Was the ‘Arab Spring’ a ‘Facebook revolution’? Or were social media mere tools used by revolutionaries like others before? What role did the internet play in the Arab uprisings? And beyond that: what impact did these new forms of communication have in the Arab mediascape and in society more generally? In 2011, the importance of social media was heavily and controversially debated in media and academia. To gain insight into how users themselves view the role of social media in the recent events, I did fieldwork in Egypt in autumn 2011 and spring 2012. Interviews and participant observation suggest that 1) while the importance of Facebook and Twitter may have been exaggerated in early reporting, social media did play a key role in mobilising and organising people; 2) the weight of social media in the flow of information is growing; 3) social media’s impact on socialisation may be at least as important in the long run as the immediate political role they play.

A Facebook revolution?

In spring 2011, Western media were quick to label the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt “Twitter revolution” and “Facebook revolution”. These new media, along with YouTube, were highly visible and easily accessible to Western observers and allowed them to follow events almost in ‘real time’. The fact that Egyptian authorities chose to block internet services after a few days of demonstrations only seemed to confirm the importance of the net in the uprising. These first impressions were, however, rebuked by none other than Evgeny Morozov who in 2009 had been the first to coin the term “Twitter revolution” (in the context of the Moldovan civil unrest). He subsequently came to the conclusion that the role of Twitter, in Moldova as well as in Iran later that year and also in the Arab Spring, had been much exaggerated and that socio-economic and political conditions were more important factors than the media in triggering these uprisings. Media, Morozov maintains, are just a tool that can be used in a variety of ways, for the good as well as for the bad; and in his The Net Delusion he warns that regimes around the world are in fact quickly learning to use these tools for supervision and repression. Those who argue that media are ‘just tools’ ignore, however, that tools have distinguishing properties that enable their users to do things that are less easily accomplished without these tools (and conversely, their limitations may constrain action in certain ways). So while acknowledging that it was social, economic, and political factors that were the root causes of the ‘Arab revolutions’ (as they are mostly referred to in Arabic), it is nevertheless important to inquire what the tools used by the revolutionaries made possible, and what would not have been possible without them.

How do people in Egypt view the role of social media in the revolution? From interviews and participant observation in autumn 2011 and spring 2012, the following picture emerges:

By Albrecht Hofheinz, University of Oslo

Albrecht Hofheinz is an Associate Professor in Arabic at the University of Oslo. He has his PhD from the University of Bergen, and his research interests are the use of internet in the Arab world, Muslim reform movements and particularly long-term processes the three last centuries and Islam in Africa.
Some activists presented an enthusiastic view of the importance of the new media. The most prominent among them is Wael Ghonim, administrator of the Facebook group “Ihna kulfinna Khalid Said/ We are all Khaled Said” (est. June 2010). In his book Revolution 2.0, he conveys the impression that the revolution was almost single-handedly created and managed via his Facebook group and associated actors. This expression conveyed a more reserved attitude, emphasising that the revolution emerged out of widespread frustration about police brutality and the blocked economic and political situation. Some of the older ones were dismissive of what they regarded as ‘clicktivism’: much activity on the social media, they argued, remained limited to the media themselves. This reflects a frustration not uncommon among leftists in Egypt who tend to attribute the popularity of Islamist movements to their long-standing social and political work on the streets and in the poorer neighbourhoods. Leftists, on the other hand, accused each other of being more comfortable in their own debating circles.

Many among the rank-and-file, on the other hand, attributed a more decisive role to Facebook in the revolution, claiming that without it, the revolution wouldn’t have taken place the way it did. Three main reasons were given for that:

1. ‘I’m not alone’: While everyone was upset about police brutality and widespread corruption, Facebook made users realise that hundreds of thousands of others shared these sentiments and were willing to publicly express them.

2. Social media allowed people to mobilise, network, and organise more effectively than through face-to-face, telephone, SMS, or print communication (but in addition to, not instead of, these other media).

3. Like no other medium before, the structure of Facebook made it easy to spread in information and opinion beyond the circles of those already engaged in political debates. ‘Likes’ from friends played a big role in this, plus the fact that during the revolution, popular soccer, music and jokes groups were taken over by politicians.

The most concise description of these dynamics was provided to me by a young man in this interview:

• When we grew up, we were trained into not speaking our minds in front of other people. Or maybe someone is just shy. But on the Facebook, this barrier doesn’t exist, it is much easier to speak one’s mind there, and that’s what a lot of people did.

• Of course many had an idea of what was going on in the country. But to see the brutality in pictures (the tortured face of Khaled Said) still makes a difference, it even gives it an emotional dimension, you get even more angry, plus you can share this easily with many others.

• During the revolution, all Facebook groups were only following non-political groups, like sports or jokes or music, they would be full of politics. And so everybody got drawn in.

• Facebook got so much talked about during the revolution that ‘everybody’ joined, even those who hadn’t been on it before.

