Byte Is Mightier Than The Sword: Egypt Revolution Of 2011

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ABSTRACT

The concept of online activism is as old as human history. The current "online" technology has simply evolved from the more traditional media known to human experience. It has transcended into an instant, digitized and easily accessible form. Historical facts indicate that the very first planned community action took place in the mid-12th century BC by the Egyptian artisans who carved and painted in the royal tombs and demanded proper pay. On the third day, the royal architects from the court of Pharaoh Rameses, III caved in and gave the workers what they demanded. More than 3,000 years later, that strategy still works. Technology empowered the Arab people to communicate, organize, implement, broadcast, and propel the revolution in many ways never thought to be possible. This is an amazing story.

Keywords: Egypt Revolution; Revolutions; Facebook; Social Media

INTRODUCTION: ARAB SPRING AND KEY ROLE PLAYED BY THE MEDIA

*I*nternet and mobile technology, coupled with social media tools like Twitter and Facebook, have changed the approach to organizing community. It altered topology of the elements involved by connecting activists and leaders with ordinary citizens through an online medium, thereby creating and expanding the network of people, resulting into a network density (Cottle, 2011).

Egypt Revolution took a three-dimensional approach. The Facebook page that was created in honor of Khalid Said, a young man who was brutally beaten and killed by the Egyptian police, was a key focal point around which 470,000 fans and supporters organized their dissidence. This was the first vertical spike. Due to its vast outreach attribute, social media helped expand the revolution to the different sections of society, creating a horizontal effect. Eventually the ranks of Egyptians in Tahrir Square expanded from young, well-educated students to doctors, lawyers, judges, women, and state TV personnel. The compounding effect is seen in the way which social media helped sustain and spread the revolution tide from one region to another – from Tunisia to Egypt to Syria to Iran to Algeria and even all the way to China (Mainwaring, 2011)
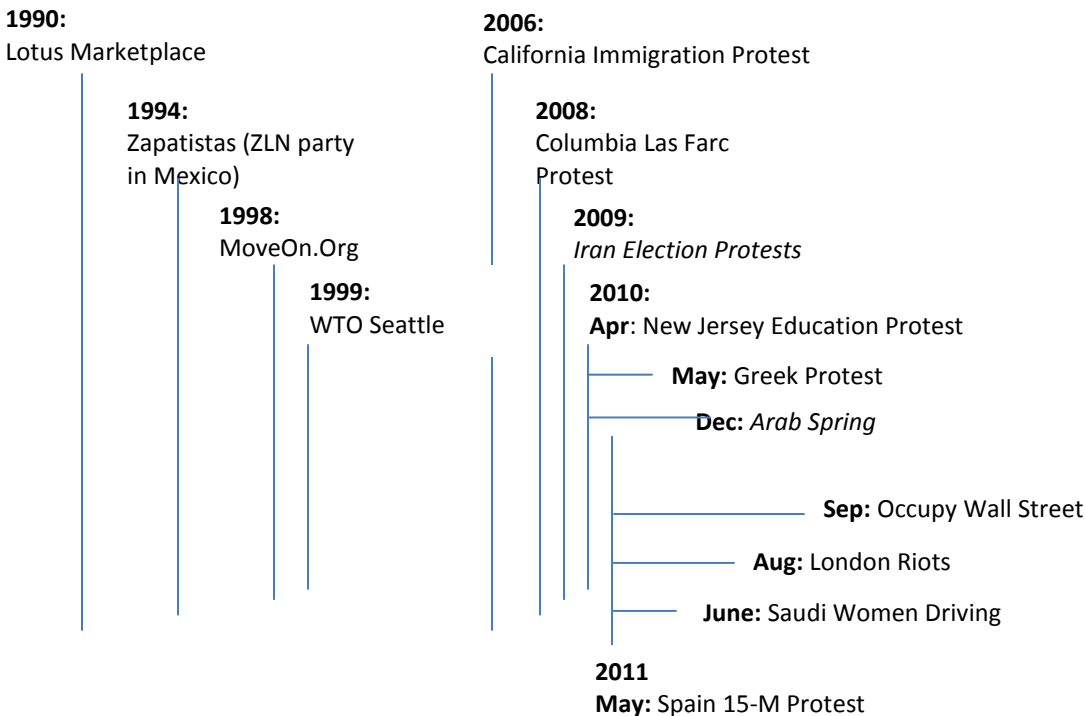
HISTORY, FRAMEWORK, TOOLS AND ARAB REVOLUTION

Figure 1 shows the timeline of some major online activism in recent times (Peters, 2011).

SOCIAL MEDIA FRAMEWORK AND ASSOCIATED TECHNOLOGIES

The type of functions provided by Social Media can be categorized into four major functions: 1) communication, 2) collaboration, 3) developing new content, and 4) organizing collective agents (Fine, 2006).

Wikipedia: Collaboration for Collective Action Tool – Wikipedia is the digital reservoir of information. It contains about 18 million articles in multiple languages, all created through collaboration of independent users. It is like the open source for information and its strength lies in the fact that people can collaborate. This tool allowed the Egyptian revolutionist to aggregate opinion on a common platform and could easily be accessed by millions, raising awareness and building consensus worldwide.

1990:
Lotus Marketplace

1994:
Zapatistas (ZLN party
in Mexico)

1998:
MoveOn.Org

1999:
WTO Seattle

2006:
California Immigration Protest

2008:
Columbia Las Farc
Protest

2009:
Iran Election Protests

2010:
Apr: New Jersey Education Protest

May: Greek Protest

Dec: *Arab Spring*

Sep: Occupy Wall Street

Aug: London Riots

June: Saudi Women Driving

2011
May: Spain 15-M Protest

Figure 1

Video Sharing Sites: Video Journalism – Recording video footage and uploading to share played a pivotal role. People could see what was going on in real time.

