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Victoria Carty

Chapman University, [carty@chapman.edu](mailto:carty@chapman.edu)

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# Arab Spring in Tunisia and Egypt: The Impact of New Media on Contemporary Social Movements and Challenges for Social Movement Theory

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# ARAB SPRING IN TUNISIA AND EGYPT: THE IMPACT OF NEW MEDIA ON CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND CHALLENGES FOR SOCIAL MOVEMENT THEORY

Victoria Carty  
*Chapman University*

## ABSTRACT

The events of Arab Spring were shocking for those who study social movements as long-term dictators were swiftly removed from office and a democratic wave hit the region. Although the outcomes of the Arab Spring revolutions are yet to be determined, what we can glean from these outbursts of collective behavior is that new media platforms played a significant role in the planning and mobilization efforts that brought people onto the streets and posed serious challenges to the existing political systems. This paper examines the importance of the communication field in influencing the political environment and motivating ordinary citizens to engage in contentious politics. I argue that these two social movements call for an expansion of social movement theory because the digital revolution has expanded the parameters within which groups and individuals can voice concerns, share information, and organize protest activities. Because the resources, organizational processes and structure, and sources of connectivity and communication that activists rely on are different than in earlier eras, we must theorize and conceptualize collective behavior in new ways as current social movements tend to rely on self-organizing and flexible grassroots networks made possible through new information communication technologies (ICTs) and other web-based tools.

Over the past several years there has been an explosion of protest activity among young people around the globe demanding radical changes in the existing economic and political systems as they embrace a new vision of the future. Arab Spring, which broke out

across parts of the Middle East and North Africa three years ago, in particular took the world by storm. Entrenched dictators who had oppressed their citizens for dozens of years were suddenly under siege and a few were removed from office as a democratic wave hit the region, at least temporarily.

These uprisings were originally greeted with great optimism throughout much of the world, yet, what we have learned from Arab Spring is that democracy is not an easy thing to accomplish. To the contrary, in some cases the protests have led to a revival of extremist groups striving to grasp political power, and/or the transfer of political power from one authoritarian form of government to another. The outcomes of the Arab Spring revolutions, including the countries of Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain and others are yet to be determined, but what is clear is that new media platforms played a significant role in the planning and mobilization efforts that brought people onto the streets and posed serious challenges to existing political systems.

Giroux (2012) emphasizes the importance of the communication field, and consequently, the political environment in motivating contentious politics. He summarizes, "Alternative newspapers, progressive media, and a profound sense of the political constitute elements of a vibrant, critical formative culture within a wide range of public spheres that have helped nurture and sustain the possibility to think critically, engage in political dissent, organize collectively, and inhabit public spaces in which alternative and critical theories can be developed" (p. 39). In essence, he argues that it is the media ecology which can either accelerate or serve as an obstacle to serious political discussion and debate, and ultimately facilitate displays of collective behavior.

One of the things that the Arab Spring social movements highlight, and which calls for an expansion of social movement theory, is that with the digital revolution the parameters within which groups and individuals can voice concerns, share information, and organize protest activities have expanded immensely. With new media technology at activists' disposal social movement actors have access to innovative communication outlets that foster a political terrain within which they can discuss grievances and collectively make demands. The uprisings also suggest that because the resources, organizational processes and structure, and sources of connectivity and communication that activists rely on are different than in earlier eras, we must theorize and conceptualize collective behavior in new ways as current social movements tend to rely on self-organizing and flexible grassroots networks made possible through new information communication technologies (ICTs) and other web-based tools.

In this paper I focus on the Arab Spring outbreaks in Tunisia and Egypt and document how disenfranchised youth took advantage of emerging wired technological formats in their respective countries to create mediated communities, networks and identities that decolonized public opinion by expanding discourse in civil society. This helped them to challenge the existing social and political structures. More specifically, this exploratory inquiry seeks to refine our understanding of the substantial impact that digital technology is having on social movement activity by addressing the ways in which ICTs accelerate movement activity, play a role in decentralizing mobilizations, facilitate recruitment efforts through virtual forms of collective identity, assist in the sharing of grievances that leads to contentious politics on the streets, and can be used to hold authorities accountable for their responses to protest activity.

The case studies also contribute to the literature on social movements as well as the research on ICTs by engaging in an interdisciplinary approach that includes political science, sociology, and media studies. For example, much of the research on social movements relies on a particular theory that focuses exclusively on either the reasons *why* social movements emerge at the macro-level (many from a political science perspective), or *how* they manifest themselves at the micro-level (more sociologically-oriented analyses). Theories of the Internet and other web-based tools, on the other hand, tend to overlook the broader context of social movement activity; its emergence, sustenance and outcome. This study, alternatively, assesses the complex ways in which structural- and micro-level mobilization efforts are interconnected as afforded by new media.

I begin by outlining the various social movement theories and note how the digital revolution has an impact on the way that we understand collective behavior and contentious politics. The paper then discusses the two case studies of Tunisia and Egypt and their theoretical relevance. Because the emergence, development, and outcomes of political transformation are always complex, I apply aspects of the different theories to conceptually and empirically understand the events and also highlight some of their limitations given the advent of new media and its impact on mobilizing efforts.

## DATA COLLECTION AND RESEARCH DESIGN

I chose the cases of Tunisia and Egypt because these uprisings represent two very recent social movements that were unexpected but shared a common theme of demanding the end of nepotism, political corruption, and economic injustice and replacing these with a

democratic system that would enhance economic growth and hold political and economic elites accountable. I do not engage in a comparative study in the traditional sense, meaning that I do not focus heavily on the commonalities vs. particularities of the cases in a systematic manner. Rather, my theoretical interest in these mobilizations is to examine how structural and micro-level factors can be mitigated through new technology to spark and maintain contentious politics in public spaces.

The data are drawn from a variety of sources including scholarly materials, the mainstream and alternative press, organizational sources, and the Internet. The data collection consists of news sources located in the LexisNexis archive and Google searches including key words such as, Arab Spring Twitter hashtags, Bouazizi, Arab Spring Youtube, Ennahda, April 6 committee, Khalid Said, January 25 Day of Rage, Tahrir Square, Facebook Arab Spring, and alternative press Arab Spring among others. For the purposes of this article I was not sampling documents per se, but rather accessing information and materials that help to clarify the emergence, developments, dynamics, and outcomes of these two social movements that can be analyzed under the rubric of social movement theory.

