

The Emergence of Libyan Networked Publics: Social Media Use during and after the Libyan Uprising

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Abstract. It is often claimed that social media sites such as Facebook played a key role during the so-called ‘Arab Spring’. Yet there have been few attempts to track what happened during and after the Libyan uprising, and how social media are – and are not - contributing to the development of revolutionary and post-revolutionary public sphere in the Libyan context. In Libya, there was an explosive growth in social media use during the post-uprising period. This rapid growth could be seen to potentially form the basis for the emergence of a new democratic, networked public sphere. By engaging with different conceptualizations and various critiques of Habermas’[1] public sphere concept, this study aims to explore the nature of emergent Libyan digital publics, and their possible role in transforming the Libyan public sphere.

Keywords: Social media, Networked public, public sphere, Information, Emotions, Libyan uprising.

1 Introduction

From 2011 the Arab countries experienced a wave of revolutionary protests with a spill-over of effects from one country to another. These events have been dubbed the “Arab Spring” by optimists and the “Arab Revolts” by others [2]. Before the Arab Spring, in comparison to Tunisia and Egypt, which had the largest proportion of internet users in the Arab region, Libya had a small number of Internet users [3]. However, during the uprising itself, although the country witnessed a long period of internet shutdown, some Libyans were able to re-connect (e.g. through internet satellite) and utilize social media to seek and spread information and news. Arguably, social media platforms functioned indirectly by getting information out of Libya, even during the period of internet black-out, to be beamed back into the country, as well as to the rest of the world, by news organizations such as Al-Jazeera [3].

Following the uprising, the internet use has increased dramatically. The number of internet users increased from 323 thousand in 2009 [4] to more than 2.5 million in 2015, [5]. This rapid increase in the use of technology that changes the way people communicate and obtain information in Libya could potentially form a basis for the emergence

of new networked publics. Thus, this study focused on exploring young Libyans' usage and perceptions of social media in relation to the unfolding events of the uprising and post-uprising period (2011-2016), and engages with various critiques of Habermas' public sphere concept, to evaluate how far a new form of digital public has emerged.

2 Literature review and theoretical framework

The concept of the public sphere, originated by Habermas, is modelled on the middle seventeenth century in Great Britain, France and Germany [1]. At this time, according to Habermas, people gathered in salons and coffee houses for rational deliberation in order to discuss common concerns and political issues. For Habermas, such practices were an ideal that declined with the advent of capitalist industrialization. However, Habermas' concept of the public sphere has been subjected to considerable criticism. The most common critique is concerned with the exclusion of gender from understanding of the public realm and the failure to recognize other public spheres of marginalized groups. According to Nancy Fraser [6], a feminist scholar, the concept of the public sphere was formulated around the interests of the dominant bourgeois excluding "sub-altern counterpublics" such as women and the working class. Fraser refutes the claim that the bourgeois public sphere was accessible and open to all, arguing that full accessibility was not recognized. In her view "the ideal of participatory parity is better achieved by a multiplicity of publics than by a single public" (p.127).

In modern digital society, the concept of the public sphere has also to evolve, in part, due to the introduction of the internet [7]. Technology and globalization enables the public with access to the internet to communicate faster and easier. In theory, the internet can empower citizens to voice their views and build solidarity, and so move in the direction of achieving a public sphere [8]. In practice, the internet can also increase polarization, where users seek out information similar to their beliefs [9]. In this way, the internet may be contributing to the fragmentation and division of societies. The digital divide, costs, computer skills and censorship cannot be ignored as other barriers to the emergence of a public sphere.

In addition, contrary to the ideal of rationality of the public sphere, the internet can become a virtual space of conflict and hostility between users [10]. However, this irrationality and emotion are seen by Chantal Mouffe [11] as a vital component of democratic practice which should not be omitted from the public sphere. Papacharissi [11] highlights that "the architecture of virtual spaces, much like the architecture of physical spaces, simultaneously suggest and enables particular modes of interaction" (p. 200). In her recent study of "affective public", Papacharissi [13] argued that digital publics are mobilized and connected or disconnected through affective statements that blend fact with opinion and emotion, demonstrating the importance of affect in creating feelings of community to sustain involvement and connections.

Thus, drawing on these understandings and critiques of the public sphere, this study aims to explore the nature of emergent Libyan digital publics, and their possible role in transforming the public sphere. It does so by examining young people's perceptions and experiences of using social media in relation to the unfolding events of the uprising and the post-uprising period (2011-2016).

3 Methodology

This study adopted an interpretative methodology. A sample of twenty-five Skype interviews were conducted with young Libyans aged between 24 to 35 in three cities, Tripoli, Benghazi and Sabha during 2016/2017. Semi-structured format was followed. Two initial contacts in each city were chosen and then sampling proceeded through 'snowball' sampling. Diversity was ensured in terms of age, gender, social class, level of education, tribe, ethnicity (Arab or Berber) and stance towards the uprising. This allows the researcher to obtain a variety of thoughts, opinions and different points of views.

With the permission of interviewees, each interview was recorded using a digital audio recorder. The average interview duration was 60 minutes. Prior to each interview, oral consent was obtained and a summary about the study was explained. Interviewees were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the interview at any point. The study was subjected to ethics review and was approved by the University of Sheffield ethics committee.

Each interview was transcribed immediately after the interview was completed. Interview transcriptions were read and initial notes were taken to gain a holistic sense of the interview data. Then, the traditional method of paper and pencil was used to analyse the interviews thematically [14] by developing a qualitative coding scheme. After that, commonalities or differences in the interviewees' experiences and stories were identified.

4 Findings

The initial findings show that while pre-uprising internet penetration was very low and public debate heavily censored, there was a significant shift in the information environment directly after the uprising. Social media was used heavily by young people to share information, and opinions and express emotions. Alongside other forms of media, this use of social media fed public debate, provided momentum for events, fostered solidarity, and kept people engaged and informed. Participants report increased diversity of information, and over time an increase in critical engagement with online content, suggesting the development of a nascent democratic public sphere. However, more recently Libyan society has become more ideologically fragmented, producing a more complex dynamic that is simultaneously more inclusive of Gaddafi loyalists, while others experience increased fear of public speech as a result of the ongoing struggle for power between militias. This suggests that although there

were some tentative signs of the development of a more democratic public sphere in the immediately revolutionary period, the deepening crisis and shrinking space for public debate indicate a complex, shifting and uncertain picture of the role of social media in the development of Libya's post-uprising public sphere.

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