

Chapter 4

Leadership in the Age of Social Media: The “Social Media Uprisings” and Implications for Global Business Leadership

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ABSTRACT

This chapter enquires into the “tricky,” and at present somewhat ambiguous, nexus between social media technologies and business leadership by analyzing the roles and influence of social media in shaping leadership processes within the recent “social media uprisings” using the case study of the 2011 Egyptian revolution. It is argued that “social media mobilizations” have inherently taken up the emergent potentialities of social media technologies in redefining the scope of leadership along increasingly constructionist, relational, and solidarity network leadership dimensions, centring on leadership as processes of influence and interaction generation. This represents a decentring of formal leadership structures as informal communication networks are favoured that rely on emergent and organic groupings of actors adept at coming together and dismantling rapidly as required by the movement in autonomous, targeted, and sometimes “one-off,” actions and partnerships. However, rather than relational and solidarity leadership processes becoming “leaderless,” this chapter finds that leaders still matter, albeit in relation to one another and other elements in networks, as multiple actors are capable and able to take on different roles as “leader” at different moments that are less “predictable” and “controllable” from traditional leadership and managerial points of view.

INTRODUCTION

The widespread emergence of social media technologies and corresponding rise in digital communication have altered the global business landscape causing leaders to examine how such technologies

can be harnessed to enhance brand loyalty, tap into consumer preferences and a potentially lucrative advertising market, and facilitate greater virtual teamwork and transnational exchange (Deiser and Newton, 2013; Qualman, 2012; Burghin et al, 2011; Silver, 2009; Holzner, 2009; Castells,

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2007). Likewise, significant attention concerning the use of social media in political mobilizations has arisen in light of the recent wave of ‘social media uprisings’ associated with the events of the ‘Arab Spring’ beginning in December 2010 and earlier mobilizations in both Moldova (2009) and Iran (2009-10). The use of social media in these events has led to monikers such as the ‘Twitter’ and ‘Facebook’ Revolutions, and, ‘The YouTube War’, reinforcing interest toward the potential role of social media in revolutionary contexts (Christensen, 2011). Since then, the number of events connecting social media with social unrest has multiplied, not only in the context of the Arab Spring but also across Western liberal democracies, with the rise of the Occupy Movement, multiple nationwide strikes across Europe in the aftermath of the financial crisis, and student protests in response to tuition and fees hikes (Gonzalez-Bailon, Borge-Holthoefer, Rivero, and Moreno, 2011). However, far less attention has been devoted toward exploring the question of how social media technologies are influencing the nature of organizational *leadership* within the context of today’s highly dynamic and complex business and socio-political environments. That is, the question of what insights can be gleaned into leadership dynamics emerging from the greater use and growth in socio-digital technologies remains largely unanswered.

This Chapter enquires into this ‘tricky’, and at present somewhat ambiguous, nexus between social media technologies and business leadership by analyzing the roles and influence of social media in shaping leadership processes within the ‘social media uprisings’ associated with the Arab Spring and reflecting on how these insights can be applied to global business leadership. It is philosophical and conceptual in its orientation, concerned with exploring whether and to what extent the ‘social media uprisings’ signify a shift toward more relational forms of leadership characterized by emergent and decentred networked processes that suggest the need to reflect and re-

evaluate traditional conceptions of leadership. This is particularly relevant in light of recent inquiry into business leadership practices and growth in alternative forms of business such as social enterprises, impact and responsible investing, and various business structures and models within the Social Economy (Hall, 2013; Salaman, 2011). Indeed, as Hall (2013) has recognized ‘[m]uch recent academic work has focussed on the development of new approaches to understanding leadership, often based on decentering leadership and shifting the emphasis away from the traits, behaviours and competencies of the leader in favour of examining what leadership practice actually involves and how leadership emerges and operates’ (p. 1). This stands in stark contrast to ‘heroic’ visions of leadership that are singular and hierarchic in which organizational initiatives and strategies are believed to be cultivated by senior leaders (CEOs, senior managers etc.) and conveyed downward to ‘followers’ who obediently carry them out.

A range of secondary data is surveyed in this Chapter in the form of reports, articles, and op-eds from a variety of academic, policy, and media sources that have sought to analyze the roles of social media technologies in the Arab Spring revolutions, applying these findings to consider the implications for leadership theory and practice. The Chapter adopts a case study approach (Gerring, 2004; McNabb, 2004; Stake, 2000) focusing on the ways in which social media technologies have been taken up and employed in the context of the ‘social media uprising’ in Egypt; from early growth in Internet usage and organizing that led to its symbolic outbreak on 25 January 2011, with the popular uprising in Tahrir Square, to the resultant overthrow of then-President Mubarak on 11 February 2011¹. The Egyptian Arab Spring revolution represents a contemporary, prominent, and instrumental case in which to examine the roles and impacts of social media technologies and explore the possibilities and implications of such processes for global leadership. The Egyptian Arab Spring revolution became famous for its explicit

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