The Role of Social Media in The 'Syrian Uprising

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Abstract

This paper, which is entitled 'The Role of Social Media in the 'Syrian Uprising' aimed to report on survey research conducted which identify the role of played by social media in the 'Syrian Uprising' Currently social media tools were good mediums of electronic communication among protesters in Syria. Further, it was a vital medium for spreading information such as photos, videos and documents about the revolution for national, regional and international spheres. This paper looked at the impact and relationship between protesters and Syrian people who used social media ,technology and the nature of its role in the 'Syrian Uprising ' as well as the study has made a controversial argument between different views of scholars about the subject and its case. This paper has interviewed 30 protesters inside Syria through a survey. This study, demonstrate the appeal that social media can have both positive and negative points in the 'Syrian uprising'.

1. Introduction

The years 2010 and 2011, can be known as the golden years for the social media or 'New media', as well as for a number of Arab countries. New media has changed its role from spreading information about events in the world to playing an arguably significant role in the political actions against governments in the Arab world. It has been suggested that social media played a vital role in toppling totalitarian governments in the Arab World and the uprisings are on-going. The current Revolutionsare spreading to other states in the region and it is claimed that it has been facilitated by social media.

According to the Guardian (2012) it is probable that "In December 2010, a man in Tunisia burned himself to death in protest at his treatment by police. What followed was an extraordinary year as pro-democracy rebellions erupted across the Middle East." Similarly, on 11th February 2011 the uprisings moved to Egypt and protesters broke down Hosni Mubarak's regime in approximately a month; Mubarak had led the country for 30 years. Then, on 15th February 2011, the revolution started in Libya against the Gaddafi regime and spread to Bahrain on 14th March 2011 but the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Gulf States sent troops into Bahrain to support the Sunni Al Khalifa kingship after a revolt by the kingdom's subjugated Shia majority. Subsequently, Syria was the fifth Arab country in the region that continues to face strong demonstrations by the majority of Syrian people on 18th March 2011 against Bashar al-Assad. Al-Assad's troops killed five demonstrators in the southern city of Deraa and the revolt has not reached its purpose yet. Finally, Yemen is the last country in the region to join the Arab Spring on 3rd June 2011 Yemenis started the uprising against President Ali Abdullah Saleh. In addition, BBC (2013) explains that the battle in Syria started in early 2011, and after that the protests took everywhere and people followed the actions against Assad's Regime and until 2013 more than 100,000 dead and millions exiled.

2. Methods

The methodology that will be useful for this research is qualitative methods. The researchers use content analysis to analyze the data which would be collected by depending on both primary (collecting documents through online sources and conducting survey) and secondary data from academic research, books, journal

articles and online resources. Hence, collecting and analyzing data by using a qualitative methodology and content analysis approach will be the research methodology.

In this research, both of primary and secondary resources will be used. The primary data for this research will be collecting data from the Syria public sphere, newspaper, social media, traditional technology, and especially Facebook pages which are playing a role in the event of Syrian revolution and the revolutionists were depending on it as a source of news and information during the uprising.

Furthermore, there are several different arguments debating the nature of the social media and its positive and negative impactson the new life tendency. Here, both the positive and negative views on the issue would be discussed and analyzed in order to find some new facts to be sure about the research's hypothesis. We depend on several secondary data such as those kinds which focus on different views of scholars like EvgenyMorozov who is quite negative about the role of internet in the revolutions. However, we will focus down on Clay Shirky, Zeynep Tufekci1 and Malcolm Gladwell who are positive about the role of social media in the social movements.

3. Procedures

In the Arab worldcountries used censorship on media and when the uprisings started most of the countries had a state media which runs by governments, that is why during the Arab Spring people used social media particularly via smartphones to communicate and arrange actions against dictatorships. According to CIA (2014) the population of Syria was 22,457,336 till July 2013, and about 12.928 Million Syrian people used Mobile phones in 2012. IBID, "in Syria state-run TV and radio broadcast networks; state operates two TV networks and a satellite channel; roughly two-thirds of Syrian homes have a satellite dish providing access to foreign TV broadcasts; three state-run radio channels; first private radio station launched in 2005; private radio broadcasters prohibited from transmitting news or political content (2007)."

