

Social Media and Social Change. A Study of the Arab Spring and Spanish Indignados

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ABSTRACT

As the world moves away from conventional tactics to unconventional ones, or conflict below the threshold of violence, public and private services will be used as a form of influence. In turn, social media's power to influence individuals and groups at all levels has emerged at the forefront of modern day conflicts. It is against this background that this paper investigated the role of social media and bringing about large-scale social or political change. The paper relies on qualitative data and method for its analysis. The Arab spring with focus on Tunisia and Egypt, and the Spanish indignados revolution in Spain were examined. The study concluded that the social media contributed immensely to the Arab spring and the Spanish indignados' revolutions through awareness, recruitment, mobilization and sustainability.

Keywords: Social media, Arab spring, social change, political change, indignados.

INTRODUCTION

Technology is the engine driving the modern world. Without technology man would not have been able to challenge nature, conquer his environment and make extraordinary exploits. In the 21st century, technology has become pervasive, entrapping every aspect of non-existence in the view of Zhigniew Brzezinski, the 21st century is the era of "technology age" (Toffler, 1980: p.23). Not only has the flattering of the world made it possible for movement and communication, it has also ensured that closed societies are seen from far through satellite imageries, and the computer networks, as services are delivered over long distances electronically with little or no degradation of quality (Friedman, 2006).

Computer technology has drastically reduced distance from one continent to another by less than a minute through the World Wide Web and its allied social media network. Toffler predicted in the 1980s, that the emerging "info-sphere will make possible interactive electronic contact with others anywhere" (Toffler 1980, p.383). the 21st century brought in its wake the radicalization of the information super high way, opening up outlets that are unique in their way for the dissemination of information through the internet connectivity.

It is through “The wired society; a term coined by James Martin in 1978, to indicate as society telecommunication networks, and Jan Van Dijk as a form of society increasingly organizing its relationships in media networks, gradually replacing or complementing the social networks of face-to-face communication” (Ihejirika, 2011) that people in “closed” societies began to see the other side of the coin outside and progressively began to agitate for change.

The internet is the single most attractive technological innovation to young men and women all over the world; using their smart phones on YouTube, and other social platforms. Through the internet connectivity, contacts are maintained on a more regular basis than any other medium, and this has greatly enhanced the dissemination of information across the globe on practically any situation anywhere in the world. This new development indicates that the world is increasingly changing and citizens of closed societies are spurred by the power vested on them as a people and makers of government to assert their right firm despotic leaders and even dismantle such regimes by protest and if need be, violence. In this regard the social media has played a crucial role in social or political change; it has proved effective in the sharing of information on human sufferings in despotic and illiberal regimes notwithstanding its inherent shortcomings associated with it as a technological platform.

The objective of this paper is to investigate the role of social media in bringing about large scale social or political change. The paper will investigate how social media enhanced social and political change in Tunisia and Egypt, two countries from North Africa during the Arab spring and the indignados revolution in Spain.

The study adopted the qualitative and tertiary method in the gathering and analysis of data. In this way, the data were gathered from reputable journals, textbooks, etc were analysed beyond the authors’ perspectives. This was done to show the relationship between the variables of the study.

WHAT IS SOCIAL MEDIA?

Social media is a term that describes online technologies and practices that people use to share opinions, insights, experiences, and perspectives. Social media can take many different forms, including text, images, audio and video. These sites also use technologies such as blogs, message boards, podcasts, wikis, and vlogs to allow users to interact. A few prominent examples of social media applications are: Wikipedia (reference), Myspace (social network). Gather.com (virtual reality), Digg (news sharing), flicker (photo sharing) and Miniclip (games sharing) (Boyd & Narain, 2012).

The above examples are by no means, the only social media outlets in existence. There are others like LinkedIn, which is a social network for professionals, and Facebook (a social network for everyone). There is also WhatsApp, (a social network for friend) and Tagged, Badoo, Hi5, Twitter and Plurk (the last two are the most popular micro-blogging services, and allow for only 140 characters per post, and each lets the user follow a set of users – “friends”, from one dashboard.

In the cases under investigation, the YouTube, Metacafe, Daily Motion and Vimeo played a critical role in occasioning socio-political change. They are social networks where video sharing is prominent, and where young people usually post videos for public viewing. These social media sites are public attraction and the YouTube for example, is the third most visited website and Facebook (New York Times, 2011). There are some of the social media platforms,

there are others as well, that have been exploited by users in their daily activities and interactions. Instagram for instance, is another potentially powerful social media platform.

