College of Arts and Sciences Presentations

2014 Undergraduate Research and Scholarship Conference

4-21-2014

#Egypt: Exploring Social Media as Association and Participatory Reporting

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Introduction

In 2011, the world watched as Arab peoples protested long-seated governments and long-accepted practices through a region-wide movement known as the Arab Spring. Egypt was one of the fronts in this unrest, and captivated the world's attention with its young, tech-savvy, driven group of activists and their fervor for change. Twitter and other social media sites were inundated with news and inspirational messages of support, such as the widely retweeted message, "RT @paulocoelho: To the people in Tahrir Square: We are all Egyptians today/Hoje ns somos todos egpcios" (Choudhary 77). One central question that emerged during and after these historic events is still being debated: what role did social media play in this uprising?

The movement has been given many names: the Revolution of Free Media, the Revolution of Citizen Media, the Social Media Revolution, the Twitter Revolution, Revolution 2.0—these and many more monikers all refer to the same 2011 Egyptian uprising (Mansour 136). These labels point to a tendency to characterize the Arab Spring uprisings *in terms of* social media, defining the events of an historic political movement by the tools that were used to organize and discuss it. Yusri Hazran warns, "One of the difficulties a historian faces is addressing events as they unfold and before they have crystallized" (116). How can we characterize these events before the dust has settled, and without overstating the role social media played in the Arab Spring? If scholars are to explore such political history in the making, the role of social media must be addressed.

I argue that defining social media as a *communication technology* with *low barriers to participation* can help both scholars and citizens determine how social media use was involved

in the Egyptian revolution. Defining social media this way allows us to draw historical parallels to the ever-changing world of social protest. This is not the first time medium has served as contributory in a social movement. Looking as far back as the mid-1400s, Johannes Gutenberg's printing press was a similarly new communication technology, lowering the barriers of participating in discussions previously difficult to join. The printing press made the skill of literacy more widely accessible, helped build wider-reaching communities of scientists and scholars, and facilitated the treatises of previously less privileged classes. Luther's *95 Theses* exemplified the *kairos* of this new technology: his message of social rebellion was timely, and spread through a medium that perhaps helped increase social equality. Was the Protestant Reformation *caused* by Gutenberg's press? Clay Shirky writes,

> Two things are true about the remaking of the European intellectual landscape during the Protestant Reformation: first, it was not caused by the invention of movable type, and second, it was possible only after the invention of movable type. . . Holding these two thoughts in your head the same time is essential to understanding any social change driven by a new technological capability (67).

This exemplifies the most realistic way to view the power of our very own millennial printing press, social media. Twitter and Facebook may not be causing revolutions and toppling power structures, but they may be facilitating social and political revolutions by offering lower barriers to participation in social meaning-making. It is impossible to realistically analyze events like the Egyptian revolution apart from the communication technologies used. Like the printing press, the power of social media is not bound up solely in its ability to transmit information widely and quickly, but rather in its participatory affordances, allowing publics to create and

define cultural movements together. As L. Gordon Crovitz wrote in the *Wall Street Journal*, "Revolutions have always been social and involved media." Social media may seem startlingly novel, but it's simply a new part of a very old tradition.

I will focus specifically on how social media can facilitate two important actions of successful protest: *association* and *participatory reporting*. In hopes of moving the conversation on social media and political movements forward, I propose and analyze these two ways of characterizing social media's hand in the Egyptian revolution. I argue that, in part through utilizing the social media tools available to them, Egyptian citizens created a shared political consciousness and built a networked public poised to enact meaningful change.

In the spirit of John Dewey, Asen and Brouwer explain this process, saying, "The public [is] an ephemeral phenomenon built through *collective perception*" (Asen et al 1, emphasis added). This collective perception is created socially and over time, resulting in a networked public. Social media served as a tool in the hands of Egyptian activists to build this networked public, through affordances I will be discussing here. Social media allows for association and participatory reporting in new ways. These actions were possible before, but were less accessible and slower via more traditional communication technologies. These two actions are made more accessible through affordances of social media, and are perhaps the most powerful aspects of protest made more available through social media.

Although previous works on social media and the Egyptian revolution have addressed participatory reporting, few have emphasized the building of the public that is crucial to any sort of significant change. I use the term *association* to refer to this vital process of networking, and then address the ways in which participatory reporting played a supporting role in the revolution.

Addressing the Egyptian revolution in this way allows the conversation to move beyond neatly divided debates about social media, and instead forward to answer questions about social change and the nature of protest.