## SOCIAL MOVEMENT THEORY

According to Tilly (2004), the three main elements of social movements are campaigns (sustained, organized public efforts that make collective claims on target authorities), repertoires (tactics that a group has at its disposal within a particular socio-political environment), and WUNC (worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment). Key to any social movement are mobilizing strategies, "those collective vehicles, informal as well as formal, through which people mobilize and engage in collective action" (McAdam et al. 1996:3). Tilly refers to these as a "repertoire of contention" — the tactical forms from which social movement actors can choose at any given moment.

Theories that attempt to explain the *why* of social movements (or the emergence of collective behavior) include political process, political mediation, and resource mobilization theories and are oriented toward macro-level dynamics at the societal and/or state level. Political process theory contends that agents evaluate the political environment and make calculations about the likely impact of collective action prior to their engagement in the struggle. It is the political context that influences the claims they will pursue, the

alliances that they are likely to ferment, and which political strategies and tactics they will choose (Amenta and Caren 2004). Though some groups may have an insurgent consciousness, because political opportunities (referring to the receptivity or vulnerability of the existing political system to challenge) are not open, there is little chance of a successful mobilization and outcome (Tarrow and Tilly 2006). This vulnerability can be the result of one or a combination of any of the following: a decline in state repression (and thus increased tolerance for protest), fragmentation among political elites, electoral instability, broadening access to institutional participation, and support of organized opposition by elites (Jenkins and Perrow 1977).

This paradigm, however, disregards activists' *perception* of available opportunities and the lenses through which they view potential opportunities for participation in contentious politics, i.e. their subjective perceptions of reality and interpretive frameworks as limited as the achievements may be. To address these shortcomings theorists of contentious politics introduced the political mediation model which examines the way in which the social and political context that participants are situated in intersects with the strategic choices that they make (Gamson 1990). It also recognizes that opportunities are indeed situational, fluid, and volatile because they depend on the way actors *perceive* and *define* the situation before deciding what action, if any, should be taken (Meyer and Minkoff 2004). Another mediating signal that this model takes into consideration is public opinion and the ability of social movement actors to influence this in a way favorable to their cause (Soule and King 2006).

Resource mobilization theory has traditionally argued that social movements are formed by rational social actors who engage in strategic political action and rely on well-established social movement organizations (SMOs) to further their agenda (McAdam 1982; Tilly 2004). This perspective contends that having formal organizational structures in place are pre-requisites for collective political action. In addition to SMOs, other resources include knowledge, expertise, money, media attention, time, allies, and support from political elites. Participants are characterized as purposeful and motivated to support a campaign on the basis of a calculation of the costs and benefits of their involvement.

More culturally centered theories focus on the *how* of mobilization efforts, or the dynamics of social movement activity by paying attention to processes of collective identity and framing at the micro-level of analysis. These suggest that actors are not merely utility-maximizers but are often immersed in commitments to others and it is broader ethical or moral sentiments, typically rooted in a

strong sense of collective identity, that lead to participation in contentious politics. Melucci (1996) defines collective identity as an interactive, shared process that links individuals or groups to a social movement through sustained interaction. It is through this identity that individuals recognize they share certain orientations and grievances, and organize political campaigns through their collaborative efforts.

Cultural explanations of social movement activity also highlight the importance of framing and assert that key to forging collective identity and articulating shared meanings is the way organizers "frame" their issues to resonate with potential recruits. In other words, to build solidarity activists attempt to link participants' grievances to mainstream beliefs and values (Benford 1993). A frame is defined as an interpretive schema that an individual or group uses to interpret reality, on an ideological basis, by selectively omitting and emphasizing various aspects of the world (Snow et al. 1986). Frames are commonly referred to as "injustice frames" that contain implicit or explicit appeals to moral principles (Ryan and Gamson 2006). For framing to be influential organizers must persuade large numbers of people that the issues they care about are urgent, that alternatives are possible, that there is a worthiness (or moral standing) of the cause, and that the constituencies they seek to mobilize can be invested with agency.

Other theorists focus on the consequences, or outcomes, of mobilizing efforts. Some scholars argue that successful outcomes occur either when the challengers' goals are realized or when the target of collective action recognizes the challengers as legitimate representatives of a constituency, thereby altering the relationship between the challengers and target (Marullo and Meyer 2004). McAdam (1982) argues that *either* undermining the structural basis of the political system or enhancing the strategic position of insurgent challengers is beneficial because both increase the political leverage of the challengers.

## THEORIZING SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

The introduction of digital technology has led to new forms of activism that challenge some aspects of the theoretical frameworks previously outlined. All social movements are shaped by the technology available at the time and influence the tactics that social movement actors pursue, how they share and distribute information, and the terms under which they mobilize support. New media platforms provide social movement actors with additional resources in their repertoire which help them develop different types of connective



capabilities and creates a new communication field that allows them to alter the power relations between insurgents and the target of dissent in a number of ways.

For example, theorists have long noted that social networks, relational ties, and friendships are an invaluable resource by serving as a conduit of information and as a channel through which to recruit people to a cause, and especially for high-risk protest movement actions (Diani 1995; Verba and Brady 1995). Other research has found that an invitation through a personal tie is one of the strongest predictors of individuals' engagement in activism (Gould 1993), which in turn fosters collective identity. The introduction of revolutionary ICTs has greatly expanded the potential of these networks to develop and mutate exponentially, and especially through weak ties.

McAdam and Paulsen (1993), for instance, argue that although the strength of social ties influences recruitment on the individual level (as argued by resource mobilization theory), weak social ties forged in the virtual sphere can be effective in communicating and spreading messages about social movement activity across diffuse networks. Since participants in social movements are often recruited through preexisting social ties (this could be friends, neighbors, co-workers, fellow students, church members or other acquaintances), they assert that an additional context is necessary to better determine the nature of individuals' interpersonal social ties to a particular social movement. Today, this additional context is cyberspace.

