

**Social Media for Social Change:
A Case Study of Social Media Use in the 2011 Egyptian Revolution**

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ABSTRACT

The debate over whether or not the emergence of social media has changed the way people communicate for social change has received heightened attention since Malcolm Gladwell declared, “the revolution will not be tweeted” in his 2010 *New Yorker* article. This capstone project examines the use of social media in several recent cases that received worldwide attention (the 2008 attacks in Mumbai, the 2009 Green Revolution in Iran, and the 2010 earthquake in Haiti), and presents a case study of the use of social media in the 2011 Egyptian revolution. The use of social media before, during, and after Internet access was shut down in Egypt is examined. Several key issues related to the use of social media for social change are discussed: social media policy, cultural differences in social media use, the effects of tie strength on motivating political action, and the digital divide. This paper concludes the following statements about the use of social media for social change:

1. Social media tools are often personified, but for social change to occur there must be people behind the tools.
2. Social media can increase world awareness of an issue.
3. Social media allows people to help each other regardless of location.
4. Social media use for social change can be dangerous.

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INTRODUCTION

Less than 24 hours after Internet access was shut down in Egypt during the massive 2011 protests, Google and Twitter launched Speak2Tweet, a service that allows Egyptians to use their mobile phones to record messages that are instantly translated into tweets with #egypt. In less than 24 hours the Speak2Tweet feed had 8,660 followers who posted 897 tweets—roughly one tweet every two minutes (Kawamoto, 2011). Clearly, communication via Twitter was deemed important enough for these companies, both western-based, to swiftly provide an alternative, an action that is just one of many marking a significant change in communication methods and expectations worldwide.

The ways social media are changing communication have received a lot of media attention in the past few years. Notably, the 2008 attacks in Mumbai, the 2009 Iran election protests, and the 2010 Haiti earthquake were situations in which social media played a significant role in communication. Social media tools are said to give people the ability to connect and unite in a crisis, raise awareness of an issue worldwide, and usurp authoritarian governments. These tools can be used to quickly get information, such as the location of a hospital, to people in danger. The increased awareness brought on by social media can help raise a significant amount of money for a cause. For the first time, everyone can be a journalist.

However, misinformation or rumors can quickly spread on social media, and the oft-lauded transparent nature can be dangerous. For example, it may allow criminals to keep track of police activity. Additionally, though awareness of an issue

may be increased, it is hard to say what role social media plays in actually putting people to action.

Other issues involved in the use of social media for social change include the ability and authority, or lack thereof, of social media companies to handle crisis situations. For example, Twitter earned praise after they delayed site maintenance (after a request from the U.S. State Department) to avoid interrupting communication in Iran during the 2009 election, but Facebook has come under fire because of their real name policy, which puts activists in danger of having their account deleted if they are found to be using a fake name (even if it is for their safety).

Many believe that these new ways of communicating can help to create social change. Twitter co-founder Biz Stone went so far as to say that social media lowers the barrier for activism (Mainwaring, 2011). Others insist that the effects of social media are minimal; social change comes about the way it always has, from people on the ground. Most famously, Malcolm Gladwell claimed in his 2010 *New Yorker* article that online social networks create only weak ties, not the strong ties that are needed for actual action. He argues that there is nothing special about using social media to communicate for social change, that we are giving too much credit to the tools behind the communication: "Where activists were once defined by their causes, they are now defined by their tools" (Gladwell, 2010). Others, like Clay Shirky, believe that the sea-change in communication has had a huge effect on the way people create change: "Group action gives human society its particular

character, and anything that changes the way groups get things done will affect society as a whole” (Shirky, 2009, p. 23). There is no question about whether people are using social media to communicate, but has this made a difference in the way activists change the world?

This capstone project will examine the use of social media in the 2011 Egyptian revolution. It will outline how social media was used to plan the protests, how it was used during the protests, and what happened after the Internet was shut down in Egypt on January 27, 2011. It will examine how the use of social media during the protests compares to past social media use and whether or not the use of social media in this case invoked not just awareness, but action. Finally, this capstone project will explore the future of social media as an agent for social change.

Limitations

As of this writing, the Egyptian revolution is ongoing. This capstone project will cover the events of the revolution from a few days before the protest started on January 25, 2011 through February 11, 2011, when Hosni Mubarak stepped down as president.

This paper will focus on the use of Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, and YouTube. There are other social networking platforms that may have played a role in the Egypt revolution and other crisis situations mentioned, but these four seem to be the most prominent players.

Because this paper was written by an English-speaking American, it should be noted that this paper may have a language and cultural bias because of the information available.

Structure

This paper will begin by providing some background on social media. It will examine three cases in which social media use affected communication worldwide, the 2008 attacks in Mumbai, the 2009 Iran presidential election, and the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, and briefly examine the implications of each example. A review of literature will focus on the how social media can be used for social change and the external factors that affect social media use. A case profile on the revolution of Egypt will be followed by analysis and discussion of the use of social media for social change.

BACKGROUND

Social Media

“Social Media” are “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, which allows the creation and exchange of user-generated content” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 60). As of June 2010, 22% of time spent online (or one in every four and a half minutes) is spent using social media and blog sites worldwide (“Social Networks/Blogs Now Account for One in Every Four and a Half Minutes Online,” 2010). The global average time spent per person on social media sites is now nearly five and a half hours per month (Jennifer Van Grove, 2010). Popular social media include Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, Flickr, and Tumblr.

Facebook

Facebook is a social network service launched in February 2004. As of January 2011 it has more than 600 million active users (Nicholas Carison, 2011). According to Mashable.com:

Facebook is a social utility that helps people communicate more efficiently with their friends, family and coworkers. The company develops technologies that facilitate the sharing of information through the social graph, the digital mapping of people's real-world social connections. Anyone can sign up for Facebook and interact with the people they know in a trusted environment. Facebook is a part of millions of people's lives and half of the users return daily (retrieved 2/26/2011).

Twitter

Twitter describes itself as “a real-time information network that connects you to the latest information about what you find interesting.” A micro-blogging site, Twitter allows users to send out messages in short spurts of up to 140 characters per “tweet.” Users can “follow” other users or communicate by searching for hashtags (e.g. #egypt), user-identified key words that clue readers in to what others think is important. Twitter is based in San Francisco, but it's used by people in nearly every country in the world, and is available in English, French, German, Italian, Japanese, and Spanish. As of September 2010, there are 175 million registered users and an average of 95 million tweets written each day (retrieved February 25, 2011).

Twitter is an extremely personal method of communication. Users must chose whom they follow, and thus create a unique experience that is specific to them.

Like email or the telephone, Twitter is a non-prescriptive communication platform. Each user experiences "Twitter" differently depending on the time of day and frequency she checks her feed, the other people she follows, and the interface(s) she uses to access the network. Because of this flexibility, norms emerge, mutate, collide, and fade away among Twitter users with a fluidity that may not be easily apprehendable to a non-user . . . (Driscoll, 2010).

