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RE-EVALUATING THE ARAB SPRING: SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE EGYPTIAN REVOLUTION

JONAS SPECTER

The January 25th revolution in Egypt is often discussed as a social media revolution.

With vivid images of protesters marching in the street real-time on YouTube, and revolutionary organization taking place on Facebook and Twitter, it is clear that social media played some role in carrying out logistical aspects of the revolution. However, the extent to which these new technologies foment revolution is commonly debated.

I. INTRODUCTION: THE CLOCK TOWER

Most scholars agree that thinking of the January 25th revolution as a social media revolution overstates the role of social media as an ideological driving force.¹ This paper attempts to understand what effect the emergence of social media platforms had on political activity, thought, and organization in the time leading up to and during the revolution. This paper argues that social media platforms are not inherently liberalizing spaces, but rather, are contested platforms with specific institutional frameworks that, in the context of the Egyptian revolution, created space for the evolution of collective solidarity and democratization, but also the dichotomization of thought, and the rise in political manipulation and subversion from actors on all sides of the

ideological spectrum. In this sense, social media within the context of the Egyptian revolution is neither a revolutionary tool, nor a neutral tool, but rather, a tool with specific institutional frameworks which helped shape the reorganization of existing conditions and sentiment.

This paper begins with an outline of the way in which social media created new, broader coalitions, tying people from different social and economic backgrounds together, seeming to affirm liberal notions of democratization. Next, this paper explores how the liberalizing aspect of social media created fissures within the revolutionary movement through the influx of a wider scope of political ideologies and Western actors, and how the dichotomous nature of revolution navigated such an expansion in

¹ See: Theodor Tudoroiu, "Social Media and Revolutionary Waves: The Case of the Arab Spring," *New Political Science* 36, no. 3 (2014): 346-365 and Robert Brym et al., "Social Media in the 2011 Egyptian Uprising," *British Journal of Sociology* 65, no. 2 (2014): 266-292.

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the scope of discussion. Finally, this paper explores the way in which following the initial revolution, social media became a contested platform fraught with deception and secrecy, utilized by both revolutionary and anti-revolutionary actors.

Before entering a discussion on how social media affects political activity, thought and organization in revolutionary Egypt, it is first important to contextualize social media usage during this time. Egyptians have had access to cheap and reliable broadband internet since 2004, the same year that cyber-activism became prominent in the country.² One of the most important features of the Egyptian broadband use in 2004 and beyond is its continually free and open nature. As opposed to other states in the region, where internet usage was heavily restricted, Egypt's access to open internet allows for a wider array of ideas to be presented and passed along to the public.³ By 2011, more than four million Egyptians were on Facebook, and there were over 48,000 blogs dedicated to politics.⁴ One important factor to remember is that those most active on the internet represent a specific portion of the population. While the number of citizens moving onto social platforms was dramatic, they represented very specific, oftentimes privileged communities, as the ability to use social media is correlated to socio-economic resources.⁵ Therefore, when interpreting findings about the evolution of thought in revolutionary Egypt, it is important to

acknowledge that social media usage is free and open, has been tied to political discourse since 2004, and oftentimes, due to the socio-economic conditions necessary for success on the platform (such as English language skills, access to a computer and phone, and time to pursue political activities) the users represent privileged minorities within the population.

II. NEW COALITIONS

One of the fundamental effects of social media on revolutionary activity within Egypt was its ability to form satellite coalitions across social and economic backgrounds, leading to a rise in collective solidarity in the years leading up to the revolution. The emergence of bloggers as newfound political actors and leaders upended traditional revolutionary hierarchies, and allowed for the dissemination of revolutionary thought on the internet throughout the country.⁶ These bloggers, initially seen as self-communicators, eventually morphed into activists because of the authority and power they were given due to their social media influence.⁷ As described by Mourad, these bloggers had outstretched influence due to the lack of overt censorship in Egypt, as compared to other states in the region.⁸ These newfound political actors played a major role in the forming of cohesive movements of thought by turning "individualized, localized, and community-specific dissent into a structured movement

² Sherif H. Kamel, "Egypt's Ongoing Uprising and the Role of Social Media: Is There Development?", *Information Technology for Development* 20, no. 1 (2014): 82. See also: Tudoroiu, "Social Media and Revolutionary Waves: The Case of the Arab Spring," *New Political Science* 36, no. 3 (2014): 351.

³ Sara Mourad, "The Naked Body of Alia: Gender, Citizenship, and the Egyptian Body Politic," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 38, no. 1 (2014): 65.

⁴ Tudoroiu, "Social Media and Revolutionary Waves: The Case of the Arab Spring," 351.

⁵ Ramesh Srinivasan, "What Tahrir Square Has Done for Social Media: A 2012 Snapshot in the Struggle for Political Power in Egypt," *Information Society* 30, no. 1 (2014): 77.

