Social Media And The Arab Spring

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Abstract

In late of 2010 and during 2011, the Arab countries saw a series of large scale political uprisings. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and other forms of social media have played a major role in the planning, acceleration, and even the preparation of some of the uprisings and revolutions that too place in the Middle East at this time. Social media was employed effectively to awaken the Arab people and to mobilize them to fight against repressive regimes in their drive for greater freedom and independence. This paper will discuss the cause of the uprisings. In addition, the role of social media in the Middle East before the revolutions and the impact it had on the uprisings and revolutions known as the Arab Springs will be examined.

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Introduction

> *Why does every nation on Earth move to change their conditions except for us? Why do we always submit to the batons of the rulers and their repression? Didn't the Palestinians resist with stones and knives? Didn't Marcos and Suharto and Milosevic and Barri fall? Did the Georgian people wait for the Americans to liberate them from their corrupt President? How long will Arabs wait for foreign saviors?*

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Talk show host Faisal Al-Qassem
Al Jazeera, December 23, 2003
(Lynch, 7).

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The Arab Spring started because people were fed up with the authoritarian regimes that dominated their respective countries. The Arab world had been struggling to change their political system for decades; be they the leftist groups or the Islamic groups, their efforts to peacefully change the systems have failed. The protests that started in 2011 wouldn't have evolved into such a massive phenomenon if it weren't for the widespread discontent over unemployment, the loss of hope, corruption levels, and low living standards. The anger felt by millions of graduates who couldn't find jobs to earn a living added to the level of resentment toward the regimes. A death of a 26-year-old Tunisian man named Mohammad Bouazizi was the trigger that led to the uprisings. Bouazizi was a street vendor and the breadwinner for his widowed mother and siblings. On December 17, 2010, he set himself on fire in front of a municipal building after an incident during which he was humiliated by a female police officer who wouldn't allow him to continue selling his wares. No one knows for certain why Bouazizi set himself on fire. Perhaps it was frustration and humiliation that drove him over the edge; however, his final deed led to the country's dictator, Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, being forced out of office. Within a month of this event, hundreds of thousands of youth protestors had taken to

the streets in almost every Arab country. All the protestors wanted to overthrow the regimes that were in place in the Arab world, and almost all of them waved the same banners. As stated by March Lynch in his book *The Arab Uprising,* "[they] fed off each other's momentum and felt the pain of each other's reversals" (7). More than anything, the people in the Middle East were yearning for better lives and democratic nations. Over the next year, waves of protests left major changes in their wake: revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt culminated in the downfall of these two regimes; a civil war in Libya resulted in the fall of its regime; civil uprisings took place in Syria and Yemen; and major protests in Bahrain, Jordan, Morocco, Algeria, Oman, Iraq, and minor protests in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Sudan. In an article titled "The Arab Revolutions of 2011 are like Europe in 1848 and 1989," author Anne Appleabaum argued that the Arab revolutions of 2011 were messy and complicated: "Each revolution must be assessed in its own context, each had a distinctive impact. The revolutions spread from one point to another. The drama of each revolution unfolded separately. Each had its own heroes, its own crisis. Each therefore demands its own narratives" (Salih, 2013). She argues that each country had a different reason for its revolution, and the revolutions were a product of multiple changes, whether it is economic, technological, or geographical.

Despite the fact that many Arab countries share the same language, culture, religion, and history, they differ in their political and ideological thinking. But for the first time in their long history, all Arabs were able to experience one world, a world with no borders, boundaries, or censorship. The internet presented the people in the region with the ability to engage in conversations regarding matters that were once forbidden. They were able to discuss issues about religion that was taboo, women's rights, governmental issues, and many other matters. The internet gave Arabs the opportunity to express themselves freely without boundaries, thus

enhancing and stimulating social and intellectual interactions. Long before the uprisings

occurred in the Middle East, social media had been lauded as one of the key factors enabling

popular uprisings and social movements. This has provided further hype for new digital media,

which were already being touted as tools for social change, liberation, and the representation of

marginalized or oppressed voices. Thanks to satellite television stations like Al-Jazeera and the

increasing presence of the internet, the follies of the Arab leadership were on full display to a

skeptical Arab public. Arab leaders could no longer go about their business in private while

simultaneously crushing any signs of discontent. Their people now had access to information

and the ability to express their opinions publically, far beyond anything the region had ever

before known. Digital media provided important new tools that allowed social movements to

accomplish political goals that had previously been unachievable. "And judging by the reactions

of the dictators and other desperate political elites, digital media have become an important of a

modern counterinsurgency" (Howard & Hussain, 18). Social media was effective in awakening

the Arab people and giving them the power to fight against repressive regimes in their drive for

greater freedom and independence. This paper will discuss the causes of the Arab Spring and

how social media played a role in the Middle East before the start of the revolutions in 2011. It

will further examine the impact social media had on the uprisings and revolutions known as the

Arab Spring.

Chapter One:

Root Causes of the Uprisings

If anyone asked a Middle Eastern person living in one of the Arab countries about the cause of the Revolutions, many will give the same, seemingly obvious, answer: these were revolts against repressive regimes, autocracy and corruption. A combination of factors have been identified as having led to the protests. "These include issues such as dictatorship or absolute monarchy, human rights violations, government corruption, economic decline, unemployment, extreme poverty, and a number of demographic structural factors such as a large percentage of educated but dissatisfied youths within the population" (Ogbonnaya, 2013).

Throughout history, revolutions have occurred as a result of similar issues-Corruption, high taxes, unemployment- which led to political and social change. In the 18th century, one of the most famous revolutions was the French Revolution; it was caused by economic difficulties, higher taxes, food shortages, and political discontent. It's long been understood that if a group of people feels oppressed, they will one day revolt and demand their rights.   that's how the revolutions in the Arab world started: each Arab country revolted against their respective regime.

