When Virtual Reality Meets Realpolitik

Social Media Shaping the Arab Government-Citizen Relationship

by
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Abstract

Since most activists participating in the recent uprisings in Arab countries have been using social media to an unprecedented extent, public analyst and researchers have rushed to reflect on and explain the phenomena, often attributing a ‘change agency’ to social media as such. This exploratory research combines recent publications and use statistics with insights from blogs and focus group meetings in order to challenge our understanding of the role of social media and its usage in reshaping the government-citizen relationship: Are the traits of social media significant enough to single them out and discuss their specific impact on the government-citizen relationship? Are we well advised to attribute an ‘agency’ of social media in shaping politics and inducing political change? And in view of the actual use of social media: What are the options of containing emerging ‘destructive’ phenomena and ‘improving’ the government-citizen relationship? Answers are presented as lessons learned for future e-government research: (1) Social media enable a new political sphere for Arab citizens, however (2) social media as such do not act and therefore do not ‘create’ e.g. democracy, rather (3) social media need care taking to serve well as mediator among citizens and between citizens and government.

JEL classification

M15, Z18

Keywords

Social media, government-citizen relationship, Egypt, Arab countries, e-government research
1. Introduction

The term ‘Facebook revolution’ had emerged along with observations that most activists participating in the recent uprisings in Arab countries have been using social media to an extent as it was not witnessed before. Since then the role of social media usage in changing the political landscape is debated, especially in the context of the so-called Arab Spring, including many voices expressing optimistic opinions how social media could improve the relation of citizens among each other and towards their governance system. The technologies and applications summarized as social media share certain characteristics such as enabling social networking based on online profiles, sharing structured (e.g. “I like”) and unstructured information in manifold ways; it is fast, ubiquitous, and repelling control due to its decentralized usage and processing structures. However, are these traits significant enough to single out social media and discuss their specific impact on the government-citizen relationship? Are we well advised to attribute an ‘agency’ of social media in shaping politics and inducing political change? And as the masses take over and flood the social media also with indecency, hate messages, shit storms etc.: what are the possible options of containing emerging ‘destructive’ phenomena and ‘improving’ the government-citizen relationship?

This paper seeks to tentatively answer the above questions based on analyzing the phenomena related to social media usage in Arab countries and with a special focus on Egypt, which is one of the countries prominently linked to the ‘Arab Spring’ and which has the highest number of social media users in the region. As scientific analysis of social media usage in the Arab Spring is still scarce, this explorative research combines available literature and use statistics with insights from blogs and focus group meetings. The objective is not to rigorously claim empirical evidence, but rather to challenge our understanding of the role of social media and its usage in reshaping the government-citizen relationship, and to suggest some lessons we should learn for researching the impact of social media as well as for designing the technology and maybe shaping the use of social media in practice.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. The next section reviews the most relevant data regarding social media usage Arab countries and Egypt in particular. After that analysis examines perspectives of the ‘power’ of social media to impact politics, i.e. possible different categories of social media agency. Another analytical section focuses on the ‘uncontrolled’ social media and its advantages vs. disadvantages for the political debate online. Finally the future role of social media in shaping the government-citizen relationship is explored, before summarizing the lessons learned.

2. Usage of social media in Egypt and other Arab countries

The use of Internet and smart phones is a function of the economic situation, and the Arab countries are quite diverse in this respect. Not surprisingly, the Internet subscription has the highest penetration in the oil-rich Gulf states (50-80%), while population-rich countries such as Egypt (35%) and Algeria (14%) still suffer from a digital divide (data as of June 2012; source: internetworldstats.com).
For many years social media remained a 'Western' means of communication with relatively high numbers of users only to be found in North America and Europe. However, the Arabization of Web content and the launch of the Arabic Facebook in 2009 have dramatically changed the adoption of social media in the Middle East. Practically all Arab countries still witness enormous growth rates regarding Facebook usage: in November 2012, for example, Egypt had close to 12 million Facebook users (rank 21 worldwide; source: socialbakers.com) compared to less than one million just four years ago. Due to its population size Egypt has by far the most Facebook users in the region, however the penetration rates are much higher in other countries such as Qatar (87%), UAE (67%), Bahrain (53%), Lebanon (38%), Kuwait (32%), Tunisia (31%), and even Saudi Arabia (21%) compared to Egypt's 15% (source: socialbakers.com).

