

From First Tweet to Final Collapse - The Dimensions of Social Media in Regime Collapse

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**Abstract:**

Social media can be used to shape civil society outside of the boundaries of the state. Social media is a political tool which can hasten the democratization process by bypassing domestic constraints, challenging official policy and pushing for reform both exogenously and endogenously. For the world's vast diaspora communities, social media serves as virtual sounding boards for resonating opinions, views, and protest. This paper will focus primarily on assumptions of whom and what mediates and ameliorates the tension of transition through social media and how civil society affected and influenced the Arab Spring. This paper will incorporate Finnemore and Sikkink's theories of norm creation to measure the role social media plays in the creation and acceptance of norms. It also seeks to modernize and revitalize the Hirschman framework by providing a comprehensive assessment of the use of 'exit, voice and loyalty' with regards to the role of social media in the Arab Spring. This paper will look specifically at Egypt and Tunisia to evaluate not only the volume of traffic but more importantly its content. Social media has made awareness and action coeval. From the first Tweet until regime collapse is a dynamic that begs analysis.

## **Introduction:**

On December 17, 2010 a street vendor in Tunisia named Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire to protest harassment and humiliation inflicted on him by a municipal officer. More importantly, he intended to demonstrate the widespread effects of the meager economic opportunities in Tunisia which contributed to high unemployment rates among the country's qualified and educated youth. Although the actual act of self-immolation was not caught on camera, the ensuing protests would soon appear on social media websites. The images and dialogue fostered by social media were the catalyst for the social movement that led to the ousting of Tunisian President Ben Ali, ending his 23 year dictatorial rule (Chrisafis & Black, 2011).

The ideals of the protesters in Tunisia and their use of social media as a tool to organize and disseminate information to Western governments and media organizations were quickly adapted by young Egyptians who experienced a similar plight (DSG, Salem, & Mortada, 2011). On January 25<sup>th</sup> the demonstrations began in Tahrir Square, Cairo and rapidly spread throughout Egypt with the aid of social media outlets. The Egyptian government soon observed how the protesters were organizing using social media and attempted to shut down Internet access. (Leetaru, 2011). With the aid of their global diasporas and Western media, the Egyptian protesters were able to circumnavigate the government shutdown of Internet access and disseminate their information to not only a domestic audience, but a global one as well (DSG, Salem, & Mortada, 2011). On February 10<sup>th</sup> President Hosni Mubarak relinquished all presidential power and resigned from the position he held for almost 30 years in response to the protesters' calls for him to step down (Blight, Pulham, & Torpey, 2012).

Using a constructivist lens, this paper will focus primarily on assumptions of whom and what mediates and ameliorates the tension of transition through social media. The lack of institutional gate keeping in social media forums facilitated their use by social movements in Tunisia and Egypt. The administrators and contributors, the gatekeepers of social media forums, gained sociopolitical capital and social prominence and were able to become agents of change through bypassing government constraints (Singer, 2001). In Tunisia the graphic and shocking images, as well as firsthand stories of police and security forces brutal attempt to quash the uprising were shown, seemingly in real time on Al Jazeera and in postings on social media networks such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. International media outlets soon featured the images and postings in their news reports (Miles, 2011). The increased attention that international news media gave to the protests in Tunisia allowed for the social movement to gain trans-border legitimacy. This legitimacy has made it possible for the protesters to continue spreading its ideology and method for regime change throughout the region. The international news media's coverage focused on the democratizing aspects of the uprising and helped the global audience identify with the protester's strife against authoritarian regimes (Motadel, 2011).

Social media outlets were originally used to disseminate information and urgency to like-minded individuals, but also acted as norm entrepreneurs when international news media outlets reported on the websites. This gave agency to the stories, images, and videos uploaded by the protesters while also legitimizing their calls for action (Seib, 2008). As Shirky notes, "Since the rise of the Internet in the early 1990s, the world's networked population has grown from the low millions to the low billions. Over the same period, social media has become a fact of life for civil society worldwide, involving many actors - regular citizens, activists, nongovernmental organizations, telecommunications firms, software providers, governments." (Shirky, 2011).

Shirky demonstrates how the rapid rise of the internet, combined with the proliferation of social media, has facilitated the acceptance of information coming from social media networks. The increased legitimacy given to social movements, through the use of social media as a legitimate tool for gathering reliable information, has allowed social media to act as a sounding board for dissenting opinions. This has acted as the catalyst for the new norms of social movements to reach a tipping point where they finally become globally internalized as the new means of engaging in civil unrest.

