

The role of information technology in defeating the Arab regimes:

Facebook 2-0 Arab presidents

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In January 2011; Arab countries and the entire world followed what happened in Tunisia and Egypt. Two Arabic regimes were step down in the same month. On January 14, 2011; the Tunisian president Zein Abedeen Bin Ali escaped outside of Tunisia after 27 days of protests. In Egypt, on February 11, 2011; the strongest Arab president Mubarak resigned and left Egypt after very active protests at all cities of Egypt. The Egyptians have a record because the protests continued for 18 days only!! A new history is being written in Arab countries.

This article discusses how internet played main role in the January revolution of Egyptian, and how RAND foundation report expected what happened, this report was published in 2003 and discussed the relation between technology and non-democratic regimes in Middle East and North Africa.

Does technology affect revolutions?

Through the history, there's no conflict about reasons of the revolutions anywhere in the world. It might be social, economic, or political reasons. Almost the same reasons for all revolutions since the early history of the humanity, but the revolutions of the modern age are different by depending on new means, and for sure communications and information technology was the most effective factors in the modern revolutions.

At the Egyptian revolution of 1919 – the biggest revolution against the British colonialism to Egypt - Saad Zaghloul met the British governor on November 1928 asking for independence of Egypt, and then formed a group of politicians acting the Egyptians, and people started to

delegate this group to act the Egyptian people. This process takes some months. In March 18, 1919 the group met the British governor again, and asked to go to Paris in order to attend "The Peace Conference" in 1919. Their request was refused, and then they were arrested and exiled outside Egypt. Let's remark the chronological sequence of the demonstrations. In the second day the protests started in Cairo University, and then after two days in Azhar University, and after about one week in some other cities.

I'm sure if this revolution happened in the recent years, it would start faster, and more information would be circulated.

The current situation of information technology and communications gives us the following facts;

In Egypt (up to December 2010)

- Cell phone lines: 65.5 millions
- Fixed phones lines: 9.5 millions
- Internet users: 22.5 millions
- ADSL subscribers: 1.3 millions
- Internet mobile users: 8.5 millions
- Internet cafes: 4600

In Tunisia (up to November 2010)

- Internet users: 3.9 millions
- Fixed phones lines: 6.4 millions (up to 2006)
- Fixed phones lines: 1.2 millions (up to 2006)
- All universities, institutions, and secondary schools are connected to the internet

Now the question is; can we really believe that the technology affected in the Egyptian and Tunisian revolution?

Opinions might be conflicted, some people can see that all revolutions through the history succeeded with the absent of technology, and if people stayed in front of PCs screens, who would participate in the demonstrations. On the other side, many opinions say that the online social networks provided e-communities helped to promote the anti governing

systems ideas, and to call and organize the demonstrations, and to disseminate news from the heart of the events.

Regardless of this conflict, we have a striking phenomenon and should be monitored.

The internet role in Egypt demonstrations

The online social networks played main role in Egypt's demonstration in January 2011, mainly, Facebook and Twitter were the basic tools used in the demonstrations. Facebook is well spread in Egypt since 2008, its popularity based on political events too, when it used to very wide invitation to a strike in all Egypt on April 6, 2008, which was very successful invitation and after that a group of political activist form and entitled "6th April Youth Movement". I think Twitter was the big winner because it started to be well known in Egypt during January events.

By an inspector eyes; we can define three main roles of Facebook and Twitter in January demonstrations; Call for demonstrations, dissemination of demonstrations news, and increasing information circulation..

Call for demonstrations

After one day of Tunisian regime fall down, invitations to huge demonstration started through Facebook. 25th January was chosen because it was the "Egyptian Police Day" which is official holiday in Egypt. The relation between the police and Egyptians is extremely bad, because of torture and killing people by the police, in addition to the bad treatment for people. The invitation was adopted by three pages on Facebook:

1. **"We are all Khaled Said"** The biggest Egyptian community on Facebook, this page has 804.000 members up to February 14, 2011. I have to mention that Khaled Said is an Egyptian boy was arrested, tortured, and killed by the Egyptian police in Alexandria.
2. **"6th April Youth Movement"** The page has 53.000 members, and the group has 93.000 members. The group was the most famous group in 2008. It was the main reason that Egyptians know more about Facebook.

