

# How did the Arab Spring shape the Internet's role in social movements?

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What is a revolution? It's a broad term that has been ascribed to everything from the beginning of permanent agricultural settlements in Mesopotamia to the 1776 American revolt against British rule. It's a "positive" term in comparison to related words like "anarchy" or "turmoil." It's a temporal term associated with a period of rapid progress. It's a fickle concept that can shift with the tumultuous tide of public opinion. Scholars, presidents, and dictators alike have all tried to repurpose this word as a manifestation of their academic arguments, or, in some cases, to bolster support for their regime. As an example, Muammar Gaddafi, the former dictator of Libya, eagerly designated his military coup and resultant regime as representative of the popular revolution. Ironically, he was deposed and executed just over 40 years later in a similarly violent revolt. Libya wasn't an outlier: suddenly, in 2011, Arab regimes around the Middle East began to face remarkable resistance to their rule. Mass protests engulfed the region, promising a bright future of economic security and democracy. Unfortunately, many scholars have dismissed this event as a failed uprising, with little long-term political change enacted across the Middle East. Some historians even believe it to be an anomalous event in a reliably statist and authoritarian region. However, this period, referred to as "the Arab Spring," was one of the most impactful revolutions in recent history because it was the first major movement to be enabled by globalized internet technology. Fundamentally, the Arab Spring event revolutionized the manner in which mass social movements are organized and conducted.

To fully understand the novel and impactful role of technology in the Arab Spring, it is necessary to examine three periods of history: the Middle East before, during, and after the events of 2011. This paper will examine the proliferation of interpersonal communications technologies and their effects on stirring the Arab populace to the point of rebellion.

## Before the Spring: Setting the Stage For Revolution

While the Arab Spring is widely regarded to have been catalyzed by the self-immolation of Tunisian street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi, the Arab world was already a powder keg. There was widespread discontent among the public towards authoritarian rule, resulting in the adoption of the slogan "the people demand the removal of the regime," during Egypt's Tahrir Square protests.<sup>1</sup> The Arabs hoped that new, democratic governments modeled after the American and British would rise up to take the place of autocracies. Creating such a style of government would be unprecedented for the Arab world. In fact, very few rebellions in the Middle East ever sought to establish democratic rule as their primary objective. One of the only successful Middle East revolutions that wasn't a military coup was the 1979 Iranian Revolution that deposed the autocratic Shah. However, it installed an Islamic theocracy that was arguably even more oppressive than the previous regimes. Unfortunately, due to the lack of information, the Iranian public was generally unaware of any alternatives to autocracy. News of democratic success outside of Iran had been heavily censored by a series of despots seeking to establish legitimacy

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Macdiarmid, *Protesters gather in Tahrir Square*, February 1, 2011, photograph.

for their regime. Heavy censorship still exists throughout the Middle East. So what was different for the 2011 revolts that enabled citizens to seek democratic reform?

The new variable was the level of access to information. Throughout the early 2000s, Arab states began to participate in the world wide web; the resultant globalization enabled Middle Eastern nations to rapidly modernize their economies and form stronger relationships with countries on the other side of the world. While initially hesitant to introduce such an unknown technology into their states, autocrats enjoyed the increased influx of wealth and ease of diplomatic communication. The introduction of the internet was relatively slow compared to the outside world, and much of it was used to bolster economic sectors. In the year 2000, anthropologist Jon W. Anderson wrote that, in the Middle East, “use of the internet for dissident politics or religious activism [...] draws more attention than mundane, typical activities such as infrastructure development and delivery regimes.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, Anderson shows that the internet was most commonly used for public industrial advancement rather than as a form of self-expression. When the article was written, online dissidence in the region would remain anomalous for another eleven years. Authoritarian leaders in the Middle East cautiously permitted more widespread use of the internet over the ensuing decade. They believed that the new technology posed little threat to the legitimacy of their regime. Yet, from the moment that Arab states became connected to the outside world, irreparable damage to their autocracies had been done.

The impenetrable information dam erected by Arab dictatorships had sprung an uncontrollable leak. According to Georgetown Professor Jefferey Ghannam, “Despite government crackdowns and strictures, such as firewalls and surveillance, a survey of 16 Arab countries conducted by the Arab Advisors Group in 2009 found that there were roughly 40 to 45 million Internet users in the region.”<sup>3</sup> Virtually overnight, the Middle East experienced one of the greatest expansions of freedom of speech in modern history. Online users who dared to openly oppose Arab regimes potentially faced serious consequences; however, it is far more difficult to charge dissidents with treason when they are able to post anonymously on American social media sites like Facebook and Twitter. Total control of the online communication is a near impossibility to begin with for any regime, and on top of that most governments in the Middle East neglected their overtaxed internet censorship departments. While Egypt, for example, had five million users on Facebook, only forty-three bureaucrats were assigned to regulate them.<sup>4</sup> Thus, over time, untraceable dissidence began to spread across social media widely undetected. Internet cafes, once used for leisurely online connection, became salons of the Arab youth.

