

Cyberactivists Paving the Way for the Arab Spring: Voices from Egypt, Tunisia and Libya

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Abstract

The wave of Arab revolutions and uprisings that has been shaking all corners of the Arab Middle East since 2011 and that has come to be known as the Arab Spring owed a major portion of its success to online activism. The spark that ignited these revolutions in the offline world was ignited by the Arab cyberactivists' well-coordinated campaigns, calling for the toppling of corrupt regimes in their home countries. These campaigns were launched through various forms of social media, such as blogs, Facebook, Twitter and Flickr with the goal of introducing drastic political changes and allowing for a higher margin of freedom in a region that has often been associated with autocracy and dictatorship. Three Arab countries in particular – Egypt, Tunisia and Libya – have witnessed sweeping transformations, leading to the ousting and court trials of members of their old regimes and the holding of democratic presidential and parliamentary elections. This study utilizes qualitative, on-the-field interviews with cyberactivists in these three countries to provide a unique perspective into how they have paved the way for a new era of openness and democratic reform in their respective countries.

Keywords

blogs, citizen journalism, civic engagement, cyberactivism, democracy, public sphere, authority, Libya, politics, Tunisia, activism, Egypt, Arab Spring

Introduction

The revolutions that swept all corners of the Arab Middle East were characterized by the instrumental use of social media, especially Facebook, Twitter, blogs, YouTube, and text messaging by protesters, to achieve a number of pragmatic goals, such as group networking, on-the-ground organizing, and offering practical advice on how to confront police brutality or how to avoid arrest. Arab cyberactivists created online platforms that served as important

venues for the exchange of ideas and the formulation of collective public opinion.

Arab cyberactivists also created virtual forums for citizen journalism through enabling ordinary citizens to document not only the protests, but, most importantly, the underlying causes that led to the eruption of these protests in the first place, such as governmental brutality, limitations on freedom of expression, flaws in the political system, official corruption, and violations of human rights, as well as allowing them to disseminate words and images to each other, and, most importantly, to the outside world.

This study contributes to understanding how cyberactivism in the Arab world has become an effective “mobilization tool,” through conducting on-the-field qualitative interviews with several cyberactivists in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya - where former dictators were toppled and reform is underway - to provide an insight into how they have played a critical role in paving the road for the popular revolutions in their respective countries. This role was exemplified through encouraging civic engagement and public participation by launching online forums for free speech and political networking opportunities and providing a virtual space for assembly, which allowed for the exchange of civic discourse, deliberation, and articulation that went beyond simply supporting the capability of the protestors to plan, organize, and execute peaceful protests on the ground. Our interviews with the cyberactivists were conducted during the period from 2009 until 2011.

Literature Review

Cyberactivism: Energizing Civic Engagement?

Online activism can actually enable the creation of a vibrant and active civil society, through encouraging civic engagement and boosting political participation. Citizens' access to information and their ability to utilize this information for the purpose of enhancing civil society have been affected by the Internet and other communication technologies. Therefore, we need to map some of the scholarly views that hailed the potential implications of

the Internet and its multiple applications in terms of bringing about actual political involvement and citizen participation, as well as those that were skeptical of such possibilities.

Today, several civil society organizations and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are utilizing the Internet to get their voices across to as many citizens as possible. Moreover, “many people connect to established social groups through the Internet as they receive e-newsletters from their groups or visit group websites. In addition, cyber associations have expanded rapidly as individuals interact through online forums, chat rooms and personal pages that are separate from the traditional social groups. This has led to the development of a ‘virtual civil society’” (Kittilson 2008:3). Moreover, “The dynamic and changing nature of the ... [Internet] and its promise of inexpensive and universal access to information and communication suggest rich potential for civic uses.” (Schuler 2004:363)

Thanks to the Internet, civic engagement has expanded due to the fact that the average individual has a bigger say in the day-to-day issues of public concern. “Structurally, the Internet has inverted the few-to-many architecture of the broadcast age, in which a small number of people were able to influence and shape the perceptions and beliefs of entire nations. In the many-to-many environment of the Net, every desktop is a printing press, a broadcasting station, and a place of assembly” (Rheingold 2004:272). This expansion of civic engagement due to the Internet was clearly manifested in the role played by cyberactivism in mobilizing, energizing, and improvising the revolutions in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya.