Twitter is similarly on the rise, but the absolute numbers are far less compared to Facebook. The number of active Twitter users in the whole Arab region was estimated just above two million at the end of June 2012, with only Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Egypt and UAE had reportedly more than 100,000 Twitter users (Dubai School of Government, 2012). Accordingly, only Kuwait showed a significant penetration rate of 13%, followed by Bahrain (5.3%), with all others with not more than around 3% or far less. In mid of 2012 the social network LinkedIn has more than 4 million members in the Arab region, and the Arab Social Media Report concludes: “Twitter penetration remains behind that of LinkedIn – except in Kuwait – indicating that job hunting and professional networking services through LinkedIn are more relevant in the region than the informational, social and political uses of social media that Twitter provides.” (Dubai School of Government, 2012, 22)

Other social media of outstanding relevance are YouTube and text messaging, followed by blogs and picture sharing tools (e.g. Flickr). For example, YouTube reportedly accounts for 167 million video views daily in the Arab region, with Saudi Arabia in the lead, followed by Egypt, Morocco and UAE (Dubai School of Government, 2012).

Social media users in Arab countries are comparatively young of age. Youth between the ages of 15 and 29 continue to make up around 70% of Facebook users in the Arab region, and just above one third of the Facebook users are female (Dubai School of Government, 2012). However, demographics have a significant impact on the Arab Spring. For example, at the time of the 2011 revolution one third of the Egyptian population was between 15 and 29 (source: UN Population Survey), and the suffering from massive unemployment and other social grievances especially in urban areas (greater Cairo, Alexandria) coincided with the highest adoption of social media compared to the rest of the country and to other age groups. Analyzing the data of media usage in Egypt, Lim (2012, 235) concludes: “[...] social media are the media of the urban youth.”

3. The power of social media to induce political change

At first sight it seems obvious that social media played a significant role in the uprisings of several Arab countries in 2011 and after. In that year the term 'Facebook revolution' had been coined and embraced by international media, and popular jokes tell the story of e.g. how former president Mubarak had being ousted by social media. Without doubt, most
activists participating in the recent uprisings in Arab countries have been using social media to an unprecedented extent – but does this indicate any kind of power of social media to induce political change?

Since then the role of social media usage in changing the political landscape has been debated, especially in the context of the so-called Arab Spring. The driving force is not only the urge to understand the witnessed phenomena, but the interest to draw conclusions about the potential of social media to improve the government-citizen relationship. In the literature we find arguments for different types of roles to be attributed to social media in that context:

• **Cause:** Of course, nobody would assume that social media itself can overthrow any regime. However, some authors present arguments that do indicate a causal relationship, for example: “The Arab spring had many causes. One of these sources was social media and its power to put a human face on oppression.” (Howard et al., 2011, 2) It refers to that only social media was able to share the emotions and breed the identity of the opposition forces as it was achieved through the famous Facebook group “We are all Khaled Said”, the story being supported by videos on YouTube and images shared on blogs (cf. Lim 2012). Another argument (Reardon 2012) is that social media was causal for involvement of new political forces. Instead of only few of the urban poor and the terrorists/guerrilla groups were involved, protesters now tended to be young, tech-savvy and included women. These groups could only have been mobilized through social media.

• **Catalyst:** In search for an appropriate analysis, Howard et al. (2011) summarize that social media “played a central role in shaping political debates in the Arab Spring” (p. 2) and “helped spread democratic ideas across international borders” (p. 3). And the second Arab Social Media Report (Dubai School of Government 2011) finds “empirical evidence suggesting that the growth of social media in the region and the shift in usage trends have played a critical role in mobilization, empowerment, shaping opinions, and influencing change” (p. 24). The role of social media is considered to be an important catalyst as it helped accelerating the revolution. This capability is mainly attributed social media being more socially embedded and difficult to control compared to the preexisting media. While such kind of analysis is frequently replicated, the unique contribution of social media still difficult to pinpoint. For example, Howard et al. (2011) state that “a spike in online revolutionary conversations often preceded major events on the ground” (p. 3). Certainly, there is data to support such kind of observation, but the sequence in time does not reveal anything about the causal or catalyst relationship.

