The Real Face of Social Activism

Unit 2 Essay: Final Draft

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Prompt: Write a well-organized and well-documented essay, in which you argue for or against your topic: Social networking and revolutions.

The great strides of the cyber world, which have moved the Internet to the interactive age of Web 2, have made a great shift in the ways people in our modern world interact and communicate. The boundaries of information and interaction have crumbled under the pressure of the new and certainly omniscient social media that is present in every aspect of the life of the modern Web user. Social networking, now an integrated part of the twenty-first century culture, has become for most nations, the East star that leads people to the light, to a new and perfect world. It is the West’s most cherished innovation, as it is the Arab world’s new route to freedom and Democracy, to the extent that the new revolutions the world has recently witnessed, have acquired a new name or attribute, namely e-revolutions or social activism. However, the extent to which these media influence and contribute to the recent recorded changes in regimes is subject to controversy. While Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, or even SMS can be successful tools in the current revolutions, it takes more than social media and networking to bring down dictatorships and bring about shifts in long-existing and stagnant regimes; i.e. social media can be successful tools to aid revolutions, but they cannot be considered the basis or the real activators of major revolutions.

 The role of social media as a tool for change lies in the fact that it gives a collective voice to the oppressed and plays on the passions or desires of these masses for change, as well as their human determination. In Egypt, a video on YouTube featuring a woman (AsmaMahfouz) enticing the people to go on the streets and challenging men to act as real men, and a Facebook page, “We Are All Khaled Said”, surly had an impact on the heartstrings and the minds of the shy percentage of Egyptians that use social networking, resulting in the civilian uprising that eventually brought the current regime down (Elmansy, 2011). As the call went viral, people responded and went out to Tahrir Square (Niman, 2011). The supporters of social activism claim that thirty years of dictatorship were brought down in eighteen days of peaceful demonstrations (Elmansy, 2011). These events were preceded by the Tunisian activism and followed by the Yemen and Bahrain protests. Evidently, social media played a role in the dissemination of information both inside the country and also worldwide, to the extent that one might call the uprisings contagious. The question that imposes itself at this stage is whether these uprisings owe themselves only to social media or whether there are other less obvious factors involved.

 A thorough examination of the Tunisian revolution proves that attributing the whole revolution to social networking, as those in favor of social activism persistently claim, is a fallacy, and what really happened is much more complicated than a mere social network provoked revolution. As the director of the civic media at MIT, Ethan Zuckerman explains, the whole thing started when Bou Azizi’s family members went protesting on their village roads and a family member filmed the clash between the protesters and the authorities. He later posted the films on a social network. If these videos were left alone, there might have been a few viewers interested in them, but no further progress could have been made. However, a Tunisian reporter (Sami Bin Gharbia), outside Tunisia, took these films to Al-Jazeera TV and consequently, the whole of Tunisia and the world were exposed to what happened in a small village in Tunisia, as the TV station broadcasted the recorded protests. Who was responsible for the uprisings in Tunisia? Was it Bou Azizi setting himself on fire in protest against the oppressive government, or the videos broadcasted on Al-Jazeera? Or was it the extensive social network usage that followed? Or was it simply the long years of oppression the Tunisians had endured? Obviously, the issue is more complicated than it seems (Zuckerman, 2011). The technological tools surly speeded up the revolution and combined the people around a collective cause, gave them a collective voice and steered them to success.