Twitter, blogs, and the changing attention economy

Compared to Facebook, Twitter use is much more an elite affair in Egypt (figures for Facebook, January 2011: 4.6 million – June 2012: 11 million; Twitter, September 2011: 130,000 – March 2012: 255,000; arabsocialmediareport.com). Active Twitter users are often rich enough to be able to afford smartphones or tablets, but some activists are also tweeting from computer keyboards. A number of prominent bloggers (e.g., Wael Abbas, Hossam el-Hamalawy) have gone over to tweeting much more than blogging. During demonstrations in Tahrir Square, Twitter served as a centre for micro-co-ordination on the ground was unprecedented, while Facebook had a wider mobilising reach. Both Twitter, Facebook and YouTube were used for post-processing events (posting and interlinking reports, images and analyses). In this way, social media helped to keep up the spirit and maintain momentum after one had come home from a demonstration. Blog on the other hand, often lay dormant during the revolution, reportedly for “lack of time” to write. Twitter took over from the blogs also in another area: the transmission of local reports, images and analyses). In February 2011, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces Egypt was the first in a long row of official institutions to open a Facebook account and use it as a prime channel to publish official statements. This reflects the realisation that social media are playing a key role in the attention economy. Toltage was, however, also used by Egyptian activists with their “Piggipedia” to point out security personnel accused of brutalising demonstrators. So far, government authorities largely appear to remain one step behind in this cat-and-mouse game. And if you can’t beat them, join them.

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During the revolution, all Facebook groups were only following non-political groups, like sports or jokes or music, they would be full of politics. And so everybody got drawn in.

However, during the revolution, Facebook was an effective tool for alternative ‘civil journalism’ (est. June 2010). Facebook got so much talked about during the revolution that ‘everybody’ joined, even those who hadn’t been on it before.

Conclusion

To understand the role that internet and social media played and are playing in the Arab Spring, their structural impact in the socialisation of a new generation is at least as important as their significance for networking, mobilisation and organisation. Communication on the network structurally reinforces the weight of peer-to-peer as opposed to top-down communication. Having been socialised on the net, young people today are more likely to be openly critical of traditional, established authorities and their decisions, and assertive of an attitude of ‘this is my view, my understanding, and my right!’

Having experienced, in the run-up to and during the revolution, that such assertiveness can actually have an impact, many young people are now proclaiming that whatever political developments the immediate future may hold, they will not fall back into simple acquiescence to what leaders choose to decree.
Some activists presented an enthusiastic view of the importance of the new media. Most prominent among them is Wael Ghonim, administrator of the Facebook group “Ihna kullinā Khalid Said/ We are all Khaled Said” (est. June 2010). In his book Revolution 2.0, he conveys the impression that the revolution was almost single-handedly created and managed via his Facebook group and associated actors. This gives rise to a more reserved attitude, emphasizing that the revolution emerged out of widespread frustration about police brutality and the blocked economic and political situation. Some of the older ones were dismissive of what they regarded as ‘clicktivism’: much activity on the social media, they argued, remained limited to the media-themselves. This reflects a frustration not uncommon among leftists in Egypt who tend to attribute the popularity of Islamist movements to their long-standing social and political work on the streets and in the poorer neighbourhoods. Leftists, on the other hand, accused each other of being more comfortable in their own debating circles.

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conspicuous role in alternative ‘civil journalism’ since 2005. Together with pan-Arab satellite TV and the internet more generally, however, blogs had been a crucial factor in breaking state hegemonies and creating an information field that eventually allowed for more critical reporting on local and national affairs also in the print media. Of course, the role of media cannot be analysed in isolation from broader social and political developments, but in autumn 2011, Egyptian activists claimed that blogs and social media had helped to break the last political tab-

bmma in Egypt: the army. And indeed, by autumn 2011 criticism of the army’s political and eco-

nomic entanglements could even be heard on Egyptian state radio.

Given the significance of the new media for evading state control, spreading alter-

native narratives, and mobilising new publics (not least: an international audience), state authorities are trying hard to maintain control. Censorship and repression have anything but disappeared since the revolution. Authorities and pro-government groups employed methods such as crowd-sourcing of surveil-

lance, using images harvested from YouTube and social network sites to identify participants in demonstrations. Crowd-sourcing was, however, also used by Egyptian activists with their ‘Piggipedia’ to point out security personnel accused of brutalising demonstrators. So far, government authorities largely appear to re-

main one step behind in this cat-and-mouse game. And if you can’t beat them, join them.

In February 2011, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces Egypt declared its first in a long row of official institutions to open a Facebook ac-

count and use it as a prime channel to publish official statements. This reflects the realisation that social media are playing a key role in the attention economy of a significant and growing section of society.

Peer communication and socialisation

The importance of social media for political communication—by acknowledging that there is a fact that Facebook or YouTube are mostly used for other, not directly politically relevant purposes. Social networking with friends and peers is chief among them, and parents and other ‘older’ authorities are often complain-

ing that the young are ‘wasting’ ever more time on Facebook, the internet in general, or their mobile phones. The ‘new’ media. Twitter and Facebook, are now proclaiming that whatever political develop-

ments the immediate future may hold, they will not fall back into simple acquiescence to what leaders choose to decree.

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ments the immediate future may hold, they will not fall back into simple acquiescence to what leaders choose to decree.
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Social Media in the ‘Arab Spring’ — the example of Egypt

Recommendations

• Maintain a clear line supporting freedom of expression online and offline, specifically with regard to bloggers and social media activists arrested and/or facing court cases because of what they have published.
• Social media can usefully be monitored for emerging social and political dynamics. While this cannot replace other means of public opinion surveys, it can help to identify up-and-coming trends especially among those of the younger generation who are willing to engage in public.

“The New Middle East: Emerging Political and Ideological Trends” is a five-year research project funded by the Section for Peace and Reconciliation at the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It is based at the Centre for Islamic and Middle East Studies at the University of Oslo and involves researchers from the Institute for Labour and Social Research, Fao, The Peace Research Institute Oslo, PRIO, and the University of Oslo. The project is headed by Professor Bjørn Olav Utvik.