

Social Media and Social Mobilisation - A Catalyst for Change

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Introduction

With the bursting of the dot com bubble in early 2000s, a new avatar of the Internet, unofficially called Web 2.0 has come into being. Instead of a few companies or individuals hosting content on servers, to be lapped up by the passive consumer, Web 2.0 has seen a dizzying proliferation of user-created, generated and hosted interactive content. Ordinary people, citizens can now revel in this new found power of interaction, expression of views (conservative or radical), real time simultaneity of coordinated expression, among so many other features. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn et al have changed the way events around the world are perceived and brought hitherto unknown incidents into limelight. They have introduced speed and interactivity into a realm which has traditionally been dominated by state sponsored media and privately owned media empires, whose stated neutralities are questionable. Comment threads on every page of every conceivable subject matter lead to a coalescence of varying viewpoints. This may, sometimes, lead to a Hegelian synthesis or alternately, a Hobbesian state of nature: chaotic and unruly. The point to emphasise is that whatever may be the end result, everyone gets a chance to air his/her sentiments or point of view. This real time horizontal and vertical linking as well as physical adaptability across multiple devices has increased the lure of the improved web.

This article seeks to explore the potential of Social Media in Social Mobilisation and see what direction it might take in the future. This has been done with the help of three case studies, of successful and not so successful mass movements in the last five years, and then draw suitable conclusions for the future of social media, both as a communication medium as well as catalyst for social change.

Mass Mobilisation as a Phenomenon

Mass mobilisation behind any cause requires (to borrow from Gabriel Almond)¹ near simultaneous interest articulation and interest generation by collectives (parties or individuals) followed by interest aggregation which can subsequently be moulded into political/social mobilisation. For the first step i.e. interest generation to be effective, an umbrella cause is required, generic enough to elicit interest from major chunks of the population and specific enough to be time bound and addressable by the relevant authorities. Traditional methods such as distribution of pamphlets and literature, television interviews, advertisements, street plays, peer groups, lobbying etc. can then be the most effective forms of interest articulation on any issue. Interest aggregation is the final step of creating a critical mass of opinion, as well as a physical presence which may manifest itself in letters of protest, peace marches, demonstrations, sit-ins, strikes, riots or near anarchy. All these three stages i.e. interest generation, articulation and aggregation require large and disciplined organisations, structured hierarchy and a motivated and relatively indoctrinated work force. Organisations such as political parties, NGOs, INGOs are well versed and adept at utilising the media for shaping the perceptions of public.

Arab Spring or Jasmine Revolution

The spark that ignited the Arab Spring was the self-immolation by Mohd Bouazizi, a vegetable vendor in Tunisia. After being humiliated and repressed by the police, he took the extreme step, protesting against his helplessness and desperation. His act was filmed and clicked by many on their personal mobile phones, and not before long the videos and photographs went viral.² Protests first started in the interior of the country. When the protestors were brutally beaten up by the state authorities, footage of these was used as ammunition by experienced online activists, to spread revolution into the affluent parts of the country. A chain reaction, these people then used cellphones and internet to coordinate their meetings and actions. President Ben Ali, who had created a virtual police state since 1987, could not cope with the outpouring of grief and anger amongst the young Tunisians, whose throttled up feelings could now be let loose. Slogans like 'BEN ALI DEGAGE' and 'RCD DEGAGE' became the chant of the common man.³ Various blogger sites such as nawaat.org⁴ and increasing Facebook updates confirmed the discrepancies and distortions in the statements of the leading politicians, and after Ben Ali fled, the same social media was used by the citizens to quell any kind of a misinformation campaign by dubious groups, as well as organise themselves against the security forces, regime supporters and looters.

