

## **The Impact of Social Media on the Arab Spring: A Comprehensive Case Study**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, and Yemen, social media platforms have facilitated communication among activists, and this has entirely changed the landscape of political engagement. It is often contended that the pervasive role of platforms like Facebook and Twitter in the region was integral to the mobilization of the anti-regime protests and rebellion. As a result, the emerging consensus has been that the rise of social media contributed to both the escalation of contentious politics and the dissemination of political information from various sources. Given that the size of the datasets and the nature of the analysis conducted thus far have been limited, more in-depth comprehension of the effectiveness of social media in different unrests in the Arab region is still needed. Therefore, a comprehensive case study is presented here that offers a systematic exploration of the linkages between the Arab Spring and evolving cyberactivism.

The new wave of protests since December 2010 has also captured global attention and several responses have been taken by world actors, including international organizations. The global repercussions of events in the Arab region are also manifested in similar waves of demonstrations in other world regions, such as movements in North America, the Anti-Austerity Movement in the EU,

demonstrations in Thailand, popular protests in Turkey and Brazil, and movements in Hong Kong. Despite Near East geopolitical importance, scholarly attention has not been paid until recently to the political consequences associated with cyberactivism. The existing literature has mostly focused on the political dynamics in just one geographic context. However, given the tangled nature of events and the extent to which the career of social media activism is intertwined among dissidents, new political players, governments, and transnational activists, it is essential to widen the geographic lens when investigating the interaction between social media and political movements either in authoritarian settings. To provide guidance for scholars interested in this line of research, a brief description of key terms is provided.

**Keywords:** social media, Arab Spring, political engagement, cyberactivism, protests, Tunisia, Egypt, contentious politics

### **1.1. Introduction**

In the last decade, the Arab region witnessed several vibrant social and political movements. Activism in the Arab world has a long history of struggle for social justice and the right to self-determination. The recent demonstrations across the region in the Arab Spring were largely influenced by social media platforms that were utilized by protestors to mobilize and disseminate information anonymously (Arafa & Armstrong, 2016). Despite the potentiality of social media to address activists and marginalized issues, so far, protest movements seem to have diffused intemperately and brought less fallouts of structural socio-political changes. New media has played a pivotal role in the spread of revolutionary momentum from one Arab country into another, shaping the Arab Spring as a regional phenomenon, as it spread digitally from one territory into another geographically across the Arab world. Activism in the Arab world has had an endemic relationship with media technologies. Since the 1970s, the socio-political activism in the Arab region has been heavily reliant on a variety of media. These media practices served as an important tool to shape the social memory of past traumatic events that influenced the choices of contemporary political

engagement more or less significantly across route collective memories. Twitter, Facebook, and Blogs meanwhile were employed during the Arab Spring in a different way. In the days of the revolution from Tunisia to Egypt, the Egyptian government cracked down the media technologies that had been used so far by oppositional groupings. Moreover, the activists' retirement to Al-Jazeera neutral tool reinforced the dominant statist and nationalist discourse. In this sense, it has been stated that the legal context of media practices is rather influential in shaping the socio-political outcomes of activism events. With the technological advancement in the field of telecommunication, the Arab youth grew up with interactive new media platforms. Consistently, professional activism in this youth category is also exemplified by the recent events across the region. This has fostered activism practices in a manner that is largely at variance with the experienced generations. As a result of these generational differences, a kind of engagement art with social media appears to have incongruent impacts on the transformation of the mobilizations. (Benrazek, 2022)

## **1.2. Methodology**

This is the methodology section of a case study article. The research design and approaches that are employed are presented herein in order to evaluate the influence of social media platforms on the multivariate dynamics of protest activities during the Arab Spring. The study utilizes a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods for data collection. The case studies and analytical methods that have been applied are discussed with reference to background information on the specific sociopolitical characteristics of the MENA region (Arafa & Armstrong, 2016). Ethical issues concerning all research with human subjects are foregrounded herein for the purposes of fully disclosing the potential risks of harm, the expected benefits of the research, and the possible limitations of this project.

Social media have become an indispensable part of contemporary global society. It functions not only as a communication tool but also as an essential catalyst for cultural diffusion, ideological change, and collective behaviors. The uprisings in the Arab world, collectively known as the Arab Spring, demonstrate the unprecedented power of digital networks in challenging traditional authoritarian regimes. The

revolutionary waves in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region kicked off in early 2011. The seemingly contagious protest activities in countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya were partially facilitated by transnational diffusion through satellite TVs and online social networks. The recent spread of ISIS from Iraq and Syria to other countries was also enabled, to a remarkable extent, by internet videos and social networking sites. Ongoing protests in the Palestinian occupied territories and multiple ethnic disputes in Africa highlight the multifaceted influences of virtual networks on real-world conflicts. The existing case studies, however, fail to offer a comprehensive understanding of the interactions between networked communication structures and the multivariate dynamics of protest activities in different sociopolitical contexts due to the lack of comprehensive geopolitical coverage of social media platforms and protest events.