⁶ Tudoroiu, "Social Media and Revolutionary Waves: The Case of the Arab Spring," 363.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Mourad, "The Naked Body of Alia: Gender, Citizenship, and the Egyptian Body Politic," 65.

with a collective consciousness about both shared plights and opportunities for action.”⁹ In this light, social media allowed for individualized dissent to snowball into collective consciousness through the algorithmic functions of social media which gives space on the internet to posts based on general popularity. This allows for individualized concerns that reflect wide held beliefs to gain traction and form networks of solidarity.

Pan-Arab sentiment was one of the most widespread beliefs disseminated through social media which gained traction in popular culture in the years leading up to the revolution. Further drawing off of Tudoroiu’s research, opinion polls conducted during 2011 showed a rise in pan-Arab sentiment, with 71% of participants identifying first as an Arab, and second as a member of their nation-state. Further, over 75% identified the desire for adopting policies that would work towards Arab unification.¹⁰ The rise in Pan-Arab sentiment in Egypt seems to confirm the theory regarding the ability of the internet to create “satellite communities” that eclipse national identity and socioeconomic status.

One explanation for the rise in Pan-Arabic sentiment coinciding with the rise of internet usage and prominence in organizing political thought is the free speech element of these platforms. The free speech element inherent to these new platforms allows for individuals to act together in the growth and development of cultures forming an “interactive cycle of social exchange, social participation, and self-formation.”¹¹ The rise in social-media allowed for the expression

of individual concerns, which, as part of the interactive cycle defined by Balkin, allows for new collective ideas to take hold through the “promotion and development of a democratic culture.”¹² The rise of “satellite communities” championing the cause of Pan-Arabism in light of this evolving democratic structure, suggests social media helped create solidarity across geographical and class boundaries.

As was discussed in the introduction, social media usage represents specific portions of society, the fact of which complicates the notion that social media is a space of free individual exchange which developed shared solidarity. In interviews with activist groups, Ramesh Srinivasan found that multiple groups made a point of discussing the way in which activity on social media is not necessarily representative of the general sentiment of the country, rather, activists saw it more as a bubble which was ripe for community building.¹³ In this light, the relationship between the satellite communities built on social media and the growth of shared national sentiment should be investigated rather than taken for granted. Further drawing of Srinivasan’s interviews, it was found that activists who used online platforms saw them as a way to reach the masses even though disparities of use existed.¹⁴ Part of the way in which activists on social media were able to widen their reach considering the limitations of social media usage was through their ability to influence the conversation happening in more widespread media outlets. Srinivasan found that bloggers articles and pictures were oftentimes picked up by larger outlets

⁹ Tudoroiu, “Social Media and Revolutionary Waves: The Case of the Arab Spring,” 365.

¹⁰ Ibid, 359.

¹¹ M. J Balkin, “Digital speech and democratic culture: A theory of freedom of expression for the information society,” *New York University Law Review* 79, no.1 (2004): 33.

¹² Ibid, 32.

¹³ Srinivasan, “What Tahrir Square Has Done for Social Media: A 2012 Snapshot in the Struggle for Political Power in Egypt,” 77.

¹⁴ Ibid, 78.

such as Al Jazeera and the BBC which were then more widely disseminated to the public.¹⁵ In this sense, we can understand social media usage as part of a larger ecosystem of information sharing in which the limits of outreach on social media can be eclipsed through a wider network of platforms on which to share ideas and information. In this sense, the place of social media in the development of collective solidarity can be understood as a space in which ideas are cultivated and given momentum, while the way in which they are disseminated to the masses might include multiple other platforms (such as word of mouth or more widely used media outlets). Irregardless of the specific pathways that ideas were disseminated, what is important for the purpose of this paper is that social media created space for the cultivation and dissemination of new ideas and concerns brought about by actors who may have been socioeconomically privileged within the context of Egyptian society, but were not overt and influential political actors before the rise of blogging and twitter. These new platforms created space for the emergence of this new class of political actors, who in turn influenced larger media outlets and society as a whole, creating the type of shared sentiment and solidarity necessary for cultivating revolution.

The rise in solidarity across social classes emanating out of the emergence of social media activism played a role in creating the dichotomous relationship of the people vs the government necessary in a revolutionary movement. The ability of social media to create spaces for shared grievances and dreams and to mobilize and communicate with the masses clearly

created new networks of anti-government solidarity.¹⁶ Further, social media helps form the type of “imagined communities” across physical spaces necessary to developing nationalistic sentiment by connecting Egyptians across social classes together through such shared solidarity.¹⁷ In this light, social media can be seen as a democratizing force that brings people together over their shared grievances, and develops a sense of revolutionary solidarity across previously restrictive bounds (such as geographical location and social class). However, as I will discuss in the next section, the dichotomous nature of revolutions also created avenues for social dysfunction and disagreement on social media, with the influx of free speech on a politically charged platform often being reduced to pro or anti-revolutionary thought, suggesting that these platforms did not produce inherently and absolutely democratizing spaces.

