

Role of Social Media in the changing face of Indian Politics

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Abstract: The Internet and its tools of social media have been heralded as instrumental in facilitating the uprisings in India. This study will look closely at the extent to which Indian activists used social media networks such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and weblogs as tools for organizing and generating awareness of political mobilisation, in the uprisings that took place in India in January and February 2011. This work will use established theories of communication that were developed long before the advent of social media, to place its use within a wider context of communication, and to explain how the inherent characteristics of social networking that made it appealing to the activists in India. The discussion will focus on the uprisings in India, which have been widely publicized and followed by the international community, and aim to demonstrate that while possessing enormous potential to facilitate and expedite political mobilisation, the Internet is an inherently dialectical force that should not be treated solely as a liberator or oppressor.

Introduction

“We use Facebook to schedule the protests, Twitter to coordinate, and YouTube to tell the world.” The ongoing Arab Spring revolutions of 2011 have fostered a budding dialogue about the role of social media and networking as a tool for political mobilization towards regime change and pro-democracy movements. Some political pundits, academics and journalists have embraced social media as an undeniable force for good, claiming that, “democracy is just a tweet away,” or as the oft-quoted Egyptian Google executive Wael Ghonim famously said, “If you want to liberate a society, just give them the Internet.” The Internet has been heralded as an effective weapon of the weak and disenfranchised against their authoritarian leaders, resulting in what New York Times columnist Nicholas Krist of labeled the “quintessential 21st-century conflict,” in which “on one side are government thugs firing bullets...[and] on the other side are young protesters firing „tweets“.” Even before the Arab Spring, the revolutions in Iran and Moldova were eagerly labeled “Twitter revolutions” a phrase the international media has embraced that leads to an impression of a young, hip, and tech-savvy generation overthrowing their archaic authoritarian rulers by monopolizing on the “digital gap.” However, the excitement from the initial success of the Arab Spring revolutions has led to an overly simplified conclusion about the role of social media and the Internet in fostering revolution.

This conclusion relies on some broad assumptions about the democratic nature of the Internet, assumptions that call for a closer examination. The uprisings that swept across the Middle East and North Africa in early 2011 are still ongoing; only a week ago from the time of writing, Tunisians voted in their first election since ousting President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali ten months ago. This was preceded by the violent death of Muammar Qaddafi, an event recorded on mobile phones and personal video cameras, then made accessible to Internet users around the globe via YouTube, emblematic of the citizen journalism that has characterized the coverage of the Arab Spring. Due to the recent nature of these events, the scholarly and academic discourse is still developing, and there is fairly limited data and analysis of the role of social media in the Arab Spring. This is not to imply that there is a lack of information. What sets the information apart is the nature of its sources: for one of the first times in history the tumultuous events of the Arab Spring have been covered by ordinary citizens via Twitter, Facebook, online blogs, and videos on YouTube, more so than the mainstream media. According to the 2011 Arab Social Media Report, 94% of Tunisians get their news from social media tools, as do 88% of Egyptians. “Both countries also relied the least on state-sponsored media for their information (at 40% and 36% of people in Tunisia and Egypt respectively).”⁶ Equally noteworthy, in Egypt there are now more users of Facebook than there are subscribers to newspapers.⁷ In addition to Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, personal blogs have been used as an insider perspective to the ongoing revolutions. The fact that these tools of social networking that have previously had a reputation strictly for socializing are now being used as sources for information and data speaks volumes of their relevance in contemporary political mobilization. It goes without saying that this is not the first time a technological innovation has been used as a tool for change. The advent of Gutenberg’s printing press in the 15th century played a crucial role in weakening the power of

the medieval church and led to the Renaissance, and later the Reformation and Scientific Revolution. However, it is only centuries later that we are able to fully comprehend the impact of such a revolutionary and transformational invention. Attempting to do the same with social media whilst contemporary with its inception narrows the spectrum of understanding that comes with the retrospect of time. Crucially, as is true of both the printing press and the Internet, any new invention with transformative and disruptive potential must be viewed as dialectical in nature. "Roughly during the first century after Gutenberg's invention, print did as much to perpetuate blatant errors as it did to spread enlightened truth."⁸ It is with this historical observation in mind that any individual attempting to analyse the role of the Internet and social media in society must do so with full acknowledgement of its dialectical nature and, most importantly, with full acknowledgement of contemporary subjectivity. As Richard N. Haas points out, "the printing press, telegraph, telephone, radio, television, and cassettes all posed challenges to the existing order of their day. And like these earlier technologies, social media are not decisive: they can be repressed by governments well as employed by government to motivate their supporters."⁹ It is in light of these circumstances that this discussion of the role of social media in the ongoing Egyptian revolution will be addressed through a dialectical framework of analysis, which "requires that we analyse both continuities and discontinuities with the past, specifying what is a continuation of past histories and what is new and original in the present moment,"¹⁰ allowing for a critical perspective that acknowledges both history and novelty.