From a global perspective the Tunisians' ability to successfully utilize social media to organize locally and disseminate information to the global media helped create and reinforce the emerging norms for social movements. The repetition of the seemingly normative activity and the increased legitimacy which global media outlets, Associated Press, Reuters, CNN, BBC, and Al Jazeera, gave the social movements by constantly updating the audience on the progress of the uprisings, allowed the norm to reach a tipping point so that it could cascade and finally be internalized. The Egyptian uprisings emulation of the same methods used by the successful Tunisian uprising, allowed for the newly emerging norms for social movements to further cascade and be internalized globally as a legitimate means of creating a social movement.

This paper will demonstrate the varying dynamics of the emergence of new norms by observing the "lifecycle" of norm formation for social change in the region (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). This lifecycle relies on both domestic and international legitimacy. This will attempt to demonstrate that the new norms for social movements were created through the success of the Tunisian and Egyptian protests' ability to use social media as a multi-faceted tool of organization which enabled a critical mass of the population to support through the gaining of media legitimacy, thus allowing for new ideals and norms for social change and human rights to

cascade and then be internalized. Each individual person adapted the new norms for social change, including the use of human rights and the increased understanding that global news media was watching. New norms are formed independently to adapt to various unique domestic situations which enable the critical mass of a domestic audience to internalize the new ideals and norms.

The paper will also observe how the global news media networks were able to give legitimacy and agency to the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings. It will demonstrate how the global news media network acted as the tipping point to reach a critical mass of support for the protesters domestically and globally. The global acceptance of their protests, by appealing to pre-existing Western norms of human rights, helped facilitate the cascading and internalization of new norms for social change. This paper will look specifically at Tunisia and Egypt as case studies to evaluate the use of the Internet traffic and social media content. Social media has made awareness and action coeval, allowing for immediate reactions to social and political situations. The ability of social media outlets to organize and be used as a tool for regime change is a dynamic that begs analysis.

### **Methodology:**

This paper will incorporate case studies of Tunisia and Egypt in order to better understand what enabled the protesters to use social media outlets to change the existing political atmosphere. These cases have been chosen for analysis here because the actions undertaken in these states have become the model for attempted social movements by other actors in the Middle East and North Africa region and beyond. In order to facilitate this endeavor, I will first analyze the importance and relevance of the Hirschman Framework's contribution of *exit* and *voice* to the promotion of norms. Following this, I will observe how the added element of social

media has given increased global legitimacy to social movements. This paper seeks to modernize and revitalize the Hirschman Framework by providing a comprehensive assessment of the use of *voice*, and to a lesser degree *exit*, with regards to the role of social media in the Arab Spring. This paper then turns to Finnemore and Sikkink's norm lifecycle to demonstrate how new norms of social movements have cascaded with the aid of international news media's use of information gathered through social media networks. After establishing a theoretical framework I will demonstrate how prevalent the use of social media was in Tunisia and Egypt at the time of the uprising by observing what social media websites were used. Finally, this paper will demonstrate how international news media's use of information gathered through social media outlets aided in increasing the legitimacy and agency given to the images and stories depicted through social media outlets.

### **Literature Review: Hirschman *Exit/Voice***

Albert O. Hirschman brought the concept of *exit* and *voice* to light in the late 1970's when he introduced a framework for social discussion. The Hirschman Framework explains the two options available to actors when faced with unfavorable circumstances. *Exit*, the ability to physically leave the situation, and *voice*, the ability to speak and be heard about the issues at hand (Hirschman, 1978). The Framework encompasses the state, system, and individual levels of analysis and has been used to describe how social movements and public discontent are expressed. The Hirschman Framework initially points to two types of reactions to discontent by the public: *exit*, the physical leaving of a situation, and *voice*, the articulation of dissent and grievances. (Hirschman, 1978) The framework observes the limitations of economists and political scientists. Economists see *exit* as a viable option, with a significant emphasis on the

virtues of competition but fails to give agency to *voice*. Political scientists, on the other hand, give relevance to *voice*, focusing on political participation and protests, ignoring the potency of *exit*.

