

SOCIAL MEDIA AND GLOBALIZATION: MEASURING THE IMPACT

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Abstract: The social process of globalization has been long debated during the past decades. The critics of globalization focus on the constraints imposed on governments by international markets and organisations and the limitations of the global civic society and social policies. This article argues that social media have altered the evolution of globalization and increased the process of civic and political participation, during the process of globalization. There are several effective ways of using the internet as a global tool of outreach. Social media and networking tools have been extremely effective towards political and social change, as evidenced by political unrest case studies in the Middle East. In this study, we will discuss how globalization has been enforced by the use and development of the internet. Furthermore, we will see how social media tools facilitated the process of democratization and how they affected political activism and challenged traditional societies in the Arab world. Arguably, the powerful impact of social media continues to challenge global politics. However, it remains to be seen whether they will become the 'driving force' of globalization themselves.

Keywords: Globalization, internet, social media, Facebook, democratization, Arab Spring.

I. Introduction

Globalisation is today an increasingly critical phenomenon in world politics, as national states and regional organisations continue to develop. Vast economic changes take place around the world creating dependencies among both developing and developed economies as a result. Apart from these changes, the idea of democracy and civic society that have been adopted in Europe years before started to spread all around the world. Civic society and political participation are crucial aspects to developed democracies (Yigit & Tarman, 2013). While civic participation is defined as the actions by individuals or groups to identify and address public concern issues, political participation is defined as actions performed voluntarily to influence elections or public policy (Johnston, 2012). These actions should be increased during the process of democratisation and globalisation; social media and networking tools have been among the most effective tools towards the achievement of these targets.

The ever-increasing power of social networks has been studied excessively. What is widely accepted is that social networks mobilize people worldwide and redefine practices around the globe. Whether social media bear political influence, it will be discussed in the following chapters. From Europe to the Middle East, examples of political activism and cultural interaction suggest that we are experiencing a social media revolution. In this context, we will explore the opportunities to promote such global initiatives and interaction through the use of social media. A variety of tools have been used to spread the word across borders and the messages vary, except in this article we will focus on the use of social media in the process of democratisation. The cases of Egypt and Tunisia, where the process of democratisation was accelerated through social networks, provide us with suitable examples of this correlation.

When exploring the implications of social media in the globalised world, theorizing globalisation is a helpful way to begin. We pursue two objectives in this article. Firstly, we

apply a typology of social networks to the key features of the globalisation theory. The result is a framework for the implications of social media to the globalisation process. Facebook, the most prominent global social network, will facilitate our effort. Secondly, we examine a variety of social media tools that provide a reference across multiple areas, such as democracy, political activism, human rights etc. Middle East and the continuous political turmoil in the area offer a great range of examples, where social media have been used as a potential tool for political change. Tunisia and Egypt are appropriately apt paradigms for our study. The method of case studies is relevant to the topic of our research due to the empirical data, which the social media field provides. Finally, our aim is to measure the impact of the use of social media in political activism and make suggestions for future researches on the topic.

II. Theorising Globalisation

Globalisation began to create a buzz as a phenomenon in the 1990s, by appearing in books, articles and discussions. A number of social theorists argue that contemporary societies are largely influenced by urban globalisation, which has imposed a world capitalist economic system that gradually reinstates the national state with transnational organisations and local traditions with global culture. “For some, it (globalisation) is a cover concept for global capitalism and imperialism and is accordingly condemned as another form of the imposition of the logic of capital and the market on ever more regions of the world and spheres of life. For others, it is the continuation of modernization and a force of progress, increased wealth, freedom, democracy, and happiness” (Kellner, 2002, p. 286). Marxists, functionalists, Weberians and other theorists have united in the argument that globalisation is a unique trend of the contemporary times. We will try to sketch aspects of the most prominent theories around globalisation below. There are three distinctions among the different approaches to the globalisation debate: cultural, economic and political theories have much in common, but represent different aspects of the phenomenon. We would also like to consider a *technologic* perspective to the globalisation process, which will help us approach the social media aspect effectively. Each of the following theorists signifies elements of the representative globalisation accounts.