As stated by internetworldstats (2014), that the number of the Internet users in Syria increased in 30 June 2012 to 5, 069, 418 million users. Likewise, consistent with Arabsocialmediareport (2014) illuminates that the number of Facebookusers in Syria is 17.44% even the country is in the list of enemies of Facebook in the world. Furthermore, Ghattas (2011) clarifies that While Syrian tried to make protests the army deployed actions against civilians which is why they thought about an alternative tool for example On Twitter, "the account of @SyRevoSlogans, created on 18 April 2011, offered a flood of slogans for people to use during demonstrations across the country - many suggested by fellow Twitter users. Similarly, User @syrianjasmine spread news of "thugs" being bussed into the town of Daraya, while @wissamtarif kept track of student protests and arbitrary detentions in the capital Damascus."

At the same time, Syrian people used Facebook along with Twitter for instanceThe Facebook page of 'Syrian Revolution 2011', with its 120,000 followers, called people for taking an action for Friday strikes. Moreover, the international media channels contacted to that page for obtaining pictures and videos of actions in Syria. As a consequence, Leigh (2013) states that "Two years after a Facebook page appeared calling for revolution; the uprising in Syria has developed into a full-blown civil war, a humanitarian crisis, and a tangled diplomatic impasse. To understand the full extent of the situation requires constant attention to – and knowledge of– the region."

Preston (2011) argues that the Syrian regime is cracking down on activists on social media in order to gain information about them and three months after allowing people to have access to the Internet and social media such as Facebook and YouTube numerous of citizens created accounts and used social media tools particularly Facebook to promote the revolutionary action through the country. Therefore, that is why Syrian officials decided to switch of the Internet and 3G mobile network as well, in order to control uploading videos and photos of protests inside Syria to the world. Correspondingly, in the same time Syrian regime made an electronic army to dissident's rebel via online.

Many scholars believe that social media tools were the main factors for collapsing a number of Arab regimes; however, others do not agree with this view.In his book *The Net Delusion*EvgenyMorozov (2011) mentions that several countries in the world just want to promote democracy and freedom via online methods but it is not a real platform for giving freedom via the Internet because some countries use the Internet to conduct surveillance of their people, he believes that authoritarians use the Internet, particularly social media, for spy work instead of giving freedom. In essence, his negative view came from his origin country, Belarus, because he strongly believes that non-democratic countries do not allow people or internet corporations to give freedom via online methods. For example Belarus and Russian authoritarians have arrested some youths during the protests in the past and the important point is that they knew everything about their activities. In other words, authoritarians can take more advantages of using social media than ordinary people because they will conduct surveillance of the users especially in the time of uprisings.

However, Clay Shirky (2011) considers that throughout the course of all revolutions, there's no conflict about the reasons of the revolutions anywhere in the world. The main factors are economic or political. He argues that the modern revolutions are different, as mostly they rely on new means. Communications and information technology was the most effective factors in the modern revolutions in countries like Syria. Those means were used to communicate the political issues.

This gives a chance to networked people to gain greater access to world information, and current issues on the international arena. Apparently, the main key for many protests is to anticipate and motivate people to take part in the movements and to go out to face authority to get their rights. Social media allows organisers to involve like-minded people in a movement at a very low cost, but they do not necessarily make these people move. More importantly, Shirky supported his argument by explaining some examples, as he stated that the power of social media has great impact in many cases in history. Sometimes protesters' success, such as in Spain in 2004, andin many cases, technological devices such as mobile phones are the reason for a fall of a party or a regime, for example the situation in 2009 when the Communist party lost power in Moldova, when public protests were organised by text messages andin June 2009 uprising of the Green Movement in Iran.

