

## Lessons from 2011: The New Media Revolution is a Strategic Asset

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### *Summary*

The year 2011 was largely seen as the year of the social media revolution. It is perceived to be empowering popular uprisings, from catalysing the Arab Spring to spurring protests challenging Putin's writ in Russia or even movements highlighting global economic grievances such as Occupy Wall Street which went viral. However, to believe that social media alone brought in the change would be simplistic. What was new, was actually the idea of a new media revolution: the convergence of various forms of media-television, social, and online networks which, when combined together, became a powerful weapon in the hands of the common man. What began with the Jasmine Revolution was not a fad, but a phenomenon that has democratised the control and monopoly over information.



A year on, the whiff of jasmine in the air is still strong. At the peak of the protests in Cairo, an activist was quoted widely as saying, 'We use Facebook to schedule the protests, Twitter to coordinate, and YouTube to tell the world.'<sup>1</sup> This open admission, tells you how fundamental social media was to the modus operandi of the movement. But could the social media alone have spurred the revolution? Perhaps not. Analysts argue, that while the "narrative is tempting" it was al Jazeera's airing of user-generated content from 'a low Internet penetrated town of Sidi Bouzid' (200 miles from Tunis) that actually sparked the protests.<sup>2</sup> Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and al Jazeera together, made for a lethal cocktail.

The media phenomenon that we witnessed in 2011 during the Arab Spring was the product of a symbiotic relationship. Social media (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube) generated the content, which al Jazeera played out, 'framed', and amplified. 'Cell phone images gave a certain "cinéma vérité" quality to the protests, and let the viewers illicitly see images the authorities wanted to prohibit.'<sup>3</sup> They also provided for translation of events for the wider non-Arabic media and audience.

al Jazeera thus framed the narrative for a global audience. It was a good story: a screen teeming with protestors and a script dotted with a healthy dose of adjectives, which defined the activists as torch bearers of a revolution.<sup>4</sup> This storyboarding had two consequences: first, the localised protests organised with the aid of social media were now 'on air' across the world as an 'international story'; and second, encouraged by the news coverage, ordinary citizens felt the need to be 'part of the movement', thereby generating content and using the social media to 'post it online'.<sup>5</sup> They created for themselves a new identity ; people who were merely 'observers of activism' became 'activists', and in turn added significantly to the movement.<sup>6</sup>

Since the Jasmine Revolution, the media and academics have written extensively on the social media revolution. While some hail the dawn of a new era, floating ideas of a 'Twitter/Facebook revolution', others thrashed the hype, calling the medium nothing more than a 'tool' that aided the 'cause'.

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<sup>1</sup> Phillips N. Howard, 'The Arab Spring's Cascading Effects' February 23, 2011, available at <http://www.miller-mccune.com/politics/the-cascading-effects-of-the-arab-spring-28575/>, accessed on December 30 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Jon B. Alterman, 'The Revolution Will Not be Tweeted', , *The Washington Quarterly* , Vol. 34, No. 4, 2011, pp. 103-116.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 111.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 104.

In fact, a recent report by the Dubai School of Governance provides 'empirical evidence suggesting that the growth of social media in the region and the shift in usage trends have played a critical role in mobilization, empowerment, shaping opinions, and influencing change.'<sup>7</sup> It appears that once the idea of using the social media as a tool for affecting political change was internalised, the penetration of the medium in the Middle East was instant. Within the first quarter of 2011, Facebook recorded a 30 per cent increase in membership in the Arab world, and almost doubled the number of users in the region since 2010.<sup>8</sup> The survey also suggests that an attempt to block out social media 'spurred people to be more active, decisive and to find ways to be more creative about communicating and organizing'.<sup>9</sup>

The service providers, too, seemed emboldened by the growing numbers of followers. Google, in a bid to help out Egyptian protestors, launched 'speak2tweet', foreseeing an Internet ban during the protests. The tool could be used by anyone with a voice connection by dialling three international numbers and have their voice messages sent out as tweets.<sup>10</sup>

Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, while publicly denying any role played by Facebook in the revolution, calling it a mere tool, has mused in the past about the latent power of the social network. In 2008, a Facebook group started by a Colombian youth against the FARC guerrillas was able to mobilise – in just one month – a massive political rally across the country and generate support worldwide.<sup>11</sup> Zuckerberg had predicted then that 'in 15 years maybe there will be things like what happened in Colombia almost every day.'<sup>12</sup> It didn't take that long for the idea to take root. Gauging the extent of its reach, one often comes across writers cheekily advocating that Facebook come up with its 'own foreign policy'.<sup>13</sup>