Many of the cultural theorists observe that “the world is becoming more homogeneous... cheap travel and new methods of communications are reducing the importance of national distinctions” (Renton, 2001, p. 5). Masao Miyoshi (1995) argues that multiculturalism becomes more and more important, while national culture is increasingly irrelevant (Miyoshi, 1995). Anthony Giddens’s definition of globalisation follows the same path: “the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa” (Archibugi & Iammarino, 1999, p. 317). This involves a change in the way we understand geography and experience localness. These cultural dimensions of globalisation can be quite broad and unspecified. James Martin describes globalisation as ‘a family of linked trends’, which includes the rejection of class politics, the rise of new social movements, a growing disappointment from rationale and the decline of the nation-state (Renton, 2001). Hence, globalisation is one of the numerous processes driving to a new, contemporary world.

On the contrary, theorists of political globalisation analyse the phenomenon of globalisation in the context of international relations. The main argument is that the emergence of global or regional institutions has reduced the initiative on behalf of the nation-state. Jürgen Habermas claims that any state “can no longer count on its own forces to provide its citizens with adequate protection from the external effects of decisions taken by other actors, or from the knock-on effects of processes originating beyond its borders” (Habermas, 1999, p. 49). John Gray makes a similar point at his work ‘The Delusions of Global Capitalism’, where he admits that a global free market is more ‘self-regulating’ than national markets, and predicts the appearance of regional and international bodies of regulation (Gray, 1998). The result is a democratic shortfall, which expresses itself in the revival of violent populist movements.

The theorists of economic globalisation offer a coherent picture of the new world, which emerged from the end of the Cold War. Some analysts emphasised on the new techniques of flexible manufacture, which enable the movement of industrial production. According to Lasch and Urry, finance is becoming more important than industry. States, tax and trade unions are unable to prevent capital from moving wherever it wants. In the era of globalisation, everything is changed. A really global economy has emerged, in which huge multinational companies relocate, at will, their investment in foreign markets in order to expand their operations and boost their sales (Lasch & Urry, 1987, p. 5-6).

As well as offering opportunity, it brings with considerable risks linked, for example, to technological change. Manuel Castells’ work exemplifies a technologic approach to globalisation. While his theories share aspects of the previous approaches, it is not the logic of capitalist development, but that of technological change that is seen to exercise underlying fundamental purpose in the million processes referred to as globalization. Castells’ approach closely associated the notion of globalization with the one of a new ‘age of information’. “In his construct, two analytically separate processes came together in the latter decades of the twentieth century to result in the rise of the network society. One was the development of new information technology, in particular, computers and the Internet, representing a new technological paradigm and leading to a new ‘mode of development’ that Castells terms ‘informationalism’. The other was capitalist re-tooling using the power of this technology and ushering in a new system of ‘information capitalism’, what Castells and others have alternatively referred to as the ‘new economy’” (Robinson, 2007, p. 132). Hence, the new global economy is directly linked to technology.

A key institution to this new economy is the ‘networked enterprise’, which is the forefront of a general form of social organization, the network society. This involves a new organizational logic based on the network structure in interaction with the new technological world. “The significance and depth of effects of the Internet in governance stem from the fact that information and communication technologies have the potential to affect production, as well as coordination, communication, and control. Their effects interact fundamentally with the circulatory, nervous, and skeletal system of institutions. Information technologies affect not simply production processes in and across organizations and supply chains. They also deeply affect coordination, communication and control; in short, the fundamental nature of organizations” (Castells & Cardoso, 2005, p. 151). Thus, the dynamic effects of trade have

been more and more dependent on technology and innovation (Archibugi & Iammarino, 1999).

In this new economy, knowledge and information are vital, as well as the globalised nature of production. Most importantly, the new economical system is based on networked communities; and the productivity is generated through global networks of interaction (Robinson, 2007). “Networks are the appropriate organization for the relentless adaptation and the extreme flexibility that is required by an interconnected, global economy, by changing economic demand and constantly innovating technology, and by the multiple strategies (individual, cultural, political) deployed by various actors, which create an unstable social system at an increasing level of complexity” (Castell, 1999, p. 6). Despite the fact that networks have always existed, as Castells points out, only now they are more powerful than ever. And the reason is purely technological. Networks feature not only strengths, in the globalised world, but weaknesses too. However, their central role in this process is undoubtable. Based on this theory we will examine, in the next chapter, the function of the internet in the process of globalisation.

III. The Internet as a Tool of Global Outreach

Information Technology has been a driving force of the globalisation process. From the early 1990s, technological advancement facilitated individuals’ access to information and economic potential (Globalisation101, 2014). With the use of innovative resources, products and ideas across nations and geographic location, IT has created new and effective channels to exchange information, increasing global integration. In the state of global turmoil we live in, it is apparent that the world is interconnected through a compound net of transnational networks. Global interconnection is what distinguishes the Internet from any other means of communication, a medium that allows people to communicate and interact with one another, regardless of physical proximity. Defined as the network of networks, the Internet can help us understand and interpret the environment we live in. The growing importance of transnational networks guides us to reshape our societies as parts of the new global reality (Uimonen, 1997).