“Civil society actors are increasingly using the Internet to document and share reality” and this can “lead to a profound shift in how politicians go about doing campaigning and interacting with the general public. This has the potential for an inverted ‘panopticon’ where citizens constantly monitor the state and document the practices of the state and those aspiring to become a part of the state” (Vatrapu 2008:16).

The Internet has taken civil society to another level: “Today’s [electronic] forms of civil society suggest that lives are increasingly lived in fluid rela-

tions where electronic information flows, material and virtual bodies, and physical locations are intersecting and integrating in more prolific, engaging and interesting ways ... Social relations ... [engulfed in civil society] are becoming increasingly informed through emerging technologies that allow for distributed connectivity and information sharing and cooperation (Dennis 2007:32).

Brauer (2008:229) argued that “the Internet seems to provide current social movements with new opportunities for restructuring their internal communication activities as well as their external media use in order to enhance their strategic potential.” According to Fuchs (2006:5), the Internet has paved the way for a self-administered “grassroots digital democracy” that relies on a bottom-up “e-participation,” and this “self-organized democracy is a process of self-determination and self-management that maximizes the involvement of affected humans in political discourse and decision taking and avoids the formation of political elites that constitute ... [hierarchical] political systems that are alienated from the direct involvement of citizens.”

Echoing the abovementioned views, Perez (2004:89) argued that the Internet, as a transparent and multidirectional, rather than a unidirectional, form of communication, can allow for a simultaneous presentation of “multiple forms of deliberation and decision-making structures, which could cater to different individual profiles and utilize varied discursive frameworks.” Witschge (2004:110) referred to the Internet’s role in promoting deliberative democracy, particularly in the political arena: “Not only could the Internet encourage more people to discuss politics by freeing them of psychological barriers, but it could do so by offering a (partial) solution to the problems that deliberative democracy is confronted with—problems previously seen as insurmountable. The Internet makes manageable large-scale, many-to-many discussion and deliberation.”

It also offers “netizens,” defined as people who are active users of the Internet, “platforms and tools to exchange the views and information needed in order to realize freedom and self-government” (Deuze 2003:211). Accord-

ing to Agre (2004:63), the Internet, “By providing a general mechanism for moving digital information and a general platform for constructing digital information utilities,” can allow for new opportunities and venues through which political interactions can be crystallized.”

Moreover, some scholars argued that the Internet, and its related applications, such as blogging, Facebook and Twitter, can play a critical role in enhancing social capital, which was defined by Putnam (2000:19) as “connections among individuals-social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.” Dahlgren (2009:159) states that “The more and better connected one is, the more likely one is to participate as an effective citizen-[this] captures the importance of networks.” Social capital enhances the feeling of social accountability and trust. “Together social capital and social trust foster norms of reciprocity and of shared responsibility for the greater good” (Lerner, et al. 2007:5). The Internet can strengthen social capital by “[drawing] people into contact with others to create shared resources and communal concerns” (Katz 2002:337).

One could not think of a better example than the role of Internet-based activism in instigating, covering and organizing the sweeping wave of popular revolutions in the Arab world, which led to unprecedented political transformations. It was new online media avenues, such as blogs, Facebook, and Twitter-which were extensively used by members of civil society, especially youth-that revealed the true faces of their regimes and exposed their flaws to the international community at large, i.e., to the “global civil society.”

Studying social media’s potential impact on public participation and civic engagement requires making a distinction between online media that serve as forums for political expression and those that are venues for political participation (Wallsten 2005). In this context, Su (2005:4) argued that “in the popular media, blogging [as a form of social media] is perhaps most recognized as an enabler for collective action. Thus, some bloggers seek to influence events in their world through blogs.”

However, Keren (2006) argued that online media alone cannot lead to concrete political action on the ground, because online activists could be “help-

less *vis a vis* the evil they experience or observe, and their helplessness is only marginally relieved by the sense of community that is emerging online ... Feelings such as fear of oppression, resentment toward authority and vulnerability ... are not easily reduced by online ... writing” (Keren 2006:151).

