Protest Movements, Social Media, and the Role of Law Enforcement

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ABSTRACT

From the Iranian green movement (2009) through the London riots (2011) and the recent anti-hijab protests in Iran, protest movements have been accompanied by considerable social media activity globally. Social media users have been involved in the quick production and distribution of audio-visuals online with protest hashtags, rumors, and sometimes fabricated information. The impact of these movements demonstrates that social media can potentially play an important role in organizing large-scale socio-political events, posing a challenge for law enforcement agencies. This research aims to evaluate and analyze the use of social media for mass mobilization throughout significant protest movements from 2010 to 2022, as well as to investigate the use of social media as a tool by LEAs. This exploratory research examines the theoretical and empirical research on the use of social media for mass mobilization, social protests, and the involvement of law enforcement authorities. The discussion has shown that social media does not drive protest movements but offers momentum to them.

KEYWORDS

Internal Security, Movements, Protests, Social Media

INTRODUCTION

The act of safeguarding, maintaining peace, law and order, and defending citizens from security threats within borders can be termed internal security. Besides the traditional internal security threats, the cyber security challenges and challenges posed by social media are some of the new-fangled threats emerging out of the techno-knowledge revolution all over the world. Social media (SM) posits an emerging challenge when it is used to spread fake news, videos, and false information, creating flash mobs and communal disharmony.

Online Social Media: Based on its evolution, media can be classified as traditional media and new media. *Traditional Media* is a term often used to refer to communication channels such as books, newspapers, magazines, radio, and television. *New Media* includes media that rely on computers for redistribution such as online media, emails, digital games, websites, blogs, virtual reality, social media, online newspapers, newsgroups, etc. It offers two-way communication permitting users to get more involved and share comments and content.

Social media or specifically online social media are interactive technologies that assist and augment various forms of expressions by sharing info, thoughts, ideas, and other articulations virtually. It is a set of information technology that enables interaction and networking through virtual online communities (Kapoor et al., 2017).

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) categorized SM into categories like blogs, social networking websites, collaboration projects, content communities, virtual social worlds, and virtual game worlds. Web usage

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to encourage social communication and exchange of ideas through Internet 2.0 has evolved into a revolutionary step in the early 21st century. IT revolution provided users with user-friendly spaces where they could create and transmit user-generated content on virtual social networks (Obar & Wildman, 2015).

Web 2.0 and resultant SM have evolved as depicted in figure 1.

Social media, with its reach, impact, and potential, is a potent tool to permit its users an unrestricted stream of information, entertainment, and knowledge. It not only impacts different cultures and societies but also plays an essential role in political transformations. The use of SM has changed the face of protests and movements globally by providing cheaper, faster, and more widespread access to users, irrespective of race, region, gender, and nationality.

Figure 1. Evolution of Social Media
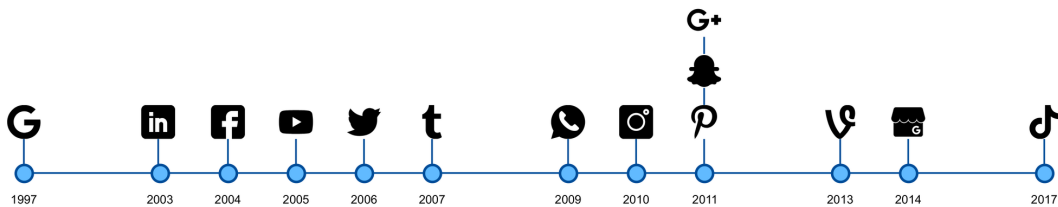
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The objective of this research is to evaluate and analyse the use of SM for mass mobilization throughout significant protest movements from 2010 to 2022, as well as to investigate the use of SM as a tool by LEAs.

This article is the result of a long-term research effort on SM movements and demonstrations in various countries affected by recent civil disobedience and social media activism. The current exploratory study identifies and analyses the significance of SM on the development, survival, and spread of social protests and the challenges faced by LEAs in countering them. Based on nine social and political movements that span close to 15 years, this article identifies the role of SM in protest movements and the challenges faced by LEAs in countering them. A comparison of studies on social media demonstrations and movements is shown in Table 1. It outlines the research's goal, the movements covered, and the SM tools employed.

The current study has employed a keyword search approach to retrieve papers from Google Scholar, Medline, PubMed, Web of Science, and PsycINFO since 2010. The search returned over 1500 studies; however, only research reporting on social media, protest movements, online activism, and LEA challenges were included in the final evaluation. These computerized searches were complemented by screening, including publications reference lists, citation tracking, and expert suggestions. The following criteria for inclusion were used: (1) The material is published in the English language. (2) The reference involved substantial use of social media during protests, (3) The reference work was socio-political and had significant involvement of LEAs. Only peer-reviewed research based on a meta-analysis, cross-sectional survey, exploratory, theoretical, or empirical inquiry was considered. It is worth mentioning that only a few studies discussed the social media protests and the challenges posed by the LEAs in encountering them. This highlights the importance of the present study, which can prove to be beneficial to the academy. Figure 2 illustrates the rise in publications on the keywords SM protests, SM movements, online protests and online activism.

The discussion in the present article begins with an outline of the major movements in which SM has played a significant role. The timeline of the movements has been presented in the paper as seen in Figure 3. It begins with a discourse on the geo-political location, causes of the movements, techniques of the SM usage, Background and the role of the SM in the evolution and spread of the movement, and finally, the role of LEAs in countering the challenges of the movement is discussed.

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