The ability for a state to *voice* concern over a treaty or international agreement gives the *voice* of the state agency. The ability for states to utilize forums of international organizations as an avenue for *voice* further enhances the legitimacy and weight of the *voice* of states. From the systemic level of analysis the ability of a social movement to utilize *voice* can amplify a local, national, and international audience and gives agency to the movement's cause and message, therefore, giving it legitimacy. The ability of NGO's and specific international causes, such as the U. N. Millennium Development Goals, to gain support and widespread acceptance demonstrates how *voice* functions. From an individual level of analysis, *voice* is recognized as the ability of citizens to protest and create a dialogue about a specific cause (Hirschman, 1978). The transcending nature of the Internet has given rise to new concept defined here as *virtual voice*, which allows like-minded individuals to interact virtually and organize through social media.

*Exit* plays an important role in the Hirschman Framework. From the perspective of a state *exit* is exercised by leaving a treaty or international agreement or by withdrawing support for specific causes. *Exit* is a viable means of dissent only if the state, organization, or individual has agency or capital to influence and affect the situation (Hirschman, 1978). From a systemic perspective, *exit* allows organizations to leave a situation by relocating and seeking better opportunities elsewhere. If a state refuses to adhere to the standards expressed by an organization there is the possibility of *exit*, but this process usually only follows *voice* (Hirschman, 1978). The evaluation of *exit* from the state, system and individual levels of analysis demonstrates the lack

of agency that *exit* has for individuals. From an individual perspective *exit* is a viable means of protest only if the individual has power in the society. Those with agency and capital can leave without trying to fix the problem (Hirschman, 1970). *Exit* is often attributed to the “brain drain” phenomenon and capital flight, where better opportunities are afforded in other countries.

(Hirschman, 1978). According to Hirschman, those with little or no agency or social capital have little effect on the conditions they are protesting when they choose to *exit* (Hirschman, 1978).

The advent of Internet Communication Technologies (ICTs), new technology and ways of interacting socially has allowed for a different option than suggested by Hirschman. In his original hypothesis on public discontent, people are limited to either *voice* or *exit*. Hirschman describes that, “a discontent public can *voice* one’s complaint while continuing as a member [...] with the hope of improving matters.” (Hirschman, 1978, p. 1). *Exit* can be exercised by pulling out your resources in response to inauspicious political and/or social conditions. *Exit* has an invisible hand of the market mechanism where dissatisfied citizens physically leave the country (Flew, 2009). People with limited capital and influence have limited agency and their *exit* does not take anything away from the state. Montesquieu defined wealth as, “money, notes, bills of exchange, stocks of companies, ships, all commodities and merchandise.” (Montesquieu, 1914). Those lacking in wealth are unable to use *exit* as a viable option because demonstrating through *exit* is dependent on socioeconomic status, therefore “*voice* is activated by the impossibility of *exit*” (Hirschman, 1978). With the advent of social media there are opportunities for new means of venting dissatisfaction, *virtual voice*. Despite the lack of option for *exit*, new options to express and amplify *voice* exist, providing a new element for social change. The incorporation of ICTs, new technology and ways of interacting using social media, has allowed for different options than suggested by Albert Hirschman. Although *exit* and *voice* are both important aspects

of political participation, social media has given increased agency to *voice*. With the advent of new technologies there is less of a need for physically moving because opinions can be disseminated and legitimized through social media outlets. This creates new opportunities to vent dissatisfaction, increasing the agency of *voice*, combined with the lack of option for *exit*, providing a new element for social change, *virtual voice*.

### **Literature Review: Norm Lifecycle**

New norms for social movements were developed and honed during the uprisings of Tunisia and Egypt. Norms have been an essential component of the study of international relations, and have become increasingly relevant with the advent of new media platforms (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). While considering the advent of social media as a new media platform this paper will identify how social media aided the cascading of newly emerging norms during the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. Norms are defined as “a standard of appropriate behavior for actors with a given identity.” (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). There are different categories of norms, but the most distinct are regulative norms and constitutive norms. Regulative norms are intended to order and constrain behavior while constitutive norms “create new actors, interests and categories of action.” (Gelpi, 1997). In this paper I will be observing how constitutive norms were and continue to be created with the aid of social media.

Norms are considered “continuous, rather than dichotomous entities and come in varying strengths,” where varying norms sway and provoke diverse levels of agreement (Legro, 1997). Finnemore and Sikkink are careful to point out that the influences of norms are at their strongest when the norms are at an early state of the norm’s lifecycle. This demonstrates how two regimes, with similar political and economic conditions, fell within months.