One of the main reasons behind the skepticism around the ability of cyber-activists to bring about actual political change or transformation has been that bloggers have been widely perceived as a disjointed group varying in purpose and motivation, and therefore their ability to organize around a singular cause or impetus is likewise perceived to be weak. In fact, Gharbeia (2007:52) points out that even as “the media now portrays...[online activists] as cyber-dissent and it has become a synonym for activism,” nonetheless, cyberactivists “generally shy away from public affairs,” or, at best, they do not have the necessary connections and tools to link their online political activism with real-life political practices that could bring about change at the decision-making level.

Echoing a similar opinion, Dahlgren (2009:163-165) indicates that there are now thousands of discussion groups, chat rooms, alternative journalism sites, blogs, civic organizations, NGOs, and grassroots issue-advocacy sites that are active in the political realm, both locally and globally. He argues that “These ‘agonistic public spheres’ or ‘cyberghettos’ can be a strong sign for a healthy democratic environment that is ‘based on contestation rather than consensus’...However, they can be a hindrance to democracy if there are no structural connections and procedures between these communicative spaces and the processes of decision-making.”

Some scholars, such as Keren (2006:16), have argued that online activism “has made political discourse interactive and abolished etiquettes that have previously served as a means to silence legitimate voices on the edges. It has allowed private or group needs ... to become matters of public concern and to expand the range of issues that require political attention.” However, the fact remains that online media forums do not necessarily serve as automatic venues for enhancing civic engagement and political participation. They may just have a “cathartic role” in the sense that “people would sit in front

of their computers and mistake typing at each other for political action” (Rheingold, 2008:103). In order for the social media to serve as an ideal environment for democratic practice and civic engagement, cyberactivists have to grasp “the connection between their power to publish online, their power to influence the circumstances of their own lives, and the health of democracy” (Rheingold 2008:104).

Along the same lines, Dahlgren (2001:53) argued that the Internet has the ability to energize and augment the public sphere, but he questioned the transformative nature of the Internet, and its related applications, when it comes to revitalizing political environments and energizing political mobilization offline. He contends that “The Internet clearly offers opportunities for the motivated. The questions today are not so much how the Internet will change political life, but rather, what might motivate more people to see themselves as citizens of a democracy [and] to engage in ... political [life].” He rightly claims that while some of the answers to these questions may be found online, “most reside in our real social circumstances” (Dahlgren 2001:53).

This is especially true since Internet technology, in and of itself, may not be the only answer to the problems facing civil society activists. “The Internet will always be a supplement to, not a replacement for, other connections. Those who already have power can make more effective immediate use of the technology—so those with less power have to work harder to make it effective on their side” (Calhoun 2004:241). Moreover, the Internet complements, rather than replaces, face-to-face communication. “It empowers local activists who would otherwise find it harder to reach others with similar concerns in remote locations. It enables both lateral sharing of information and better access to information” (Calhoun 2004:243).

In this context, Rheingold (2004:275) posed a very critical question: “Will worldwide Usenet discussions ... World Wide Web pages, and email chain-letter petitions add to civic life, or remove people from it?” To put it differently: “Will the Internet strengthen civic life, community, and

democracy, or will it weaken them?” (Rheingold 2004:273). According to Rheingold (2004:276):

Electronic communications do not offer a utopia, but they do offer a unique channel for publishing and communicating, and the power to publish and communicate is fundamental to democracy. Communication media are necessary, but not sufficient, for self-governance and healthy societies. The important stuff still requires turning off the computer and braving the uncertainties of the offline world.

This last point is certainly applicable in the case of the successful revolutions in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya. If it wasn't for the willingness of political activists in the real world to risk their own lives, through having the moral courage to take out to the streets in large numbers, at great personal costs to themselves, no form of cyberactivism in the virtual world alone could have brought about the desired political transformation and the historical outcome that marveled the world.

Salter (2004), as cited in Lunat (2008:6), argued that “the Internet is not passive but rather shaped by ... ‘forms of use.’” To suggest that the Internet has a positive or detrimental impact on communication and discourse ignores the fact that the Internet does nothing without people doing something with it.” In other words, as Bohman (2004:132) rightly points out, “electronic and computer-mediated network communication may well expand the scope of certain features of communicative interaction across space and time ... [However], it is the software rather than hardware that constructs how communication occurs over the network.”

