Social Media as a Catalyst in the Egyptian Unrest

Lieutenant Colonel Sushil Pradhan*

'On the Internet people are uploading and downloading ideologies. In a few years, every citizen of the world will be able to comparison shop between his country and his own government and the one next door.'

– Thomas Freidman1

Introduction

The world's attention has turned to Egypt as anti-government protestors have succeeded in ousting Hosni Mubarak's thirty year old iron-fisted rule. Thousands of these protesters took to the streets in Egypt to express their opposition to President Hosni Mubarak's regime and the nation's current economic situation, and the government responded strongly, using military forces to bolster police presence and impose curfew. As such, much of what happened in Egypt has repercussions on the Arab world; since geopolitically, Egypt serves as a bridge between the predominately Muslim areas of North Africa and the Middle East.

Inspired by the 'Jasmine Revolution' that toppled the former president of Tunisia, Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali in January 2011, student and opposition groups had been staging protests across Egypt. Egypt has a large youth population which grew progressively dissatisfied about unemployment, poverty, rising food prices and an autocratic leadership seen as corrupt and calcified. In an unprecedented display of unity among disparate wings of Egyptian society, middle-class students and Internet-savvy young people protested alongside older, hardened activists and those from less privileged backgrounds.

The outbreak of protests in Egypt was marked by a uniquely 21st century phenomenon. Much of the organisation took place over social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Citizens no longer depended on mainstream media to spread word of activist campaigns and dissent. Thanks to social media, every protester, every citizen, had the power to be a journalist, to broadcast breaking news to the computer-using, phone-wielding population of the world.

Genesis of the Movement

With a population of over 80 million, Egypt is the most populous Arab nation. Because of its large size, Egypt plays a very influential role in the politics of the region. An estimated 90 per cent of Egyptians are Muslims and 9 per cent are Coptic Christians. Egypt's government functioned as a republic with its legal system borrowed from Islamic law and other systems, such as the Napoleonic code. Presidential elections occurred on a six year cycle, with no term limits, as exemplified by Mubarak's 30-year reign. In 2007, reforms were passed through national referendum to ban any parties based on religion, race or ethnicity. Although the Muslim Brotherhood has been officially banned through the 2007 reforms, it is nevertheless considered the most viable source of political opposition in the country. Another important figure of political opposition is Mohamed El-Baradei, who served as the Director General of the UN's International Atomic Energy Agency from 1997 to 2009. In 2010, El-Baradei announced the formation of a 'National Association for Change'2, a move many believed to be indicative of his political aspirations.

Reports of human rights violations in Egypt were consistently grim throughout Mubarak's presidency3. Human Rights Watch reports that the government took repressive action against minority Coptic Christians, reporters, political dissidents and human rights activists in 2010. In recent years, the government cracked down hard on those who attempted to expose rights violations in the country, making information hard to come by.

An estimated 20 per cent of Egyptians live below the poverty line. Following the global economic crisis, economic growth slowed down from an average seven per cent annual growth of GDP. Two results of the economic downturn have been a sharp decline in foreign exports and revenue brought in from the Suez Canal, both harming Egypt's economic well-being. Living conditions in Egypt leave much to be desired. Legions of dynamic young people who have worked hard to get an education find there's nowhere to use it, with negligible employment prospects.

At the centre of the protest was opposition to President Mubarak. Egyptians grew increasingly frustrated with Mubarak's regime, which was marked by corruption and rights violations. Egypt's economic situation further fuelled the flames of discontent, coupled with widespread unemployment and economic hardship.

Social Media Mobilises the Protestors

Since January 2011, protestors took to the streets in Egypt and soon congregated at Tahrir (Liberation) Square in Cairo. President Mubarak imposed curfews, which many protesters defiantly disregarded. As the protests intensified, the police and military forces began taking retaliatory actions. Many demonstrators were hit with rubber bullets, water cannons and tear gas. There were instances of protesters fighting back against police in violent confrontations. The protests in Egypt were markedly different from other social uprisings because there was no clear leader or political group organsing the actions, raising the doubt whether the movement would fizzle out in the absence of leadership.

However, social media with its strength of social networking, and the sense of inclusion and empowerment that it can bring, served as a key to successful spread of information about the protests in Egypt. The widespread use of twitter, Facebook and other social media outlets enabled protestors to organise themselves and wage a successful media campaign. A Facebook group called 'We are All Khaled Said'4, named after an activist who was killed in Alexandria following an incident of police brutality last year and the April 6 Youth Movement5 (comprising socialists and pro-labour people) were at the forefront of organising the internet movement.

