Social Networks and Democratic Transition
Vision and Reality

WALEED EL-ASHRY EBRAHIM ALI
PhD in Information and Communication Sciences
Applied Research on 2. FRANCE
Lecturer of Electronic Journalism
Faculty of Special Education – Tanta University

Abstract
Over the past few years, social networks have gained significant popularity and become one of the new media platforms most widely used at an unprecedented form, not only as a powerful tool for community building and identity formation but also as a valuable means for political change and the collective action. These digital platforms have provided new avenues for political communication, along with contributing to creation of public sphere which could encourage democratic activity and dissemination of dissenting viewpoints, as well as engagement in social movements. Hence, it is not surprising that these platforms are emerging as an effective tool, not only to enhance democracy, but also to quote social and economic advancement. In this respect, this paper sheds light on the contribution of these new media platforms in building and sustaining democracy by studying certain mechanisms important in building and sustaining democracy by studying certain mechanisms important in the context of the January 25 revolution. In this sense, Ghannam, (2011) pointed out that:

"...the Arab spring..."

The massive wave of uprisings which have quickly spread across Arab countries in early 2011 highlights the distinct role of new media and their ability not only as a platform for airing repressive regimes but also as a starting point for supporting demands for political freedom. These digital platforms also have significantly impacted both developed and under-developed countries. In this sense, Blue (2011) states that:

"...the new media technologies have not only influenced the individuals and communities in the developed countries but also the people of developing countries and the countries in transition period have become part of the global community by using new media technologies, especially internet and mobile phones."

Recent revolutions, which collectively referred to as "the Arab Spring", have demonstrated that the new media have potential to creating the collective consciousness, and have provided unprecedented opportunities to improve political communication substantially under the citizens’ fear of speaking out — particularly in the Arab societies because of the intense state censorship (Lynch, 2011). Therefore, it will come as no surprise that these new platforms as an alternative platform “citizens’ media” not only mobilize and gain technical knowledge are expected to lead even greater voice, political influence and participation over the next 10 to 20 years (p.151).

But in spite of numerous scholars and researchers have made theoretical contributions, and paid a great deal of attention to study the role of new media as an effective tool and a key organizing tool for the uprisings which swept across the Arab world (e.g., Facebook, Twitter), there are still several questions about the durability and the impact of these media which require significant rethinkings and about its role that still to be seen. In this respect, the first goal of this paper is to present an overview of the new media environment with a focus on its role as safe havens for democracy in the context of the January 25 revolution. The second objective is actually the focal point of this research paper, which stresses to examine the role of new media in shaping democratic values. In other word, to what extent does these new platforms can become one of these uprisings that considered a historical turning point in the history of democracy in Egypt that led to topple the authoritarian regime of Egyptian President Mubarak and open the door to its success in fundamental meaningful political change. In fact, the January 25 revolution did not come out of the void (See Figure 1 for illustration). Many of activists had been protesting for years (e.g., the protest movements of Khaled, against the succession of Gamal Mubarak, the April 6 Youth movement in support of labor protests, and the protest movements after fraudulent elections in late 2005), but they had largely failed to force meaningful change. Egyptians were influenced by Tunisia revolution and its success in elimination of President Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali on January 15, 2011, which strengthen a sense of collective identity (Elkhayat & Wael, 2011). On 25 January 2011 “Day of Rage”, tens of thousands of Egyptians took to the streets of Cairo for the wave of popular protests “Day of Rage” against President Hosni Mubarak’s autocratic regime that had governed the country for three decades. These protests were organized initially through the Facebook page “We are all Khaled Said”.

Figure 1: Indicators of the January 25 revolution

Waleed El-Ashry
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New Media: safe havens for democracy
With increased use of the internet, new media have gained significant popularity and have become one of the new platforms most widely used at an unprecedented form. These digital platforms have provided new avenues for political communication (Pew, 2011), along with contributing to creation of public sphere that could encourage democratic activity (Sternven & Friis, 2009) and dissemination of dissenting viewpoints, as well as engagement in social movements (Fahn, 2009).

As such, the new media have provoked unprecedented opportunities for individuals to produce the information and share it among themselves in an easy and timely manner, in addition to discussing political information with other citizens..."
In sum, the contemporary communication landscape has seen the emergence of social network sites (SNSs) which have gained significant popularity and have become one of the new platforms most widely used under the social media as an unprecedented form. Further, these digital platforms have provided unprecedented opportunities for dialogues worldwide, combined with enhanced interaction between users and news around difficult and sensitive topics—particularly in the societies where media is not free (Ali & Hassan, 2012).

More than ever, social network sites have become one of the better sites that rival the traditional media—in particular under increasing the offer and demand of its services by a new generation of users, to satisfy their thirst for news and to keep abreast of current events. Hence, it is not surprising that these new forms that provide "breaking news" are emerging not only as a basic source for the news, but also as the most effective pillar for knowledge creation and transfer between users at an unprecedented form. Therefore, they are seen as "a global consumer phenomenon" (Kieso & Griffin, 2011), that sees a power shift between consumers and traditional producers of information (Shongori-Kooi, 2006) within the last few years.

