ability to create real political change on the ground in Iran. "To ascribe such great importance to Twitter is to disregard the fact that it is poorly suited to planning protests in a repressive environment like Iran's" (Morozov 2009:12). According to Morozov, the technology-savvy, pro-Western Twitter users inside Iran, which he estimated at less than twenty thousand prior to the protests, failed at connecting with the Iranian public masses, because "The Iranian opposition did not seem to be well-organized, which might explain why it eventually fizzled" (Morozov 2011:16).

Echoing the same thought, Sohrabi-Haghighat (2011) argued that the Twitter uprising failed in generating "slogans and programs to attract the interest of low-income groups in urban areas. Apart from the vertical expansion through social classes...the movement could not extend its horizontal and geographic reach beyond big cities [in Iran]."

In this context, Slavash Abghari, an Iranian online activist who lives in Atlanta, GA, said (e-mail to the authors, April 15, 2011) that:

> The weakness of the 2009 freedom movement in Iran could be attributed to the fact that the participants in the movement were mostly from the middle class and failed to connect with the working and lower classes by expressing and demanding their needs. The working-class members who are suffering from high unemployment and inflation rate, all of them living below poverty line, are first concerned about their survival not political freedom. To succeed, the movement should have engaged the working class too.

According to Abghari, who runs an English iblog titled "My Homeland" that was hacked by the Iranian regime in 2009, "the movement couldn't achieve its immediate goal of freedom, due to the brutality of parallel security forces and lack of an independent leadership with a clear vision and strategy."

Morozov's concept of "slacktivism," which was explained earlier in this study as a "feel-good online activism that has zero political or social impact," was one of the main characteristics of the Iranian "Twitter uprising" (Heacock 2009). This "'freedom to scream' online may actually help regimes by providing a 'political release valve'" (Carafano 2009), which is what happened in the Iranian case.

The lack of organization on the ground in Iran did not meet the four characteristics of the SPIN model. The absence of a domestic Iranian civil society that would lead to the formation of segmented, polycentric and integrated networks of political activism played a critical role in the failure of the 2009 protests. Iran's "Green Movement" lacked political groups that would act "in a strategic thought-out fashion or, at least [speak] with one voice...Iran's Twitter Revolution may have drowned in its own tweets: There was just too much digital cacophony for anyone to take decisive action and lead the crowds" (Morozov 2011:197).

In this context, Golnaz Esfandiari, the Iranian activist who was quoted earlier, said in a personal interview with the authors:

> The movement just had symbolic leadership, but it lacked real leadership. People needed guidance, but they did not find this guidance on the streets. There was complete chaos with no organized efforts. Also, protesters did not hold to their grounds on the streets. The symbolic leaders of that movement were themselves part of the establishment. They included a former prime minister and a former speaker of the parliament. So, they did not want to bring down the establishment. They just wanted to change the results of the elections. They were calling for a new election, but not for the fall of the Khamenei regime.

The non-hierarchically organized networks that are part of a well-organized political activism – as called for by the SPIN model – were totally absent in the Iranian uprising. The Iranian opposition was so weak that it failed to "break away from the existing system and present a democratic alternative acceptable to the majority of the protesters who...[risked] their lives" (Acuff 2010:225). It seemed that the overall religio-political environment in Iran was not conducive for the success of the street protests that took place in 2009. The Iranian clerical regime was more organized than the opposition, and more effective in utilizing social media. That is why, the impact of the 2009 protests was hardly felt outside the major Iranian cities, and the pro-regime forces were more than enough to suppress street activism. In this context, Ali Afshari, an Iranian human rights and democracy activist living in Washington, D.C. said (personal communication, Washington, D.C., May 23, 2011):

> There was a lack of organized leadership among the opposition movement, since it mainly emerged as a reaction to the election fraud that took place, but was not previously organized in a structured way. Therefore, it was shocked by the role of the revolutionary guard and the intervention of the supreme religious leader to change the elections' results in favor of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. This, coupled with

the lack of a clear strategy and the excessive use of violence and suppression by the Iranian regime, led to ineffectiveness and chaos.

