

Chapter 64

Social Media for Promoting Grassroots Political Movements and Social Change

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ABSTRACT

In light of many recent Internet-led revolutions, the Internet and its tools of social media have been heralded as instrumental in facilitating the uprisings. This chapter provides a close examination of the social media role in grass roots political and social change movements. The chapter discusses the ways activists have used social media tools for organizing and generating awareness of political mobilization and the characteristics of social networking that can be harnessed in a particular cultural and historical context to achieve collective political actions. The chapter also discusses long-established theories of communication to explain how social networking tools became appealing to the activists in these Internet-led movements. The chapter will look at various Internet-led political movements around the globe to demonstrate the enormous potential of social networking tools to facilitate and expedite political mobilization.

INTRODUCTION

Social media is defined as a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). Social media tools include social networking sites such as Facebook, micro blogging sites like Twitter and Instagram, video sharing sites like YouTube, and image sharing sites such as Flickr and Tumblr. Social media studies are a relatively young but growing field (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). In June 2010, 22% of time spent online was spent using social media and blog sites worldwide (Neilson, 2010). Grove (2010) estimated the global average time spent per person on social media sites in 2010 was nearly five and a half hours per month. However, by early 2014 the average time spent on social media sites dropped to 3.6 hours per day (Brendan Butler, 2014).

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The recent Internet-led uprisings have fostered an ongoing dialogue about the role of social networking tools for promoting grassroots political movements and social change (Conover, 2013). Social media is now being considered an undeniable force for good. According to (MacKinnon, 2011), Wael Ghonim, Google executive in Egypt, famously declared right after Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak stepped down in February,, “If you want to liberate a society just give them the Internet” (p.1). The Internet proved to be an effective weapon of the masses against their authoritarian leaders. According to the New York Times, such use of Internet was the 21st-century way to resolve conflict. As (Kristof, 2009) put it, “On one side are government thugs firing bullets and on the other side are young protesters firing tweets” (p. 1). We have also witnessed Twitter revolutions (i.e. different revolutions and protests, all of which were coordinated using Twitter) in which the young tech-savvy generations monopolized the digital gap to challenge their archaic authoritarian governments. Some examples of such revolutions include 2009 Moldova civil unrest, 2009 Iranian election protests (also known as Green Revolution), 2010 Tunisian revolution (also known as Jasmine Revolution), Egyptian Revolution of 2011, and Euromaidan Revolution of Ukraine in 2013. The initial success of such Internet-led revolutions has brought a great deal of attention to the role of social media and the Internet in fostering grass root political change. Nevertheless, such potential of change is dependent on the extent to which social media and the Internet is (Gibson, 2013).

The Internet-led uprisings in the Middle East (e.g., Egypt) and North Africa (e.g., Libya and Tunisia) brought significant developments in all these countries. Scholars in the academy continue to debate the role of social media in these uprisings. Because these events are recent, available data and analysis about the role of social media and the Internet in grass root political and social change is limited. Prior to such events, research concerned with social media as a vehicle for social change was largely speculative in nature. One key issue is the manner in which social media became the source of information. Meaning, the source of information was ordinary citizens who for the very first time in their history used social media more than mainstream media to react to and even cover the events of political revolutions (Hassan, 2013).

This phenomenon of social networking as a political and social change agent is very significant. We see after centuries a technological innovation used as a tool for change. The social networking tools such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and personal blogs have been used as an insider perspective to the ongoing revolutions. Revolutions can occur without Internet or technology. Revolutions have been taking place before the advent of social media. The advent of social media provided a crucial facilitator role by bringing together distant people and providing gathering real time information. The data about the use of these tools as source of information, a part from their established use for socializing, provides significant evidence of their relevance in mobilizing political movements and bringing change. However, the social media tools can not only be repressed by the governments but also used in their favor. Therefore, a logical analysis of this phenomenon is needed to establish a critical perspective about the history and novelty of this phenomenon of social networking for political and social change.

This chapter aims to understand the connection between technology, society, and political movements through the creation of a network society and analyze the extent to which social media can play a positive role in grassroots political change by analyzing various case studies from different countries. The chapter also discusses the characteristics of social media that can be harnessed in a particular cultural and historical context to achieve collective political actions.

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