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# Networks, Social Media and Political Change in MENA

Victoria, B.C. Canada  
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## Conference Report (DRAFT 2)

### Executive Summary

The University of Victoria's Centre for Global Studies hosted the Networks, Social Media and Political Change in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) conference from November 29 to December 1, 2011 in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada. A group of 27 academics, activists, government and private sector representatives, and social media experts gathered for three days to discuss this timely subject matter. The conference was structured into five informal discussion forums and included a web conference with individuals from the MENA region.

The conference began with a review of the role of social media in MENA since the start of the phenomenon known popularly as the Arab Spring. After canvassing the types of hardware/software which might be characterized as constituting "social media", participants agreed that the role of those media varied from country to country, largely depending on the degree of Internet penetration. A lively discussion ensued on the relationship between traditional (printed press, television networks) and new/social media in MENA over the last year. Participants agreed that the old and new media were interacting and evolving in relation to each other. A combination of old and new media often significantly affected specific event outcomes, although the level of impact depended on circumstances. They also agreed that the media as a whole contributed to a demonstration or cascade effect from one country to another. The role of journalism in MENA was examined, including the differing practices and approaches of the two *Al Jazeera* networks.

The general parameters of social media effects were agreed upon. These included – various types of organizing function; an important "witnessing" function, which served to draw global attention to events in a specific country at critical times; and the mobilization of outside expertise, so that the social media could be used to encourage or facilitate transnational collaborative problem solving.

After reflecting on the role of social media and their underlying social networks in MENA, three current initiatives were presented: Cloud to Street (a Canada-based collaborative project which seeks to mobilize expertise to help Egyptian activists maximize their political power), Ushahidi (a non-profit tech company which develops free and open source software for information collection, visualization and interactive mapping), and MediaBadger (a Canadian social and media commercial research firm providing critical actionable intelligence to

government, IGOs and the private sector). All three groups have generated tools which are currently being used to analyze and build civil society and democracy in the region.

Victoria participants were joined by 13 individuals in remote locations in the Middle East and elsewhere in North America for further discussion, mostly focussed on possible future activities. The general conclusion was that outsiders could be a useful resource, although the priorities would have to be set by the people of the MENA region themselves. The discussion also canvassed the limitations of the social media and the issues raised by the involvement of large, for-profit enterprises in Internet-related businesses. Taking into account these areas of concern, the larger group brainstormed a number of ways in which they could personally assist with political change through the use of social media and personal networks.

The group concluded that future meetings would be beneficial. The focus of this next tranche of work should be on how social media can be used to root democracy in the region and to foster the development of democratic institutions.

## **1. Importance of Social Media in MENA in Past Year**

Participants began by reviewing events in the MENA region in the past year, as protests against established regimes spread from Tunisia to other countries. It was agreed that social media (and the more traditional counterparts) played a major role in this phenomenon, although the precise nature of their impact varied from country to country.

Participants did not attempt to prescribe a single definition of social media. While most participants agreed that social media included Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, arguments were also made that blogs, forums, text messages and Blackberry Messenger could be included under this umbrella. For example, many protestors in MENA used text messages to communicate about the uprisings. In the end, it was determined that a single definition of social media was unreachable at this point, given the rate at which the technology is changing.

Participants began the first session by discussing the role of social media in the past year. Much of the group was active on Twitter during the conference, sparking a memory of a particular tweet from an Egyptian that summarized the role of social media in the Arab Spring: "Facebook was used to set the date, Twitter was used to share logistics, YouTube to show the world, all to connect people." The group agreed that social media was simply a tool for change and that they should not be mistaken as the sole inspiration for revolutionaries. The idea of labelling the Arab Spring uprisings as a "Facebook revolution" or "Twitter revolution" was questioned. Activists within the group pointed out that recognition of the importance of social media must not be taken to minimize the role of the citizens in the region.

Throughout the last year, social media have evolved from a tool used by protestors to organize, mobilize and lead action, to a tool used by governments to monitor the public and as an instrument of social control. From student gatherings to opposition movements, social media have provided a platform for individuals with similar concerns to form political groups that have achieved regime change and now lead governments themselves (eg the National Transitional Council in Libya).

