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Gender Perspective on the Arab Spring

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Abstract

This paper looks at the role of media of Arab Spring by presenting a gender perspective of the upheaval. This is an assessment of the potential role of “New media” as a reliable source of information and its implications on “conventional media outlets” such as television and newspapers. The study suggests that a prospective trend of joint venture between “horizontal means of communication” in conjunction with “conventional media” is to be seen in the future. The results indicate that an outburst in the use of “social media” occurred during the uprisings that swept the “Arab world” in early 2011. Two years later; this phenomenal reliance on social media tools and networks continue to gain momentum ranking “digital media” the most desired source of information. Yet, the results suggest that “digital media” does not overcome the status of “conventional media” rather operates in parallel with each other. The study highlights a gender perspective of the “Arab Springs”; its causes and implications on the people in three of the Arab countries; Egypt, Yemen and Libya, drawing on the opinion of 314 female students from the Middle East, Asia Africa who were surveyed during the summer of 2012.

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1. Introduction

The “Arab Spring” which swept the Middle East and North Africa region in early 2011 left scholars and analysts contemplating over the main causes triggering the mass protests. Yet, the most debated “factor” has been the role conveyed by “Digital media” tools and networks such as Facebook, twitter and YouTube.

In 2011, the social uprisings and digital media contributed to the ouster of two of the major regimes in the Middle East; Tunisia and Egypt. The significance of “horizontal connectivity” in organizing and mobilizing the people of these countries is undeniable; yet scholars suggest that it is being over-rated. Khondker H. H. [1] suggests that the role of conventional media, especially television was crucial. Yet, the most important factor was the presence of “revolutionary conditions” and the “inability of the state apparatus to contain the revolutionary upsurge” [1]. An analysis of the impact of three inter-related spaces of the physical protests, mainstream media and digital media during the Egyptian uprising of 2011 by Nanabhay M & Farmanfarmaian R [2] suggest that audience interest in “citizen-produced news” is not “elastic as for mainstream news; which includes professional analysis emanating from a credible source” . Though what the authors referred to “citizen videos” dominated the “videos” produced and consumed by the audience during the 18-days of the Egyptian ‘revolution’; however (between Feb 6 and Feb 9 2011) when there was little to report; citizen-produced video lacked appeal, even when there was access to the internet [2].

Cyberactivism has been defined as ‘the act of using the internet to advance a political cause that is difficult to advance offline’ [3]. The control of conventional media by state apparatus enhanced the role of new media. Ironically, in Tunisia and Egypt state encouraged the promotion of “new media” to divert people attention from the deteriorating socio- economic conditions in both countries. Tunisia was the first Arab country to connect to the Internet in 1991 followed by Egypt in 1993 [4]. The “new media” attracted young people who saw it as a free space where they can express their ideas, as well as frustration with the situation. Khaled Koubaa, - the president of the Internet Society in Tunisia- reports that “before the revolution there were two million users of Facebook”. He further emphasizes the importance of “Social media” as an “absolutely crucial”. According to Mr. Koubaa three months before Mohammed Bouazizi burned himself in Sidi Bouzid, there was a similar case in Monastir; but no one knew about it because it was not filmed. What made a difference this time is that the images of Bouaziz were put on Facebook and everyone saw it [5].

A similar case is reported in Egypt. Six months before the outbreak of the Egyptian revolution; an Egyptian young blogger of the name “Khaled Said” was dragged out of a cybercafe´ and beaten to death by policemen in his hometown Alexandria, Egypt. The cafe´ owner, Mr Hassan Mosbah, described the details of his murder in a filmed interview that was posted online. The images of Mr. Saeid’s disfigured face appeared over the Internet. On 14 June 2010 Issandr El Amrani posted the details on the blog site Global Voices Advocacy [6]. A young Google executive; Wael Ghonim created a Facebook page, ‘We Are All Khaled Said’, which enlisted 350,000 members before 14 January 2011 [7].