<u>*Tunisia*</u>

Bouaziz's self-immolation was a cry for help, but this act promoted a revolution in Tunisia because demonstrations shared his assumed motives. The prohibitive rise in the cost of living, frustration over rampant unemployment (particularly among college graduates), contempt for the authorities, and the brutally of the police were among many factors that led to the revolt. The protests that swept through the country in late 2010 and early 2011 were triggered by demands for social and economic change. Demonstrators were protested against unemployment

and low living standards. Thousands of people, mostly students, marched to demonstrate their support for the Tunisian uprising. "Sit-ins, demonstrations, marches under various rallies denounced low wages, the arbitrary hiring practices of some companies and the government, precarious working conditions, and the absence of work at all" (Guessoumi, 2012). The demonstrations also criticized the Tunisian media's inadequate reporting, thus demanding better, truthful coverage.

Egypt

Egypt's revolution was inspired by the successful protests in Tunisia that led to the downfall of the regime. Although Egypt's revolution, which started on January 25, 2011, was sparked by the successful Tunisian revolution, it had already been brewing for decades. The primary reasons for the uprising against the regime were corruption, economic failure, and the Egyptian's people thirst for democracy and legitimate elections. Since the early 1980s, Hosni Mubarak had won every election with a voting percentage of 99%. These results did not fool anyone but were forced upon the people whether they liked it or not. Additionally, Mubarak had built a powerful, notorious police state. Tight internet controls, beatings and the kidnapping of who dared to defy the government, torture, police brutality, and bribes ran rampant under Mubarak's regime. One of the famous slogans that people knew by heart in Egypt before the revolution was, "sent behind the sun,: which referred to the pervasive kidnapping by the police and the disappearance of citizens (Corrimal, 2011). Another phrase, "walk near the wall," meant to walk one's head down to avoid any eye contact with the police so as to avoid interrogation (Corrimal, 2011). Before the uprising started in Egypt, people had already been extremely angry about the death Khalid Said. Khalid Said had been beaten to death by the police who went to a cyber café to interrogate him. His death galvanized an already worked-up Egyptian youth who

were fed up with the police and their brutality. The other major factors leading to the Egyptian revolution were economic distress and low incomes. For instance, in Egypt there was a huge income gap under the rule of Hosni Mubarak. "One half of Egyptians live on a $2/ day or less. The average per capita income in the country is just $6,200" (Jamoul, 2012). Egypt was known as one the countries where food prices were constantly on the rise. Half of the Egyptian population could not afford to buy food; they lived on bread. When I visited Egypt in 2009, one of my husband's friends explained to us that they never ate meat as they could not afford it. In an ordinary Egyptian household, the notion of eating meat was unattainable. "According to FAO [Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations]… global food prices reached a record high in January 2011, surpassing the levels reached during the 2007-2008 food crises" (Gana, 2012). As several analysts have shown, the rise of food prices in most Arab countries led to people being vulnerable, and this was undoubtedly a causal factor in the social unrest. "Impacts of the food crisis have been expressed in growing financial pressure on public budgets and cuts in food subsides" (Gana, 2012). This had major consequences for household budgets, forcing people to spend most of their money on food. The Egyptian people were fed up with the corrupt regime, bribery, and the government-controlled army and police who beat people with impunity. They wanted democracy and justice.

Libya

With the success of the revolutions in their neighboring countries, Tunisia and Egypt, the people of Libya were inspired to start a revolution of their own. Like Tunisia and Egypt, they had been rule by a dictator for 42 years in a very erratic and unpredictable manner. Education was very important in Libya : "According to United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 99.9 percent of youth are literate, 99 percent of the appropriate-age

population is enrolled in primary education, and 71 percent of the appropriate-age population is enrolled in secondary education" (Sizemore, 2014). However, the type of education provided for Libyans were determined by the country's leader, Muammar Al Qaddafi. For example, in high school the history books depicted Qaddafi as a hero who freed Libya from the previous regime. The curriculum was based on *The Green Book*, a book written and published in 1975 that includes Qaddafi's theories and ideologies. "The book rejects liberal democracy, capitalism, and Western ideals, and even demonizes any childcare which is performed by any other individual than the mother, thus discouraging females from seeking careers" (Sizemore, 2014). Even though Gaddafi tried to teach his people his ideologies, the injustices that were rampant within Libyan society could not be ignored. Gaddafi used oil returns and income to maintain power, to fund and strengthen his grip on power, and to finance many anti-Western terrorist organizations. In 2010 alone, "$41.9 billion worth of oil was exported out of a country with only 6.6 million inhabitants, yet Libya was known for high rates of poverty and unemployment" (Sizemore, 2014). The Libyan people, who were mostly educated, lived in a country that had a few economic and employment opportunities. "Estimations of unemployment in 2009 were 20.67%. Unemployment among men is 21.55 percent and at 18.71 percent among women" ("Libya's Unemployment at 20.7 percent"). Indeed, Libya had the highest number of unemployed people in North Africa, leading to increasing youth frustration. This deprivation became a severe problem, and the concomitant anger was evident among the masses of protestors who swarmed the streets of Libya during the Arab Spring.

Syria

In March 2011, Syria followed in the footsteps of the other Arab countries. Syrians, like the people in many of its brother-state countries, were tired of their ruthless regime. But one incident that might have ignited the Syrian revolution was:

> Influenced by Arab Spring protesters on TV, in March 2011, children between the ages of nine and fifteen in Daraa wrote anti-regime graffiti on the walls of their school and were promptly apprehended by security forces. Upon release, their bodies and faces showed signs of severe torture; some had burns and others had had their fingernails pulled out (Al Saleh & White, 2013).

This event, also known as "Friday of Dignity," was the main reason for the popular revolt. These children, whose only crime was to express their feelings on the walls of their school, were tortured and some were killed. This violent punishment angered and enraged the Syrian people who have been for decades oppressed by the Assad regime. "For the youth who dominate the majority of Syria have a rate of 20% of unemployment" (Roudi, 2011). Given these two sources of discontent, the Syrian people started the revolution by going out into the streets calling peacefully for the end to the Assad regime.

