

# DIGITAL DEVELOPMENT DEBATES

## Social Media in the Revolution

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**The Arabic revolutions, initially ignited in Tunisia in December 2010, have been shaped by the coordinative and uncomplicated techniques offered by the Web 2.0. The media enjoys symbolically referring to them as "Facebook" or "Twitter" revolutions. Which raises the question: Can social media do justice to this claim and, if not, what was their actual function in the revolutionary context?**

### **Revolution is a physically real event**

First of all, we have to dispense with the idea of linking revolutions and social networks too closely. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and MySpace create digital public spaces. Real power relationships, however, require actual physical space. Revolutions necessitate direct confrontation with state violence. This takes place on the street or, as in the case of the Egyptian Revolution, in a central place in the capital city of Cairo, the Midan Tahrir, which has now become a symbol that provides an identity. Revolutionary images are produced on location, offline in a sense. In the revolutionary context, Facebook and Twitter then offer a platform for the coordination and, more importantly, the relatively uncensored exchange of the information in these pictures. Social networks can also assume the function of the so-called "political street".

### **The political street – the everyday becomes political**

Asef Bayat's theory of the political street in the Arabic world can be divided into four basic components:

1. The street as a collective term for public spaces such as parking lots, markets, work places etc. that offer the average citizen a place for active discussion, a space to express the collective mood and opinions.
2. The street serves as a place where the problems under discussion collect. The individual becomes communal.
3. Joint activities to change specific problems develop without having been organised or planned.
4. So-called "social non-movements" can develop.

Bayat describes the latter as a basically unorganised collection of different emotions, expressed opinions and problems of individual average citizens that can develop from individual action to collective activity in spaces not originally intended for this use. Facebook, blogs and MySpace offer more effective alternative digital platforms than Twitter. Since around 60% of people in the Arabic world are under age 30, and this peer group generally shows a high affinity for digital social networks, these media represent a digital variation of the Bayatian political street. The "like" button here is used for the quasi-empirical determination of the general mood, recording users' emotionality through the click of a mouse. It does not take many steps to move from this unorganised collection of opinions to a structural - though in its implementation at times uncoordinated looking - mass movement. Ultimately opinions are amassed on a quite manageable number of profile pages. The content exchanged is similar or exactly the same, so that, in combination with the most popular Google searches, increasingly unified search results emerge. Over the long-term, this leads to an intensification on a few blogs and profile pages. Twitter reports accumulate under similar conditions through the use of the appropriate hashtags and frequent "retweets". The randomness with which this occurs leads one to conclude that this action starts out uncoordinated. Demonstrators in Egypt were ultimately brought together based

on the premise that a certain Twitter hashtag - in Egypt's case #Jan25 - has crystallised and amassed revolutionary messages of almost every type.

### **Social media as a carrier of social frustration**

The role of social media as a carrier of social frustration in Egypt - in particular for young people - goes back further than 2011. Around the murder of the blogger Khaled Said in Alexandria on June 6, 2010, the ubiquitous frustration of Egyptian youth began to grow tangible. Images transmitted via YouTube and Facebook of the disfigured body of Khaled Said unmasked the official statements on the exact manner of his death and progression of events as falsehoods. The youth protest movement that slowly began to develop in the wake of his death under the name "We are all Khaled Said" on Facebook, and organised by the Egyptian Google manager Wael Ghoneim, went public with smaller (inter-religious) protest announcements that generally received little attention from the traditional media at home and abroad. The individual disillusionments and disappointments of young people found their symbolic expression in the pictures of Khaled Said's corpse spread via Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. In the confrontation with authoritarian police violence that - despite the burden of proof to the contrary - continued to publicly insist that Said's death was caused when he asphyxiated on a packet of hashish he was trying to swallow, clearly an attempt to make Said out to be a drug dealer, revealed the corruption and unfairness inherent the authoritarian regime. If, in this context, one follows Bayat's theory of the political street, the individual becomes a collective shared experience which can develop a draw that culminates in an unorganised yet commonly supported action. Caused in all likelihood by the fact that, while they enjoy great regard in an economic and data protection rights context, social networks, in their pure network function and production of public spheres and due to their digital, read hardly "tangible", components, have long been maligned as a youth "medium". This disdain allowed a frustrated oppositional public sphere to form in these media and prepare the ground for revolution. The Egyptian parliamentary elections at the end of 2010, which were quite clearly manipulated and ended in a landslide victory for Mubarak's ruling NDP, are likely to have been one of the most important motivations for the ultimate discharge of the disillusionment and disappointment of more than just the country's youth, ignited by a shared experience, moving it out of the social networks and onto the streets in the form of demonstrations.