Protestors Inter-Connected. When people needed to communicate to organise demonstrations, they went to Facebook to tell each other where they would be. Egypt hosts an active and politically minded blogging community, and

approximately 79 per cent of the citizenry - over 60 million people - own a mobile phone. As in Tunisia and Iran, many Egyptians learned of anti-government protests via activist pages on Facebook. Even the protests themselves were in part inspired by the death of the blogger-activist, Khaled Said, who was beaten to death by Egyptian police. Without these mass organising tools, it's likely that fewer people would have known about the protests, fewer people might have shown up, and the Egyptian authorities might have more easily dispersed them.

Journalism on the Internet. Social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter enabled journalists to circumvent traditional barriers of communication to share what was happening in blocked off and censored environments. Social media also grabbed the attention of mainstream media outlets around the world, who used video found on YouTube and photos plucked from Flickr in TV news broadcasts and newspaper articles. Professional journalists like CNN's Ben Wedeman were using Twitter to report live from protest areas. Nicholas Kristof, a journalist for *The New York Times*, not only used Twitter for short updates, but also Facebook for observations about the real situation on the ground in Egypt6. The *public commentary*, by virtue of the level of interest, led to worldwide debates, since Kristof's page was meant to be a fan page. Social media was also revolutionary because it made the average citizen a reporter. Armed with just a mobile phone and an Internet connection, protestors uploaded the raw, unedited footage of the latest protests in Cairo to YouTube or Facebook and disseminated them to millions before reporters were even on the scene.

Shaping the Narrative. In situations of chaos, the upper hand often goes to the group that can shape a narrative in its favour. When looting began in Cairo, the narrative could easily have shifted in favour of the government since apparently hooligans were turning the city upside down. But word started getting out via Twitter that hastily arranged neighbourhood watch groups were apprehending looters who, it turned out, had government identity on them. This might or might not have been true, but it certainly shed a different light on the looting. The narrative was reset. Soon thereafter, CNN changed it's on-screen headlines from "Chaos in Egypt" To "Uprising in Egypt." Social media successfully quashed reports deliberately spread by the regime that looters were descending upon the National Museum where a third of the world's priceless treasures are housed. Twitter feeds revealed that in response to these claims, students and activists headed for the museum and formed a human ring around it to prevent looters from entering; although mainstream media reported that it was the Army that had secured the building.

Putting Pressure on Washington. In disturbed regions, Washington has often found it more convenient to spin the narrative in favour of the authority in power, in the interest of maintaining stability and an ally. Egypt being one of the closest allies of the US in the Middle East, there was concern about instability in the region, should Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak fall. However, too much information had been escaping the country, particularly via Twitter and Facebook; and this seemingly endless flood of details firmed up the impression that a genuine uprising was taking place. With that deluge of information, Washington lost any ability to downplay events on the ground and maintain a distanced posture. It had no choice but to subtly and incontrovertibly shift its stance as the unrest continued.

Building-Up Worldwide Opinion. What seemed so striking about the concept of a "social media revolution" wasn't just that protesters in Egypt could communicate with each other, organise, and execute protests. The unique attribute was that people all over the world were able to interact with this information in ways that still-photos and short videos on the nightly news don't permit. It allowed the world to be apprised of the situation in real time. Facebook updates resulted in several hundreds of comments from users, many of them astute observations about, among other things, the political future of Hosni Mubarak, the validity of comparing Cairo's unrest to Tiananmen's, and the role that the media (both within Egypt and outside of it) were playing as the situation escalated.

Convergence of Voice Communications and Social Media. Without doubt the Egyptian government realsed the potency of social media, when it shut down all Internet access in an apparent attempt to curb dissidents and the spread of information. In an innovative move to converge social media on the Internet with voice communications, Twitter teamed up with Google and its recently-acquired SayNow to create a service specifically for the Egyptians called Speak2Tweet7. This service allowed its users to dial any of three international phone numbers using any voice line and leave a message. The message was immediately sent to the Twitter account Speak2Tweet with the hash-tag identity '#Egypt' added to it. Those following the tweets were then able to listen to the voices of the protestors and whatever messages and updates they wanted to relay. Those inside Egypt's borders who wanted to be updated could access all the messages by dialling any of those same three numbers. Global Voices and Stop404.org soon followed suit.

Voices of Dissent. Critics of social media's influence in activism8 are quick to point out that people organised and revolutions occurred long before the Internet existed. Indeed, the role of real people, bravery and sacrifice leading to President Hosni Mubarak's resignation is more important than Facebook or Twitter. While protests continued even after the Egyptian government shut off access to the Internet, the impact of social media can no longer be dismissed. Evgeny Morozov argues9 that it's wrong to assess the political power of the Internet solely based on its contribution to social mobilisation; we should also consider how it empowers the government via surveillance, how it dis-empowers citizens via entertainment, how it transforms the nature of dissent by shifting it into a more virtual realm, how it enables governments to produce better and more effective propaganda. The point is not that social media tools like Twitter and Facebook cause revolutions in any real sense. What they are very good at doing, however, is connecting people in very simple ways, and making those connections in a rapid and widely-distributed manner. This is the power of a networked society and of cheap, real-time communication networks. Social media may not be a cause, but it can be a powerful accelerant.

