Can Social Media Sustain a Revolution?

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The recent uprisings across North Africa and the Middle East have come to epitomize the awesome power of new social media, specifically its usefulness in mobilizing the masses for revolutionary action within states and across entire regions. The momentum and outcomes of public action and the international audience it garnered made for prime time viewing – revolutions Bourne style: fast, efficient, intelligent, and successful. Mimicking the warp speed of digital communication and similarly offering instant gratification, these uprisings seemed to exemplify at the mass level what had occurred at an individual and local level – reliance on social media as an intrinsic part of everyday interactions. But as countries in this region struggle to construct viable states and contestations for power continue to destabilize the region, questions about the revolutionary outcomes surface. This paper argues against those who tout new media as having a definitive effect on revolutions. Instead it proposes that while social media is an important platform for mobilizing support, revolutionaries cannot rely too heavily on it as it detracts from the kind of face-to-face interactions that are necessary for revolutions, specifically structural transformations that attempt to address the objectives of revolutionary organizations.

Revolutions are not quick, simple, and rapid events. As Jack Goldstone observes, they are reactions to a complex set of circumstances involving state crisis, divisions among elites, discontented civil society, social conditions that predispose popular organizations into action, and the possibility that heterodox groups can provide leadership against the state.[i] This also includes how the state reacts to demands made by international actors (states, international organizations) and how these impact domestic relations (like reform, economic liberalism).[ii] In other words, serious long-term cumulative structural and socio-cultural challenges contribute towards volatile situations that are messy, chaotic, uncontrollable, and unlikely to be resolved just by a change of government.

Media and Mobilization

Some fundamental tenets to the notion of revolution are issues pertaining to mobilizing support, the ideologies of revolutionaries, and the outcomes of revolutionary action. By emphasizing the impact of media in the current wave of revolutionary action, analysts have often subsumed a discussion of these issues under the larger theoretical discourses of social media and transnational social movements. To frame the media analyses many highlight the contending views of Shirky who sees social media as having an indelible and positive impact on mobilizing for a cause, and Gladwell who opposes this view and instead sees media as offering one mobilizing mechanism among many, revolutions specifically requiring discipline, strategy, and other long-term grassroots techniques.[iii] Supporting the former position, Rheingold argues that "smart mobs" (people who act in concert even if they don't know one another) can now mobilize where collective action was previously not possible as occurred in the Philippines in 2001.[iv] Others have highlighted "Netwars" as a mode of conflict (protagonists use network forms of organization, doctrine, strategy, and technology) that has proliferated and is used by a range of activists from criminal and terrorist networks to social activists.[v] Those that are more circumspect about the role of media have emphasized the part played by powerful external democratic supporters (the "iron cage of liberalism"),[vi] the global dimension of revolutionary action (an "international revolutionary bricology"),[vii]and the need to recognize that major transformations and revolutions that relied on social media to mobilize, are still at their very early stages.[viii]

Social Movements and Revolutionary Organizations

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The social movement literature is also a popular pathway to making sense of revolutionary action. The challenge here is to distinguish between *social movements* and *revolutionary organizations*, as there is a tendency to conflate the two.[ix] A few critical distinctions need to be made: 1) The long-term objectives of social movements and revolutionary organizations are generally not similar – the former might be issue specific or associated with attacking particular organizations, the latter is usually focused on seizing the state or ousting the ruling elite, and bringing about political, economic and social transformations.[x] 2) While social movements are generally active in all state formations, revolutionary organizations generally make headway in states where autocratic leaders and military juntas are most prevalent. 3) Revolutions require organizations (and a concomitant organizational structure) because of the formidable opposition and the ultimate goals; social movements do not necessarily need such organization. [xi]

It is useful to see social movements as operating in an anarchic space (no central authority in control), very much in the way neorealism visualized the operation of states in international relations.[xii] Like states, social movements make moves and create/join networks based on their self-interests and over time a balance of power evolves, ties remain loose covering a wide range of groups and decisions are made through consensus, albeit divided along global north-south lines.[xiii] Revolutionary organizations primarily operate within the state, the latter retaining some degree of control with coercive powers inside its borders. The use of social media has indeed changed the way in which all groups organize, as they are influenced not just by media but also by globalization and the far-reaching effects of global capitalist systems and international organizations. Social movements and revolutionary organizations employ transnational networks to augment their struggles at the local level, and these range from gathering funds and support to boot camps where strategies and resistance techniques are learned.[xiv]

But even given these changes, face-to-face mobilization still remains fundamental for revolutionary organizations. A strong theme among classical theorists is that revolutionaries organize only when political opportunities become available through state reform or breakdown.[xv] By creating mobilizing strategies and an ideological platform around opposition to the state, such organizations initiate resistance for regime change. Even when there is a high reliance on social media, there is also a high reliance on social and political networks, civil institutions, and repertoires of contention (previously employed methods and practices).[xvi] In other words, the groundwork for revolutionary organization is labor intensive, historically deep, has an organizational structure (usually hierarchical), and requires various levels of commitment from participants. Theoretical definitions of revolutions place emphasis on outcomes rather than mobilization.[xvii] The literature on revolutions is rather thin on organization.