In working to differentiate between kinds of social media platform, scholars distinguished and label several subsets of social media with a particular emphasis on social networks sites. Boyd and Ellison (2007) explicitly differentiate social network sites from social networking sites. They argue that social networking implies meeting new people and making new connections, which contrasts with actual users practices. Specifically, social network site users tend to interact with existing, rather than new social contacts. Examples of social network sites includes: Facebook, Myspace, YouTube and Live Journey.

A second sub-category of social media consists of micro-blogging sites. This allows users to distribute short messages to a broad audience, often through links and images. Such sites have explicit limits on the number of characters or amount of content allowed per message. Twitter, the predominant micro-blogging site in the United States and Weibo, china's suite of micro-blogging sites, limit each message to 140 characters. For example, Vein Twitter's video application, limits clips to 6 seconds.

In addition to the label of social media, the contemporary internet, characterized by interactivity and user-generated content is also known as "web 2.0". Some scholars have argued that the newest era of digital technologies, characterized by user collaboration and cooperation, can be labeled 3.0. Others however, content that web 1.0, 2.0 and 3.0 are better understood as variations in user practice rather than technological capability of particular relevance, social media users, who can engage in participatory and collaborative activities online, also utilize social media platforms to send e-mail, type messages or engage in synchronous discussions, both of which characterized the web 1.0 era (Barassi & Trere, 2012).

Because of the pervasiveness and availability through numerous devices – including home computers, work computers, tablets and mobile phones, social media have been viewed to have an important implications for private and practices and processes in everyday life. In particular, social media pervade processes of identity, inter-personal relationships and the political economic.

THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL CHANGE

When change in social structure, social order, social values, certain customs and traditions, socio-cultural norms, code of conduct, way of conducting oneself in the society and related factors take place, it is said that there is social change. When there is social change, the process of socialization also changes accordingly. The individual who is an active member of the society becomes an agent and target of social change. He brings social changes and also is influenced by such changes.

In a particular period or after a gap of several years each and every member of the universe is subjected to face social change. A particular social order does not continue for several decades; say hundred years or more, there is bound to be some change. Social change can be evolutionary or revolutionary. The evolutionary theory focuses on analytical construction of stages of growth, while the revolutionary concept seeks to explain how individuals and groups as citizens, brings about fundamental transformation of the social institutions through agitation,

and non-violent or violent social movements which aims to bring about good governance and democratic regimes, etc.

In the view of Anele (1999) the concept of social change refers to alterations in the pattern of social organization of specific groups within a society or even of the society itself. Deducing from the above definition, Ekpenyong (1993) posits that alterations in the social organization of a group or society refer to the development of new norms, the modifications of role expectations, a shift to new types of sanctions, the development of different criteria for ranking and the introduction and use of new production techniques. Anele (1999) further contends that a change in any part of the society or social organization affects other parts and the society generally at large.

Likewise, Moore, (1968) define social change as the significant alteration of structure (that is of patterns of social action and interaction) including consequences and manifestation of such structure embodied in norms (rules of conduct), values and cultural product and symbols. It is evident from Moore's definition that both social change and cultural change were emphasized. Although changes in the materials and non-materials contents of culture also may not be regarded as social changes, however, it is important to note that the two are very difficult to separate as they are usually interdependent. In this regard, social change may often bring about cultural change and vice versa.

THE CONCEPT OF POLITICAL CHANGE

Plato and Aristotle placed political stability and change at the very centre of their theories. The conception of the three forms of government – aristocracy, monarchy and democracy – the principles embodied in these forms, the cause of their perversion, and sequences of change which they are alleged to undergo, has been one of the most influential conceptual schemes in the history of political theory. These ideas are to be found repeated, elaborated, and modified in Polybius, Cicero, Machavelli, Bodin, Locke, Montesquieu and the federalist papers.

Political change occur when there is a significant disruption in a government “that leads to a new or modified leadership or policies. Political change is a universal phenomenon, yet the speed and the extent varies from political system to political system. It is a consequence of a whole host of interrelated factors, individuals, social structure, level of economic development as well as political institutions and political ideas. There is not one single variable but many; ideologies may help to legitimize the process of change, but they are only one aspect; political parties may be the most important ideological carrier and interpreter” (Ball, 1977).

Although it is possible to identify a number of factors that obviously have a great deal to do with contemporary development and change in the world's political systems, such as industrialization, population growth, the “revolution of rising expectations” in the less developed countries, and international tensions, there is no generally agreed theory to explain the causes of political change. Some social scientist have followed Aristotle's view that political instability is generally the situation in which the distribution of wealth fails to correspond with the distribution of political power and have echoed his conclusion that the most stable type of political system is one based on a large middle class.