Literature Review

A central tension runs through the research done on social media, debating the varying level of influence social media had on the Arab Spring and other political movements. Malcolm Gladwell argues persuasively in the *New Yorker* that popular media overestimates Twitter and Facebook's power in political activism, citing an "outsized enthusiasm for social media" (3). Through highlighting the sacrifices of safety and comfort made by activists of the past—specifically discussing the American Civil Rights movement—Gladwell dismisses social network-mediated movements as motivated by the ease of Internet "slacktivism" and the ability to be involved with the click of a mouse or the stroke of a keyboard. "Fifty years after one of the most extraordinary episodes of social upheaval in American history," he writes, "we seem to have forgotten what activism is" (3). He claims that social media distracts from real activism because these "slacktivists" can engage in low-risk, low-impact activism.

However, Gladwell is not without staunch opposition. Clay Shirky, an NYU professor and the man credited by Gladwell to have written the social-media movement bible, argues, "The fact that barely committed actors cannot click their way to a better world does not mean that committed actors cannot use social media effectively" (Wasik). Sarah Joseph notes that Shirky's argument revolves around the claim "that social media has revolutionized how people form political opinions and has made information so widely accessible that more people than ever are able to develop considered points of view" (Joseph 152).

Several theorists have sought to find a middle ground between "digital evangelists" like Shirky and "techno-realists" like Gladwell (Comunella et al 453). Comunella and Anzera postulate that the conversation has revolved too much around these dichotic oppositions, and has become a discussion akin to the early days of the Internet when utopians and dystopians debated and found little common ground. They further argue that the fields of internet studies and international relations need to come together as interdisciplinary forces in any analysis of the Arab Spring (454).

Like Comunello and Anzera, Hofheinz argues that without further research and the application of alternate theoretical lenses, cyber-skeptics and cyber-utopians will continue to argue, each with equally legitimate points (1422). Similarly, Fuchs refers to Cohen's book from 1972, saying that Cohen "shows how public discourse tends to blame the media and popular culture for triggering, causing or stimulating violence" (385). Fuchs goes on to characterize both "cyber-utopianism" and "techno-pessimism" as opposite forms of "technological determinism," noting that neither of these two extremes answer critical questions about the nature of unrest and revolutions (386). These discussions all attempt to move the conversation beyond focusing on the technologies alone and more on the nature of the revolution itself.

Popular media outlets are perhaps the most overt in claiming social media caused the Egyptian revolution, and by extension the Arab Spring. CNN's Amber Lyon called the Arab Spring protests "digitally-fueled revolutions" that "leveraged the technology of the Internet to call out injustices," hosting a series called "iRevolution: Online Warriors of the Arab Spring." Philip Howard claims in his book that social media was "consistently one of the most important sufficient and necessary conditions" in the Arab Spring, claiming that "none" of the "many

tactics" besides social media worked to enact meaningful change in the Middle East (France-Presse). The barrage of nicknames for the Arab Spring and digital-media headlines during and after the Egyptian revolution added to a frenzy of excited conversation. This excitement may be due to a very Western love of technology.

Ultimately, attempts to characterize any social movement in terms only of the tools used by its participants are short-sighted. Political conditions must be seen as exigent, and citizen association must take place. Social media, like other communication technologies, can facilitate the creation of a networked public. I would argue that the low barriers to participation and the relative inability for governments to control social media can enhance these standard communication technology affordances.

Political Background and Timeline

Egypt has long been the center of Arab intellectualism, and a powerful political force for arbitrating peace and stability in the tumultuous Middle East. Historically, Egypt has ranked low in voice and accountability in world governance indicators, which calculate the sentiments on government quality provided by survey participants and expert analysts (Attia et al 370). In other words, citizens frequently reported feeling they had little ability to select their government officials, and had low freedom of speech, association, and assembly. Simultaneously, Egyptian citizens rank very high in uncertainty avoidance, showing that regulations and procedures in place foster an environment of high stability and conformity (Attia et al 370). This active avoidance of uncertainty, coupled with a populace discouraged from activism, could explain why President Hosni Mubarak remained in power for nearly 30 years ("Hosni Mubarak").