The question of collective identity is at the heart of the scholarly debate regarding how digital ICTs affect collective behavior. A related inquiry points to the relationship, if any, between online sharing of information and participation in contentious politics in real communities. Much of the research finds that rather than replacing collective identity (as feared by some scholars, for example see Hindman 2007; Jordan 2001), mediated forms of communication often complement those based on face-to-face interaction (Boulainne 2009; Jenkins 2006). This is important because many activists, and particularly youth, receive information about mobilizations and contentious (as well as electoral) politics through digital channels of technology from people they trust. This in turn increases their likelihood of participation as they may not receive this information through any other communicative format (Giugni 1998).

Furthermore, Boulainne's (2009) research reveals that the instantaneous peer-to-peer sharing allows for the development of collective identity *before* protest activity on the street begins and that informational content through online activity is positively associated with increased political participation. Jenkins (2006) uses the term "civic media" to describe how new electronic mediums can lead to

face-to-face civic engagement and a participatory culture on the ground in the form of contentious politics, what he refers to as the "spillover" effect. Thus, we can consider these technology-enabled networks as hybrids in that they do not result in mere "clicktivism" but rather encourage viewers of information to engage in contentious politics if they feel the issues are urgent and that they have a sense of agency.

New media technologies also substantially shift the way that activists can create, distribute, and consume information. This broadens the public sphere of communication because they allow organizers to quickly and cheaply reach a critical mass, in contrast to the one-to-many flow of information through mainstream media (Van Aelst and Walgrave 2003). This facilitates the development of community in spite of physical distance, creating virtual public spheres (Kahn and Kellner 2003). Castells (2001) refers to this explosive type of informational politics as leading to a new kind of civil society based on the "electronic grassroots of democracy." Additionally, these new types of information sharing potentially offer a mode of communication that is resistant to state regulation, reducing authorities' capacity to repress the distribution of political communication, and thereby gives rise to a new type of civic engagement at the grassroots level (Bennett and Iyengar 2008). In sum, new media challenges the hard physical power of the state through the soft power new information technologies (Nie 2001).

Finally, scholars also highlight that new media allows for, and in fact encourages, new organizational structures of social movements. Tufekci (2012) contends that this new media ecology, and its virtual infrastructure, helps to build networks of coordinated action that are loosely articulated, decentralized, egalitarian and pluralistic. These social movement communities permit multiple memberships and part-time participation, and there is little if any distinction between leaders and rank-and-file members, members and non-members, and private and public roles. Mann (2000) describes these networks as "interstitial locations that consist of the nooks and crannies in and around the dominant institutions" (57). He argues that groups that are marginal and blocked by the prevailing institutions can link together and cooperate in ways that transcend these institutions.

Today, new digital media is par excellence for creating these interstitial locations as social movement actors now operate in ways that are less dependent on leaders and function in a more ad hoc manner in terms of organizing than previous ones which were reliant on SMOs. Additionally, new organizational processes enabled by digital networks are transforming organized dissent and the political terrain because they do not rely on traditional and external resources

such as access to mainstream media or professional leadership. Instead, they are supported by informal and grassroots networks. Such innovative types of connective action have led to the emergence of a personalized digitally networked politics in which diverse individuals address common problems that can lead to collective behavior (Bennett and Segerberg 2012).

However, there are certain caveats, in addition to the question of collective identity (addressed above) regarding the role of new technology in social movement activity. As the case studies which follow illustrate, new media structures, created through digital tools based on past email communications and Internet use, can be traced by elites. State authorities can also monitor and censor online activity through surveillance and repression through their own social media, especially when material is deemed political or critical of the government (Morozov 2011). Digital ICTs further enable authorities to manipulate activists' agendas and activities by following their online tracks and forming pre-planned responses to protest activities, and by blocking access to or shutting down access to the Internet, social networking sites, and mobile phones.

## ARAB SPRING

Although several countries experienced Arab Spring events when ordinary citizens surprisingly began to challenge authoritarian regimes that had ruled for decades with little respect for the formal realm of political processes, this analysis focuses specifically on the cases of Tunisia and Egypt. In both of these countries repressive regimes managed to sustain political power in large part through censorship and/or limiting access to news and information via state run media (Howard and Hussain 2013). Under these circumstances there were few, if any, public channels for citizens to openly discuss grievances or dissent, or to resist the ideological control that the political dynasties maintained through their monopoly on traditional media.

Therefore, digital media and social networking sites played a critical role in bringing decade's old grievances to fruition in virtual and public displays of collective behavior. The initial campaigns began through wired activism as Tunisians and Egyptians started to circulate information amongst themselves that was critical of the government. According to the Arab Social Media Report by the Dubai School of Government, the most popular Twitter hashtags in the Arab region during the first three months of 2011 (when Arab Spring erupted) were "Egypt", "Jan25" "Libya", "Bahrain" and "protest," all

of which provided information and updates about the growing revolutionary fervor across the region (Huang 2011).

These digitally enabled communication systems enhanced the realm of public discussion, debate, and communicative action through the grassroots distribution of information that circumvented the mainstream and state-owned media. In fact, during the protests in Egypt and Tunisia most citizens (who participated in Arab Spring) reported that they received their information about the revolutions from social media sites (88% in Egypt and 94% in Tunisia), and 56% in Egypt and 59% in Tunisia said it had a positive effect in that it motivated them to sustain their participation in the social movement events (Huang 2012). Almost 90% of Egyptians and Tunisians surveyed (again, those who participated in Arab Spring) in March of 2011 said they were using Facebook to organize protests or spread awareness about them (Huang 2012). There was an international component of the digital activity as well. For example, an analysis of more than three million tweets that contained some of the most widely used hashtag codes pertaining to the Arab revolts, such as #Egypt and @sidbouzid found that the major spikes in usage were driven by tweeters living *outside* of the Middle East (Stepanova 2011).

## TUNISIA ARAB SPRING

The driving forces behind the Tunisia revolution were a combination of political corruption and nepotism exercised by the dictator, Zine el Abidine Ben Ali, food inflation, high unemployment, and overall poor living conditions (Pollock 2013). The country also had a long history of a lack of political expression for citizens and a censored press. When Ali came to power in 1987 all forms of media were forbidden until a small conservative television station was allowed to broadcast in 2003 (Pollock 2013). Later, in 2009 Ben Ali's son-in-law purchased a publishing house that printed four newspapers. Thus, when the revolution in Tunisia began the majority of major news media sources were controlled by a member of Ben Ali's family.