Therefore, without taking into account the overall political, social, economic, and cultural contexts in each society, and the accompanying factors that might either mobilize and activate the public(s) or restrict and limit the level of political activism, any discussion of online modes of communication and their ability to bring about political change will not be sufficient to provide answers or solutions for the lack of political involvement and civic engagement.

In brief, we can contend that cyberactivism can influence our discussions of current events and public affairs. However, the implications of these blogs on actual political engagement are still largely controversial. While a lot of scholarship on the issue are empirical studies of whether or not the Internet increases or decreases outside political engagement (such as voting, campaigning, or other “tangible” forms of political engagement), we can argue that the very act of engaging in cyberactivism could also be considered a form of political action in and of itself. This could be attributed to the fact that a large part of the purpose behind political actions, such as gathering in rallies and protests, is to garner saliency.

Therefore, the act of writing on a topic or an event, commenting on it, and interacting with it, as is the case with cyberactivism, could also lead to the same result of increasing saliency and drawing attention to that topic or event.

Cyberactivism: Reconstructing citizen journalism?

Citizen journalism “wants citizens to be conscious of themselves, informed on the issues, and ready to act on their conclusions” (Leonard 1999:85). It attempts to enhance citizens’ ability to discuss the problems that are covered in the news and to contemplate solutions for these problems (Nip 2006). In a way, the citizen press’s role in this type of journalism is “not just to inform a public that may or may not emerge, but to improve the chances that it will emerge” (Rosen 1999:19). In that sense, citizen, or public, journalism, as it is sometimes called, is closely tied to Habermas’ notion of the “deliberating public,” where there is “a focus on topics of common concern to all citizens” (Haas 2007:39).

The Internet has helped in crystallizing and reformulating the concept of citizen journalism. Online media have blurred “the boundary between professional and non-professional journalists by co-opting their consumers into the process of message production. Casting their lot with consumers-turned-producers, they abolish the hierarchical boundary between production and consumption of messages. The result may be

communications that faithfully reflect the reactions and needs of the users” (Woo-Young 2005:926).

In referring to the Internet’s role in citizen journalism, Paulussen (2008:28) states that it is not realistic to exaggerate the power of online journalism in a way that reflects “technological determinism,” which “falls short in considering the social, cultural and economic contextual factors that influence how and to what extent journalists use new technologies.” Paulussen (2008:28) also points out that recently, “technological deterministic accounts of online journalism have become outnumbered by social constructivist approaches in which the adoption of online journalism practices ... is no longer seen as the result of a technology-driven process, but as the outcome of the complex interaction between professional, organizational, economic and social factors.”

The resemblance between the role played by cyberactivists and that played by citizen journalists led some scholars to contend that virtual activism is a new form of (citizen) journalism that is free of the disciplinary practices of journalism and, therefore, tends to be more authentic and independent. Thanks to online activism, regular people feel that they have their own voice and that they can set the political news agenda. “[Cyberactivism] today has become an alternative platform that offers voice and contact to those outside the mainstream media ... This new phenomenon of Citizen-Generated Media...which includes uncensored information and unmediated conversation, is considered to be the greatest strength of the...[virtual sphere]” (Hall 2006:6).

Along the same lines, Keren (2006:9) argued that “the channels opened up by the Internet to individual self-expression have raised hopes for a reinvigoration of a public sphere worn off in an age of centralized mass media ... The current diversification of communication channels ... is politically important because it expands the range of voices that can be heard in a national debate, ensuring that no one voice can speak with unquestioned authority.”

Similarly, Ford (2001) highlighted that the Internet can play an important role as an alternative medium. “As an interconnected infrastructure

for multiple forms of communications, [the Internet] facilitates an era of convergence of media technologies. By providing for the easy transmittal of simple texts as well as the means to combine and re-combine a range of media formats and social actors, it allows for an unprecedented distribution of knowledge and resources to virtually anywhere in the globe” (Ford 2001:202).