Social media have also been used to lead campaigns for the release of detained journalists and, more recently, activists. The recent arrest, detention and release of Egyptian-American journalist, Mona Eltahawy, was raised frequently by participants as an example of the

impact of social media. There was much debate surrounding the precise role of Twitter campaigns in releasing prisoners such as Eltahawy. While some participants argued that Eltahawy's status as a well-known journalist and her online presence was more responsible for her release than the hashtag #FreeMona, others believed that Twitter campaigns have the ability to affect the treatment of prisoners positively because of the publicity around a given case. The group concluded that it is wise for journalists and activists to create online networks in advance so that if they go missing, their absence is quickly detectable.

## **2. Relationship between Traditional and New Media**

The next session was dedicated to discussing the relationship between traditional and new media in the context of the Arab Spring. By traditional media, the group referred to journalistic sources such as newspapers, television and radio reports (even if available on the Internet), and by new media, they referred to social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, blogs and forums.

Participants noted that the role of traditional media has been altered by the introduction of new media and its ability to provide quick and concise reports. While the two types of media compete in many ways, they also rely on one another. For example, when a news organization does not have a reporter on the ground, it is forced to rely on social media for the latest details, or it risks missing the story. Traditional media are under more time constraints than ever before to verify and post stories as quickly as possible. While new media are able to attain footage and reports out of countries such as Syria, conference participants agreed that traditional media are still central because of their reputation as a reliable source.

During the debate regarding the relationship between traditional and new media, citizen journalism was identified as a key factor drawing these two sorts of media together. News organizations increasingly rely on the work on citizen journalists for tweets, blog posts and live coverage from the ground. The new media remain a critical reporting tool for traditional media in following the Arab Spring. Newsrooms now have their own Twitter, Facebook and YouTube accounts and receive large amounts of attention through the use of these social media. For instance, the *Al Jazeera English* Libya webpage has a live Twitter feed next to stories. One news organization that has recognized the importance of this convergence is *Al Jazeera English*. Participants agreed that *Al Jazeera English* has had a profound impact on the coverage of Middle Eastern issues since its creation in 1996. The new organization's unique ability to take human interest stories and apply them in another region, a notion coined "transnational inspiration", is innovative. Participants agreed that *Al Jazeera English* has been much more effective than *Al Jazeera Arabic* in presenting both sides of the Arab Spring because it has provided a platform for both demonstrators and government officials to speak. *Al Jazeera English* has provided "clear coverage."

However, the news organization did have a few flaws in the eyes of the participants. *Al Jazeera English* has strong ties with certain countries, such as Qatar, which was noted as the "the biggest city in *Al Jazeera* country," and weak relationships with other states, such as Libya, where it took two weeks for the news organization to begin coverage of the protests due to its poor relationship with Gadhafi. The role of Islam in the newsroom was also questioned. The example of five women-anchors quitting because of clothing issues was brought up during this discussion.

### **3. The Notion of Social Media "Bearing Witness"**

The discussion of this topic began with the question of whether the demonstrations in MENA would have occurred without the presence of Internet-based media. It was concluded that the Tunisian protests were probably inevitable, but -- would activists in other countries in the region have followed suit without social media? Participants noted that the use of photographs, videos and comments on social media provided the international community with a glance into the Arab Spring. However, the notion of "bearing witness" had an even more important role beyond informing the world at large. As Tunisia's revolution engulfed the country, the images and reports of the revolution on social media inspired Egyptians and Libyans as well.

Participants agreed that in states with limited or no Internet access, the social media have not been as effective. In the case of Syria, President Bashar al-Assad has banned journalists from the country, forcing protestors to secretly capture their own video and export it. Technological sanctions have also been applied by the government (meaning citizens cannot access simple tools such as GoogleMaps or Skype), while the government itself is able to work around sanctions and utilize these critical technologies.

The group then considered how the notion of "bearing witness" has sometimes distorted the situation on the ground. One participant reported that in Cairo during the elections at the end of November, the chaos of Tahrir Square witnessed on social media was not representative of the situation in the city as a whole. Just a few blocks away from the square, life was normal for Egyptians, as though a public consciousness of a second revolution did not exist. Civilians were apparently more interested in soccer than the protests.

Finally, participants agreed that use of the social media by journalists raised issues related to verification and trust. In this area, both sides of the media fence are learning from each other as they go along.

### **4. The Current Situation: Initiatives Building Democracy and Civil Society**

After reviewing the effects of social media and networks on political change and journalism in MENA, discussion turned to current efforts to utilize these technologies for democratic change and analysis. The key question addressed was: what roles can social media initiatives play in building civil society and democracy in the MENA region? Three projects working with societies in MENA to inspire political change and analysis were presented.