- 3. “Elbradei President of Egypt 2011”** This page has 244.000 members, Dr. Mohamed El Baradei is Egyptian diplomat who got Nobel Prize, and he was the director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) from 1997-to 2009. When he returned back to Egypt he started to call for change in Egypt.

None could expect what happened at January 25, 2011 in Egypt; over 500.000 people went out to streets and participated in the demonstrations in 8 cities. Most of Egyptians never expected this positive response to the electronic invitations. The call for more demonstrations renewed, they called for bigger one consists of million participants in Friday January 28, 2011, and this day called “Friday of Anger”. The Egyptian government realized the vital role of Facebook and Twitter, so a unique decision was taken; all communications were cut in Egypt.

From Thursday January 27, 2011 at 4:00 P.M the Facebook and Twitter were blocked, on Friday 28, 2001 at 12:00 A.M all Egypt had no connection to internet, at 1:00 A.M all cell phones networks stopped working, at 2:00 A.M BlackBerry service was cut too. Egypt lived in the 1st century ideas in 2011!! This decision pushed all Egyptians to participate in the “Friday of Anger” and the result was over 1 million people participated from about 10 cities.

Dissemination of demonstrations news

From the first day of the demonstrations, the mentioned pages and groups started to disseminate news from the heart of events through many reporters who depended on the internet mobile services, another groups of pages admins were not participating in the field, but they have different mission that is disseminate news which published in TV channels, news web sites, and receive news from their reporters. Also; photos and videos were published.

One of the important pages was “Rassd News”. It was the main source for demonstrations news on Facebook, this page had about 250.000 members before hacking their page and creating new one which has now about 150.000 members. “The Original Dostor” newspaper page was one of the best pages that covered the demonstrations news through its journalists; this page has about 110.000 members.

At this stage, Twitter appeared as an active tool in managing the demonstrations and disseminating news from the field. Rassd News, The Original Dostor newspaper, and We

Are All Khaled Said accounts was the most active on Twitter. Also some famous politicians participating strongly on Twitter like Dr. Ayman Nour account.

We can summarize the vital role of Facebook and Twitter in the following points:

- Disseminating news from the heart of events.
- Managing directions and collecting the participants.
- Publishing audio and visual materials on the demonstrations.

Of course all of this happened in the first 3 days of the demonstrations from January 25-27, 2011 before cutting the internet and all communications in Egypt.

The following statistics show the huge flow of information on Facebook and Twitter from January 25 to February 10, 2011:

Rassd News

57 video clips; 400 photos; 367 web links; 10.584 tweets.

We are all Khaled Said

61 video clips; over than 200 photos; 100 web links.

The Original Dostor

More than 500 tweets

We have to notice that Egypt stayed 6 days without internet connection.

Increasing of information circulation

Members of Facebook played a great role in information flow and circulation during the demonstrations days. The Members got their posts from different resources, like; Facebook pages, news web sites, TV channels, and the field it self. The status of members changed every minute.

The Egyptians response to Facebook is unprecedented phenomenon, I accurately monitored the growth of members in some pages, so we can estimate the effect of Facebook in this events:

- The event of "Friday of Anger" which created by "We Are All Khaled Said" page, the average of members increasing was about 20 members per minute.

- “We are all Khaled Said” page members were about 400.000 before January 25, 2011, and became 600.000 members on February 9, 2011. On February 14, 2011 increased to 804.000 members. It means that 20.200 members joined the page daily in 20 days only.
- Wael Ghonim the admin of “We are all Khaled Said” page was released on February 7, 2011 after 11 days of arrest. A new page was created to delegate him to act the demonstrators. The page created exactly at 11:00 P.M on February 7, within the first 5 hours of creating the page the average of subscribers was 150 members every 10 seconds!! After the second day, the page had 190.000 members with average of 7916 members each hour, 131 every minute, and 2.1 members every second.
- Response to posts published in the hot pages we talked about is unbelievable, for example the range of comments is 2500 to over 10.000, in some cases it was 26.000 comments. The minimum number of likes is 10.000 in most posts.

RAND corporation report on information technology in Middle East

RAND Corporation is one of major research centers in the United States. It's nonprofit institution that helps improve policy and decision making through research and analysis. It published a report about the future of information technology in Middle East and North Africa. The report edited by Grey E. Burkhardt and Susan Older who specialized in Middle East studies. The report analyzed the core results of researches and conferences papers about the information technology in the area.

