

INTRODUCTION

Social Media and Political Change: Capacity, Constraint, and Consequence

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This introductory essay highlights the key findings, methodological tool kit, and production process of this Special Issue. We argue that communication researchers are uniquely positioned to analyze the relationships between social media and political change in careful and nuanced ways, in terms of both causes and consequences. Finally, we offer a working definition of social media, based on the diverse and considered uses of the term by the contributors to the collection. Social media consists of (a) the information infrastructure and tools used to produce and distribute content that has individual value but reflects shared values; (b) the content that takes the digital form of personal messages, news, ideas, that becomes cultural products; and (c) the people, organizations, and industries that produce and consume both the tools and the content.

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Zine El Abidine Ben Ali ruled Tunisia for 20 years, Hosni Mubarak reigned in Egypt for 30 years, and Muammar Gaddafi held Libya in a tight grip for 40 years. Yet among their bravest challengers were 20- and 30-year-olds without ideological baggage, violent intentions, or clear leaders. The groups that initiated and sustained protests had few meaningful experiences with public deliberation or voting, and little experience with successful protest. Where did these young people learn to be so politically disciplined, pragmatic, and collaborative? Where do people who grow up in entrenched authoritarian regimes get political aspirations and ideas about life in countries where faith and freedom coexist? How do they bring aspiration to action?

We believe that scholars of communication are uniquely trained to investigate questions such as these. After all, communication researchers have long been concerned with changing interpersonal dynamics, adapting systems of political communication, and the social impact of new communication technologies. The turn of current affairs has made communicative processes key to understanding international relations and developing sound foreign policy.

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There is little doubt that digital media played a fundamental role in the wave of protest across North Africa and the Middle East, beginning with political upheavals in Tunisia and Egypt, and spreading to other parts of the region including Libya, Yemen, and Syria. The *élan* of revolution was not contained by state borders: It cascaded across neighborhoods, nations, and continents. Different grievances were obviously important in different places, but just as obviously communication technologies, such as Twitter and Facebook, amplified the contagion.

And yet, as the contributors to this special issue make clear, popular and academic punditry about the “Facebook Revolution” overlooks the deeper and ultimately more important processes at work. There is a connection between technology diffusion, the use of digital media, and political change. But it is complex and contingent. Demonstrators and dictators alike recognize that the Internet and mobile telephones have become part of the fundamental information infrastructure for political conversation where there are few face-to-face opportunities, especially for women. However, the use of that infrastructure, the push and pull between repression and change, takes many forms as is evident in the articles by Lim, by Tufekci and Wilson, and by Pearce and Kendzior.

The contributors to this special issue also have much to teach us, both about the process of research and the nature of social media. They remind us that our understanding of new or surprising phenomena often benefits from using more than one methodological approach. In selecting what we considered to be the most insightful of more than 70 submissions we received, we ended up with contributions utilizing a remarkable range of methods including historical narratives (Lim), structured interviews (Tufekci & Wilson), computational discourse analysis (Papacharissi & Oliveira), interpretive case analysis (Youmans & York), network analysis (Seo & Thorson), content analysis (Hamdy & Gomaa; Hassid), surveys focused on a single country (Valenzuela, Arriagada & Scherman), large multinational surveys (Nisbet, Stoycheff, & Pearce), and even a field experiment (Bailard).

Digital media compound attention on poorly performing governments. Lim, for instance, finds that authoritarian Egypt failed to respond to the communities of opposition that coalesced online well in advance of 2011, while Tufekci and Wilson illustrate how social media reduced the threshold for the mass expression of opposition in Tahrir Square in early 2011. Bailard shows that Internet use predicted cynicism about transparency during a Tanzanian election; Hassid demonstrates that Chinese bloggers lead in the framing of issues when the ruling political and media elites do not appear to be acting responsibly; and Valenzuela, Arriagada, and Scherman’s study of Facebook use in Chile in 2010 shows how social media can mobilize those who are not already involved in political activism.

This lesson takes on even greater urgency when we consider the comparative landscape sketched by several of the contributors. For example, Nisbet, Stoycheff, and Pearce’s comparative study of 28 countries not only advances models for understanding the contribution digital media make to democratic expectations, but also reveals which authoritarian regimes have the most pent-up demand for

democratic practices. Indeed, their study might be read by foreign policy experts as a “watch list” of countries with moderate or high levels of Internet use, pent up demand for democratic governance, but relatively few freedoms: Hong Kong, Kenya, Malaysia, Nigeria, Senegal, Singapore, Thailand, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. These are countries where social media may, in coming years, have an important role in the narrative of social change.