Penetration of social networks in Egypt

Despite that revolutions occur regardless of the existence of the Internet or technology, implying that these digital platforms are not causing the revolutions, yet 4 certainly has played a crucial role in the January 25 Revolution in Egypt by these main dynamics: organizing protests, shaping the narrative, and putting pressure on Washington (Bryd, 2011).

In the section below, we analyze new media tools that has been used extensively and effectively during the Egyptian uprisings, which halted as agents of change.

• Facebook

It has been observed that among Arab countries, Egypt has seen the highest increase in the number of Facebook users in the first quarter of 2011. According to the Arab Social Media Report, 2011, Facebook had been used primarily in Tunisia and Egypt to raise awareness of users about the ongoing civil uprisings (See Figure 3).

More recently, figures indicate that the number of Facebook users in the Arab world reached 43 million in April 2012. It is significant to note that Egypt holds the largest number of Facebook users in the region, with 5 million members, constituting one quarter of the total number of Arab users.

Figure 3: The Main Usage of Facebook during the Protests movements 2011

On the other hand, 86% of Facebook users in Egypt are Youth (See Figure 3). Despite that the Facebook is not the sole environment for political communication, but the greatest benefit that it has provided was a valuable means to rally and organize Egyptians during January 25 Revolution for real democracy.

Figure 4: User age distribution on Facebook in Egypt

• Twitter

Twitter is one of the most important avenues used during the Arab Revolutions. More specifically, Twitter was the most popular new media tool in the 2011 Egyptian revolution. Newly released studies indicate that Egypt holds the largest number of Twitter users in the Arab region between January and March 2011, with 2.4 million (Cherbib & Solah, 2011). There are an estimated 131,204 Twitter users in Egypt between 1 January and 30 March 2011, generating an average of 24,000 tweets a day during that time period (Arab Social Media Report, 2011, p.28). In addition, an approximate 15,000 Egyptians were using Twitter to send messages concerning the nature and location of protests (Cottle, 2011). (See Figure 4)

Figure 5: The Main Usage of Facebook during the Protests movements 2011

• YouTube

You Tube is a video-sharing website on which users can upload, share, and watch videos. According to Alexa ranking, You Tube is the third most visited website on the internet. You Tube was the social medium that captured the action of the 18-day Egyptian Revolution, according to the report produced by Techno Wireless, during the first week of the Egyptian Revolution 2011. Egyptian users viewed 8.3 million popular videos on YouTube. This number was reduced after the blockade of internet services by Egyptian authorities from 28 January until the first of February (Cherbib & Solah, p.141).

Figure 6: User age distribution on Facebook in Egypt

Social Networks: revolution of new media

The technological advances and the paradigm shift, new media in recent years, have led to a communication revolution, where social network sites are recent trend in this revolution (Moqbel, 2012). Recently, these new media platforms have quickly become one of the fundamental building blocks which allow people to connect and interact with each other on a particular subject (Bloor-Omonote et al., 2012, p.45) without the substantial cost or without the media gatekeepers, in addition to maintaining preserving social connections (Ellison et al., 2007). In this respect, SNSs have been aptly described as a global phenomenon, the public display of connections (Donath & Boyd, 2004), and a phenomenon of communication and information (Verst & Appel, 2003).

"Social networks are Internet sites where people publish and share all types of information with third parties, acquaintances and complete strangers" (Crawford, 2009, p.92).

Coule and Vaughn (2008) state that: "social networks exist because humans are social and require relationships in order to survive" (p.13). Moreover, they represent an important tool for creating a user’s digital lifestyle through providing a range of mechanisms to share and recommended news content (Singer et al., 2008), along with applications and collaborative tools (See Figure 2).

Figure 2: SNSs are becoming online portals
New media and democratic transition: The structural pathways

In fact, the discussion about the role of the new media including social networks as a catalyti for advancing democratization is not easy. However, we must recognize that “new media” become now a constituent of legitimacy in representing the broad masses, which give people greater power for speaking out and providing liberty. Therefore, we suggest the following structural dimensions to achieve democratic transition by these new media platforms:

- Media independence
- Freedom of expression
- Media pluralism
- Public opinion
- Transparency

1- Media independence

It is rightly recognized that independent media is cornerstone for stable and peaceful societies. Therefore, there is a growing consensus that independent media within each nation are cornerstone for buttressing democratic transitions and consolidations, by contributing towards the right of access information, freedom of expression, accountability of governments, along with cater to the citizens, and their legitimate claims. In this context, Jef fersonian stated: “Were it left to me to dic ide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without government, I should not hesitate to preferring the latter”. Therefore, the positive relationship between the growth of the free media and the process of democratization is thought to be reciprocal. As Carey (1996) states: “Journalism is another name for democracy; or, better, you cannot have journalism without democracy. The prac tise of journalism are not self-justifying; rather, they are justified in terms of the so cial value they represent, namely the constitution of a democratic soc iety; mobilization and the organization of public opinion for the betterment of the society; the individual participation in the democratic processes; the collective consciousness of the general public, in the participatory and self-determination that is the core of the democratic system”.