 However, according to McCafferty, “a number of respected thinkers say technology does not really advance activism to achieve its most critical goals” (McCafferty, 2011, p.17). In other words, it is not enough to click the “like” button or copy-paste a certain text to become an activist (McCafferty, 2011). According to Professor Philip Seib, Director of Center of Public Diplomacy USC, social activism is a “misnomer” and the real communication in the recent revolutions was “underneath” and not on Twitter or other media (NATO Review, 2011). Moreover, Professor Robert Mc Nab of the Naval Postgraduate School, California believes that social media can only start the idea of revolt, but cannot make a revolution (NATO Review, 2011). Both professors conclude that it is unfair to call it social activism, because this does not do justice to the people who died for the cause. They go on to explain that the people’s failure to understand the factors at work and their need to find a “Rationale” leads them to the hasty conclusion of social activism or e-revolution (NATO Review, 2011). To take the issue further and clarify perspectives, Professors Mc Nab and Seib stress on the fact that the real revolution happened when all media were shut down by the government in Egypt in order to paralyze movement. However, according to Professor Seib, “the momentum was already developed” and the people’s anger to this move led them to the streets (NATO Review, 2011). According to Amr Hassanein, an Egyptian producer working for ABC News, blocking the Internet in Egypt turned peaceful demonstrations to a real revolution. Hassanein even wonders about “the consequences of blocking people from information (Mc Cafferty, 2011, p.21). There surly is a limit to trespassing on the part of the government, and when it comes to the freedom of expression, the situation can prove to be dangerous, as in Egypt. Therefore, it can be concluded that the Egyptian revolution was bound to happen. It was being planned underground, and as Mazen Nahawi, CEO of News Group in Dubai, stated, the concept of freedom in Egypt developed around eighteen months before the revolution (PBS News Hour, 2011). However, the social media gave it speed and of course a safe place for protesters to express themselves in times when other ways of expression like newspapers were censured and meetings were dangerous. According to Dave Karpf, a Professor and leading researcher at Rutgers University, the social media in recent revolutions were “basically acting as much more efficient phone trees” (McCafferty, 2011, p.18).

 The role of social media in the recent revolutions thus defined as an accelerator and practical tool for communication and media coverage, the issue that imposes itself at this stage is whether social change and activism can take place with or without these new technological tools. While social activists consider social media a necessity without which reform is impossible, history provides us with a multitude of examples of major system shifts which took place in times when even phones didn’t yet exist. Take for example, the Bolshevik revolution. No revolution has achieved its results and it was all in times when technology was unheard of. Malcolm Gladwell reminds us of the revolutionary actions that took place in Germany before the fall of the Berlin wall (2010). According to him, at the time, only thirteen percent of the East Germans had phones and contact between demonstrators was through Monday night meetings outside a church in Leipzig (Gladwell, 2010). Some critics, in favor of social media in activism, give the examples of Moldova’s Twitter revolution and The Iranian Green revolution to defend their standpoint and to show the indispensable role of the new technology (Gladwell, 2010). However, Evgeny Morozov, Foreign Policy writer and the author of “Net Delusions” (Ingram, 2011), points out that Moldova’s Twitter accounts then were so low that they couldn’t possibly move masses (Gladwell,2010). In Iran, Golnaz Isfandiari explains that, “there was no Twitter revolution inside Iran” and that the tweets were all in English and not in Farsi as they ought to be if Twitter was being used in Iran at the time (Gladwell, 2010, p.3). These facts lead us to conclude that these revolutions or protests were not social activism. In fact, Gladwell’s vivid description of the 1960s sit-ins in the United States and the simple means of communication between the protesters then, clearly defies the necessity of social networking for achieving successful change (Gladwell, 2010). As the historian Robert Darnton explains, “the marvels of communication technology in the present have produced a false consciousness about the past-even a sense that communication has no history, or had nothing of importance to consider before the days of television and the Internet” (Gladwell, 2010,p.3). Revolutions need ways of communication, but the ways of communication are not the determinants of the success of these revolutions.

 Some supporters of social activism argue that social media have the ability to mobilize great masses through associating them across the network and that it is difficult to achieve these results in classical activism. Professor Zeynep supports this view when she says, “social media is connecting people in very simple ways and making connections in a very fast and widely distributed manner” (as cited in Ingram, 2011, p.2). Moreover, social activists like Granovetter, a sociologist, stress also on the loose ties that bind people across the Web and their importance in promoting change (Ingram, 2011). However, what these people are missing here is that real change involves high risks and high levels of sacrifice, and weak ties cannot lead to a motivation level that can involve high sacrifice (Gladwell, 2010). Gladwell announces that activism is not for the “faint of heart”, and Stanford sociologist, McAdam, considers high-risk activism “a strong-tie phenomenon” (Gladwell, 2010, p.4). In his detailed description of the 1960s uprising in the US, Gladwell sheds light on the commitment of the protesters to each other and to the cause, focusing on the strong ties established between them through late night, face to face and church meetings and gatherings (2010), convincing them that “they have a great personal stake in the consequences” (McCafferty, 2011, p.18). In his New Yorker article, Gladwell also gives the example of the Germans who seldom gave each other away and who were true to the cause, owing their courage and commitment to the strong ties. The journalist, Ekaterina Walter, supports Gladwell and his followers and acknowledges that social media cannot substitute for the bravery and resilience of the people who actually stand up to oppressive systems at the cost of their lives (Walter,2011). Evidently, a strong cause needs courage and commitment which can only be present if the ties binding the protesters are strong and this is not the case with the big masses of social media protesters.