III. FREE SPEECH AND REVOLUTION

The juxtaposition between the influx of new ideas and the dichotomous nature of revolutions is one of the overlooked aspects of social media’s effect on the development of thought and political activity in revolutionary Egypt. To clarify, the dichotomous nature of revolutions refers to the way in which revolutionary actors are forced out of necessity to create binary camps (for or against the regime) as a means of maintaining cohesion and alliance within the revolutionary network. Returning to the framework presented by Balkin, the free speech which emanates out of social media platforms supposedly constitutes a tool in the development of a democratic framework (as exemplified in the rise of

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Brym et al., “Social Media in the 2011 Egyptian Uprising,” *British Journal of Sociology* 65, no. 2 (2014): 287.

¹⁷ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 6.

Pan-Arab sentiment). However, Balkin's understanding of how free speech operates does not seem to take into account the dichotomous nature of revolution, nor the Western influence present on social media. As such, the evidence of how different forms of thought interact and navigate with each other on social media in revolutionary Egypt should not be understood as clear cut and inherently democratic.

The dichotomous nature of revolutionary Egypt saw the rise of anti-regime sentiment, and pro pan-Arabic sentiment in the revolutionaries. However, in defining these camps, and their allegiances, we see how the rise of new ideas within the liberalizing sphere of social media has complicated the dichotomous nature of revolution. The case of Alia, a young Egyptian woman who posted a nude picture of herself on her blog is one of the most profound examples of such complications.¹⁸ Alia, who identifies as an Egyptian feminist, became a contentious actor, whose motives eclipsed the dichotomy of pro and anti-revolutionary sentiment. Alia was assailed from all sides of revolutionary thought, even though she identified as a revolutionary. Specifically, many liberals and seculars condemned Alia for her promotion of sexual freedom within a revolutionary time, suggesting that the revolution had greater priorities.¹⁹ The contention Alia faced from both sides seems to offer a competing narrative about the use of social media during the Egyptian revolution, leading one to question how a platform that creates space for the liberalization and democratization of information and ideas can exist within a dichotomous environment.

Alia's case suggests that new ideas are not necessarily interacting with

each other in a melting pot, but rather, are hyperpolarized and either affirm or challenge the revolutionary narrative. In this sense, the development of converging ideas of freedom are not so much working together to form new understandings of liberalization but rather, are competing with each other for a place at the revolutionary table, where seating is limited and controlled by the dominant social and economic groups. From this perspective, social media appears less a platform to develop thought, and more a megaphone out of which acceptable thoughts are amplified and dichotomized (which might be another way to understand the rise in pan-Arabic sentiment). When one looks further at Alia's case, certain phenomena appear that provide more evidence on the polarity of thought present on social media during the Egyptian revolution.

One of the most divisive issues of social media that Alia's photo brought to the forefront of conversation was the dichotomy of Western and Eastern thought. Part of the criticism of Alia was focused on her Western interpretation of liberalization, with many other bloggers and activists on Twitter assailing her motives, suggesting her interpretation of liberty is Western and thus a colonial product.²⁰ The debate over Alia's Egyptianness, and the overwhelming criticism she received, further points to the polarization of East/West dichotomies within the revolutionary context. Thus, a revolutionary who exemplifies Western ideals complicates the dichotomous understanding of culture at the time. Alia was not given space to emulate Western feminism within a pro-Egyptian revolutionary context because of the revolution's identity as anti-Western.

¹⁸ Mourad, "The Naked Body of Alia: Gender, Citizenship, and the Egyptian Body Politic," 63.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 69.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 70.

In this sense, while social media allowed for the liberalization of perspectives, it appears that because of the revolutionary nature, individual ideas and concerns were put into the dichotomous camps, and thus, stifled the type of open dialogue that Brym and Balkin see as being inherent to the rise of social media usage.

To complicate this narrative, Alia's experience could also be viewed from an alternative perspective which challenges the notion that thought on social media was undemocratic during the revolution. Alia's inclusion on a famous graffiti wall, and the amount of attention she received on social media and in more traditional media outlets, made apparent that while her ideas were misappropriated, her actions very publicly undermined social order, both through her assertion as a political actor, and through her challenges to Egyptian notions of decency.²¹ In this sense, the prominence of Alia's experience and the dialogue that surrounded it could be understood or seen from the democratizing perspective through an understanding that her challenges to social norms in and of themselves constitute the type of social exchange and interaction that defines the democratizing aspect of social media. It appears that both notions have truth to them, that thought was stifled and grouped into dichotomous "camps," but within the dichotomous framework, Alia's activity on social media and the response she received could be seen as an example of the way in which a free exchange of ideas can exist within such a polarized space. Finally, as the last part of this essay, this paper reviews the use of social media in the years following January 25, 2011, showing how both revolutionary and anti-revolutionary actors

utilized the platform as spaces of secrecy and as means of promoting disinformation, further complicating the notion that these spaces are inherently democratizing.