Historical Background

The social media are nowadays playing an increasing role in people's everyday life and the use of the social media has become more and more important as a way of communicating in the last couple of years. Social media like Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and LinkedIn have gained more and more popularity (Pondres, 2011). From the social media especially the „big tree“ services as Facebook, Twitter and Youtube have grown tremendously in the last couple of years. Since Facebook was created in 2004, it has in 2012 grown to 845 million active users worldwide. Also Twitter has grown increasingly in five years since it was created in 2006 to over 300 million users and with the establishment of YouTube in 2005 it has become more easy to distribute video content. One of the underlying factors of this increase in popularity is because the social media make it possible for large numbers of people to easily and inexpensively be contacted via these social media services. Also the approachability of the social media have increased its popularity, where the social media make it possible for everyone to share information (Safranek, 2012, p.1-2). This popularity is not only shown by the increasing amount of people who are using the social media, but also by the fact that they involve many actors, like regular citizens, activists, nongovernmental organizations, telecommunication firms, software providers, but also governments (Shirky, 2011, p.1).

The increasing influence of the social media is illustrated by recent developments in the last couple of years where the social media also had influence on governments. One of these distinct developments are the revolutionary events in the Middle-East in the spring of 2011. The so called Arabic Spring can be seen as a good example of the emerging role of social media in political and regime change, which is being described by Safranek in her article (Safranek, 2012). But what do these recent developments imply for public policy makers? A situation in which the social media almost cannot be ignored any longer by the authorities is present nowadays. As the focus in this research is on crisis communication, it is important to determine whether this is also the case for authorities in crisis communication. Although the importance of the social media has increased the last couple of years, there are still pessimists about these new media devices. These pessimists see the social media as a threat. For example because of the fact that rumors can be disseminated easily and very fast as never was able before. Especially when focusing on crisis communication they claim that in crisis communication it has become very difficult to hold grip on the (external) communication and because of this the formerly role of authorities or persons with authority, has diminished. On the other hand there are the optimists who emphasize the infinite possibilities the social media can offer, also in crisis communication.

Based on the wisdom of the crowd the social media offer tremendous possibilities, whereas Twitter for example can help train travelers to inform each other about a interference or it can help to solve a specific problem with each other (Duin et al., 2012, p.143). Particularly with regard to the topic of wisdom of the crowd it is also important to pay attention to the role of the social media in relation to democracy. A recent published report of the Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid (WRR) titled „Vertrouwen in burgers“ states that involved citizens are vital for a democracy. Although there are nowadays more involved citizens than expected, these citizens do not feel called upon participating because of the ways the government has shaped this involvement. In order to increase citizen involvement the report states that government and citizens need to trust each other more (WRR, 2012, p.11). With regard to this first aspect of democracy, citizen involvement, the social media might also provide ways in crisis communication to accomplish this. But also with regard to democratic legitimacy it is important to determine the role of the social media in crisis communication. How can the social media for example be of help in increasing the public's content with the crisis communication performed by the

authorities. Especially in times of a crisis one can speak of a tendency between providing sufficient information and making decisions in a limited time span on the one hand, and keeping in mind democratic values, like legitimacy, on the other hand. Where the first can be seen as a process in which there is a time limit and one needs to act as quick as possible, the latter can be seen as a time consuming process. Although recent research has already shown that the use of social media in crisis communication by authorities can be effective and especially Twitter is a good addition to the normally used communication resources (Bos, van der Veen & Turk, 2010, p.p. 49-51), this research will give new insight in this role of the social media in crisis communication where a democratic point of view is taken into account. The focus in this research will be on how the social media can be useful in achieving the objectives of crisis communication, which are meaning, providing sufficient information and limitation of harm, and why at the same time the use of the social media is important in crisis communication from a democratic point of view. How can the social media for example be of use in crisis communication in order to increase the democratic legitimacy of the crisis communication being performed by the authorities? The above stated question will be elaborated in this research by focusing on the crisis communication of two incidents which occurred in the beginning of the year 2011 in the Netherlands.

The first incident took place on the 5th of January 2011 in the municipality of Moerdijk. On the outside area of the company Chemie-Pack, a packaging company for chemicals, a fire arose which rapidly spread to the total complex of Chemie-Pack. Soon after the fire started, it became clear that this was not just an ordinary fire, but a unique incident which had consequences for a big part of the West of the Netherlands. By combating the fire multiple safety regions and authorities became involved (IOOV, 2011, p.4). The second incident is a shooting incident which took place on Saturday the 9th of April 2011 in shopping area „De Ridderhof” in Alphen aan den Rijn. Seven persons were killed, including the offender himself who committed suicide, and many people were injured during the incident (OM, 2011, p.3). The crisis communication of the above mentioned incidents have been the topic of discussion in the Netherlands, especially because of the role of the social media in their crisis communication. Where the social media did hardly had a role in the crisis communication of the fire in Moerdijk, the social media however was included in the crisis communication of the shooting incident of Alphen aan den Rijn. Because of this difference these two cases can give good insight in which role the social media can have in crisis communication and can be of help for determining why it from a democratic perspective is important to include the social media in crisis communication.