 Social activism, as argued by its supporters, is a strong and fast way to achieve change due to its broad base and the ability of the social network to reach multitudes in a very short time. However, the broad base, these activists are so fond of, is a major weak point in that it is a leaderless base, making it a loose network, lacking in organizational structure. For all those who believe that the Arab world revolutions were purely digital, it can be argued that a successful revolution needs a leader who according to Robert McNab inspires motivation and commitment (NATO Review, 2011). Activism needs centralization and a hierarchical organization with division of labor for efficiency (Gladwell, 2010). Gladwell illustrates this fact through the Palestinian Liberation Organization which failed to meet its goals because it started as a network that lacked centralization. Every revolution needs a leader, a designer, and this is lacking in broad based social activism, making it vulnerable.

 Even though the uprisings in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya were successful, the lack of centralization is evident in the final outcomes. The chaos in these countries today proves that in the absence of a hierarchical organization, the whole outcome of a revolution might well go down the drain, because even though change has come, but who takes over is the next issue. In the Bolshevik revolution, for instance, the leaders of the revolution took Russia all the way to the desired goals and became the actual leaders of the country. In the Arab world, even though a seeming Democracy is already born, better conditions for the people and peace are still absent. Zuckerman mentions that a friend of his, Alaa’ AbdulFateh, a social activist who contributed greatly in the uprising, is currently and unjustly detained by the Egyptian military (2011). Obviously, the lack of leaders is not without effect (Vila, 2011).

 Moreover, a hierarchical organization is needed in activism for careful planning from beginning to end. While social activism is triggered, as previously stated, by a post, comments or a YouTube video, real activism needs an initiation based on calculations, predictions and plans in order to avoid clashes and unnecessary losses. It is very far from being spontaneous, but it is also the most guaranteed way to take the revolution to safe harbor without shattering it to pieces when the storm gets intense. Not long ago, the people of Libya were urging the responsible to clear the country of weapons in the hands of unruly laymen. A revolution can really be successful only if it can maintain the success it has achieved and proceed to reform. Time might show the inability of social activism, through its leaderless structure, to satisfy these criteria.

 Social activists in praise of social media also focus on the protesters access to fast expression, which leads to a fast and spontaneous response and in general, generates an atmosphere of enthusiasm. It is true that millions answered the call of the social media on the 25th of January and crowded the streets in Egypt (Elmansy, 2011). According to many thinkers, and of course, Gladwell, who are critical of social activism, what really motivated these masses was actually the small amount of sacrifice demanded (Gladwell, 2010). Gladwell argues that low motivation is substituted by participation, i.e. quantity for quality. In his New Yorker article he gives the example of the Facebook page of Save Darfur Coalition which is the most popular among other Darfur charity pages, because it requires an average of only nine cents, the lowest among all pages (2010). The response on social media depends on what is demanded, which, given the weak ties and low motivation, has to be reasonable. But isn’t activism about sacrifice without limits? In real activism, the quality of participation covers up for quantity, and spontaneity has no place in a carefully planned and organized movement where no effort is spared to attain the desired goals.

 Moreover, the issue of free and fast expression on social media, that activists brag about, is a double edged facility that can lead to endangering the participants. In the London riots, the same social media that played a role in the riot organization played a role also in the prosecution of the participants that caused the riots (Walter, 2011). Dr. Michael Niman cautions that “the moment for Facebook and Twitter revolutions is about to pass” (2011, p.2). He explains that while social media can be used to stir up uprisings, “developed police states use it to spy on activists” (2011, p.2). Nevertheless, Gladwell believes faster expression is not a necessary tool in revolutions, as it can also make expression less effective and even endangering and exposing (2010). From here, the secrecy and careful expression in classical revolutions stand out against the endangering fast and exposing expression of social activism that might put a whole revolution at stake.