One of the strengths of Twitter is that it can be accessed using computers or mobile phones, making it a lightweight method of communicating during crisis.

YouTube

According to Mashable.com, YouTube, founded in February 2005, is the leader in online video, and the premier destination to watch and share original videos worldwide through a Web experience. YouTube allows people to easily upload and share video clips on www.YouTube.com and across the Internet through websites, mobile devices, blogs, and email (retrieved February 25, 2011). YouTube changed the way people share videos because it created a simple way to share otherwise cumbersome and large video files. Before YouTube, it was difficult to share video with a large number of people.

Flickr

Flickr is a photo-sharing site that allows users to share photos on www.flickr.com or through embedded apps on other websites. Flickr allows users to tag photos with keywords, which creates communities around common interests or events.

SOCIAL MEDIA COMMUNICAITON: THREE STUDIES

There are many recent examples of how social media is changing communication, but three cases stand out: the 2008 attacks in Mumbai, the 2009 Iran revolution, and the 2010 Haiti earthquake. This section will provide real world examples of how social media are being used for communication.

2008 Attacks in Mumbai

The attacks in Mumbai, India occurred on November 26, 2008. Pakistani gunman targeting American and British citizens for use as hostages killed at least 101 people and wounded 200 in the tourist areas in the Indian financial center of Mumbai (Magnier & Sharma, 2008). Two hotels, the city's largest train station, a Jewish center, a movie theater, and a hospital were attacked with machine-guns and grenades (Sengupta, 2008).

Immediately after the attacks began, firsthand accounts began showing up on Twitter, Flickr, and other social media sites. People near the site of the attacks shared locations where blood was needed and gave reports on the health of their family and friends and the activity of both the police and the terrorists (Leggio, 2008).

@mumbaiattack: Hospital update. Shots still being fired. Also Metro cinema next door

@aeropolowoman: Blood needed at JJ hospital

Figure 1 Sample tweets during 2008 Mumbai attack (Shachtman, 2008).

Social media use during the Mumbai attacks prompted a debate over the ethics of “citizen journalists” on social media. Social media users are obviously not held to the standards that traditional journalists are, and the tweets and posts coming from the Mumbai attacks were problematic. Rumors began to circulate that the Indian government was asking people at the site of the attacks and elsewhere not to post the location / activity of police for fear that the terrorists would utilize this information (Leggio, 2008). Additionally, some warned that because citizen journalists often post unconfirmed information that can quickly be retweeted or reposted by hundreds of people, social media can consequently create chaos. In crisis situations, this can happen easily and is not a phenomenon limited to new media.

One blogger likened the Mumbai social media chaos to the chaos that ensued during hurricane Katrina, before social media was so ubiquitous. “Frenzied media recycled and amplified many of the unverified reports.” National media reported on rumors “that an infant's body had been found in a trash can, that sharks from Lake Pontchartrain were swimming through the business district, that hundreds of bodies had been stacked in the Superdome basement,” which gained credence with each retelling (Rosenblatt & Rainey, 2005). In Mumbai, though some of the information shared through social media was undoubtedly helpful and legitimate, cynics pointed out that much of it was repetitive or valueless, or simply repeated the reports from mainstream media (Caulfield & Karmali, 2008).

The Mumbai case shows us that while social media use in a crisis situation may be helpful to those on the ground and those seeking information about the crisis, it is dangerous because it can cause or increase the spread of rumors and misinformation.

2009 Iran Revolution

The 2009 Iranian presidential election protests, also called the “Green Revolution” and the “Persian Awakening,” began on June 13, 2009. Protesters disputed the victory of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in support of Mir-Hossein Mousavi, contending that Ahmadinejad had won the election fraudulently (Bower, Amanpour, Desta, & Bozorgmehr, 2009).

To counter the protesters, the regime censored newspapers, blocked websites, and jammed satellite transmissions. The telephone system used for texting was taken down (“EDITORIAL: Iran’s Twitter revolution,” 2009) At one point, all Internet connections were taken down for a period of 20 hours (Moscaritolo, 2009).

Despite the efforts of the regime to quiet protesters, social media was used to broadcast the protests and violence surrounding them to the world. Iran “by one estimate” has more bloggers per capita than any other country in the world. “Any Iranian with a mobile phone could film the protests and the response of the security forces. Hour by hour, these clips found their way onto YouTube and countless blogging sites” (Blair, 2009). The protests were quickly nicknamed “The Twitter Revolution” because of the activists’ reliance on the social network for

communication. At its peak, a search for "Iran" on Twitter generated over 100,000 tweets per day and over 8,000 tweets per hour (Boguta, 2009).

Protesters used Twitter and other social media to warn each other of dangers and communicate basic information.

[Iranians] used [Twitter] to tell each other where NOT to go. They used it to help each other. The government did what it could to bog down the communication networks (both the Internet and SMS), but people both inside and outside Iran made strides in creating work-arounds to the blocks, like secure server space outside of Iran for use in protest-organizing message boards (Vafa, 2010).

In Iran, there is only one Internet provider, the government-run company Data Communication of Iran (DCI). DCI can program its Internet routers to block access to particular sites, like YouTube. DCI can also throttle back the total amount of Internet data entering or leaving the country, or it can shut off the Internet altogether (Bray, 2009). However, Twitter messages can be sent by many websites, making it impossible for the government to find and block each one. This is why Twitter rose to the top of communication methods during the prime of the protests.

As the messages from social media began to reach the rest of the world, people outside of Iran turned their home computers into what is known as a "proxy," a virtual host that substitutes for the home connection of users in Iran, allowing them to bypass the filters employed by Iranian government censors (Bray,

2009). Taking it a step further, political activists used Twitter and other social media sites to recruit hackers to help with the protests, calling for DDoS (Distributed denial-of-service) attacks against Iranian government websites, making them unusable or taking them down completely (Moscaritolo, 2009).

This crisis also marked an increased understanding of the problems social media's transparency (or false sense of transparency) can bring. There were a number of reports that Twitter accounts, email addresses, and Facebook accounts were hacked by what appears to be the Iranian government. "[It is believed] that since some of those [hacked accounts were] used to spread misinformation about the location of rallies, it was an organized or semi-organized effort by the Iranian government to spread misinformation" (Moscaritolo, 2009).