Egypt, Tunisia and Libya: Voices from the Field

Several cyberactivists from Egypt, Tunisia and Libya have paved the way for the launching of revolutions in their respective countries by enhancing public awareness about corruption, nepotism and human rights violations. We conducted in-depth interviews with several cyberactivists from the three countries under study. The process of selecting which cyberactivists to interview varied from one country to the other. We spent time in Egypt before, during and after the January 25 revolution, and we utilized our connections and networking with cyberactivists there to schedule and conduct interviews with them. We could not travel to Tunisia and Libya, but we interviewed several cyberactivists from these two countries during the course of Al-Jazeera forum, which was held in Doha, Qatar in March 2011. At that time, Tunisia was finished with its revolution, which started on December 18, 2010 and led to the resignation and escape of the Tunisian President Zein el Abedeen Bin Ali on January 14, 2011. However, the Libyan revolution, which erupted on February 17, 2011, was still ongoing. This revolution led to the capturing and killing of the Libyan President Moammar Qadhafi on October 20, 2011. Throughout the process of interviewing cyberactivists in all three countries, we made sure to have a balance between male and female activists.

Among the cyberactivists we interviewed in Egypt was Noha Atef. A prominent female Egyptian blogger, Atef’s blog titled “Torture in Egypt” helped make Egyptians aware of torture cases in some Egyptian prisons under the regime of President Hosni Mubarak, who was ousted on February 11, 2011, 18 days after the launching of the January 25 revolution. In a

personal interview with Atef in 2009, she said: “I started to contact human rights organizations, lawyers and NGOs to send me reports of torture cases so that I could post them on my blog. I also received witnesses’ reports. When I read about torture cases in the newspapers, I conduct my own investigation through trying to talk to the victims and lawyers and track down the cases, and then I provide an analysis of these on my blog.” Atef believes that her blog has revitalized civic engagement in Egypt through increasing people’s awareness of such as sensitive topic as torture. “At least my blog makes people aware of the fact that torture exists in Egypt. Also, a number of NGOs are interested in making sure that these torture cases are posted on my blog so that people can become aware of it. My blog is also inspiring to victims of torture. In fact, my blog has encouraged some torture victims to start blogging about their experiences.”

Another Egyptian female cyberactivist - Dalia Ziada - has been trying to enhance public awareness about different issues, which are women’s rights. Ziada, who has been blogging since 2006, told the authors in 2009: “I have joined other cyberactivists in collaborative efforts to spread the word about sexual harassment in Egypt, and we were able to increase the public’s awareness about this critical problem. So, women started to take precautions to defend themselves on the street. I believe that political change will not result from changing laws. We have been doing that for decades now, but with no obvious result. I believe that the best way to change is through changing people’s culture and mentalities. And that is what I have been encouraging through my blog.”

Addressing the importance of raising public awareness through cyberactivism, Ibrahim El-Hodeiby, a male Egyptian cyberactivist and the grandson of Ma’amoun El-Hodeiby, the late General Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood group, told the authors in 2009: “Those who are not aware usually come from the elitist socio-economic classes, and they will soon be holding leadership positions and that would mean that they might be leading the country politically or economically without being aware of the political challenges facing the country or the challenges facing the people. It is our

role as cyberactivists to help the average person become more knowledgeable of his/her political rights because knowledge is power.”

Similar to the Egyptian cyberactivists’ efforts in enhancing people’s awareness about critical issues, their Tunisian counterparts have been engaged in the same efforts, despite the tough circumstances that they have been facing. A case in point is Lina Ben Mhenni, a female Tunisian online activist whose blog was blocked and Facebook account was suspended by the regime of ousted President Bin Ali. “I think this was because I was dealing with human rights issues. I continued to use my blog using proxies outside the country to get around the government’s censorship. We had been living with online censorship for a long time, and so we learned how to get around it by using other technological means,” said Ben Mhenni in a personal interview with the authors in 2011. Ben Mhenni actively participated in enhancing the Tunisian people’s awareness about the atrocities of Bin Ali’s regime during the buildup to the Tunisian revolution, which took place in December, 2010. In this context, Ben Mhenni told the authors:

I have been denouncing all the injustices in Tunisia for more than two years through my blog. At the beginning of the revolution, I started covering what was going on in the capital city, Tunis. I took photos and videos of the lawyers’ and students’ demonstration, and I shared them online. And then one day I decided to go to Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine to be on the ground and to see what was going on. On the same day that I traveled to Sidi Bouzid, some friends whom I met on Facebook called me from the city of Regueb to say that the police had just killed five people. So, I went there to cover the incidents. There were no other media, and I took pictures of the bodies of these people and posted them on my blog. I also put a link to Twitter and I posted the link on Facebook, along with the pictures. And on January 14, I took part in the big demonstrations that led to the escape of Bin Ali. I was tweeting through my mobile phone, and I took live video through my mobile phone as well.”

