

Exploring Digital Discourse in the Middle East: A New Paradigm of Politics

Amir Cohen and Galit Raz

Amir Cohen, Department of Politics and International Relations, Tel Aviv University, Israel; Galit Raz, School of Communication, Bar-Ilan University, Israel

Abstract

Social media determined dramatic changes in the balance of political power in the Arab world and in Israel. In the new politics of the Middle East the political environment and the communications between people are different than what used to be before 2011. Two major civil demonstrations – the Arab Spring and the Israeli Social Justice movement - were motivated by the masses through social media and received tremendous media coverage. The revolutions proved that the internet is truly a powerful tool that changed the world in ways that no government can stop social movements. The research finds similarities between the uprisings in the Arab world and in Israel, which created a new environment of "new politics." The uprisings that began on Facebook, and Twitter changed the way societies function and caused governments to change old policies. Despite the long-lasting conflict in the Middle East, involving the Palestinian issue, which traditionally occupied governments and public agenda, the uprisings raised social and economic issues. The events started with isolated acts of young people through social media and brought together people from all walks of life and across all political spectrums. The legitimacy of the protest to be considered as social revolution came only after the media started live transmissions – global media of the Arab Spring and Israel's national media services of the Social Justice movement. This proves the crucial role of traditional media, since only after the social media revolution was accepted by the media, a new reality could be created, in which the public rather than governments and social media and not the traditional media are dictating public agenda and enforcing political changes.

Keywords: Arab Spring, Social Justice, Facebook Twitter, Uprising

Introduction

In the age of smartphones, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, we are able to witness historical events unfold around the world – instantly, live and unfiltered by traditional media or governments. The world is now much more connected due to social media. It was not long ago that protests and revolutions were only seen on the evening news and in newspapers or magazines, which presented a version of events consistent with the bias of the media. However, starting with the Arab Spring, and followed by the Social Justice movement in Israel, social media became the new and improved way to present the events in the Middle East, contrary to what governments and traditional media wanted to present.

The protest in the spring of 2011 was a series of pro-democracy uprisings that in the Arab world, mainly Tunisia, Morocco, Syria, Libya, Egypt, and Bahrain (The National, 2011). The uprising was organized by activists which used the Internet as a dynamic vehicle to maintain broad-based support in the streets. The protests across the Arab world seemed to have appeared from nowhere, organized by Internet activists with a powerful social agenda

(Hemple, 2016). The nature of each pro-democracy uprising varied wildly from country to country, and yet they had one defining characteristic in common: social media. The term Arab Spring became interchangeable with "Twitter uprising" or "Facebook revolution," as global media tried to make sense of what was going on (Shearlaw, 2016).

Following that, the turmoil in the Middle East continued with the Israeli Social Justice movement of summer 2011, which was identified as a "social media revolution." What began as a private initiative on Facebook, turned into an unprecedented wave of socio-economic protest featuring tent encampments and mass rallies (Rosenhek, 2013). Hundreds of thousands took to the streets calling for "social justice," following the Arab Spring and associated too with the impact of social media – bypassing the traditional media and turning directly and without filters to the government (Schejter and Tirosh, 2015).

The research examines the role of the social media revolution in the Middle East while examining similarities in the events of 2011 in the Arab world and in Israel. It examines the impact of social media on the turn of events and the social and political changes that followed the demonstrations. The research claims that the environment of "new politics" that was created in the Middle East and spread around the world caused significant changes. As was evident in the historic events in the Middle East, communications between political institutions and publics changed as social media bypassed governments and traditional media services. Social media increased the involvement in political processes, and the Israeli public was inspired by the Arab movements.