The most successful and memorable use of the social media, however, was made by the Egyptians. If the final aim of good governance was achieved or the unemployment rates showed a downfall, are questions which remain unanswered. But the attitude and poise showed by the Egyptian youth during the Arab Spring has few parallels in history. The Egyptian Arab Spring, similar to Tunisia, started due to the brutal killing of Khaled Saeed, a 28 year old man who was beaten to death by two police officers. Photos of his disfigured corpse went viral and a Facebook page called 'WE ARE ALL KHALED SAEED'⁵ was created which received massive hits. More calls to action such as 'I'M GOING TO TAHRIR, ARE YOU?'⁶ and 'DOWN WITH MUBARAK, LONG LIVE THE REVOLUTION'⁷ and its variants galvanised the youth into action. It was now time for the long pending woes of inflated prices, high unemployment rates, abhorrently expensive housing and institutionalised corruption to end. The government machinery got into action and tried to shut down the social networks. Ironically this led to more and more number of people coming on the streets. A week prior to President Hosni Mubarak's resignation, the number of tweets about change in the political situation in the country went from 2300 a day to 230,000 a day. The top 23 videos on this subject received 5.5 million views. A total of two million people gathered in Tahrir Square, a significant majority of whom were present due to the extensive social media coverage.⁸

Occupy Wall Street

In order to protest against the growing income gap between the top one per cent and the rest of the American population and inspired by anti-austerity protests in Spain, protestors occupied Zuccotti Park in downtown Manhattan

on 17 Sep 2011. The main demands of the movement were the reduction of influence of financial corporations on politics, more balanced distribution of income, more and better jobs, student loan forgiveness and most importantly, alleviation of the foreclosure crisis. The campaign was initiated by a Canadian pro-environment and anti-consumerism group called Adbusters. Before the main protests of Sep 17, a large number of unrelated but similar incidents had already occurred, most taking the support of social media to advance their cause. Some of them were:

- (a) Jun 12 – Thousands of people marched on Wall Street, egged on by labour unions.
- (b) Jun 14 – Online activist group Anonymous tried an occupation of Wall Street.
- (c) Aug 1 – Group of artists arrested after performing nude in front of Wall Street.

A group of people calling themselves New Yorkers Against Budget cuts (NYAB) organised a ‘sleep in’ in lower Manhattan, called Bloomsbergville. This led to a large number of activists, online and ground, to collect at one place and ‘Occupy’ movement started taking shape. When the main protests started on 17 Sep, they were supported by Anonymous and A Day of Rage, among many others. 19 Sep saw creation of a Facebook Page with an embedded YouTube video describing all the previous events. By mid-October, the number of Occupy related pages had crossed 125. The number of members of these pages exceeded 450,000.⁹

When the protestors were finally chased off the property on 11 Nov, they had introduced a novel system of functioning and introduced slogans such as ‘WE ARE THE 99 per cent’, procedures such as modified consensus, progressive stack and the dead notion of direct democracy. However, what was clearly visible was the use of Facebook, Twitter and YouTube in keeping the protests alive, meaningful and relevant to the common man. One of the major effects of this huge online campaign was that the Occupy Wall Street spawned a number of similar Occupy movements such as Occupy Sandy, Occupy SEC etc. Though the movement was not able to accomplish much in terms of their demands but its impact has been so significant that the upcoming 2016 elections are going to be all about reducing the income gap.¹⁰

Protests in Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in 2015

The violent protests and riots that erupted in the ‘Dark Heart’ of Africa were against the time delaying tactics of incumbent President Joseph Kabila Kabange. On the verge of completing his mandated two terms in office, President Kabila introduced a resolution in the Parliament in Kinshasa, by way of which a compulsory census had to be completed successfully before the 2016 elections could take place. In a country larger than the size of Western Europe combined, and crippled by a non-existent communication network as well as endemic corruption, this could have easily taken several years. Already incensed by what they saw was an incompetent and an insensitive regime, the Congolese people in the urban centres took to the streets to protest the provisions of the bill and calling for removal of the controversial census clause. The protests were spearheaded by students of Kinshasa University, who gathered around the Palais de Peuple on 19 Jan 2015. As more and more people joined the protests, the movement turned violent. In order to stop the Congolese people from coordinating their protests across the country and especially in the restive eastern provinces of Nord and Sud Kivu, the government ordered the shutdown of all internet and text message services on 20 Jan 2015.¹¹