The three main stages to the lifecycle of a norm are when they emerge, cascade, and are finally internalized (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). A major theme of this paper focuses on the period before the norm cascades, the tipping point, where a critical mass of relevant actors adopt the norm (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). The origins of norms, defined as norm emergence, have two distinct actors: norm entrepreneurs and organizational platforms where the entrepreneurs act (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, p. 896). A norm entrepreneur has strong notions about the behavior of their community and “calls attention to issues” (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, p. 897). Norm entrepreneurs actively dictate what is appropriate and desirable in their specific situation and target state leaders for criticism (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, p. 904). During the uprising in Tunisia, the revolutionaries acted as norm entrepreneurs and attempted to convince a critical mass of states and media organizations to recognize and embrace the newly emerging norms for social movements.

The motives for norm entrepreneurs are empathy, altruism and a commitment to adhere to the norms. Some common modes of getting the new norms accepted are by using persuasion and empathy. The acceptance of new norms is crucial to international law where international norms are entrenched in treaties and obligations (Durlauf, 1998; Risse & Sikkink, 1999). There are two variables with respect to norms, who creates them and who accepts and adheres to the new norms (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). Finnemore and Sikkink’s observations on norms is a useful framework to provide insight into the role an alerted Western public and government played in persuading the Tunisian and Egyptian governments to behave responsibly, and not react violently towards the protesters. These norms were also able to help protect the physical integrity of the protesters from brutal government repression.

The second stage of the norm cycle is when the norm cascades, when new norms are adopted by additional actors (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). In this case the actor is the popular uprising in Egypt. The cascading of norms often occurs when the international or regional effect of the emergent norm gains more credence than the domestic efforts for changing the norms (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). There is some socialization which occurs during the cascading of the norms, when there is either emulation of heroes, praise for the behavior that conforms to group norms, and ridicule for deviation from existing norms (Waltz, 1979). The main actors during the cascading stage are states, international organization, and networks. The main motives during this phase are for the emerging norms to gain legitimacy and esteem. The international attention given by the news media and international organizations acted as the tipping point during the Arab Spring and allowed the emerging norms reach a critical mass and cascade. Finnemore and Sikkink concede that certain actors matter more than others. (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998) What was happening in Egypt and Tunisia was a replication of what had been happening in the West for a long time, where social media has become politically, socially, and educationally a legitimate method of gaining an international audience. The social media had become the “grass roots” and had established the support of the West already as part of the “critical mass” of states. (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998)

The final stage of the norm cycle is the internalization, or acceptance of norms. Once a norm has reached the point where different actors have observed the benefits and consequences of internalizing the norms, the new norm is accepted and achieves a “taken-for-granted” reputation (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). As populations around the world observed the effects of the Tunisian uprising, social networks were used as a legitimate and viable form of expressing dissent and organizing.

The new internalized norms vary between different states. This difference in the adaptation of the new norms can be explained by “isomorphism” (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, p. 905). Isomorphism tries to explain the similarities between varying organizations and draws conclusions on why there are distinct similarities between different organizations (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983)

Using social media as an organizing tool for social movements ensured the emergence of a new norm for gaining international recognition (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). Norms are “customary rules of behavior that coordinate our interactions with others.” (Durlauf, 1998). Thus, the success of the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt helped establish “a standard of appropriate behavior” for social movements to gain local and global acceptance (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998).

### **Media and Social Media**

In Tunisia and Egypt international news media played a significant role in framing uprisings by focusing on images of solidarity and unity for a just cause. (Gitlin, 1980; Kreiss, 2009). By doing this, new media has been able to shape the global perception of the Arab spring (Kreiss, 2009). The use of social media networks, including YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter allowed the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt to gain international legitimacy. Social media has allowed societies to form regardless of boundaries and borders, allowing for likeminded individuals to utilize the open *voice* of social media outlets, which enables individuals to organize and promote dissenting opinions. Giving the participants a *virtual voice*, allows for increased political participation and the formation of new norms incorporating human rights. In both Tunisia and Egypt the authoritarian governments made elaborate attempts to influence public opinion and policy by using traditional state run radio, television, and print news. Social

media has allowed movements to communicate outside of these traditional boundaries and borders, facilitating the culmination of like-minded individuals to utilize the collective *virtual voice* of social media to organize and promote change in the authoritarian regimes of Tunisia and Egypt (Fahim K. , El-Naggar, Stack, & Ohu, 2011).