The first was Cloud to Street, which was introduced by co-founder Farhaan Ladhani. The project, which began in January 2011, connects the needs of democracy advocates in Egypt with the people and technology skill sets of networks in North America. Through the process of "hackathons" at Stanford University, Cloud to Street developed a crowd sourcing platform for the discussion of 17 human rights principles that were to be enshrined in the new Egyptian constitution. Watthiqah.com allowed users to vote on these principles and, within one week, generated 6,300 visits and 18,000 page views.

After seeing the desire for such engagement at the ground level in Egypt, Cloud to Street started its current pilot project. With this initiative, Egyptians suggest changes, needs and desires from within their community and then use telephones and a cloud-based service to share these concerns with the people in external diasporas, who advocate on behalf of the

internal community. For example, if a community in Egypt has a problem with potholes and they communicate through the mobile network with the diaspora community in England, the money from the diaspora can go to support that specific community problem. This project promotes democratic discussions about community-based issues that may be overshadowed by the overhaul of the government.

The second initiative was a crowd-sourcing map project called Ushahidi, presented by founder Patrick Meier. Ushahidi is a free open-source method of sharing information on a map through means of social media to allow for real-time situational awareness of a region. Through the use of Twitter, Facebook, SMS and cell phone applications, users can upload pictures, videos and text from a particular point to an Ushahidi map. The creator ultimately decides which information is uploaded onto the map. This initiative was first used as a citizen-based observation tool during the 2010 Egyptian elections before it made its way to Tunisia. More recently, an Ushahidi map was set up by a group of Syrians in Atlanta to create a crowd-sourcing map tracking human rights violations in the country. The United Nations requested an Ushahidi map early this year to track the demonstrations in Libya. The project is also being utilized to map sources of help, where people who can provide assistance on the ground identify themselves on a map.

The third, and final project focuses on the analysis of social media in specific countries. MediaBadger, a commercial company represented by vice president Mike MacKinnon, is an analytical firm based in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada that began in media marketing three years ago but is now shifting towards a social science applicability of their software. The company is currently working on a project analyzing Egypt. From the period of the beginning of the Iraq war in 2003 to the outbreak of the Egyptian revolutionary protests in January 2011, this project examines how the interplay between political activists and the various technology tools has developed.

Participants noted that MediaBadger is not the only firm doing analytical work in the field of social media policy. Other organizations, such as consulting groups at RAND and SAIC, have developed social media "boutique shops."

The group then went on to debate the possibility of private or governmental funding for projects such as Ushahidi and Cloud to Street (MediaBadger is already a private sector company). It was concluded that governments would most likely not be interested in projects that undercut their ability to control crisis and, thus, lead to tensions between civil society and government. In terms of private sector support, there has been great interest from the corporate world in supporting philanthropic projects such as Cloud to Street and Ushahidi. However, participants expressed concern that private organizations would do so in an effort strictly to improve their public relations image and, thus, invest in the wrong initiatives. In conclusion, the group agreed that because these projects were designed for grassroots use, without private or governmental funding, institutionalization may be inappropriate.

During a subsequent web conference, participants were joined in a video conference by a number of individuals and groups from the MENA region. Among them were individuals who discussed a social media project they have been involved with in Saudi Arabia helping to build democracy. In this case, Google worked with the Kingdom Dialogues in Saudi Arabia on their education reforms to set up a website where the public could ask questions about education via social media. The response was overwhelming - over 3,000 questions were posed to the

Minister, 15 of which he answered. After the project was complete, the Minister asked for a copy of the questions to consider in future work.

## **5. The Role of Outsiders and Conference Participants**

As the three-day meeting wrapped up, participants concluded that there are a number of things they, as experts in the area of study, and the general public could do to help promote democracy through social media in the MENA region.

One suggestion called for participants to apply pressure on governments and corporations supporting the violent regimes in MENA, such as Syria, where Canadian companies have corporate interests. It was suggested that an op-ed be submitted to a large national newspaper exposing these companies and government officials. One participant also suggested expert workshops educating diplomats prior to their postings about the role of social media and networks in political change.

Participants also highlighted the risks of the social media “bubble” people tend to surround themselves with when using Twitter. By following certain individuals and groups one agrees with or is interested in, social media users sometimes fall into an unconscious bias. Algorithms used by search engines and social media websites ensure that advertisements and search results are tailored to the individual’s interests. Thus, social media users fall into a “spiral of silence”, as described by Ethar El Katatmy, award-winning journalist and blogger. To defeat the “spiral of silence”, participants suggested social media users reach beyond their current online networks for exposure to different views on issues such as the Arab Spring.