One of our discipline’s lasting contributions has been to help policy makers and the public appreciate the effects of media structure. Our contributors once again remind us that infrastructure and design count. For example, while Lim’s analysis shows that a rudimentary “blogosphere” was an essential precursor to 2011’s “social media revolution” in Egypt, Seo and Thorson document the developments in the global information infrastructure that paved the way for the catalytic spread of unrest we now call the Arab Spring. On the other hand, Youmans and York illustrate how user agreements and design decisions by social media builders can limit civic discourse and discourage social movements.

Although social media are generally thought to be democratizing and good for democratic institutions, several of our contributors paint a more complicated picture. Valenzuela and his colleagues show that only certain types of Facebook use were associated with political activity in Chile. Bailard demonstrates that online exposure to debate about transparency during Tanzania’s recent Presidential election resulted, not in greater civic engagement, but rather in voters disengaging from the political process. In some cases authoritarian regimes have successfully discouraged Internet use, as Pearce and Kendzior demonstrate in the case of Azerbaijan. If nothing else, social media may color civic discourse in particular ways. Hamdy and Gomaa’s analysis of Arabic language coverage of the Egyptian uprising, for example, reports that social media framed political issues quite differently than the way they were framed by either state agencies or independent news outlets. Similarly, Papacharissi and Oliveira develop a novel category of “affective news” to describe the peculiar kinds of content that circulate most easily over social media during political crisis: some gossip, some facts, plenty of opinion. We should not therefore assume that social media are automatically democratizing or that the political discussion they engender is necessarily in line with idealized conceptions of civic discourse.

The uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt were the impetus for this special issue, but our understanding of the complex relationships between social media and political change in the developing world cannot be confined to those countries or even to the Arab Spring. Our call for papers generated submissions about or from over a dozen countries. We included contributions not only about the Middle East and North Africa, but also about Azerbaijan, Chile, China, and Tanzania. We must continue to gather country-specific cases and conduct comparative work if we are to gain a more complete appreciation of the subtle, often unexpected ways, in which social media, traditional media, and political culture interact.

To do so, we must take seriously the research challenges our contributors faced. Most obvious, of course, is the difficulty of bringing to press research on events that

are still far from settled and whose implications are still not clear. Our deadlines were hurried and our contributors were heroic. It is our hope that the value of addressing the historic events of the past year and a half will offset the admittedly incomplete, sometimes less polished, nature of several of the contributions to this issue.

And yet other challenges will persist as researchers are required to develop new skills and sensitivities. To study Chinese blogs and newsprint, for example, Hassid had to borrow and create tools for reworking the data before submitting it to a computerized content analysis, while Papacharissi and Oliveira were forced to combine multiple methods to conduct their concept mapping. Nisbet and colleagues assembled survey data from 28 different countries, but even contributors whose work focused on a single country were often dealing with languages and scripts other than English. Communication researchers will increasingly need to work with very large datasets using the tools of computational social science. Seo and Thorson's analysis of network infrastructure offers one example. Beyond this, however, advances will come more quickly when research teams combine qualitative case-oriented methods with quantitative broad-based methods. We call not for generalists, but rather for dialogue across multiple methodological specialties. Methodological myopia is a liability, but when it comes to understanding the unfolding role of social media, so, too, is a lack of history. No myth is more damaging to our understanding of new technologies than the belief that they are entirely new.

Finally, the stage is set for thinking in greater detail about what we mean by the term "social media." As a form of shorthand, we often describe social media by identifying particular applications, like Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube. But social media are inherently social; meaning that beyond a particular proprietary tool, there is very social content. Several of articles in this issue illustrate how the content of social media is different from the content of other news media, even when it is dealing with the news. Design choices and infrastructure both shape and are shaped by users' social activities in ways that far transcend the traditional categories of uses and gratifications theories. In our view, social media may be defined in three parts, consisting of (a) the information infrastructure and tools used to produce and distribute content; (b) the content that takes the digital form of personal messages, news, ideas, and cultural products; and (c) the people, organizations, and industries that produce and consume digital content. It is our hope that the articles in this issue will stimulate further research, not just on each of these dimensions of social media, but also on the linkages between tools, content, producers, consumers, and consequences.