In Tunisia the virtual *voice* of the protesters was expressed through Facebook, Twitter and YouTube amongst other social media websites. This *virtual voice* was initially used to disseminate information to other dissenters and disillusioned youth. After people connected online, they organized and helped start a seemingly unified popular uprising. The popular uprising was able to create and define the intended message using prevailing international norms of human rights which enabled them to act as a norm entrepreneur. This process was aided by the recognition and legitimacy of the information posted online received, achieving its goal of garnering the attention of the established international news media (DSG, Salem, & Mortada, 2011). The increased use of citizen journalists and activists' uploads to social media websites by international news media outlets, such as the Associated Press, Reuters, Al Jazeera, BBC, and New York Times, allowed for the information to be disseminated globally from an authentic on the ground perspective. Although social media does not cause disorder, the acceptance of social media as a legitimate and accurate source, helped launch a protest movement that contributed to the falling of governments (Seib, 2008, p. 59).

In Egypt, social media played an essential role in organizing and overcoming information asymmetry by creating a platform that allowed participants to discuss where “others were willing to take to the streets” (Leetaru, 2011). How news is framed for an outside audience offers a window into the national consciousness (Gerbner, 1977). The cultural and contextual influences of the media allows for the audience to react based on imperfect information when social media

is used increasingly as a legitimate source of information (Seib, 2008). Over the past fifteen years Internet based news has displaced the print and broadcast medium, which in 2010 represented 46% of all content (Leetaru, 2011).

There is much discussion about the importance of social media in the uprisings of Egypt and Tunisia that has produced studies indicating that, while social media played more of an organizing role, state controlled news media had a larger audience and impact in guiding broad public opinion (Leetaru, 2011; DSG, Salem, & Mortada, 2011). International media outlets perceived social media as the collective *virtual voice* of the Egyptian protesters and disseminated throughout multiple international news media outlets. The urgency by which the Mubarak regime secured the state television headquarters demonstrates the importance of traditional mainstream news media. The strategic seizing of the broadcast news allowed the regime to either frame the protesters as “foreign and violent,” or simply neglect to cover the protests, allowing the regime to regain some control over the proliferating public dissent (Fahim K. , El-Naggar, Stack, & Ohu, 2011). Meanwhile, international news media outlets were increasingly obtaining information from social media outlets to present on television and print media, as well as their own websites. This new trend allowed social media sources to increase their agency, allowing for the *virtual voice* to become the authentic opinion of the population.

New norms emerged and were made relevant by protesters through their use of social media to channel their collective message. Social media provides platforms to self-publish and link individuals to a larger global audience. The messages used by the social movements in Tunisia and Egypt tapped into preexisting norms regarding human rights and social rights, thus giving increased legitimacy to their plight while allowing them to reach a large global audience (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; Risse & Sikkink, 1999). Both movements were built on ideas of

human dignity which transcended each country's borders despite being under authoritarian regimes for several decades. Many of these rights have been internalized and institutionalized in international treaties that many countries recognize. (Risse & Sikkink, 1999) Tunisia and Egypt both had suffering economies with high unemployment rates while maintaining a high level of education; this contributed to the degree of disillusioned youth present. Social media became a way for them to get their message out while validating their use of social media in the process.

Isomorphism explains the similarities between the Tunisian uprising and the Egyptian uprising. There were distinct similarities between the conditions of both states. From Tunisia to Egypt the method of social dissent and expression was similar. However, the scope of violence was perceived as more extensive in Egypt due to the heightened level of international media in the region following the success of the Tunisian uprising. In Tunisia and Egypt regime change was rapid, violent and extreme (Shirky, 2011). There are similarities between Egypt and Tunisia: their use of social media as a means of organizing, the scope of the protests, subsequent government reaction, the amount of international media attention, ensuing international reaction and in the time it took for the regimes to be overthrown.

The Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings were able to use a combination of international media attention, existing norms of human rights, empathy, and the reluctance of authoritarian regimes to go against existing norms and be ridiculed for deviating from existing international norms on human and social rights (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). The ability of social media to be used as a relative means of giving accurate information has allowed for social movements to utilize the new medium to get their message across while utilizing pre-existing widespread beliefs and ideas on norms of human rights and social rights (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998).

