



## مجلة البحوث الإعلامية

مجلة علمية محكمة تصدر عن جامعة الأزهر

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سكرتير التحرير  
د. محمد أحمد هاشم

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Can Social Media Incite  
Political Mobilization?

Dr. Eman Mosharafa

**Assistant Professor of Communication**

**At City University of New York (C.U.N.Y)**

## ملخص :

تعتمد الانتفاضات الشعبية على قدرة الجماهير المقهورة على القيام بعمل جماعي. ويستلزم الإعداد لمثل هذا العمل ارتباط هذه الجماهير بشبكات اجتماعية تتيح لها الالتقاء والتواصل بشكل طبيعي لا يفت نظر النظام الحاكم. تاريخيا، كانت هذه الشبكات الاجتماعية تتمركز في دور العبادة والجامعات والمدارس والتجمعات العمالية والمنتديات الاجتماعية. أما في عصر التكنولوجيا الرقمية، فقد أتاحت مواقع التواصل الاجتماعي للمستخدمين الالتقاء افتراضيا بشكل يومي. وعلى الرغم من أن الالتقاء افتراضي إلا أنه يقوم بنفس الدور في إعطاء المستخدمين الفرصة للتواصل والحشد. يستعرض هذا البحث الدراسات المنهجية التي ترى قدرة مواقع التواصل الاجتماعي على تفعيل حراك جماهيري وتلك التي تنكر عليها هذا الدور. كما يقدم البحث نماذج لحركات جماهيرية قامت في العقد الأخير في عدد من الدول مستخلصا من واقع التجربة قدرة مواقع التواصل الاجتماعي على أن تكون محفزا لتحرك جماهيري مؤثر.

## Abstract :

Uprisings depend on whether oppressed people are able to group among existing social networks where people communicate naturally and regularly. Traditionally, social networks were formed around places of worship, universities, schools, workplaces or recreational meeting points. In the digital age, social media play that role of getting people to meet on a daily basis. While the meeting is virtual, it provides the same function.

This paper examines scholarly literature which supports and that which challenges the role of social media in political action. The paper presents cases of mobilization movements in various countries in the last decade, concluding from actual experiences, that social media can be a catalyst for political collective action.

Paper won 'Best Paper Award' at International Organization of Social Sciences and Behavioral Research 'IOSSBR' Conference, 23-25 April, 2012, Atlantic City.

## **I - Introduction**

Political mobilization and building a pro-democracy movement to redress grievances, injustice, repression and exclusion hinges on the ability of people to come together within already existing social networks where they normally gather and communicate on a daily basis. Traditionally, social networks formed around places of worship, schools, universities, workplaces and recreational meeting centers. The fact that social movements sprout in the everyday networks of participants is what gives them their hidden quality (Taylor 2000). In the digital age, social media substitute the physical surrounding and allow people to connect beyond their immediate environment. Social media have expanded beyond brick and mortar into the digital spheres. It has been contested by communication scholars whether social media can in fact incite political mobilizations.

One school of thought stands behind the idea that social media are not effective tools for mobilization. Its argument is rooted primarily in the four following reasons: restricted webpage reach, low barrier of entry for social media resulting in an abundance of casual participants, the digital divide separating the have's and have not's of technology, and that most movements motivated by social media are small in scope and restricted to social or cultural causes rather than political ones.

On the other hand, proponents find that social media can be a valuable site for political mobilization and that the internet and its tools of social media such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and weblogs can play a role in terms of creating a social network where people could meet, socialize and interact daily. Such meeting, although virtual, would provide the same function as a traditional social network that is influential enough to reach a critical mass to afoot a political movement. Their viewpoint is rooted in the following four reasons: digital activism, political discourse, reach out, and 'vote-advice applications' in addition to new social media features. We examine these two opposing schools of thought and refer to literature by scholars such as Clay Shirky, Lincoln Dahlberg, Malcolm Gladwell, Fergus Hanson, Van Zoonen, Fadi Hirzalla, Bob Samuels and others to point out strengths and weaknesses of each position.

After presenting both arguments by proponents lead by Clay Shirky and opponents lead by Lincoln Dahlberg, author will demonstrate that there is a stronger evidence for the position of Clay Shirky. We will present case studies featuring the important role social media played in recent political movements to demonstrate that social media are critical tools for mobilizing, organizing and broadcasting the various stages of present and any future political uprisings. Or as Shirky has stated: "social media have become coordinating tools for nearly all the world's political movements (2011, P2)."