The Spread of Social Revolution

The social revolutions of the Middle East began with one protester and sprang through social media, demonstrating the new political reality, where ordinary citizens force governments to change the political course. The Arab Spring started when Mohamed Bouazizi, a Tunisian street vendor, received a ticket for his unlicensed vegetable cart and could not afford to the fine, though he tried to pay. When he gave what he could, the police officer spat in his face and slapped him. He appealed to the municipality, but they did not see him. In protest, he set himself aflame. Other citizens related to him, and soon the recognition came as people watched and uploaded YouTube videos about the abusive state, read foreign news coverage of political corruption online, and shared jokes about their aging dictators over social media sites. Pictures of Bouazizi, in the hospital and covered with burns, were shared online, and soon Internet campaign began as citizens and unions setting up groups to support the uprising (Abouzeid, 2016).

What started in just one country, Tunisia, rapidly spread via social media and inspired citizens of other countries to protest, including Egypt, followed by Libya, Algeria, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan. Common to the protests in these countries is the spread of social revolution and the reaction of governments. The Tunisian government, attempting to control its citizens, tried to block social media networks from the country, although within a few days hackers outside the country were able to break through the firewalls (Ghannam, 2016). In Egypt, Facebook and Twitter were the protesters' most powerful weapons that helped them to spread messages and set up demonstrations, demanding accountability and democracy. The uprising escalated after the government cut off access to the internet: four internet providers simultaneously went dark, and mobile phone service in many areas went down. The move had unintended consequences, as security forces killed hundreds of people in clashes and the military mobilizes amid unrest. Soon hackers focused on getting around the block, using proxy computers to beat government censors. They set out to "anonymise" online data and focused on getting information to the Internet by bouncing content to computers in other countries (Shearlaw, 2016).

The protests in Israel also began with one protester, when Daphne Leef, a 25-year-old freelance video editor based in Tel Aviv, received a notice from her landlord that she'd have to vacate her apartment while renovations were taking place. Searching for a new residence, she found herself priced out of the city due to her inadequate monthly income. Determined to reside in Tel Aviv, she created a Facebook event calling on her neighbors to pitch tents on ritzy Rothschild Boulevard to protest Israel's out-of-control real estate prices (Bronstien, 2016). According to the 2012 Mercer cost of living survey, Tel Aviv was the most expensive city in the Middle East and the 24th most

expensive city in the world. Real estate prices were high, especially in the larger cities such as Tel Aviv (Weizmann Institute of Science, 2013).

What began in June as a Facebook-driven rebellion against the rising cost of living, turned in July into tent encampments protesting soaring real estate costs and became a full-scale Israeli social movement (Steinberg, 2011). Leef's call for action struck a chord, particularly among leftists. Dozens of tents went up on Rothschild, while other tent cities sprouted in dozens of locations around the country. In a matter of days, larger groups adopted Leef's cause, including the National Union of Israeli Students and the Socialist-Zionist youth movement (Bronstien, 2016). At the first public demonstration, a week and a half after Leef pitched her tent, the number of protestors already numbered in the tens of thousands. Inspired by the increasingly visible sense of unity throughout the country, Israelis enthusiastically joined the movement. Tent cities appeared across the country and protesters rallied behind the slogan: "The people demand social justice." Among the issues raised were the cost of housing, transport, childcare, food and fuel, the low salaries paid to many professionals, including doctors and teachers; tax reform; and welfare payments (Simons, 2018).

The movement had the support of about 90% of the population, according to different opinion polls. About 430,000 people took part in marches and rallies across the country in Israel's biggest ever demonstration to demand social justice, a lower cost of living and a clear government response to the concerns of an increasingly squeezed middle class (Bronstein, 2016). The large demonstration followed 50 days of protests that raised hopes for a new social movement that would transform Israeli domestic politics. (Sherwood, 2011). The demonstration became the issue that was mostly discussed on Facebook and was transmitted live on all national TV channels, to what became a social celebration with the participation of celebrities and leading singers and with wide public support. The success of the social movement was amazing: with the initiative of a single protesters, a total of about 5% of the Israeli population from all segments of society actively participated in the large demonstration.

