

The impact of social media on the Arab uprisings:

The Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube revolutions?

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Synopsis: Did social media facilitate and sustain contentious politics during the Arab uprisings? Many have speculated about this but it remains difficult to distinguish fact from hype. To examine these issues, Part I establishes the theoretical framework. This chapter theorizes that social media could potentially have four functions for mass uprisings: informational (spreading knowledge, awareness, and news), networking (coordinating collective actions and organizing movements), cultural (strengthening democratic aspirations and critical evaluations of regime performance) and behavioral (reinforcing the propensity for citizens to engage in protest acts challenging the regime). Part II outlines the survey evidence used to analyze the impact of social media in several diverse states in the Arab region. Data is drawn from representative surveys conducted by Zogby Research Services in September 2011, the Pew Global Attitudes Project surveys in spring 2010 and spring 2011, as well as the 2005-8 wave of the World Values Survey. Part III examines this evidence to determine the functions of social media. The conclusion summarizes the key results and considers their implications.

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The Arab uprisings rocked the foundations of deeply-entrenched autocracies in many Arab states, generating after-shocks rippling out as far as Beijing and Moscow. In Tunisia, President Ben Ali fled to Saudi Arabia, replaced by an elected coalition government of the Islamist Ennahda and the left-wing Ettakatol parties. The Egyptian uprisings led to the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) victory in parliament, although government power remains with the military. In Yemen, President Ali Abdallah Saleh has agreed to stand down and the regime transition continues to unfold. Libya saw bloody civil war, the death of Gaddafi, and governance by the interim National Transitional Council. Seeking to prevent similar events in Bahrain, Sheikh Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifah unleashed Saudi security forces to repress Shia unrest. In Syria, President Bashar al-Assad used even greater brutality, deploying mortar shells against civilians. For decades, authoritarian regimes in the Arab world had seemed immune from change, apparently impervious to the third wave of democratization sweeping the rest of the world, and untouched by the color revolutions in Eastern Europe. Scholars had previously sought to explain the puzzle of the robustness of authoritarianism in the Middle East (Bellin 2004, Diamond 2010). The Arab uprisings therefore caught most seasoned observers by surprise, generating widespread speculation about their causes.

In seeking to explain these events, numerous commentators have emphasized the role of information and communications technologies. The expansion of access to social media platforms such as Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, and YouTube is widely believed to have facilitated contentious politics in the region, with the capacity to undermine autocratic control of the airwaves and the streets. This claim gains plausibility from the way that the Middle East has experienced a massive wave of technological change since *Al Jazeera* launched in 1996, with access to satellite television, mobile cellular telephones, and social media platforms spreading faster than an oil slick in the Gulf. However although highly visible, especially to Western commentators, the impact of social media may have been exaggerated compared with many other deep-rooted causes of contentious politics and popular uprisings.

To examine these issues, *Part I* establishes the theoretical framework. This chapter theorizes that social media could potentially have four functions for mass uprisings: *informational* (spreading knowledge, awareness, and news), *networking* (coordinating collective actions and organizing movements), *cultural* (strengthening democratic aspirations and critical evaluations of regime performance) and *behavioral* (reinforcing the propensity for citizens to engage in protest acts challenging the regime). *Part II* outlines the survey evidence used to analyze the impact of social media