The conditions were ripe for political upheaval especially when the global economic crisis, which began in 2008, affected large segments of the Tunisian middle class. At the time of the revolution unemployment was 14% and youth unemployment was 23% (Solnit 2012). But, what was needed was a spark. This occurred on December 17<sup>th</sup> when Mohamed Bouazizi, a twenty-six year old jobless college graduate with a computer science degree, set himself on fire in front of the Sidi Bouzid regional council (Solnit 2012). Unable to find steady work and trying to support a family of eight, he resorted to selling fruit

and vegetables on the street. The police seized his produce because he did not have a license.

His situation was common among youth living in the poverty-ridden area of Sidi Bouzid. Many high school graduates (as was Bouazizi) and college educated youth are unable to find dignified employment. As a result they gravitate toward the informal economy for employment opportunities. In Bouazizi's case, not only was he fined, but he was also treated harshly by a female police officer who allegedly physically and verbally abused him (Abouzeid 2011). In response to the indignity he was subject to Bouazizi attempted to file a complaint to the local authorities at the provincial headquarters, but was denied an opportunity to speak with anyone (Abouzeid 2011). This sense of desperation and indignity resonated with other unemployed and alienated youth immediately, and later with scores of other Tunisian citizens across all age groups.

The availability of new media helped to influence public opinion when the pictures of Bouazizi's self-immolation spread rapidly in cyberspace. Citizens recorded the tragedy on their mobile phones and posted them on the Internet and Facebook, which were then uploaded onto mainstream broadcasting sites by the international news group, Al Jazeera (Laghmari and Kasseem 2011). The day after Bouazizi's death Tunisians flocked to a common Twitter hashtag calling for a march the next day. Tweets mentioning Tunisia showed up in Twitter streams as many as 329 million times, reaching 26 million Twitter users. The most retweeted account, @VoiceofTunisia with its 496 followers, was retweeted over 400 times (Laghmari and Kasseem 2011). This distribution of information and planning of the mobilization efforts in cyberspace resonates with McAdam and Paulson's argument about the importance of weak social ties that develop in the virtual world and help spread messages across diffuse networks. The developments are also relevant to Jenkin's conceptualization of "civic media" and support Bennett and Segerberg's findings that show how digitally networked individuals, as diverse as they may be, can use public media platforms to express common grievances that later lead to contentious politics at the local level.

For weeks Tunisians protested throughout the country and on January 11<sup>th</sup> demonstrators reached the center of the capital city of Tunis (Levine 2011). The police responded with a harsh and violent crackdown and the images of the abuse, which were recorded in real time, provided more visual ammunition for bloggers and online political activists around the globe. International support encouraged the demonstrators to not only continue, but to ramp up the struggle. The next day tens of thousands took to the streets in Sfax, Tunisia's

second largest city. After blogger Majdi Calboussi's recorded the protests and police violence on his blackberry, which he then uploaded onto Twitter and YouTube, the video got half a million hits the first day alone and fueled the outrage (Levine 2011). Diani (1995), Verba (1995) and Gould (1991) all emphasize the crucial role of relational ties as an important resource for sharing information and recruiting individuals to a cause, and this is what transpired in Tunisia.

Though the regime blocked YouTube during the month of unrest, it did not entirely block Internet access, and cyber activists took advantage of this by playing bridging roles in the communication field. They re-posted videos and Facebook content about protests from closed loops of private networks to twitter and online news portals with greater reach (Safranek 2012). Additionally, during the first two weeks of January 2011 there was an eight percent surge in the number of Facebook users, coupled with a shift in the usage from one being mostly social in nature to one more politically-oriented (Safranek 2012). Boulainne addresses how the distinction of what individuals use new media for correlates with political engagement, and suggests that when citizens utilize digital media sites for political and knowledge-based reasons rather than entertainment the likelihood of political participation increases. This too is supported by Arab Spring in Tunisia.

Alternative media sites such as *Tunisia Live* were also vital to the mobilization because they published stories, photos and videos of the revolution that were not covered in the mainstream press. *Tunisia Live* served as a citizen media initiative that connected Tunisia with the English-speaking world, and spread the story globally (Solnit 2012). Nawaat, the Tunisian blogging group, set up a Web site called "Tunileaks" that widely distributed the cables to Tunisian citizens. Once the protests gained momentum the government completely blocked the Internet, Facebook and YouTube. This made alternative news outlets even more vital to the mobilization.

Despite the government's attempt at censorship activists found various ways to circumvent the blackout. They used landlines to phone in tweeted messages through Google's makeshift alliance with Twitter's "Speak to Tweet" service (Buhler-Muller and der Merwe 2011). This once again delineates how important it is for social movement actors to control the narrative and in Nie's (2001) words, how the physical power of authorities can be mediated by the soft power of new information technologies. Mann's conceptualization of interstitial locations through which activists, working at the grassroots level, can circumvent mainstream institutions and disseminate information and organize is also pertinent to our understanding the unfolding of the Tunisian revolution.

The Tunisian regime eventually lost legitimacy as public opinion shifted in support of the young insurgents and galvanized their allies. Ben Ali promised to create 300,000 jobs in the next two years and that he would not run for re-election (after having ruled for twenty-three years). He also guaranteed more freedom and civil rights to Tunisians. However, thousands of protesters continued to demonstrate and demand that he vacate immediately. The president eventually announced the end of his reign and the dissolution of the government within six months, and fled to Saudi Arabia in exile (Solnit 2012).