Revolutions of Young Protesters

The social revolutions in the Middle East proved to belong to young protesters. In Tunisia, the average age is 30, and approximately 23% of the 10 million population is under 14 years old. There are 93 cellphones for every one hundred people. The cellphone became the weapon of choice for spreading the word of revolution as virtually everyone with a phone had access to the outside world and could send or receive information. In Egypt, social media was well embedded in the culture of the country's overwhelmingly young population – 60% under the age of 30. Because of the nature of the revolution, it was much easier for women in the Arab world to join the conversation, and Arab women finally felt empowered to be included in the political conversation. 30% of Twitter threads from inside Tunisia, and 33% from Egypt had female participants during the revolution (Mourtada, 2016). In covering the events that started on Facebook or Twitter, global media focused heavily on young protesters with smartphones mobilizing in the streets in political opposition. The importance of social media was in communicating to the rest of the world, as Twitter and Facebook data-informed international audiences and mainstream media reporting (Aday, Farrell, Lynch, Sides and Freelon, 2012).

The movement in Israel, which also started by young activists and continued with the support of student organizations, can be referred to as a social media campaign. The protests, which sparked the first demonstrations, began because of a Facebook protest group that initially led hundreds of people to establish tents in the center of Tel Aviv, an act that soon gained momentum, media attention and began a public discourse in Israel regarding the high cost of housing and living expenses (Levin, 2011). The rapid accumulation of issues fed into the overall demand for social justice aimed at the government and its economic and social policies (Simons, 2018). The protest was a tremendous success that brought more citizens into the streets than any demonstration in Israeli history (Bronstein, 2016). The movement received media coverage for almost two months on all news outlets, despite the protest's broad demands and its overall radical indictment against the economic system (Shoshan and Shultziner, 2017).

The success of the Social Justice movement is in changing the course of public agenda that identified Israel since its establishment. Security issues and terror threats undermined all other issues, despite high-income inequality

and high poverty rate (Khattab, Miaari and Stier, 2016). The socio-economic gap is one of the most important issues that encourage the struggle in Israeli society, including differences in income and educational level ((Grinberg, 2013). The roots of the social revolution are the result of the country being one of the most unequal economies in the Western world, according to OECD report (Datel and Maor, 2015), with significant gaps between the rich and poor. In 2011, it was second only to the United States among developed nations in inequality (OECD, 2011). Even though efforts made into shrinking the socio-economic gaps among the population, Israel is still today one of the most unequal economies. Despite efforts by the government to shrink the socio-economic and digital gaps, Israel is still one of the most unequal economies, as it was in 2011, with high inequality and socio-economic differences among the different groups of the population (Dattel and Maor, 2015).

As the Arab Spring spread across the Middle East, the government said that Israel is an island of stability”, remarkably secure amid revolutions, being the Middle East’s only stable state where everybody is equal. But as the protest escalated and the government’s approval rating tumbled, official response had to be taken with the government forming a national advisory forum to tackle the demands for social justice (Simons, 2018). The consent of the government ended the protest and proved how deep the changes to Israeli politics ran. The social movement succeeded to derive its power directly from the public and engage that public in direct dialogue, bypassing the traditional media and the government. Perhaps this is the biggest achievement of the movement, which maintained its power from on social networks, using them as alternative media to the traditional networks.

The Role of Social Media

The new politics of the Middle East, which followed the social media revolution, changed the way we use and consume media. It changed the way people around the world consume information and form political opinions. Especially in the Arab world, it changed the public agenda and politics. Twitter had a loyal population of followers who resided in mainly larger cities in Tunisia and Egypt. While the traditional use of Twitter conversations prior to the revolutions were used by networks of family and friends to discuss issues related to everyday life, it became a political vehicle following the Arab Spring. Likewise, with Facebook, which was used to share articles, clips and personal messages with many friends at once, became a useful political tool because demonstrators used it to deliver information to the world (Howard, 2018). The wide political use of Facebook and Twitter also created new global political trends, since demonstrators could bypass the limitations imposed by governments and traditional media and deliver instant information to the world. When looking at Egyptian college education, use of social media for obtaining political information is wide. 84% of those who are online say they visit social networking sites for news about Egypt's political situation. These findings point to social media's important role in spreading information and a mobilizing force in the uprisings (Brown, Guskin and Mitchell, 2012).

