

## NEW MEDIA TECHNOLOGY AS PUBLIC SPHERE FOR SOCIAL CHANGES: A CRITICAL STUDY

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### ABSTRACT

*The revolution in the information technology is now fuelling the ongoing social movements world across. New Media Technology application like social networking sites and mobile phones are meant for social interaction, using highly accessible and scalable publishing techniques. Social media use web based technologies to turn communication into interactive dialogues and create public opinion on social issues. The dialogic nature of the social networking sites deepen the democratic aspirations of the mobile middle class and the young people, depoliticized from the political movements after the collapse of communism, are finding the tools easier to handle and vent their grievances. In this paper, researchers discuss the role of social media and other communication technologies in a democratic society, the power of social media in creating a public sphere and the rise of social opposition through social media in the Middle East.*

**Keywords:** Arab Spring, Democratic Society, Habermas, New Media Technology, Public Sphere

**"If you want to free a society, just give them Internet access."**

Egyptian activist *Wael Ghonim* in a CNN interview, Feb 9, 2011.

Public sphere in the modern societies is the site in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk. It is space in which citizenry participate and deliberate about their common affairs. Public sphere is the institutionalized arena of discursive and dialogic interaction. This contrasts distinctly from the state. In fact, it can be compared to a buzzing street. Public sphere is a site for the production and circulation of critical discourses against the centralized power of the state, corporate or the resource-owners. Habermas who developed the concept of 'public sphere' in his seminal book, "*The Structural transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into Category of Bourgeoisie Society*" (1962) updated the concept recently and argues,

*"By the 'public sphere' we mean first of all the realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed... Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion – that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions – about matters of general interest."* (Habermas, 2010)

After the collapse of the radical communist movement in the wake of the end of the Cold War and the demise of the erstwhile Soviet union, it was argued that new form of public sphere was needed to salvage this arena's critical function against the ubiquitous power of the State and the corporate and to reinvigorate democracy. Deliberative democratic public sphere theory has become popular to examine the effects of

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internet expansion and opening up new platform for public deliberation. According to the "internet democracy" commentators, internet is a complete public sphere as it promotes the public discussion and participation. In the contrast to the mass media the internet is seen as force for 'radical democracy'. Habermas strongly pointed out the impact of social media in his comment,

*"At a time when disgust for traditional democratic party politics runs deep and when the so-called democratic deficit makes European political integration look like a scheme concocted by self-serving elites, perhaps the internet offers hope for change. Think, after all, of how social networking sites were used during last year's Iranian elections to mobilize young voters." (Habermas, 2010)*

The internet is seen as helping marginalized groups- those groups excluded from the mainstream public sphere-develop their own deliberative forum, link-up and subsequently contest dominant meaning and practices. Before the expansion of new media, the earlier mass media of press and broadcasting were seen as adequate and beneficial for the conduct of democratic polity and the sustainment of public opinion in the public sphere. The forms of media enable the information about public events to be passed to all citizens and politicians and governments were able to be criticized by the society. However, information flow was predominantly vertical and asymmetric. The extreme commercialization of the media market has led to the neglect of democratic communication roles between the public itself and the leaders, institutions and the organizations of mass media. Thus, earlier forms of mass communication limited action and discouraged active political participation and deliberative dialogue within public sphere. Habermas has elaborated upon the collapse of the traditional media as the forum for public sphere succinctly,

*"The disintegration of the electorate as a public becomes manifest with the realization that press and radio, "deployed in the usual manner", have practically no effect; within the framework of the manufactured public sphere the mass media are useful only as vehicles of advertising. The parties address themselves to the "people," de facto to that minority whose state of mind is symptomatically revealed, according to survey researchers, in terms of an average vocabulary of five hundred words. Together with the press the second classical instrument of opinion formation, the party meeting, also loses its significance. By now it has been learned that "used in the usual manner," it can at best serve the task of handing out slogans to a small troop of persons who are hard core loyalists to begin with. Party meetings too are useful only as advertising events in which those present may at most participate as unpaid supernumeraries for television coverage. (Habermas, 1989 :p.217)*

Habermas realized that traditional mass media is now prone to manipulation by parties and the oligarchy. In the manipulated public sphere of traditional mass media , it is an opinion climate instead of a public opinion. But, New media allows dialogues between politicians and active citizens and thus it provides an arena where public discourse can take place and public opinion, as its function can be formed. (McQuail, 2005;pp.150-151)

Social Networking Sites (SNS's) play a very significant role in Arabs countries, as it is an ideal way to connect the public association, which brings together different communities and individuals for a common goal. In the real sense, social media opens the boundaries for sharing of thoughts. The countries like Morocco, Libya, Bahrain, Tunisia, and Egypt are some of the countries where massive flare up was tweaked by the social media and later people got motivated and started demonstration to challenge the might of the State.

