What the Arab Spring Tells Us About the Future of Social Media in Revolutionary Movements

By Richard A. Lindsey

Introduction

The Arab Spring spawned a series of revolutionary movements that are unique in that they utilized social media as an effective means to spread information and promote insurgent agendas. This revelation deserves consideration in all future discussions of revolutions and the concepts of ideology, narrative, momentum and unifying motivations. The Arab Spring uprisings are the first collective movements of their kind in the Middle East after the internet and social media revolutions of the late 20th/early 21st centuries, and tactics, techniques and procedures utilized by resistance populations during the Arab Spring may affect future movements. The factors of social media affecting public opinion and international support, rapid dissemination of news, widespread messaging, and the ability of the individual to spread information globally are relatively new phenomena during revolutions. Likewise, regimes and counter-insurgents can implement social media to meet their own agendas in never before seen ways. That the future of revolutionary movements in globalized societies will involve social media is assured, but the degree to which it will is yet to be determined.

Phases of Insurgency

Before discussing how social media affected the Arab Spring and will affect future revolutionary movements, first it is important to identify how revolutions are phased. There comes a point in any insurgency where it must move beyond the reach of social media, and tangible gains must be made on the ground – positions occupied, personalities deposed, systems replaced, logistics realized, and governments overthrown. Messaging, information, ideology and narrative are only an aspect of a successful insurgency, albeit a truly necessary aspect.

U.S. Army Special Forces doctrine identifies three phases of insurgenies: the Latent/Incipient Phase, followed by Guerrilla Warfare, and finally a War of Movement.[i] Drawn from the writings of Mao Tse-Tung, this doctrine admits that although "successful insurgenies pass through common phases of development…not all insurgenies experience every phase…[and] the same insurgent movement may be in different phases in separate [locations]."[ii] The first phase, Latent or Incipient, offers the greatest opportunities for social media as an organizing tool and informational vehicle. During this phase, leadership or organizers of resistance movements must recruit, spread ideology, establish cellular
intelligence networks, and develop sources for external support. Social media offers a conduit for communication, and facilitates these activities. Social media cannot conduct the attacks and sabotage, establish the administrations and organizations, or advance the social and economic development that is crucial to the latter phases of an insurgency. As Barrie Axford says in "Talk About a Social Revolution: Social Media and the MENA Uprisings," “[t]he digital public sphere, if such it is, may increase the number and range of participants but, in terms of outcomes, it could still be argued that bombs, guns, and Apache attack helicopters tip insurrections and win revolutions.”

Nevertheless, the mobilization of ideas and people is a consistent requirement throughout, and clandestine communication can be enhanced with social media. As has been seen in Syria, social media offers a medium for obtaining international sympathy and support for a cause. Propaganda, one of the rebels' greatest tools, is made easier and more efficient by technology. Furthermore, recruiting new insurgents, traditionally one of the more difficult tasks of an insurgency, is made much easier by social media. As Steven Metz observes in “The Internet, New Media, and the Evolution of Insurgency,” it “takes a special person to become an insurgent, to undertake the personal danger and hardship it entails…[and] finding those rare people was difficult…[but] the Internet and new media greatly increase the ability of insurgents to find the type of recruits they are seeking.”

With the creativity of its users as its major limitation, social media will likely play a larger role in future revolutionary movements for both insurgents and counterinsurgents alike.

Information as a Weapon

"If you want to liberate [a people], give them the Internet.” - Wael Ghonim, Egyptian Activist

The difference between an insurgent, revolutionary, disenfranchised citizen, or terrorist is simply a matter of perspective. Bashar al-Assad would like the world to see the Syrian rebels as terrorists. They would like the world to see al-Assad's regime as oppressive, criminal and inhumane. Whereas the Syrian regime attempted to control traditional media and frame its message through press conferences, rebels used YouTube and social media to provide real-time footage of the conflict, portraying the regime in a negative light. Axford notes that "[t]he 'spin' on images relayed to the outside world by amateur clips sent via cell phone or posted on Facebook became that of innocent civilians gunned down by marauding troops, not desperate times for the forces of law and order." Amateur video showed rebels across the region the location of Syrian Army Republican Guard convoys, air assets and checkpoints. The process of information collection and processing known to the U.S. military as Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield, which is normally conducted by thorough research and includes the mapping of threat composition and disposition, was achieved for the rebels via compiling scores of amateur videos uploaded by hand-held devices. It is this enriched content that makes YouTube one of the most explosive forms of social media, as there is a vast difference in sometime saying what is happening via Twitter or telling you how they feel about it via Facebook and them actually showing you via video. In Syria, disabling the cell network to counter this reality would only play into the rebels hands, but it was this cell network that was being used so effectively against the regime. Thus is the conundrum that social media places into the hands of oppressive or authoritarian regimes. Information has always been a weapon, but now its accessibility and usability is reaching into never before seen realms.

