

Social media and social action – global lessons from the summer of 2011

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Many commentators have claimed that somehow new social media, like Facebook and Twitter, and new mobile phone networks, especially when used by smart phones, have directly lead to social action and protest seen in many parts of the world today. The reality is that this is at best an oversimplification and at worst highly misleading. Social media are transforming how social action is conceived and carried out, but they do not cause social action which derives from more fundamental conditions in society. This paper examines a number of vignettes of social action using social media from around the world, both inside and outside the Middle East, especially during the summer of 2011. It also highlights their similarities and contrasts, as well as some tentative conclusions about the role of social media in social action.

1. Tunisia – where it all began?

On 17 December 2010, a twenty-six year old unemployed college graduate, Mohamed Bouazizi, set himself on fire in the small town of Sidi Bouzid in Tunisia to protest at the corruption which had denied him a licence to sell vegetables from his roadside stall. He died from his ordeal on 4 January 2011 without much notice. It is clear that the root cause of Mohamed's frustration and despair was years of autocratic and corrupt governance, and the lack of social and economic prospects for ordinary citizens, even those with a good education like himself. His deed seemed to demonstrate a final act of desperation as the only option left to him in the face of impenetrable government. He clearly also recognized his powerlessness to effect change in any other way. What followed, and what Mohamed could hardly have imagined, is now history.



This event, and the even more momentous events which followed, have sometimes been described as evidence that social media have so transformed our world that they are directly responsible for the toppling of regimes, as well as other dramatic examples of social action. Some have even gone so far as to claim that “digital technology marks the end of monopoly of thought – no more Irans, no more fundamentalist regimes of whatever hue....”¹

But how true is this? What really is the role and impact of social media in social action and democratization in the Twenty-First Century?

A few days after Mohamed Bouazizi died, a cousin of his filmed his mother as she protested outside the Town Hall in Sidi Bouzid. He uploaded the images to Facebook. Within 24 hours the TV station, Al-Jazeera, picked up the clip and broadcast it around the globe. It then went viral, leading to multiple copy-cat

¹ Johnny West, author of: “Karama – journeys through the Arab Spring”, Reuters, August 2011

incidences of self-immolation and other acts across the Middle East. Mohamed's brave and desperate act had struck a resonant chord.

2. Oman – (largely) peaceful protests supported and guided from the top

Oman, at the entrance to the Gulf, is an Arab country under the relatively benign rule of a progressive Sultan who was already working to open up government and to talk to citizens before the events in Tunisia. The unfolding progress of the Arab Spring, in fact, strengthened his hand against somewhat traditional and conservative elements in the public administration. Even so, there were many student protests across the country in early 2011, all with very small numbers of demonstrators. Some protests outside the fully-appointed consultative assembly (A'Shura) were also for better eGovernment services. The vast majority of protesters were peaceful, as were a number of pro-government rallies.



Social media was certainly an important tool in these events, both in following wider events and organising activities on the ground. A Facebook group entitled "March 2 Uprising for Dignity and Freedom" called for further protests in all parts of Oman, beginning on 2 March, and attracted more than 2,300 users, many more than most demonstrations.

Unlike other protests in the region, Oman's demonstrators have emphasised their loyalty to their ruler, whilst voicing their dissatisfaction with corrupt officials. The Sultan responded to most of the demands which focus largely on more jobs and higher minimum salaries for Omanis, in addition to more power for the A'Shura and the removal of several ministers. The progress of democratization in Oman is slow but genuine, and on its own terms, with much depending on overturning the traditional governance mindset through peaceful change. The main threats to this process is contamination from outside by more violent and dramatic events, as well as the fact that the current Sultan is old and has no clear heir.

3. California – knee-jerk reaction by authorities?

What does the police killing in July 2011 of a homeless man at the BART (Bay Area Rapid Transport) station and civic centre in San Francisco have to do with the Arab Spring? In protest at this seemingly pointless killing, the BART station was closed down by a small but determined group of protesters keen to draw wider attention to what they saw as an unjustified and brutal act by the authorities. In response, the authorities then attempted to 'suppress' the protests, including by shutting down the mobile cellphone network to stop them coordinating and rallying support— an act unprecedented in US history.