It is no wonder then that the competitive world of TV journalism has embraced social media with such enthusiasm. Not only is it a bankable source that feeds the 24-hour monster of Live TV; media honchos have realised that the only way to ensure survivability

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<sup>7</sup> See *Arab Social Media Report*, Vol. 1, No. 2, May 2011, published by the Dubai School of Governance, available at <http://www.dsg.ae/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=7ZESSJHiXY8=>, accessed on January 3, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Christopher Mondini, 'Why Facebook Needs a Foreign Policy', January 25, 2011, available at [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/christopher-mondini/why-facebook-needs-a-fore\\_b\\_853288.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/christopher-mondini/why-facebook-needs-a-fore_b_853288.html), accessed on January 3, 2012.

<sup>11</sup> David Kirkpatrick, 'Does Facebook have a Foreign Policy?', *Foreign Policy*, December 2011, available at [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/11/28/does\\_facebook\\_have\\_a\\_foreign\\_policy?page=full](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/11/28/does_facebook_have_a_foreign_policy?page=full), accessed on January 5, 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> See Christopher Mondini, n. 10 above.

while increasing interactivity and the numbers is to tap the combined potential of all forms of media. Eric Qualman, in his book *Socialnomics: How Social Media Transforms the Way We Live and Do Business*, sums it up well: 'we don't find news, the news finds us'.<sup>14</sup>

This was apparent in India as well, when the Anna Hazare movement went viral in early 2011. Television editors were only too happy to bring the protests into one's living room day after day, and to hold endless discussions tailor made for 24-hour live news formats. A 74-year-old Gandhian's fight to bring accountability and transparency in governance – an Indian version of the Ombudsman Bill tied up neatly with the various graft scams exposed by competing news networks and made for an explosive story. Of course, one could not ignore the numbers of "hits" either.

The 'India Against Corruption Campaign' web-page had over 350,000 followers in September 2011.<sup>15</sup> Anna Hazare who has several fan pages dedicated to him, himself took to blogging sensing the power of this medium. A website petitioning for Hazare's movement ([www.avaaz.org](http://www.avaaz.org)) signed up 170,000 people within 24 hours.<sup>16</sup> Social media co-ordination and broadcast media coverage ensured that Anna's call of 'jail bharo' or 'voluntarily courting arrest' on December 30<sup>th</sup> 2011, saw 1.3 lakh people signing up for the online petition.<sup>17</sup> While the agitation was called off eventually, the perception of the power of the movement was felt in all corridors of power.

According to a report released by Facebook, 'Anna Hazare and the Jan Lokpal bill were mentioned the most in status updates in 2011 in India'.<sup>18</sup> In fact, Union Law Minister Salman Khursheed was candid in admitting that the government was caught unawares: 'We were frankly at a disadvantage as we didn't use social media as effectively as Anna Hazare used it.[...] They did a remarkable job.'<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> See Eric Qualman, *Socialnomics: How Social Media Transforms the Way We Live and Do Business* (Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley & Sons, 2009), p. 268.

<sup>15</sup> Paul de Bendorf and Matthias Williams, 'Anna to Launch Public Fast as Govt Relents', *Reuters*, August 18, 2011, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/08/18/us-india-protest-idUSTRE77G0PF20110818>, accessed on January 5, 2012.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Himanshu Diwan, 'Battlecry: 1.3 Lakh Join Anna's Jail Bharo Campaign', *Times of India*, December 27, 2011, available at [http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2011-12-27/india/30561301\\_1\\_battle-cry-jail-bhara-campaign-court-arrest](http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2011-12-27/india/30561301_1_battle-cry-jail-bhara-campaign-court-arrest), accessed on January 5, 2012.

<sup>18</sup> T. Adinarayan, 'Anna Hazare, Jan Lokpal Bill Top Status Updates in 2011', *Times of India*, December 8, 2011, available at <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/tech/news/internet/Anna-Hazare-Jan-Lokpal-bill-top-status-updates-in-2011/articleshow/11024988.cms>, accessed on January 5, 2012.

<sup>19</sup> 'We Were Caught Unawares by Anna Stir', *Times of India*, October 18, 2011, available at [http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2011-10-18/india/30296102\\_1\\_lokpal-bill-team-anna-anna-hazare](http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2011-10-18/india/30296102_1_lokpal-bill-team-anna-anna-hazare), accessed on January 3, 2012.