The crisis in Iran highlighted the value of Twitter by sharing the struggles of the Iranian protesters with the world, seemingly at the very moment when Twitter's value was being questioned (Bray, 2009). "When the Soviet Union suppressed the revolts in Hungary in 1956 and Prague in 1968, it did so behind a convenient veil of secrecy. Today's technology ensures that Iran's regime will not be so fortunate" (Blair, 2009). Ahmadinejad remains in power as of this writing, but the success of the Green Revolution may not depend solely on deposing Ahmadinejad. As one blogger wrote:

Iran is arguably one of the most enigmatic and isolated countries in the world. Yet for the past year, MILLIONS of non-Iranians have been made aware of the democratic aspirations of the Iranian people. Is this worthless? After 30+ years of mischaracterization and Orientalist rhetoric being thrown

against a monolithic Iranian identity, people from all over the earth learned that Iranians are young, intelligent, powerful, tech-savvy, and hate their crooked government as much as the rest of the world does (Vafa, 2010).

The use of social media during the 2009 Iran revolution highlights both the benefits and dangers of using social media for communication. Social media can be used to provide information to people on the ground, but it can also be used to spread misinformation or inform the opposition of protesters' location or personal information. Perhaps most importantly, social media can be used to spread awareness of an issue worldwide.

2010 Haiti Earthquake

On January 12, 2010 the Port-au-Prince region of Haiti was struck by a magnitude 7.0 earthquake ("U.S. Geological Survey Homepage," n d). Haiti is one of the poorest countries in the world, and was ill-equipped to handle the aftermath of the quake which affected 3 million people ("Red Cross: 3M Haitians Affected by Quake," 2010).

Charity efforts on Facebook and Twitter "grew by leaps and bounds" the week of the earthquake (Valentino-DeVries, 2010). A digital campaign that allowed people to text a number to donate money to the Red Cross (the donation would appear on their next phone bill) raised over 3 million dollars in just 48 hours. Celebrities promoted the campaign on Twitter, which helped to quickly break

mobile giving records. Users could change their Facebook statuses to reflect how much money they had donated, and donate they did. Red Cross spokesperson Jonathan Aiken described it as "a phenomenal number that's never been achieved before" (Gross, 2011).

The Red Cross was just one organization using the Internet to raise money for the cause. Quickly after the quake, calls for donations online were ubiquitous (Gross, 2011). Even virtual worlds had calls for donations. For example, users could purchase virtual goods in the popular Facebook game Farmville to raise funds for the earthquake victims (Mainwaring, 2011).

A design blogger, Jeanine Hays, started a "Bloggers Day of Action," an idea that started with a tweet and eventually united many bloggers and raised thousands of dollars. The idea was that each blogger would create a post about Haiti and link to a site where readers could donate to the cause. Some bloggers took the day of action farther by auctioning artwork to raise money for Haiti or vowing to donate money for every comment received on their blog.



Figure 2. Image used to designate that a blog was participating in the Bloggers Day of Action for Haiti.

The Day of Action showed just how effective social media tools can be in uniting otherwise unconnected people for a cause.

This movement highlights the power of a single action - as well as potential directions for the blogging community to evolve into leaders of change, echoing the sentiments of anthropologist Margaret Mead, 'Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has' (Rubenstein, 2010).

The flipside to the good done using social media is that Facebook, Twitter, and sites promoting donations were plagued with scams soon after the quake (Valentino-DeVries, 2010). This brings to attention a major problem of social media—just as it allows everyone to be a “citizen journalist” with no checks or balances, it also requires everyone to be able to discern what is news, what is nonsense, and what is a scam.

Social media use for the Haiti earthquake relief illustrates the power of social media to quickly raise money for a cause and connect otherwise unaffiliated people, but also exposes the danger of scams.

LITERATURE REVIEW

How Social Media is used for Social Change

Online Communication

To understand how social media can be used for social change, it is important to understand the ways that one can communicate online. This section will discuss the ways that users can communicate and interact with groups of people. A group can be a formally organized number of people or simply people who identify with similar values or who have a common interest or experience. For example, Flickr users who tag their photos with the same event tag could be considered a group.

Users can:

- Virtually join a group
- Get updates and messages about a group
- Read, post, or comment on news and information
- Receive / send private messages with group leaders and members
- Read and engage in transparent conversations that can be seen by others
- “Lurk” in a group—read information without making oneself known as a follower or member of the group
- Interact with others despite social or location boundaries

Communication online is different from the one-way communication of television, radio, and newspapers because online users can respond to messages in real time, not just receive them. However, much like learning of a news story from television, receivers of that information are not necessarily prone for action. Even those who virtually “join” a group may take no further action. “Instead of attending meetings, workshops and rallies, un-committed individuals can join a Facebook

group or follow a Twitter feed at home, which gives them some measure of anonymity but does not necessarily motivate them to physically hit the streets and provide fuel for a revolution” (Papic & Noonan, 2011).

There are some clear benefits of online communication for social change. Online groups are less expensive for training, recruitment, and organization than traditional methods (Papic & Noonan, 2011). Most people are already using the social media platforms that activists can use for communication, so there is no need to convince recruits to find or join another site, or in the case of traditional media, watch or subscribe to a new program or publication (Greeley, 2011). Also, groups of people naturally form groups around shared causes or interests, so finding an audience is easy online (Mainwaring, 2011).

Studies have shown that people who are active online are likely to be active in group activities. The Pew Research Center found that 80% of Internet users participate in groups, compared with 56% of non-Internet users. Social media users are even more likely to be active: 82% of social network users and 85% of Twitter users are group participants (Rainie, Purcell, & Smith, 2011, p. 2). Additionally, if users feel that they can actually make a difference, they are more likely to engage in a group (Rainie et al., 2011, p. 14).

In crisis situations, like the Haiti earthquake or Mumbai attacks, there are more broadcast-based information sharing activities, where the user is pushing information out to many users and not directing it toward one specific user (Hughes & Palen, 2009). This is different from the way social media is normally used, but

these kinds of communications in disaster contexts can serve important tactical, community building, and emotional functions (Palen & Liu, 2007, p. 728). Also, a study by Hughes and Palen (2009) found that those who begin using social media during a crisis are more likely to become long-term users of social media.

Activists who use social media for social change can use them to plan in-real-life and in-virtual-life meetings, keep followers informed about events and news, and gain followers. Social media use can increase users' self-efficacy to join a cause because, in part, their peers' involvement and actions are transparent. It can also be useful by giving an on-the-ground view to people not culturally or physically close to the users.

Motivating Political Action

Regardless of the kinds of tools used for organization and communication, social change requires a lot of work. Revolutions take organizing, funding, and mass appeal (Papic & Noonan, 2011). Even a well-organized revolution must go through an "activist process of social transformation—which includes information acquisition, knowledge development, transfer and sharing; ideation and thought leadership; empathy and emotional connection; and the spread of credible ideas that inspire cognitive dissonance" (Leggio, 2008).

An important aspect of motivating social change is convincing people that their participation will make a difference, especially if their participation will require them to experience personal discomfort or danger. This is no small task.