Activists recognized the crucial role that social media tools played in the ousting of the regime in their celebratory gatherings. For example, after the fall of Ali, banners and graffiti throughout the capital read "We Love Twitter," and "We Love Facebook" (Solnit 2012). However, it is important to acknowledge that although technology played a major role in the uprising, there are other variables that enabled the mobilization efforts that social movement theory can help clarify. Political process theory is limited in its ability to explain the outbreak of protest activity because the formal political system was relatively closed under the Ali dictatorship. Political mediation theory, on the other hand, which directs our attention to the role of public opinion and the *perception* of political openings, and belief in a possible victory despite a closed political system at the institutional level, is useful in understanding how the social movement activity transpired. One successful *aspect* of the revolution was the removal of Ali from office. What aided this was the shift in public opinion that favored the activists as they increasingly, and quickly, gained a sense of Tilly's concept of WUNC (worthiness, unity, numbers and commitment), and therefore legitimacy as a valid constituency promoting social change. Though the political transformation is still a work in progress, Tunisian citizens were able to undermine the structural basis of the political system and therefore strategically gained leverage over the authorities, thus supporting McAdam's definition of one of the positive consequences of protest activity.

An updated version of resource mobilization theory is also important in understanding the uprising because the most optimal resources were digital tools rather than those provided by formal SMOs or professional leadership. Money, labor-intensive organizing, and expertise were also less relevant than was access to new media. Cultural theories are also informative because the activists were not necessarily utility-maximizers but had a shared set of grievances that they articulated through an injustice frame and which was embedded in moral principles — in particular the sense of indignity that they felt

subject to by the authorities. Additionally, the participants carefully framed their issues in ways that included not just the concerns of youth but of society as a whole, and in this way were able to recruit new members both online and offline, and ultimately challenge the stability of the government.

## POST REVOLUTION TUNISIA

After Ben Ali's departure Tunisian citizens held sit-ins, strikes and riots throughout the country demanding legal recourse. The interim Tunisian government eventually issued an arrest warrant, charging Ali for money laundering and drug trafficking. He and his wife were sentenced to thirty-five years in prison on June 20<sup>th</sup> of 2011 (Adetunji 2011). Then again, on August 15<sup>th</sup> protesters engaged in direct action by flooding the streets and called for immediate reforms including the formation of an independent judiciary that could put corrupt officials and the killers of the "Revolution Martyrs" on trial for the death of the twenty-three civilians (Bohler-Muller and der Merwe 2011). As a result, the Prime Minister resigned, the police force was dissolved, and political prisoners were released. The interim government announced a new Constitution and on October 21<sup>st</sup> Tunisians had the opportunity to vote in the first free and fair election in twenty-four years. The Islamist party, Ennahda was voted into power, yet agreed to step down in late September of 2013 due to months of political upheaval and discontent with the party, and in particular its attempt to mandate that Islam be the official religion of Tunisia in the Constitution (Gall 2013).

There are currently plans for new elections in the spring of 2014 and in the meantime Ennahda has agreed to transmit power to an independent interim government. However, an attempt to transition from an authoritarian political type of governance to a peaceful democracy is facing challenges. There is a growing fear that a new theocracy may hinder the creation of a genuine civil society as the debate over the role of Islam in the framing of the constitution and the political process more generally continues (Bellin 2013). Additionally, as civil society has opened up following the departure of Ali there are now over one hundred political parties that are registered, many obscure and unknown by most Tunisians, and who are not only competing with Ennahda but almost among themselves (Bellin 2013). Thus, in addition to addressing the role of religion in political life there are further questions regarding the representation of the different groups in political life.



## EGYPT ARAB SPRING

The success story of Tunisia spread throughout the region via cyberspace and as a result other regimes began to face similar challenges. As was the case in Tunisia, the list of grievances in Egypt under President Hosni Mubarak's tenure was long. It was a group of young individuals that called themselves the April 6 Movement, and who began mobilizing years before the Arab Spring revolution, which blazed the trail for the Egyptian Arab Spring (Souaiaia 2011). In fact, Egypt experienced thousands of labor protests as early as 2004 that were organized by the labor movement in conjunction with April 6. Workers held a strike on April 6<sup>th</sup> of 2004 (thus inspiring the name of the movement) at a textile factory run by the government outside of Cairo. This initiated other strikes that activists advertised on a Facebook page and through which citizens began demanding Mubarak's departure (Souaiaia 2011). When the government attempted to break the strike by using riot police labor activists, young Egyptians, and other sectors of the population formed the "6 April Committee." This coalition later organized the January 25<sup>th</sup> occupation of Tahrir Square which called for the end of Mubarak's rule, and Egypt soon exploded into a full-blown revolution.

Resource mobilization theory highlights the significance of networking among SMOs and other coalitions as a powerful force in assisting social movement organizing, which is relevant to the early stages of Arab Spring in Egypt. What is different, however, is that during the beginning phase of Arab Spring ICTs allowed activists to reach a critical mass quickly through peer-to-peer networks and to create "virtual public spheres" that Kahn and Kellner (2003) refer to. As a result, they were able to establish avenues of civic engagement at the grassroots level, which Bennett and Iyenga (2008) regard as essential to social movement efforts, and what Castells (2001) underscores as the grassrooting of democracy through new media platforms.

While occupying the square activists expanded their list of grievances and demands. Complaints included Mubarak's role in maintaining the blockade against Gaza, his acceptance of the privatization measures imposed by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, the fact that half of the Egyptian population was sustaining itself on \$2.00 a day, the lack of freedom of expression, and excessive human rights abuses (Kuebler 2011). Amateur journalists, through their cellphone videos, circulated first-hand accounts of hundreds of cases of police abuse and disregard for citizens' rights and spread them globally. In this way digitally-armed citizen journalists evaded state authorities and the mainstream media to get their story

out and create their own account of the events, thereby exemplifying Mann's emphasis on the importance of interstitial locations. This new transparency, developed and sustained through connective action via a digitally-rooted politics, is also representative of Bennett and Segerberg's contention that new media has a profound impact on transmitting personal complaints into common demands.

Another comparison to Tunisia is that disaffected youth make up a significant percentage of the population in Egypt; the average age in the country is twenty-four and 60% of the population is under the age of twenty-five (Kuebler 2011). Egyptians too had a martyr with the beating to death of an Egyptian citizen at the hands of the police and this culminated in the largest protests in the country in fifty years (Preston 2011). On June 6<sup>th</sup> police pulled Khalid Said, a twenty-eight year old Egyptian and underemployed businessman from an Internet café and beat and killed him because he had distributed evidence of police corruption by hacking into a police officer's cell phone. He also widely distributed a video of officers displaying drugs and stacks of cash.