South Africa and Egypt

Two examples are useful to exemplify what this paper is trying to get at: the negotiated transition in South Africa in 1993 and the forced resignation of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt in 2010. Over the 47 years of apartheid, the cornerstone of opposition was political and social movements which thrived among school pupils, college students, neighborhood communities, and workers. The organizational strength of these disparate social movements, which eventually coalesced into a few powerful revolutionary organizations, lay in an efficient coordinated structure with a strong core of leaders and a committed membership. The African National Congress in exile, for example, relied on the United Democratic Front (UDF), an umbrella organization that was formed to oppose the reform initiatives of the apartheid state in 1983. Relying on charismatic leaders, an army of highly motivated and committed activists, and powerful mobilization strategies, the UDF was successful in garnering mass support to make townships ungovernable, shut down city centers through consumer boycotts, and to intensify resistance against the regime.[xviii] This convinced corporate companies (both national and international) and influential Afrikaner intellectuals and politicians to expedite negotiations with the exiled African National Congress (ANC). Contending groups like Inkatha and the Black Consciousness Movement were powerful but had fewer followers, in part because they required a greater commitment to the organizational ideals. Mobilization techniques included door-to-door canvassing, recruitment in sheebeens (illegal pubs), on public transport, the factory floor and other public institutions, the use of mass gatherings to educate the people (like funerals, mass rallies, street marches, demonstrations), and posters, pamphlets, and theatre.

In Egypt too, over the 30 years of Mubarak rule, trade unions, student movements, and community organizations were active, operating within the confines of an oppressive regime. Here organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood

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created an institutional structure that operated in the spaces neglected by the state, offering welfare services like after-school tuition, pre-schooling, loans, sewing clubs, copies of texts and so on. Trade unions were equally effective, having a strong hierarchical leadership structure and membership responsibilities.[xix] These networks that were operative at the local level, formed the basis for mobilization against Mubarak in 2010 – social media was an effective medium to coordinate public demonstrations, but the divisions between and within the various organizations remained. As in South Africa where some of the bloodiest battles were fought between the ANC and Inkatha (the latter was assisted by the apartheid regime) *after* the negotiated settlement was initiated, in Egypt some of the most contentious face-to-face battles have occurred in the post-Mubarak period like the ongoing conflicts between the Muslim Brotherhood and other secular organizations and contentious struggles within these groupings. To conclude, this paper makes the argument that by emphasizing the impact of social media in the revolutions of North Africa and the Middle East, analysts have shifted attention away from the underlying fabric of civil institutions that contribute the most towards revolutions.

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[i] Jack A. Goldstone, *Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

[ii] See Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution*, (Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1978)

[iii] See Malcolm Gladwell, "Small Change: Why the revolution will not be tweeted," *New Yorker*, October 4, 2010, pp. 42-49. Clay Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody. The power of organizing without organizations*, (New York: The Penguin Press, 2009).

[iv] Howard Rheingold, *The Next Social Revolution*, (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books Group, 2002).

[v] David Ronfeldt and John Arquilla, eds. *Networks and Netwars. The Future of Terror, Crime, and Militancy*, (Rand Corporation, 2001).

[vi] Daniel Ritter and Alexander H. Trechsel, "Revolutionary Cells: On the Role of Texts, Tweets, and Status Updates in Nonviolent Revolutions," Paper presented at the conference on "Internet, Voting and Democracy," Laguna Beach, California, May 14-15 2011, http://www.democracy.uci.edu/files/democracy/docs/conferences/2011/Ritter_Trechsel_Laguna_Beach_2011_final.pdf, accessed 8.11.2013.

[vii] Eric Selbin, "Zapatistas' White Horse and Che's Beret: Thesis on the Future of Revolution," in *Theorizing Revolutions*, ed. by John Foran, (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 84.

[viii] See for example Marc Lynch, *The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished revolutions of the New Middle East*, (PublicAffairs, 2012), Charles Tilly and Lesley L. Wood, *Social Movements, 1769-2012,* (Boulder and London: Paradigm Publishers, 2013).

[ix] See for example Frideh Farhi, "The Democratic Turn: New Ways of Understanding Revolutions," in *The Future of Revolutions. Rethinking Radical Change in the Age of Globalization,* ed. by John Foran, (New York: Zed Books, 2003).

[x] Lenin wrote: "The basic question of every revolution, is that of state power." Lenin, "The Dual Power" [1917], in Robert C. Tucker, ed. *The Lenin Anthology*, (New York: Norton, 1975), p. 301. See Sidney Tarrow, *The New Transnational Activism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005)

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[xi] This is a large discourse. For some key explanations see: John A. Goldstone, "An Analytical Framework," in Jack A. Goldstone, Ted R. Gurr, and Farrokh Moshiri, eds. *Revolutions of the Late Twentieth Century*, (Boulder: Westview, 1991), Ted R. Gurr, *Why Men Rebel*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), John Foran, ed. *Theorizing Revolutions*

[xii] For a classical study, see Kenneth Waltz, *Man, the State, and War. A theoretical Analysis* , (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959, reprinted 2001)

[xiii] See Kumi Naidoo, "The Rise of Civic Transnationalism," *Transnational civil society: an introduction*, ed. by Srilatha Batiwala and David L. Brown, (CT, Bloomfield: Kumarian Press, 2006)

[xiv] See Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders*, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1998).

[xv] See Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions*, Jeff Goodwin and Theda Skocpol, 'Explaining Revolutions in the Third World," *Politics and Society*, 17(4), 1989, 489-509

[xvi] See Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution*, (Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1978)

[xvii] For a typical definition, see Samuel Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies,* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), p. 264

[xviii] See Jeremy Seekings, *The UDF: A History of the United Democratic Front in South Africa 1983-1991* , (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2000)

[xix] See for example Diane Singerman, *Avenues of Participation*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995)