 However, Morozov (2011) states that "Security has never been among the internet's strong sides, and the proliferation of social media in the last decade has only made things worse. In the past, the KGB resorted to torture to learn about the connections between activities; today, they simply need to get on Facebook" (p.146-156)Conversely, Chadwick (2010) explains that many opponents argue that social media including websites, networks and blogs are the main tools for connecting people all over the world. People can share ideas and information. Even though, in the 21st century social media has become a very significant part in many communities around the world.

Significantly, an important factor for the effect of social media currently can be the capability of accessing networks all over the world. People everywhere can get access to the Internet easily, and almost all people can use it. As Clay Shirky illustrated, nowadays social media is used by many people as a tool mainly for commerce and social life. On the other hand, Morozov (2011) believes that throughout the Middle East the main place where many civilians could express their anger was on Facebook. In some cases vividly in the Middle East people engaged in using the Internet in protests, that "the internet is more important and disruptive than [its greatest advocates] have previously theorised".

Furthermore, Morzovo said that "the Internet does not play an essential role in middle eastern democratic revolutions compared with other factors, like the new procedures that the new leaders do take, such as the new constitution and the principles of the previous government." Consequently, the dispute about the social media is a further negative since the Internet or social media may have a limited effect on revolutions.
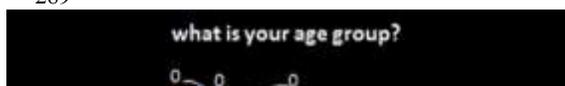
This paper depends on an online survey for collecting primary data; 30 participants contributed to our online questionnaire. Here, the responses will be explained question by question. The questions will be illustrated in order to gain academic results.

Figure (1) shows the participants' genders and age as well according to the chart 9 of the contributors are female, and 21 contributors are male, this figure explains that the rate of males is higher than females due to reasons including: religion, economy and politics. Also, it can be seen that most participations are young people in the group of age 20-29 and 30 – 39. Through this statistic it is an undeniable fact that the new generation in Syria have arranged actions via online particularly through social media.
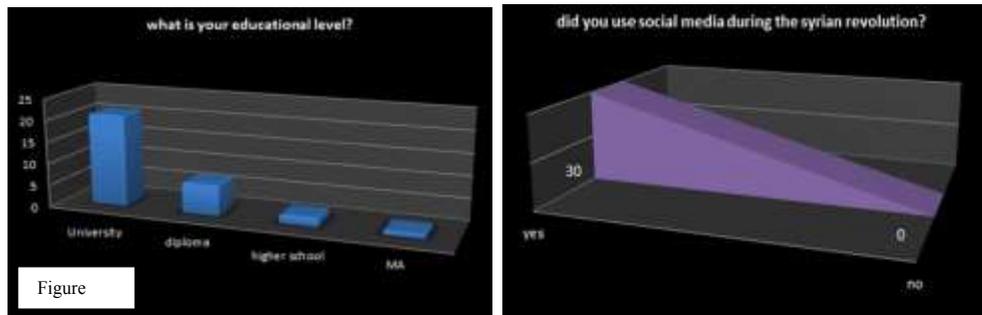