## **II - Social Media are not Effective Tools for Mobilization**

We will summarize the four predominant arguments, which state that social media are ineffective tools for political mobilization.

### **A. Restricted to Politically Active Web Pages:**

Critics of online mobilization argue that Internet use cannot activate political participation across the vast population. Political engagement is inherently localized to those participants who are already engaged users. These users tend to visit specific political blogs and forums. Political content and discussions on the internet that allegedly demonstrate the Web's potential for mobilization are contained on specific political cyber-forums such as E-democracy, Debate Politics, and newspaper websites. Research findings that claim that Internet can create a public opinion are drawn explicitly from investigations of such politically charged web pages. These findings cannot be generalized to the Internet as a whole as mobilization requires reaching beyond the population that is politically active and engaging the sideliners in the movement. Critics of social media point out that such marginal engagement limits social media from becoming a mobilizing factor (Hirzalla, van Zoonen, & de Ridder 2011).

### **B. Slacktivism:**

The term 'Slacktivism' is a shortening of the words slacker activism. The term is accredited to Fred Clark who used it in 1995 in a seminar series held together with Dwight Ozard. The term refers to Fergus Hanson "feel-good" measures taken by casual participants seeking social change through low-cost activities. For example users get a sense of accomplishment by simply putting a sticker on their vehicle, signing an



online petition, or joining a Facebook page that advocates a noble cause such as fighting hunger in Africa or exposing Joseph Kony of Uganda. Those who see social media as ineffective, argue that such measures, which require minimal personal effort, are ineffective and do not necessary translate into useful action or change in the real world (Christensen, Henrik Serup).

### **C. The Digital Divide:**

The digital divide refers to the gap between those who have and those who do not have access to digital and information technology. The underprivileged class, who supposedly need political change the most, are the ones lacking access to technology. This fact reduces the prospect for online mobilization.

Universal access to computers and the Internet is seen as a value and a goal for many societies. Van Dijk (2012) explores four successive types of access - motivational, physical, skills and usage – to further clarify this important issue of inequality in the information society. These four types of access constitute the criteria that users satisfy to have what is considered full access.

- 1) Motivational access is defined as the motivation to use a computer with an Internet connection.
- 2) Material access includes physically having a computer with Internet connection plus being able to pay for related expenses that cover the computer, network hardware, software and services.
- 3) Skills access is the ability to work with computer hardware, software and the Internet and the ability to use information contained on the computer and network sources to achieve certain goals.
- 4) Usage access is the actual usage of digital media. It is determined by usage time, number and diversity of applications, use of broadband vs. narrowband connections and active and creative use (such as having a website, publishing a blog, etc...).

Inequalities in these four types of access expose the existence of a digital divide. Research about Internet use indicates that differences in access manifest three socio-demographic gaps in world societies. A socioeconomic gap reflected in less Internet use by people with relatively low education and income levels than their higher education and income level counterparts. A gender gap reflected in less Internet use by women

than men. And an age gap reflected in less Internet use by older than younger people (Hirzalla, et al. 2011).

#### **D. Online Activism Is Limited to New Social Movements:**

New Social Movements (NSMs) are movements that have developed in many Western countries since the mid-1960s in a post-industrial economy. NSM theories suggest that these movements are more social and cultural than political or economic. The movements focus more on human rights issues than matters of economic redistribution (Scott 1990). They also emphasize social change in identity and lifestyle and usually seek to effect change on a single-issue basis. Examples of such movements are the anti-war movement, the student movement, movements for women and gay liberation and the environmental movement (Pichardo 1997).

These movements are made up of a loosely organized and informal social network of supporters that have no leaders and no interest in an ideological bureaucracy. They stand in contrast to the formally organized and ideologically committed members that constituted what is referred to as the old social movements.

Unlike the traditional movements of the industrial age whose key actors were the working-class, the key actors in the new movements come from members of the middle class who tend to have a higher level of education and therefore access to information and resources. The profile of the key actor in NSM's also includes marginal groups locked out of the labor market such as students and the unemployed. But the working-class, which was the primary constituent of old social movements, is missing from the class base of NSMs (Buechler 1995). Losing the working class from the NSM is another barrier to bring about a sweeping political change.