How Social Media Journalism Accelerated the Uprising?

With the Internet inaccessible for the majority of people in Egypt, much of the international community was relying on journalists and citizens with satellite phones for real-time updates on the violent protests. The information flowing out was a hybrid of the "old school" reliance on reports from journalists on location, and "new school" amplification through the social web. To summarise the multifarious uses of this technology, some *critical enablers* were:-

(a) Real Time Tweets. Journalists on location were updating their Twitter accounts with 140-character stories. Sometimes these were quotes from sources being interviewed and at times simply comments on their observations.

Several news organsations like *NPR*, *CNN*, *The New York Times*, *Al-Jazeera English* and others collated Twitter lists of journalists and citizens tweeting from Egypt.

(b) Facebook Storytelling. Journalists were not only including information about the demonstrations, but also their observations of and personal reactions to the tense situations on the streets of Cairo. They were posting rich and detailed updates to their Facebook pages based on their reporting.

(c) Live Streaming and YouTube Videos. After having their Cairo bureau closed and press credentials revoked by Egyptian authorities, *Al-Jazeera* English and Russia Today utilised YouTube to post updated video reports on the demonstrations.

(d) Live Blogs. Journalists on the ground in Egypt and web producers of news organisations were live-blogging updates to their websites. *The Washington Post's* live blog was updated with all relevant inputs coming from Twitter, Facebook and other platforms since the protests began. Other notable live blogs include *The New York Times, CNN, Reuters, Al-Jazeera, Guardian, BBC* and *The Huffington Post.*

(e) Tumblr Curation. Utilising its newly launched collated (or curated, in Internet terminology) 'topic pages' feature, Tumblr created an Egypt page that was being curated and contributed to by journalists and news organisations. Playing to the strengths of Tumblr, the page included an array of short updates, videos and photos from Cairo, while crediting original sources.

(f) Real-time Audio Updates. *Al-Jazeera* was continuously posting audio reports from its journalists to a website called Audioboo, which permits one to record shareable audio recordings on-the-go from mobile devices and contextualises that recording with the location, available photos and other information.

Social Media and Egypt: A Portend of the Future of Revolutions?

Are we in the age of Internet revolutions, where Facebook, Twitter and text messages are essential ingredients in democratic change? However, it takes a lot more than the 21st century version of a communication system to persuade people to take to the streets and risk harm, imprisonment, or death. The idea that change in Egypt was brought on by Twitter or a "Facebook Revolution" has been disputed by some, which doesn't mean social media cannot play a role. Social media will simply make it happen faster. Some trends that clearly emerge are:-

(a) Real Time Information. The protests would have happened with or without Twitter and Facebook but we might not have heard about it. Would Al Jazeera, without offices on the ground, have been able to report on the unfolding story as it did?

(b) People as Information Nodes. Humans are functioning as de-facto news aggregators using the publication tools already available. Interested people took it upon themselves to become individual nodes of information, using the social media tools they had to serve as their own news networks.

(c) Global Reach. More than ever, the Internet remained a crucial vehicle of sustaining and transmitting resistance by allowing Egyptians to 'network the world'. In a matter of hours, "Egypt" and "Jan 25" emerged as the most tagged messages on Twitter, with more than 2,500 tweets per second.

(d) Working Around Media Censorship. Social media didn't cause the protests, but social media services have been a catalyst, helping to spread information about the protests and providing a way to share details about what is happening where. Where the media was censored, social media has filled the void, with citizens themselves reporting on what was happening around them.

(e) Technology to the Aid of Citizens. Innovation kept people on the ground in Egypt connected to the outside world throughout the crisis. The Google-Twitter partnership that set up Speak2Tweet ensured that when mobile networks were down, people could call from landlines and still reach their Internet audience.

(f) Citizen Journalists. Social media can and did, help tip off journalists about developments in places they couldn't access. For example, it was difficult (and risky) for foreign journalists to report from the city of Suez, which saw some of the worst violence. But a steady stream of tweets and blog entries, as well as photos and cell-phone video, provided at least some understanding of the rapidly evolving situation there.

(g) Engaging the People. Governments now have no option than to use social media to get their message across, if they want to engage with their target audiences.