• **Tool or Tactics:** Wael Abbas, a prominent Egyptian blogger, is quoted in a Social Capital blog with “Social media is a tool. But the revolution is a decision of many people.” (Socialcapital 2012) This blog finds social media being instrumental in mobilizing protesters, undermining a regime’s legitimacy, and/or increasing inter- /national exposure to a regime’s malpractice and summarizes: “Everyone agrees that social media add new arrows to the quivers of social activists.” Indeed most of the analyst and commenter put forward that social media have been decisively used in information sharing, opinion building, mobilization, and coordination of action.
However, it is not only the activist perspective that matters. Social media is also considered as being instrumental within a wider perspective of civic development, e.g. as a set of “long-term tools” that can strengthen civil society and the public sphere (Shirky 2011).

• **Just as any media:** The history of revolutions and all other uprisings shows that activists always utilize the media of their time. Accordingly, academic media analysts are often careful in attributing any unique influence to social media, for example: “Social media was not causal. It told people to go here, to do this, but the reason was social influence, not social networking.” (Kathleen Carley quoted in Reardon 2012).

Or: “Social media wasn't a catalyst. The events it describes were the catalyst.” (Huan Liu quoted in Reardon 2012).

The debate is not settled, however it is widely acknowledged that focusing on social media alone is not sufficient. First, social activists and influencers tend to act across all media, whatever fits best to the circumstances at hand. And second, the integration across media itself adds new potentials. For example, in order to overcome the social media shutdown during Egyptian Revolution, many had used the “Speak-To-Tweet” service powered by Google and Twitter which allowed posting a ‘tweet’ on Twitter by calling a designated international phone number and leaving a voice message. Another example is how amateur videos uploaded on YouTube are often re-transmitted by TV channels, especially when professional journalist cannot access the facts on the ground (e.g. videos posted by the Syrian opposition).

Therefore, a direct relationship of causality between social media and political change cannot be assumed. Social media may have its contribution; however this always depends on the circumstances and the historical context (Dahdal 2012). As El-Nawawy and Khamis (2012) conclude: “There needs to be a complex network of events, forces, and people in order for social media to be effective in political change.” Accordingly, the remainder of this article seeks to understand the role of social media in re-forming the government-citizen relationship in Egypt and the region.

4. Social media out of control

Social media are different to preexisting media types as they support not only content consumption but also content provision through massively decentralized usage. Information flows and related data transmission and processing depend on Internet connectivity and dedicated servers usually outside the Arab region; hence any government in the region cannot force anything on social media usage unless by cutting off Internet or applying extensive filtering.

The first occasion within the Arab region when social media was attributed a significant influence beyond the control of the regime in power was during the uprising in Iran for several months in 2009 (cf. e.g. Morozov 2009, Sohrabi-Haghighat 2011, El-Nawawy and Khamis 2012). While, for example, Twitter proved being useful to pass by censorship, the circumstances in the social movement itself (such as lack of strategy, organization, and mobilization potential) were not in favor to help the ‘Twitter-powered’ protests achieving a break-through. And the regime adapted swiftly in applying countermeasures such as
deploying false messages into the network, cracking down on Twitter account owners and campaigning against social media usage based on threatening their users. In order to contain the uprising the Iranian government tried to marginalize the social media users as non-religious, sending out the message to citizens: when using social media you are the denying the national consensus and thus destroying the government-citizen relationship.