The Tunisian revolution has been described as “The Jasmine revolution” where no violence was involved; sadly the Egyptian revolution was not at all that peaceful. Yet; in both revolutions; the “new media” played a distinct role in mobilizing and organizing people. During the anti-Mubarak protests; an Egyptian activist describes it succinctly in a tweet: ‘we use Facebook to schedule the protests, Twitter to coordinate, and YouTube to tell the world’ [6]. Ms. Lina Ben Mhenni; a prominent young Tunisian blogger was nominated for one of the world most prestigious awards; The Nobel Peace Prize, for her active role in reporting the Tunisian revolution at a time when foreign journalists and International media was banned from the country [8].

While the “New media” could be attributed for their contribution to both the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, however the same conclusion cannot be generalized in the Libyan and Yemeni revolutions. Indeed, the Libyan revolution was more dramatic, more violent and more prolonged than in neighboring Tunisia and Egypt. Alia Brahimi’s analysis of the Libyan revolution concludes with three over-lapping factors to account for the Libyan revolution and differentiate it from the two revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt. The first factor is “the

personalization of the political system and economy” represented in a regime that revolved around one man Colonel “Mummar Al Qaddafi”. Qaddafi’s monopoly over power, his refusal of any form of challenge to his authority and the violent methods adopted to inhibit any opposition centralized all the political, economic and social failures in him. Thus to bring any form of change the removal of the source of all problems is a prerequisite; hence Colonel “Qaddafi”. The second factor; as the author suggests, is the manifestation of “tribal system of governance” instead of a state system. Each “tribe” is to solve its own affairs without any “state institutions” or a hierarchal structure inherited in modern states. This long manifestation of “tribalism” during 42 years of the “Qaddafi’s” ruling managed to provide a “support base” for the leader; however, as the author argues it also accounted for these “vast swathes of the country had been systematically disenfranchised in the first place”. The third and final factor according to the author is “pre-existing geographical tradition of resistance towards” centralized authority which enabled the rebellion to develop as a credible force and sustain itself for six months, despite military setbacks.

The Yemeni revolution; on the other hand; shares many similarities in terms of origins and motivations with other Arab countries. The revolution; led mainly by young people who were fed up with the deteriorating socio-economic situation, high levels of unemployment and extreme poverty analyzed the Yemeni revolution describes the revolution as fundamentally “peaceful and inclusive in nature”. He concludes that the Yemeni case:

Confirms the importance of the use of social media in new forms of political mobilization in the region... where even in the poorest country in the Arab world with the lowest levels of internet penetration, the use of social media such as Facebook and Twitter was significant, if too easily exaggerated.

Ms. Tawakkul Karman; a young journalist and human rights activist, became the public face of the International Yemeni revolution; when she co-received the prestigious Nobel Peace Prize for her active role in leading civil protests demanding the overthrow of President Ali Abdullah Saleh.

As the implications of the “Arab revolutions” are yet to fully unfold themselves; they all seem to share similarities in terms of origins and motives. While the “New media” seems to have contributed in the Arab revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia, the same argument could not be generalized in other Arab states such as Syria and Bahrain where it failed to challenge the regimes despite the existence of chances to report the uprisings. This paper aims to provide an insight into the potential role of “New media” as a future reliable source of information as perceived by women from across Asia, the Middle East and North Africa.

2 Data Collection Method & Survey Instrument

The research took place at the National University of Malaysia; therefore English and an Arabic version of the survey instrument were developed simultaneously to survey both Non-Arab as well as Arab students. A pilot test of the survey was later introduced to students during April 2012. Some 22 questionnaire were collected from the students. The internal consistency of the instrument was examined using Cronbach alpha coefficient value using SPSS software. The Cronbach Alpha value was 0.718 which exceeds the minimum level 0.7. Amendments were later introduced in order to accommodate the results from the Pilot test.

