Social Media in Egypt’s Transition Period

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Abstract

This research examines the role of social media in the transition phase in Egypt (February 2011-June 2012). It asks whether social media networks lose out in turn as agents of mobilization to the political organizations that sprung up in the transition phase. Further, it examines whether different political participants in elections, civil society, and massive protest movements used Facebook and Twitter differently in the transition period. It also analyzes the use of social media in different types of protests. A mixed method was used that included focus groups, interviews and a user survey (n= 230). Among the main findings was that different social media networks are used differently by adherents of different political orientations, as well as different types of political participants. Also, social media partially reinforced organized structures of mobilization during the transition period.
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Introduction

The current wave of cynicism with the Egyptian revolution and its outcomes has induced many academics and theorists to question the mobilizing agents that sparked it, including social media. Marc Lynch has recently discussed this in his article “How Social Media is Hurting the Arab Spring.” Other skeptical articles are also coming to the fore, such as “Why Social Movements Should Ignore Social Media” by Evgeny Morozov. This comes in stark contrast to other articles that appeared in the early heydays of the revolution, such as Rasha Abdalla’s (2011c) “The Revolution will be Tweeted,” which highlights the positive impact of social media on mobilization, horizontal communication among Egyptians, and the democratic socialization of Egyptian youth. Research demonstrates that context matters in shaping the roles social media may play in politics, public opinion construction, and mobilization in Egypt. How the impact of social media differed in the aftermath of the revolution is the leading question driving this research. In the aftermath of the revolution, the Egyptian context has changed importantly. Elections are now freer and fair, political parties’ restrictions reduced, and civil society, while still institutionally restricted, has gained a lot of momentum in regards to its initiatives, maneuvers, and other activities. Also, the increase in political space has allowed for a surge in protests along with less contentious forms of participation. Given this fluid and changing context, how did different participants use social media? And how did this change of context impact social media mobilization?

Foremost, I argue that social media helped increase participation in the offline mobilization agencies such as political parties and other civil society organizations. They also provide a parallel space through which mobilization for political activities takes place. I argue in this article that the role of social media needs to be understood in light of the facilities of the media themselves as well as what the users make of them. I look at four different forms of participation: civil participation, demonstrations, other protests, and elections. I examine how the various participants in these different forms of participation use social media. I also examine how those of different political orientations use social media. I qualify my argument on how social media impact

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1. http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/02/07/twitter deviations arab spring social media
3. A variety of questions come to the fore when discussing the role of social media in politics. First, it is questioned whether it has an independent political effect from the content posted. To elaborate, the question is asked to see whether there are effects on the political behavioral of the users or if normative change occurs, independent of the posts that they are exposed to. At issue here is the democratic impact of social media. A second area of controversy is concerned with the selective exposure that social media allow. You see posts of your friends and pages that you have liked on Facebook, but your picture of social media is far from complete. Finally, what are the limitations of social media mobilization?
4. Two main variables that guided the data analysis are *Forms of offline participation in the transition period* and *Level of participation in different participation forms*. The respondents were asked to tick off a range of activities that they took part in. The former included a number of activities that ranged the spectrum of the four main categories of participation: demonstrations, other forms of protests, elections, non-demonstration and civic work activity. The range of choices was then classified accordingly. The latter variable classified users into the level of participation by coding them into a dummy variable of 0-3 for demonstrations, elections, other protest participants and 0-2 for offline civil work. This was based on the amount of ticks that the participants gave for the activities in each classification. Demonstration participation included three activities, taking part, organizing for a demonstration and giving a speech in a demonstration. Strikes, boycotts, and petitions are three types of non-demonstrations protest. Elections activities include voting, campaigning and monitoring. Civic participation or civic work was measured by two criteria: organizing meetings and taking part in human rights or political awareness campaigns. Similarly taking part in one of them would denote a "1", in two would denote a "2." The more ticks they gave in a category’s activities, the higher their level of participation in that category.
mobilization by viewing the negative aspects of these forms of fluid mobilization during the transition period. The article ends by questioning whether the users are aware of their limitations.

