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USING CIRCUMVENTING MEDIA TO COUNTERACT AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on how potential circumventing media and communication technologies could potentially assist the information flow when authoritarian regimes decide to block the main channels, such as the Internet and the mobile phone networks. The point of departure is the recent Internet blackouts in countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), such as Egypt, Bahrain and Libya. We discuss several applications that were developed as a response to state repression in these countries, and their future potential that would allow people to communicate more freely despite Internet and mobile network blackouts.

KEYWORDS

Circumventing media; decentralization; social media; citizen empowerment; uprising; revolution

1. INTRODUCTION

It has probably not escaped many that traditional (TV, newspapers, etc.) and social media (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc.) have played a great role in the political disturbance of Middle East and North Africa (MENA). It started with Tunisia and continued on to Egypt, Bahrain, Iran, Syria, Yemen and Libya, among others (Howard, 2011). Several factors have fueled the uprisings in these countries and these include, but are not limited to, poverty, food inflation, lack of freedom of speech, enactment of democratic reforms of the political system, corruption, high unemployment, poor living conditions and police brutality (Spencer, 2011).

The initial spark was the self-immolation of the Tunisian citizen Mohamed Bouazizi on December 17, 2010. This led, 28 days later, to dislodge the president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali on 14 January 2011.

Inspired by this, the Egyptians initiated an uprising on 25 January 2011 with purpose to bring down Hosni Mubarak. In Egypt, unlike Tunisia, the government took a different path and shut down mobile networks and the Internet on 28 January 2011 (Singel, 2011). Not only did this damage the country from an economical point of view but it sent out a signal to demonstrators that the technical restriction on them was a sign of weakness from the government. Turning off the Internet had a counterproductive effect for the government. It activated people to mobilize on the streets and the chain of events ultimately led to the resignation of Hosni Mubarak on 11 February 2011, only 18 days later. During these events in Tunisia and Egypt, other countries in MENA felt threatened that their turn might come and decided to be proactive and cut the free flow of on-line information. Among others, Syria cut off the Internet on 28 January 2011 (Durden, 2011), Bahrain on 18 February 2011 (Hooker, 2011), and Libya on 18 February 2011 (Cowie, 2011). These events have reminded us that governments are still in possession of the possibility to shut communication down. For instance in Egypt, circumventing media could be as easy as paper leaflets that was spread around by demonstrators in Cairo or innovative tools such speech-to-tweet applications from Google and Twitter. It is of course also the case that the existence of communication technologies alone does not invalidate social and political structures in any given society. Considering structural factors, the informational infrastructure is however vital for any analysis of political change.

A whole range of specific cultural and social factors is crucial to democratic movements, not least courage. Among factors known for their importance in explaining any type of political participation, we find

resources such as time and money, organizing skills, but also knowledge about political affairs, a sense of self-efficacy, and a will to engage (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). Authoritarian governments are also growing increasingly competent of using social media and other technologies to control potential oppositional forces. Near-monopolistic services such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Google underline the importance of alternative channels and services (Askanius & Gustafsson, 2010).

From this point of departure, one might ask how circumventing media and technologies of communication can assist the progress of information flow when authoritarian regimes decide to push the kill switch for the Internet?

2. SOCIAL MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY

It is obvious in the light of recent uprisings in MENA and elsewhere that social media are likely to have a great role in facilitating citizen movements against non-democratic governments. For instance, social media can according to Bertot, Jaeger, and Grimes (2010) be a useful tool against corruption in governments and corporations. According to the authors, social media have four major strengths: (1) collaboration, (2) participation, (3) empowerment, and (4) time. Social media are built on interaction between users and hence it provides a platform for collaboration and participation. This platform can empower users with the ability to speak freely about issues. Because social media are inexpensive by its nature anyone has the ability to publish and broadcast information. With regards to time, social media technologies allow users to interact with each other close to real time. Despite attempts by many governments to censor social media, some have failed because current filtering techniques are less effective on limiting the content of social media compared to traditional Internet services such as search engines (Faris, Wang, & Palfrey, 2008; MacKinnon, 2008). An example of a social media application that has been developed to fight corruption is Wikileaks (Lynch, 2010). Wikileaks is an online service that publishes anonymous and sensitive information about governments and corporations, to the limit that has lead many countries in Europe and North America to take significant measures to quiet down Wikileaks, however without success.