The Internet has altered all industries in many ways, but there are a number of traditional sectors that have been dramatically changed through the use of the internet. These include travel industry, music industry, science and academic publishing, news industry, as well as bookstores and of course retail trade. At the same time, traditional industries such as the postal service and video rental are rapidly declining. Nowhere has that impact been felt more than in science research and academic publishing, especially during the transition from hard copy to electronic files and the emergence of networked science. While this is not the best known advancement in the development of the Internet, it is one of the most significant. A remarkable change in protocol has established the course of the Internet throughout our business and personal lives today (Dumon, 2013). Besides, education at all levels is constantly transforming thanks to innovations in communication; websites now serve as a primary source of information and analysis for the masses. The business of higher education seems to becoming subject to technological disruption as other information-centric industries such as the news media, magazines and journals, encyclopedias, music, etc. “The technical affordances of cloud-based computing, digital textbooks, mobile connectivity, high-quality

streaming video, and ‘just-in-time’ information have pushed enormous amounts of knowledge to the “placeless” Web” (Anderson et al., 2012).

The news industry was radically changed by the appearance of numerous Internet-based news-gathering and dissemination outlets. The internet has become an increasingly important part of the traditional media’s business. This point is demonstrated by the circulation figures of a popular daily newspaper compared to the number of unique visitors to its own website. The Audit Bureau of Circulations’s figure for The Guardian newspaper is 196,425 per issue (February, 2014), whereas for the same period guardian.co.uk received a daily average of approximately 5,393,452 daily unique browsers (Audit Bureau of Circulations, 2014). Websites, blogs, instant messaging systems, email, social networking and other internet-based communications systems have made easier to connect, exchange information, and any form of transaction. Social networking websites, twitter and other Web 2.0 applications are changing the way people use and share information for personal, political and commercial reasons (Globalisation101, 2014).

The retail trade has experienced considerable changes as well. Retailers that took their business online have been able to maintain engagement of their customers, and found it easier to arrive at the next generation of shoppers; younger population is used to getting everything they need from worldwide web (Penny, 2013). Additionally, many national retail brands were able to expand their business onto a global audience with the subsequent sales growth. The American chain *Bloomingdale* extended its e-commerce services in 91 countries, while French *Cartier* online store expanded beyond the borders of the European continent (Finocchiaro, 2011; Doran, 2012). For many consumers, the internet is a valuable source of research regardless of their intention for purchase. Accessible anywhere, at any time, shoppers favour the flexibility of online shopping, as well as the reduced costs and use of discount codes. According to a BRC (British Retail Consortium) survey, a record online retail was took place in Christmas 2013 in the UK, which evidenced a 16.5 percent increase in online shopping (BBC, 2014).

The nature of the Internet alone contributes to the improvement of people’s lives. If those needs are to be properly addressed though, we need to specify what these needs are. For example, poor people struggling with daily survival are less likely to have a PC, as much as an internet connection. Thus, the Internet does not seem to offer much help to poor people. However, the internet does not automatically mean individual access. As a matter of fact, “lack of technical know-how and equipment are fundamental obstacles to Internet access in poor countries, and will continue to be so in any foreseeable future. Most people in the Third World will never be able to afford their own PCs, and many countries will not be able to invest in the necessary infrastructure nor training” (Uimonen, 1997). Even where individual access is a utopia, it is preferable to avoid a privileged access to information. Therefore, community-based access is beneficial for the society as well. “The Internet is an especially appropriate medium for the transmission of cultural contents, including that for even the smallest minority, given that it notably increases the possibilities for choice for the public and offers immediate access” (Kaul, 2011). The Internet can facilitate and develop interesting cultural ideas and activities.

The rise in internet in companies accelerated the pace of globalization by allowing the sharing of knowledge and information simultaneously across the globe. Experiencing the

many ways in which the internet facilitated the expansion of a global market, it is hard to undervalue the significance of the worldwide web in today's economy. The creation of a cheaper, faster and easier means of communication, an infinite gathering of information and the development of e-commerce have taken the globalisation process into new levels of expansion. The wide expansion of the internet use for commercial reasons goes back fifteen years, even though the rapid proliferation of internet-based platforms started only five years ago (Kane et al., 2014). Among the best known of these tools are sites such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter, each of which are used by hundreds of millions of people daily.

