

The Role of Information Communication Technologies in the “Arab Spring”

IMPLICATIONS BEYOND THE REGION

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Ekaterina Stepanova

*Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO),
Russian Academy of Sciences*

The tide of mass protests that swept through the Middle East in early 2011 highlighted the distinct role of modern information-communication technologies (ICT) and digital social media tools and networks. The impact of these technologies was felt globally, affecting both developed and developing nations, if not in the same way. While the “Arab Spring” may point to a phenomenon of new mass forms of sociopolitical protest facilitated by social media networks, particularly in regard to their organizational and communication aspects, it should also produce some major reservations about the applicability of any “direct lessons” to other regional and sociopolitical contexts.

The Middle Eastern Context

In the 2011 “Arab Spring” protests, social media networks played an important role in the rapid disintegration of at least two regimes, Tunisia and Egypt, while also contributing to sociopolitical mobilization in Bahrain and Syria. ICT and social media had little to do with the underlying sociopolitical and socioeconomic factors behind the protest movement. In Egypt, the sociopolitical gap between the small ruling elite and the bulk of the population had long reached critical levels, prompting most experts on the region to expect a major upheaval at some point. However, the fact that the crisis occurred sooner rather than later, in direct follow-up to protests in Tunisia, was largely due to the initial mobilizing effects of ICT and social media networks. The protests were kickstarted by a Facebook campaign run by the opposition “April 6 Youth Movement,” which generated tens of thousands of positive responses to the call to rally against government policies. Over the past decade, fast scalable real-time Internet-based information and communication tools have become relatively accessible in Egypt (with broadband access starting at \$8/month). According to the Egyptian Ministry of

Communications and Information Technology (MCIT), the country has over 17 million Internet users (as of February 2010), a stark 3,691 percent increase from 450,000 users in December 2000, and 4 million Facebook users. This total includes over 160,000 bloggers, with 30 percent of blogs focusing on politics.

The profile of the most active users – young, urban, and relatively educated – fully correspond to the core of the first anti-government protesters in January that later led to a larger and more mass-based campaign. Overall, the input of the social media networks was critical in performing two overlapping functions: (a) organizing the protests and (b) disseminating information about them, including publicizing protesters' demands internationally (Facebook reportedly outmatched Al Jazeera in at least the speed of news dissemination).

As for government reactions, the counter-use of social media for tracking, repressive, and propaganda purposes has been minimal throughout the "Arab Spring," compared to Iran in 2009 and 2010. In contrast, however, attempts to limit or block Internet access have far exceeded Iran's move to slow down Internet connectivity during its 2009 protests. While the Tunisian government blocked certain routes and singled out specific sites that coordinated protest actions, the response from Egypt's government was qualitatively harsher, even unprecedented in Internet history. Having first blocked Twitter and Facebook, the Egyptian authorities moved directly to ordering all major telecommunications providers to block Internet access; Telecom Egypt, Vodafone/Raya, Link Egypt, Etisalat Misr, and Internet Egypt all complied. As a result, 93 percent of Egypt's Internet addresses and networks were shut down. However, even this unprecedented Internet blackout was not total: both European-Asian fiber-optic routes through Egypt and the Noor Group/Telecom Italia routes used, among others, by the Egyptian stock exchange were left undisturbed, perhaps in the hope of re-opening the stock exchange as the protests were quelled. Nonetheless, the Internet shutdown and cell-phone service disruptions were major hindrances to Egypt's economy and debt rating.

Thus, on the one hand, Internet-crackdown campaigns in the Maghreb in early 2011 proved that it is possible for a determined regime to temporarily stop Internet access countrywide. On the other hand, they also showed that this strategy does not ultimately work in today's world of abundant ICT networks. Moreover, the economic and reputational costs of the crackdown far exceeded the perceived benefits of regaining information control. The crackdowns also spurred new technology solutions, such as utilizing router/path diversity methods, IP proxy servers, and Google's voice-to-Twitter applications.

Beyond the Middle East: General Implications and Reservations

The 2011 events in the Middle East defied skeptics like journalist and author Malcolm Gladwell* and writer and blogger Evgeny Morozov† by proving that information and communication networks can serve as powerful accelerators of social transformation.

* Malcolm Gladwell, "Small Change: Why the Revolution Will Not be Tweeted," *The New Yorker*, October 2010

† Evgeny Morozov, "The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom," *Public Affairs*, January 2011

No region, state, or form of government can remain immune to the impact of new information and communication technologies on social and political movements. While the political contexts of mass unrest in large parts of the Middle East have important country and macro-regional specifics, the impact of net-based technologies and social tools goes beyond that region and will continue to affect developing and developed countries alike.