The report estimated what will happen in the Middle East and North Africa area regarding catching the information technology revolution. The main result of the report that is countries of the area – expect Israel and Turkey – will delay to catch the information revolution because the governing regimes of these countries are not elected by fair way and do not apply the democracy, so they will aim at control the information flow in the society because the freedom of information flow against their existence.

The report expected that Arab regimes will control all information resources and all means of information circulation. The same thing happened in the past with audio and visual mass media, and used it to direct and lead the public opinion to what the regimes want to say. When satellites spread widely, and became out of control, they moved to control the new media that was the internet.

In the next lines we will show how Arab regimes controlled the internet by different ways and means.

How RAND scenario fulfilled

It's well known that all Arab countries has no democracy, and the governing regimes are the most repressive and dictatorial regimes ever. Egyptian and Tunisian regimes classified as the top fighter of internet usage by political activists. Both of them achieved great developments to improve communications and technology, but on the other hand they fight any activities against their existence.

Here some evidences that prove how they were against technology:

1. Blocking web sites

Blocking the web sites in Arab countries is organized process, and do not includes only sexy sites, but it's extended and included anti-regimes sites and blogs, also news sites which criticize the internal affairs of the country. For example; in Tunisia; many non-Tunisian sites were blocked like: the Egyptian news site "al-Misryun" and the "Arabic News Network". For Tunisian sites, there are many examples like: "al-Kalimah", "al-Bawwabah", "al-Nahdah.Net", and "Tunis News". The most famous case for blocking was Facebook and YouTube, which unblocked by order from the Tunisian president himself.

There's no different in Egypt, political sites and blogs are block regularly, Muslims Brothers and "al-'Amal Party" were blocked for many years. During January demonstrations some sites were blocked; Facebook, Twitter, and "The Original Dostor Newspaper" because these sites were active factor in managing the demonstrations

Almost the same situation exists in most of Arab countries. Saudi Arabia classified as 1st blocker of web sites, the authority that responsible for blocking in the country receives requests to block sites through web form, and all requests are accepted without any verification to the content of the sites. UAE and Sudan blocks the sexy web sites and many of political sites. Syria control the internet strongly, in the early

years of connecting the internet the famous email providers like Hotmail and Yahoo were blocked. Iraq in Saddam era allowed the internet connection for post graduates students at home for 6 hours daily.

2. Using the internet to attack the political opponents

Tunisia is unique country in attacking the political opponents, the government monitors and hacks their emails and accounts on Facebook and Twitter. By cooperation with the local internet service providers they send fake page to login and get their data and be able to monitor them.

In Egypt; the National Party employed many of youth to perform some missions; like: promoting the plan of bequeathing Gamal Mubarak to be the next president after his father, and improving the picture of Mubarak and the National Party. On Facebook they had more missions; they created thousands of fake account, and created groups and pages to support Gamal Mubarak and the national party. On the other hand, they attack and criticize the political opponents like Mohammed El Baradei and Ayman Nour. As a reaction from “6th April Youth Movement” they discovered the fake accounts, and published a list of their names to warn Facebook member.

3. Arresting the internet activists

Blogging in topics criticizing the government and the regime is not the only reason for arresting the internet activists and bloggers in Tunisia. In 2003, a teacher and journalist called “Umm Ziyad” was imprisoned for a month because she criticized in a blog the education policy in Tunisia. There’s a long list of bloggers who imprisoned, arrested and killed because of political blogging.

In Egypt, in addition to arresting and imprisoning bloggers, accusation fabrication is available option. Wael Abbas – the famous blogger – accused with stealing internet cable from his neighbor who works as a policeman! Hala Botros an Egyptian blogger, her father was hit by secret police forces.

4. Conspiracy of internet service providers with the government

Cutting the internet and all communications considered the evidence of controlling the regime on communications and technology sector in Egypt. I think it was easy decision from the government to cut cell phones networks and internet, because these companies conspire on Egyptians since years, and always accused with conspiracy with the government.

TE DATA is the biggest internet provider in Egypt, always accused with blocking web sites. It offers internet family program which blocks sexy sites, but also blocks the political blogs. After 6 days of cutting the internet in Egypt, the providers companies for cell phone service and internet announced that the signed contract with the government includes a condition force the companies to cut the service if the government requested that.

Conclusion

Although all practices of the Egyptian and Tunisian governments against usage of internet and technology in general, the technology was effective factor in the revolution, and defeat two of the strongest regimes in the Arab countries.