Just as dangerous for Middle Eastern autocrats was how their populaces could now easily see how other regimes worked in the outside world. The use of virtual private networks allowed Arab citizens to discover democratic government in the West. Upon juxtaposing the republican government with the repressive regimes that didn’t want their own citizens to learn about democracy in the first place, many Arabs were furious with their current government. Due to the expansion in political education created by increased internet access, dissidents were able to

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<sup>2</sup> Jon W. Anderson, "Producers and Middle East Internet Technology: Getting beyond 'Impacts'," *Middle East Journal*.

<sup>3</sup> Jefferey Ghannam, "Amplifying Voices, Responding to Crises: Media Technology and the Arab Spring," Georgetown Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, last modified April 17, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Ghannam, "Amplifying Voices," Georgetown Center for Contemporary Arab Studies.

clearly picture the new type of the regime that they wanted to install. Many Iranian rebels in 1979, having never heard the term “democracy” before, were pawns of the clergy and oligarchs seeking to seize power from the Shah. With no other alternatives, they were forced to choose between monarchy and theocracy. In 2011, a decade of internet technology enabled rebels to be their own master, and to fight to establish unprecedented egalitarian regimes.

Lastly, the rise in access to information allowed citizens to also observe in greater detail the atrocities committed by their regimes. PBS Correspondent and Egyptian citizen Mona Eltahway, prior to the Arab Spring, describes that “the revolution has been years in the making. [...] Police brutality, jails full of political dissidents, and horrific torture [has been] reported by human rights organizations in Egypt and outside of Egypt.”<sup>5</sup> Not only were Arabs in the 2000s able to view successful democracies around the world, but they were made aware of the horrific acts committed by their own government. Thus, the introduction of the internet simultaneously stoked anger towards autocratic regimes while raising hopes for a democratic future.

The introduction of the internet into the Middle East vastly changed the nature of revolutions in the region. No longer were revolts limited to military coups and misinformed promotion of charismatic despots. Since the Arab spring, politically educated citizens increasingly demanded power to the people. In contrast to 1979, Iranian protesters in 2023 are more well informed about human rights precedents and democracy in other parts of the world. Thus, the expansion of information leading up to the Arab spring has enabled future revolutions to potentially succeed in their pursuit of democratic reform.

### **During the Spring: The Revolution Will Be Televised**

In 2010, the Arab world was a matchbox. Internet access was widespread, especially among the impressionable youth that accounted for 60% of the population. The economy was in a slump, with an unemployment rate of 10%; for youth, it was four times higher.<sup>6</sup> Thus, as journalist Ellen Knickmeyer states, “rather than the usual suspects—bearded Islamists or jaded leftists—it [was] young people, angry at the lack of economic opportunity available to them,” that eventually became the backbone of the revolts.<sup>7</sup>

Mohamed Bouazizi was one such Arab youth, disaffected and down on his luck when a Tunisian police woman confiscated his fruit stand for not having the requisite permits. In desperation, Bouazizi marched to the governor’s office only to be turned away. In an act of protest, Bouazizi ran outside the gates of the office, and shouted, “How do you expect me to make a living?”<sup>8</sup> Then, he doused himself in gasoline and self-immolated. The news spread rapidly across the internet, and soon multiple groups had started on Facebook to celebrate Bouazizi’s act of defiance while simultaneously protesting against the Tunisian government. The efficiency and ease of online communication allowed dissidents to organize mass protests at a moment's notice.

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<sup>5</sup> Mona Eltahawy, interview, PBS, last modified February 9, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Ellen Knickmeyer, "The Arab World's Youth Army," *Foreign Policy*, January 28, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Ellen Knickmeyer, "The Arab World's Youth Army," *Foreign Policy*, January 28, 2011.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Worth, "How a Single Match Can Ignite a Revolution," *The New York Times*, October 7, 2011.

Abruptly, the Tunisian government was overwhelmed by a wave of dissent. As much as neighboring regimes tried to limit knowledge of the events in Tunisia, internet technology ensured that almost no Arab youth in the Middle East was unaware of the revolt. In effect, Bouazizi's act was the single spark to "set on fire the Arab imagination."<sup>9</sup>

The protests spread to Egypt, Bahrain, and throughout Northern Africa. According to a study from the University of Washington, at least 2300 tweets coordinating protests were sent everyday between dissidents in Egypt and Tunisia alone.<sup>10</sup> Mass protests, such as Egypt's famous Tahrir Square protests in which millions took to the streets, were a result of organization on the internet. Prior to the Arab Spring, protests had required months of planning under constant scrutiny. There was a perpetual fear that the police would locate and arrest dissidents. However, the 2011 revolts demonstrated the power of online communication in fighting to achieve political objectives.