IV. The Powerful World of Social Media

Since the rise of the Internet in the early 1990s, the world's networked population has grown from millions to billions. Over the same period, social media have become a fact of life for civil society worldwide, involving many actors - regular citizens, activists, non-governmental organizations, telecommunications firms, software providers, governments etc. (Shirky, 2011). The development of social media and the switch from web 1.0 to web 2.0 applications revealed new opportunities in the field of political communication (Vesnic-Alujevic, 2012). Social networking sites have gained momentum "since the dot-com boom at the start of the new millennium" (Globalisation101, 2014). Approximately 73 percent of people who are **active online** use social media to communicate (Duggan & Smith, 2013). Social Networking in Indonesia, Argentina and Russia have surprisingly demonstrated the highest percentage of SN users, according to a poll conducted in the countries (Gottfried, 2012). Social media is a very broad term, which describes a set of technologies and services that make self-publishing online easy, and which often allow the consumers of such media to interact. The term encompasses blogs and social networks, which include Facebook, Twitter, WordPress, YouTube, MySpace etc. These services hold the reins of the so-called 'social networking' and are often seen as a step towards democratising access to media production and publishing.

The main characteristics of social networking sites comprise Web 2.0 features with an interactive, user-based platform built around the notion of a personalised profile that can be modified accordingly. Besides the profile alone, another aspect of social networking is the ability to connect to a circle of friends and acquaintances, creating a net that is truly connected. "Social Networking Services not only allow for users to stay connected more frequently, but they also provide a more personal user experience in a generation founded upon technology. Like other web-based services, there is a mass conglomeration of social networking websites springing up on the Internet" (Globalisation101, 2014). Typically, a social networking website features the following essential components: a/ profile in identifying the user, background and preferences, b/ list of friends or connections, c/ network information and d/ the ability to provide updates, add content and interact with other within the personalised network (Helman & Peng, 2010).

To understand how a social networking website could expand its user base quickly, we can look no further than how the users actively become the viral agents of the website. Gladwell explained this process on how the 'tipping point' affects the embracing of a product or an idea once it passes that point (Gladwell, 2002). A social networking website thrives on this process: it starts with one user, who will invite his friends, family members, and/or

colleagues to sign up establishing the connectivity network. Those friends, family members, and/or colleagues would then invite theirs creating a viral network expansion (Helman & Peng, 2010). Social media bear incredible impact on people’s online behaviour; how they search, play, converse, form communities, build and maintain relationships; and how they create, tag, modify and share content across other sites and devices. The social media services have irreversibly penetrated the markets, while new business models emerge “where firms blend unique technologies and business models to build competitive advantages” (Kietzmann et al., 2012).

According to the Pew Research survey, 71% of online adults today use **at least one** social networking site (Duggan & Smith, 2013). Facebook is the dominant social networking platform in the number of users, but a remarkable number of users are now expanding onto other platforms, as well. Some 42% of online adults now use **multiple** social networking sites. In addition, Instagram users are near as Facebook users with the interconnection process existing between the two platforms. These are among the key findings on social networking site usage and adoption from the last survey conducted at the Pew Research Center’s Internet Project (Duggan & Smith, 2013). While most sites have effectively developed a unique user target, Facebook is popular across a diverse mix of demographic groups. We will examine the case of Facebook in the next chapter.

Social networking does not offer personal networking opportunities only but great business potential, as well. Different sites serve different roles, which fit into diverse functions of the internet accessibility. The most important uses of the social networks are the ones shaping the way people or companies are engaging themselves within the internet:

- *Personal networking:* Facebook and Twitter have been classified as ‘lifestyle’ networking tools, where users not only communicate, but also upload pictures, update their interests, and comment on each other’s activities (Globalisation101, 2014). Facebook functions facilitate the use of photos more comparing to Twitter, but the latter is competitively preferable. In the same way, LinkedIn targets working professionals and make qualified networking with colleagues more convenient.
- *Corporate and Market Research:* As social networks have a wide pool of users, they offer a large market outreach and business expansion opportunities. More and more companies are beginning to target consumers through Social Networking Services. Despite the fact that Facebook is particularly popular to young generations, more than 45 percent of the current users are 45 years old or older. At the same time, users with corporate profile, like for example musical artists, clothing lines, TV shows etc. (Skelton, 2012).