In large groups, such as those involved in a collective political protest, the contribution to the action of each ordinary member (i.e., one who is not a leader of the group) has no discernible impact on the group's overall success; therefore, the rational individual will not absorb the cost of participation (such as time, financial resources, or the threat of physical injury), since he or she will enjoy the public good in any case if others provide it (Finkel, Muller, & Opp, 1989, p. 886).

Gladwell points out that the work behind to social change is now often associated purely with the tools people use to communicate, instead of the people behind the work. It should be noted that regardless of the tools used in planning and organizing, from word of mouth to radio to Internet, the same basic principles of motivation must be applied. Social media may make the task of communicating information easier, but the task of convincing people to take personal risks is not lessened.

The Influence of the Media

Social media tools have been praised for the ability to reach many people, but the transition from reach to action is debated. In fact, the argument over whether or not the media influences social change is not new. In their 1948 study, Lazarsfeld and Merton argued that the mass media can cause audiences to become knowledgeable about a subject, but take no action (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1996, p. 11). Thus, they argued that media create no social change, but instead works to enforce existing social values. For example, though television, newspapers, and other media reach

massive amounts of people, it is impossible to tell the “social and psychological impact” that this causes (p. 11).

According to the study, inventions that “enlarge the radius of movement and action” like the automobile have a greater effect on society than inventions that “provide avenues for ideas –ideas which can be avoided by withdrawal, deflected by resistance, and transformed by assimilation” like television, radio, or computers (p. 12). This is because inventions that provide avenues for ideas can lull people into a false sense of complacency—they can mistake their being informed for being engaged, and consequently do nothing.

This idea may easily be applied to social media—one can see how the over abundance of information streaming on a Twitter feed, for example, could bring a person not towards action, but over-stimulation or a false sense of understanding. For example, a person might learn about the massive earthquake relief efforts on Twitter, but not be compelled to donate because of the feeling that they are already involved.

With so much information available in an instant, it is difficult to know what to pay attention to in the first place. Kova Boguta, a co-founder of Infoharmoni, a company that analyzes Internet data, asks, “How does an Internet junkie, news organization, or political operative monitor rapidly evolving real-time events, from the crucial details to the bigger picture? More importantly, how can a data stream be turned into real-time action, reaching the people who need it, when they need it, and in a form they can easily digest?” (Boguta, 2009). In this way, social media is different from television, newspapers, or radio because an editor does not filter the

information streamed on social media. This gives a voice to those who may not otherwise have one, but those voices maybe considered unreliable.

The Theory of Ties

An important part of communicating for social change involves the theory of ties. In sociology, weak ties are loose acquaintances that can help a friend generate creative ideas, find a job, and transfer knowledge, while strong ties are trusted friends and family who can affect emotional health and often join together to lead organizations through times of crisis (Granovetter, 1973, p. 1365). Weak ties can help job seekers, who rely on quantity of connections for job leads and references. For example, a job seeker who has held many previous jobs may have more luck finding a new position than one who held the same job for many years, because the former has many connections, however informal, to rely on.

Gladwell says that weak ties do not help people create social change. He cites Stanford sociologist Doug McAdam who studied why certain people participated in the 1960 civil rights lunch counter sit in.

What mattered more was an applicant's degree of personal connection to the civil-rights movement. All the volunteers were required to provide a list of personal contacts—the people they wanted kept apprised of their activities—and participants were far more likely than dropouts to have close friends . . . High-risk activism . . . is a “strong-tie” phenomenon (Gladwell, 2010).

If strong ties are essential for social change, and social media do not create strong ties, perhaps it is important to note that people may have fewer strong ties

than they did when Granovetter coined the term in 1973. A study by McPherson et. al in 2004 found that the number of people who say there is no one with whom they discuss important matters has tripled. The study recreated the 1985 General Social Survey, which collected data on the confidants of Americans. According to the study's findings, the ubiquity of recent technology such as computers and mobile phones may have affected people's relationships and ties:

“While [computer] technologies allow a network to spread out across geographic space and might even enhance contacts outside the home (e.g., arranging a meeting at a restaurant or bar), they seem, however, to lower the probability of having face-to-face visits with family, neighbors, or friends in one's home . . . Internet usage may even interfere with communication in the home, creating a *post-familial family* where family members spend time interacting with multiple computers in the home, rather than with each other. [This suggests] that computer technology may foster a wider, less-localized array of weak ties, rather than the strong, tightly interconnected confidant ties (McPherson et al., 2006, p. 373).

Still, maybe the Internet allows weak ties to be utilized in a different way. For example, as described in the Haiti earthquake case, many people with little or no strong connection with the country donated money. People were motivated to do good when they saw the blog posts, tweets, and status updates of their peers. In that case, awareness was raised via a network of weak ties.

... by spreading awareness via weak ties, other social roles can be defined and filled, perhaps by some individuals less strongly committed the cause but important in terms of their positions within the network (hit the 'donate here' button!) (Srinivansan, 2010).

The \$10 one person donated didn't make a big difference in the relief effort, but by sharing the donation on social media hundreds more (weakly connected people) were called to action to donate and share as well.

External Factors that Affect Social Media Use

Cultural Differences in Social Media Use

Social media sites like Facebook are used by many different countries and cultures, but not necessarily in the same way. Studies have shown that cultural differences profoundly impact the way people use social media.

One study identified five areas in which cultural differences affected communication: design, language, language subtleties, Internet performance, and faces and avatars (McGrath, 2009). This tells us that though popular sites like Facebook and Twitter may be used by many different cultures, they may be utilizing or understanding the features in different ways.

Another study used the Geert Hofstede framework to examine social media use across different cultures. This framework "defines national cultures using five dimensions — Power Distance (PDI), Individualism (IDV), Masculinity (MAS),

Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI), and Long Term Orientation (LTO).” Different cultures have different levels of these dimensions. For example:

Individualism (IDV) versus Collectivism describes the degree to which individuals are integrated into groups. In individualist cultures the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after him/herself and his/her immediate family. In collectivist cultures, people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, often extended families which continue protecting them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty (Mishra, 2008).

Because of differences in cultures, people may use social media tools differently. For example, Facebook treats all “friends” as the same, but some cultures may have different expectations for different relationships. This may also factor into a variety of aspects of social media, such as the way tie strength is perceived, and thus alter the way different cultures are able to use social media for social change. This should be considered when analyzing the use of social media for social change in other cultures.

Legitimacy of Social Media

One reason why social media coverage of crisis or revolution may be such a popular source of information is that there may be little or no other way to get the information that is broadcast using social media. For example, Al Jazeera English, which offers coverage of the Middle East, often when no other media will or can, is not carried by any major American cable or satellite companies, and can only be found on a few small cable systems in Washington, D.C., Ohio, and Vermont (Rich, 2011).

