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The Facebook Revolution: An Exploratory Analysis of Public Pages during the Arab Political Unrest

Abstract: Social network sites have been viewed as viable tools for communication during the political unrest in the Arab world since it started in December 2010. This study employs content analysis method to explore the characteristics of public political pages in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Syria during their recent political events.

Résumé:

1. Introduction

Currently an elaborate modernization process and social change are taking place in the Arab world due to the effects of economic innovation and political experimentation in all areas of life (Nydell 2006). This has come about through several factors including the adoption of financial structures, educational concepts, and most notably information and communication technologies (ICT). Murphy (2006) noted that the implementation of ICT in particular has raised quite a challenge for the Arab states because of its potential political impact that could challenge the authoritarian regimes in the region.

This impact of ICT, especially the use of social network sites such as Facebook, was evident during the political unrest that started in Tunisia and spread across the Arab world since December 2010, to the extent that this unrest has been sometimes dubbed "The Facebook Revolution" by the media (The Daily Star 2011).

2. Background

The Spark

The political demonstrations and protests in the Arab world started in Tunisia in December 2010 and have rapidly spread across most countries in the region. Since then, people in these countries have been taking to the streets demanding economic and political change and protesting against some of the authoritarian regimes in the region.

These events were sparked when Muhammad Bouazizi, an unemployed college graduate from a small town in Tunisia, set himself on fire and died of his injuries in protest after police confiscated his fruit cart, saying he was selling without a permit. This incident led the people of Tunisia to the streets accusing the government of corruption and demanding the resignation of their President, Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali. Following a month of large demonstrations with a toll of 21 casualties, the President gave in to the demands and fled the country to Saudi Arabia on 14 January 2011 (CNN Wire Staff 2011). Shortly after, these protests had a ripple effect and quickly spread to the neighboring North African and other Arab countries, most notably Egypt, Libya, and Syria.

Facebook

Since their introduction in 1997, social network sites such as Twitter, MySpace, and Facebook have attracted millions of users on the web, making them indispensible tools for daily communication among users.

Although Facebook was initially intended for personal use, there has been an enormous increase of interest from public figures, nonprofits, governments, and corporations to utilize Facebook to directly engage with the public. This has generated extensive research investigating the use of this tool in different arenas (e.g. Bender, Jimenez-Marroquin, and Jadad 2011; Bortree and Seltzer 2009; Muralidharan et al. 2011). As Facebook's features facilitate political communication and arguably has a better means of achieving a true public sphere than anything that has come before it (Westling 2007), it has been used to promote political ideas and campaigns such as the midterm election in the United States in 2006 (Sweetser and Lariscy 2008) and in the 2008 congressional and presidential elections (Feezell, Conroy, and Guerrero 2009; Fernandes et al., 2010; Woolley, Limperos, and Oliver 2010).

The purpose of this study is to look into how people in the Arab world have utilized Facebook during this political unrest, and to describe the pages in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Syria. This examination is one of the first studies that looks at Arab user reaction and engagement in political discussions on social network sites during these political events.

3. Methodology

According to Krippendorff (2004), content analysis is a valid method used to describe trends in a communication context, allowing researchers to draw inferences on patterns and differences among similar components of that communication context. The components examined in this study are Facebook pages related to Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Syria during their recent political unrest. These countries have had a major role in the anti-government protests that have spread rapidly through the Arab world.

To determine the sample frame for this study, a list of Arabic search terms related to the political unrest in the selected countries was entered into the search box function embedded on Facebook to locate pages. Using the country's name and "revolution" or "unrest" alone did not prove to be sufficient. This is partially because many pages are named after a specific event or a public figure that had inspired these movements in their respective countries. For example, some pages in Egypt are named "The April 6th Movement" or "Anger Day", while one of the most popular pages in Tunisia is called "Muhammad Bouazizi", named after the man who inspired the revolution in his country. Therefore, preliminary search terms that were extracted from news services such as Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabia were used to locate pages from each country. For each country, the terms are the name of the president, an inspirational public figure during the revolution, a key date, and the country's name associated with "movement" or "revolution". The search was conducted in Arabic and the analysis was restricted to publicly available Arabic pages that were related to the unrest in the Arab world.

The search results were downloaded and archived in an Excel sheet. Two coders examined the title of each page to determine whether it had a positive, negative, neutral, or unknown tone in relation to the term used. For example, "Taking Bashar Al-Assad Down" would be coded "negative" in relation to the Syrian President, but "Bashar Al-Assad is our Leader Forever" would be coded as "positive". The description of the page was helpful to determine the tone in cases where the title itself was unclear such as in the case of the page entitled "Hosni Mubarak" which was coded "negative" based on its

description. If the page did not have positive or negative tone in the title or the description, it was coded "neutral" and "unknown" if the tone was not clear. Additionally, these pages were examined for the number of their members (i.e. number of people who "Like" the page). A random sample from these pages will be further analyzed for additional elements such as their activity measured by the number of postings and the themes of these postings in order to provide a snapshot on the Arab user reaction and engagement during the political unrest.

4. Results

The content analysis of Facebook pages in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Syria will reveal the general characteristics of such pages related to the Arab Spring on Facebook like the number of members and the tone of these pages. It will also reveal how active they have been during the unrest and what topics were generally discussed in them. At this point in the study, names of the Presidents of the four countries were used to retrieve pages on Facebook. There were 492 pages related to Zine El Abidine Ben Ali (Tunisia), 600 for Hosni Mubarak (Egypt), 538 for Muammar Ghadafi (Libya), and 1076 for Bashar Al Assad (Syria).

Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of the 589 pages related to Hosni Mubarak, as 11 pages (%1.8) were not related to the search term. An intercoder reliability of 93% was established using Holsti' reliability formula for these pages.

	Positive	**Negative**	**Neutral**	**Unidentified**
Number of pages	247 (41.2 %)	291 (48.5 %)	11 (1.8 %)	40 (6.7 %)
M (members)	692	1613	947	168
SD	3169	6278	2546	388
Max. number of members	42471	45420	8593	1926
Min. number of members	0	0	9	0

Table 1. Characteristics of pages retrieved related to "Hosni Mubarak"

5. Discussion

At this point, the analysis of pages related to Hosni Mubarak suggests that there are more negative pages than positive ones within Facebook on the ousted Egyptian President. Additionally, the number of members of the negative pages was higher than that of members of the positive ones. Although this result might not be surprising considering the political events, it was interesting to see the relatively high number of positive pages on him. This might be attributed to the fact that Mubarak still has supporters in Egypt, or because some of these pages were created before the massive demonstrations started.

Because of the nature of Facebook pages, where users have to "Like" the page in order to be able to post on the page, liking the page does not necessarily mean that all users support the page, therefore some may post conflicting opinions. This calls for a need to analyze not only the postings in these pages, but also the comments on these postings to capture the dialogic political communication of these users.

This small study has only attempted to explore a sample of Arabic pages on Facebook related to the political unrest in a few Arab countries in order to explore their general characteristics. Focusing on one country would also enrich the research and permit a more nuanced analysis which allows the examination of Facebook pages over the course of protest in that country. On the other hand, including other Arab countries that have experienced these events would allow for comparison between Facebook pages related to them.

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