### **III - Social Media are Effective Tools for Mobilization**

We will summarize the two predominant arguments, which state that social media are effective tools for political mobilization:

the first is pro-democratic practices online and the second is new social media features.

#### **A. Pro-Democratic Practices Online**

Communication scholars such as Fadi Hirzalla, Van Dijk, Liesbet de Ridder, Cheri Carpenter, and Vinedo Chadwick argue that social media

could play a role in mobilizing people due to the following four democratic online practices.

### **1. Digital Activism:**

Digital activism refers to antagonistic forms of interaction between citizens and the political and economic elite for the purpose of achieving more transparency and legitimacy (Hirzallah, et al. 2011).

The “Do It Yourself” (DIY) format available in new technology has made it possible for citizens to move beyond the role of a spectator, becoming more of a player in the political game. The Internet and the development of new technologies have enabled this shift.

Consider the following examples of political engagement enabled by Internet tools. YouTube, the popular video-sharing service, has spawned a vast amount of political (and non-political) user-generated videos using a DIY format. The result has been very effective campaign videos produced at a small cost without professional media production. Political candidates in the United States trying to make themselves familiar to voters at the grassroots level benefited from the increased use of YouTube. YouTube is not only one of the most popular Internet applications; it has become today an essential tool for political content distribution that is being increasingly utilized by politicians (Carpenter 2010).

Twitter is a free, real-time, micro-blogging and short instant messaging online service. Users are able to send 140-character posts or tweets to their social network and they can send tweets from their Twitter pages, Facebook accounts, emails and text messages from their mobile devices. This social networking site has demonstrated that it is a valuable and convenient political tool. It is increasingly used for campaign reporting as well as engaging the average citizen and allowing users to participate as citizen journalists (Carpenter 2010).

### **2. Reach Out:**

The Internet enables nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), governments and individual political agents to propagate their message (Hirzalla, et al. 2011). Media technologies do not build social movements. But when a social movement is created, the ability of its members to reach out to the general public, communicate with others and develop alliances is vital for its success. A lot of oppositional movements share not only an antipathy towards mainstream news production but also

employ similar tactics to reach out to their audiences (Sholette; Ray 2008).

### **3. Vote Advice Applications:**

Vote Advice Application (VAAs), a new phenomenon in electoral politics in democratic systems, are an Internet application that helps voters find a party whose agenda matches their political preferences as closely as possible. These applications are thought to provide an essential service in the “e-democratic pre-voting sphere.” It is a site where citizens go to learn more about political parties and candidates’ agendas, which in turn enables them to form a more informed opinion (Hirzallah, et al. 2010).

### **4. Political Discourse:**

Some researchers and general observers see a growing trend of democratic practice in online political discussions on Web forums and network sites. Several studies suggest that the Internet extends and pluralizes the public sphere. According to Dahlgren (2005), a functioning public sphere is “a constellation of communicative spaces in society that permit the circulation of information, ideas and debates - ideally in an unfettered manner.” Public opinion will develop in the public sphere and the media will play a prominent role in this process. In the past, mass media dominated the public sphere but the rise of interactive media made available by new technologies has democratized the communication process between citizens and the holders of power. ‘E-democracy’ refers to an interactive online environment where citizens can inform themselves about and correspond with political representatives (Chadwick 2006).

These four democratic practices involve: First, changing the source of information. Rather than information flowing from mainstream media to the ordinary mass population, it now flows amongst ordinary persons, through the means of social media, directly to their fellow citizens. Second, facilitating the communication among fellow citizens, the propagation of political messages, and the opening up of political debates. Third, incorporating VAAs, used to provide information about political parties and candidates’ agenda. The final point discusses the ability to create a public opinion.

## **B. Social Media's New Features**

Social media, succeeded in overcoming space restriction, one of the major obstacles to full mobilization. While the Internet's political potential is primarily exploited by people who are already involved in politics, social media succeeded in engaging people who are not politically active offline through a new set of features that they incorporate. These features include hybridity, me-centricity & publicity, and bottom-up spontaneity.