That is when the expatriate Congolese community took the lead in propagating the revolution. Online campaigning led to support of the protests by countries such as Senegal, whose online activists also took up the cause of #Telema (Stand Up in Lingala) and #JeSuisKinshasa (I’m Kinshasa).¹² However, the effect of the internet blackout was substantial. Protests petered out in Goma, Bukavu and Lubumbashi (respective capitals of Nord Kivu, Sud Kivu and Katanga provinces), after three to four days of violent demonstration. With no access to internet or text messages and mainstream media being carefully monitored, protestors slowly lost the momentum that had been generated from 19 Jan 2015. A total of 42 people had been killed, a figure contested by the government authorities. The impact of these protests was that the President, after witnessing the killings as well as being advised by diplomats of US, UK, EU, UN, France and Belgium, recalled the controversial clause on 25 Jan 2015, and subsequently the protests stopped.¹³

An Analysis

The above three protest movements occurred in three different Continents, in different circumstances, across different time zones and had varying impacts, either on the authorities or the general populace or both. However, some salient points which may be said to be common and perceived to have a bearing on future movements are enumerated in the succeeding para.

Resonance. For a movement to be successful, it has to resonate with the general mood of public opinion. Issue(s) of contention could vary from incompetent governance to repressive state authorities to local level administrative issues. Modern social movements, after the advent of the social media have depended on a flashpoint, something extraordinary, to act as a clarion call for mass mobilisation. By providing visuals and opinions on a global forum and providing opportunities for all strata of society to participate, social media acts as the catalyst to ignite reactions and as a platform to coordinate actions and protests on an unprecedented scale.

Perception. Perception, in unison with resonance plays an important role in the initiation as well as the continuance of any social or mass mobilisation. It depends on the customs, traditions and priorities of a particular society. The cause and call to action for people in societies is different for different parts of the world. Environmental protection, freedom of press, free speech, creation of jobs, reducing income inequality gap: all are worthwhile causes depending on how people perceive them in their importance. Also important is the population’s perception of the individuals or groups organising the cause. Social media by putting visual media and opinions in the relevant context helps create and shape perceptions.

Coordination. The Congo protests in 2015 have showed the failings of an uncoordinated movement. Due to effective shut down of internet and text services by major telecom providers almost immediately, the government, in effect,

crippled the movement from the very start. Also, once the protests started, there was no way to control the mob and in most cases, the youth damaged and destroyed a significant portion of their neighbourhoods. The movement, started for a rightful cause, disintegrated into mob violence as soon as it began due to lack of coordination among different groups taking part, as well as no clear directions. Coordination has an almost folkloric importance for any group activity, and becomes crucial for mass mobilisations. By allowing people to coordinate their activities among different groups and take control of the momentum of a movement by dispelling malevolent rumours and ensuring strict adherence to agreed codes, social media acts as an enabler.

Leadership. While most movements are led by individuals or groups fighting for a particular cause, there is emerging a new type of phenomenon, exemplified by the Occupy Wall Street, of leaderless movements rallying behind a cause. This involves time-dynamic leadership, which essentially means that people with a specific set of qualities and qualifications step up and take up the mantle for a particular time frame, or till a portion of the project is complete and then step down, only to be replaced by others in a similar fashion. What better and time effective way to attract members to a cause than online activism.

Online Activist Groups. Online activist groups such as change.org, avaaz.org, purpose.com, moveon.org have changed the way activism functions. With member bases around the globe and boasting of memberships of tens of millions, these organisations have used novel ways to elicit public interest in a multitude of topics. They generally use online public petitions, videos and email-your-leader tools to generate interest in the causes, and then stage sit-ins, rallies, phone-ins and media friendly stunts, to elicit action and reaction on part of the relevant authorities.