With the advent of social media, *voice* has gained increased agency and was transformed into a virtual collective *voice*, allowing for the dissenting population to have a unified message of discontent. Social media has acted as a virtual community, where like-minded individuals are able to come together and *voice* their concerns with fewer limitations as to content, social standing, or political borders.

The Tunisian and Egyptian protesters triggered an empathetic response from global news media networks, allowing for domestic and global support to gain momentum (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). On December 19<sup>th</sup> 2010 Reuters reported that “footage posted on Facebook social network site showed several hundred protesters outside the regional government headquarters, with lines of police blocking them from getting closer to the building.” (Reuters, 2010). Reuters was careful to point out that the images “did not show any violence.” (Reuters, 2010). . The acceptance and dissemination of the protests on Al Jazeera, CNN, BBC, amongst other major news networks, allowed the popular uprising to act as a catalyst for the emergent norms of social change to be adhered.

The expansion of global news media networks allowed the Tunisian and Egyptian movements to be disseminated “from the source” facilitating the acceptance of the information as legitimate. Social media has helped like-minded individuals, regardless of their physical location, to organize, leading to social activism and political mobilization. A networked world may not promote “justness” in the Western point of view, but has nevertheless allowed for like-minded individuals to organize, leading to a perceived democratic popular movement with little regard to political loyalties or ties (Morozof, 2010).

## **Case Study: Tunisia**

The uprising in Tunisia began in late December, 2010 when a 26 year old college educated vegetable peddler, Mohamed Bouazizi, protested against the inadequate and harsh economic and social conditions in Tunisia by setting himself on fire. Bouazizi sparked the protests because his experiences hit an empathetic cord with his fellow countrymen and vast scattered global diasporas, provoking compassion. He was young, university educated, and with no prospect for future employment. When the authorities stopped him and confiscated his goods he protested his condition of destitution by setting himself on fire. This act sparked a protest around the country that quickly spread through social media outlets (Whitaker, 2010). On 19, December, extra police presence was on the streets of Tunisia, In response, 95% of Tunisia's lawyers went on strike on 6, January, reflecting the ever mounting, demand for political and social change was ever mounting (Sandels, 2011). Although there were no live images of his immolation, news of the act spread quickly through social media and garnered support across Tunisia (Anonymous, 2011). Within a month of setting himself on fire, Mohammad Bouazizi's actions in response to destitution sparked protests which soon spread throughout Tunisia and proliferated throughout the region and the world (Shirky, 2011).

International media and social media played an integral role in the ousting of the 23 year authoritarian regime of Ben Ali (Olivarez-Giles, 2011; Miles, 2011; Anonymous, 2011). In the past decade there has been a global Internet boom and since 2010 social media has been used in varying manners in the Arab region (DSG, Salem, & Mortada, 2011). Social media has been used to rally people around social and political campaigns, boost citizen journalism, and has created an active forum for debate between governments in the Middle East and their communities (DSG, Salem, & Mortada, 2011). The use and integration of social media as a

means for political and social communication can be demonstrated by the use of Facebook in the Egyptian presidential campaign in February 2010 as well as social media being used as a primary source of information on the uprisings in Tunisia (Arfaoui, 2011). The editor of al-Watan, Noureddine Mbarki claims that in Tunisia "[at] the time when the official media was absent, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and blogs were full of videos, images and timely coverage of events. World news agencies and satellite television channels were all also using the content published by these media and depend on it in preparing their reports and news coverage." (Arfaoui, 2011). Individuals from around the globe, as well as governments and international media organizations used social media to gain information about the protests in Tunisia (KNA, 2011; Anonymous, 2011).

The use of Internet has risen in the past decade in Tunisia, with four decades of GDP growth. However, corruption was rampant and the slow economic progress and rising unemployment among university graduates contributed to the domestic sentiment of destitution (CIA, 2012). Between 2000 and 2009 the domestic penetration rate for access to Internet went from 1% to 33.4%, demonstrating the proliferation of the Internet in Tunisia (ATI, 2012). Internet penetration rate, as it is used here, refers to the percentage of total population of a given country or region that uses the Internet (Stats, 2011). The use of social media websites has also increased significantly and during the protests between December 2010 and January 2011, there was an 8% increase in Facebook subscribers in Tunisia. (DSG, Salem, & Mortada, 2011). Tunisia has a 36.3% (3,856,984) Internet penetration rate while 26.3% (2,799,260) of the population now subscribe to Facebook (Stats, 2011). The high penetration rate of Internet usage and the increased use of social media as a means of creating a virtual community, has allowed

Tunisians to fully utilize social media. The virtual communal *voice* which social media fostered acted to give increased agency to the *voice* of the Tunisian uprising.