Compared to Tunisia and Egypt, Internet use for political purposes was more limited in Libya, particularly since the start of the Libyan revolution

on February 17, 2011. There were very few Libyans on Facebook, and many of them were not involved in politics. Despite the strong clampdown of the regime of the now dead Libyan President Qadhafi on the Internet, several Libyan cyberactivists managed to enhance the Libyan public awareness of country's political events during the prelude to the Libyan Revolution. A case in point is Faraj Saad Faraj, a male Libyan cyberactivist who had been using social media, particularly Facebook, for political purposes and for calling for change before the revolution. In a personal interview with the authors in 2011 before the ousting of Qadhafi, Faraj said: "I had been trying to post political messages on Facebook without risking my own life. There have been many cases of online activists who were arrested by the regime in the course of the revolution. Several Internet thugs were employed by the regime to monitor online activists and to launch Facebook pages and online campaigns to publicize for the regime. Several online activists were arrested in Benghazi [a Libyan town] before the revolution, and we don't know anything about their fate. This has instilled some fear among the other online activists."

The cyberactivists' efforts in enhancing public political awareness can lead to a boost in the general public morale, which can eventually create a feeling of self-assurance in the possibility of change. In this context, Hofheinz (2005:92-93) argued that Cyberactivists "in the Arab world tend to develop an increase in self confidence and belief in one's own potential. Arab Internet users become aware of their own individuality," in a way that can lead to real change on the ground.

So, a natural outcome of the increase in Arabs' political awareness through online media platforms was public motivation and citizen journalism with the help of cyberactivists in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, who did provide platforms through which ordinary citizens could express their frustrations with the ousted regimes. Cyberactivists' efforts in these three countries had led to motivating the members of the general public through engaging them in the online public sphere. The average citizen in these three countries had felt that their voice counted and that they could make a real difference in their communities. In this context, Radsch (2011) argued that the contours

of the information society have made citizen journalism, social networking and other forms of digital activism one of the most potent and politically charged manifestations of power in societies where citizens lack access to the political arena and the media sphere is dominated by state interests.

Echoing this thought, Hussam El-Hamalawy, a prominent male Egyptian cyberactivist who blogs on the rights of laborers and labor unions, told the authors in 2009: “My blog is in English. When I know that there is news at any Egyptian factory that would have never seen the light had it not been for my blog, I perceive this as a success. When I find that it is via my blog that the solidarity messages of the labor movement or other activists in Europe and in America have moved in solidarity with the strikers or detainees because they read the news on my blog, then I know that it had made a difference. Egypt has just witnessed the birth of the first independent labor union in the modern history of the country. I was part of this fight, meaning that I was working with the free union leadership to get international labor unions to intervene on their behalf.”

A prominent female political activist, Esraa Abdel-Fattah, started a Facebook group that epitomized political mobilization in Egypt. She told the authors in 2010:

“I wanted to do something positive for my country, and I thought of using Facebook because I got tired of participating in the civil society in the physical world given the restrictions that were put on it by the Mubarak regime. So, I thought the virtual world was more open and more conducive for political activism. I started a Facebook group on April 6, 2008, and I was calling for a general one-day strike as a sign of complaint about the high prices of basic goods. My idea coincided with the laborers’ strike to complain about their poor living conditions. I joined efforts with Ahmed Maher, another political activist, and we formed the Facebook group that called for the strike. We chose April 6 because there was another strike that was organized by the laborers on December 6 of the previous year, and it was successful, and so we chose the sixth of the month as a good omen. Through

the group, I called on people not to go to work on April 6 and to stay at home. I also called on people to do other things on that day, such as wearing black, hanging the Egyptian flag on their balconies and abstain from buying products.”