Social media have however the potential to lower the thresholds for participation and provide the communicational infrastructure vital in all political mobilization (Boekkooi, 2010; Gustafsson, 2010). On 3 November 2008 thousands of people in USA participated in a day of action against climate change. In traditional terms, environmental organizations are usually the ones who mobilize but in this event individuals primarily organized the actions. A total of 454 participants completed a survey that was used to investigate whether participants would mobilize online and then take on the streets. The findings showed that 42% of the participants mobilized by an online channel such as Facebook. It is likely that the use of social media as means of mobilization have been one of the strengths in the uprising of countries in MENA. Although this is to be confirmed by future studies, the fact that the respective governments have tried to disconnect the Internet and mobile networks suggests that this is the case. One must also bear in mind that, in addition to the mobilization function, content sharing is likely to be an efficient means of feeding uprisings. Correspondingly, the Internet would serve the governments by stopping horrific images from being uploaded and shared through social media. Even higher technological solutions have been harnessed for counteractions against autocratic regimes that are trying to crush unprecedented peaceful protests.

Online organizations such as Avaaz (2011) have mobilized its members to gather financial support to aid expert support teams on the ground with secure satellite modems and phones, tiny video cameras and portable radio transmitters. It is however not always possible to supply this type of equipment into countries that have authoritarian regimes. Several initiatives have already been taken to work out alternative solutions to decentralize the Internet and give people access if and once suppressing regimes disconnect its citizens.

2.1 Circumventing Media

The concept of *circumventing media* refers to communication technologies that facilitate the flow of information in events when access to Internet and mobile networks are not available or filtering mechanisms are being used. These media have also been referred to as alternative media, participatory media and social movement media.

2.1.1 Speak-2-Tweet Application

Speak2Tweet as a communication service is one of technologies that were born due to the restraint of sending news out to the world about the uprising in Egypt during the beginning of 2011. The issue of shutting down the Internet by the government of Egypt made it difficult for locals to inform the rest of the world about the events that occurred and made communication in general very limited. Speak2Tweet provided people the ability to call international phone numbers (+16504194196, +390662207294 or +97316199855) and leave a message, which later was transformed to a link and posted on Twitter together with the hashtag #egypt. A hashtag is composed of the hash sign (#) together with a keyword to categorize 'tweets' or messages together. The service had the possibility to trace the location of the caller; however, calls and tweets could come not just from inside of Egypt but everywhere else (Liedtke, 2011). Even though, this service was firstly meant to help protesters in Egypt and was widely used by Egyptians, protesters in other countries of MENA has been able to use it.

2.1.2 Micro ad-hoc Network

Recently, the Freedom Box Foundation developed under the supervision of professor Eben Moglen a device that could act as a low-power plug server. This has been developed to decentralize information and power. Using Facebook as an example, it is not difficult to decollate a revolution by expediting an order to Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook, which he cannot afford to decline. In contrast, by using thousands of encrypted servers no repressive government would be able to find out who published or read incendiary material (Dwyer, 2011). However, this could also be extended further to allow people to connect to each other's servers and create an internal network. Each server would work as a node and could use external peripherals to access the Internet, such as satellite modems and phones (Dolan, 2011). In this perspective, people without Internet access could for instance through modified software publish offline a message on Twitter together with their username and password in an encrypted form. This software, which could exist in every node, would send the message, username, as well as password around in nearby nodes until it reach one that is connected to the Internet and then publish it.

2.1.3 Anonymous Internet Surfing

Employing TOR software was another solution for distributing news of Egyptian's protests in an anonymous way via networks of systems, specifically of ISPs. This provided much more secure channels when exchanging news in social media environments. People in Egypt used dial-up Internet connection as it is stated by the TOR project, but because the speed of the connection was reduced through use of TOR or VPN this could have pushed people to avoid using these alternatives. Yet, as it is written in the TOR blog, such thing did not happen in Egypt and people chose to connect by TOR more and more (Tor, 2011). According to Hide Yourself Online (2011), this type of technology would have been helpful in the case of Bahrain as it would bypass the filtering mechanisms being used for social media, e-mail, etc.

3. CONCLUSION

Recent revolutions and uprisings in MENA seem to indicate that information technology can sometimes be a critical weapon of democracy, as has been the case during the history of revolutions. The distributed nature of the Internet and mobile networks, however, is in some cases more difficult for the authoritarian governments to block than the mass media of the past, for a more critical perspective on this notion see Morozov (2011). Apparently the massive citizen movements in these countries are taking the advantage of these media. These events are revealing the weak points of modern IT and motivating a range of new solutions for robust media that go around censorship, i.e. circumventing media. The pace of innovation in modern communication technology has been accelerated as a result of the battle between governments and citizens in MENA. As states around the world persist to suppress democratic freedoms of their citizens, technology-skilled individuals will find their way to each other and innovate solutions for citizens. As long as authoritarian regimes continue to exist, there will be a need to evaluate new ways of bringing solutions and technological communication alternatives to the suppressed. It is also important to remember that the existence of technology alone is not sufficient for citizens to mobilize against an oppressor, let alone succeed in their en-

deavor. Regarding all of this, it is of growing importance for the furthering of democratic movements around the world that citizens are able to organize and communicate using social media and other tools.

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