In Tunisia, *virtual voice* was incited by the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi. As Carolyn Penner, a Twitter spokeswoman, declared, "[but], right now, along with the rest of the world, we sit back and watch in awe at how people are using Twitter and other platforms to provide on-the-ground perspective during this highly developing and potentially historical moment." (Olivarez-Giles, 2011). The increased legitimacy of social media and *virtual voice* as a means of expressing discontent has allowed for *voice* to gain more power. The reasons and emotions behind this extreme expression of discontent united a population, emotionally and gave a sense of commonality (Hirschman, 1978). The combination of social media as a platform for organizing and expressing the collective *virtual voice* and the increased legitimacy that major international news media outlets gave to the content of the websites and social media outlets allowed the *virtual voice* of the Tunisian and Egyptians to be heard and understood both locally and globally. In Tunisia a bond was formed between Mohamed Bouazizi and the rest of the population which facilitated the formation of a new type of social mobilization where social media was used to find a collective *virtual voice*. The manner in which this new collective *voice* formed, using a common media platform, social media, as an initial tool of organization, created a transfusion of ideas. Where open, ideological discussions and a market place of ideas allowed for its rapid spread throughout Tunisia, Egypt and the rest of the world.

After the Tunisian protesters persuaded the population to adopt the newly emerging domestic application of human rights norms, adherence to the new norm reached a tipping point, when a critical mass of the population feels compelled to adhere to and accept the new norm. Domestically and globally, the Tunisians used preexisting ideologies of human rights and ideals

to trigger a sympathetic response (Shirky, 2011, p. 2). According to Finnemore and Sikkink the norm tipping point is when one third of the population internalizes the new expectations (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). Finnemore and Sikkink emphasize that, “[d]eliberately inappropriate acts [such as organized civil disobedience], especially those entailing social ostracism or legal punishment, can be a powerful tool for norm entrepreneurs seeking to send a message and frame and issue.” (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, p. 897).

In the cases of Tunisia and Egypt the tipping point was influenced by the local population’s adherence to popular uprising and the recognition international media organizations gave to the actions. (Shirky, 2011, p. 3). Social movements and protests have been a way for society to effectively use *voice* (Hirschman, 1978). The empathetic nature of the *virtual voice* of the Tunisian plight allowed it to gain significant domestic agency and support (Anonymous, 2011). In the case of Tunisia the common *voice* was the lack of economic opportunities and the drastic ramifications by the Tunisian government on their people. People in Tunisia, and globally, acted and reacted based on imperfect information gathered through news media and increasingly social media. The increased legitimization of social media has fostered it as means of gaining newsworthy information (Leetaru, 2011). The increased legitimization by credible international media organizations has acted as the tipping point and helped in the cascading of the emergent norms of social change. By January 14, 2011 the *virtual voice* of the people, which fostered and organized nationwide protests and revolts toppled the Ben Ali regime, ended more than two decades of authoritarian rule.

### **Egypt: Case Study**

The Egyptian uprising used the same methods of social change as the Tunisian uprising, as seen in the use of social media and gain support from international news media outlets

(Osama, 2011). Organization for mass protests in Egypt began gaining momentum on January 17<sup>th</sup> 2011, a mere three days after the ousting of the Ben Ali regime in Tunisia (Blight, Pulhan, & Torpey, 2012). Initially there were protesters setting themselves on fire to protest the meager standards of living and the security apparatus in Egypt. This demonstrates similarities between the manner in which individuals' demonstrated dissatisfaction in Tunisia and Egypt (Jones, 2011). The Egyptians and Tunisians had similar complaints against their governments; in both countries increasing prices for basic commodities, persistent poverty, and high unemployment combined with an ever increasing population plagued society. The government regimes ignored the basic needs of the average citizen despite several decades of consistent economic growth (Jones, 2011; CIA, 2012). Despite such growth in Egypt, the living conditions for the average Egyptian was considerably lower than GDP might have indicated, which contributed to the uprisings in January of 2011 (CIA, 2012).