However, a new political and social force has surfaced in recent years in Egypt: a younger population. Egypt's current median age is 24, and this demographic has established a flourishing tradition of political awareness and activism, organizing numerous wide-scale demonstrations and protests over the past decade. This increasingly outspoken demographic, combined with Egypt's suffering economy—including an unemployment rate of around 9.7% and rising cost of living—may have created a perfect environment for the Egyptian revolution (Attia et al 370). Social media usage among these urban youth is also reported to be high. Though Internet penetration in Egypt only reaches 30%, Cairo residents boast more than 64% Internet-connected households. 78% of the around 5 million Facebook users in Egypt are aged 15-29, suggesting that social media is the tool of choice for urban youth (Lim 235).

In early 2011, the unique political environment of the Middle East served as the stage for an equally unique wave of protests, some of which ended where they began. Others, like the Egyptian revolution, ended in a dramatic and rapid regime change. On January 14, 2011, the Tunisian Revolution found such success when the Tunisian president, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, was forced to flee the country after only four weeks of massive protests and demonstrations. Activities in Tunisia were quickly associated with the emergence of the Arab Spring. From January 14-24, Twitter and Facebook were reportedly flooded with calls for similar demonstrations to be held in Egypt. In fact, over 90,000 Facebook users confirmed their participation in a large-scale protest slated for January 25 in Cairo (Attia et al 370).

The following timeline incorporates different sources of data to provide major events, Twitter trends, and the results of events throughout the Egyptian revolution. Twitter provides unique insight into the trends of social networking during the Egyptian revolution. Twitter is a

microblog site that allows users to post or "Tweet" 140-character messages to followers, who then have the option of then "retweeting" to their own followers. This characteristic of Twitter is one reason why it may be valuable to activists, in that a message can be widely distributed in a relatively short amount of time. Twitter also highlights trends by identifying the most popular topics during a time period, categorized via hashtags ("About"). This trending characteristic was used by Northwestern University's *Pulse of the Tweeters* to aggregate Tweets during the time period surrounding the Egyptian revolution, illustrated in the following timeline.

The timeline also illustrates how enthusiasm for topics related to Egypt grew as the movement gained traction and momentum. Total Tweets reached their peak as the movement itself did. Over 20 million Egyptians involved themselves in the increasingly popular revolution, and Twitter responded with increased discussion and support. If nothing else, this data shows that Twitter was used extensively by both Egyptians and global users to discuss and support the movement.

Date	Major Event	Number of Tweets		Result
Jan. 14	Tunisian Revolution succeeds in causing Tunisian President to flee country	No Data	No Data	Calls in Egypt on Twitter and Facebook for similar protests
Jan. 25	"Day of Rage" protests in Cairo; Egypt-related topics begin trending on Twitter	**Topic**	**Number (cum.)**	Tens of thousands of Egyptians protest across the country; more discussions on social networks and calls for more demonstrations
		cairo	6,992	
		egypt	N/T	
		hosni_mubarak	N/T	
		tahrir	N/T	
Jan. 27	Egyptian government begins limiting access to Internet	cairo	N/T	Adverse affects for the Egyptian government, in that the protests became larger and more fervent in response to losing freedoms
		egypt	9,395	
		hosni_mubarak	N/T	
		tahrir	3,053	
Jan. 29	Mubarak dissolves his cabinet, appoints Omar Suleiman as Vice President	cairo	90,901	Mubarak announces he will stay in office only until September, some sympathy from citizens
		egypt	334,612	
		hosni_mubarak	5,759	
		tahrir	6,929	
Feb. 2	Also known as Bloody Wednesday, Egyptian government ends limiting access to Internet	cairo	122,575	Demonstrations intensify in response to brutal beatings of protestors by government; 4-5 million people now protesting
		egypt	418,955	
		hosni_mubarak	5,759	
		tahrir	90,616	
Feb. 6	Egypt topics cease trending on Twitter; Mubarak resigns Feb. 11	cairo	152,463	Revolution has grown to include 20 million people
		egypt	418,955	
		hosni_mubarak	12,719	
		tahrir	146,439	
Feb. 11	Mubarak resigns	N/T	N/T	Major objective of revolution achieved

Table 1. N/T stands for "Not Trending," indicating that the topic was not trending at the time; No Data indicates that Pulse of the Tweeters did not record data for the given time periods. Adapted from Attia et al and Choudhary et al.

As Table 1 suggests, actions taken by Egyptian citizens had dramatic effects and

consequences for the existing regime and the public. This is strong evidence that the activists

who took to the streets in Cairo were certainly committed actors, belying Gladwell's warnings

against slacktivism, and the data suggests that they utilized social media heavily. However, how

was social media used in Egypt, and did it play a pivotal role in the revolution's success and

visibility? In working to avoid oversimplifying the conversation and swinging the conceptual

pendulum toward "digital evangelism," the complex social and political factors also at play in

the Egyptian revolution must be simultaneously considered in relation to social media.