(h) Human Involvement. Every individual has an equal voice on social networks. People are not just hearing a piece of news, but can actually be part of that event in a way that they have never been able to do before. Social networking gives an observer anywhere in the world a voice and something positive to contribute to.

Countering Social Media

Social media have their drawbacks too. Lowering the costs of communication also diminishes operational security. Facebook messages are transparent, and even private messages can be viewed by authorities through search warrants, or pressure on the Internet social media firms. Indeed, social media can quickly turn into a valuable intelligence-collection tool. Reliance on social media can also be exploited by a regime willing to cut the country off from Internet or domestic text messaging networks altogether, as has been the case in Egypt. The capability of governments to monitor and counteract social media developed alongside the capability of their intelligence services10. In order to obtain an operating license in any country, social networking websites have to come to some sort of agreement with the government. In many countries, this involves getting access to user data, locations and network information. Facebook

profiles, for example, can be a boon for government intelligence collectors, who can use updates and photos to pinpoint movement locations and activities, and identify connections among various individuals, some of whom may be suspect for various activities.

Beyond monitoring movement websites, governments can also shut them down. This has been common in Iran and China during times of social unrest. But blocking access to a particular website cannot stop tech-savvy Internet users employing virtual private networks or other technologies to access unbanned IP addresses outside the country in order to access banned sites. In response to this problem, China shut down Internet access to all of Xinjiang Autonomous Region, the location of ethnic Uighur riots in July 2009. More recently, Egypt followed the same tactics for the entire country.

Regimes can also use social media for their own purposes. One counter-protest tactics is to spread disinformation, whether it is to scare away protestors or lure them all to one location where anti-riot police lie in wait. While such a government ''ambush'' tactics has yet to be used, its use is inevitable in the age of Internet anonymity. Government agents in many countries have become quite proficient at trawling the Internet in search of paedophiles, terrorists and criminals.

The most effective way for the government to use social media is to monitor what protest organisers are telling their adherents either directly over the Internet or by inserting an informant into the group, counteracting the protestors wherever and whenever they assemble. Authorities monitoring protests at World Trade Organisation and G-8 meetings as well as the Republican and Democratic national conventions in the United States used this successfully. One of the biggest challenges for security services is to keep up with the rapidly changing Internet. In Iran, the regime quickly shut down Facebook but not Twitter, not realising the latter's capabilities. If social media are presenting a demonstrable threat to governments, it could become vital for security services to continually refine and update plans for disrupting new Internet technology.

Conclusion

What has happened in Egypt in the last few months has now set a precedent. In spite of digital blackouts and information blockages, while the signal was lost, the voice survived. It found echoes and resonances around the world. Civic hackers in Egypt found supporters around the world, who not only spread their message but also provided them with legal and political infrastructure to make sure that their voice was heard. This revolution was not only about the present but also about what the future will hold. Digital natives who are integrated with the circuits of technology mobilisation and networking have been able to use these platforms to fight for their rights for freedom, dignity and expression. And all this was orchestrated using social media, viral networking technologies and digital communication assemblages.

Social media represents only one tool among many for an opposition group to employ. Their leaders must have charisma and organisational ability. Representing a new medium with dangers as well as benefits, social media do not create protest movements; they only allow members of such movements to communicate more easily. It is part of the overall strategy, but it cannot be the sole strategy. Still, the expansion of Internet connectivity does create new challenges for political leaders who have proved more than capable of controlling older forms of communication. This is not an insurmountable challenge, as China has shown, but even in China's case there is growing anxiety about the ability of Internet users to evade controls and spread forbidden information.

The ways in which Internet connected citizens are able to harvest the technologies of mass communication and social outreach is an indication of how the contours of global governance are going to be shaped. Social networking, citizen journalism, citizen action and civic collaboration are the new weapons of social change and transformation that the world should be able to use effectively. In Egypt, the Internet and social media have once again proven themselves as highly effective tools in the organisation of political protests and are also indicative of what the future holds for political dissent.

Social media networks have become major conduits for news, information and commentary that can unite grassroots movements to change and challenge governments. The unrest that began in Tunisia and Egypt has spread to Libya, Bahrain, Jordan and Yemen too. Even with severely limited internet access in large parts of India, will such form of protest-mobilisation emerge in the near future in the *urban* parts of Kashmir Valley or even in other regions? Food for thought indeed; for those monitoring the internal security situation in the Country.

***Lieutenant Colonel Sushil Pradhan** was commissioned into the 5th Battalion, The Mechanised Infantry Regiment (14 KUMAON) in 1990. Presently, he is Colonel Administration at the Mechanised Infantry Regimental Centre, Ahmednagar. A regular contributor to professional journals, he won Second Prize in the COAS Essay Competition 2010.

Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CXLI, No. 583, January-March 2011.