At the same time, their impact is not universal or unconditional. As enthusiasts seek to project the latest developments in the Middle East into the future and to other regional contexts where ruling regimes face pressures of economic and political modernization, forecasts and parallels are to be made with great caution. The mobilizing effect of new information and social media networks as catalysts of broad sociopolitical protest will vary significantly from region to region and from one political context to another. The presence of multiple underlying causes for sociopolitical protest will not suffice for new information and communication networks to become a major catalyst.

For one, Internet access must be available to significant segments of the population. In the foreseeable future, this condition will exclude a number of underdeveloped countries with minimal Internet penetration. For instance, much of the Near East, with the exception of Iran, cannot be exposed to social media activism by default owing to underdevelopment and the lack of Internet access (Internet users made up just 1.1 percent of Iraqis and 3.4 percent of Afghans in 2010, for example, as compared to over 21 percent in Egypt, 34 percent in Tunisia, and 88 percent in Bahrain).[‡] Outside the broader Middle East, this is also true for a host of countries from Myanmar to Somalia.

At the same time, developments in the Middle East in 2011 raise doubts about decisively linking mass social protest with a proliferation of net-based networks and social media, whether today or in the short- to mid-term. Across and beyond the region, no direct regional correlation can be traced between, on the one hand, levels of Internet penetration and other IT indicators (such as the spread of social media networks) and, on the other, proclivity for and intensity of social protest. States with some of the highest levels of internet usage (such as Bahrain with 88 percent of its population online, a level higher than that of the United States) and states with some of the lowest levels of Internet exposure (like Yemen and Libya) both experienced mass protests. For the latter, however, the limited or absent role of major ICT and social media networks as direct facilitators in organizing protests did not diminish the role of mainstream electronic media devices – cell phones, tweets, emails, and video clips – capable of quickly capturing and broadly transmitting eyewitness accounts of domestic developments to the rest of the world. Another example is Iran, the regional leader in terms of combined indicators of ICT development and a country that has shown one of the highest growth rates in Internet usage over the past decade (with 43.2 percent of Iranians using the Internet in 2010, compared to just 42.8 percent in Russia and 31.6

[‡] Internet World Stats, "Internet World Stats: Usage and Population Statistics," 2010 <<http://www.internetworldstats.com>>

percent in China). If anti-government net-based social media activism does not become a qualitative accelerator in the context of present or future protests in Iran, this will be for reasons unrelated to the overall level of the country's technological development.

Third, not all types of ICT and related information and social networks have had the same impact. Nor have they outmatched other means of information and communication, from satellite television to cell phones, in playing a mobilization or public information role. While the media utilized the term "Twitter revolutions" for the developments in the Middle East, identifiable Twitter users in Egypt and Tunisia numbered just a few thousand, and the mobilization role of micro-blogging as a driver of protests has been somewhat overemphasized, as compared to other ICTs, including cell phones, video clip messaging (such as YouTube), and satellite television.

Fourth, a critical constraint on the catalyzing effect of net-based mobilization tools is likely not the ability of governments to master social media or to limit or block Internet access but rather a country's particular system of governance, especially in terms of its representativeness and its linkages to the mass public (which could be in a populist, if not "democratic," sense). The new ICT networks are likely to have a critical effect in countries where the governing regime has little or no social base (which was true of Tunisia and Egypt, but does not fully apply to Syria, Bahrain, or Libya, and is not the case for populist regimes such as Iran or Venezuela). If a governing regime is not alienated from the mass public but is at least partially mass-based, there are significant limits to what even advanced ICT-based social media/protest networks can achieve.

Finally, for ICT networks to succeed, the younger, relatively educated generation, which represents the most active Internet-users, should make up not only the bulk of activists, but also a sizeable percentage of the population at large. This effectively excludes, for instance, areas of Eastern Europe and Eurasia where this segment of the population faces a dramatic decline.

A Link to Western-style Democracy Promotion?

Yet another set of reservations concerns the short-sightedness of linking the mobilizing role of new information and communications technologies and related networks primarily to pro-democracy, pro-Western forces in the developing world.