### **1. Hybridity:**

Social networking sites (SNSs), such as MySpace and Facebook, make it possible for users to connect with their social circle. They begin by creating personal accounts then they invite other users to become "friends," and are able to send and receive messages and content - text, video, pictures and sound - to their network of friends.

A Facebook group page brings together thousands of people who share a common interest. Moreover, information on the group page can later be diffused to the outside members by 'sharing' features. The structure of the Internet itself is based on linking different sites and people together. The diversity of associations built into the web enables people to connect and organize across traditional class, gender, and race boundaries (Samuels 2011).

Web 2.0 describes technology that allows user-generated content and enables users to interact and collaborate with each other. It includes SNSs, blogs, video-sharing sites and web applications. SNSs are places where multiple elements and actors - human and technological, informational, communicational and political - interact in ways that shape online public discourse (Newsom, Lengel 2012). These sites do not simply transpose an already existing public will online. Rather by imposing specific conditions, possibilities and limitations on web use, they define the scope of online political practices, influence public discussion and mold the public itself. The encounter between technologies of communication and political processes creates new conditions that formulate issues of common interest and shape the public. Online publics and issues therefore are shaped by linking, assembling, connecting and thus hybridizing diverse platforms, software, networks, information dynamics, political discourses, movements, politicians, and citizens. This hybridity allows activists to engage non-

politicized citizens. Also it hinders the ability of governments to exert censorship or to inhibit online users from communicating with each other.

## **2. Face book, Me-Centricity and Publicity**

The types of exchange among friends on Facebook are diverse. They range from news stories that allow users to be informed about their friends' Facebook activities to private messages that have features similar to an email to public "wall"-to-"wall" posts. Facebook facilitates communication within and to a network through features like invitations and reminders. Users can invite their own friends to join a group, page or event either by actively sending a message or posting it on their wall or in a more passive fashion as their status updates become visible to their friends (Langlois, Elmer, Mckelvey & Devereux 2009).

Facebook also allows users to express political views in three ways. They can "like" a politician's profile, create or join a group or post their political views on their own profile. Joining groups or "liking" politicians' pages allows a person's profile to expand beyond the 'me-centric' network. Becoming a fan or a member of a group makes it possible to collect and publicize information around causes or even political figures. That is how networks of common interests are built. Facebook groups reflect the participatory nature of social media more than a politician's profile page, which follows a top-down decision-making model by parties and campaigns (Langlois, Elmer, Mckelvey & Devereux 2009).

Wael Ghonein, the Egyptian activist who created the famous "We are All Khalid Said" page that played an instrumental role in the Egyptian revolution, said that he formed the page to be a "public figure" page whereby posts would appear on members' walls as opposed to a "group" page where you have to visit the page to see the posts shared on it. This is a prime example of a me-centric approach, which proliferated a political opinion by utilizing social media outlets.

## **3. Bottom-Up Spontaneity**

Many young people have grown up in an environment characterized by social diversity, so they have helped to build a system that allows open communication with a low entry barrier. It is difficult for one group to control or dominate the conversation given the decentralized nature of new media. The use of new media and the inclination towards coalition politics have linked together different groups that normally do not speak

to one another. The decentralized nature of these networks may be empowering because it allows for bottom-up spontaneity. But formulating a list of demands is also central in the era of new media organizing, because new social movements do not have a specific ideology or leadership (Samuels 2011).

These new social media features not only enable the politically active to organize but also involves the sideliners to become engaged through the information dissemination of social media. New features as described above play a role in achieving a communications power shift away from a top-down structure to a bottom-up one. The decentralized information is less likely to be influenced by specific groups but rather represents the grassroots diversity of ideologies. Allowing individuals to aggregate and form digital groups based personal interest.