For all the attention social media has gotten from the media, government officials may have been ignoring it. After the crisis erupted in Egypt the CIA was accused of not giving President Obama enough warning time to prepare for the seriousness of the crisis. Senior U.S. lawmakers used a Senate hearing to accuse the CIA of being slow to grasp the “open source” revolution (Greg Miller, 2011). (Greg Miller, 2011). This marks an important part of the debate over the usefulness of social media in a crisis. Social media is a transparent form of communication that is changing the way people receive and interact with news and information, but one that is only now being seen as legitimate.

The Digital Divide

One of the biggest concerns when analyzing the effect of social media use on social change is the question of who has access to the Internet. The “digital divide” describes the “potential for a divide between those connected to the Internet and those not connected, sometimes worded as the divide between the information have's and have's not” (J. Steyaert, 2002). An illustration of this problem can be seen in a 2010 map of the world as shown by Facebook users (see [Appendix A](#)).

Figure 3 shows Internet users in the world distributed by world regions. We can see that Africa accounts for only 5.6% of the world's Internet users and the Middle East only 3.2%.

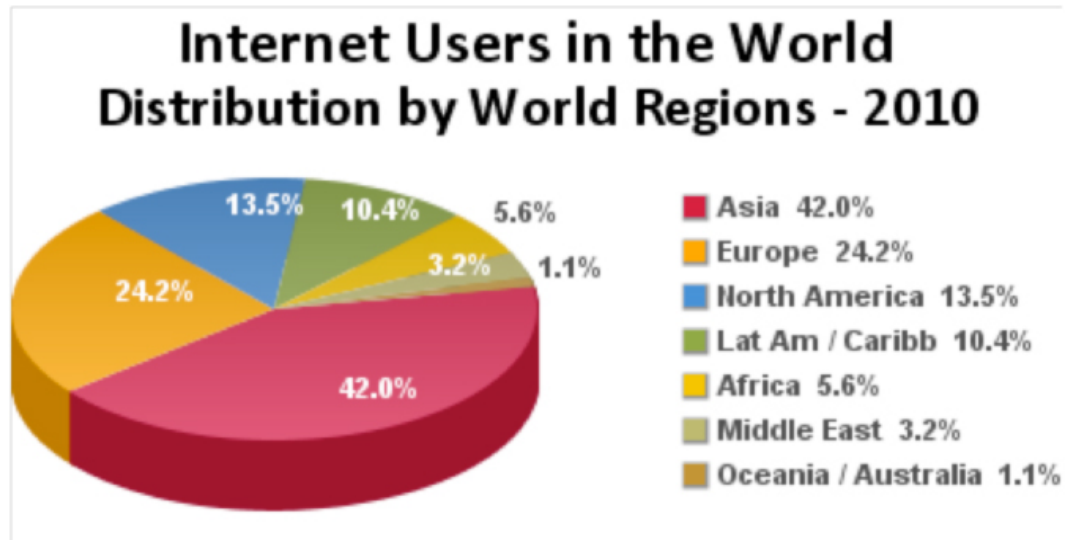


Figure 3 Internet users worldwide. ("World Internet Usage Statistics News and World Population Stats," 2010)

If the majority of a population does not have access to the Internet, the success of social media use for social change efforts will clearly be limited.

Policy Implications

Social media use has clearly surpassed the "early adopter" stage. With so many users, it is hard to say who has control over all of the information shared using sites like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Much has been made of "citizen journalists," but they cannot be held to the ethical standards of traditional journalists. Privacy concerns have been a part of social media for years, but as social media becomes more integrated into the way people communicate, complex issues have arisen. The range of problems is diverse, ranging from debate over an iPhone app that allows users to avoid DUI checkpoints ("Checkpoint for iPhone, iPod touch, and iPad on the iTunes App Store," n.d.) to governments hacking into activists' profiles (Madrigal, 2011).

In a January 2010 address, Hillary Clinton said, "New technologies do not take sides in the struggle for freedom and progress but the United States does (York, 2010). This statement reiterates the problem Gladwell complained of, that we personify tools instead of actions, but also raises an important question. Who makes the rules of social media: the government, the platform, or the users? "[Social media platforms] often [lack] even the language skills to make moral and political judgments in other countries. Nor [do they] offer basic constitutional protections such as habeas corpus or the right to face your accuser" (Greeley, 2011). If activists in Egypt are using social media platforms developed in the U.S., whose rules should they follow?

Another question that pertains to the topic of social media and social change is the question of who has a right to have a social media presence. Certainly one would agree that those who use social media to be abusive or threatening should not be allowed to continue, but the non-transparent policies that some platforms have on the issue of deleting accounts makes the issue complicated. For example, Facebook's policy on deleting profiles is unclear (an issue in itself), but it seems that it is easy for users to get other users' accounts removed. Any user can "report" another user for misconduct, and after a certain number of reports the offending account is taken down. There is no correspondence with the removed user, just the option to email disabled@facebook.com to request that the account be reinstated (York, 2010). One example of abuse of Facebook's "report" action can be seen in a group that was created on Facebook (in Arabic) for the sole purpose of reporting, and thus having removed, Facebook profiles of atheist Arabs. The group (no longer

in existence) was entitled “Facebook pesticide” and its sole purpose was to “identity Atheists / Agnostic / anti-religion in the Arab world.” Once identified, the group members would then attempt to report such users until their accounts were deactivated (York, 2010)

It is easy to see how this can affect activists using social media for social change. If an activist is using Facebook to organize events and relay messages, it may be easy for the opposing side to have his or her account deactivated, thereby cutting off the source of information and forcing the group to find another way to communicate.

Facebook’s real-name policy has also caused a stir. Recently, popular Chinese blogger and activist Michael Anti’s Facebook account was disabled because he was not using his legal name, Zhao Jing. Anti had been using the name Michael Anti for more than a decade in his activist work, and has been published solely under that name. “By locking him out of his account, Facebook has cut him off from a network of more than 1,000 academic and professional contacts who know him as Anti” (Tran, 2011).

The real name policy poses a serious threat to activists organizing a revolution because the transparent nature of social media allows the government to see their actions and take action against them if they deem necessary.

Furthermore, there seems to be little documentation on why certain profiles are deleted for real-name policy violations and others are not. A quick Facebook search for the user “Santa Claus” will illustrate this point.

The opposite of Facebook's real-name policy is the lack of verification found on other social media sites. Twitter, YouTube, and LinkedIn do not have strict real name policies (LinkedIn has a vague rule that one cannot "Create a user profile for anyone other than a natural person"). This creates different problems for activists—one cannot be sure that people are who they say they are (as mentioned briefly in rumors of government impersonating activists in Iran example above).