Smaller companies or larger corporations turn to Social Networking Services in order to gather demographic information and improve their marketing tactics, while the use of Ad sales has been increased. According to reports, social media advertising spending will reach \$11 billion by 2017 (Stambor, 2013). Seventy percent of the ads featured in the framework of Facebook and Twitter are nothing more than customised ads based on the user’s preferences. Besides sales, social networking has become a platform for business exchange, law

enforcement and social activism, to name few of the recent experiences with social media (Globalisation101, 2014).

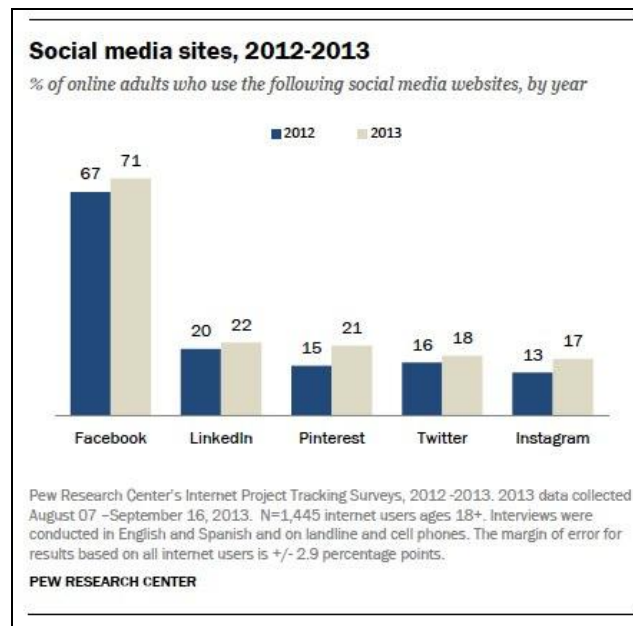
IV.i. The case of Facebook

Although there are hundreds of social networking websites today, a few global winners have emerged as the favourites for the general public. Those winners include MySpace, LinkedIn, Twitter, YouTube, and most importantly Facebook. Specifically for Facebook, the company has quickly become the actual representative and most prominent among social networking communities, due to the following features: a) an open to anyone platform, b) the larger number of users and user activities worldwide and c) not targeting on or limited number of social groups. Originally, open to Harvard students (2005), it later spread to other American and UK universities (2005), before it extends beyond educational institutions to anyone with a registered email address (2006). The site remains free to join, while makes profit through advertising revenues (Phillips, 2007).

Due to the characteristic of open platform, many different applications have been created by independent developers for the users. These applications allow users to play games, post reviews, make surveys and do thousands other functions to make sure those users visit Social Networking Services on a daily basis (Helman & Peng, 2010). In a word, these websites would imitate daily life practice as intended by Mark Zuckerberg when he started Facebook, which is “to build an online version of the relationships we have in real life” (Hempel, 2009). In one of his speeches in Germany, he pronounced: “We think that if you can build one worldwide platform where you can just type in anyone's name, find the person you're looking for, and communicate with them, that's a really valuable system to be building” (Hempel, 2009). His long-term goal is probably more ambitious: to create a standardized communication platform, as omnipresent and spontaneous as the telephone, but far more interactive and multidimensional (Hempel, 2009).

Following the globalisation aspects, social networking tools have expanded globally to other countries, as the need to connect throughout boundaries becomes more and more indispensable (Helman & Peng, 2010). The company has insistently pursued international expansion along with other companies in the social networking space (Holahan, 2008). On the one hand, due to the process of internationalization, the growth abroad has been faster than the growth within the borders of the country. On the other hand, the usage factor for users between 18 and 34-year olds, who are most likely to spend hours socializing online, appears to be consistent regardless of where the physical location of the user (MacMillan, 2009).

Today, Facebook counts more than 1,2 billion users, YouTube follows with 1 billion, while LinkedIn and Twitter count 277 million and 243 active users respectively (Smith, 2014). Instagram (200 m. users) and Pinterest (70 m. users) have increasingly gained momentum to younger crowds over the past 3 years (Smith, 2014). The following graph demonstrates the preferences of online adults towards social media.