Meanwhile the numbers of social media users in Arab countries are in the millions, thus simple marginalization cannot succeed any more. While all political stakeholders in the region are now struggling to embrace social media for their purposes, we find increasingly reports about malpractices. For example, in Iraq it has become popular to read online stories about corruption among government officials as well as online news reports with free access to breaking stories; however this comes along with several severe problems as Nasrawi (2012) reports: “Dozens of such websites describe themselves as digital news outlets and have no easily identifiable ownership. It is difficult to know who is behind the sites […] “faked stories were apparently posted in order to frustrate Al-Maliki's opponents by claiming that Washington was standing firm behind the Iraqi prime minister. […]” In their war of words, the sites usually employ anonymous abuse, attributing controversial news to unnamed sources. […] “Many suspect that some of these media outlets have been involved in dirty political campaigns.” And so forth.

Focus group meetings1 about use of social media in the political debate in Egypt confirmed that social media are a suitable source for forming opinions, attracting more and more citizens to join (“even ‘dinosaurs’ now appear on Facebook”). Pitfalls include misinterpreting certain online indications (e.g. the “I like” button in Facebook mostly reflects information interest but not opinion support) and being deceived by online predictions (e.g. regarding election outcomes) that turn out to not accurate. Meeting attendees also confirmed the malpractice of social media: rumors and bad language increase, spreading hate messages is getting viral, agents with unknown agenda spark the debate. In result, radical opinions take over the debate while moderate users tend to turn away.

Since especially in the Arab region social media is now attributed power which everyone can seize, the struggle for social media domination is in full swing, not only in the political sphere but even more in the consumer market (Hall 2012) as well as in online debates about social issues (e.g. religious matters). However, the absence of any rules and control often leads to more or less scrupulous practices from pretending false identities and sharing fabricated opinions, spreading rumors and disseminating false information, sending hate messages and igniting flame wars – all of this often enough based on an agenda which is not owned by the users themselves but by their money source. Apparently, the ‘freedom’ of the social media does not lead automatically to a culture of using social media which promotes multifaceted discussion based on tolerance and willingness to embrace new thoughts; instead in-group thinking prevails and sectarianism is on the rise (Haque 2012). If this analysis overrides the little good news of social media supporting the overthrow of oppressing regimes in the Arab region, then we need to reconsider the role of social media shaping the government-citizen relationship.

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1 Conducted by the author in June and November 2012, each with almost the same group of about ten academic members of an Egyptian university.
5. Social Media Shaping the Arab Government-Citizen Relationship

Finding nowadays practically all Egyptian ministries being active on Facebook, and remembering the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) being keen on reaching out to citizens after the ousting of former president Mubarak, are clear indicators that the government in Egypt (as similarly in other Arab countries) accepts social media as tool to relate to their citizens. Political actors from all strands study carefully e.g. Obama's online campaign in order to learn from and form their own social media strategies. And with citizens massively using these tools and following up government activities online, the re-shaping of the Arab government-citizen relationship in relation to social media is already underway. However, so far there is little evidence to where this reshaping will lead and what the driving forces on this way are.

The Arab Social Media Report (Dubai School of Government 2012, pp. 3-4) published results regarding the influence of social media on societal and cultural change in the Arab World. The survey was conducted between March and May 2012 and received almost 5000 responses from eight Arab countries, with the target demographic mirroring the demographic makeup of each country. For example, support for the statement “Social media played a role in empowering me to influence change in my community/country” ranged between about one third and one half in the various countries, and between 47 and 65% of respondents stated that they are “more open to tolerating different points of view.” Looking at the half-full glass, this could be good news, but at the same time it indicates also that skepticism and in-group thinking strongly prevail.

The same survey found that respondents in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE “strongly concur that their connection with, understanding of, and contribution to their societies and fellow citizens has been facilitated and enhanced through the use of social media” (measured agreement between 71 and 92%), but no survey data was collected that could shed light on the government-citizen relationship. And asking about reinforcing identity within the networked virtual communities of the eight Arab countries, the survey found that the 'national identity' was reinforced strongest (66-85%), feeling like a 'global citizen' came second (69-80%), and reinforcing 'religious identity' was the relatively lowest ranking (60-80%). The report concludes somehow optimistically “that social media may – for now – have the ability to influence a more globalized society while de-emphasizing religious differences.” (ibid, p. 4)