Yemen, Bahrain, Jordan, Morocco, Algeria, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia

In Yemen, Bahrain, Jordan, Morocco, Algeria, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia, protests took the form of sustained campaigns involving thousands of citizens who used civil protest techniques: strikes, demonstrations, marches and rallies. The people of these countries had had enough of their low standards of livings, unemployment, dictatorships, and the brutality of the

security forces. Although their protests were not as large as those Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria, the people took to the streets to have their voices heard across the world. With the whole world watching through Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, the Arab people screamed for justice and openly elucidated their dream of living with dignity and freedom in democratic countries.

Chapter Two

> "Social media is a tool for of liberation and empowerment.
> The freedom to communicate openly and honestly is not
> Something to be taken for granted" (Omidyar, 2014).

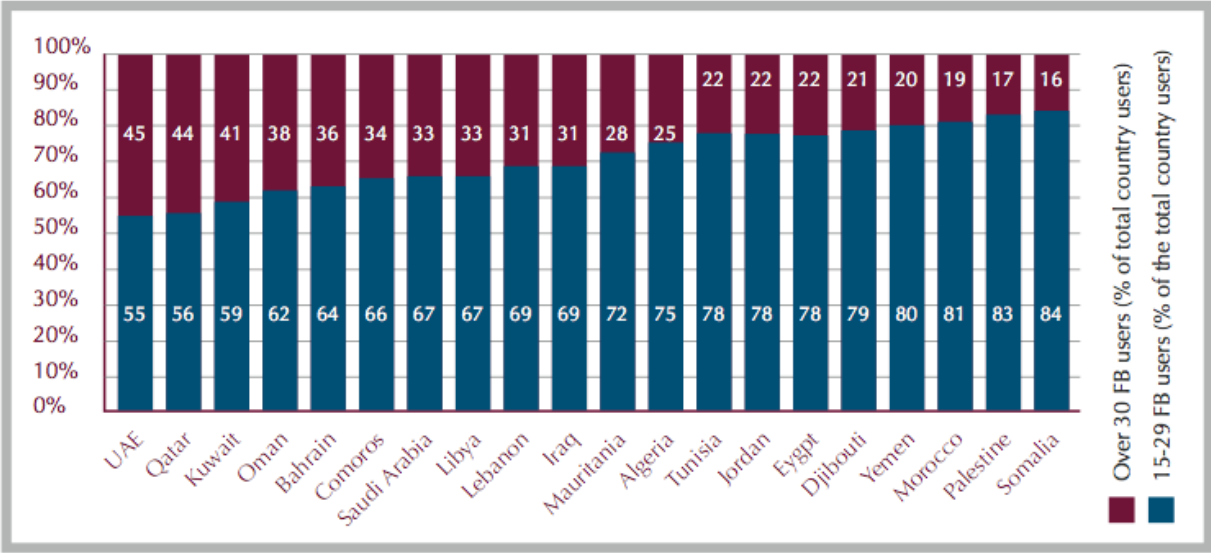## Role of Social Media in the Middle East Prior To the Revolutions

The use of social media has become the most pervasive phenomena in today's society. Children and adolescents use social media like Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace as a means for social interaction, while gaming sites, virtual worlds, and videos from YouTube have become the entertainment tools for today's youth. "Social media and networking have come to define a new generation of communication and have created a platform that possesses limitless abilities to connect, share, and explore our world" (Bhulyn, 2011). Social media is one of the most important "global leaps forward in human history" (Omidyar, 2014). It provides human beings with the means for self-expression and mutual understanding. "It enables rapid information of networks and demonstrates our common humanity across cultural differences" (Omidyar, 2014). It's a phenomenon that connects people and their ideas like never before. Prior to the existence of social media, the Middle East only had news media outlets, where everything was censored by the region's governments. No one was allowed to tell the truth, and if any organization dared to do so, the government would silence them. Before the revolutions, the Middle East had witnessed tremendous growth in digital communication technologies in a way that made it possible for people to express their frustration via social networking. "Using these sites allowed people to communicate in real-time and thereby was effective in developing democracy because social media sites gave people a voice to express their opinions about government, television, political leaders, and any other issues of concern" (Bhulyn, 2011). Sites like Facebook and

Twitter allowed people in the Middle East to control communication and to have the power they'd yearned for.

The Arab youth were the primary users of social networks although during the new millennium only 10% had access to the internet. In 2000, Arab countries were filled with internet cafes that many of the youth would use as their primary internet source. They would spend hours playing video games and socializing in chat rooms with people from around the world. The internet was only one of many forms of connectivity employed by large numbers of youth. "At the beginning of 2009, a little over half of Egyptians had cell phones. By the end of 2010, nearly three-fourths had one, and there were hundreds of thousands of new connections each month" (Cole, 9). By 2009 in Tunisia, literally everyone--the rich or the poor--had a cell phone. The young people interviewed by Cole felt that "[it] was very important for them to have cell phones for their activism" (Cole, 11). Because of the country's filtered and one-sided news broadcasting, the youth used text messaging to spread word of their discontent. When the revolution first began in Libya, the government shut down the phone networks and the internet, but the youth and activists used text messaging via their cell phones to communicate. A 2005 article on marketing to the Arab youth in a web-based magazine in Dubai spoke of "the Arab Generation Y and how advertisers could reach its members" (Cole, 11). Cole further explained how Generation Y spent most of their time surfing the internet and reading the news on their cell phones rather than printed newspapers and magazines. The youth of the Middle East were hooked on websites like Maktoob, which allowed them to share music, videos, and video games. "Other portal sites, such as Mazzika, concentrated on offering MP3 pop up music, and as the Web 2.0 unfolded, it became possible for Melody to offer music videos" (Cole, 11). By 2010, there were tens of millions of Arab youth on the internet. "In that same year, 15 million of the

Middle East and North Africa (MENA) were using Facebook. 50% of them have selected

English as their primary language to use Facebook, 25% chose French and just 23% selected

Arabic" (Middle East & North Africa Demographics, 2010). "Youth between the ages of 15 to

29 made up three quarters of Facebook users three years later" (Cole, 11). "50% were under the

age of 25 and 37% were female users" (Middle East & North Africa Demographics, 2010).