Blogs/Digital Newspapers and Magazine – Blog readers can choose their own experts who could be someone in their community, a friend, or a person living anywhere in the world who is blogging about their personal opinions and experiences. Blogs and online reports have brought about an interesting paradigm shift in the arena of news reporting. Bloggers don't have to wait for the news to be published or telecasted on prime time, they blog it as and when it happens.

Social Networking Site: Engagement Tool – Social networking sites, like Facebook and Twitter, are based upon the information trust model in a digital friend circle. They are the modern engagement tool in a digital village. A friend's Facebook post or a Twitter tweet has a ripple effect in the social media pond as it gets viewed by friends of friends and gets re-tweeted or re-posted by friends; the word spreads like a wildfire. For most people participating in the Arab Spring, this was a very important aspect to socialize and interact (Shah & Sardar, 2011).

EGYPT REVOLUTION 101 – HOW IT ALL HAPPENED

It was an Egyptian youth that understood the importance of social media and knew how to harness its power. This technically savvy, hardworking, very creative and problem-solving generation organized themselves to take what rightfully belongs to them, without even a singular leader taking the mantle (Shah & Sardar, 2011; Campbell, 2011).

Activists set up Facebook sites and posted information, videos and questions that created buzz which gained attention from people all around the world, not just within Egypt. The "We are all Khalid Said" Facebook page received over 11,000 followers and was used for rallying Egyptians to participate in the January 25, 2011, protest. Tech savvy Egyptian youth used the TOR project – a hacker tool for hiding identity on the web - since this network is used by spy agencies around the globe and it is next to impossible for the Egyptian police to break it

(Shah & Sardar, 2011). They used social media to create mass involvement and held secret in-person meetings to finalize the details of the rally before making it public. About 85,000 people signed up to attend the historic protest in Egypt on January 25th (Campbell, 2011). Egyptian activists reached out to Facebook's director of policy for Europe who ensured that the key pages related to the Egyptian Revolution were placed in special protection from hacking or disabling (Shah & Sardar, 2011).

On the day of protest, several key Tweeters took over the network with two key purposes: 1) to alert the protestors to avoid the police checkpoints and 2) to misdirect the police that were eavesdropping the tweets. Using cell phones, Google maps, and GPS programs, alternate routes were being tweeted to the protestors to make their way to Tahrir Square. People positioned themselves at several locations to monitor police movement and would alert the demonstrators via twitter. They tweeted messages to misdirect the police (Campbell, 2011).

Support From Outside Of Egypt And Emergence Of New Technologies

The Facebook page that became the symbol of revolution – "We are all Khaled Said" - was started anonymously by Wael Ghonim (Google Executive based in Egypt). The page was brought down following a complaint as it violated Facebook's policy on creating accounts using pseudonyms. An Egyptian immigrant in the U.S. came forward and supplied her Facebook account to Ghonim to re-instate the account. Re-instating the page using a U.S.-based account added a second layer of security (Shah & Sardar, 2011). By day 3 of the revolution, Mubraka's regime decided to shut off electricity, water, and all mobile phone networks. All major internet service providers and web addresses inside Egypt ceased to exist. Demonstrators used landlines, radios, and even fax machines to inform those outside Egypt who took this information and tweeted them for all to see. Google and Twitter teamed up to create a service "Speak to Tweet**"** to help out with this situation (Campbell, 2011).

A man from Silicon Valley was working with the activist in Egypt and tweeting their every move to keep communication open between Egypt and rest of the world. When the Egyptian government flat-lined the internet and cellular network, this activist set the wheels into motion for Project OpenMesh which, until then, was just a concept. The basic idea behind OpenMesh is to create a secondary wireless network that is independent of regional mobile or internet service. Utilizing wifi-enabled devices, like computers, iphones, and other mobile devices, creates a network where each connected node acts as an independent router or smart device. With the help from crowdsource volunteers, within a few hours, the OpenMesh Project was live. Several companies in the U.S. and Canada stepped up to help provide technical expertise and donate patents.

Hackers from all over the world joined forces to extend their support to the protestors in Egypt. An anonymous hacker group launched a DDos (Distributed denial-of-service) attack by bombarding official websites in Egypt, mainly targeting the Egyptian Ministry of Communication and Information Technology. Another group of attackers hacked into and shut down the NDP party and Interior Ministry (police forces) website. The hackers also found and circulated a copy of Mubarak's bank statement from Barclay Bank showing $7.5 billion in his personal account with a photo of the statement going global within minutes.

CONCLUSION

This is just the beginning. What the people of Egypt managed to achieve in the 18 days of revolution is no ordinary achievement. It was a leaderless revolution fueled by social media that transcended national boundaries, religion, and economic class, and helped overthrow a 30-year old repressive regime. The Egyptian revolution has had a ripple effect worldwide. The civil war in Libya, uprising in China (Jasmine Revolution), and Occupy Wall Street in the U.S. have sprouted up. The U.S. wants ambassadors to expand the use of Twitter and Facebook. Every diplomat employed at the U.S. foreign-service institute is required to receive training in social media.

The powerful global exchange, using social media to create a political and social change in Egypt, can very well be replicated to other disciplines. Scientists and humanists can create a globalized marketplace for ideas. Like-minded people across the globe can build enterprising teams resulting in collaborative entrepreneurship. Great social activists and reformers, like Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., strongly believed that non-violent resistance is the most potent weapon available to oppress people in their struggle for justice and human dignity. The

Arab Spring proved that again. Regardless of one's personal opinion, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and other such social media tools will continue to play a pivotal role in future social changes for the better.

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