Assessing the SPIN Model in the so-called Egypt's "Facebook Revolution"

On January 25, 2011, Egypt witnessed a popular revolution that led to a historic outcome. On that day, hundreds of thousands of Egyptians took to the streets, demanding freedom, justice and an end to corruption. Then their demands were escalated to reach a point of calling for toppling President Hosni Mubarak who stayed in power for thirty years. The mass demonstrations started out in Tahrir Square in the center of Cairo, and then spread throughout various Egyptian governorates. Despite the fact that the protesters refrained from using violence, "armies of riot police took up positions on key thoroughfares around the capital, ready to beat back demonstrators," and using live ammunition and tear gas canisters against many unarmed civilians (Coker et al. 2011:A12).

After the failure of police forces to stop the increasing demonstrations, Mubarak ordered the army to take control of the situation and deploy throughout areas of tension in Egypt. In the meantime, Mubarak made several concessions by firing his cabinet and naming a vice president and a possible successor – a step that the Egyptian public had been calling on him to take for years (Coker et al. 2011).

Demonstrations continued despite Mubarak's concessions, and over the course of eighteen days, the masses defied a nationwide curfew and they were relentless in their demands in a way that stunned the Mubarak regime. Eventually, Mubarak had no choice but to step down on February 11, 2011, delegating his powers to the military and marking a new page in Egypt's history. The fall of Mubarak "was as swift as it was unexpected... [He] had inherited and shaped a system of patronage, nepotism and brutality that seemed beyond challenge" (Levinson et al. 2011:A8).

It was not a surprise that social media played a role in the Egyptian revolution given the fact that Egypt has been among the pioneering countries

in the Middle East in terms of Internet usage. "Egypt followed Tunisia by linking to the Internet in late 1993. This was done by the Information and Decision Making Support Center affiliated to the Egyptian Cabinet." The number of Internet users in Egypt at the time of writing this paper is approximately 17 million, which is 21 percent of the population. "The usage growth was 3.691 percent between 2000 and 2010. All receive the service through 211 Internet Service Providers" (Rinnawi 2011:126). The number of Egyptian blogs has risen from 40 in 2004 to approximately 160,000 in July 2008 (Internet Filtering in Egypt, 2009). "Although Egypt's Interior Ministry [under Mubarak] maintain[ed] a department of 45 people to monitor Facebook, nearly 5 million Egyptians use the social networking site" (Ghannam 2011:5). "That's less than 7 percent of Egypt's total population. In other words, less than 7 out of every 100 Egyptians are Facebook users" (Vijayan 2011).

Despite the small number of Egyptians on Facebook, activists used this social media tool to get their message across and to plan their meeting points on the streets. That led many observers to describe the Egyptian uprising as the "Facebook Revolution." One Facebook page was launched before the revolution, and it played a key role in mobilizing the Egyptian public. This page revolved around a young Egyptian male – Khaled Said – who was beaten to death in June 2010 on the streets of Alexandria by two police officers after posting a YouTube video which allegedly revealed police corruption (Khamis and Vaughn 2011). The "We Are All Khaled Said" page attracted close to a half-a-million followers, and it "became a rallying point for a campaign against police brutality. For many Egyptians, it revealed details of the extent of torture in their country" (Profile: Egypt's Wael Ghonim 2011).

The social media role in the Egyptian revolution was suspended on January 27, 2011, after the Egyptian regime's unmatched step of shutting down the Internet service and cutting the mobile service in the whole country. Despite the fact that the Internet blackout lasted for six days, during which the country was totally isolated from the virtual world, "protest organizers

were able to bring out larger crowds than ever using flyers and leaflets, word of mouth, and mosques as centers for congregation" (Baiasu 2011).

The protesters' ability to carry on with their activities on the ground during the height of the revolution without social media could be attributed to a well-organized Egyptian civil society that had been active for years before the revolution despite pressures from the Mubarak regime.

The Egyptian civil society under the Mubarak regime was subject to state laws that curtailed its functionality. Still, the decade that preceded the revolution had witnessed waves of protests and "cycle[s] of contestation," that were instigated by "the continuing structural crises of the Egyptian economy and state system, which had long since alienated the mass of the population" (El-Mahdi 2009:96).

In 2000, the first wave of political activism was exemplified in a series of street protests that took place on many Egyptian university campuses in support of the second Palestinian uprising. Then, a second wave of protests took place in 2003 against the U.S. invasion of Iraq (El-Mahdi and Marfleet 2009). In 2004, a third and massive-scale cycle of contestation started when activists from various political backgrounds and affiliations came together and formed "The Egyptian Movement for Change," whose slogan was "*Kifaya*" (English for Enough). This movement, which included Islamists, Liberals, and Socialists, among others, called on Mubarak not to run for a fifth term and rejected the possibility of his son Gamal succeeding him.