Slacktivism. A relatively new term, slacktivism combines the word 'slacker' and 'activism' and is used to denote an activity that just satisfies the ego of the person performing it. These activities may include clicking on online petitions, changing the avatar on social networking sites, sharing of status messages or updates on Facebook or Twitter. This gives the 'slacktivist' an erroneous self-satisfaction of taking part in a social movement without the accompanying physical or financial effort. In spite of its many criticisms, there is no denying the fact that online activism has done what traditional canvassing or activism has so far failed to do: creating awareness about complex issues in the most effective way and shortest time possible. A great example in this case is the effort by the group Invisible Children to educate people about the atrocities perpetrated on African children by Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). The group created a 28 minute film which when uploaded on YouTube became the fastest growing viral video of all time. It was viewed by over a 100 million people in just six days.¹⁴ This effort made a global impact and led to mass awareness about LRA, a feat which number of diplomatic missions, NGOs and aid workers had not been able to accomplish for a long time.

Conclusion

No revolution or social movement in the history has been successful without mass participation. Mass participation, in turn requires a consciousness, of being exploited, of being wronged. Awakening of the consciousness is brought about by knowledge, of events, of government policies and repression. As brought out earlier, people may also be galvanised into action by a momentous single event, which may resonate with their latent frustrations with the system. Before the advent of social media, mass movements were centralised, leader oriented and more often than not, led by either famous individuals or well-funded and disciplined organisations. An example is the Civil Rights Movement in the US led by Martin Luther King Jr on the one hand and the militant Black Panthers on the other. The main drawback was that these movements, while purporting to be people based, never used democratic methods in drawing up their charters or deciding their course of action. Opinion making was limited to the 'inner circle' or a few elites. The general sequence was word-of-mouth publicity, recruitment, indoctrination and finally action. Another disadvantage was, due to their calling-card and very public and propaganda based actions, these movements were susceptible to sabotage, infiltration or total break up. Also canvassing and lobbying for a particular cause required a huge presence on ground, lots of time and enormous amounts of materiel.

However, by masking everyone under an avatar (or Gravatar), by linking disparate groups on public as well as private chat rooms, by enabling leaderless movements, by eliminating the need of huge logistics, by providing time critical information at never-seen-before speeds, by dispelling incorrect rumours and acting across multiple devices and countries, social media has helped ordinary people avoid coercive state mechanisms as well as strengthened and supplemented mass movements. Internet based social mobilisation and ground based canvassing are two sides of the same coin. They are not mutually exclusive but reinforce each other. With increasing internet penetration, improvement in communication infrastructure and rising awareness all across the world, social media is on its way to becoming the most powerful tool for social change in the future.

Endnotes

1. <http://udel.edu/~jdeiner/strufunc.html>. Gabriel Almond's theory of structural functionalism is a key concept in comparative politics. His ideas have been modified and adapted to the needs of this article.
2. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tunisian_Revolution.
3. <http://genius.com/Michael-hardt-declaration-take-up-the-baton-annotated#>. The author also took the help of various YouTube videos in postulating the view.
4. <http://nawaat.org/portail/>. Since the author was posted in the DRC during the time of writing of this article, he was helped by numerous Francophones in translating and understanding the contents of the website and some French words in particular such as Dégagé.
5. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death_of_Khaled_Mohamed_Saeed.
6. <https://www.facebook.com/elshaheed.co.uk>. Since this article is about the virility of social media, the author

has relied heavily on various social media platforms.

7. <https://freehaifa.wordpress.com/2013/07/06/egypt-down-with-the-coup-long-live-the-revolution/>.
8. <http://www.washington.edu/news/2011/09/12/new-study-quantifies-use-of-social-media-in-arab-spring/>
9. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Occupy_Wall_Street.
10. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/wp/2013/09/17/what-occupy-wall-street-meant-or-didnt-to-politics/>.
11. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2015_Congolese_protests. Since the author was posted in the vicinity of Goma, some of the information may reflect the author's experiences during the tumultuous days and may not form part of any website or magazine as a reference.
12. <https://www.telema.org>
13. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2015_Congolese_protests
14. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y4MnpzG5Sqc>.

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