Lastly, outsiders can help with the social media movement for democracy in MENA by setting up a map with crowd-sourcing networks such as Ushahidi, adopting an activist in the region and providing them with support through Cloud to Street, or even leading activist Twitter accounts from thousands of miles away, such as LibyaInMe and ShababLibya. Overall, participants agreed that the international community should not lose interest in the Arab Spring uprisings once they are over. There must be recognition that not only governments need to be rebuilt, but community concerns such as roads, schools and jobs must also be addressed.

## **6. What’s Next: Future Discussions**

The conference, which was the first of its kind held by the Centre for Global Studies, was deemed progressive and thought provoking. As the role of social media and networks in the Arab Spring continues to change, the group considered further discussion of these developments at future meetings.

Future talks could focus on the implications of technologies such as HTML 5, the next generation of web development which will act as a single platform for commercial providers who develop apps, instead of developing specific apps for the Blackberry, iPhone and Android platforms.

Participants also expressed concern about the growing amounts of information individuals are now dealing with. Participants agreed that knowledge management was a field which required additional academic work.

Participants agreed that a key future focus should be the development of social media tools which might support democracy and its constituent institutions. It was noted, however,

that new forms of democracy which emerged in the wake of country-specific revolutions might not always resemble Westminster-style processes, especially at the beginning.

## **Participants**

### **Conference Participants**

Adel El Zaim	IDRC, Senior Program Specialist, Information and Networks, Cairo Office
Andreanne Goyette	Analyst, Policy Research Division, Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada
Andrew Wender	Professor, Religion and International Politics, Middle East, University of Victoria
Esma Mneina	Shabab Libya, Twitter
Farhaan Ladhani	Cloud to Street Former Head of Strategic Communications, Provincial Reconstruction Team in Kandahar City
Ferry de Kerckhove	Former Canadian Ambassador, Egypt
Gordon Smith	Executive Director, Centre for Global Studies Distinguished Fellow, Centre for International Governance Innovation
Hanin Bengezi	Researcher, The Centre for Research in Multiliteracies at Brock University LibyaInMe, Twitter
Hoda Emneina	Shabab Libya, Twitter
Jillian York	Director, International Freedom of Expression
Katherine Maher	Co-organizer, ICT for Development (ICT4D) Learning Network
Klaus Linsenmeier	Executive Director, Heinrich Boell Stiftung North America
Maguerite Dehler	Journalist, Ottawa
Mike Annany	Post-Doctoral Fellow, Microsoft Research New England Fellow, Harvard's Berkman Center for Internet and Society
Mike MacKinnon	Co-Founder, Vice President, Public Policy and Research, MediaBadger
Mohammed Al Abdallah	International Center for Journalists
Patrick Meier	Founder, Ushahidi Co-Founder, International Network of Crisis Mappers

Philip Howard	Director, Project on Information Technology and Political Islam, University of Washington
Peter Mandaville	Founding Director, Center for Global Studies, George Mason University Associate Professor, Government and Islamic Studies, George Mason University
Taylor Owen	Banting Post-Doctoral Fellow, Liu Institute for Global Studies

### **Web Conference Participants**

Anas Qtiesh	Syrian blogger translator Tech enthusiast
Ausama Monajed	Member of the Syrian National Council Executive Director, Strategic Research and Communication Centre
Ayat Mneina	Libyan Youth Movement
Dacey Lee	L Team (worked with individual Libyans and the Free Generation Movement)
Ethar El Katanty	Award-winning journalist Blogger, author
Iyad El-Baghdadi	Entrepreneur, project manager, Islamic libertarian Austrian economist Writing a manifesto for the Arab Spring
Mina Al-Oraibi	Assistant Editor in Chief, Asharq Alawsat
Mohammed Abdelfattah	Egyptian journalist
Stephanie Lamy	Consultant crisis management through social media
Samir ElBahaie	Google MENA Policy Team
Nashwa Hussien	Google MENA Policy Team
Brian Joel Conley	Founder, Small World News
Andy Carvin	Senior strategist at NPR

### **Observers**

Alan Breakspear	Former Canadian Public Servant
Iffet Ozkut	CEO, RIFO Consulting
Jennifer Swift	Project Coordinator, Centre for Global Studies
Michelle Zilio	Rapporteur, Carleton University Journalism Student



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