In some cases, social media platforms may be asked by governments or law enforcement to turn over some user information or to help identify criminals. According to Facebook's Chief Security Officer Joe Sullivan:

We get requests all the time in a few different contexts where people would like to impersonate someone else. Police wanting to go undercover or human rights activists, say. And we, just based on our core mission and core product, don't want to allow that. That's just not what Facebook is. Facebook is a place where people connect with real people in their lives using their real identities (Papic & Noonan, 2011).

Twitter attempts to notify users if they have to release any records or information about them.

Our position on freedom of expression carries with it a mandate to protect our users' right to speak freely and preserve their ability to contest having their private information revealed. While we may need to release information as required by law, we try to notify Twitter users before handing

over their information whenever we can so they have a fair chance to fight the request if they so choose (Caulfield & Karmali, 2008).

CASE PROFILE

The use of social media in the Egyptian revolution has received much attention. During the protests, Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube were key players in communication of the activists. When the Internet was shut down on January 27th, the protests did not dwindle, which brings into question the extent of the value and influence social media played in the revolution. This case profile will outline and examine the use of social media from December 2010 until February 11, 2011, when Hosni Mubarak stepped down as president of Egypt.

2011 Egyptian Revolution

The 2011 Egyptian Revolution, also called the Egyptian Protests, the Lotus Revolution, the Days of Rage, and the Papyrus Revolution, was inspired by a similar revolution in nearby Tunisia, which saw the overthrowing of the long time Tunisian president. Thousands took to the streets in Cairo, Alexandria and other cities in Egypt to protest poverty, unemployment, government corruption, and the autocratic rule of 30-year president Hosni Mubarak (Craig Kanalley, 2011). The primary demands from protest organizers were the end of Hosni Mubarak's regime, the end of emergency law, and a call for freedom, justice, a responsive non-military government, and management of Egypt's resources (Alexis Madrigal, 2011).

The following dates are significant to the revolution:

January 25, 2011: Protests began

January 27, 2011: All Internet access in Egypt is suspended

January 28, 2011: President Hosni Mubarak declares a new government will be formed.

January 31, 2011: A new Egyptian government is sworn in

February 1, 2011: Mubarak says that he won't run for reelection in September
February 2, 2011: Internet service returns in Egypt
February 10, 2011: Mubarak is expected to step down, but refuses
February 11, 2011: Mubarak resigns and leaves Cairo

Social Media Momentum

Tunisian Roots

The protests in Egypt were inspired by the successful revolution in



Figure 4. A photoshopped image of Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg holding up a sign that reads "Sayeb Sala7, ya 3ammer," the slogan of a freedom of expression campaign in late 2010.

neighboring Tunisia, which saw the overthrow of dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. The protests began after a 26-year-old fruit vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, set himself on fire to protest the injustices of life under Ben

Ali. A Facebook page in his honor made him a national martyr and led to massive protests (Yaffa, 2011). Soon, Facebook played a continuing major role in the protests, as activists used the site to share videos and information when many other sites were blocked by the Tunisian government.

The videos -- shot shakily with cameraphones -- created a link between what was happening on the streets in the poor areas of the country and the broader Tunisian population. Many are graphic. In one video -- since taken

down, apparently -- a young man is lying on a gurney with his skull cracked open. Brain oozes out. Cries are heard all around. The video focuses in on the man's face and as the camera pulls back, we see that there are two other people with cameraphones recording the injury. Video after video of the revolutionary events captures other people videoing the same event. Those videos, and the actions they recorded, became the raw material for a much greater online apparatus that could amplify each injury, death, and protest (Madrigal, 2011).

The videos, pictures, and information about protests spread like wildfire, and Tunisia had several hundred thousand new Facebook users in a few days, with average time spent on the site doubling. However, this was not without the government's notice, and online activists began to have run-ins with Ammar, the name Tunisians have given to the authorities that censor the Internet. Thousands of passwords were captured by the government using the country's Internet Service Providers to log information and delete profiles (Madrigal, 2011).

In this case, Facebook took action. They routed all Tunisian requests for Facebook to an https server, which encrypts information so that it's not susceptible to the keylogging strategy the Tunisian government was using. They also employed a system that required users to identify their friends in photos in order to log back into their account (Madrigal, 2011).

Neighboring Egypt watched the YouTube videos, read the tweets, joined the Facebook groups, and watched in awe as Ben Ali was overthrown. "The riveting

images beamed into millions of Egyptian homes of the Tunisian uprising appear to have led to a shift in the public consciousness” (Murphy, 2011). But Egypt is much larger than Tunisia, and many doubted that citizens would be united in the way they were in Tunisia.

State of Affairs in Egypt

Egypt is the largest Arab country (more people live in Cairo than in all of Tunisia). The U.S. has tolerated the regime’s “anti-democratic excesses in the interest of stability,” and Egypt has been a longtime ally (Murphy, 2011). It is currently the second highest recipient of U.S. foreign aid (after Israel) (Craig Kanalley, 2011). Egypt is one of only two Arab states to have a peace agreement with Israel. It straddles the vital Suez Canal and is considered a huge influencer of the Arab world.

“With its strategic situation, its cultural influence and a population double that of any other Arab country, Egypt has for three decades now been the linchpin of a precarious but enduring regional Pax Americana. If Egypt were to fall into chaos, not only the nation, but also the region, would be deeply affected” (“A special report on Egypt: America’s lieutenant,” 2010).

Hosni Mubarak had been president of Egypt since 1981, after his predecessor, Anwar Sadat was assassinated. When he took office he extended the country’s “Emergency Law,” which gives the government the right to “imprison individuals for any period of time, and for virtually no reason, thus keeping them in prisons without trials for any period” (Craig Kanalley, 2011).

The ongoing 2011 revolution is the largest popular revolution in 30 years. Many believe that the use of social media for communication and planning has made the revolution possible for the long unhappy people. One activist tweeted, "We use Facebook to schedule the protests, Twitter to coordinate, and YouTube to tell the world" (Howard, 2011).

With an Internet penetration rate of 15.4 percent, Egypt is ahead of most of Africa, though it lags behind many Middle Eastern countries. For contrast, Iran has an Internet penetration rate of 31 percent, the United Kingdom has a rate of 83.6 percent, and Afghanistan has a rate of 3.6 percent ("Internet Filtering in Egypt," 2009).

Central to the momentum of the protests were two viral social media efforts, a Facebook page called "We are All Khaled Said" and viral videos by a young woman, Aasma Mahfouz.

We are All Khaled Said

Khaled Said was a 28-year-old man from Alexandria who was beaten to death by police after allegedly posting a video showing police sharing drugs from a drug bust. A Facebook page, "We are all Khaled Said," served as a memorial and had 473,000 users (as of February 6, 2011). The biggest dissident Facebook page in Egypt, the page united Egyptians in rage about Said's death with posts of cellphone photos of Said's battered body in the morgue and YouTube videos contrasting pictures of a healthy Said with the morgue images (Preston, 2011).