In 2012, Alex Choudhary and others compiled hundreds of thousands of tweets concerning Egypt during its 2011 revolution to analyze what "trended," why it trended, and what the pulse of the nation was. They noted that, overall, "[t]he discussion was marked by strong negative sentiment less cohesive than for other
types of Twitter topics," but that inspirational stories (human interest) constituted over 15% of tweets and general news covered up to 65%. An overall picture of the Twitter scene in Egypt shows that (a) the population was disenfranchised, (b) they were thirsty for updates on events, and (c) they still cared about personal-level stories during the revolution. Negative tweets about Mubarak's government, tweets about personal hardship, and tweets about events affecting each dominated Egypt in 2011. Over 5 million Egyptians were on Facebook at the start of the revolution, and the page "We Are All Khaled Said" is credited with aiding youth movements in organizing and facilitating messaging and outreach to other populations, including the 18-day occupation of Tahrir Square. Statistically, according to Emma Hall, Facebook users in Egypt rose from 450,000 to 3 million in the six months following the revolution, and now stand at 5 million. In Egypt, the role social media played in the most recent revolution may be dwarfed by the role it plays in the next one, as the population appears to be embracing digital technology.

Information can take many weaponized forms, but for the revolutionary simply spreading the occurrence of true events may be advantageous. In both Syria and Egypt, government forces activities directed at population and resources control measures (PRCM) played into revolutionary hands and legitimized the narrative and ideology of the partisans, insurgents, opposition and rebels of those nations. The modern, globalized world is also information-starved, and social media has adapted to this reality. In 2009, Twitter changed its prompt from “what are you doing?” to “what’s happening?” and, as Blake Hounshell says, “[o]ne of the fastest ways to tell whether someone's not worth following is if they're still answering that first question.”

Another weaponized form of information is propaganda, which stands counter to real-time events in that propaganda may or may not be true. Technology, globalization and social media have altered the propaganda landscape permanently. Dennis Murphy and James White note that:

The historical use of information as power was primarily limited to nation-states. Today a blogger can impact an election, an Internet posting can recruit a terrorist, and an audiotape can incite fear in the strongest of nation-states, all with little capital investment and certainly without the baggage of bureaucratic rules, national values (truthful messaging), or oversight.

What social media has done, or at least helped, is to weaponize information down to the individual level. Whether social media facilitates information as a weapon in the form of truth or propaganda for the revolutionary, or terrorist, again is subject to a combination of perspective and reality. What is not up for debate is the access to the world that social media has provided to the individual, and vice versa.

Limitations of Social Media in Insurgencies

“More than a million people have joined a Facebook page of the Save Darfur Coalition, but few among them have taken any additional action to help those in Sudan.” Tweeting Toward Freedom, Wilson Quarterly

As discussed before, social media cannot replace the physical actions required for successful revolutions, especially in the latter Guerrilla Warfare and War of Movement phases where social institutions require decisive alterations, violence may be necessary, and job titles must change. Daniel Schorr puts it well in his article “Iran’s Twitter Revolution,” saying “[p]erhaps one should not exaggerate the effects of the
cyberspace battle in Iran…[t]he beleaguered regime still has the instruments of repression, the guns and the truncheons.”[xiii] Furthermore, social media holds minimal utility during the transition phase of an insurgency into a government. As Jon Alterman notes, “[s]ocial media are not evidently helpful in facilitating political bargaining in constitution-writing processes, and social media have only played a limited role in helping form new political parties.”[xiv]

But, social media also has its limitations in the first phases of social movements and revolutions, through a phenomenon Malcolm Gladwell calls “weak ties,” or in other words, the kind of ties that individuals share via social media, as opposed to strong ties characteristic of personal relationships.[xv] Gladwell proposes that weak ties do not lead to high-risk activism, and offers the Civil Rights Movement as an example, saying that activists during the Civil Rights Movement were not participating due to shared ideology, but instead due to a personal connection to the movement, through a friend or number of friends.[xvi] On the other hand, Gladwell notes, “Facebook activism succeeds not by motivating people to make a real sacrifice but by motivating them to do the things that people do when they are not motivated enough to make a real sacrifice,” such as donate an average of 9 cents per person to the Save Darfur campaign.[xvii]

This argument offers an interesting counter to the social media proponents – the more high-risk a revolution becomes, the less useful social media will be. For example, Facebook may be enough to sway a representative to vote a particular way on an issue, but not enough to force that representative to resign. Assuming personal risk will first require the prerequisite of a personal investment of some sort, and traditional relationships are the most efficient mechanism through which these ties are realized.