Facebook, Twitter, and Youtube all played another role beyond protest organization: they allowed the people to speak directly to the outside world. The West was able to view the uncensored struggles of people fighting vigorously to realize their dreams of democracy. The United States Institute of Peace analyzed the extensive use of Twitter during the 2011 protests, and came to the conclusion that one of the platform's primary uses was to "communicate to the rest of the world what was happening on the ground during the uprisings."<sup>11</sup> Thus, proliferation of the internet not only allowed Arabs to draw inspiration from democracies in the outside world, but also allowed citizens in those very democracies to observe the resultant revolts in the Middle East. Protests against autocracy sprang up across France and England, garnering public support for the Arab rebellions. The spotlight shone on the Middle East may not have resulted in success for the 2011 protests, but it certainly achieved awareness among Westerners of the situation in Arab countries. Even more importantly, shared videos and blogs during the Arab Spring allowed internet users around the globe to empathize with Arab citizens and see them as fellow human beings with a noble cause worth fighting for.

### **After the Spring: A New Revolution**

Frankly, the extent to which the 2011 Arab Revolts accomplished their political objectives is not a controversial topic. With the notable exception of Tunisia, the Arab Spring is widely regarded as an abysmal failure in catalyzing true social change. According to Hicham Alaoui, a former Moroccan Prince exiled for promoting liberal reforms, "that first burst of energy disrupted the system, but it lacked structure — or plans for the future. In the power vacuum, Islamists rose up, and the surviving autocrats clamped down."<sup>12</sup> The overreliance on social media to organize protests may be a cause of the protests' impotency: without a single leader guiding the uprisings, the protestors had no way to focus the direction nor sustain the momentum of their rebellion.

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<sup>9</sup> Mona Eltahawy, interview, PBS, last modified February 9, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Catherine O'Donnell, "New study quantifies use of social media in Arab Spring," *University of Washington News*, September 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Heather Brown, "The Role of Social Media in the Arab Uprisings," Pew Research Center, last modified November 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Clea Simon, "10 years later: Was the Arab Spring a failure?," *Harvard Gazette*, February 3, 2021.

Furthermore, youthful social media gurus lacked the necessary political expertise to intelligently and effectively work with the government to enact reforms.

Authoritarian regimes have learned their lesson from the Arab Spring. While social media is still the primary method of protest organization for many in the Middle East, countries like Egypt have greatly expanded their bureaucratic infrastructure to handle any potential dissidents. The Pew Research Center has found that sites such as Facebook have been coerced into silencing anti-government speech in the Middle East; if they don't comply, these companies will not be allowed to exist in any form in the region.<sup>13</sup> Cyber-surveillance technology has enabled authorities to pinpoint the location and personal information of protestors. The Arab Spring demonstrated that the internet, when left unchecked, has the capability to overthrow regimes. Dictators in Egypt and Bahrain certainly learned their lesson, now instituting some of the strictest cyber policies in the world.<sup>14</sup>

However, the news is not all dismal. The Internet is often criticized for being an unequal platform leveraged by greedy corporations for their own personal gain. Instead, the Arab Spring showed the capability of the internet to enable positive social change. From Brazil to China, successful demonstrations have utilized social media similarly to the protests of the Arab Spring. Many regimes across the Middle East are wary of the internet technology that can hold them accountable for human rights abuses and disseminate information of wrongdoing. Thus, the 2011 protests repurposed the internet to be a tangible tool for change and a force for good around the world.

## **Conclusion**

The introduction of the internet reshaped the fabric of Middle Eastern society, culminating in the events of the Arab Spring. The internet enabled Arabs to be inspired by the world outside their repressive states while simultaneously inspiring each other to fight against oppression and tyranny. As a result, authoritarians have recognized the internet as a legitimate threat to their sovereignty, and have made bold attempts to control access and limit online dissidence. Therefore, the Arab Spring's use of the internet to catalyze and coordinate rebellion will continue to impact social movements and their repercussions. Tarek Megerisi, a North Africa specialist at the European council of foreign relations, states that, "the Arab Spring will continue: no matter how much you try to repress it or how much the environment around it changes, desperate people will still try to secure their rights."<sup>15</sup> Thus, the ideals of the 2011 uprisings will live to see another day. There will be more revolutions in the Middle East, and possibly, one will eventually succeed at establishing a new democratic order for the entire Arab world. If such a thing happens, the next generation will have to thank the technological pioneers of the Arab Spring for providing the foundation for such a large-scale, democratic uprising.

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<sup>13</sup> Heather Brown, "The Role of Social Media in the Arab Uprisings," Pew Research Center, last modified November 2012.

<sup>14</sup> Anne Alexander, "Internet role in Egypt's protests," BBC, last modified February 9, 2011.

<sup>15</sup> Vivian Yee, "What Have We Done With Democracy? A Decade On, Arab Spring Gains Wither," *The New York Times*, October 10, 2021.

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