See figure 1 for further information regarding social media usage in Arab Countries.

* Excluding Syria and Sudan (due to US technology sanctions, no data on demographic breakdown of Facebook users available)

Figure 1: Social media use in the Middle East in 2010. [Facebook Statistics in the MENA

Region]

"From Morocco to Bahrain, the Arab world has witnessed the rise of an independent

vibrant social media and steadily increasing citizen engagement on the Internet that is expected

to attract 100 million Arab users by 2015" (Ghannam, 2011). With so many of the youth surfing

the web, they turned to the internet to express their rage and dissatisfaction with the problems

they faced each day, such as unemployment, rigid economic conditions and government

corruption. "They have utilized the internet to rally the populace to their cause" (Al-Naway & Khamis, 2012).

Prior to the Arab spring, some countries in the region had had vibrant online civil societies where open political conversations took place beyond the control of government censorship. Even before their revolutions began, Tunisia and Egypt had active bloggers. "Often the most critical government coverage of government abuse was done not by newspaper reporters, but by average citizens using their access to the internet in creative ways" (Howard & Hussain, 37). In 2007, a video of the Tunisian president using an airplane to visit one of Europe's most prestigious shopping destinations became notorious. Once the video went viral, the Tunisian government cracked down on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and other online applications. In Bahrain it was Bahrainonline.com that first attacked the prime minister for corruption, and by 2010, "every country in the region had an online source for credible information about corruption and regime abuse, spaces for political conversations" (Howard & Hussain, 38). Given all the advances that social networking offered Arab citizens, it was met by limitations and challenges from the respective regimes. Arab governments waged widespread crackdowns on journalists, bloggers, and human rights activists. "Hundreds of Arab activists, writers, and journalists have faced repercussions because of their online activities" (Ghannam, 2011). For example, in Egypt a blogger named Kareem Amer was imprisoned for more than four years, according to authorities, "insulting Islam and defaming Mubarak" (Ghannam, 2011). "In Syria, 19-year-old Tal al-Mallouhi was said to be the youngest Internet prisoner of conscience in the region and in December 2010 marked her first year in prison, mostly incommunicado, for blogging through poetry about her yearning for freedom of expression" (Ghannam, 2011). In Bahrain, a social networking blogger, Ali Abduleman, was imprisoned for

"allegedly posting false news on his popular website *BahrainOnline.org"* (Ghannam, 2011).

These are just some of the people in the Arab world who were imprisoned for posting their

opinions online. There were--and still are--thousands of bloggers who are punished for blogging

the truth and making their voice heard. In the hands of average people, digital media became a

means of documenting corruption and regime abuses.

Chapter Three

"If you want to liberate a society, just give them the internet"
Wael Ghonim

Impact of Social Media on the Arab Revolutions of 2011

No one could have imagined that the Arab revolutions would start because of the actions of a young man named Muhammad Bouazizi. His self-immolation caused the end of the Tunisian and Egyptian regimes and the start of civil wars in both Libya and Syria. He inspired tens of thousands of protestors to go onto the streets chanting for freedom and democracy. The Arab spring had many aspects, but one of these was social media, which had the power to put a human face to political oppression. Bouazizi's story was told over and over again on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, inspiring other people to organize protests and challenge their regimes. "Indeed, Facebook became the information infrastructure that supported political organizing independent not only of the state, but independent of other political parties" (Howard & Hussain, 47). The start of the revolution in Tunisia received little media attention, contrary to the 24 hour coverage of the Iranian protests that had occurred in 2009. When the protestors swarmed the city streets of Sidi Bouzid, the US was busy with the Christmas season, and the rest of the world did not know because no news outlets covered the events. Iran had a large media-savvy diaspora, which helped to promote the protests in 2009. Furthermore, Iran had a strong outlet; the Green Movement wouldn't have been as popular had it not been for social media. It was effective in promoting the Green Movement to a receptive online audience that followed tweets, Facebook posts, and web videos. Because of this phenomenon, the world saw everything; people were hungry for news from the frontlines of the protest. And that's what many of the protestors in Tunis and the rest of the Middle East did. They wanted to show the world the truth, how people

in many of the Arab countries had been living under corrupt authoritarian regimes. Indeed, if it wasn't for Facebook and other social networks, the Arab spring would not have been as well known or documented.

The Impact of Social Media in Tunisian Revolution

Facebook was perceived as the catalyst that ignited the Tunisian revolution. Without this social platform, the revolution would have certainly been slower and easier to crush. Each Tunisian user had developed certain knowledge about either acquiring or sharing information related to the uprising. "By being involved in the field and filming live action related to the unrest, "citizen media and journalism" were crucial in shaping people's collective consciousness" (Marzouki et al. 2012). The people in Tunisia overcame police brutality and heavy censorship to ensure that their uprising was heard. One of the protestors of the revolution, Rochdi Horchani, who was also a relative of Bouazizi, said, "Protestors took to the streets with a rock in one hand and a cell phone in the other" (Ryan, 2011). In clip after clip, footage of the demonstrations swept through the region. Most of the protestors were young men seen holding their mobile phone cameras and documenting the scenes. Footage of the peaceful protestors and horrific scenes of brutality at the hands of the police were uploaded onto Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube and aired on Arab satellite stations like Al-Jazeera. As stated by Horchani, "we could protest for two years here, but without the videos no one would take any notice" (Ryan, 2011). Bouazizi's self-immolation was not the first; there had been many men before him who had set themselves on fire to protest their way of life, but no one had heard of them. What was different this time is that people were fed up, and they did everything in their power to have the truth be seen and not just heard.