The research triangulated a retrospective analysis of political participation and mobilization of social media users during the transition period of February 12th 2011 - June 30 2012 by engaging with two snowball focus groups (one for users and another for activists), interviewing 12 social media experts and activists and conducting an online survey (n=230) distributed via the website Survey Monkey (www.surveymonkey.com) and delivered through the author’s Facebook page and Twitter accounts in the period from May 28 until June 10, 2012. The sample I obtained illustrates a community in which social media became a main informational tool, an experience shared by many educated young people.

The “Role” Of Social Media

The question is whether the “role” attributed to these media is one that can really be independently attributed to the media themselves or simply depends on the user. One of the differences between the social media activists and the media experts interviewed was the different weights that they give to both users and media. Based on the interviews, focus groups, and survey questions, I argue that most of the interviewees fail at adequately understanding the role of the media in mobilization, as they give excessive weight to either one side or the other. I argue that the relationship between the media and the users is a two-way relationship in which the users use media in specific ways to suit their needs and are in return affected by the medium.

In “The Federal Democratic Republic of Facebook,” Dr. Rasha Abdulla argues that Facebook has an independent effect on how youth associate, which she views as inherently democratic. However, the importance she gives to the medium itself seems exaggerated. To her, Facebook’s structure is democratic, akin to a federal democratic republic, and has given its users space to organize independently and communicate horizontally (Abdulla, 2009: 1ff). In this respect she argues “Facebook has a lot to teach Arabs about democracy as it affords users the opportunity to speak their minds with no ‘red lines’” (Abdulla, 2011 (3): 3-5).

Many activists disagreed with Dr. Rasha Abdulla’s opinion and stated that Facebook is not an inherently democratic medium. Wael Abass referred to the incident when the “Kolena Khaled
Saeed Page” was blocked by Facebook’s administration. He also said that he had to lead an international campaign against other social media sites such as YouTube, which removed his videos documenting police torture in Egypt due to their violent nature (Abass, 2012). Based on the author’s observations, Facebook’s administration can ban Facebook’s members from befriending other members if they have a history of sending requests to people that they do not know in real life. It also bans nude pictures as inappropriate content once a report has been submitted. My research has also revealed that Twitter has a set of rules that may ban content from some countries (Twitter, 2012). Thus, it is clear that universal principles of freedom of expression are not the sole principles that the Facebook and Twitter administrations take into consideration.

Generally, many of the activists would argue that “they used social media” as a tool in a functional manner. Many would not realize that it too has an effect on them and how they interact. Wael Abass stated that there were people protesting long before Facebook. He argued that the real cause of the revolution was not the dynamics the medium introduced but rather the grievances against Mubarak’s regime. Abass similarly agrees that any democratic impact of the social media depends mainly on the users (Abass, 2012); whereas Dr. Abdulla would argue that the medium plays a role.

I argue that the relation between media and users is a two-way and not one-way relationship: the users use the medium for their own purposes, but it too, has an effect on them. Social media allow for freedom of expression in the view of the majority of respondents. In addition, Facebook also allowed most users (55%) to develop their presentation skills, possibly allowing them to become more effective in communication. It was also used as a tool to inform activists and users of different protests, of candidates for elections, and of various opportunities for civic engagement. In this respect, excessive stress on structure and on usage of social media should be avoided in future discussions on their capacity for mobilization. The democratic impact differs according to users. The effect of social media is thus contextual. How users perceive the medium is based on what they are doing. The majority of users in the survey believe that social media do provide for freedom of speech, whereas some activists see that there are limitations. Social media did have structural impacts, but they also put limits, further discussed below, on allowing people to communicate as well as to associate freely.