3. Sample

The data made available to this study through electronic survey administered to all postgraduate students who enrolled themselves during the summer of the academic year 2011/ 2012 at the National University of Malaysia. The responses were later filtered and only female students were considered for further analysis. A total of 314 students are counted as valid respondents to the survey. A first layer analysis was conducted utilizing Survey Monkey website (www.surveymonkey.com). Scholarly work has used Surveymonkey web toll with success

since 2004. As Watson argues that, "Using electronic mail to conduct survey research is a natural result of the phenomenal growth in private and public electronic networks as well as increased accessibility of the internet" (1998, 43).

The percent of the Malaysian female participants accounted for 83.9% of the total female sample surveyed. The second group of respondents was mainly from Non-Arab speaking countries accounting for 8.9% of the sample. The respondents from Arab speaking countries constituted the smallest percent accounting for 7.9%. The respondents from Non-Arab speaking countries were mainly from Iran, Indonesia, China, Pakistan, Vietnam, Brunei and Turkey. The respondents from Arab speaking countries were mainly from Libya, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Iraq, United Arab Emirates, Palestine, Egypt and Jordan. The respondents were mainly from the age group 21- 30 years old accounting to 62.5% of the total sample surveyed followed by the age group 31- 40 accounting for 28.9%.

4. The Study Results

The study aims at studying five aspects of the revolutions in the Middle East and thus it is divided into five parts. The first part of the study aims to unveil the most popular medium of communication to seek information in 2012 as well as the degree to which women are involved in the process of seeking information with regards to the events in the Middle East. The second part of the study aims to investigate the role played by the media especially "conventional media" in reporting the uprisings in the Middle East. The third part of the study aims to investigate the transformation process prevailing in countries where the revolution took place; mainly the factors that contributed to the popular uprisings, the observations of the results of transformation following the uprisings and the implications of the uprising. The fourth part of the study gives special focus to three countries where the uprising took place namely; Egypt, Yemen and Libya. The respondents are asked to describe their opinion with regards to what is currently happening in each of the countries. The fifth and final part of the study consists of three questions which aim to study the role of the "social media" in the uprising; as well as the future of using social media as a reliable source for information seeking.

Part One: Information Seeking

The results from the survey suggest that 85.4% of the respondents seek information regarding the current events; namely the uprising in the Middle East; however not very actively; compared to 14.6% who were active in seeking information regarding the uprisings in the Middle East. The results indicate top four sources of information, reported by the respondents who were asked to make multiple choices, were Internet (84.4%), Online News (61.0%), Social media (60.6%) and Newspapers (56.2%) followed by TV news (38.4%). As can be seen top three sources of news were digital media.

Part Two: Role of Media in Reporting the Uprising in the Middle East

The second part of the survey aimed to investigate the role of media; conventional and social media in reporting the uprisings in the Middle East. The results from the respondents' observations about news reporting of the Arab Uprising suggest that all respondents believed that all of the conventional media portals (Newspapers, Aljazeera, BBC, CNN, and TV stations) were neutral in their coverage of the unfolding events in the Middle East.

The participants responded positively that social media portals (Facebook, twitter) are unfettered medium of communication; communicated unbiased information; played a big role in the events; were quick to report the unfolding events and effective in informing people.

Part Three: Overview of Transformation in the Middle East

The results from the survey suggest that the main factors contributing to the popular uprising in the Middle East were “Frustration with the governments” and “People wanting Democracy” respectively (34.0%, 21.2% respectively). The respondents ranked “Urbanization” and the “Widely use of social media” as the least contributing factors to the uprisings (6.1%, 9.1% respectively). The events in the Arab world over the last two years are described as “Revolution” (38.2%) followed by “Uprising” (33.7%) and only (9.5%) of the respondents chose to describe them as “Arab Spring”.

