

## Technology: A Modern Revolution To Repressive Regimes

Commenced in early January, a wave of revolution shuddered through various nations of the Middle East. As Tunisia was the first to voice their discontent- Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and other Muslim nations followed in what resembled the domino effect. Only hours of revolts passed before going viral on leading social networking sites- including Facebook, Twitter, and video hosting sites such as YouTube. As opposition forces clamor to obtain democracy for their nations, these online tools have become necessitated in order to perform an array of tasks, ranging from organizing protests to sharing personal accounts of the ongoing revolution. As the opposition continues, technology serves the Middle East revolutionaries as an elixir to authoritarian regimes while providing didactic sparks that spur democracy.

The eruption of opposition movements that occurred in Tunisia are largely due to social networking. Although the draconian rule that reined over the country had applied austere censorship policies, many youth activists acquired the skill of cybersubversion. The art of doing such gave way for unsatisfied citizens to organize anti-government protests, and eventually aid the country in ousting Ben Ali- the former dictator. Most of the minds behind the acts of cyber-activism were forced to remain anonymous in order to shield their identities from the prying eyes of Tunisia's government. Facebook was home to one of the movement's leading pages, "attracting over 15,000 friends in two

weeks time” (Beardsley 2). YouTube additionally aided the Tunisian revolution, although “access to the site has been blocked since 2008”, portraying the sharp skills acquired from a seemingly new cyber-generation (Beardsley 1). By utilizing proxies, virtual private networks, and effectual encryption, the youth of Tunisia ventured further into censored sites in order to share their unfolding events to the rest of the globe. A popular Tunisian blogging group- Nawaat.org- also played a key role in the uprising. The blogs were used to not only report the protesters experience in a first-handed manner, but greatly aided the movement by “rallying anti-government protesters by reporting on the protests which the national media ignored” (Beardsley 2). Insufficient coverage of such events were no surprise on a national scale, since most media outlets were closely tied to Ben Ali and his government. Nawaat.org was unique and cardinal as a revolutionary tool- for it served as a remedy to the issues ignored by the media, by means of the personal accounts of revolting Tunisians. The site had been established in 2004 by Sami Ben Gharbeia, “[He was] a prominent blogger outcasted from his country due to his political views”- and now lives outside of Tunisia in exile (Beardsley 2).

Many journalists and Arab revolutionaries alike have referred to the uprising in Egypt as the Facebook Revolution, due to the central role it played in organizing and transpiring the dynamic protests that packed Tahrir Square. The various protest pages that began popping up over such social networking sites allowed public awareness to swell among throngs of dissatisfied inhabitants of Egypt-being ruled under long-time President Hosni Mubarak. Floods of citizens gathered in the streets in order to peacefully combat for their freedoms; most of the protests were originally spurred and spread upon the Internet. One Egyptian revolutionary claimed that “[t]echnology has

robbed sound sleep from dictators” (Hanson 1). A Middle East marketing manager for Google by the name of Ghonim was one of the first to create a Facebook page, calling for fellow Egyptians to stand and fight for their rights. After being detained, and later released, Ghonim quickly became a symbol for the Egyptian movement- primarily due to his outreach made to the public by means of Facebook. Under Egypt’s suffocating police enforcement, the popular site began to appear as an “ideal revolutionary tool” since “whatever is published on a wall cannot be blocked by government, unless they block Facebook completely” (Hanson 1). Many of those who gathered in the street confessed to doubting- only days earlier- that any other Egyptians shared such liberal ideals. By collectively assembling upon the site- citizens found (numerous) others who craved a shift to democracy. This open online forum of opinions brought “a liberal undercurrent to the surface of Egypt”- one of which erupted and later led to the revolution’s success (Shapiro 3).

When a country’s web services are either filtered or blocked entirely- inhabitants are withdrawn from accurate, up-to-date reports and are greatly inhibited to organize protests or distribute information about opposition movements. This limitation does not completely prevent the plethora of information being communicated by mobile texts- a pliable plan B to the stern restrictions being placed by highly unpopular governments. Although chain text messages serve as a sufficient method to organize within the country’s borders, foreign media and journalists are encumbered by authoritarian censorship, yielding to diminutive international coverage of the transpiring revolts. Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi has become notorious for impeding access to much of the Internet in rebel-run cities in the country’s western

coast, such as his “beloved” Benghazi and the oil town of Ras Lanuf. Three weeks following the birth of the rebels’ revolution, “most online journals, blogs, and international news sites were blocked”- as computer savvy Libyans aided the rebel forces by probing for proxies around the applied restrictions (McHugh 1). Only a few months prior to Gaddafi’s grapple with social networking, Egypt suffered similar blows to their online activism by receiving rolling disconnectivity through the country’s largest cities. Hosni Mubarak, the abhorred leader at the time, “[he] noticed the growth of the revolution taking place on social networking sites (Facebook) and immediately took alarm before the ‘cyber-activism’ could continue” (Shapiro, 3). The hostility between government forces and citizens in revolt have thus proven to lead to the streets and World Wide Web alike, as both undergo extreme measures to silence or communicate the accuracy of the unfolding events.

As the world sits on the edge of their seats to discover a total consummation of the wide-spread demand for democracy among Arab nations, the public stays informed by means of an abundance of chronicles being reported through social networking sites, and other Internet outlets. Technology has not only aided the revolutionaries that protest for freedom in the Middle East, but assists citizens on an international scale with keeping keenly informed of the opposition’s efforts. Modern times are beginning to glimmer of parallel battles being fought on land and on the web- as jittery governments attempt to cripple the chances of information being leaked by means of Internet restrictions. Cyber-warfare has become a concurrent grapple for both sides of the expanding revolts, and directly delineates the importance of technology upon contemporary affairs.