One way to understand the significance of social media in Tunisia is to examine the government's attempts to silence it. The government had always had internet censorship, blocking not just political sites, but other social sites that had video-sharing capabilities. Video-sharing websites were mostly targeted, including the one where the president and his wife were seen shopping in Europe. "Tunisian authorities began "phishing" attacks on activists' Gmail and Facebook accounts. By injecting malicious computer code into the login page of those services through the government-controlled Internet service provider, Ben Ali's monitors were able to obtain passwords to these accounts, locking out the activists and harvesting email lists of presumed activists" (Zuckerman, 2011). When the riots began, the government started arresting prominent internet activists responsible for encouraging people to go out into the streets. Ben Ali did everything in his power to censor the internet; as Horchani explains: "he sent the police into the streets using live ammunition. Why didn't he let them use rubber bullets?" (Ryan, 2011). Ben Ali was so fearful of losing power that he did everything possible to silence his people, and by doing so, he proved how powerful social media was in playing a major role in the revolution. "Tunisia not only exercised a tight monopoly on internet provision but blocked access to most social networking sites except Facebook" (Beaumont, 2011). The media was tightly controlled, but the government couldn't shut off Facebook because millions of Tunisians were using it; to shut it down would have meant greater problems for the country. Despite all his efforts to censor his people, Ben Ali failed because the youth and the people of Tunisia used everything in their power to make him step down.

The media played a major rule in the Tunisian uprising, and the reason was the country had many tech-savvy citizens and a youth that was eager to use the technology to shape a better future.

Impact of Social Media on the Egyptian Revolution

In Egypt during the time of the revolutions, almost everyone had a cell phone. The country also had the largest internet-using population in the region. This meant that up-to-the-minute news of the Tunisian revolution was available in Egypt, and news of Ben Ali's resignation spread rapidly through Egypt's social strata. Like Tunisia, Egypt has long had a large and active online public sphere. "It is here that illegal political parties, radical fundamentalists, investigative journalists, and disaffected citizens interacted" (Howard & Hussain, 21). Without the use of these social networks these groups wouldn't have had the opportunity to voice their concerns and their political views about the country. Wael Ghonim, a regional executive at Google, started the Facebook page called "We Are All Khalid Said," in memory of a young blogger who was brutally beaten to death by the Egyptian police in June 2010 in Alexandria for exposing their corruption. Ghonim wrote on the Facebook page "Today they killed Khalid, if I don't act for his sake tomorrow they will kill me too" (Vargas, 2012). Images from his bruised up face were taken as his body lay in the morgue, and the images were passed around from one phone to another. They were seen by thousands of people who started their own pages on Facebook seeking justice for Khalid Said and organizing protests on the internet. "The webpage to memorialize Said became a portal for collective commiseration." (Howard & Hussain, 21). Though this page looked like a memorial for Said, the idea of passing the image of Said along was to remind people of the brutality of the Egyptian police and how they tormented bloggers. It became a way for bloggers and activists to stand together and find a solution to end corruption. "Technology is not a panacea; Facebook did not make the revolution. In Egypt's case, it was simply a place for venting the outrage resulting from years of repression, economic instability and individual frustration" (Vargas, 2012). After the picture of Said went

viral, Wael Ghonim became the country's most prominent tweeter, linking massive social networks in Arabic-to-English websites. In his fast-paced political memoir *Revolution 2.0*, he wrote, "All young Egyptians had long been oppressed, enjoying no rights in our homeland" (Vargas, 2012). Two minutes after he opened his Facebook page "We Are All Khalid Said," there were 300 hundred followers; after three months that number had escalated to 250,000 followers. "What bubbled up on the internet inevitably spilled onto the streets, starting with a series of 'silent stands' that culminated in a massive and historic rally at Tahrir Square in downtown Cairo on Jan 25, 2011" (Vargas, 2012). During the heaviest of the protestors, Ghonim was arrested and placed in jail, but luckily he was released two weeks later, making him the voice of the Egyptian chapter of Arab spring. Although he became the symbol of the Egyptian revolution, Ghonim rejected this idea declaring, "I'm not a hero, I was writing on a keyboard on the internet and I wasn't exposing my life into danger, the heroes are the ones who are on the streets" (Smith, 2011). During an interview on CNN in 2011, Ghonim said that he believed the internet was responsible for the Arab uprisings, stating: "I want to meet Mark Zuckerberg one day and thank him. I'm talking on behalf of Egypt. This revolution started online. This revolution started on Facebook. This revolution started in 2010 when hundreds and thousands of Egyptians started collaborating content. We post a video on Facebook that would be shared by 600,000 people on their walls within hours. I have always said if you want to liberate a society just give them the internet" (Smith, 2011).

The first protestors to occupy Tahrir Square in Egypt shared the same hopes and dreams as their fellow Tunisians. "They were a community of like-minded individuals with similar backgrounds: underemployed, educated, eager for change, but exhausted by the religious fervor and political ideologies of the past decades" (Howard & Hussain, 21). They found peace

through social networking and digitalizing, and used texting on their cell phones to cajole each other to the streets to protest. The number of protests raised so quickly that the government analysts and outsiders were surprised to see how fast people gathered in Tahrir square. Just like Ben Ali who had tried to censor the social networks, Mubarak tried to disconnect the global information technologies. "It was a desperate maneuver with mixed impact" (Howard & Hussain, 22). But a small group of tech-savvy college students outsmarted the government and "organized satellite phones and dial up connections to Israel and Europe so they were able to keep strong links to the rest of the world" (Howard & Hussain, 22). "The government felt it didn't have any other option but to block all Internet access in the country for five days starting January 27 (as well as mobile telephone communications for one day)" (Abdulla, 2012). While the government was successful in shutting down the internet for days, it also took down the nation's information infrastructure thereby crippling the government agencies. Egypt's middle class were the most affected by this; they didn't know what was happening with the protests, and they were not able to get in contact with their family members. However, these measures by the regime were too late as people had already found their way to Tahrir Square; in the absence of information, many took to the streets, eager to find out what was going on.