In December 2010 Facebook disabled the group because its administrators were using pseudonyms. The group was reinstated when an administrator, Wael Ghonim, offered his real name (Greeley, 2011). “The page quickly became a forceful campaign against police brutality in Egypt, with a constant stream of photos, videos, and news. Ghonim’s interactive style, combined with the page’s carefully calibrated posts—emotional, apolitical, and broad in their appeal—quickly turned it into one of Egypt’s largest activist sites” (Giglio, 2011).

On Jan. 14 the Tunisian dictator fell and “We are All Khaled Said” announced a revolution of Egypt’s own. “Each of the page’s 350,000-plus fans was cordially invited to a protest on Jan. 25. They could click “yes,” “no,” or “maybe” to signal whether they’d like to attend” (Giglio, 2011).

As discussed above, vowing to attend an event or joining a group online is not necessarily a true indicator of the number of people who will attend or become involved. The success of the protest was yet to be seen, and Ghonim and others were unsure about the follow-through of their social media followers.

Ghonim, the head of Marketing for Google Middle East and North Africa, has little time to debate the merits of social media for social change:

The bottom line is: I have no idea. . . While some commentators hyped “that the Internet is making a revolution,” others proclaimed that the “revolution can’t be tweeted” . . . I don’t know, and I don’t give a s--t. I’m doing what it takes to make my country better (Giglio, 2011).

Two days after the January 25 protests Ghonim was arrested and held for 12 days, Upon his release, he was hailed as the online hero of the movement, a title he refuted in a tweet: "Revolution 2.0: No one was a hero because everyone was a hero" (Porter & Beininger, 2011).

Aasma Mahfouz

Aasma Mahfouz is a 26 year-old Egyptian woman who was one of the founders of the 2008 April 6 Youth Movement (a Facebook group started in Spring 2008 to support the workers in an Egyptian industrial town who were planning to strike on April 6). On January 18th she uploaded a video to Facebook that called for Egyptians to join her in protest at Tahrir Square on January 25th. The video was uploaded to YouTube and went viral. The message of the girl who was unafraid to show her face spread across Egypt:

I'm making this video to give you one simple message: we want to go down to Tahrir Square on January 25th. If we still have honor and want to live in dignity on this land, we have to go down on January 25th. We'll go down and demand our rights, our fundamental human rights (Goodman, 2011).

Part of the success of Mahfouz's video was that she did not hide behind a computer screen to share her message. "Asmaa Mahfouz speaks directly to the camera and identifies herself. The boldness of this act, speaking out so forcefully as a woman, inspired many others to start posting their images online" (Goodman, 2011).

#Jan25

January 25th was a public holiday in Egypt, National Police Day. The calls to action sparked by “We are All Khaled Said” and Asmaa Mahfouz were repeated in the hashtag #Jan25. Activists used this to mark all tweets related to the protests.



Figure 5. Example of call to use #Jan25 on Twitter.

During Protests

There is often a disconnect between what happens online and what happened at the protests. But there is no doubt that the protests in Tahrir Square were very real.

This was no movie—no student sit-in either. Some 500 died in the clashes. There were many casualties when unarmed young men rashly stormed the Ministry of Interior building and were mowed down. Countless more were injured when Mubarak supporters tried to take the square. Those hurt refused to go to the hospital for fear of being arrested (Porter & Beininger, 2011).

A 22-year-old Internet activist named Ahmed Abd Rabo arranged for protesters to sleep under tanks to prevent them from moving. She reported terrifying details of the protests along with uplifting moments of hope:

"When snipers were shooting they [the protesters] would chant, 'Keep on going. There are 80 million of us.'" She saw two people shot dead and was herself saved when a stranger covered in blood dragged her out of the way of a charging vehicle. And yet she says, "This was a moment of Utopia, when it did not matter what your religion was, how you dressed, or where you came from" (Porter & Beininger, 2011).

These graphic narratives, images, and videos were sent to Egypt and the world by those who had access to the social media, but as discussed above, not all of Egypt or even most of Egypt has access to the Internet (Internet penetration rate of 15.4%). The activists' strategy for the #Jan25 protest, planned through online communication, was for "multiple fast-moving demonstrations in twenty locations around the city, designed to try to mobilize the people in poorer areas (who could not afford the luxury of computers and the Internet) and avoid the usual police tactic of cordoning off protesters and preventing them from rallying" (Nunns & Idle,

2011, p. 31).



Figure 6. Tweets during the protests (Nunns & Idle, 2011).

Those with Internet access reported to the world in real time. Tweets from the protests ranged from rallying cries to requests for help to journalistic note taking.

During Blackout

The Internet was blocked in Egypt for five days. Many see this as a clear indicator that activists' use of social media tools was a huge threat to the government. "The fact that Hosni Mubarak's regime took the step of blocking the Internet, despite the millions of dollars lost to the economy, is a testament to the fear it provoked among the rulers" (Nunns & Idle, 2011, p. 21).

The Internet block was too late. By the time they lost Internet access the protests had already been planned and the activists were already together. Social media had gone from tools used to plan and organize to real-time reporting tools,

and Egypt had already gotten the attention of the world by the time access was cut. Like the revolution in Iran, the rest of the world was tuned in and willing to help activists get online or spread news.

[The activists] went to great lengths to get online during the five-day Internet blackout, when their tweets could not easily be read by other Egyptians. By telephoning friends abroad to upload their tweets, pooling their resources to get on to the one remaining Internet service provider in Egypt (the one used by the stock exchange), or offering interviews to news organizations in return for access to their satellite Internet connections, activists managed to ensure that the regime could not cut them off from the world (Nunns & Idle, 2011, p. 20).

This highlights an important aspect of using social media for social change. Communication for planning and information sharing between revolutionaries is important and crucial to a point, but one of the most important aspects is the raised world awareness social media can bring to a cause. The protests were planned online, but many of the people who attended the #Jan25 protests learned about them through word of mouth. The rest of the world became involved through the Internet.

CASE ANALYSIS

Global Ties

From the case study above we can see social media tools in action, rather than in the abstract. The idea that clicking “like” on a Facebook page for a cause will translate into action is absurd, but when that Facebook page is a testament to problems people face in their daily lives, there is much higher likelihood that they will take action.

Weak ties have been said to be helpful in situations where it doesn’t cost someone much time or effort to help. For example, someone might ask their Twitter followers if they know anyone who is hiring for part time work and receive many replies. Gladwell says that this kind of response won’t happen if a social media user asks for something big, like time or money. This may be true, but what Gladwell doesn’t consider is that in a revolution like that in Egypt, people are asking their weak ties for help for a problem that is universal. Though the activists may not know the people they recruit to protest, the people they are recruiting are very similar to them and the problems they describe are universal.