The implications of the role of ICT and social media networks in the Middle Eastern context go beyond direct parallels with other developing regions. The growing spread of advanced information and communication/social media networks will definitely reveal new vulnerabilities and opportunities in the developed world as well. At the same time, identical tools may function quite differently in developed and developing countries. Likewise, counter-tools employed by actors such as governments or corporations targeted by social protest movements may be different or significantly nuanced for developed democracies and developing hybrid regimes and autocracies (consider the case of Twitter finding itself under repressive attack from the Mubarak regime over anti-government protests, while simultaneously being subpoenaed by the U.S. government over Wikileaks-related tweets).

In this context, the United States stands out, first and foremost due to its role as the lead external actor in the greater Middle East (in contrast to the more narrow and focused role of certain European states, such as France, in certain parts of the region). Perhaps even more critical is the U.S. position as the leader in the use of information/social media networks, the main provider and developer of related technologies, and the self-declared champion of Internet freedom, especially at the governmental level. The Barack Obama administration, in particular, has elevated Internet freedom projects around the world in U.S. diplomacy and budget allocations (the funds appropriated for such projects in 2010 represented a 600 percent increase from 2009).

However, there is an indication of dialecticism in U.S. policy regarding progress and setbacks fueled by ICT developments. This offset may be seen by the controversial impact for the United States of the Wikileaks phenomenon. U.S. policies on Iraq and Afghanistan featured prominently in the open-access distribution of leaked materials such as videos and classified or semi-classified U.S. Department of State cables revealed by Wikileaks. The leaks delivered a public relations and diplomatic blow to the United States, even though they did not affect actual U.S. policy toward Iraq and Afghanistan and had a limited effect on the political situation in the region itself. As a result, the U.S. government de facto posed as Wikileaks' main "counter-agent," reacting harshly to the fall-out from the Wikileaks' releases. In so doing, the Internet freedom agenda championed by the United States suffered a major political and credibility setback internationally (much criticism against this reaction came from some lead segments of the Internet and media community, especially outside the United States[§]). At the same time, the reaffirmation of support for Internet freedom by the United States and other Western states in the wake of the Middle Eastern protests caused the pendulum to swing back. In this context, the U.S. government's firm and prompt denouncement on January 28 (via Twitter at first) of Egypt's crackdown on the Internet and social media and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's official denial of any U.S. role in coercing private companies to deny services to Wikileaks in her "Internet freedom" speech on February 15 may be seen as part of this overall trend.

In the end, however, the U.S. government's somewhat moderated but persistent blame-laying upon Wikileaks is not the weakest link in its public reaffirmation of support for Internet freedom. Nor are the familiar claims, routinely made by Internet activists and a number of foreign governments, of political bias in the U.S. Internet freedom support agenda. Nor is the widespread concern about the potential for U.S. support to compromise local forces who accept it as non-genuine, pro-Western actors.

The weakest link in U.S. policy on the matter is the automatic connection it makes between social media networks and a Western-style democracy agenda. While the U.S. government (and others) are probably doomed to make this connection, it is a problematic one in several ways. By emphasizing the power of new technologies in

[§] Criticism came from a wide range of sources including *The Guardian*, other newspapers, exchanges at Harvard University's Berkman Center for Internet Society (see links 1, 2, 3), etc.

spreading Western democratic values, this approach ignores the socioeconomic and social justice and equality dimensions of the mass protests in the Arab world, which may be linked to, but is not identical to, political democracy promotion, especially in its liberal sense. Also, while effective as a grassroots tool to bring down an authoritarian regime, social media-based network activism may not be best suited for political competition at the stage of “post-revolutionary” state-building, governance reform, and institutionalized politics in general, compared to more institutionalized and better organized actors. More generally, net-based information and communication tools may serve as powerful accelerating factors of social protest, but they do not in and of themselves reflect or dictate the substantive natures (sociopolitical, value-based, and ideological) and contextual forms of such protests. These tools and technologies are utilized by different sociopolitical forces in different contexts, ranging from secular left-wing trade unions, reformist and radical Islamists (as in Bahrain and Syria), and right-wing populists and nationalists.

If there is a positive pattern to discern in the impact of Internet-based tools and social media networks on recent developments in the Middle East, it may have less to do with fostering Western-style democracy than in encouraging relatively *less violent* forms of mass protest. In contrast to Tunisia and Egypt, low or minimal social media activism (especially in Libya and Yemen) tend to roughly correspond with violent escalation, even as a host of other factors, not least of which is the degree of government repression, may ultimately contribute to violence. In this context, the use of ICT may be seen as the new “technical” basis for reviving the phenomenon of mass, *non-violent* protest campaigns. This pattern is certainly one that merits further empirical and analytical investigation.