The momentum was such that the Government of India decided to combat Team Anna tweet for tweet by putting together a blue print to counter Hazare's social media clout. It was also reported that the government was reaching out to private news broadcasters to convince them to stop 24-hour coverage of the Lokpal Bill protests, which they believed was fanning the nationwide agitation.<sup>20</sup>

Similarly, the 'Occupy Wall Street' Protests that began in New York in September 2011 to 'focus national attention on income inequality and the perceived greed of the rich and powerful', also went on to become a global movement spanning 1,300 cities by engaging the social media and being followed extensively on television.<sup>21</sup> 'Occupydream.org, the social platform of the movement had mandated itself to collect a million "statements of dreams" in advance of a march on Washington timed for Martin Luther King's birthday as a testament of support to the cause.<sup>22</sup> The effort has definitely not gone unnoticed by the White House and the US Congress.

Innovation has become key to the success of these movements. Trying to stay one step ahead of the authorities, activists have begun to use 'Vibe', an application for iPhones, iPads, and Android devices that allows the user to send messages that are visible to only other users, and not to police or other outsiders, and leave no time trails.<sup>23</sup>

Even in countries like China and Russia, where the media is state monitored, local spin-offs of Facebook and Twitter have become outlets of expression. A report on Businessinsider.com maps data to show that 500 million Chinese are avid Internet users of whom 50 per cent have more than one social network profile and 30 per cent log on to social networks on an average of twice a day. While 80 per cent 'log in to read the news', 37 per cent blog and 33 per cent indulge in social networking.<sup>24</sup>

The first signs of social media emerging as the one free outlets of speech in authoritarian China emerged in the summer of 2011 after the high-speed rail crash in Wenzhou. The

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<sup>20</sup> Yatish Yadav, 'Lokpal bill: Govt to Counter Anna Hazare's Social Clout', *Business Today*, December 15, 2011, available at <http://businesstoday.intoday.in/story/lokpall-bill-anna-hazare-social-media-support/1/20944.html>, accessed on January 5, 2012.

<sup>21</sup> 'Social Media and the Wall Street Protests', *The Economist*, October 2011, available at <http://www.economist.com/node/21532071>, accessed on January 8, 2012.

<sup>22</sup> 'Occupy Wall Street Movement Develops New Strategies for 2012', *Economic Times*, January 9, 2012, *Economic Times*, available at <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international-business/occupy-wall-street-movement-develops-new-strategies-for-2012/articleshow/11421290.cms>, accessed on January 9, 2012.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Dylan Love, 'Infographic: Here's How Social Media Works in China', *Business Insider*, December 1, 2011, available at [http://articles.businessinsider.com/2011-12-01/tech/30461480\\_1\\_facebook-censors-china](http://articles.businessinsider.com/2011-12-01/tech/30461480_1_facebook-censors-china), accessed on January 8, 2012.

incident led to an outpouring of public fury on microblogs about the authorities' management of the disaster; it even emboldened some of the mainstream media to cover the incident and voice concerns.<sup>25</sup> While the social media will not be shut down completely due to the threat of a backlash, a communique issued by the Chinese Communist Party ordered severe punishment and censorship to counter the 'evil designs of microbloggers'.<sup>26</sup> A similar set of events was seen with respect to the recent anti-Putin protests in Russia.

Critics would argue that it is the people, the social and political circumstances, and, ultimately, the cause, that unite and propel peoples' movements forward. It is not the social or electronic media which, while indicating support for a cause, absolve one of responsibility and do not guarantee participation. However, the events discussed above elucidate that while civic participation is essential for any revolution, the combined resources of the social and electronic media provide the glue that sustains the movement, when exploited to its true potential. It is not just a means to an end, but a medium that is bringing together societies from all corners of the world on to a single platform where ideas meet more ideas, bridging gaps of generation, language, ethnicity and class, and generating energy for collective action.

One could perhaps then nuance the argument from the basic neither/nor binary to argue that social media in isolation may not change the world, but when combined with powerful inventions like the 20<sup>th</sup> century television, yield a potent tool to the masses. If used as a mean to an end and unleashed innovatively; the new combined potential of the various forms of the media could give regimes authoritarian or otherwise daily nightmares. Contrarily, regimes could adapt to this change and use the medium to reach out to their people. In essence it's the germination of the idea of this combined 'new media' that is truly revolutionary. One year on, from the Jasmine Revolution; this idea is here to stay.

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<sup>25</sup> 'China to Step Up Social Media Censorship', *The Guardian*, October 26, 2011, , available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/oct/26/china-social-media-censorship>, accessed on January 3, 2012.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.