#### **IV - Global Account of Online Mobilization**

There is no shortage of historical examples in which media has played a pivotal role in mobilizing a political movement. We will underscore cases from various countries around the world that embody this phenomenon, such as Ukraine, USA, Iran, Tunisia, and Egypt. In Ukraine Orange Revolution (2004-5), while only a small percentage of Ukrainian population had access to Internet (2-4%), Internet and SMS were major mobilizing tools. Activists leading *Maidan* and *Pora* pro-democracy organizations utilized the organizations' websites to develop independent cyber media, facilitate online discussion boards, and document election fraud. The significant influence of the Internet can be explained through the two-step flow of communication theory that stipulates that there is a possible information path from elite opinion leaders to the wider population (Goldstein 2007). In 2008 American presidential elections, in addition to traditional campaigning methods, the Barack Obama campaign used the Internet and online communication as a political platform. Web applications such as MyBarackObama.com, VoteForChange.com, YouTube, wikis, e-mails, and text messages, which were tried for the first time in a political campaign, were proven to be very effective. The support that the campaign received online translated into over 30,000 events organized to support Obama's candidacy. In addition, the campaign was able to

generate a Web-driven donor base of 1.5 million people engaging small donors bringing in over \$700 million. The rest, as they say, is history as Obama won the election becoming the first black President in the US (Carpenter 2010).

In Iran (2009), waves of protests followed the 2009 Iranian presidential election against the victory of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad stating that votes were manipulated and that the election was rigged. The uprising was named the "Twitter Revolution" because of the protesters' reliance on Twitter and other social-networking Internet sites to communicate with each other. Iran is highly computer literate society: by 2009, there have been 28 million Internet users, the third of the population, and about 60,000 blogs that are regularly updated. While the heavy crackdown of the regime has managed to crush the movement and end the uprising, social media are credited for exposing the atrocities committed by the regime and in mobilizing approximately three million people in Tehran alone (Abdo 2010).

With regard to Tunisian revolution (2010), Facebook was cited as the revolution's main catalyst. At the time of the protests, there were 3.6 million Internet users (about 35% of the general population of Tunisia) and 850,000 Facebook users. Images and videos of funerals and injured citizens were posted online when clashes between security forces and peaceful protesters erupted after Mohammad Bouazizi, the 26-year old street vendor who had lit himself on fire, died of his severe burns. The protests and the State's violent crackdown that followed were closely documented by cell phone cameras and amateur video recordings that were then uploaded to Facebook and YouTube in real time. Web tools helped prevent the protests from fizzling out. Instead, online dissemination of information, organization, and mobilization of participation allowed the uprising to build momentum until it succeeded in driving the Tunisian president out of office and out of the country (Marzouki, Skandrani-Marzouki, Bejaoui, Hammoudi, & Bellaj 2012).

In the case of Egypt (2011), January 25, which marked the eruption of protests in Egypt, was first organized and publicized on the "We are all Khalid Said" page. Activists organizing the protests were able to reach a huge audience through the group, which had several hundred thousand members. Page administrators called on Egyptians to take a stand against torture, police brutality, corruption, favoritism, poverty and



unemployment and their call resonated especially with young Egyptians who had been encouraged by the outcome of the Tunisian revolution. Within 4 hours of creating the event, 25,000 members stated they were attending. By January 24<sup>th</sup>, the number increased to 70,000 members stating they were attending. The page administrator coordinated, via email, with other leading activists who have actual presence on the street, especially *Ahmed Maher* from April 6<sup>th</sup> movement and *Mostafa El Naggar* from ElBaradei presidential campaign. The proceedings for the day were announced in detail on the page three days before the event, which gave page members enough time to prepare but not for the Police to confront them. Details included date, time, locations, telephone numbers of lawyers to call in case of arrest, and other instructions. The result was mobilization to a degree unseen in Egypt before (York, 2011).

## **VI – Conclusion**

The state of mobilizations erupting all over the world, from Canada to the UK and from Tahrir Square to Wisconsin and from Greece to Chile, drives the need to take on the causal factors and the dynamics of mobilization. This paper tries to understand the process of mobilizations in light of the digital age that characterizes our contemporary society. Inexpensive technologies could empower citizens and mitigate the top-down politics where leaders control information and decide for the people. Moving from the revolution to a political process, social media can be used to drive young voters to participate. Research suggests that personal appeals from friends can actually affect voter mobilization without shaping voter attitudes (Suarez 2010). This could be an invaluable resource in emerging democracies such as Egypt. The promise and challenge of the democratization process in Egypt in the age of social media is to allow strong and viable political parties to emerge in a country where over 80% of the population has never participated in party politics. Social media can facilitate and hasten the process of recruiting members and activists, of spreading political messages, mobilizing voters and organizing support. The prospect is that social media become tools for democratizing Egypt just as they were tools for toppling the president.

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