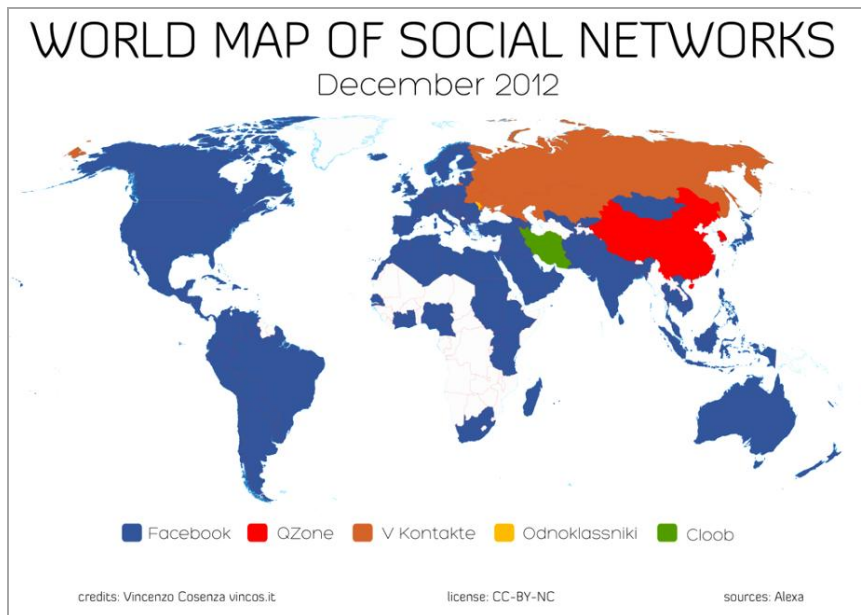


Graph no. 1. Social Media Sites, 2012-2013

Source: Pew Research Center

With over 1 billion monthly active users in 2014, more than 600 million of which are mobile, it's not surprising that Facebook has maintained its position as number one. Eight years after its launch, Facebook made its debut in the stock market, and rapidly increased its market value to \$180 billion due to the immense potential of the company (Frier, 2014). For those who thought Facebook run its course, it would be interesting to watch its tough battle of overthrowing some popular local competitors in countries where governments block the site (Helman & Peng, 2010). While Facebook has been temporarily blocked in several countries during the Arab Spring, China and Iran have permanently blocked the site since 2009. Syria followed in 2011, while other countries have imposed a total restriction on the use of internet (North Korea) or the content publicised (Vietnam) (Liebenson, 2014). Nevertheless, Facebook's dominance is mainly thanks to growth in Asia, where its 278 million users (according to the Facebook Ads Platform) recently surpassed Europe's 251 million. North America has 243 million users, South America has 142 million, Africa is at almost 52 million, and Oceania has just 15 million.

In 2012, Facebook became the number one social network in Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, and Vietnam (Protalinski, 2013). The following graph illustrates the geographic popularity of Facebook compared to other regional networks (Protalinski, 2013):



Graph no. 2: World Map of Social Network, 2012.

Source: Alexa

One more interesting observation is connected to the language barrier. In addition to the above described characteristics, Facebook also has pursued international growth through the adoption of twenty foreign languages used on the website (Holahan, 2008). Surprisingly or not, English remains the predominant language on site. However, the nature of information sharing within the social network settings is not influenced by the language barriers within the adoption of a common language, where English is not considered a native, but rather international language (Helman & Peng, 2010). Therefore, the development of social networking websites, with Facebook as predominant, has fundamentally gone global. The users worldwide have adopted their tactics creating social interactions that go beyond borders, which firms and corporations are aware of. The online social networking phenomenon has impacted on the global economic strategies forming a new global economic system, especially in the area of marketing communications.

V. Communicating Political Ideas

During the past few years, protests around the globe received international momentum through the use of social media. Global citizens watched the Egyptian protests against the regime of the President Mubarak (January 2011) generating a worldwide reaction via social media. The demonstrations on the name of civil freedoms in Turkey (May 2013) caught our attention when social media started to have an impact on organizing further demonstration within the country. The Arab Spring (December 2010), a term used to describe the wave of successive revolutions in the Arab world, brought first the use of these networks in play. It is evident that the use of social media has provided the means for citizens to play a role in their own governments, through organising protests or purely voicing their concerns or opinions. The Internet is an important tool that people use in order to express themselves and share ideas. During the past few years it has become an important tool that democracy and human rights activists use to organize real or virtual demonstration for political, social, and economic

reform (Yigit & Tarman, 2013). Various researchers have discussed how social media tools have been used in the process of political engagement and how they affected civic and political participation within this scope.

Internet has created a new complex environment, which could bring create more inclusion and participation in the public debate, as a public platform for the citizens and not only for political elites. While the communications landscape gets more complex, and more participatory, the networked population is gaining more access to information, more opportunities to engage in public speech, and an ability to undertake collective action. In the political arena, this has increased freedoms that can help a coordinated demand change from the public (Shirky, 2011). Thus, one could argue that the political scenery have shifted towards a more participatory equilibrium.