Moreover, numerous observers have recognized that social media are valuable for democracy, and for human development. Therefore, social media are already form an essential part for the democracy development, especially across the Middle East and North Africa regions, or in the societies in which the media are themselves (Cottle, 2011, p.657). Therefore, independent and revised media are most important requirement in the Egypt’s post-uprising phase. Indeed, all forms of me dia’s newspapers, radio, television stations, independent newpapers, private television channels should facilitate greater transparency by providing a civic forum for multiple voices in public debate which was not possible during thirty years of authoritari an rule.

2- Free flow of information

There is widespread agreement among researchers that free flow of information “is not easy. However, we must recognize that “new media” become now a constituent of legitimacy in representing the broad masses, which give people greater power for speaking out and providing liberty. Therefore, we suggest the following structural dimensions to achieve democratic transition by these new media platforms:

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2- Free flow of information

There is widespread agreement among researchers that free flow of information generally viewed as one of fundamental requirements of democracy. Habermas (1989, cited in Hailey, 2006, p.4) says that with greater access to information comes greater participation in democratic process. In fact, new digital media platforms have provided multi-directional platforms for disseminating information and sharing of content without the substantial cost or without the media gatekeepers, implying that the power to control information no longer resides exclusively with the institutions of the state.” (Howard, 2011, p. 28).

In this context, Maas, 2010 state that: “In the new media landscape, including online communication, the distribution of news and information is not controlled by traditional mass media institutions to the extent that it has been. The traditional concept of news distribution and the power of gatekeeping journalists are partly challenged.” So, we can say, that with the arrival of new media to creating the collective consciousness of the general public, the power of gatekeeping journalists are partly challenged.”

As mentioned above, one of the most attractive attributes of new social media is its transforming individuals from passive consumers of content to active producers (Nev and Howlett, 2010), implying that all citizens now produce and share information and share among them themselves. Furthermore, everyone can now play a role in determining the flow of information. In that sense, interactive engagement emerges as the most significant innovation in the new media (Kraut & Hunsb ry, 2003), and this makes communicating and connecting between people easier and more efficient, particularly for active participants in political events, in that sense, new media are found to be more critical to the human’s ability to share news and among the citizens, and rival political groups. The result was “sacrificing news objectivity” and upshaping the facts.

3- Freedom of expression

According to General Assembly of the United Nations and Convention for the Protection of Human Rights declared: “Everyone has the right to freedom of expression. This right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers”... we can say, that there cannot be a democratic society without the fundamental right to freedom of expression, because the progress of any society does not depend only on the possibility of receiving information, but also depend on information sharing and its discussions. Thus freedom of expression is one of the essential foundations of a democratic society. In this sense, Freedom of expression provides the citizens with the right to participate to common life and ensures their capacity to contribute in action. In Egypt, censorship and state-control on media still are common practices toward reducing freedom of expression. The penal code provides for fines and imprisonment in case of criticism of national or foreign governments, for diffusing news against the public security, and journalists are frequently subject to violence. In the other hand, the government owns controlling shares in the three largest television stations (Al-Ahram, Al-Ahbar and Al-Gomhuria), at the same time, the Ministry of Information controls content in the most of independent websites.

Constraints of democratic transition in Egypt

1- Transition from state control to private ownership

Mohamed was supplied in 2011, for instance, for example of TV channels owned by state owned companies, the exposure to a wider variety of cultural content being provided swiftness in receiving and disseminating information— in light of unique features of media ownership, including traditional and online media declining. It is worth noting that, credibility crisis or lack of confidence emerged during the 2011 revolution, due to the distorted coverage of the uprising by state owned media, in particular the national Egyptian television’s, which played down the protests, and did not reflect an accurate picture of the event itself, while drew attention to the pre-Mubarak rallies. In this respect, idle and Nuno (2011) stated that: “The importance of citizen journalists cannot be overestimated in a country like Egypt with a state controlled media. One of the features of the uprising was the gradual under-taking of state TV and newspapers, to the extent that journalist began to resign as the public saw the hallucines coverage for what it was. Idle and Nuno (2011) also note that the control of the news is unduly influenced by powerful business and political interests who play into the state TV’s own desire to make profits. One of the hand, media landscape has changed dramatically with the arrival of Web2.0. Since then, it has become difficult to control online content with the Internet and other forms of communication.

Due to that “humans are so-...critical to the humans (Durden, Hill, & An-...sisors of content to active producers (Nov...forms have provided multi-directional plat-...forms of media content (written, audio,...generate content (UGC) covers a various...rise of user-generated content (UGC) on...digital media platforms is largely unrealized. Thus, we need to...

1- Rethink the role of the new media in achieving and advancing democratization. Indeed, this is the question arises under lack of real participation in the election processes that recently conducted for pos-...sible change in the practice of journalism and other forms of communication. 3- Publish such research for use by dif-...the practice of journalism and other forms of communication. Indeed, this is the question arises under lack of real participation in the el...


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