Others have adopted Marxist theories of economic determinism that views all political change as the result of changes in the mode of production. Still others have focused on governing elites

from the masses, as the prime cause of revolutions and other forms of violent political change. There are others who have explained causes of political change from the perspective of unstable political system. An unstable political system is one that prove vulnerable to crisis pressures and that which breaks down into various forms of internal warfare. Political change occur when political systems suffer violent breakdown, when channels of communication fails to function effectively, when institutional structure and process fail to resolve conflicts among demands and to implement acceptable policies, and when the system ceases to be viewed as responsible by the individuals and groups making demands on it.

Many important questions remain as to the reasons for political change, the ways in which change, and the effects of change. Scholars are still puzzle with why some systems have manage to avoid violent political change for considerable periods, while in other systems, change is typically accomplished through military regimes, revolutions and other forms of internal warfare. The explanation may have much to with the existence in countries such as the United States and Great Britain of well-established political institutions that permit peaceful political change the presence in the population of widely shared attitudes towards the government, and the existence of basic agreement on the legitimacy of state authority.

There are forms of political change; first, radical revolution. This form of political change transforms not only the structures and institutions of government but of the whole policy, it also transforms the social order, the moral basis, and the values of the whole society. Secondly, structural revision. This type of political change involves alterations to the structure of the political system. Thirdly, political change as change of leaders. This involves the replacement of political leaders. Fourthly, change of policies. Government policy itself may be an important agency of political change. Major government policies is often a response to widespread pressures and demands that if not met by the system, may intensify and lead to various forms of violent political action and change.

WHAT IS SOCIAL MOVEMENT?

Research into social movements dates back to at least the 1950s, when researchers started to look at how individual behavior could transform into collective action toward social change. However, movements were not seen as strategic, organized, and rational efforts on behalf of a cause. Instead they were treated as a negative, irrational, and disruptive form of crowd behavior and social unrest that posed a threat to the norms and values of the existing social order.

Borrowing insights from the organization studies literature, the dominant paradigm guiding social movement research started to change around the 1970s. Since then, social movement scholars have emphasized how movement aim to achieve their mission by mobilizing resources (McCarthy & Zald, 1977), taking advantage of political opportunities (Tilly, 1978) and framing issues in advantageous ways (Benford & Snow, 2000). More recently, research on social movement has started to examine how social movements pursue their agendas by engaging in hegemonic struggle (Henmans, 2003; Van Bommel & Spicer, 2011).

Social movements are defined as networks of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations, engaged in political or cultural conflicts, on the basis of shared collective identities.

In the view of Wilkinson (1970), social movement is a deliberate collective endeavor to promote change in any direction and by any means, not excluding violence, illegality, revolution or withdraw into utopian community. Social movements are thus clearly different from historical movements, tendencies or trends. Blumer viewed it as collective enterprises to establish a new order of life. They have their inception in the condition of unrest, and derive their motive power on one hand from dissatisfaction with the current form of life, and on the other hand, from wishes and hopes for a new scheme or system of living. For McAdam (1972) social movements are those organized efforts, on the part of an excluded groups to promote or resist changes in the structure of society that involve recourse to non-institutional forms for political participation.

Social movements provides window for articulation of grievances and problems. They bring pressure on the State, keep check over the authority needed for healthy democracy. Social movements have five main components: objectives, ideology, programmes, leadership, and organization. Emotional outcry of group of people in the form of crowd is not social movement. Social movement is related to social and political change. So, it has an immediate and long term objective.

The immediate objectives may be to resolve a particular issue or protest again the decision of the authority. But that collective action does not end there. It takes up other issues and proceeds to a long term objectives of changing authority, power relationship, dominance and political system. For the long term objective, the movement evolves strategy for action. It gives priorities to certain porgrammes over others and also focuses on a particular direction, mobilizes certain groups.

Social movement involves mobilization of people who in course of the process identify with the objective of the movement. They share values and begin to share perception of common understanding of social problems and reality. For their mobilization and to sustain their participation, the leadership of the movement evolves different programmes and organization. In summary, social movement is the spirit of democracy and dynamics of society.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND SOCIAL MOVEMENT

In recent years, the appropriate way to explain the political change in most part of the world has been through the internet, mobile phones and the social networking such as Facebook, twitter and WhatsApp, etc. The masses in the expectation of democracy have not only produced large sharing network through using those technologies, but also organized their political responses at unprecedented speed (Howard & Hussain, 2011).

According to some researchers, social media and networking are the driving force behind the social movements which were started against authoritarian and despotic regimes in North Africa can the middle East Spain, Greece and many parts of sub-Saharan Africa (Webster, 2011; Cohen, 2011).