Following the incident, Google executive and activist, Wael Ghonim created a Facebook page, "We are Al Khalid Said" that commemorated Said by posting cellphone photos from the morgue and YouTube videos that juxtaposed pictures of him happy and smiling with those of him beaten and bloodied. This was the biggest dissident Facebook page in Egypt and helped spread the word about the upcoming demonstrations in protest of police brutality and lack of accountability (Preston 2011). It was also through this digital site that activists began to build a sense of collective identity and organize contentious politics on the streets. The uprising, therefore, lends credence to Bennett and Iyenagar's reference to the pivotal role of the spillover effect — organizing efforts that begin on the Internet or through social networking sites that result in demonstrations on the streets.

For example, in the days preceding what organizers called "Revolution Day" 85,000 people committed to participate in the protests online (framed as a stand against torture, poverty, corruption and unemployment) to be held on January 25<sup>th</sup>. Activists picked January 25<sup>th</sup> as "Revolution Day" because it is a national holiday to commemorate the police forces, later calling it a "Day of Rage."

That day over 100,000 marched throughout the country and 10,000 in Cairo alone; the largest to ever take place in the downtown area (Preston 2011). Police and demonstrators clashed and the officers fired tear gas and used water cannons against the protesters (AP Press 2012). A few days later, after viewing the abuse, sixty political groups and political parties announced their participation in the upcoming

protests, called "Friday of Dignity," or "Second Day of Rage" (McNally 2012). Protests continued across Egyptian cities for the next several days.

Some Egyptians resorted to the extreme act of self-immolation as copycat acts emulating Bouazizi setting himself on fire in Tunisia. During a one week span in January three activists carried these out which led to further protests (Hashem 2011). In an attempt to appease the insurgents Mubarak dismissed his government and eliminated the cabinet, but he himself refused to step down. On January 31<sup>st</sup> about 250,000 people gathered in Tahrir Square, the European Union called for free and fair elections in Egypt, and investors worldwide withdrew large amounts of capital en mass (AP Press 2012).

To keep the momentum going Egyptian citizens used Twitter for planning discussions under the hashtag #25. One unique site, @TahrirSupplies was used to coordinate donations for medical supplies and other assistance to Tahrir demonstrators, something that in the past would have occurred in a very limited fashion without the advantage of digital technologies and social media. Citizen journalists provided footage of the situation through mobile phones and circulated them through social networking sites which helped to increase global awareness of the happenings in Tahrir square. The images were then broadcast on mainstream media which influenced international public opinion in favor of the protesters as many supporters outside of Egypt began to pressure their own governments to force Mubarak to cede power (Nir 2011). In other types of symbiotic relations between mainstream and new media, Livestream viewers could watch the Al Jazeera channel on podcasts over the Internet and through its Facebook page and Twitter feeds. During the first two days of protests alone viewership of the channel increased by 2, 500% (Nir 2011).

The organizers also spread the information about the January 25<sup>th</sup> events through peer-to peer sharing over a Facebook page which had about 400,000 members, and which allowed them to elude the authorities (Hauslohner 2011). For example, to throw off the police activists stated publicly that they would gather at a particular place and in anticipation, the police would mobilize to meet them there only to realize they had been fooled as the protesters announced the actual meeting place online. This is another example of how connectivity amongst social movement actors is being transformed in the digital age.

The framing of the revolution in the streets emphasized, in a playful way, the significance of social media and the Internet in fostering the uprising. Popular signs read: "Mubarak is offline" and "Delete Mubarak" ([www.mideastreports.org](http://www.mideastreports.org)). Ghonim explained the effectiveness of Facebook in motivating Egyptians to participate in the

high-risk activities this way: "This wasn't a page that tells people what to do; this was a page that asked people, 'What should we do?' and created surveys. Then, based on the most liked choices, actions took place.... Anonymity was critical — and not only for security reasons.... Contrary to what many people would think, the anonymity added a lot of legitimacy to the page. And why? Because people could connect directly to the cause.... The moment the footage started coming in, there was another lesson learned. People were very happy sharing their photos. Why? Because of the instantaneous feedback. The moment you upload the photo on the page, hundreds of likes, tons of comments, and it made everyone happy that they took part. So all of this played a critical role in building the DNA, the credibility between the page members and the page, despite the fact they didn't know who was running it" (McNally 2012).

Thus, similar to the case of Tunisia, with access to new media venues communication in Egypt was no longer constrained by political or economic forces as it had been with mainstream or state-controlled media. Through social networking sites all citizens were free to participate in dialogue on equal terms. Ghonim's elaboration on the impact that Facebook had on the rebellion is an example of what Castells (2001) refers to as the "electronic grassroots of democracy" as activists exchanged ideas and information horizontally through geographically diffuse networks. His explanation also illustrates that new media outlets lend themselves to alternative organizational dynamics and structures which are grassroots in nature, often leaderless, and based on peer-to-peer exchanges of communication that help to recruit new members and accelerate protest activity.

## THE GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE

The government's initial reaction to the activists' protest activity on the streets was straightforward (a violent one), but less consistent when it came to harnessing and counteracting activism in cyberspace. When the sparks of the revolutionary fervor began the government assumed that allowing citizens to vent online would diffuse offline protests so it allowed these tools to remain activated (Howard and Hussain 2013). However, when action did manifest itself in public spaces in such a formidable way security forces began to suppress digital media, but it was too late. On January 28<sup>th</sup>, when the government fully restricted the Internet, Facebook, Twitter, Blackberry Messenger Services and cell phone access the uprising was already underway and the organizing was for the most part complete as to where, when, and how to participate in the struggle.

