

Nov 04, 2016 by *Simon Mainwaring*



a life or death

Hundreds of thousands of Egyptians, many wearing bandages from days of street fighting, turned out in Cairo's Tahrir Square on Friday for what they are calling the 'Day of Departure', a nationwide call for the immediate removal and prosecution of Hosni Mubarak who has ruled the country for 30 years. This story is now larger than Egypt and the Arab world, as international news coverage and social media has broadcast the escalating violence around the world, time and again featuring Egyptian citizens dying and risking death in order to have their message heard and for regime change to become a reality. Egypt is widely considered the litmus test for what will happen in the rest of the Arab world, but the importance of social media in its political transformation is larger than that. The use of social media in Egypt is a dramatic demonstration of a clash of cultures – of the old and new, of violence and peace, of the old and young, of the past and future. Or a noted Egyptian blogger Sandmonkey wrote in a tweet from Tahrir Square today:

One group is peaceful and uses technology, the other is violent and uses rocks to smash your head. Which side do u wanna take? #jan25

Malcolm Gladwell, author of *The Tipping Point*, *Blink*, and *Outliers*, questioned the activist value of social media in *The New Yorker* in late 2010 asserting that social media are ineffective tools for serious social transformation. His much-debated article, entitled “Small Change: Why the revolution will not be tweeted,” argued that social media creates little more than “weak ties” between people warning “Weak ties seldom lead to high risk activism.” By comparison, Gladwell cited the activism of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, which required considerable mental strength and mutual commitment among the groups of black protesters who staged restaurant sit-ins and protest rallies, often under threats of violence and even death. Gladwell maintains this position in regard to the protesters in Egypt and Tunisia writing:

“Surely the least interesting fact about them is that some of the protesters may (or may not) have at one point or another employed some of the tools of the new media to communicate with one another. Please. People protested and brought down governments before Facebook was invented. They did it before the Internet came along.”

Despite Gladwell’s disinterest, the courage of protesters in China (over the suppression of the Nobel prize winner Lui Xiaobo), Yemen, Tunisia, Egypt and Jordan, to face violence and then share their story using social media is important because of the scalable connectivity it enables. While Gladwell is right to assert that social media is largely used to exchange trivial information, it is a mistake to limit its transformative potential to the worst excesses of its current practice, denying that technology and the dynamics it enables will mature and grow along with its users, especially in dramatic circumstances such as the protests in Egypt.

So to answer such critics such as Gladwell and Foreign Policy writer Evgeny Morozov, here are six levels of activist empowerment social media enables:

1. One-to one interaction between individuals connecting via Facebook, SMS, or Twitter, irrespective of time, distance, or delay. As Clay Shirky writes:

“We are living in the middle of the largest increase in expressive capability in the history of the human race. More people can communicate more things to more people than has ever been possible in the past, and the size and speed of this increase...makes the change unprecedented.”

2. Groups of people using social media to form communities, congregating around shared values, whether they are focused on a politician, cause or brand, such as we see in Egypt.

3. Connections between people across platforms, as conversations around shared values and ideas migrate tirelessly from one network to another and amongst different groups. As Henry Jenkins, author of *Convergence Culture* wrote in response to Gladwell silo-ed understanding of social media:

“We do not live on a platform; we live across platforms. We choose the right tools for the right jobs. We need to look at the full range of tools a movement deploys at any given moment—including some old fashion ones like door-to- door canvassing, public oratory, and street corner petitions, to understand the work which goes into campaigns for social change.”

4. Dialogues that go on between governments and citizens, or between brands and their consumer communities, using social media.

5. Interactions between the private sector, governments and non-profits, often with consumers or citizens as intermediaries.

6. The commingling of the virtual and real worlds through the parallel universes constructed within social games and virtual worlds. For example, the use of virtual goods within Zynga’s Farmville game on Facebook to raise funds for earthquake victims in Haiti.

By offering these six levels of engagement, social media provides a complex and deep infrastructure perfect for the activist processes of social transformation—which include information acquisition, knowledge development, transfer and sharing; ideation and thought leadership; empathy and emotional connection; and the spread of credible ideas that inspire cognitive dissonance. These tools are accessible to everyone, available 24/7, infinitely scalable, real time and free. As Twitter co-founder Biz Stone succinctly wrote in response to Gladwell’s article, “Lowering the barrier to activism doesn’t weaken humanity, it brings us together and it makes us stronger.”

As more people use social media to tell the story of the future, the wants and needs of more people will be reflected. Like all technology, social media is neutral but is best put to work in the service of building a better world. This week that involves the tragic loss of so many lives in Egypt as its citizens take to the streets to draft a new chapter in the their history. Their courage, sacrifice and story should not be dismissed or diminished for in the mutually dependent global community we now live in, or what I call a We First world, their story is our own.

Do you believe social media can accelerate social change? Or do you see its importance on par with all other media?

Cross-posted from We First.