A continuous interaction between the members of a social movement and the society at large is needed from the point of emerging and spreading of the movement. Thus, the process of exchanging information on social fields begins. However, communication is not solely enough to create a social movement. For that reason, the most important aspect of communication is, it help in revealing common values for both participants of the movement and those who are

out of the movement in the efforts of social groups who live in a political and social world in putting their identity to society, it is important to inform the individual and groups through media (Isik, 2013).

Social networking sites draw attention as environments designed to develop social interactions in the virtual environment. In such a communication style, the user can exhibit their interests on their personal pages; share their photos and images with other people; or may present data to people about their information (Special & Li-Barber, 2012). Social networking has exceeded the limitless of time and space. This is the reason it has played a crucial role in organizing and sensitizing the people in most social movements that has taken place in recent times.

The social movements which began in the Arab geography at the beginning of the year 2011 and is still going on began on social networking sites as a tool of meeting and organizing analytic thinking on social media. The members of these networks provides revolutionist messages and succeeded in sharing those messages to their families, friends and founders of their movement through mobile phones and digital media. Moreover, the produced revolutionist messages were also distributed to mainstream media and satellite channels.

This is to say, that social media has enabled activists and persons all over the world opponent to oppressive regimes to gather under the same roof and make the illegal activities of the oppressive and authoritarian regimes and their armed forces visible.

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE ARAB SPRING REVOLUTION (TUNISIA AND EGYPT)

The Arab spring was just a spring forward for many countries in the middle East such as Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and seventeen others, who fought against their oppressive government regimes to put the power back in the lands of the people. The Arab spring revolution started with Mohammed Bovazazi, a fruit seller from Tunisia who was told by the police that he was not allowed to sell his merchandise without paying a bribe that he could not afford. After the Governor decline to hear his grievance, he set himself ablaze in protest. This revolutionary act motivated the masses who mobilized themselves against their corrupt and oppressive governments that had made living in countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Syria almost impossible.

In the early stage of the unrest, the internet and social media was quick at hand to spread the news of the violence. For instance, pictures of youths being brutalized by regime forces and other attacks was made popular to the outside world by social media – YouTube, Twitter, and Twitpic (New York times, 2011).

It was these images accessed by people in remote areas of Tunisia and abroad that ignited the citizen's fury and aggression against the regime and elicited the sympathy and support of foreign governments. The violence intensified out of control, and Ben Ali quickly delegated powers to his Prime Minister Mohammed Ghannouchi and fled to Tunisia with his family, thus marking the downfall of his despotic regime and the liberation of Tunisia from his twenty-four (24) years of totalitarian rule.

Systematically, the protesters using social media, posted regularly videos of each demonstration and issue calls for the next one on Facebook and Twitter (New York Times,

January 14, 2011) in the view of Kirkpahick (2011) by many accounts, the new arsenal of social media and networking helped to accelerate Tunisia's revolution, driving the country's 24 years Zine et Abidine Ben Ali, into ignominious exile and igniting a conflagration that has spread across the Arab world at breath-taking speed. Even the bloggers slim Amamou, who was held in Ben Ali's interrogation facility, was released by the five of the revolution and was made the new Minister for Youth, he however resigned.

Another role of social media in the success of the revolution in Tunisia included Twitter updates with stories of state oppression, police brutality and unrest, and tweets feeds of imminent street protests. During the Tunisian revolution, over 30,00 videos of state led violence and brutality were placed on YouTube.

The uprising was made possible due largely to the availability of internet facilities and smartphones with which protesters and activists communicated and posed images for the consumption of the general public. These images and videos, elicited then sympathy of the outside world. For instance, Ben Ali after he fled Tunisia, wanted to land in France, but the French authorities denied him landing rights and returned back his air plane, thereby forcing him to fly to Sandi Arabia where he was received for asylum on condition that he would not participate in Tunisian politics from there (Nelson, 2011).

The defiance of Tunisian protesters and the deepening of the crisis in that state, galvanized the Egyptians into similar action, and this was as a result of the internet and allied social media. Emboldened by the will to survive or perish, opposition leaders in Egypt declared a day of rage "against Mubarak" thirty-years misrule. The crack-down on the protest by Mubarak's security men could deter mass protests all over Egypt. The killing of protesters became a source of inspiration and reinvigorated the opposition's will to overthrow the regime. The first wave of opposition lasted for 18 days and the protesters used Twitpie, Facebook and YouTube to disseminate videos and photographs and called on Egyptians all over the world, to support the protester and bring down the regime. In the January 25, 2011 protest alone, more than 90,000 people signed up on a Facebook page, which was framed by the organizers as a stand against torture, poverty, corruption and unemployment.