Kovas Boguta created an infographic that visualizes the Egyptian Influence Network on Twitter (see [Appendix B](#)). The map shows individuals near those they influence (those who are likely to read and share their tweets) as well as the language they use to tweet (Arabic and English). The size of the node representing each individual represents how many others they influence. Wael Ghonim can be

seen as an influencer for both the Arab and Western worlds, for example. Boguta notes that many of the prominent nodes on the infographic were at one point arrested, but “their deep connectivity help ensure they were not “disappeared”(Boguta, 2011).

Citizen Journalists

The Egypt revolution raises questions about whether citizen journalism is activism and whether participants can be journalists. As discussed earlier, the fact that social media users do not have to be vetted or held to ethical standards is both a problem and a blessing. Perhaps the “rules” of social media will become clearer as they are embraced by the next generation of social media users, both in crisis situations and more peaceful times. In this case, citizen journalists in Egypt have shown us that they are a force to be reckoned with. Social media creates an unprecedented outlet for the voice of an oppressed people against a dictatorship.

Dangers

The massive organizing and action that happened through the use of social media in the Egypt revolution may make it seem as though using the Internet as a tool for social change is not dangerous. Even post Mubarak, it still is extremely dangerous in Egypt. On April 11, 2011 *The New York Times* reported that a 25 year old blogger, Maikel Nabi, was sentenced to three years in jail for speaking out against the Egyptian army’s abuse of female detainees. The evidence against Nabi was a compact disc of screen shots of his personal Facebook page and blog (Bronner, 2011).

It may be even worse in other countries. According to Facebook's Chief of Security Joe Sullivan, "When you step back and think about how Internet traffic is routed around the world, an astonishing amount is susceptible to government access" (Madrigal, 2011).

Conclusion

From this brief case study a few conclusions about the current use of social media for social change can be made.

- There are people behind the social media tools that are used for social change.

A common trend has been to give credit, at least in name, to the tools used for social change and not the people behind them—Iran's "Twitter Revolution," for example. Social media can be used as a tool to raise awareness, raise money, and join people together, but to personify these tools is to underestimate the time, resources, and risks that activists and citizens sacrifice.

- Social media tools can raise world awareness of an issue

In Egypt, we saw that though not all or even most of the country had Internet access, people were united at the #Jan25 protest. But perhaps the biggest effect that the online aspect of the protests had was to give the rest of the world a view from the ground. This was also apparent in the money raised for the Haiti earthquake relief and in the world awareness of Iran's revolution.

- Social media tools allow users to help each other, regardless of location

Social media use during the Mumbai attacks helped people get help to those in need and get information to family members. In Egypt, protesters used social media to share information about dangers and help each other get supplies and medical attention. But the ability to get help from others by using social media is not limited by location. Not only did people from many other countries tune in to the revolution in Egypt—many people helped the activists by setting up proxies, hacking into government sites, and spreading the word about the cause. Additionally, the increased awareness may incite politicians to be more vocal and open with their reaction to the revolution or situation transmitted via social media.

- Social media use for social change is dangerous.

It is clear that the policies of many social media platforms may not be in the best interests of activists, and there is a real danger of governments using social media to spy on, misinform, or incriminate activists.

The author of this capstone hopes that this paper has made it clear that social media is neither a perfect method for social change communication nor a trend that will quickly pass.

APPENDIX A

World map visualized by Facebook users (Butler, 2010).

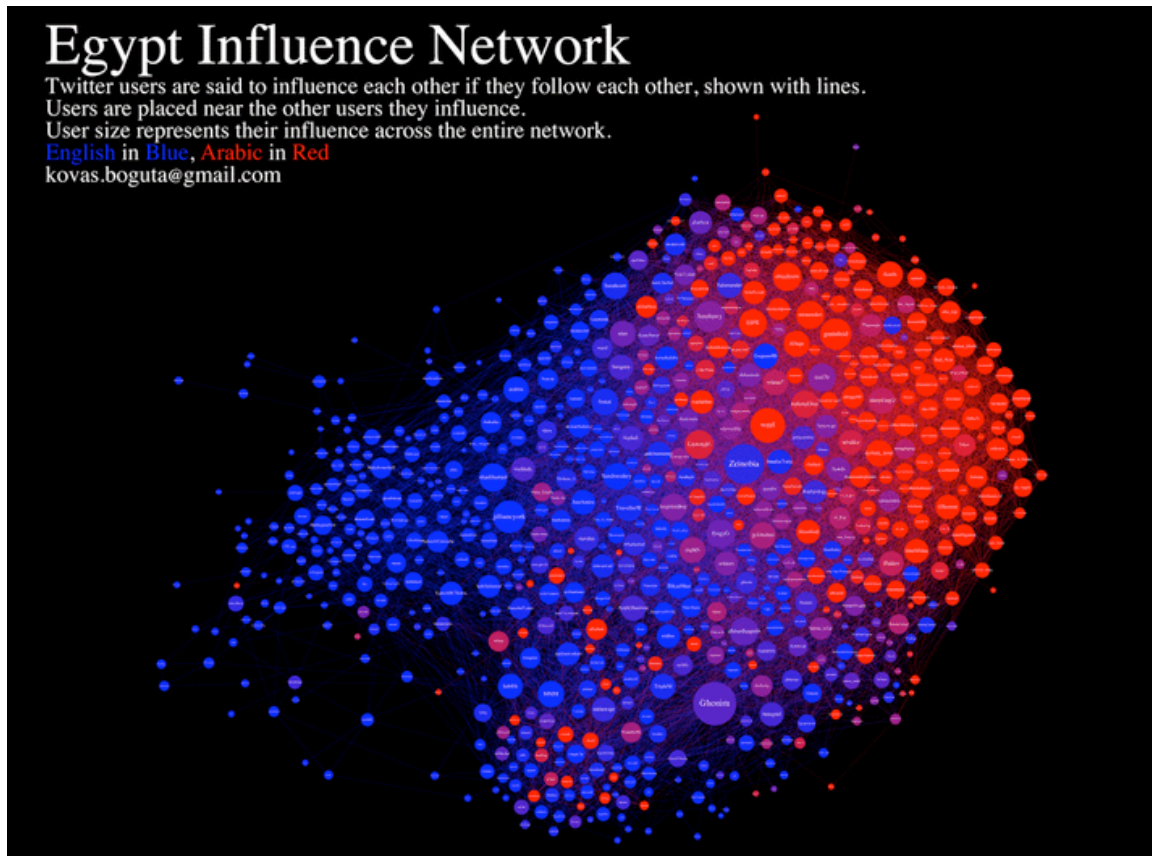
See high-resolution version [here](#).



APPENDIX B

Map indicating the “Egyptian Influence Network” shows Twitter users in proximity to the users they influence and the language they use (Boguta, 2011).

(See high-resolution version [here](#).)



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