

Chapter 10

Journalists and Mobile: Melding Social Media and Social Capital

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ABSTRACT

Despite the high profile of many social media activist efforts, such as the Arab Spring, researchers are still questioning whether these mostly online campaigns can lead to real world impact. Journalists are also asking themselves what role they fill as they watch, comment on, and cover the deluge of activism on Twitter, Facebook, and other sites. Through a comprehensive review of the literature on social capital and its intersection with the Internet and social media, this chapter suggests that social media can lead to social capital, but journalists provide the key ingredient to lead to lasting social change. Literature on the goals and aims of journalism, coupled with a review of its vital role in a community, point to the need for the context and verification that journalism provides in order for social media to transform into social capital.

INTRODUCTION

When Facebook became the megaphone for Tunisian citizens to organize themselves and trumpet their causes to the world, many journalists, including Andy Carvin (2014) took notice. What he first saw in Tunisia and ended up chronicling closely throughout Egypt, Libya and other Middle Eastern and North African countries became what is now known as the Arab Spring, a movement that capitalized on social media in several parts of the world to enact real world government reforms. For Carvin, it also represented a “stunning revolution in the way breaking news is reported around the world – and who controls the news”

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With countless revolutionaries using the Internet as part of their protests, anyone online could gain direct access to the news moment by moment – no filters, no spin, no delay. No longer did media outlets have a monopoly on international reporting; people on Twitter or YouTube could patch directly into the revolution of their choice. (p. xii)

For Carvin, social media director for National Public Ration in Washington D.C., the revolution couldn't be ignored because journalism had an important role to play. Through his book and his reporting on social media, Carvin, a journalist, told the stories that "would have otherwise fallen through the cracks of history if people on the ground weren't using social media to tell them" (p. xv). While he does not take credit for enabling or sustaining these movements, he does ask "What exactly does it take for one of these movements to go all the way and overthrow a regime?" (p. 7).

Within a less specific and less revolutionary frame, this chapter asks the same question. What does it take for an online movement such as those Carvin describes or other even less impactful movements such as the ALS Ice Bucket challenge, discussed later in this chapter, to gain real world traction after getting a start in online social media? In other words, can social media lead to real world social capital? And what is journalism's effect on the social capital that can be generated? Does a movement that begins with a niche audience on social media need the mass communication influence of mainstream journalism to really make a difference? Finally, how can academic research help denote the impacts of each and on each other?

We explore these questions by first defining social media in terms of real world and social media application. Next we explore the connection between the goals and mission of journalism as it relates to social capital and community building. Finally, we examine several examples, including what has been written of Carvin's work during the Arab Spring, to suggest that while social media has evolved to defy early social media theorists' predictions, it often needs the influence of journalists to shine a light on what's most important and help vet information to reveal what is true and what is unsubstantiated rumor or needless hyperbole.

DEFINING SOCIAL MEDIA

Social Capital

Social capital, in its simplest form, is the "ways our lives are made more productive by social ties" (Putnam, 2000, p. 19). In fact, society is most powerful when civic virtue is "embedded in a dense network of reciprocal social relations" (p. 19). In other words, social capital has transformative power when individuals can use their family, friends, and group affiliations to accomplish things for their lives, namely to get jobs, help government run efficiently, or just pass the time pleasurably with one another.

In the United States, social capital has always ebbed and flowed, Putnam (2000) says, even at some points collapsing and needing complete renewal (p. 23). However, the major premise of his book and the reason behind the title *Bowling Alone* is that Americans are becoming increasingly individualized and less likely to build social capital through leisure and political activism. Two of the main culprits Putnam blame are the media and technology. First, news and entertainment have become increasingly individualized (p. 216). People no longer need to attend a concert with scores of other community members to get their music fix or visit theaters to see plays or movies. Even the community building

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