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Communications 125

13 December 2011

Social Media and the Arab Spring

Revolutionary waves of protest and demonstrations have occurred in most Arab countries. This movement is known as The Arab Spring. Issues including: government corruption, human rights violations, extreme poverty, economic decline and a number of demographic structural factors have fueled these protests. An incident that sparked this revolution happened to a 26 year old male who was selling fruit.

His cart was confiscated by government authorities and on December 20th, unable to support his family, he gave up. Bouazizi doused himself in gasoline and lit a match while standing in front of a government building in the city of Sidi Bouzid in central Tunisia. He picked a very public location for his action, just outside the Governor's House and another Facebook page sprang up to honour him. This time though, the Tunisian government made the mistake of blocking Internet access to his page. (Campbell)

The government's reaction to the Facebook page caused the Labor Unions to join the protest, spreading the protest to the capital of Tunis to challenge Ben Ali (a Tunisian dictator). When Ali finally fled to Saudi Arabia, the Tunisian government fell, sparking demonstrations across Algeria, Bahrain, Iran, Iraq Libya, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, but most of all Egypt.

These demonstrations are not organized by telephone or shown on the local news like the Occupy Wall Street movement. They are organized through a very different sort

of medium. Instead of telephone or television, the demonstrations are organized using the Internet. Social mediums such as Twitter, Facebook, and Youtube are used as highways of information. These mediums, “played a vital role in organizing protests, highlighting government injustices, and swaying public opinion, ultimately demonstrating how immense social media’s role has become in 21st century politics” (Dahlberg-Seeth). Social mediums are not only connecting people, but they are also organizing demonstrations and riots. It is believed that if revolutionaries had not had access to these social mediums, the Arab Spring would not be nearly as effective. The idea of democracy continued to spread through this network of connection along with proof of inappropriate use of government force: “As government forces brutally attacked more and more protestors, bystanders began capturing these injustices on camera and uploading them to Facebook and Youtube” (Dahlber-Seeth). Uploading these images and videos on YouTube allowed the general public to see what exactly was happening in a ‘first hand account’ instead of just by word of mouth. Using social media in this way sparked action: “After analyzing more than 3 million tweets, gigabytes of YouTube content and thousands of blog posts, a new study finds that social media played a central role in shaping political debates in the Arab Spring” (University). Most of the information shared in these posts leads to demonstrations or were about recent demonstrations. For example, conversations on Twitter and blogs pertaining to liberty, democracy, and revolution often immediately preceded mass protests.

Leah A. Lievrouw discusses activism in the new media in her book Alternative and Activist New Media. Mobilizing citizens and getting them into action has been the most difficult part of movements, “communication channels are seen as important

resources for formulating and conveying movement aims, and cultivating support” (Lievrouw 152), however, with censorship in the media of the Middle East, such channels were shut down, or so the government thought. New technologies and social medium formed new lines of communication of the activists in the Arab Spring. With new means of communication, support can grow and catalyze a movement. Lievrouw also believes that, “in new social movements, mobilization is accomplished by cultivating collective identities, shared values, and a sense of belonging among people linked in diffuse decentralized social and community networks” (Lievrouw 153). It is important not just to communicate throughout such movements, but it is essential to have structure to the communication, to create a sense of togetherness. If communication is lacking in structure or meaning, it is a bunch of random thoughts that do not lead to action. To fuel a movement, organization is crucial in communication.

Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube are means of communication for most Americans. Many use these social technologies to stay connected with a friend or loved one or to spy on an ex. People in the Arab Spring utilize these forms of communication to organize demonstrations and riots or to warn the public about police and government. Since the government controls most forms of media, social media is a useful way of spreading information. A recent study conducted at the University of Washington, concluded that during the Arab Spring, the total rate of tweets from Egypt related to political change ballooned from 2300 per day to over 230000 per day. If information can be spread so quickly today, how fast will future technologies allow communication and what will they be used for?

Works Cited

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