During the revolution, Twitter was used by peaceful struggle groups. Twitter allowed for massive volumes of small texts to be created and distributed. According to journalist Catharine Smith, "One of the most important organization and social features of Twitter use in Egypt was the "hashtag" #Jan25 along with others like #Egypt and #Tahrir" (Thompson, 28). Egyptian protestors used hashtags to report what was going on in the protests or in Tahrir Square. One Egyptian activist with username (alya989262) explained the importance of Twitter for her movement: "Twitter is a very important tool for protestors, as evidence by the fact that it and

Facebook were repeatedly blocked in Egypt as the protests flared up. We use it to campaign and spread the word about protests and stands. But most importantly, it allows us to share on the ground information about police brutality, things to watch out for, or activists being arrested" (Thompson, 29). Twitter was just as important as Facebook in that it gave the protestors a glimpse of how fast and far their messages were traveling.

Impact of Social Media on the Libyan Revolution

The Libyan revolution erupted on February 15, 2011. But before it started, the Libyan dictator, Muammar Gaddafi, blasted the Tunisian people for forcing the resignation of their president Ben Ali. He mockingly and arrogantly stated, "This internet, which any demented person any drunk can get drunk and write in, do you believe it. The internet is like a vacuum cleaner, it can suck anything. Any useless person; any liar; any drunkard; anyone under the influence; anyone high on drugs; can talk on the Internet, and you read what he writes and you believe it. This talk is for free. Shall we become the victims of "Facebook" and "Kleenex" [a reference to WikiLeaks] and "YouTube"! Shall we become victims to tools they created so that they can laugh at our moods" (Lynch, 82). Qaddafi would soon regret his words because it was the internet that helped his people revolt against him and assassinate him.

Facebook was important in igniting the revolution in Libya because in late January 2011, a Facebook page, "The Uprising of the 17th of February, a Day for rage in Libya," was created (Elmahjub, 2013). The page urged the Libyan people to follow in the footsteps of the Tunisians and Egyptians. It advocated the end of Qaddafi's rule and declared that he was a treacherous, malicious murderer. The page also showed how Qaddafi's sons were spending money on lavish holiday to Europe and private yacht trips, showing how corrupt the government was. "On

February 15, 2011 some young Libyans responded to the invitation and took to the streets in the city of Albyeda, 1,200 kilometers east of Tripoli" (Elmahjub, 2013).   In response, Qaddafi's security forces killed two of the protesters and captured the others, placing them in jail. At this point in February 2011, Qaddafi felt the impact of the threat of Facebook and gathered all the famous Libyan activists and bloggers, and threatened them with dire consequences if they were to continue blogging on social networks. However, his warning came too late; "within a short time, the Facebook page has attracted 82,000 followers. By February 17, 2011, tens of thousands of Libyans took to the streets of Benghazi, Libya's second largest city, to end Qaddafi regime" (Elmahjub, 2013). When the protest first broke out, Qaddafi was in denial and tried to manipulate his people. "Al Jamahiriya, the Libyan state-owned television channel, was broadcasting nonstop patriotic songs, poetry recitations and rowdy rallies supporting the Libyan leader" (Mekay, 2011).   While these TV stations were broadcasting videos of Qaddafi, bloody clashes were occurring between the demonstrators and the security forces, killing hundreds of people. The people who were in the streets protesting took pictures and videos of the clashes as they were occurring, and posted them on Facebook and YouTube. These were broadcasted by Al-Jazeera and other news channels. Because of the use of social media, "unprecedented international coverage of the situation in Libya took place, associated with condemnation from the international community for the brutality of Qaddafi's regime" (Elmahjub, 2013).   Through the lenses of social networking, the whole world saw what was going on in Libya. On the 21st of February 2011, Gaddafi's security forces were driven back from the eastern coast of Libya. Meanwhile on the February 19, 2011, Misrata, the industrial capital and the third largest city in Libya, saw big massive demonstrations. "50, 000 citizens took to the streets and by the 22nd it was liberated from Gaddafi brigades" (Elmahjub, 2013). Gaddafi was losing power in major

cities in Libya, and only had control of the nation's capital, Tripoli. Instead of resigning and ending his long time reign, Gaddafi and his supporters unleashed their maximum military force on the people of Libya. What was unique about the Libyan revolution was the instant flow of information about what was happening daily during the revolution. "Young Internet users acted as journalists and reporters for the events on the ground. Stories, funerals, footage of injured persons, and waves of human masses chanting freedom slogans were constantly posted on social platforms right after the specific event would unfold" (Elmahjub, 2013). If it wasn't for these young protestors and their camera phones and social networking, the world wouldn't have known what was going on in Libya.

Gaddafi, his security forces, and his supporters took action and started cracking down on the protestors in Tripoli. It is believed that more than 600 protestors were killed in one day. In March 2011, Gaddafi tried to block or find a solution to the problem of social networking. "They developed responses that ranged from jailing and beating bloggers to more sophisticated strategies such as asking loyalists to identify protesters in photos posted on Facebook, creating domestic surveillance programs forcing citizens to monitor one another's activities, and more" (Howard & Hussain, 72). Gaddafi also called on his supporters to post videos showing their loyalty and support for him. He used social networking against bloggers and protestors, knowing that social networking could help him look good. As a last resort, he started using heavy military weapons that included tanks and rocket launchers to regain power of Misrata and the eastern coast of Libya. The pictures and videos that were posted on Facebook after the heavy fighting in Tripoli were horrific. They were very gruesome "that the United Nations (UN) Security Council passed Resolution of 1973 to impose a no-fly zone28 as a result of Gaddaf's use of the air force" (Elmahjub, 2013). Thus, the demonstrators became freedom fighter, and with the help of the no

fly zone and weapons from the US and other countries, the people of Libya were successful in letting Gaddafi to flee Tripoli for his hometown, Sirt, where he was finally caught and assassinated.

Social networking undoubtedly played a major role in the Libyan revolution. If it wasn't for social media, the people of Libya would never been able to remove Gaddafi from power. Ironically, pictures and videos of his capture and death were first posted on Facebook.