During the months that preceded the 2005 presidential elections, *Kifaya* organized "a host of public activities – demonstrations, campus rallies, meetings and marches." It came up with new ways to contest the authorities. (El-Mahdi 2009:89-90). The rise of *Kifaya* coincided with the emergence of a vibrant group of online activists and bloggers who documented the regime's brutalities, particularly police torture and human rights' violations (El-Mahdi 2009). *Kifaya* utilized the bloggers' help to disseminate its message, but its main activities took place on the ground. It had a "horizontal structure" (El-Mahdi 2009:91) that invested in the talents and energies of

its members who belonged to different factions, yet they were united in a coalition movement that called for an end to the Mubarak regime.

This horizontal nature of *Kifaya*, that organically connected its members who held different ideologies, exemplified the SPIN model, where "multiple hubs" (Bennett 2003) of segmented, polycentric movements are collectively integrated into a network of "nonhierarchical social linkages" with shared understandings among the ideologically-diverse participants (Gerlach 2001:295).

Additionally, in 2006 a group of judges organized public sit-ins and protests to call for the independence of the judiciary system. This was "an unprecedented development in which dissent came from within the core structures of the state itself" (El-Mahdi 2009:99).

Furthermore, over the course of 2008, hundreds of thousands of workers collectively participated in huge strikes and protests. Then, a couple young activists started a Facebook group, calling for a general strike on April 6, 2008. As a result of this call, a massive strike took place and "drew in an unusually broad array of formal and informal opposition groups...[along with] state workers...independent journalists, and university professors" (Ottaway and Hamzawy 2011). A movement known as "April 6" was formed in the immediate aftermath of this call, and it included activists and bloggers belonging to several ideological schools, thus exemplifying the same spirit that existed in *Kifaya*. Egypt continued to witness workers' protests over the course of 2009 and 2010.

None of the abovementioned movements could "claim a decisive victory. But together they have succeeded in changing the agenda for political action under conditions of sustained authoritarianism" (El-Mahdi and Marfleet 2009:10). Moreover, they were effective in mobilizing the Egyptian public and building up a strong momentum for the 2011 revolution. These movements were organized in a way that created "shared communities of protest" and revitalized "an environment of public dissent" (El-Mahdi 2009:96).

As mentioned earlier, the SPIN model was evident in most of the civil society movements in Egypt, but the best exemplification for it was wit-

nessed during the 2011 revolution. The revolution started out with small demonstrations that grew bigger. No particular group or movement led or claimed exclusive responsibility for these demonstrations. "Though small, [these] organizing groups were clearly effective in bringing people to the streets who had never engaged in political activity a day in their lives. While organizers did meet in person, social media was sometimes a safer way to interact and plan" (Baiasu 2011).

The SPIN model calls for collective action, group coordination and organized division of labor among members of various groups. All these characteristics were featured at Tahrir Square during the Egyptian revolution. Esraa Abdel-Fattah, a political activist and co-founder of the April 6 group, said (personal communication, February 13, 2011, Cairo, Egypt) right after Mubarak's falling: "Members from all the youth political groups were protesting at Tahrir Square...It was a perfect division of labor among the protesters. It was a whole life at the square."

The young activists whose organizations participated in the revolution formed the Coalition of the Revolution's Youth. With approximately 50,000 members on its Facebook page, it served "as a forum for discussion and an umbrella movement that will try to crystallize specific demands...Suggestions made online [through Facebook] are taken up and discussed at face-to-face meetings, both in the capital and in the governorates" (Eissa 2011).

This coalition is an embodiment of the SPIN model at its best. The segmented and polycentric youth movements that formed this coalition overcomed their differences and formed an organized network to channel the demands raised during the revolution. This coalition's participants captured the core of Gerlach's SPIN model in that they "are not only linked internally, but with other movements whose participants share attitudes and values. Through these links, a movement can draw material support, recruit new supporters, and expand coordination for joint action" (Gerlach 2001:296).

Conclusion

Despite the fact that social media, particularly Facebook and Twitter, played a critical role in the political upheavals that have been taking place in the Middle East, we cannot assume a relationship of causality between social media and political revolutions. This study shows that social media can potentially contribute to political revolution, but only under certain circumstances. There needs to be a complex network of events, forces, and people in order for social media to be effective in political change.