Egyptian activists were able to observe the methods of inciting social movements used in Tunisia and used similar tactics to organize the protests and gain global support. The occupation of Tahrir Square was carefully orchestrated through social media websites (DSG, Salem, & Mortada, 2011). As reported by the New York Times, “[m]ore than 90,000 people signed up on a Facebook page for the Tuesday [Jan. 25, 2011] protests, framed by the organizers as a stand against torture, poverty, corruption and unemployment.” (Fahim & El-Naggar, 2011). The rapid proliferation of Facebook users in Egypt demonstrates how emerging norms embodying existing norms, regarding human rights, hit a cord with a critical mass of the population and was able to cascade successfully to the masses.

In response to the increased use of the Internet and social media, the Egyptian government reacted by shutting down the Internet within the state (Dunn, 2011). In shutting

down the Internet and other means of communication, the government disrupted the apolitical citizen's business and source of revenue, polarizing them to use social media and contribute to the *virtual voice* and increase international diplomatic attention on the crisis (Dunn, 2011). Many businesses were forced to shut down and banking institutions were unable to make international transactions. The Egyptian government's response to shut down and limit Internet and social media placed the government outside of existing norms of human rights and freedom of speech. (Thomas, 1999) The Egyptian government violated the rights of speech and it pointed to discrepancies between the other states and the actions of the Mubarak regime (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, p. 904). As Alexandra Dunn states, "when Twitter was blocked, activists used circumvention software to access it; when the Internet was shut down entirely, Twitter users called friends abroad on landlines to have them Tweet for them; satellite television showed Tweets on air and even provided telephone numbers for access to Google's newly developed Speak2Tweet system." (Dunn, 2011). When mobile phone lines were shut down a critical mass of the population had already adopted the new emerging norm for social change and, with the aid of international news media acting as the catalyst for the tipping point, the norm cascaded and was internalized at the local, domestic level. Egyptian government was incapable of shutting down the collective *virtual voice* of the population to communicate political ideas and information (Dunn, 2011). The ability to circumnavigate government restrictions and constraints on communication gives credence to the power of *voice* and *virtual voice* and its ability to initiate social, political and cultural change.

### **Conclusion:**

The events of the Arab Spring highlighted the importance of upholding the right to freedom of assembly and ensuring the right to peaceful protest was protected around the world

(Gooderham, 2011). Larger ideas of human dignity transcended borders in Tunisia and Egypt. Both were under authoritarian regimes for several decades and had issues with finding sufficient employment for their university educated youths. In both Tunisia and Egypt the amount of social services provided by the governments had been drastically cut in recent years due to the austerity measures instilled by the World Bank and WTO (Murphy, 1999, p. 74). An explanation of why revolutions started at the periphery rather than at the center of the capitalist system can be seen by the lack of strong ideological support for capitalism which is often at odds with the difficulties faced by attempts at effective reform (Bhagwati, 2002). The Internet facilitated globalization, allowing the world to seem closer and while also bringing “images of far-off suffering into our homes.” (Bhagwati, 2002, p. 3). The discontent of the global youth can be demonstrated by numerous examples, including the protests in Seattle against the WTO, the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, and the global Occupy movement.

There are two levels of the internalization of new norms locally and globally. The Tunisians’ success created momentum and increased the legitimacy to utility of social media as an organizing tool and avenue to disseminate messages both locally and globally. As a result of decades of authoritarian rule, exercising *exit* caused a brain-drain, however, this phenomenon, perhaps ironically, increased the global reach of the Tunisian and Egyptian diaspora. This community was able to facilitate the deciphering of the local language, allowing for a breakdown of communication barriers and creating a global understanding of why the Tunisians and Egyptians, independently, were protesting and demanding the ousting of their traditionally oppressive authoritarian regimes. New norms for global social movements were formed by using social media to organize, disseminate information and gain international media attention. With the advent and increased legitimacy of social media, the *voice* of the social movement gained

increased agency. This allowed two local norms of social movement to emerge. The mold for social movements was created and gained agency and legitimacy through the success and speed demonstrated in Tunisia and Egypt.

New norms for government reactions to social movements were also created during the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. These new norms of social change were internalized and reinforced globally through the repetition, by varying social movements and the use of social media as a tool for organizing as well as a legitimate agent for disseminating information. Some of the movements coming out of the Tunisia and Egypt were successful, but many are waning because of varying independent factors. The Tunisian and Egyptian uprising created a model for other movements to follow, but whether their own movements are able to gain local and global legitimacy is dependent on their image within the international news media networks as well as the perception of global international organization such as the U.N as well as the global news media perception.

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