Internet's expansion in access to information and exchanges of ideas as enhancing political participation, civil society and democracy have provided the rise of social movements. Eric Hoffer argues how weakening of individuals through marginalization , in fact, has caused the present predicament when social movements become the only panacea to retrieve one's potency. Hoffer writes,

*“ It is impressive to observe how with a fading of the individual's creative powers there appears a pronounced inclination toward joining a mass movement. Here the connection between the escape from an ineffectual self and a responsiveness to mass movements is very clear. The slipping author, artist, scientist—slipping because of a drying-up of the creative flow within—drifts sooner or later into the camps of ardent patriots, race mongers, uplift promoters and champions of holy causes. Perhaps the sexually impotent are subject to the same impulse.” (Eric Hoffer, 2010:p.30)*

Social media have played a very crucial role in the Arab Spring movements in spite of the mass media ignoring the protesters. In the Arab world, the majority of the opinion leaders are male since traditionally women are expected not to engage themselves in the political activities. However, the internet provides women the opportunity to express their opinion more freely. There are bloggers and the face-book activities that allow more people to speak out, discuss and disseminate the ideas to influence their network. For social movement, the ideas can be spread faster among the connections, which again widens the horizon and space for the social changes. The effect cascades and results into amplified physical mobilization. The communication structure which is provided by the social media can thus foster social movement and results into social changes. Social media provides activities from all over the world the means to coordinate activities, exchanges best practice examples and gain attention for their causes.

In 2011, the Arab world was shattered with massive popular uprising. Soon it was followed by the political uprisings in Spain, Israel and Greece. Inspired by these social movement, the Occupy Wall Street movements took off in New York in September, 2011. The Occupy movement was orchestrated by public intellectuals like David Graeber and Slavoj Zizek. By the mid October, the protest went global. The root cause of all these protest was similar i.e. high unemployment especially young people frustration against political corruption, corporate greed and the financial sector as well as general dissatisfaction with the political situation, in order to organize protest, social media tools will continue to play a pivotal role for social movement, especially for the global democracy movement that is unfolding. (Fulya Sen, 2012)

In the last several years, we have witnessed the power of the internet that helps citizens to change the regimes that govern them. From the 2008 presidential campaign in the US to the Arab Spring and ongoing protest in Istanbul, organizer have been using online tools as the biggest support, disseminate information, raise money and mobilize citizens on the massive scale. Social media provides rapid flow of information to mobilize the social opposition. For social changes the formation of opinion is very important and internet is the perfect tool to inform and motivate People.

### **The Use of Social Media in Social Movement**

The growth of the Social Media and its rapid expansion has led to extensive researches of the possible implications it might have for democracy. Social media not only start democracies, but also motivate people to sustain the radical democracy. The networked design of social media is the key factor threatening authoritarian regimes. The social media is the communication tools for the wealthy, urban, mobile and educated elites whose loyalty is important for any government to survive legitimation crisis in the wake of infinite demands from the new precariat (Proletariat in precarious existence). The Internet is also growing and expanding like mushroom both vertically and horizontally due to the cheapening of technology. Especially among young people, internet is as essential as education. One research indicates that use of Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Myspace is increasingly very common among younger age groups within the Arab world, especially the 20 to 30 year old age group, which uses the net more avidly compared to the rest of the population (Abdulla, 2007: p.80). This can very well explain why and how new media were effectively deployed by young people in the Arab world to trigger political reform. In Egypt, for example, the 15 to 17 percent of the population who are

active Internet users are mostly youth, who were the driving force behind the Egyptian revolution. (*Sahar Khamis & Katherine Vaughan, 2011*)

The growth of the Social Media and its rapid expansion has led to extensive researches of the possible implications it might have for democracy. The bulk of it has been addressing interactivity as the main elements to change the nature of the citizen's participations in politics and public life in general. The advocate of the "electronic democracy" argues that the internet may either improve the existing form of democracy or revive the ancient form of direct democracy. Internet may offer solutions for the problems that have been obstructing political participation- time size, knowledge and access. The internet has overcome the boundaries of time and space and it is no longer necessary for citizens to be physically present to contribute to the discussion. The limited political knowledge of the ordinary citizens and the unequal distribution of resource which has been hampering their capacity to get involved in the process of deliberation may no longer be a problem. There are many slogan used for cross-border exchange of ideas using social media. A Tunisian activists posted on Facebook:

*"Advice to the youth of Egypt: Put vinegar or onion under your scarf for tear gas"*

The internet has been recognized as a platform for public deliberation and the fastest medium to share critical analysis. The net seems to provide a way around the practical problem posed by the democracy. Citizens can not only exercise their vote, but also deliberate on public policy to participate directly. Social media may be viewed both as technology and space for expanding and sustaining the network on which social movements depends. The Arab revolt amplifies how online social networks facilitated by social media have become a key ingredient of public movement. Social media are not simply neutral tools to be used by social movement but rather influence how activists form and shape the social movement.

Since the Arab spring burst forth in uprisings in Tunisia and in Egypt in early 2011, scholars have sought to understand how the internet and social media contribute to political change in authoritarian regimes. Social media are just one portion of a new system of political communication that has made its impact felt in North Arica and the Middle East. News coverage of the recent uprisings trends to concentrate on catchphrases like "Twitter Revolution" or "Facebook Revolution." However, the connectivity infrastructure should be analyzed as a complex ecology rather than in term of any specific advice. If we consider the role of social media in the cases discussed above, we can state that cross-section of resources have played very crucial role in the formation of public opinion and ideas, which range from Facebook & twitters to journalistic articles and academic journals. In all the cases, the acceleration of events occurred with the effective use of social media networks. Social networks are now a form of organizational infrastructure and not merely virtual networks. Egyptian activists were able to efficiently play off the strengths of the social networking capabilities of Facebook and Twitter by capitalizing on their "many-to-many" communication capabilities and the speed with which information can be transferred and spread.

### **The Role of Cell Phone in Arab Spring**

The impact of mobile phones technology in the formation of public opinion is also very much discernible. In the Arab world, the influence of mobile phones is extensively used by opinion leaders. How the Cell phone contributed to recent political protests will be evident from examining the impact of various services that it offered.

#### **1-SMS (Short Messages Services)**

The role of SMS and new technologies in the creation of a "perfect storm" was well marked in the

revolution which took place in the Arabic countries in 2011. With the development of infrastructure of tele-communications, it became very easy for the opinion leaders of the countries like Tunisia, Egypt, Syria and Yemen to communicate their impressive views and thoughts and it was made possible due to unexpected rate of expansion of mobile telephony, Internet and 3G networks. It is important to mention here that understanding and deployment of mobile technologies and social media influenced Arab spring. There are various SMS used by the opinion leaders to motivate the people for the action. Some examples are given below:

- *shab yurid isqat an- nizam* (" the will of the people is to bring down the regime").
- "Tell your friends," and " Look what is happening in Tunisia."

There are many others example of SMS used for the mass mobilization of people in Egypt like, when government blocked Internet, people used the cell phone to disseminate message - 'Egypt can't be blocked and its people can't be unplugged' ." According to Adel Iskander, Professor at Georgetown University and an expert on Arab media, for protestor in Egypt, mobile phones and Facebook were the very effective tool for public mobilization and organization, as mobile phones played a very significant role in empowering of the commitment of the community in Egypt and Tunisia by strengthening social views and constructive opinion for social, political and cultural upliftment.

## 2. MMS (Multimedia Messaging Services)

The role of cell phone in many Arab countries like Tunisia and Egypt uprising had been immense, since people could share their picture through MMS instantaneously and gather the People for protest. Dissemination of information in the Middle East countries now strongly relies on the Internet technologies and social media such as Twitter, Twits Pictures, Facebook and YouTube. All these through visual of atrocity and police excesses accelerated the social protest.

In the contemporary context, the postmodern public sphere and public discourse cannot be separated from the mass media. Public opinion has been facilitated by various forms of media including newspaper, magazines television, and talk program. The internet has been heralded as a new potential public sphere as it has opened newer form of public discourse. Within the internet, the SMS is seen as a potential tool to structure the public platform. The story of the social media in developing nations so far is one of individual empowerment. Social media not only connects deprived nations to the outside world but also provides power to shape the internet in a way that is relevant to common people's lives, the power to organize in scale and the power to speak. In fact, the new media technology has created a more democratic and participatory public sphere all across the world obliterating the ethnic, religious, racial or growth divide.

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