Understanding the Social Media Landscape in India

The medium is not always the message. Social media devoid of purpose and content would do little to enable people to prepare, respond and recover in the face of disasters. Generically speaking, social media can be defined as “a form of new media that facilitates social interaction and communication through the use of online internet-based platforms.” Within this broad ambit, social media tools can be categorised into the following:

A. Social networks and blogs. Social networking sites refer to sites that allow people to build their own personal pages to enhance content sharing and communication with other people (e.g., Facebook). Blogs are online journals or discussion sites used to post content and relevant updates (e.g., The Huffington Post);

B. Bookmarking sites. This refers to websites that help people store, classify, share and search links through the practice of folksonomy techniques on the internet (e.g., delicious.com, digg.com and reddit.com). When people tag and share content on bookmarking sites, the visibility of shared content typically improves across the board;

C. Collaborative projects. Collaborative projects are communal databases created through user generated content (e.g., Wikipedia);

D. Content communities. Content communities are online communities where people share various types of content such as photos, audio and videos (e.g., YouTube, Flickr);

E. Social reviews. This refers to websites that allow people to search, rate and share information as well as provide recommendations (e.g., Google Places). Using social reviews, people are able to vote on content based on personal interest, inclinations and perceived relevance.

Framework to Enhance Social Media Capabilities for Crisis Management

To guide the development of capabilities in harnessing social media for crisis management, a framework to foster a more systematic and coordinated approach outlined in Figure 1 is proposed.

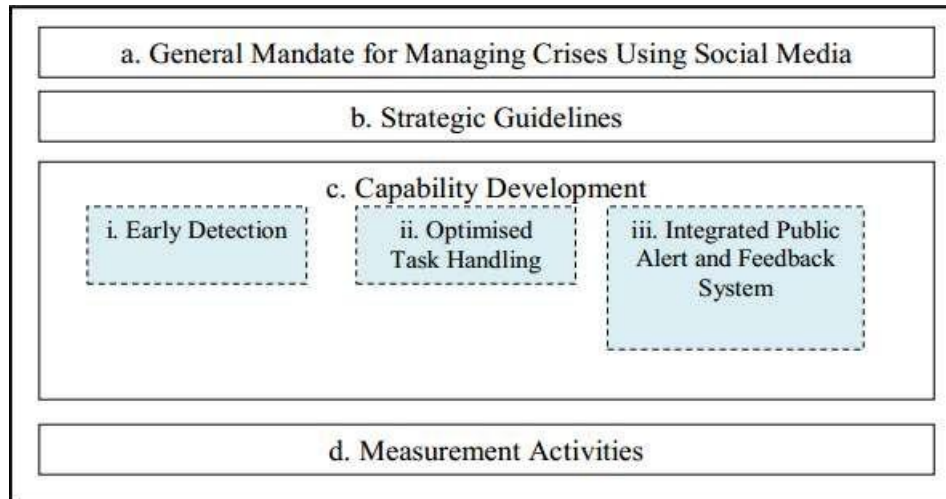


Figure 1: Framework for Whole of Government Crisis Management using Social Media

The framework comprises the following elements:

A. General Mandate for Managing Crises Using Social Media: Obtaining senior management buy-in on the value of harnessing social media tools as a complementary approach to Whole-of-Government (WOG) crisis management is essential to send a strong and consistent message to agencies involved in crisis-related work;

B. Strategic Guidelines: Establishing clear and consistent guidelines for ministries on the use of social media tools for crisis management are needed. A different and more expedited process may be needed to ensure information is put out onto the social media in a timely manner either for reassurance or to obtain critical intelligence. However, as social media is only one of the channels that may be used in a crisis and do not in any way replace existing means of communication, such process and protocols need to be harmonized.