More than 77 thousand followers joined the group that Abdel-Fattah called for online between March 23 and April 6 2008. On April 6, many streets were empty despite the announcement by the Ministry of Interior that warned people against joining the strike and encouraged them to go out to their work on that day. Abdel-Fattah came to be known as the “Facebook girl.” As a result of organizing this event, and under the auspices of the Emergency Law, Abdel-Fattah was arrested while sitting at a café and wearing black with a few other activists. She was accused of disrupting public life, and she spent 18 days in jail. A movement came out of the Facebook group under the same name.

Another female Egyptian cyberactivist, Asmaa Mahfouz, posted a video on Facebook that was believed to have played a critical role in the launching of the January 25 revolution in Egypt. Mahfouz told the authors in 2011:

“The idea of the video originated when four Egyptians set themselves on fire on January 18, 2011 to complain about their deteriorating economic situations. And when one of them died, several people started calling on taking action to change the situation on the ground and break the political status quo. So, I announced on my Facebook page that I was going out to Tahrir Square to demonstrate and I called on people to join me and posted my cellphone number. Then, I went out to Tahrir Square on January 18, 2011, and I was joined by just three of my friends. I carried a banner saying: ‘Four Egyptians set themselves on fire because of poverty, humiliation and hunger.’ And I started yelling at people and saying: ‘Come on Egyptians, join me and demonstrate against the suppression. When will you move? When will you take action?’ Then, the state security started chasing and harassing me and they threatened to lock me up. In the course of all this action, I had to leave and headed straight to a human rights

center in downtown Cairo. Over there, I took my video camera out and said the same things that I was saying at Tahrir Square on the video. Then, I uploaded the video on Facebook and it started to get so much public attention, which I did not expect. On the video, I also called on people to protest on January 25, 2011. On the video, I did not specify demands, but I made it general by calling on people to go out asking for their rights and to regain their dignity. Since I posted the video, my mobile phone did not stop ringing. I posted my cellphone number in the video as well. I was also surprised that pamphlets were disseminated on the streets using my slogan of ‘Go out and ask for your rights.’

On the evening of January 24, 2011, I posted another video on Facebook to remind people to go out on January 25. More than 20 thousand people watched that video overnight in less than 24 hours. This video was also posted on several other pages.

Then I went out on January 25 to protest with the people. I feel that I invented a new tool to fight and resist the state security in a way that the authorities did not expect, and that is the use of social media and Facebook for political purposes.”

Similar to their Egyptian counterparts, cyberactivists in both Tunisia and Libya were highly successful in motivating their followers in a way that enhanced civic engagement. A case in point is Malek Khadrawi, a male Tunisian blogger and director of Nawaat, which is a group of Tunisian blogs that have been covering the political situation in Tunisia. Nawaat also served as a platform for the leaders of banned political parties and civil society pioneers in Tunisia during the ousted regime of Bin Ali. When blogging developed in Tunisia, Nawaat has become a center where political bloggers share and exchange ideas about the Tunisian politics. The site includes more than three hundred posters and fifty active bloggers. The Nawaat site is an exemplification of the concept of citizen journalism in Tunisia.

Khadrawi used to live and blog in France before he returned to his home country after the revolution. In a personal interview with the authors in

2011, Khadrawi said: “During the revolution, I worked on transmitting and sharing information about what was happening inside Tunisia through collaboration with the Tunisian people who were uploading videos about the revolution. We used a blogging platform on Nawaat that used auto-post and cross-posting of these videos on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. I was also double-checking the validity and authenticity of these videos.”

Omar Boshah, a male Libyan activist who played a role that was similar to that of Khadrawi, but used different techniques, was also able to mobilize the Libyan public in the prelude to the revolution that ousted the Qadhafi regime. Boshah told the authors in 2011:

“Before the revolution, I had been using social media to cover the political and social life, particularly in my city Al Baida’a, which is 1,200 kilometers east of Tripoli, the capital. I had been using social media to criticize negative aspects of life in Al-Baida’a through posting pictures and comments. For example, I would post a photo of a place that was run down in the city or had poor infrastructure. I would also post pictures of people who were tortured by the regime. In doing so, I was using fake names rather than my real name to avoid being arrested. The regime had its own Facebook groups to publicize for its policies, and to target figures who were opposed to it. A few weeks before the revolution, the regime kidnapped and arrested several Libyan online activists, and several Facebook groups were formed to call for their freedom. Even the people who were afraid to voice their opinions in public joined these groups. All this has contributed to the day of rage in Libya on February 17, 2011, which was called for through a Facebook group. This page attracted many people.”