### **Twitter as an optimal revolutionary medium**

Due to the limited number of characters, its incorporation into SMS services, the integration of photo and video messages and its uncomplicated operation, Twitter is surely the best possible medium for spreading revolutionary communications. Tweets can be received and sent per SMS, allowing for communication even in the absence of a mobile or stationary internet connection. Considering that around 60% of the Egyptian population has a mobile phone (as of 2007), in addition to its flexible applications, Twitter also has the user range needed. Modern smartphones are less important here since they, due to their high cost and relatively greater vulnerability, are still comparatively less widespread. Almost all modern and even most older mobile telephones have a camera function though, so that pictures can be linked to texts. This is easy to do on Twitter. The term 'citizen journalism' can be expanded here by an investigative component. The field of professional journalism is being deprived of the simple production of news step by step - in contrast to the evaluation and verification of the Twitter news feed. One key distinction lies in the differentiation of discrete consumer groups. Apparently for the users of social media, traditional media such as television, radio or newspapers serve more for retrospective analysis or to expand the public perception than as a primary source of news. In the first days of the Egyptian revolution, the traditional media along with the established Egyptian parties and opposition movement were surprised by the digitally organised power of the demonstrators. Live streams spread in realtime via mobile telephones and the constant flow of information through Twitter and linked Facebook profiles revealed the astonishing possibilities offered by Web 2.0 media.

## **Authoritarianism and the Web 2.0**

During the very first days of the Egyptian revolution, the authoritarian regime tried to suspend the use of social networks, live-streaming websites and additional digital communication channels. In hindsight, it is clear that the Egyptian government would have had to limit electricity in Cairo to really effectively battle the stream of information.

Shutting down individual internet service providers (ISPs; with the exception of the Noor Network, which primarily provides the Egyptian stock market and other larger firms and hotels with internet access, all large ISPs were shut down), the restriction of mobile transmissions and the blocking of non-numerical domains on Facebook, Twitter and related sites was a mistake in two ways. For one, with support from abroad, analogue dial-up connections were set up, the Noor wlan nets from some firms and hotels hacked and a few retired fax machines brought back into play. Secondly, the blocking of digital communications from abroad was viewed very critically by Arabic satellite broadcasters such as Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiyya in particular, which led to an increase and expansion of live coverage. The government's attempt to change satellite broadcasting frequencies was also circumvented by Al-Jazeera in particular by a parallel frequency change. Unintentionally and contrary to its intentions, the regime expanded the audience and increased the attention of international media by limiting internet access.

### **Social media as the "surprise guest" at modern revolutions - a conclusion**

The speed with which the active phase of the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions took place is impressive in view of the theoretically assumed resilience of Arabic authoritarian regimes. We must therefore not overlook the fact that the revolutions, as Asef Bayat's theory of the "political street" explains, must have had their genesis before the wide medial focus commenced at the beginning of 2011. A medium whose content was ultimately ignored served as the transmitter of individual frustration, the collective experience of which accumulated on Facebook, Twitter and in blogs, creating the motivational core of the revolution. In addition to the collective function of social networks, the Arabic revolutions in Tunisia and geopolitically more significant Egypt were supported in particular by demographic problems and the overriding - and ultimately destructive to loyalty - corruptibility of these authoritarian regimes. It is therefore surely worth keeping an eye on active participation in social networks in future to recognise and analyse crises and linked frustrations earlier. To call revolutions Twitter or Facebook revolutions (including the Green Revolution in Iran in 2010) cannot be justified due to a number of influencing factors. A successful revolution, as the Libyan example surely demonstrates, requires a bundle of premises. In addition to amassed frustration that serve as motivation, a demographic development of society must be apparent that presents an authoritarian regime with increasing financial difficulties if it tries to contain its citizens directly or indirectly via the overstretched state sector. The fact that 60% of the people in the Arabic world are under age 30 illustrates the demographic imbalance. This is surely exacerbated by the fact that Egyptian society, like Tunisian society, does not base its loyalties on classical tribal relationships as do Libya and the Gulf states.

In this particular social environment, social media can - as described above - function as transmitters and transfer individual experience in an unorganised form to collective constructions of identity. The success of a revolution, as Egypt and Tunisia also clearly demonstrated, continues to depend on how the armed part of the government, that is the military, positions itself with respect to the regime after considering real political interests. So it seems that a military coup, despite the social origins of the revolution, continues to determine the revolution's success or lack thereof. In this context, social media themselves are a "surprise guest" for traditional media and are developing into an increasingly important alternative to them.