**Effect of Social Media on Offline Mobilization Agents**

Marc Lynch’s article touches on the limitations of social media in mobilizing users to join or build civil society organizations. Lynch’s argument is limited, as it does not take into consideration how changes in context can lead to a surge in the use of social media for joining organizations. I argue that in the aftermath of the revolution, in which users were more optimistic and willing to take part in organizations, including political parties, social media introduced these users to the organizations that they eventually joined. Social media complemented political and civil society organizations in the transition period, in addition to serving as a parallel arena for organization and self-expression.

Social media have indeed supported offline agencies of mobilization. Although the majority of those in my survey who had Facebook and/or Twitter accounts did not belong to Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), much less political parties, those who were members had often been encouraged by social media to join them. Thus for about 60% of the respondents who are in a CSO

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8 72.7% of the respondents agreed for Twitter, and 80.3% agreed for Facebook.
(46 out of 77), social media played a role in introducing them to the CSO they later joined. As Figure 1 shows, this was mainly Facebook based mobilization, rather than Twitter based. This suggests that social media, far from being “anti-organization” and replacing the offline agencies of mobilization, actually encourage participation on the ground.

Fig. 1: Social Media introducing CSO

Indeed, among the members of a CSO, some 18.7% (14 out of 79) stated that the group had started online (Fig. 2). Social media may be used to support the association of youth in civil society organizations that they themselves form first by associating online. In other words, the virtual groups of social media may facilitate the formation of groups on the ground.

The data suggest, however, that social media are not quite as useful in recruiting political party members. About 52.7% of those who were in political parties at the time the survey was conducted (10 out of 19, see Fig. 3) stated that social media played a role in introducing them to the party before joining it; in comparison to 60% of those affiliated with CSOs.

The party members in the sample, moreover, were a bit more likely than the rest of the sample to engage in all other types of participation, such as elections, demonstrations, other forms of protest, and civic activities, as Fig. 4 indicates.

Fig. 3: Social Media Introducing Party

Fig. 4: Type of Participation by Party Membership
Yet my focus group of activists told a somewhat different story. They discussed a dispute among “civic” activists who were previously members of political parties but had decided to resign. They stated that these traditional organizations were not conducive to democratic development, which is why they had to resign. They felt that the time was not ready for partisan politics, which is divisive, as the regime hadn’t really changed. They also stated that they had resorted to social media, as an alternative, in order to increase people’s awareness as well as to mobilize them to take part in activities that would lead to serious regime change. The Islamist member in the focus group, however, held a different view. The aim of his political participation was to encourage the application of Sharia, which was a long held principle of the Salafi forces in Egypt, even before they officially entered the political arena. His comments suggest that social media may be supporting some organizations by communicating their call as well as offering an alternative space for extra-institutional mobilization. Again, the role of social media is contextual, depending on who you are and what you do.

Social Media as Separate Mobilization Agencies

For those who were not involved in any organizations during the transition period, I argue that social media also constituted a separate or parallel mobilization agency. Those who were not members of CSOs or political parties (n=106) were singled out to discover if social media could be considered a mobilization agent for them. Among these non-members, I discovered that Facebook was the most preferred source of information on demonstrations for demonstrators, on elections for electoral participants, and on civic work for those who engaged in civic activities. This supports my argument that social media was a parallel agent that mobilized those who are not members of civil society organizations for different forms of participation. However, the difference between those who preferred other sources of information and those who preferred Facebook is lowest for the participants in elections and greatest for civic engagement, suggesting that Facebook had a greater impact as a mobilizing agency for the latter.

The Social Media and Its Role in Mobilization

Clearly from the above, social media did not die out after the 2011 revolution. This challenges those who thought that social media had a small role to play. When I asked my focus group of users to compare the role social media played in mobilization after the 2011 revolution, they stressed its role in advocating for different activities, mainly elections, but also protests and civil work. Clearly there was a surge in the call for these different forms of participation on social media after the revolution.