In the ensuing weeks activists and authorities engaged in a cyberspace cat and mouse game. For example, to get around the blockade citizens accessed Google's app, speak2tweet which allowed them to dial an international number and then send their voice messages as tweets with the word #Egypt added as a hashtag to Internet links. Organizers also encouraged supporters to use Twitter because it allows users to adopt pseudo names and manually set their location or to choose "worldwide" in order to circumvent the blocking system (Snider and Faris 2011). However, technology, as noted, is a neutral tool and can be utilized by both challengers and the target of their discontent. Authorities cannot only block or disrupt services but can also use manipulation and deceit through the anonymity that social media provides. For instance, when access to digital media was restored pro-Mubarak supporters got onto the Khalid Said Facebook page and added wall posts and comments that criticized the protesters, demanded Mubarak be given a chance to remain in power, and claimed that the upcoming protests were cancelled (Karr and Le Coz 2012). They also sent pro-Mubarak propaganda via text messages.

Another point of comparison to the Tunisian case is that the alternative press provided a crucial resource in the struggle. Independent Egyptian newspapers such as *Al Shorouk* and *Al Masry Al Yorum* played a fundamental role in getting information out regarding the revolution. The former went from a distribution of 30,000 to 180,000 copies, and the latter doubled to 200,000 during the rebellion (Snider and Faris 2011). In these strategic ways demonstrators fought to manage the interpretation of the reality on the ground and relay it to the outside world, and in doing so petitioned the international community for support.

Despite government claims that the social movement actors were inspired and driven by outside forces, amateur journalists accessed social media and alternative media outlets to rebuke the government's accusations. Their use of new media, therefore, prevented government propaganda from discrediting them because the live images that they captured and uploaded onto YouTube, the Internet, and social networking sites permitted them to bypass editorial spin and the filter of state-controlled media. This transparency of the government's response countered the rumor/propaganda attempt by the authorities and further damaged Mubarak's credibility both domestically and internationally. Thus, Egyptians were able to prevent what has happened in many attempted but failed revolutions; atrocities go unnoticed by the global community until several years later when documents filter out because of the governments' control of the media which allows them to avoid critique or repercussions from the outside world.

Back on the streets, despite the determination of the demonstrators to remain nonviolent, the government continued to accelerate the aggressive attacks on them. On February 2<sup>nd</sup> police rode horses and camels into the crowds of protesters in what was the most violent day of the revolution up to that point, resulting in the "battle of the camels" (Chivers 2012). Once again, akin to the situation in Tunisia, support for the opposition only grew when the government perpetuated the violence. A coalition of youth groups called for another mass demonstration on February 4<sup>th</sup> called the "Day of Departure." In Cairo one million people protested and by February 7<sup>th</sup> thousands were camping in Tahrir Square (Chivers 2012).

Both political process and political mediation theories can help make sense of these developments. The political mediation framework highlights how the reading of the political context can spur collective behavior and consequently alter the strategies and tactics participants choose, especially when there is belief and hope in a conceivable triumph. Political process theory emphasizes the importance of a division among elites that activists can use as leverage and to their strategic advantage. In the case of Egypt, although the army was deployed in and around the square it did not use violence against the occupiers (Dreyfuss 2011). This may have been to increase its chance of staying in power after Mubarak's ouster as it was clear the agitators were now legitimate contenders and were gaining new allies both within and from outside the country, and had established Tilly's conceptualization of WUNC. At any rate, the fracture between the military and government helped to sustain the protest activity.

The protest actions eventually led to the collapse of the regime when *Mubarak resigned on February 11<sup>th</sup> and handed over power to the army*. The military dissolved the Parliament, suspended the Constitution, and promised to lift the thirty year emergency laws (Kirkpatrick 2012). In July more than two dozen officials were *charged with murder, attempted murder and terrorism*. Mubarak was sentenced to life in prison on June 1<sup>st</sup> and charged with being an accessory in the death of more than two hundred and forty demonstrators (Kirkpatrick 2012).

When the generals took over as the interim government, however, it was apparent that they were not competent to govern. In frustration with the slow economic and political progress protesters returned to Tahrir Square in late July. On August 1<sup>st</sup> Egyptian troops and police officers forcefully cleared the sit-ins (Kirkpatrick and Stack 2012). The following summer, in 2012, Egyptians went to the polls and voted the Muslim Brotherhood into power and Mohammed Morsi became the first democratically elected leader of Egypt. He was elected by only 51% of the vote, largely because there was no other

real alternative on the ballot (Levinson 2013). The only other contender was a member of Mubarak's despised previous regime (the Prime Minister), so Morsi's electoral victory was less than impressive. Additional problems continued to loom as many were suspect of the intentions and agenda of the Muslim Brotherhood, and of Morsi's overreach of political power, especially when he declared that he had authority over the courts until a new Constitution was passed and a new Parliament established (Levinson 2013). This was purportedly to make sure that the new Constitution was not influenced by Mubarak's previous regime.

Egyptians responded to this acquisition of power with more demonstrations. The president, in turn, reacted to the discontent with the imprisonment and torture of activists and journalists. After securing a majority in Parliament following the elections the Brotherhood took control of writing the new Constitution and under their jurisdiction added new interpretations of Sharia law and continued to consolidate power leaving almost no room for other political actors to take part in any state institutions (Isango 2013). Many Egyptians viewed the country as drifting toward a theocratic dictatorship, thus short-circuiting the promise of Arab Spring.

The hopes of Arab Spring continued to diminish as Parliament failed to pass any significant reforms, the economy continued to worsen, and tourism (a major economic asset) dropped by 20% (Finamore 2013). Frustrated citizens therefore forged another revolutionary attempt largely through the Tamarod (which translates into "rebellion" in Arabic) opposition, made up of a group of young organizers who began mobilizing against the new dictator. It distributed petitions throughout the country that named a number of reasons why, in their words and referring to the Morsi regime, "We Reject You." Among the complaints the petition noted the security failure and rising crime rates throughout Egypt, increasing poverty, and the absence of accountability for those killed in the January protests, estimated at nearly nine hundred (Finamore 2013).

The petition was a clever tactic because it allowed activists to avoid the physical violence that was prevalent under the Mubarak and Morsi regimes when they occupied public spaces. This was also a decentralized mobilization made up of volunteers who engaged first and foremost in an education campaign that emphasized Egypt's economic, political, and social woes. They linked the frequent fuel and electricity shortages, rising food prices, growing unemployment, and the drastic drop in the stock market to structural governmental policies (Finamore 2013). An estimated twenty-two million Egyptian citizens signed the petition to oust Morsi and the Brotherhood, far exceeding the original goal of fifteen million (Finamore 2013). The petition

embraced three central demands: express a no confidence vote of Morsi, reinstate the goals of the January revolution, and hold early presidential elections. To put this in perspective, Morsi received only eleven million votes that got him elected (one half of the votes which were cast to get him *out* of office).