Impact of Social Media on the Syrian Revolution

The triumph of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions inspired the people in Syria to start their own. Slowly, individuals and groups started to voice their opinions on Facebook and other social media. Political opinion had existed before this time, but it was confined to secret chat groups for fear of being watched by the government. On March 5, 2011, young men between the ages of eight and 15 painted the popular revolutionary chants they had seen on satellite television, including "The people want to topple the regime"; "Your turn is coming, Doctor"; "Leave" - on their school walls" (Hanano, 2012). They made matters worse for themselves by writing their names on the walls, too. The Syrian security forces captured these young boys, and for weeks, their families did not know where they were. When this incident occurred, the people of Daraa protested for the release of the young prisoners and organized peaceful protests after Friday prayer. Their main slogan was *silmiya*(peaceful) and *hurriya* (freedom). The Syrian regime in return opened fire on the protestors, killing dozens of people and injuring others. In solidarity with the Daraa killings, a wave of protests spread to other cities in Syria, reaching Homs, the "Revolution capital city" (Shehbat, 2012).

Unlike Tunisia and Egypt, the role of social media was originally limited due to fears of the government scanning or keeping tabs on Facebook and Twitter. A 21-year-old activist who referred to herself as Rana for fear of the government stated: "I am too scared to speak about my political activity on Facebook and I am not going to open a Twitter account" ("Social Media: A Double-Edged Sword in Syria"). Still, activists knew the internet was their only option to get their word out of the country and for the world to see how the Bashar regime operated. "There are Facebook groups that organize protests, but they only give the location of the protest at the very last minute," Rana told Reuters at her apartment in Damascus. "You don't know what time it will start until just before it actually starts" ("Social Media: A Double-Edged Sword in Syria"). While the Syrian regime was using arms to kill people at demonstrations, videos from people's cell phones were their only weapon. "Their only retaliation weapon was YouTube" (Shehabat, 2012). The people of Syria wanted to expose the Syrian regime to the whole world. In May 30, 2011, "a video that was uploaded into YouTube showed the battered, and clearly tortured dead body of 13 year-old boy, Hamzeh Alkhateeb. This video sparked international outrage, as the whole world saw how brutal the Bashar regime could be" (Shehabat, 2012). After this incident, many activists took to Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Skype for live stream broadcasting news and information. One Facebook page that had many followers was called "We Are All Hamzeh Alkhateeb"; it was similar to the Egyptian Facebook page "We Are Khalid Said." The Bashar regime followed in the footsteps of the Tunisian, Egyptian, and Libyan regimes by trying to censor the internet in Syria. "The Syrian government switched off mobile phones and Internet connections in Daraa and Homs in an effort to hinder communication and the dissemination of news about the revolution" (Shehabat, 2012). To stay connected, the people in Syria smuggled SIM cards from neighboring countries. The people in Daraa, which is close to the border of

Jordan, would smuggle Jordanian SIM cards for their phones to stay active, while the people who lived in north, close to the Turkish border, would smuggle Turkish SIM cards. "Smart phones and the access they provide to 3G wireless internet have also been a significant tool for the revolutionaries, so significant in fact, that the Syrian government has banned the use and import of iPhones into the country" (Shehabat, 2012).

As the result of the on growing protests that were organized on Facebook, the Assad regime cut off internet connections and mobile phone services to hinder the activists' communication. In May 2012, Assad appeared on a local Syrian TV station "expressing his anger. He condemned social media and pronounced that the revolutionaries were winning the space battle" (Shehabat, 2012). He also indicated that even though the people were organizing street protests and were winning their cyber war; his military was winning the ground battle. Although Facebook was the number one source of communication in other Arab countries, Syria relied predominantly on YouTube. YouTube highlighted the regime's brutality by documenting events captured via mobile phone technologies. It also worked as an alternative press. I recall during the revolution that the Syrian channel would run a soap opera series or a morning show as if nothing was happening in the country. However at the same time, horrific videos of massacres were being broadcast on YouTube. In fact, other media outlets like Al-Jazeera received their video feeds in the same way; they would upload them from YouTube. Facebook was the second most important social media platform that the activists relied upon to get their information across. "Syrian activists have harnessed the power of Facebook pages in recruiting, coordinating and diffusing information to local and worldwide audiences. The most powerful Facebook pages have been 'We are all Hamzeh Al-Khateeb', the 'Syrian revolution 2011' and 'Euphrates Revolution Network' (ERN)" (Shehabat, 2012). The government was able to locate and then

imprison or even kill them on the spot. Skype was also an important social media that played a role in the revolution. Indeed, I remember that on CNN Anderson Cooper would communicate with journalists via Skype. For safety reasons, those journalists could not share their locations and would only communicate at night time. Skype was thus very important in facilitating communication between local coordination revolutionary committees. Because of this, "the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF, 2012) has reported that Skype has been directly targeted by the regime with a Trojan called 'Dark Comet (RAT)'. The Trojan allows an attacker to capture webcam activity, disable the notification setting for certain antivirus programs, record key strokes, steal passwords, and more – and it sends that sensitive information to the same Syrian IP address used in attacks (Shehabat, 2012). Sadly, although the Syrian people had tried to end the regime, what emerged from the social media battle was a civil war that continues to this day.

Impact of Social Media on Yemen, Bahrain, Jordan, Morocco, Algeria, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia

Tawakkol Karman, a female Yemeni journalist and political and human right activist, was named "The Mother of the Revolution." In 2011, she won the Noble Peace Prize for being the voice behind the Yemeni Revolution. The Yemeni Revolution started right after the Tunisian Revolution ended, and it was during this time that Tawakkol organized a protest via Facebook for Yemenis to meet in front of Tunisian Embassy on January 16, 2011 to celebrate the victory of the Tunisian people. Tawakkol and group of students from Sana'a University believed that, like the Tunisians, their nation would benefit if the country's corrupt regime ended, so they set up their first demonstration on January 15, 2011.   "The demonstration were astonishing; thousands turned up, and Sana'a witnessed its first peaceful demonstration for the overthrow of the regime. 'Go before you are driven out!'" (Karman, 2011). After one week of peaceful protesting,

Tawakkol was detained by Yemeni security forces. "This was to become a defining moment in the Yemeni revolution: media outlets reported my detention and demonstrations erupted in most provinces of the country; they were organized by students, civil society activists and politicians. The pressure on the government was intense, and I was released after 36 hours in a woman's prison, where I was kept in chains" (Karman, 2011). After she was released, Karman initiated another protest on January 29, 201,1 calling for the protestors to organize a "Day of Rage," similar to the Egyptian Revolution on February 2, 2011. She was driven and determined in her efforts to end the Saleh regime. She proved not just to women but to the entire Yemeni population that they had the power to stand together and end the reign of the corrupt regime.