The protests then increased dramatically and took on a new dimension and purpose. Now the focus was not just extra-judicial killing but also to “protect free speech”, something almost sacred to the American psyche. Catherine Crump, of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU): “We're filled with indignation, when a little organisation like BART ... kills innocent people, two or three of them in the last few years, and then has the nerve to also cut off the cellphone service and act exactly like a dictator in the Mideast. How dare they do this in the USA?”

4. A long, hot social media summer – the 2011 UK riots

“Whilst protesters in Cairo call for democratic rights, London youth loot plasma TVs – is this the price of democracy?”² Between 6 and 10 August 2011, several London boroughs and districts of cities and towns across England suffered widespread rioting, looting and arson. Following a peaceful citizen march on 6 August 2011 in retaliation to the fatal police shooting of a local resident, a riot began in Tottenham, North London.



In the following days, rioting spread across London and then to some other areas of England. The rioters were mainly youth in largely poorer districts engaged in violent looting and arson attacks. Five people died and at least 16 others were injured as a direct result of the riots. An estimated £200 million worth of property damage was caused, and local economic activity was significantly compromised. The authorities and wider public were caught by surprise, despite the fact that riots in UK cities have regularly occurred throughout history, most recently on a large scale in the mid-1980s.

The immediate knee-jerk call by politicians and the popular media was for a hard police crackdown, including shutting down mobile and social media networks. This was a very similar response to events in Cairo and San Francisco, as well as in Iran in 2009-2010. Despite the long history of English riot long before modern technology, the 2011 riots were seen at the time by many commentators as directly resulting from the widespread use of mobile phones and social media. Later on, however, more sober analysis showed that Facebook and Twitter, as relatively open networks, were not used to coordinate riots but rather to comment on them. However, the Blackberry (as the preferred smart phone of the ‘underclass’ inner city youth involved in the riots) was an important coordination tool. It is a relatively closed system, cheap, easy to use, but goes viral very easily and quickly.

² Tweet quoted by the “Click” radio programme on the BBC World Service, 9 August 2011.

As in countries like Iran, however, social media were also quickly turned on the rioters by the authorities. Images from street cameras were displayed in public places and on newspaper websites asking the public to help identify the rioters and “bring them to justice”.



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Do you know these looting suspects? Police release a handful of pictures (but we've found 40 more to be going on with)

- Scenes of violence and looting shock the world
- Photographs will be used to bring looters to justice, say police
- 'Catch a looter' blog set up to aid capture of thieves

Wanted: CCTV images released by Greater Manchester Police of people suspected of taking place in looting across the city and Salford

After initial hesitation and some denials, the technology companies cooperated with the authorities and the London Police claimed to have used data supplied to thwart attacks on the Olympic Village and Oxford Street by analysing Tweets and Blackberry messages. In the end mobile networks were not shutdown in London 2011. It was recalled that this had happened during the London bus and tube bombings in 2005 which seriously hampered rescue efforts. Although the authorities had secure networks which were unaffected, much potentially useful intelligence from victims and witnesses was lost. Clearly, more damage than good was done by this ill-thought out shutdown of the public network. It also meant that worried families could not communicate with survivors.

Immediately after the riots died down, Facebook and Twitter were used effectively by local clean-up volunteers, many of whom were also young people. It was arguably not police action which stopped the riots but instead local communities which reined in their own. For example, the Twitter feed, #riotcleanup, got more than 70,000 followers the day after the riots in London alone.



Many local residents claimed that their streets were now “cleaner than before riots”.

The UK Government has clearly now had some second thoughts about ‘controlling networks’ but police are entering into long term discussions with service and network providers in anticipation of future incidents.

5. Cracks in the Chinese facade

A Chinese News Agency in early August 2011 is quoted as saying: "The UK is paying the price for allowing the open use of social networking, tools which, had they been better managed, would have been easier to control". Clearly, the Chinese authorities have their own way of dealing with and using social media. They have long had 'special' agreements with Google, Microsoft and Facebook to 'control' or 'modify' aspects of their services to conform with Chinese 'norms' and 'protect against chaos'. Twitter, however, is banned having refused to submit to similar constraints. Due to popular pressure, however, the authorities do sanction a Chinese micro-blogging site (Weibo), in many ways the equivalent of Twitter although heavily controlled. For example, in late January 2011, after the Egyptian disturbances commenced, the authorities banned the word "Egypt" from search on Weibo, not wishing Chinese citizens to follow events in Cairo.