 The social activists of modern times go to great lengths in defending the role of social media when they focus on the power of these media to draw greater attention to a cause and of course, in record time. However, as McCafferty argues, the power of these media in calling attention as such and to really generate “boots on the ground” is exaggerated (McCafferty, 2011, p.18). Sarah Sobieraj, a sociology professor at Tufts University, attributes the social activists’ overstatement to their infatuation with technology when she considers, “modern efforts as more of an infatuation with technology with little show to it” (as cited in McCafferty, 2011, p.18). In her book, *Soundbitten: The Perils of Media Centered Political Activism*, she concludes her research by claiming that the role of the Internet in influencing people is actually a shy one (2011).

 The overestimation of the power of the social media is also attributed to the West and its infatuation with the technology it has created (Heaven, 2011). For example, in answer to Clay Shirky’s announcement of the big role played in Iran’s 2009 revolution, the journalist, Will Heaven, uses facts from Morozov’s book and proves that what happened was far from activism, because the Twitter accounts registered then amounted to only 0.027% of the Iranian population (2011). Hamid Tehrani, the Persian editor of Global Voices, explains the issue further in saying that, “the West was focused not on the Iranian people, but on the role of Western technology”, leading to the conclusion that social media were important in disseminating news, but their role was exaggerated in Iran as in Egypt (Heaven, 2011, p.2). Further research shows that what applies to Iran and Egypt also applies to the rest of the Arab countries that witnessed social activism. Will Heaven states that everything was packaged for the Western audience, taking the focus away from the street protesters to the technology itself (2011). Therefore, it can be justly inferred that the power of the social media in attracting and moving masses for a cause is questionable and even “propagandistic” and surly the recent revolutions have other factors that led them to success.

 A broad perspective that includes all factors is a must in order to do justice to the recently witnessed and successful revolutions and to redefine activism. In Egypt, for example, the idea of freedom, which was crucial to the activism, was developed long before the protests began. In addition, the role of the Tunisian revolution and the overthrowing of the dictator nine days earlier were not without effect on Egyptians. The blocking of all media by the government is also an important factor and it is actually the spark that ignited the uproar. However, the revolution was bound to happen with or without Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. The actual life and the misery of the people was the real cause. Haguette Labelle, Chair of the Board of Directors of Transparency International, describes Egypt before the 25th of January as a cauldron on fire that will eventually boil over and what social media really did was to catalyze the boiling procedure through providing a safe, cheap and fast way of communication to share experiences and opinions (NATO Review, 2011). After all, discovering that someone else shares one’s same views can be empowering and can strengthen the protesters’ belief that they can achieve reform if they combine efforts, regardless of the means of communication. The role of TV shouldn’t also be ignored, because in these areas of the world, TV is much popular than any other means of communication and according to Fares Braizat of the Qatar-based Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, “Al-Jazeera has given people a voice they didn’t have before” (Heaven, 2011). In short, when all these factors are considered together in analyzing the success of the so-called Egyptian e-revolution, and of course all other recent revolutions, it is justified to conclude that the term e-revolution is in fact a misnomer and that social media do not make revolutions. In short, social media are only one of the tools that accelerate activism, but do not constitute a major and indispensable tool that social activists claim them to be. Revolutions can happen and achieve success with or without the new social media.

 In the end, as McCafferty clearly states, “activism has always been –and will always be-about people. Specifically, people who show up in person”, and as Dave Karpf clarifies, modern activism is “traditional conservatism that intelligently embraces new media technologies” (McCafferty, 2011, p.18). In our modern world, just like in the past, change is possible if all conditions for it are valid and mature. However, it is time to focus on the still much needed change itself and on the brave heroes, the real activists, who are pushed aside by the social media and are unjustly left in the shadows of the new technology. It is high time the world realized that revolutions are about people and major shifts in systems and not about the media. As McCafferty concludes,” the dialogue has reached a deafening point on line and everyone has a cause. So it takes hard evidence to turn heads” (2011, p.19). Only the masterminds’ clever plans and the courageous leaders’ commitments to the cause can turn heads and make people join the route of change, i.e. of real activism.

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