Association: Circumventing Government Control

In a much-cited study, sociologists Elihu Katz and Paul Lazarsfeld suggest that mass

communication alone does not influence and build peoples' opinions. Ideas may be heard first

via mass communication, but until they are echoed by friends, family, and colleagues, they do

not resonate on an individual level (Shirky 6). This underscores the importance of social media's

arguably most powerful affordance: *association*. Palczewski notes that discussions of

cyberactivism have tended to cast the affordance of the Internet in terminology of mass

dissemination of information. In other words, "People tend to focus not on its [the Internet's]

interactive nature, but on its ability to transmit information" (Palczewski 162). Web 2.0

technology, although a powerful tool for mass communication, is also an often-undervalued

participatory tool. Social media is inherently participatory—a built-in space for associating with

peers. Rheingold describes this shift as

>...not a 'few-to-many' medium like television, talk radio, newspapers or
>
>magazines, but a 'many-to-many' medium that gives large numbers of people

access to large numbers of people. The power to persuade and educate—to

influence people's beliefs and perceptions—is radically decentralized when

people can communicate in this way: control is spread throughout the network

(qtd in Palczewski 167).

In the past, this many-to-many influencing of opinions took place in either physical space or

through slower and less prolific methods of communication. In a nation like Egypt, with

historically low freedom of association, speech, and assembly, citizens could arguably be said to

have limited understandings of what associating and coalition-building even entail. Although this

association certainly took place in the past, social media created an avenue for instantaneous and

wide-spread association, and in a medium that proved difficult for the Egyptian government to

control or discourage.

In fact, when the Egyptian government attempted to censor internet usage, citizens

previously uninvolved in protesting joined the revolution, outraged by the Internet shutdown in

particular, leading to the opposite result intended by the government. Rather than quelling the

protests, the government's action increased the movement's active participants. This further

underscores social media's ability to increase citizens' association, as governments have a

difficult time controlling these communication technologies. Physical association requires risk

and must remain subversive, thus limiting the number of people who can be involved in defining

and creating the movement. Virtual association, on the other hand, is far less dangerous, and can

include the vast "many" in the meaning-making. Although individuals involved in Internet-

mediated protest may be tracked down by the government with significant effort, this kind of

retribution is significantly less dangerous for most participants than, say, a mass arrest or

violence against a gathered group. In this way, the affordances which concern the "slacktivist" critics actually allow publics to stage very meaningful activism, by removing the difficulty and risks of physical association.

Many Egyptians involved in the revolution support this notion themselves. Mansour interviewed and surveyed revolution participants from a range of backgrounds to gauge their sentiments on the importance of social media, and his findings reveal that 100% of survey participants indicated that Facebook was "commonly used" by activists during the revolution, while 79% reported equal usage of Twitter. It seems that Egyptians felt that social media was a powerful tool for changing opinions and disseminating information, with 90% of participants citing "get[ting] opinions" as "very significant" in their social media use, the remaining 10% reporting this as "significant" (140). Young people in Egypt, using the communication tools they had at their disposal, built a networked public through sharing their opinions, and readied themselves to voice their demands as Mubarak's regime crumbled.

Social media's affordance of association in a situation where low freedom of association previously existed produced other effects as well. Mansour points out that social media usage allowed citizens to tell their stories to the world, and that they succeeded in "gaining the sympathy and support of the international community, particularly those which may have a strong influence on the existing regime, such as the USA and the European Union" (144). This suggests that association can be effective not only in building a strong civil society in an oppressed state, but also in helping build coalitions of understanding and compassion internationally. This also holds true in that the Arab Spring became a region-wide phenomenon, the impetus of which was facilitated through citizens' social media. Though supporters in the

United States and elsewhere were arguably involved in Gladwell's "slacktivism," portraying

their enthusiasm for the Egyptian revolution without intent or ability to mobilize, they were able

nonetheless to voice personal support in very real, instantaneous, and constant ways, adding to

the momentum of the revolution and other movements throughout the Arab Spring.