The distinction that marks the difference between traditional and new (internet-based) media is based on the concept of interactivity. The notion of interactivity is frequently linked with the political ideal of active citizenship, through the possibility for citizens becoming active instruments of the government (Gane & Beer, 2008). According to Delli Carpini (2000), classical political institutions and actors have disconnected young adults from public life, by paying no attention to them and to the topics that matter to them, thus not supplying them with the opportunities to participate. Already in 2000, Delli Carpini introduced the issue of possible new opportunities for civil engagement created by new media, as the Internet was “the most useful source of such (political) information” among young adults (Delli Carpini, 2000, p. 346). Wainer Lusoli (2005) also advocates that the Internet contributes to the “liberation” of younger generation as it “unlocks participation from traditional authority structures and information gatekeepers” (Lusoli, 2005, p. 155). In the same wavelength, more scholars claim that political participation and engagement could be encouraged through social network sites and could serve as a means for mobilization of young adults. As the inclusion of ‘youngsters’ in the political communication is an important matter, they are seen as a target group for online political communication (Baumgartner & Morris, 2010). In fact surveys have shown that the average daily user of online communication (especially Facebook) is of relatively young age and highly educated (Vesnic-Alujevic, 2012). This is also due to the fact that their older counterparts are more likely to read a daily newspaper or watch the traditional news broadcasts.

Social media has made an impact on countries around the globe, from world powers like the United States and the European Union, to Latin America and the Middle East. The impact it has, however, depends upon the resolve of the citizens to actually do something more. From activating young voters in the U.S. to the roots of the Arab Spring in the Middle East, Twitter, YouTube, Facebook and other SNSs tools have played not just an important role, but a highly influential one (Omidyar, 2014). Social media have created a record for becoming coordinating tools for most of the world’s political movements, when most of the world’s authoritarian governments are trying to control or limit access to it. In one of its declaration, the U.S. State Department has committed itself to “internet freedom” as a specific policy aim of progressiveness (Dickinson, 2010). Already from 2009, and while thousands of protesters gathered in Tehran to demonstrate about the presidential election, something unprecedented happened. “For the first time young people in America were connecting with

young people in Iran, and realizing they had far more in common than they'd ever thought” (Omidyar, 2014).

The alarming effect is obvious. The governments often fail to understand that people will not stop communicating; there will always be new ways to do so. The power of political ideas and the capacity of social networks can be an intimidating combination for those with dominating intentions. The more hopeful way to use social media is as long-term tools that can strengthen civil society and the public sphere.

V.i. Supporting Democratisation in the Middle East: the cases of Egypt and Tunisia

The Internet and social media in particular, played an essential role in connecting protesters during the Middle East uprisings known as the “Arab Spring” starting in December 2010. The revolutionary wave of demonstrations and civil unrest against the authoritarian regimes of the Arab world is believed to have been assisted greatly by the use of social media, which aided people to network and arrange common activities. In this sub-chapter we will examine the ways social networks - mainly Twitter and Facebook - affected the democratisation process, especially during the preparation of demonstrations.

The role of social media in Arab democratisation has been major; the uprisings in the Arab world have often been labeled the ‘Twitter Revolutions’ or ‘Facebook Revolutions’ in recognition of the outstanding part played by social media in the coordination of massive demonstrations, communication of instantaneous images and up-to-date information, and for their appeal to the international community, foreign civil societies, and diasporas (Jebril et al., 2013). Rather, they were ‘people’s revolutions’ and the role of social media was to create channels of communication in the virtual world, facilitating action in the real world (Hivos, 2012). Additionally, it is arguable that social media content had, at the same time, a noteworthy impact on the content and quality of media coverage in broadcast Arab media. Social media had served as a unifying power for the Arab populations across the Middle East, as people around the region watched the same images on Al-Jazeera or accessed similarly revolutionary opinions on their country’s news sites (Kaiser, 2011). Two outstanding cases from Egypt and Tunisia offer us examples of the social media influence.