Differences between Facebook and Twitter Mobilization

Facebook and Twitter are different in terms of the type of users and the means of mobilization. Facebook is indeed a more popular and widespread medium than Twitter. It is a more mainstream and “fun” medium which allows images and videos to be displayed together with the text in the homepage. Twitter is more organized, and the tweets have no visual distractions, as is the case with Facebook posts. Twitter’s display hides the visual details of the posts from the homepage (images, videos, etc.) and displays only the tweet. If the tweet gets another user’s attention, then they need to click to see the images. Twitter thus is a more concise, organized, and less distractive medium than Facebook (Saleh, 2012).

How does this relate to mobilization? Twitter is more useful for those who need to get a message out quickly, whereas Facebook is more useful in discussions and sharing different points of
views (El Hossiny, 2012). According to the interviewees, the Facebook community is different from the Twitter community. The interviews and my data suggest that the two social media are different in terms of their general “mood.” Rasha Abdulla states that Twitter is more activist-based than Facebook, which has a larger base that is more mainstream and popular (Abdulla, 2011a). Other activists think that Twitter users are more “elite” than Facebook users and more intellectual (Hegab 2012; Lasheen 2012).

**Forms of Participation**

I examined the levels of participation of those surveyed who declared Twitter to be their preferred media for getting information about elections compared to those who preferred Facebook and other media forms. My observation is that social media, and particularly Twitter, are more associated with higher levels of activism. Thus, Twitter is more often used in elections to share information about how the elections are going among monitors and campaign activists. Users who preferred Twitter are more active in the higher levels of electoral participation than those who preferred Facebook.

![Figure 5](image)

**Fig. 5: Acceptance of Transitional Period Institutions by Preferred News Source on Demonstrations**

When users were asked about their preferred source of information for demonstrations, Twitter again was associated with higher levels of activism, in regards to rejecting the status quo. Over 83% of those preferring Twitter rejected the transition period institutions, as Figure 5 highlights. Facebook has a more mixed profile than Twitter, as only 57% of the respondents who preferred it for learning about demonstrations stated that they reject the institutions of the transition period. Even so, those who prefer Facebook are more rejectionist than those adhering to conventional media such as TV and other internet news sources (with the exception of unidentified ones in Fig. 5).

It turned out that those favoring Twitter also demonstrated more than those who stated that Facebook is their favorite source of information. To elaborate, 19% of those preferring Twitter took part in 11-15 demonstrations during the transition period, following January 25, 2011,
compared to 11% for those preferring Facebook; and 15% of those preferring Twitter took part in 16-20 demonstrations, compared to none who favored Facebook.

Preference for Social Media by Political Orientations

![Graph showing preference for social media on demonstrations by political orientation](image)

Fig. 6: Preference for social media on demonstrations by political orientation

Apparently, political orientation is also associated with differing media preferences. For instance, Islamists, who demonstrated the least during the transition period under study, prefer Facebook rather than other sources of information about demonstrations. Leftists on the other hand, prefer Twitter to receive news on demonstrations. It is apparent that Leftists, who, as Fig. 7 indicates, have a much higher profile of participation in demonstrations, make more use of Twitter than the other orientations who demonstrate less. They presumably use it more than the other activists to share information during demonstrations. Facebook is a more important source of this kind of information for Islamists and Liberals than for Leftists. Even concerning elections, where Leftists do not participate as much as Liberals or Islamists, the former find Twitter more useful for conveying information than do the latter (Figure 8), presumably for monitoring or campaigning.

![Graph showing participation type by orientation](image)

Fig. 7: Participation Type by Orientation

![Graph showing preferred source on elections by orientation](image)

Fig. 8: Preferred Source on Elections by Orientation
A possible explanation for Twitter attracting more radical and contentious users than the more mainstream Facebook is that Twitter is a more real time form of social media, relaying news taking place on the ground instantaneously. Leftists, who by virtue of their political orientation are more oppositional and would engage in more contentious forms of participation, are also the ones to make greater use of Twitter to convey information on what is happening on the ground during demonstrations. This explains why there is a leftist, radical trend on Twitter. On the other hand, Facebook is a more mainstream medium that mobilizes different participants from a variety of orientations, allowing it to attract less contentious users than Twitter.