The use of social media can also be seen as part of a development towards e-participation and/or open government. For example, in Egypt the government has build sufficient capacity for providing citizen information services, and according to an OECD report (in which Egypt is the only Arab country mentioned; OECD 2010) the Ministry of State for Administrative Development (MSAD) is basically committed to developing a more open and transparent government. Equal access to online information and services is still a major problem as many Egyptians have only limited or no Internet access (“digital divide”). However, while preparing for open government it is essential to understand: (a) what is an appropriate approach to analyze the requirements for dissemination of governmental data and information, and (b) how can these requirements be translated into
adequate technical support for computer-based communication channels within the given information infrastructure? These questions were the driver for conducting two focus group meetings with in total more than twenty young Egyptian citizens (conducted in May 2011 with the help of an Egyptian university student), discussing citizen informational needs and public participation in information exchange. The findings can be summarized as follows (Klischewski 2012):

- Information regarding full transparency and stakeholder accountability is a top priority objective for all Egyptian citizens.
- Citizens highly appreciate the government’s usage of social media for information sharing.
- Citizens seek information not only in retrospect but also about governmental actions in terms of detailed plans, including time frames and milestones, supplemented by periodical progress reports.
- Citizens expect that the information is easy to find and easy to understand; if matters are complex, then understanding should be supported by explanations, mediators, and/or additional tools.
- Citizens are willing to interact with the government, calling for more options to do so; however, the overall low quality of online discussion is an impediment; to this end online polls and surveys might be preferable for obtaining citizen feedback.

In Egypt, at least MSAD is committed to implementing open government principles. However, the mandate from the whole government to embark on this journey is still missing, the action plan to reach out to citizens beyond the current practice is still vague, and with the political system still under transition [at the time of writing] it remains to be seen when and how social media may contribute as a mutually accepted instrument to improve the government-citizen relationship. The findings from this case underline that using online communication channels as such is not the key; rather it needs the management of the context of government-citizen communication and the establishment of a common ground for information sharing in order to improve the relationship between government and citizens.

6. Lessons learned

This paper set out to tentatively answer some questions related to social media usage in Arab countries and with a special focus on Egypt, which is one of the countries prominently linked to the ‘Arab Spring’ and which has the highest number of social media users in the region. The available evidence so far suggests that the role of social media in reshaping the government-citizen relationship is manifold, thus challenging our hopes for social media being a transmitter of democracy and/or any other kind of healthy political practice. Approaches to theorizing the re-shaping of the Arab government-citizen relationship in relation to social media are still lacking, however, developing a framework for such discussion is beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, the insights of the above exploration are summarized as ‘lessons’ we might be advised to learn before further
researching the impact of social media, designing social media applications, and maybe shaping the use of social media in practice, especially in the Arab region:

1. **Social media enable a new political sphere for Arab citizens**: their massive use establishes uncontrolled virtual spaces of interaction, opinion building and mobilization, attracting millions of citizens (even new user groups) to participate freely in public debates.

2. **Social media do not act**: there is no evidence for a direct relationship of causality between social media and political change, e.g. no leverage to democracy. The specific impact of social media on the government-citizen relationship always depends on the social actors' strategies and behaviors as well as on the context of social media usage and the state of realpolitik. Hence we are well advised to attribute an ‘agency’ in shaping politics and inducing political change only to social actors but not to social media as such.

3. **Social media need care taking to function well as mediators among citizens and between citizens and government**: as social media are massively adopted in the Arab region, their channels become also flooded with indecency and offensive communication, thus alienating moderate users who are not willing nor able to put up with this. Just as in any other social sphere free of hierarchy and control, the in-built anarchy of social media requires a rather high level of self-discipline on the side of the users to mutually enjoy such freedom. As this can only be an outcome of a long collective learning process, alternatively social and technical mechanisms of care taking should be developed, discussed and implemented.

Research in e-government should indeed focus more on the use of social media in re-shaping the government-citizen relationship. However, in order to understand more about phenomena and to derive guidelines for design and use, the above ‘lessons learned’ may contribute to careful conceptualization and theory building while avoiding to jump to early conclusions – although the insights might not always match what we would hope to learn.

7. **Acknowledgment**

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8. **References**


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