Figure

Figure (2) shows the educational level of participants, according to the graph most of the participants have finished a high level of education such as high school, university, diploma and Master, It seems that most of the people who joined the revolution in Syria have studied and most of them finished university which is a good level of public awareness in their country. However, there is no one as illiterate participant in this survey and the only reason could be because they are social media users or may be other reasons. The chart displays the number of social media users during the revolution and consistent with the chart, 30 persons use social media.
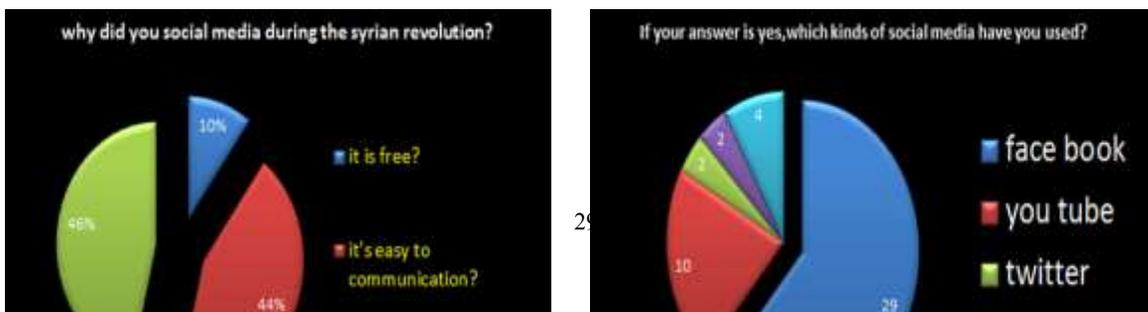
Figure (3) explains the reasons of using social media during the revolution and the posted things through social media tools, according to the charts 46% of participants used social media because it's the fastest way of delivering videos and news to the world, also 44% of participants used it because its easy tool of communication. The chart clarifies the participants used Facebook and then YouTube.
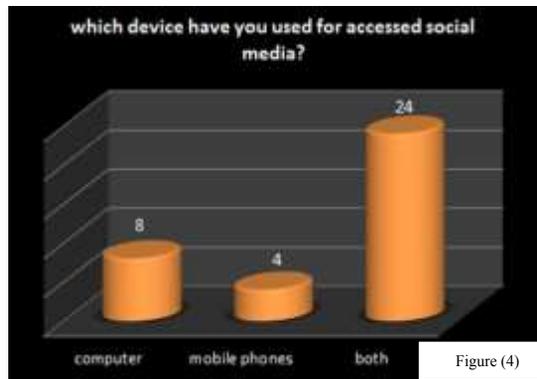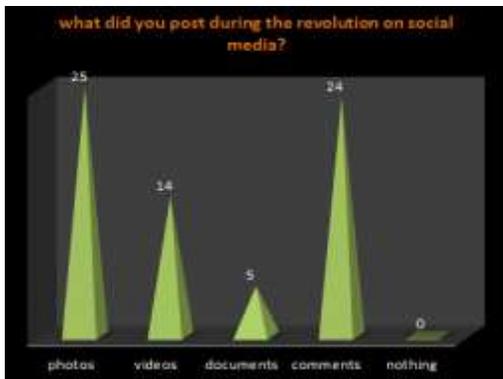

Figure (4)

Figure (4) illustrates that the most of participants posted photos and comments on social media, and then videos with documents. Likewise, the chart explains the devices that participations used for opening social media for example 8 of them used computers and 4 of them used smartphones as well as 24 of them used both of devices

During the revolution and smartphones was the best ways as some of participants mentioned because they recorder and captured photos of actions and posted in the same time.
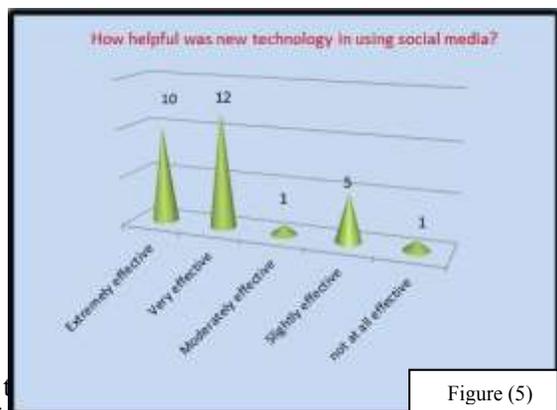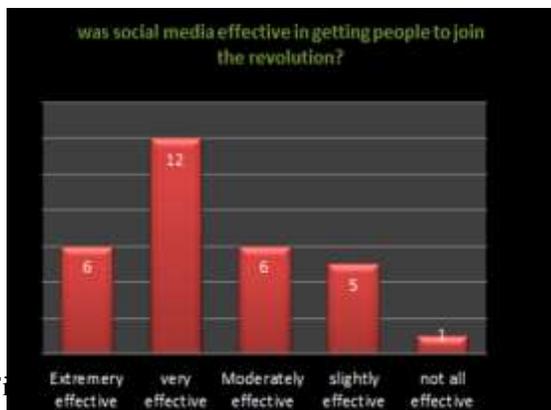

Figure (5)

Fi_____ f the revolution. According to the chart 6 participations believe that social media was extremely effective and 12 of them believe that it was very effective. However, just1 participation considers that social media was not at all effective. According to the chart 10 contributions believe that new technology was extremely

effective and 12 of them consider that new technology was very effective nonetheless just1 participation think that technology was not at all effective.