**Limitations on Facebook and Twitter Mobilization**

As stated earlier, any discussion of social media mobilization is incomplete without specifying the social and political context. As Dr. Abdulla argues, social media allowed the less politically experienced, and less knowledgeable, a channel through which to take part in politics (Abdulla, 2011(1)). My interviewees were divided over whether this was generally positive or negative for the course of the Egyptian revolution. Abass thinks that Facebook and Twitter encouraged people to take part politically, but their lack of political experience and understanding led social media activists to make grave mistakes. Abass adds that “Kolena Khaled Saeed” refused to support some demonstrations after Mubarak resigned for this reason. He attributed all the “mess” of the first transition period to Facebook as activists insisted on remaining mainstream (Abass, 2012). In this respect, Amr El Hossiny also agrees with Abass that the “revolution has ended with Facebook as it has started with it --because many of the administrators who incited the revolution are inexperienced and not rooted in revolutionary politics.” (El Hossiny, 2012)

Many of the activists disagreed with this vision. The younger activists, particularly those who were influenced by “Kolena Khaled Saeed” such as Salma Hegab and Tahany Lasheen, thought that Abass’ views only underlined the negative side of the process. Contrariwise, they thought that Facebook mobilization allowed them to become politically active. Both activists had no prior experience with protests before becoming members of the "Kolena Khaled Saeed" group. Again, this supports the view that different users view the media differently, as seeing the limitations rather than the opportunities is contextual.

Social media have limitations in terms of quality of information shared by users, as they may be inaccurate, or may be influenced by the “electronic committees”\(^9\). The more intellectually refined differ from average users in how they tackle social media news. However, large majorities of both Facebook and Twitter users (85% and 77%, respectively) agree that Facebook and Twitter increased their level of political knowledge.

**Conclusion**

Technology plays a role in changing certain social and political contexts, but its utilization may develop from that very context that it came to change (Bijker, 2006: 681). Definitions of politics, as well as technology, are contextually relative. I espouse a view in which different people, in different societies and social positions, have different views of technology and their effects. Thus,

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\(^9\) Electronic committees are organized groups of users hired by political groups or security agencies to counter argue or disseminate false information against their political opponents.
technology can have more than one “logic” or effect in society depending on the social position of the users. This breaks the one-standard view of technology and allows it to undergo the tests of contextual relativity (Bijker, 2006: 688-94). Social media, being one such technology impacting politics in Egypt, need to be examined with this view in mind. The effects and usage of social media in Egypt are specific to a social and political context and to certain actors within it. As the context changes - which it does at great speed - so also do the effects and usages of social media.

This research supported such a contextual theory of technology, which argues that technology will be used differently by different users in different contexts. Social media aided the surge to join civil society organizations. It also provides a parallel space for mobilization for those who may not have been willing to join offline organizations in the transition period. This is mainly provided by Facebook due to its more mainstream nature. Twitter on the other hand, due to its facilities that allow real time dissemination of information, proves invaluable to activists on the ground. The Leftists, who protest and engage more than the others, particularly favor it. All things considered, social media based mobilization has some serious shortcomings, including the superficial politicization of users who may not be politically knowledgeable. These limitations must be taken into consideration, as they interact with less favorable political contexts to produce less favorable political outcomes.

Evgeny Morozov argues that there are two ways to be wrong about the internet: “One is to embrace cyber-utopianism and treat the Internet as inherently democratizing…Another is to succumb to Internet-centrism… Internet-centrists make a fetish of the virtual over the real world and assume that political problems have technical solutions.” I argue that there is a third more common pitfall for academics and practitioners alike if they do not pay attention to the continuous state of interaction and flux of social media with the current social and political context. We simply cannot make any sweeping statements about standard effects of social media at all times and irrespective of users’ varying experiences.
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