On 24 July 2011, China experienced a serious high-speed train crash, killing over 40 and injuring many more. Normally such stories are kept relatively quiet or information about them is censored and only released slowly. But this time the tragedy could not be kept under wraps because of instant micro-blogging by victims and onlookers direct from the crash site, as well as afterwards when they began to ask searching questions about the safety of China's high speed trains. The authorities eventually admitted that grave mistakes have been made in the very rapid roll-out of the high-speed train system and that safety concerns and procedures may not have been adequately taken into account. Perhaps for just about the first time ever, uncensored public sentiment and anger was being widely broadcast. Old habits die hard, however, and on 28 August 2011 the authorities sent messages to Weibo subscribers reminding them to refrain from "spreading false information and acting irresponsibly".

6. Some lessons and many conundrums

The vignettes presented above are of course few in number and highly partial. They can, however, at least help to sketch out a tentative understanding of the role that social media, including mobile networks, might play in social action in the 21st Century.

First, it is abundantly clear that social media do not cause social action. Social action, whether to demand rights, to wrong injustice, to pursue democracy, or even for personal or criminal gain, is part of the human condition and has been present in all societies throughout history. At most, the new social media and mobile tools are enablers which change, albeit dramatically in some cases, how such action is conceived and carried out.

Second digital technology does not mark the end of monopoly of thought, as Johnny West would have us believe³. As shown above, the authorities and those who have vested interests in prevailing power and

³ Indeed, Eli Pariser in his 2011 book "The filter bubble" maintains that search engines, like Google, which adapt to the individual user, are increasingly adept at filtering search results which can lead to new types of highly personalised and thus narrow thinking.

social structures are perfectly able to themselves use social media for their own purposes and to turn against activists. What social media are doing, however, is putting enabling tools potentially in the hands of everyone for the first time in history, and this might make it easier and faster to achieve certain ends which are already potent in a given circumstance. This is the power of social media – they can create much greater awareness and opportunity to undertake social actions in new ways, even though the goals and causes of such action are derived from the wider societal context. They do, therefore, change and possibly transform power relationships. Perhaps the best historical analogy is the printing press from the middle of the 15th Century in Europe.

Social media are thus embedded in a given context, and this includes existing and traditional media, as the critical role of Al-Jazeera in Tunisia exemplified. Similarly social media used for social action does not mean that geographic space and physical activity are unimportant. This is testified by the importance of Tahrir Square in Cairo, of the Puerto del Sol Square in Madrid, as well as the many on-going ‘Occupy’ movements in many cities around the world. Physical focal points for social action are of course common throughout history. Today they are supplemented by social media, but they were equally important before the Internet, for example in Tiananmen Square, Beijing, in 1989.

How governments and authorities themselves use social media, as well as react to their use by activists is also relevant. Even in the USA, which has made ‘free speech’ into an ‘icon of democracy’, authorities attempt to control social media used for this end, as the San Francisco example shows. Current authorities in China and Iran, to name just two, have been relatively successful in controlling social media used for social action, although the story on this is never closed as the Chinese high speed train crash incident shows.

Authorities in all countries seem to wish to control mobile and social media networks and services when they themselves feel threatened or inconvenienced. Knee jerk responses by the authorities to cut or control such networks, sometimes urged on by the popular traditional media, seems to rest on the misunderstanding that they are purely communication channels. Even if their role was restricted to that, any shutdown is a blunt instrument which can also affect innocent and even vital activities, as the London bombing experience of 2005 showed. Mobile and social media tools can also be hubs of free speech, expression and creativity; they can become digital echo chambers for seeding and extracting content for social movements of all types, whether we support them or not. They are not merely communication tools like the traditional telephone. Cutting off such tools, even for the best of intentions, is likely to seriously undermine democracy and accountability as the protesters in Cairo, San Francisco, Iran and elsewhere realize.

These conundrums beg the question how should government react to the use of social media for social action? Is there a role for legislation or regulation, and if so what type? What responsibilities, if any, do the technology companies and network providers have for how their products and services are used? Less formally, should guiding principles for social media be developed? If yes, this might be done in the same way that guiding principles for democracy and other social goods could be developed, i.e. in an open and ongoing process involving as many viewpoints and interests as possible as part of a continuous dialogue rather than seeking a definitive solution. The social media themselves could be important tools in this process.