It can be seen that there are several points in the arguments about this data that have been analysed and it could be said that according to these data social media was an effective revolutionary tool in Syria and it helped them to communicate online and arrange actions as well, as a final point, it can be seen that the number of online protesters were higher than the number of street protesters. Coincidently, the next section will explain and show the result of the paper in brief.

4. Results

This section will focus on the most significant results that have been achieved through conducting the process of the research. In the whole of the research, and by depending on the data we have been used.

It can be stated that social media tools were good mediums of electronic communication among protesters in Syria. The usage of the social media has been useful for participants during the uprising to liberate their countries and to change the economic-political systems of their states. Further, it was a vital medium for spreading information such as photos, videos and documents about the revolution for national, regional and international spheres. Here, the research is parallel with the notion of Chadwick (2010) who believes that social media are the main tools for connecting people all over the world because people can share ideas and information online. Even though, in the 21st century it has become a very significant part in many communities around the world.

According to the sources that have been used, social media was an effective tool to inspire people to join the revolution because they used it to send revolutionary messages via social media. As well as,it has a crucial role in drawing the world's attention to the Syrian uprising in order to achieve global support for the revolution.

Again, in concordance with those scholars that believe social media has an important role, we also support the notion of Shirky (2011) that supported his argument as he stated that the power of social media has a great impact on many cases in history. In many cases, technological devices such as mobile phones are the reason for a fall of a party or a regime. Some examples are like the situations in 2009, when the Communist party lost its power in Moldova, when public protests were organised by text messages.

However, other academics have opposite views about the role of the social media in the Arab spring uprisings. Found in some sources that the social media was just a tool of communication among the people, because people just used those tools to gain information and communicate with each other but not for arranging political actions against regimes. However, the participants of the survey have explained that they used Facebook to choose dates and locations of the uprising.

Social media tools could be used in some countries for conspiracy and confidential activities including "spying". Morozov (2011, p146-156) states that "Security has never been among the Internet's strong sides, and the proliferation of social media in the last decade has only made things worse. In the past, the KGB resorted to torture to learn about the connections between activities; today, they simply need to get on Facebook." The research agrees with that point that the case of security is an important case for individuals' privacy and also for organisations and states and it's a weak point of using social media, but it should not make other scholars ignore the important role that social media played in opening the world and societies. It is plausible to believe in the technology and networking that it has mutual positive and negative aspects. Moreover, the research agrees with Thomas Friedman who concentrates on a very essential point in which he emphasised that social media did not emancipate people to collaborate but helped the public to communicate (2012).

The final negative point is that the revolution needs another important element, which is the human resource. The whole concept of this research is that social media was a good tool in some terms but not all; it helped people to create a better public sphere to talk freely about events and political situation in the region. Hence, Gladwell states that: "Social networks only create weak ties between people."(2010).

Above all, new technology like smart-phones has a crucial role because protesters have used smart-phones to take photos and record videos of the uprising and then upload them to Facebook and other social media tools, according to our survey.

5. Conclusions

To summarise the arguments, it can be concluded that social media tools such as Facebook and Twitter were significant tools for demonstrators for spreading and exchanging information and sending their messages to the world. Conversely, it does not make a revolution alone because it was just a tool, and other factors pushed youths to explore the situation and to make revolutions in the region and Syria as well.

In brief, there are both positive and negative points of using social media in the Syrian uprising. However, the positive aspects outweigh the negative points because it has been an undeniable fact that social media played a fundamental role in the Syrian uprising but as a tool to spread information and it has a role to provoke people to join the revolution, but other factors such as economic, poverty, unemployment and the political situation pushed people to stand up against the regime.

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