According to Boshah, the barrier of fear was broken online and that encouraged him to take to the streets to protest against the Qadhafi regime. “I stayed active online until the Internet was cut on the second day of the revolution. The fact that the Internet was cut was positive because it encouraged every online activist like myself to leave their computer screens and go out to the streets. We set up tents in the main streets and squares in Benghazi

and Al Baida'a and we organized a cultural carnival showcasing Qadhafi's crimes against the Libyan people. It was very similar to the situation at Tahrir Square in Cairo during the Egyptian revolution."

Discussion and Conclusion

This study provided a unique insight, through the eyes of cyberactivists in three Arab countries that have gone through political transformation in the context of the Arab Spring, about the Internet potential for being a venue for online democracy and, thus, a catalyst for democratization. While there is a significant amount of debate as to whether cyberactivism currently has an influential role in promoting actual change and boosting political transformation, even the critics and skeptics agree that cyberactivism does have a great deal of potential to influence meaningful social and political change in the future. This potential was clearly manifested through the words and actions of the cyberactivists who we interviewed in this study. The continuity and consistence of the cyberactivists' potential to bring about political change will largely depend on their ability to successfully organize and debate controversial and complicated issues. During the course of the revolutions in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, almost all cyberactivists were united around one goal: toppling the regimes. However, the complexities of the issues that have started to surface after the revolutions, such as writing a new Constitution, reframing the role of parliaments and revising the President's authorities, have posted new challenges that have created some ideological divisions among the cyberactivists in these three countries. "When the message was simple and negative—"The people want to bring down the regime"—unity among the opposition groups was simple. When the message becomes complex and positive, it becomes harder to sustain both unity and participation" (Alterman 2011:42).

It is quite helpful to consider the fact that not all platforms of cyberactivism will be equally successful as catalysts for political change. Rather, it makes more sense to consider each cyberactivistic environment as a separate entity and a unique case that should be better analyzed within its own contextualized setting and intertwined variables.

It is certainly useful to avoid a “technologically deterministic” approach that privileges the medium over the context within which it functions, through reminding ourselves that the Internet, just like any other communication tool, is whatever the cyberactivists make of it. Therefore, we have to always bear in mind that social media tools can only be effective when used by successful actors within suitable contexts to achieve attainable goals. The level of sophistication and potential of civil society, along with the degree of government suppression of social media and the Internet penetration levels were among the factors that helped or curtailed the social media role in the Arab Spring.

In this context, Egypt, Tunisia and Libya had witnessed a different set of circumstances that paved the way for the toppling of their regimes. In Egypt, the civil society was relatively active and well-established despite the political restrictions set by the regime of the ousted President Hosni Mubarak. Adding to that, Internet penetration in Egypt is close to 20 percent. That was why, the Egyptian revolutionaries and cyberactivists were able to bring down the strong Mubarak regime over a course of 18 days. In Tunisia, it was the strong tradition of online activism that had led the overly frustrated Tunisian youth onto the streets, leading to the fall of President Bin Ali’s powerful regime over a course of 28 days. As for Libya, it had one of the lowest Internet penetration rates in the Arab world (close to 5.5 percent). Adding to that, the Libyan civil society was being totally suffocated by the Qadhafi regime to the point where there was a total absence of cadres of grassroots movements that had the ability to mobilize the Libyan streets. That was why the Libyan revolution needed the help of NATO air strikes to end the regime of Qadhafi, who was killed after close to nine months of bloody protests.

Despite the above-mentioned circumstances under which the cyberactivists operated in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, the dictatorial regimes in all three countries were toppled. The efforts of the online activists in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya would not have been successful in contributing to the drastic political transformation in these three countries, however, had it not been for

the will and determination of the offline revolutionaries, who risked their lives to gain their freedom and attain their dignity.

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