In considering the relationship between social media and political revolutions, we have to acknowledge the differences in content and capability among various forms of social media. For example, while Facebook allows for rich information and a high level of sustained interaction among its users, Twitter has the potential to reach a broader audience at a faster pace compared to Facebook. These differences between Facebook and Twitter were exemplified in their use by activists in Egypt and Iran.

The comparison between the Internet role in Egypt's 2011 revolution and Iran's 2009 uprising showed that political realism is more functional than cyber-utopianism in assessing the role of social media role in public mobilization. The Iranian protesters' inability to change the course of the 2009 elections, "let alone spark a revolution, should remind us that utopian interpretations of technology and social movements often run into a hard reality. Using the criteria of existing theories of revolution, it is clear that Iran was – and remains – far from reaching the requisite threshold of a political or social revolution" (Acuff 2010:226).

In the context of political realism, the SPIN model was more applicable to the Egyptian revolution than the Iranian uprising. This could be linked to four major differences between both cases. First, while the Iranian protesters were disorganized and failed to attract large numbers of people, the Egyptian segmented groups, which were part of civil society, were able to integrate, network and act in unison despite their polycentric nature and the disparities in their ideologies. Mohammed Ali Mohtadi, the Iranian thinker

quoted earlier, said in the same interview with the authors that: "The uprising that erupted in Iran was launched by certain and limited factions of the upper and middle classes of the Iranian society. This was very different from the Egyptian revolution, which involved all factions of the society, such as the elite, the youth and the laborers." The fact that the percentage of Internet users in Egypt is way less than that in Iran, as previously mentioned, yet the Egyptian revolution succeeded in toppling the regime, indicates that the social media need a strong civil society in order for them to function effectively. This is also important given the reality that the Internet service in Egypt was suspended by the Mubarak regime for more than a week during the 18-day revolution, yet political movements succeeded in mobilizing themselves on the streets without the use of social media during that time.

Second, a lot of the activists who were the mobilizing force behind the Iranian uprising were opposition groups operating in the diaspora outside of Iran, while this was not the case in Egypt, where the opposition groups were all active locally. This is closely related to the previous point, since local groups are more capable of on the ground organization and attracting a wide base of popular support.

Third, the level of sophistication of the Iranian government in combating the opposition's cyberactivism efforts was much more than the Egyptian government, since the Iranian regime was not only more technologically savvy than its Egyptian counterpart, but was also more prepared and more proactive, rather than reactive, in countering activism, both online and offline.

Fourth, in Egypt the struggle was against a clearly corrupt and visibly oppressive regime, but in Iran the regime acquires a large part of its legitimacy from the religious theocracy that is ruling the country, which makes it much harder to shake this regime or to fight against it, thus limiting the effectiveness of opposition movements, both online as well as on the streets.

Therefore, the authors can safely conclude that social media cannot automatically or single-handedly launch a revolution. "This is not to say that

social networks don't matter; they matter a lot. But they do not incarnate freedom, do not bring about some final, heaven-like stage of human history" (Rieff 2011). In order for social media to be effective in initiating change, they have to be complemented by an active civil society, with well-organized political groups and networks that fit the characteristics of the SPIN model. If these groups exist on the ground, social media can serve as tools for accelerating public mobilization. This well-organized civil society that is conducive for political change existed in Egypt, but not in Iran.

It must be acknowledged that not all protests can lead to revolution. The protests that took place in Egypt in January 2011 were of the confrontational, revolutionary nature that led to toppling the regime, but the protests that took place in Iran in 2009 were less confrontational with the regime, as they were not backed up by a strong support system of organizational networks in the real world. Therefore, we need to be cautious in our assessment of the role of social media in political mobilization to avoid falling in the trap of technological determinism or cyber-utopianism. Rather, we have to bear in mind that "Social media are often a useful compliment to the kinds of activism" that take place in the offline world" (Jones 2011), but they are not a decisive factor in determining the outcomes of uprisings and revolutions. In Egypt, unlike in Iran, the decisive factor was the on-the-ground organized networking that emulated the SPIN model. At the end of the day, the success or failure of political movements depends primarily on political activism in the real world, rather than merely cyberactivism in the virtual world.

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