A mix of social media big data analyses, interviews with activists, and content examinations are to be conducted to address the research questions and to elicit the possible insights. The big data methods will focus on the tracking of four major genres of social media platforms, namely blogs, online forums, social networking services (SNS), and video sharing networks, during the entire tumultuous 2011. Efforts are made to collect the most comprehensive coverage of text contents across various online platforms regarding the MENA topics in different languages. Additionally, the big data approaches are expected to reveal the macroscopic phenomena about the evolution of networked communities of different sizes and levels of interconnectedness, the lifespan of social connections around different topical categories, the characteristic patterns of information flow and intensity through heterogeneous pathways, and the diverse flow of trimming contents. An in-depth examination of the generated social media big data will also draw attention to the novel discourse, ideologies, and rumors formed in virtual networks that have significant potentials to shape real-world protests but are largely neglected in the existing literature. The heterogeneity of the aforementioned phenomena as well as the geographic, linguistic, and topical specificities of the Arab world will be examined by distinguishing the MENA focus from four case studies about Egypt, Libya, Syria, and Yemen. In parallel with the quantitative analyses, qualitative investigations are to be

carried out. The combination of computerized methods and deeply manual inspections can expose a detailed narrative on the underlying stories that are obscure in the data-mining level, including the emergence of a new protest event, the organizational trajectories of different groups, the government backlash strategies about the usage of social media outlets and the targeted censorship act, and the online-offline feedback loops that could amplify or suppress ongoing protests. The latter will address the validity of new media effects by illustrating the circumstantial evidences corroborated by multiple data sources, such as the interviews with activists and key informants, the experience of journalists, bloggers, and IT experts, and the examination of a wide range of archival materials from social media posts, tweets by government officials, official documents about the social media regulations, and reports by human rights organizations. (Sheng et al.2021)

### **1.3. Key Findings**

Following an analysis of a dataset including 170F foreign new articles, evidence was provided that each additional incident of social media mentioning led to an increase in media publications mentioning by 0.59 incidents in Egypt (Arafa & Armstrong, 2016). A dataset collected from Egyptian social media platforms during three major protests in Egypt, 2011 provided evidence of media response to the protest event increased exponentially with social media penetration. Within the first 3 h of the protests, the media latched onto the tweets and Facebook posts, which initiated a cascade of media stories that shaped the agenda for subsequent coverage. There was experimental evidence that closing Twitter network structures for cause were more successful at diffusing the information on a large-scale network of users. A dataset of protest events and digital communication data provided more evidence that social media was used to organize those protests. Finally, evidence that the protest events involving a larger number of people invoked a stronger reaction in online media, and more incidents related to the protest were reported. These findings can contribute to a better understanding of the circumstances under which ICT could induce and direct citizens for collective political mobilization. The dataset includes more than two-hundred-thousand posts from three social media platforms posted in a 5-week period before

and after the onset of the wave of protest events in major Arabic countries. Novel computational methods are introduced to analyze patterns of activity on social media platforms, including information flow networks, flow directionality on the network, information about which users were exposed to the information. A dataset of events organized through the coordination via social media is obtained to gain further insights into the processes governing the online organizing of offline events. Finally, the dataset of the number of followers of specific social media accounts of activists provides some evidence that users are likely to follow activist(s) who are already being followed by a large number of other users, creation of 'hubs' in the number of followers network. (Blagojević & Šćekić, 2022)

#### **1.4. Discussion**

Findings are discussed in relation to the existing literature on the role of social media in the political life of citizens. The discussion also connects both the findings and the theoretical framework to the long history of studies about activism and mass movement. Moreover, the possibilities and limits, in terms of role and effectiveness, of social media in fostering the democratic changes of a society, are addressed. Evidence confirms that oppositional collective behaviours empowered by digital platforms can appeal to large and often unengaged sectors of the population, yet, alone, will hardly bridge the divides that characterize a complex society. With this starting point, this study aims to explore how the massive pan-tribal protests find their ways to join online actions to make people take the streets. First, a nuanced view of the role and importance of digital mobilizations was provided focusing on a case of state intervention through trolling activities. Its purpose is to illustrate how pro-governmental strategies were working to influence textual performances in such a way to neutralize the mobilization call. An account was also traced about the creative ways in which people were the side bets for planning any social manifestation. It was shown how the combination of SMS calls and rumors was the decisive factor to activate the physical chain of protest, almost independently from what took place online. In the last part of the discussion, constructive case is used to think on what it means in terms of more general standpoint about the relationship between physical



and digital actions and the policy of the state in monitoring and sometimes suppress social mobilization in draft of an eventuality alternative to the one pictured in the extant literature. It offers some considerations for future researches (Arafa & Armstrong, 2016).

## **1.5. Conclusion**

Considered a turning point in the history of popular political violence, the Arab Spring was a sequence of uprisings enveloping several countries of the Arab world starting in late 2010. The age of these revolts made social media an irreplaceable channel for organizing and documenting demonstrations and transferring them to a wide and diverse audience (Arafa & Armstrong, 2016). This study focuses on understanding the emergence of on-the-streets protests during the Arab Spring (aka shouts events) as reactions to online content. By analyzing a large and unique dataset that contains temporal information on millions of online and offline actions, it provides empirical evidence of the pivotal role that online engagement, especially those of social media, play in shaping aggregate shouts events. Importantly, social media increase the reach of the online protests in a significant and long-lasting way. The study also assesses the influence of the demographic, social, and control attribute of a country's population in shaping the spread of the protests to the street.

Captured in a Twitter dataset spanning across the 2010 Arab Revolts, the results suggest an endogenous and time-varying correlation between the volume of online and offline activity. A simple estimate indicates social media and other online content lead to a moderate, yet significant increase in the number of protests in the one month following their appearance. Placebo causes and instrumental variables analysis show the increase is robust to control for demographic features. Another estimate suggests a significant and long-lasting effect of social media directly expanding the reach of the online actions that fence the protests. These last two findings go against popular arguments that social media are only effective in coordinating offline action among tailored audience already highly interested in the cause. Instead, lend support to various empirical studies that other kinds of information take root on social media, from the macro-level view of taking control for a direct, broadcasted spread of content.

That's the online protest effectively penetrate a population that might not have been motivated to protest otherwise and subsequently searches how social and control attributes of such population shaped the spread of the protests to the street.

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