The Egyptian government resorted to episodic brutality and censorship as the videos posted on YouTube and Facebook showed. Furthermore, the regime attempted to disrupt internet and cell phone connection in Cairo, Alexandria and other places in an apparent move to break the spread of the protest and the circulation of videos and photographs through the electronic high ways and cutting of social media websites that had been used to organize the protest, thus complicating efforts on the part of the news media to report the events play out in Egypt to report the events play out in Egypt.

The authorities went as far as instructing mobile operators to suspend services to the mobile communication by protesters. Mubarak's social media crackdown betrayed his fear that facebook, Twitter, Laptops and small phones could empower his opponents, expose his weakness to the world and topple his regime. Thus on February 10, Mubarak ceded power and the peoples power prevailed over the powers of a tyrant.

THE INDIGNADOS MOBILIZATION OF SPAIN

The indignados movement is an example of social movement that coalesced in response to the global economic crisis that began in Europe and the austerity measures that were imposed by governments to address the financial fallout.

Displays of collective behaviour against the austerity programme in Spain with the M15 (May 15) movement, and eventually became part of a broader, global movement. The organization began two weeks before the national elections in Spain in resistance to both of the two final candidates who Spanish citizens feared would further the neoliberal agenda (Goodman, 2012). More specific concerns were lack of political accountability among elected officials and representation of citizens concerns, high levels of unemployment, cuts to public services, bank loans, and home foreclosure.

The resistance over the political crisis move onto blogs and online social network services. Spanish cyber-activists used these tools to gain adherents and to protest against the prevailing situation. This discussion gave birth to the collective Democracia Real Ya: (DRY: Real democracy Now!). Members of DRY called for public demonstration to be held on 15 May in more than fifty cities across Spain. These evolved into what was later referred to as the Spanish revolution with protesters spontaneously setting up camps in many of the cities. Once again activists in these camps used Twitter as a channel for discussing their position and organizing themselves.

Twitter and facebook were the main communication platforms for spreading the messages put forward by the protesters. On Twitter, it did not take long for a set harsh tags to become widely adopted for discussing the political issues at stake and engaging with the protesters. As camps sprang up to several cities and across Europe, the use of Twitter to mobilize and comment on the protests became widespread.

In a study conducted by Vallina-Rodriguez et al (2012) on the rise of the Spanish indignados on Twitter, their findings suggests that the majority of election-related tweets expressed an alternative political orientation outside the traditional left-right political spectrum, and most often were concerned with the protest movement or universalist issues such as the electoral process, the economic situation or unemployment rather than a single issue or identity politics. Their study indicates that the main debate on Twitter was centred around the alternative politics proposed by the Democracia Real (Yal (DRY) Movement and the protesters in the different regions of Spain/

Pena-Lopez et al (2012) argued that indignados movement in Spain quickly spread all over the country, with information and communication technologies (ICTs) being crucial instruments for coordination, communication and (political) deliberation. In their views, among all these technologies, Tweeter played an important role both within and outside the movement, to get in touch with other citizen, organization, media and formal democratic institutions, including members of the parliament and political parties at large. Thus, for the indignados movement in Spain, social media played the role of recruitment, mobilization and sustainment tools to keep activists informed, focused, and physically engaged.

CONCLUSION

In contemporary times, social media has played a crucial role in precipitating large scale social or political change. Social media tools such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, etc. has allowed large scale mobilization processes to occur without involving formal organizations. At the same time, it enhance citizens to play a more active role in mobilization processes. Individuals can now rely on informal networks in order to get information about demonstration interpret it and spread the word through the expression of their involvement or identity: all of this at the expense of traditional mobilizing agents.

Social network have traditionally been considered important as recruitment channel for mobilization (Diani & Mac Adam, 2003 Research into online social media is flooded with information diffusion and recruitment (Gonzalez-Bailon, 2011), and on how social media tools change organizational dynamics (Segeberg & Bennet, 2011) encourage the massive sharing of experiences between loosely coupled individuals (Bekkers et al, 2011) and bring about political change (Howard & Park, 2012).

Summarily, social media has accentuated the patterns of political protest that already existed before digital media and has become a crucial component of connective action. Social media has been a tool in rising voice, awareness, and call for social change. It allows people to have access to a level of communication that the older generation never had. Through social media, people can now easily call out and mobilize the masses against wrong practices, injustices, and have a voice in different situations. In this way, social media has been a catalyst for social or political change.

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