Another limitation of social media, along the same lines, is a gap in the level of participation of social media users. One million likes on a Facebook page does not translate into one million mobilized volunteers, or even one million people who agree with the cause of the host. As Blake Hounshell notes, “I’ve also been tweeting about the Arab revolutions, pretty much day and night. Does that make me a revolutionary? Not at all. Despite all the sweeping talk about it, Twitter isn’t the maker of political revolutions.”[xviii] While the Tahrir Square occupation was made possible by Facebook, how many users liked the page or indicated they would be there and then did not show up? Such data may not be possible to calculate, but the gaps between weak ties and high-risk activism and the level of participation in a social movement do exist, and they are a weakness to social media’s application in support of an insurgency.

Another limitation of social media in insurgencies is the dynamic of leadership and the internal heading of an insurgency, revolution or social movement. As Metz notes, “[t]he early stages of most insurgencies involve as great an internal struggle as an external one.”[xxii] Thus, what appears to be a strength of social
media, the involvement of a multitude of users at the individual level, also presents quite the conundrum – who is in charge? When over 100,000 people of Facebook organize a march into Tahrir Square, what is the overarching theme of the march, is the message unified, what is the most crucial goal that must be accomplished, and how can that march be parlayed into a successful revolutionary act? In societies where internet usage is low, the users are likely to be the natural leaders in that society, or what James DeFronzo calls the “dissident elite.”[xxiii] This may mitigate this limitation to some extent. But, leaderless organization at the lowest levels creates mass movements instead of focused movements, limiting gains of revolutionary activities and providing regimes with more response options and potentially less disastrous consequences. For example, a mass protest may be settled with government concessions, provided that the regime does not retaliate on protestors. Such an event would play into the hands of the regime, which would gain legitimacy in the minds of its constituents – exactly what the revolutionary does not want to happen. At no point during the so-called “Million Man March” in 1995 was the United States government in danger of losing control of its status, despite a mass number of individuals participating in public discourse.

Conclusion

The Arab Spring ushered in a new age in revolutionary movements, as it was the first string of such movements to incorporate social media in achieving its goals. Insurgencies require development through phases to be successful, and by design social media offers more benefits to insurgencies during the initial phases via facilitation of recruiting, mobilization and informational warfare. Enriched content, such as YouTube, is likely to be the most valuable form of social media to the insurgent in the future, and such content may aid insurgents in generating the international support necessary for their cause to succeed. In societies where social media usage is higher than in the Middle East, different benefits of user-generated content and social networking tools may present themselves.

However, social media relies on “weak links,” and historically these weak links do not manifest themselves into high-risk activism. Social media alone does not require, or even encourage, useful involvement in an insurgency or result in any tangible efficacy of insurgent-oriented activities. Social media can only facilitate, not create, the leadership that is necessary for insurgencies to survive and succeed. Ground-level, person-to-person organizing and mobilization, with some level of personal investment being necessary, is still the key contributor to the successful mobilization of insurgent populations. It is also difficult to separate the useful participants of an insurgency from the bystanders via social media alone. As the world continues to globalize and social media usage continues to increase, insurgencies may find new uses for it throughout each of the phases. But, for the time being, the Arab Spring indicates that the environment in which the uprisings occurred affected the outcome of the revolutions more so than social media did.

References


White Canvas Group, “Strategic Seminar in Social Media.” June 11, 2013, Fort Campbell, KY.

End Notes


[ii] Ibid. Chapter 2-19.


[xvi] Ibid.

[xvii] Ibid.


[xx] Ibid.


Richard A. Lindsey is an Army Special Forces Warrant Officer currently assigned to 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne). He holds a MA in Military Studies from American Military University and a BA in History from Texas A&M University. He has deployed multiple times to the USCENTCOM Area of Responsibility.


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