In terms of the factors that ignited the uprising; the majority of the respondents ranked “authoritarian regime” and “corruption”, “political suppression” (36.0%, 20.1%, 19.1% respectively) as the most contributing factors; followed by “Lack of Freedom” (9.2%) and Poverty (11.1%); while “Unemployment” was recognized as the least influential factor (5.7%). The results from the survey indicate that “losing faith in the government” constitutes the most dominant factor of political eruption (83.5%), compared to (48.3%) of respondents who believed that the main cause of political eruption in the region is due to “purely internal reasons”; yet, almost the same percent (48.9%) considered the political eruption as “instigated by foreign elements” and (42.2%) believed it is due to “pressure by foreign governments”.

The majority of the respondents agreed that the uprisings will result with “more prosperity for the people”, “more democracy” and “more freedom” (42.6%, 65.1%, and 57.4% respectively); however (60.0%) of the respondents believed that the uprising will result in “more chaos”, while (29.8%) believed the uprising is “likely or most likely result in no corruption” and (27.0%) believed it will result in “no change”.

When asked about the transformation of the countries following the uprising; the majority of the respondents (66.9%) believed that “more upheavals will occur before peace and stability is achieved” compared to (69.5%) who believed “they will change from an authoritarian regime to democracy”. The majority of the respondents (26.1%) believed that there will be “no substantive change”. A small percent of the respondents believed that the countries will not be peaceful for a long time (40.8%).

The majority of the respondents believed that “young people spearheaded the political struggle” (82.3%), followed by (78.1%) who believed that “the majority of the people are very much involved in the political struggle”. The respondents did not agree that “the majority of the people are still in the old mind set” (24.6%) or that “the majority of the people are not interested in what happened” (14.9%). Only (46.1%) believed that “the majority of the people are interested in their daily life”.

Part Four: Possible Changes in Egypt, Yemen & Libya

A. Changes in Egypt:

The majority of the respondents believed “there is democracy in the country”, and the “people will have a better future” (31.1%, 27.7% respectively). Some respondents believed “there is little change in the country” (20.9%); followed by “people are happier now” and “country is worse off economically” (6.1% and 13.7% respectively).

B. Changes in Yemen, the respondents thought “there is little change in the country” (38.4%), followed by “there is democracy in the country” (17.0%). The “future is better for the country” (15.0%) followed by “the people are much happier now” (11.7%) and “the country is worse off economically” (17.1%)

C. Changes in Libya: The majority of the respondents believed that “there is democracy now in the country” and that “there is little change in the country” (23.7%, 38.4% respectively). Followed by “the future is better for the country”, “the country is worse off economically” and “the people are much happier now (13.3%, 22.0% and 17.9% respectively)

Part Five: Media Use in Future

The results from the survey indicates that the majority of the respondents believe that people will continue to use social media (86.0%); however they will continue to depend on International news channels (58.4%). Newspapers and local news channels constituted the least desired means of communication (38.7% and 38.4% respectively). The majority of the respondents agreed that they will use social media after the uprising (79.7%), however they believed that the influence of social media is over rated (58.7%).

When asked about the people and the future role of media in the Middle East, the respondents believed that most likely people will depend more on social media (83.0%). The respondents also believed that it is very likely that “people will continue to depend on local TV stations” and “People will shift to international news channels (e.g. BBC, CNN, Aljazeera) (51.3% and 57.2% respectively). The respondents thought is it is a little likely that “People will continue to depend on newspapers” (44.1%). Finally the respondents believed that it is very unlikely that the “people will abandon newspapers” or unlikely that “the people will abandon local TV stations” (52.3% and 53.4% respectively).

5. Conclusion

This study comprised female respondents who are post-graduate students of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. They are mainly from Malaysia, with the rest from Arab countries and non-Arab countries. All of them followed the unfolding events in the Middle East mainly through the Internet and social media. At the same time they also followed other media but to a lesser degree.

It is their perception that what happened in the Middle East was a revolution and an uprising because the people could no longer accept the governments which they considered as authoritarian. They were hopeful that the people will enjoy a better future, however some of them believed that there would a prolonged chaos before this could be achieved.

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