Participatory Reporting: Storytelling from the Ground

A second powerful affordance of social media revealed in the Arab Spring protests is

participatory reporting, also referred to as citizen reporting. Participatory reporting includes

citizens sharing their personal narratives and reporting on events they are personally involved in,

mixing their own commentary, emotions, and perspective into the news feed. Participatory

reporting is certainly related to the previously discussed characteristic of association, but serves a

unique contributory role in social movements. Participatory reporting serves a more direct role in

influencing how networked publics make sense of resistance, since the language used by activists

themselves helps define the movement in their own terms.

　　One characteristic of participatory reporting is that it provides an immediate and constant

collection of news. Papachrissi and de Fatima Oliveira analyzed news feeds on Twitter by

tracking, cataloging and dissecting #egypt, saying that,

> #Egypt is characterized by mounting, emotive anticipation, expressed through
>
> posts that are shared to inform, but also frequently simply for the sake of opinion,
>
> expression, and release. These constant and repetitive streams of updates sustain a
>
> lively stream of news that is always on, and thus mediates a networked movement
>
> that never sleeps (276).

This constant stream of news and information helped keep Egyptian protestors connected.

Papachrissi and de Fatima Oliveira go on to suggest that the constancy and the emotive language of the updates "drummed up the heartbeat" of the Egyptian revolution (274). "As individuals constantly tweeted and retweeted observations, events instantly turned into stories" (274). Tweets such as "Its time to come back NOW and join your fellow brothers and sisters," and "#Libya and #Egypt one hand together ..#Revolution until victory against all dictators" demonstrate how emotion and solidarity were clearly expressed in citizens' reporting on the events in their own back yard (qtd. in Papachrissi and de Fatima Oliveira 276). Twitter commentary provided by citizens involved helped define the Egyptian revolution, and it could be argued that this participant-given definition of "revolution" helped spur the movement forward from protest to regime change. Papachrissi and de Fatima Oliveira write, "The centrality of [the word] 'revolution,' compared to the presence but peripheral position of 'protest' suggests an anticipatory tendency to affirm this movement as revolutionary, and thus distinguish it from protests that might connect publics but not result in decisive breaks with past hierarchies of governance" (275). The protestors themselves defined the movement, rather than allowing outside influences or the government to impose their own definitions on the revolution.

This isn't the first time that participatory reporting has helped a movement gain traction in Egypt. The "We are all Khaled Said" movement in June 2010 was a widely-publicized social networking mediated protest in Egypt. The Facebook group "We are all Khaled Said" was created by cyberactivist Wael Ghonim in response to the brutal beating and subsequent death of Khaled Said, a 28-year-old Egyptian (Crovitz). Police allegedly beat Said because he was involved in dealing drugs, and reported that his death was drug-related. Papachrissi and de Fatima Oliveira note, "In regimes where or during times when media are controlled, inaccessible,

or not trusted, platforms like Twitter permit individuals to bypass traditional gatekeepers and contribute directly to the news process" (269). This is exactly what citizens did in response to the official story of Said's death—Internet sources responded with intense distrust immediately, with multiple sources claiming that Said was killed because he possessed video footage of police officers distributing seized drugs amongst themselves. Graphic images of Said's injuries were shared across social media platforms, and the Facebook group helped organize five different silent protests which thousands of Egyptians then attended (Lim 241). Lim suggests that "this collective identity was characterized by a sense of shared victimization as well" (241).

Ghonim, a Google product and marketing manager for the Middle East and North Africa, is an excellent example of a highly committed actor who utilized social media as a tool. His story also exemplifies how virtual tools are able to circumvent government control. Though Ghonim created the Facebook page anonymously, he was still tracked down and held, blindfolded, for 10 days by the Egyptian authorities (Crovitz). He was undeterred by this, and when he was released, he continued his organizing role in the ensuing protests. Later, during the revolution, Google was pivotal in helping citizens continue to circumvent government control by creating Speak2Tweet, which Egyptians used to leave voice messages that were then converted to Tweets (Crovitz).

Participating in the refutation of the official report of Said's death built a sense of solidarity and martyrdom among users, as well as a sense of trust in something beyond the government, helping to build a strong networked public. This networked public was already formed and continued to gain momentum as the Egyptian revolution came to a peak in early 2011. Participatory reporting through social media platforms allowed citizens the opportunity to build

strong ties and coalitions after Said's death, and allowed citizens to do the same during the

Egyptian revolution.