Morsi refused to back down and described those critical of his administration as "traitors" in his now infamous speech (Hubbard 2013). This led to a rupture among some of his most high-ranking supporters and ultimately hastened his political demise. Following the statement his entire cabinet issued a statement on the government's official Twitter account claiming: "The cabinet declares its rejection of Mr. Morsi's speech and his pushing the country toward a civil war. The cabinet announces taking the side of the people" (Finamore 2013). Foreign Minister, Mohamed Kamel Amr resigned from his position and six other ministers announced their resignations as well. On the first of July, 2013 the military, historically and still the most powerful institution in Egypt, gave Morsi an ultimatum under which he had forty-eight hours to respond to the demands of the protesters (Hubbard 2013). If he refused they warned that they would forcefully remove him from office, which they did on July 3<sup>rd</sup>.

In another surprising move the ultra-conservative Islamic party, al Nour, also broke ties with the Brotherhood, and in fact backed the military coup despite the group's obvious approval of the return to Islamic law that the new Constitution initiated. Al Nour had tried, but failed to convince the Brotherhood to form a broader coalition with groups of varying political persuasions, and to hold early presidential elections (Hubbard 2013). The sheer number of challengers and Morsi's refusal to recognize their grievances persuaded Al Nour that for their own political survival it was imperative that they acknowledge the legitimacy of the opposition. Political mediation theory can explain their positioning because it advises that political struggles are always situational and competing groups respond to the fluidity of the circumstances when choosing alliances, and this is often impacted by public opinion trends.

Immediately after the coup pro-Morsi supporters galvanized a potent oppositional force to the military takeover. On July 7<sup>th</sup> soldiers and police killed over fifty Morsi advocates and injured more than four hundred civilians while they were praying outside of the quarters where Morsi was presumably being held (Wickham 2013). At least eighty people were killed a few weeks later, on July 27<sup>th</sup>. The slaughter occurred a day after hundreds of thousands of Egyptians marched in support of the military. This was encouraged by the now *de facto* leader, General Abdul-Fattah el-Sisi (Fahim 2013). While [amarod's mobilization efforts proved fruitful in ousting Morsi and



the Brotherhood, the group lacks effective organizing power so the future of Egypt remains uncertain. Furthermore, the country is once again an authoritarian state and the two most powerful groups remain the military and Islamist groups, though the military now clearly has the upper hand. This is because they have been able to build an infrastructure, accumulate wealth and power, and surmount a coherent agenda over the years that other activist entities lack. These kinds of complications make it difficult to theoretically tease out social movement outcomes, and the ensuing complications in Egypt remind us that revolution entails much more than overthrowing the current leaders.

## CONCLUSION

The revolutions, though incomplete, originated out of what Pilfer refers to as the "theater of the impossible." The social, political and economic contexts of Tunisia and Egypt are of course distinct, and results of the revolutionary activity in these countries will take years to discern. What they both demonstrate, however, is that across Egypt and Tunisia it was, at least initially, digital media — a new and critical resource — that provided new venues of communication for expressing grievances, an activity that was previously deemed unimaginable in these relatively shielded and oppressed societies. New web-based outlets significantly enhanced the public communicative sphere for citizens and led to combative forms of collective behavior that helped sustain the insurgencies. Young people in particular found a safe and anonymous platform for political conversation and discussion in cyberspace which permitted them to collectively challenge the political and economic structures. Although the two countries are hardly thriving democracies (though Tunisia is much closer than Egypt at this point), we can expect that the changes in the communication field will continue to serve as an invaluable resource as the struggles continue.

One of the things that allowed the unpopular dictatorships in Tunisia and Egypt to survive for so long is that in the past, despite growing grievances among the masses of Tunisians and Egyptians, citizens had no way of knowing whether their own dissatisfaction or revolutionary passion was shared by others (apart from a small group they might know personally, i.e. strong ties). Going beyond these personal and small pockets of resistance, however, in order for a full-fledged social movement to emerge it is essential that potential activists realize that others are also willing to join the struggle. In Tunisia and Egypt social movement actors solidified weak ties in

cyberspace through which they began building community and decentralized forms of organizing that fostered a sense of collective identity and erupted in revolutions on the streets, where strong ties were forged in the midst of the violent backlash by the authorities.

The insights from these two cases have implications for theorizing contentious politics not only regarding the impact that new media have on collective behavior, but also challenge and contribute to the recent literature on social movements. They illustrate that the new media ecology creates new social and political spheres because activists no longer have to depend on "open" political systems in the traditional sense which political process theory refers to. Digital technologies are helping citizens to create new, albeit virtual, political openings and ways to participate in political discourse that were not available in the past. This, in turn, increases the vulnerability of authorities in different ways. Citizen journalists, as these cases depict, can influence public opinion by disseminating live coverage of events on the ground to which citizens both within and outside of the country respond to, and this sends a signal to the activists that they are succeeding and assists with recruitment efforts. The injustice frames that they circulated also gained them WUNC and invested the young agitators with a sense of agency. The new communication terrain, therefore, allows protesters to alter the power relations as the hard physical power at the disposal of the state can be undermined by the soft power of amateur journalists.

The availability of these new tools in activists' repertoire of contention call for an updating of traditional versions of resource mobilization theory and also assist in conceptually bridging the *why* and *how* of social movement activity (and in doing so highlights the interconnection between structural- and micro-level dynamics). Activists established weak ties through preexisting social connections peer-to-peer, thus demonstrating the relationship between information sharing and protest activity in local communities and exemplifying the hybrid, or spillover affect that new media enables. SMOs and traditional, external resources, as well as access to mainstream media are less important for contemporary social movement actors because grassroots mobilizations rely more on alternative and social media. Finally these analyses also underscore the relevance of political mediation theory because it was the subjective interpretations of what was possible that encouraged the protesters to continue their occupations despite the repression by authorities.

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