The new politics of social media changed the course of political discourse, emphasized the power of the public and social media while describing the impact of governments. Bloggers and journalists finally had a way to post political opinions and credible information without endangering their lives and upload information online anonymously. The Muslim Brotherhood, a militant organization that opposed the Egyptian government, set up platforms and blogs from servers in the United Kingdom, so that the government could not turn them offline. This proved an effective method and was used throughout the revolution. Even though the Muslim Brotherhood was deemed illegal by the Egyptian government, they used Arabic and English publications, claiming that they want to keep an equal and prominent presence in online Egyptian politics as a way to counter legally sanctioned parties (Aday, Farrell, Lynch, Sides and Freelon, 2012).

The revolution in Israel was different in that the government did not restrict social media, and demonstrators used Facebook as the main tool to promote the Social Justice movement and encourage the general public to join the protest. But what is similar to the Arab Spring is the important and critical role of social media and the change of political atmosphere in favor of new politics. Same as in the Arab world, new media increased the role of the public, who could influence political issues by bypassing the monopoly of the political establishment and traditional media on the political discourse (Simons, 2018).

The extensive role of social media in the protest was since Israel has high rates of Internet usage, and a vast number of online news and information websites and Facebook pages have sprung up during and after the 2011 protests. The wide use of social media is evident in that Israel has one of the highest household broadband penetration rates in the world and nearly three-quarters of the Jewish population have access to the Internet and use it regularly. More than half of all Internet users take active part in social media sites (Freedom House, 2016) and the time spent on Facebook per visitor per month among Israelis is one of the highest in the world. Israel is ranking seventh globally, with around 68% of all Israeli Internet users active on social media. Israelis spend an average of eleven hours daily on social networks, almost double the world average of six hours, and ahead of countries like the US and the UK with seven hours (Goldenberg, 2015).

The popularity of social media is also related to the fact that Israel is composed of different ethnic groups and considered a country of immigrants (Kaplan, 2015). While past movements had almost always been about defense issues or the peace process, this one was on social issues, supported by vast majority of Israelis (Bronstein, 2016). The combination of technology advancement and socio-economic gap provided for the disparities of social groups and a major cause for their perpetuation (Kaplan, 2015a). This set the stage for the movement that involved hundreds of thousands of protesters from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds opposing the continuing rise in the cost of living. This can be considered as the main success of the social media revolution in Israel – the change in public discourse from security to social issues and forcing the traditional media to join the protest – and as a result establish the recognition that was required to question the traditional policy of the government.

Conclusion

The Arab Spring and the Social Justice movement changed the face of how political issues are presented to the world and caused people to come together in support or opposition online, starting from Facebook and Twitter. The uprisings tremendously changed the political establishment in the Arab world, leading to new environment of “new politics” in the Middle East. The political and social impact of the Arab Spring proved to be significant to the social revolution in Israel, which brought the biggest civil demonstration in Israel’s history – the Social Justice protest. Social media revealed, in a way that was never possible before, the deep socio-economic problems that spread across Israel’s, with a widening gap between rich and poor and high cost of living to the entire population. As can be seen from the Arab and Israeli experience, even though the main channels for public debate remain the traditional media, the exposure of the public to social media is accelerating a wide unmediated debate which takes place as young people participate in the political discussion or are activity online. What started with a genuine initiative of single demonstrators in both the Arab Spring and the Israeli Social Justice movement, was inflamed via Facebook and Twitter and accelerated to mass demonstrations which received the recognition of civil uprisings with live and massive reporting of the traditional media. As a result, one major participant in the triangle was missing – governments, with the other two actors – social media and the people – forcing governments to change traditional policies to what the demonstrators demanded. However, as the research concludes, social media alone does not help, and in order for a civil demonstration to be recognized and gain real attraction, the mainstream media must pick it up as well.

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