In the wake of the wide popular protests in the Middle East, and especially after the fall of Mubarak’s regime in Egypt, the current debate about the political role of social media has emerged. Along with those who praised Facebook, Twitter, and similar websites with organizing, uniting and sustaining the Middle East protests (Preston, 2011) are those who suggest that the impact of such technology has been largely overrated. In comparison to the uprisings in Tunisia (18 December 2010 - 14 January 2011), which took 28 days, the Egyptian activists overthrew Mubarak in 18 days and (25 January 2011 - 11 February 2012) - relatively - peacefully in comparison to other uprisings in the Arab Spring (Storck, 2012). Essential to the rushing of events was the efficient use of social media networks. In Egypt, social media have even sidetracked the role of satellite television. It was only when the Internet was shut down by the regime that TV channels, such as Aljazeera, running 24-hour updates on the events, created the psychological motivation for Egyptian to join the protests (Arthur, 2011). The use of social media enabled reaching out thousands of people across the country in real time to organise tactics, quickly decide on the meeting points, etc.

Social media have also assisted greatly in real-time coverage of the events, due to the accessibility of mobile devices, which broadcast events as they happened across Egypt. The diversity of social media coverage created huge waves of pressure on the government and encouraged powerful allies, such as the US and the EU to gradually change their position and verify the tyrannical nature of the Egyptian regime (Bytheway, 2013). At the same time, blogs have proven they can have a direct effect in promoting democracy in purely political contexts. In response to the treatment exposed by the blogs, many Islamic political parties themselves took to the Internet and the blogosphere in order to better inform their supporters about important issues (Kaiser, 2011). Egyptian authorities actively tried to block access to such sites. What is perhaps most noteworthy about the use of social media in the Egyptian revolution is how it changed the dynamics of social mobilization. Social media initiated speed and interactivity that was absent in traditional media (Eltantawy & Wiest, 2012).

The Tunisian Revolution's triumph in removing a dictator was notable in the struggle for democracy, which rapidly spread throughout the Arab world. Naming the event the "Twitter Revolution" was one way in which the movement was recognised as a progressive movement, fundamental part of which was the contribution of social media (Esseghaier, 2013). This revolution did occur in a period of new media development in the Arab world, where Tunisians assembled through social media as an unregulated, though surveilled, communications tool. In the case of Tunisia, social media was as well a tool to share opinions but also an alternate channel believed to be more transparent in sharing information and with different content than the information broadcast by mainstream media (Hivos, 2012).

Within the first two weeks, protests began to spread to the wealthier parts of the country, including the cities of Sfax and Tunis. It was then that the movement became a viral phenomenon, and drew more and more people driving the center of online action to Facebook. Winning over Twitter - which was also extremely popular - due to the visual nature (photos and videos posted on Facebook) of the medium, made the protesters demonstrate in a primitive way as they spread through people's online social circles (Delany, 2011). Additionally, social media channels have enabled various groups advocating for specific issues, such as women's rights or freedom of information groups, to reach a wider audience and to join forces in order to influence policy-making. This is especially true for emerging groups in Tunisia, who used social media to generate awareness on the importance of taking part in the constitutional reforms (Hivos, 2012). Interestingly enough, before the breaking out of these uprisings, the role of social media was limited as it was considered elitist and minor.

VI. Conclusions

In general, online activities and political activism have grown considerably in recent years, mainly because of the ease that internet provides and in which activists are able to get a numerous citizens involved quickly, without the authorities being able to track their efforts (Porter, 2013). This study indicates that internet and social media tools have strengthened national and international social ties in a many ways. The development of web 2.0 applications has altered dramatically the way users can participate in the production and consumption of content in the Internet. Besides corporate and private use of social media tools, it became common to see those tools, like Facebook, YouTube and Twitter used by governments as means of political communication, especially in developed countries. Social

media sites, like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have played a strategic role in mobilising citizens in developing countries as well, to fight for rights that each person in democratic nations takes for granted (Yigit & Tarman, 2013). Until recently, the Arab world was considered incomparable because of the lack of democratic governance, as it has progressed very little compared to other parts of the world. Nonetheless, during the past few years, most Arab countries experienced various forms of liberation within a limited amount of time. Such reforms have mostly been driven by globalisation of the economy and technology, especially the use of social media which enabled the acceleration of authoritarian regimes overthrown. Lastly, what we know about the role of media in the process of democratisation today might be questioned in democratisation processes in the future, just because of the rapidity of transformation of digital media environments. It is possible that future democratic revolutions ‘won’t be televised’, as the political impact of television will gradually resolve in favour of the internet and social media, or other communication technologies are yet to emerge (Jebril et al., 2013). This is one of the most important aspects that is hard to predict; “when a revolution will move from the pages of social media to the streets as happened in the Arab world” (AbuZayyad, 2013).

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