C. Capability Development. Three capabilities are identified:

i. Early Detection. Pre-emptive and early detection mechanisms need to be in place so that early signs of a brewing crisis can be discovered. This will require an active sense-making platform where social networks, blogs and forums are regularly monitored. Active dialogue and engagement with community and active groups on social media are also needed so that these relationships can be leveraged on during a crisis;

ii. Optimised Task Handling. Dedicating resources to support information dissemination, disaster planning and training, collaborative problem solving and decision making as well as information gathering within the organisation could help ensure that tasks are handled optimally from the onset of a crisis. The targeted use of social media tools could serve to complement existing analytical processes residing within ministries to enhance crisis preparedness, response and recovery efforts;

iii. Integrated Public Alert & Feedback System. An integrated public alert and feedback system that incorporates social media tools that allow for a seamless and straightforward communication from the government to the public and for the public to send relevant information to enhance government operations during a crisis is needed.

d. Measurement Activities: The use of appropriate leading indicators⁵ to monitor the application of social media tools can help guide ministries in the evaluation of existing crisis management plans that leverage on social media tools. Developing leading indicators in areas such as operational efficiency and utilization of public perspectives could provide insights into existing organizational practices and how these may be improved to enhance crisis management. Measurement approaches should be consistent within government to aid benchmarking efforts.

Social Media as an alternative press in India

With its low entry barriers, social media tools provide an accessible platform for citizen journalism, defined as the use of digital media tools to “report on events on the ground, uploading text and videos directly to the Internet or feeding the information and videos to media outlets.” The dialogue taking place via Facebook, Twitter and other SMNs was used by the mainstream media as a source during the height of the protests. Al-Jazeera in particular relied on reputed bloggers and Twitter users during the uprisings for real-time coverage of events, by using Sharek, a citizen’s media platform that received and filtered through submissions by citizen journalists. “The strategy worked by trying to identify key bloggers in countries before protests broke out, informed by the situation in other areas, to act as citizen reporters and then be able to verify information later on.” Though there are obvious accuracy issues related to citizen journalism, the implication for the role of social media within the uprising is that it allowed for those directly involved to shape their own narrative and expose themselves to an international audience. Social media place “the tools of documentation and truth-telling into the hands of ordinary citizens, SMNs create linked activists who can contest the narrative-crafting and information-controlling capabilities of authoritarian regimes.”

It is of interest to note that there is growing criticism of a “Western narrative” that is shaping the way the world perceives the Indian revolution and other uprisings that are considered part of the Arab Spring. George Friedman summarizes this “Western narrative” as the assumption perpetuated by the mainstream media that the Arab Spring was a political uprising by masses demanding liberal democratic reform and that this uprising, supported by the Western democracies, would generate sweeping political change across the Arab world”. Central to this narrative is the use of social media as a facilitating tool. It has been argued because Twitter, Facebook, Youtube and the other social media tools are western in origin, their use in helping protesters to successfully overthrow their respective dictators has been exaggerated and has fueled the hegemonic discourse of a modern, technologically-advanced west aiding the underdeveloped non-west. However, to discount the use of social media as an attempt by the west to take credit for the successful uprisings is to ignore all those Indians who made use of the collaboration between social media networks and the mainstream media, in an effort to give their own narratives a platform.

Conclusions

This study has examined the role of social media networks in the Indian uprisings of January and February 2011, using a content analysis of primary sources of social media outlets as well as examining a cross-section of secondary source accounts from the mainstream media and academic journals. Though there is a range of opinion as to how influential social media was in generating political mobilization in the Indian uprisings, it has been argued in this paper that its main roles were in providing an organizational infrastructure, as a form of alternative press, and as generating awareness both domestically and internationally of the ongoing revolution. By analyzing the way the activists utilized the tools of social media through established theories of communication, one can see how the inherent characteristics of social media and the Internet were able to foster the necessary requirements for collective action. However, despite its success in organizing the uprisings, it would seem from the current situation in India that social media has been less useful in translating the needs and demands of protesters into political reality. A further study of the use of social media in Indian politics post-uprising could investigate the role of social networking in establishing new political parties or civil society groups, a process that has proven itself to be the main obstacle to protesters gaining political legitimacy.

The creators of social media that have been eulogized as liberators in the Arab Spring are given attention by the mainstream media, and treated as experts in the field. In 2009, as a result of the media excitement over Twitter’s use in the Green Movement, the micro-blogging site and its creators were being considered for the Nobel Peace Prize, a move that perhaps discredits those individuals behind the social media tools. It is important to remember in any analysis of the Internet and its role in political activism, that throughout history, there have always been those individuals willing to decide that enough is enough, and to take the risk of imprisonment, torture or death to stand up to the powers that be and publicly voice their dissent. The founders of Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube did not create their products with the intent of starting revolutions and ousting dictators, and though they may feel they have played a role in the process by providing these vehicles for change, these revolutions begin in the minds and imaginations of those driving them. They choose their tools and their mediums for communication, whether it is print, radio, blogging or just word of mouth, but the strength of a movement lies ultimately in the will for activism. It is just this will for activism that inspired the editors of Time Magazine to name it’s Person of Year for 2011 “The Protester,” in a tribute to those individuals who made up the revolutionary movements in the Middle East as well as other regions across the globe. Time’s choice of the “The Protester” for its prestigious annual accolade captures the zeitgeist of the era in which the Egyptian revolution is taking place, and perhaps even defining.

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