Discussion

Bill Wasik argues in *Wired*, "Technology becomes an important part of the story only if it's

changing the nature of the events—and the nature of the social groups that are carrying them

out." I would argue that both the nature of the events and social groups in Egypt were indeed

changed in specific ways through social media. This is similar to other times in history when a

change in the medium of communication altered the nature of the message—and who the sender

and receivers were—by way of its affordances. Through the affordances of association and

participatory reporting, the Egyptian revolution of 2011 was positively influenced and partly

mediated by social media, just as other social changes in the past have been influenced by other

communication technologies. The political and social environment in Egypt was certainly ripe

for revolution, but it is crucial to note the role of social media in creating that readiness, and its

further facilitation during the regime change.

Marshall McLuhan's reminder about medium is timely in analyzing the Arab Spring, and

specifically the Egyptian revolution. He writes,

> In a culture like ours, long accustomed to splitting and dividing all things as a means of
>
> control, it is sometimes a bit of a shock to be reminded that, in operational practical fact,
>
> the medium is the message. This is merely to say that the personal and social
>
> consequences of any medium—that is, of any extension of ourselves—result from the
>
> new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new
>
> technology (11).

The Egyptian revolution is a prime example of the inevitable "social consequences" of a new medium. Social media's involvement in modern protests represents a fundamental change in medium, and thus a change in the message. Social media's affordances of low barriers to access and participation led to association and participatory reporting, changing the message being sent, as well as who the senders and receivers of that message were.

Part of changing the medium of communication involved in defining, organizing, and mobilizing revolution requires changing *who* is involved in the conversation. Social media presents low barriers of access, enabling more individuals to join a movement; the required steps to create an account or a profile on most social media sites are relatively few. Social media sites are available prolifically through smart phones, a device now surpassing the personal computer in popularity. Social media connects individuals with similar interests, backgrounds, or in the same geographic location, and thus naturally connects like-minded activists. And although this new technology is much like the printing press and the radio and the television, it includes that instantaneous back-and-forth of conversation, allowing for "many-to-many" communication on a new level, requiring both its admirers and its critics to treat it as a unique medium of communication. Thus, as McLuhan suggests, we must also analyze its message in new ways.

Conclusion: Everything, and nothing, has changed

Although it is unwise and hasty to assume that social media tools cause revolutions in situations unready for revolt, it is equally unwise to dismiss this media and analyze the events that transpired entirely apart from the tools used. Social media, as seen in the examples analyzed here, can help build a public sphere when regimes begin to crumble, and can serve to further

cuases in the hands of both the involved public and an international audience. As Mansour, an

Egyptian himself, puts it,

> In part through these [social media] platforms, Arab peoples are rewriting their
>
> own narratives, individually and collectively, and announcing their ability to
>
> peacefully foment change and demand universal rights. Arab youth appear to be
>
> taking the region in a new direction, enabled with the technologies they know best
>
> (22).

The events of the Arab Spring remind us of the power in the old traditions of protest, such as

physical assembly (association), and participatory reporting. Although the traditions may be

accomplished through the new tool of social media, they are nonetheless familiar and vital to the

continuing existence of popular protest. Association allows for sharing and building of opinions,

and participatory reporting allows protest participants to define their own movements in their

terms. Social media has emerged as not only a new medium through which to communicate but

simultaneously capable of producing new meanings and new messages altogether. While the

Burkean idea of language creating meaning is not new, we now see another medium allowing for

this sense-making to take place. The online sharing of language and notions through social media

can bring previously unconnected individuals together under a collaboratively-created

movement. Furthermore, social media can allow for lower physical risks than traditional

association, as well as enable participants to collectively engage in protest by reporting their

individual experiences to the world without the constraints of established government or media

outlets. Such effects *are* new, and I argue that these effects are directly related to the shift in *both*

the medium of communication used to network publics and the meaning of the resulting message.

Sifting through the events of the Egyptian revolution is an important and ongoing process, with significant implications for understanding social change, communication, and rhetoric. Scholars, activists, and citizens alike must have a seat at the table as we debate the recent history of protest. The back-and-forth debate of "utopians" and "dystopians" is no longer helpful; we now know through data, anecdotes, and recent events that social media is part of the ever-changing landscape of social change. Our task now is to progress toward analyzing and understanding what we know. Scholars must continue work that attempts to understand how new media affects social change, and social media will be a part of this conversation for the foreseeable future. Activists need to understand the power and affordances of social media as they launch campaigns aimed at social change. The citizens of democracy need to understand social media, if for not other reason than to understand how democracy is changed by the unique affordances of social media, providing more individuals the opportunity to exercise their rights to free speech and assembly.

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