IV. A Contested Platform

In the years after the initial uprising of January 25th, 2011, social media has become a hotly contested site with government and mainstream political actors having recognized the power of social media in network building and organization.²² The emergence of social media as a contested political tool has led to a change in strategy on the platform, from a means of organizing and democratizing to a means of secrecy, subversion, and misinformation.²³ As social media evolved as a political battlefield, new uses for the development of thought within the tool have emerged. One important new development is the government and revolutionaries' use of hacking and misinformation campaigns.²⁴ While hacking was common during the initial uprising in 2011, with groups like Anonymous being seen as supporters of the revolution, it has descended into a tactic undertaken by both sides, and disrupts the democratizing aspect of social media. As space on the platforms becomes contested, groups begin vying with each other for attention on the platforms, and thus the ability of the platforms to provide secrecy, to misinform, and to organize thought hierarchically becomes of central importance.

In his research with different revolutionary groups in the years following January 25th, 2011, Srinivasan explores how social media usage has evolved in this light. Specifically, in his discussions with members of the Freedom and Justice Party, as well as with the April 6th Youth Movement

²¹ Mourad, 67.

²² Srinivasan, "What Tahrir Square Has Done for Social Media: A 2012 Snapshot in the Struggle for Political Power in Egypt," 71.

²³ Ibid, 75.

²⁴ Ibid, 79.

leaders, he found that both groups were seeking to develop new online strategies to combat the misinformation of the regime.²⁵ These strategies involved the use of secrecy with private Facebook groups, and focused on ways to widen the scope of their voices on social media. The newfound contested nature of the platforms has led to the rethinking of its usefulness and its place within developing revolutionary solidarity. As social media becomes more widely used, and competition for the space develops, the institutional framework of social media sites becomes of central importance, and the tendency towards “filtration, selection, and curation” define and shape the battle over space.²⁶ The newfound importance of the institutional mechanisms of social media has led a certain Westernization of ideas on the platform.

The newfound challenge of subverting the institutional constraints and mechanisms of social media has led to the emergence of Western thought on the platform in revolutionary Egypt. As described by Srinivasan, one of the main strategies undertaken by both the Freedom and Justice party as well as the liberal leaders was the influx of Western ideals and concerns into social media usage as a means of drumming up attention and thus amplifying the voice of the group.²⁷ The move towards Western rhetoric and attention signals something very important about social media usage in Egypt during this revolutionary time, specifically, that social media is a Western institution, dominated by Westerners, and because of the institutional structure which filters and curates information based on popularity, the battle for space on social media becomes tainted by the need to appeal to Western

perspectives for attention.

In this sense, social media spaces appear to be undemocratic, or almost neoliberal. Specifically, that the ability to be amplified coincides with eschewing Western sentiment complicates the previously mentioned dynamics of the dichotomous nature of revolutionary thought in Egypt at this time. Revolutionary “satellite communities” now must also take into account the whims and desires of Westerners, which, as made apparent in the case of Alia, seem to dampen or inherently challenge the revolutionary narrative as anti-imperialist. As anti-imperialist sentiment helped to create the “satellite communities” which form the “imagined communities” necessary for nation building, the necessity of inclusion of Western thought in continuing the formation of those dichotomies creates a sort of paradox for the revolutionary movement on social media. The influx of misinformation, secrecy, and Western ideals into the process of thought formation on social media seems to seriously challenge any notion that social media is an inherently liberal and democratizing force, and suggests rather than how revolutionary sentiment develops on social media is complex and contextual.

V. CONCLUSION

It appears that social media was not a clear lightning rod of revolutionary thought, but rather, was a contested platform that democratized thought, amplified dichotomous notions of thought, but also insulated, filtered, organized, and promoted thought based on pre-existing social conditions (such as the prevalence and privilege of Western thought, economic

²⁵ Ibid, 75.

²⁶ Ibid, 76.

²⁷ Ibid, 71.

conditions which facilitated social media use, and pre-existing public sentiment) and the institutional framework of the social media platforms. The results of social media usage on political development in revolutionary Egypt has been mixed and evolving. At one place a tool of bringing people with shared sentiment together and developing a shared consciousness, at another, a tool of polarization and another, a tool of opportunism, resulting in misinformation, secrecy and the invasion of outside thoughts and ideals. In sum, the development of social media usage during this period in Egypt exposes the ever-evolving nature of social media platforms as contested sites with specific institutional features that interact in complex ways with pre-existing societal power structures and hierarchies.