The power of these revolutions lay within the people's strength and determination to work together. "The events in Tunisia and Egypt inspired the whole Arab region, they made us realize that we don't have to live with all the problems we're having, and change is indeed possible," internet activist Ala'a Jarban, 21 told Channel 4 News. While the bulk mobilization efforts in Yemen happened through word of mouth or the radio, it was easier to use Facebook because with one click of a button, large numbers of people could be called onto the streets to protest. People from different cities would gather and stand together to protest with one voice. Activist Jarban continued, "I know lots of people who didn't use Facebook and they asked me for help to join in. I even did small workshops to new users of Facebook and Twitter" (Channel 4 News, 2011). He believed that by using social networks, he could show the people of Yemen and the world how corrupt their government was, and he could mobilize the people to ask for both better lives and a better country. Said Jarban, "It worked. The call to protest was specific: "Our meeting point will be at 9:00 a.m. in front of City Mart. We will wear (white) shirts or T-shirt. And then we will head to Sana'a New University" (Raddatz, 2011). The Yemen

Revolution started on February 27, 2011, and though the bloggers and activists were a minority population in Yemen, they helped to organize masses of protestors.   It is also important to remember that: "Online activists are not the only revolutionaries. In the media's ultimate search for heroes, the West often coins online activists as leaders of the revolution simply because they can relate to them. They speak their language, and they can follow their blog" (Alwazir, 2011). This revolution was not on the internet, it was on the streets of Yemen, but social media did help to organize and let people know when to go out into the streets.

In Bahrain, the internet proved to be a strong ally in the protests that occurred in Pearl Square. Many of the people with the latest mobile phones used live web streaming to broadcast the protest live. "Sites such as Ustream, Live stream and Bambuser have enabled young protesters to take to the internet and filming live, while simultaneously taking part in the protests" (Channel 4 News). However, the Bahraini government followed in the footsteps of the other corrupt governments by blocking and shutting down many of the websites. Nevertheless, many of the activists would not be silenced. "On Twitter the hashtag #Feb14 - the first day of the protests - became the identity of the Bahrain action, while video and pictures were uploaded through other means" (Ghannam, 2011). The Bahraini activists were believed to be more advanced than those in their neighboring countries in the Gulf. "Bahraini activists are utilizing the technology very well. The government fires back, but there are always back doors that the technology provides," said Ahmed Mansoor, a prominent blogger in the United Arab Emirates (Ghannam, 2011)   Although the protesters and the Bahraini people didn't get what they wanted in the end, through the use of social media they did everything in their power to speak out against their government.

The protests swept across the Arab world to other countries, including Jordan, Morocco, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. While the uprisings were not as large and were unfortunately unsuccessful, social media was also used to organize protests and to voice people's opinions and concerns. It is believed that there were high restrictions on the internet in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait and that many activists were therefor unable to reach many people to mobilize them to go into the streets.

Social media has become a threat to the Arab regimes to the extent that there was a rumor that the King of Saudi Arabia was willing to buy Facebook from Mark Zuckerberg for $150 billion dollars. This suggestion was shared so freely on different social networks that many people believed it. On the surface, it was entirely plausible because the King would want to put an end to the revolts, and the only way to do so would be to destroy Facebook. The emergence of this rumor greatly supports the notion that social networks played a major role in the success of the revolutions and had a great impact on protestors. Indeed, supported by social media, the Arab Spring, at least in its early stages, led to the toppling of four ruthless dictators and the unprecedented outbreak of protests in many Arab states.

Conclusion

I remember the start of the revolutions as if they happened yesterday. When the Tunisian revolution started, it was only broadcasted on Al-Jazeera. CNN and other major Western media outlets rarely talked about what was happening in the Middle East. However, when I opened my Facebook page, I saw videos of the protests and all the other events as they were unfolding. Initially I thought that they were going to be just like the Iranian revolt, and in the end, although many people would die, the president would stay in power. It was therefore very surprising when, after only one month of protests, Ben Ali fled Tunisia, leaving behind his presidency; it was a major triumph, and everyone was happy for the Tunisian people. However, in the week immediately after the Tunisian revolution had ended, the Egyptian uprising commenced. This time, the whole world paid attention because of the success of the Tunisian people. Significantly, the reason for the Tunisians' victory was social networking. Indeed, this was the tool that the Egyptians used to start their uprising. "Digital media were singularly powerful in getting out protest messages, in driving the coverage by mainstream broadcasters, in connecting frustrated citizens, and in helping them realize that they shared grievances and could act together to do something about their situation" (Howard & Hussain, 24). Before social media it was very hard for people in the Arab world to hear each other as the news media outlets were controlled by the respective governments. But with the advent of digital media, it was possible to mainstream and broadcast everything that was going on in an instant. "Facebook and other social media platforms are now beginning to define how people discover and share information, shape opinion, and interact" said Carrington Malin, an executive at Spot on Public Relations in Dubai in May 2010. "Facebook doesn't write the news, but the new figures show that Facebook's reach now rivals that of the news presses" (Ghannam, 2011). Although there were

countries that succeeded in their revolutions, some that ended in civil wars, and some that failed, in every single case, the inciting incidents of the Arab springs were digitally mediated. Mobile phones, Facebook, and other social outlets are part of the story of the revolutions of 2011. While there were ultimately different political outcomes within the Arab spring, it doesn't diminish the fact that social media had a major impact on the course of the uprisings.

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