

Social media is free speech gone mad

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The atmosphere is tense, yet a seemingly uncontainable excitement pervades the air. Chants and banners proclaiming change overpower the senses of those who are present, and the revolutionary spirit is well and truly alive. These seemingly romantic scenes have been observed across the Arab world in recent months, where people have fervently displayed their desire for regime change in what has become known as the "Arab Spring". This collection of revolutions and rebellions has one defining aspect that differentiates it from previous demands for human dignity - the integral role of social media as a vehicle for free speech. For despots and dictators, social media is viewed as a form of free speech 'gone mad'. Though for everyday citizens, forms of social media such as Twitter and Facebook have become an alternative vehicle for people to express themselves freely. Moreover, the recent events highlight the capacity for social media to act as a tool for agitating social and political change. In this part of the globe, social media is not a form of free speech 'gone mad', but is simply a liberating and empowering force.

Freedom of speech is generally regarded as a basic and fundamental human right. In spite of this, free speech is limited or tightly controlled in many countries throughout the world. While these nations may have provisions for freedom of speech provided in their constitutions, it is often severely curtailed in practice. In Syria for example, 'The Press Law' of 2001 provides the government with broad control over the print media. It prohibits reporting on subjects considered to be sensitive by the government, which includes material relating to "national security" or "national unity". The breaking of these laws may lead to monetary fines of up to US\$20,000 or prison sentences of up to three years. More cases of government restriction can be observed throughout the Arab world, with international watchdog Freedom House designating the press in Libya, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and Jordan as "Not Free". Since the majority of Arab nations are governed by authoritarian regimes and dictatorships, freedom of speech is restricted in order to maintain control over the population, in addition to curbing the capacity for political dissidents to voice their concerns and hence undermine the ruling regime. The advent of social media in this environment is therefore clearly not free speech 'gone mad', but is a sensible extension of people's basic human rights and liberties.

In spite of the limited capacity for freedom of speech to be practiced in Arab nations, social media has exploded as an alternative beyond the control of the state. While print and television are tightly controlled by these regimes, social media and networking sites are much more troublesome for them to control. Even in countries where social media is prohibited by the ruling regime, government firewalls are easily bypassed by the tech savvy at internet cafes. The first Arab nation to witness a revolution was Egypt, with President Hosni Mubarak resigning on 11 February 2011 after a rule spanning

three decades. His resignation was prompted by massive protests held by demonstrators, who were responding to the deep-seated political and social ills in Egypt at the time. These demonstrations were not incited by traditional forms of media such as print, but instead the agitation for a revolution was spread by means of social media, to the extent that some have dubbed it a "Twitter Revolution". It allowed for the population to circumvent tough government laws on traditional media and push for social and political change without hindrance from the government. Through the use of Facebook and Twitter, demonstrators were able to communicate with one another and engage with wider audiences to spread their cause, while also organising demonstrations and protests. Journalist Roger Cohen, from Cairo's Tahrir square observed that a mere "tweet electrified the square" and that "the energy it generated was a reminder of the spirit of the moment when fear dissolves". The use of social media did not go 'mad', but was sensibly used by the Egyptian people to agitate for change in the context of repressive government censorship. It became a viable voice for free speech, one powerful enough to free and liberate entire peoples.

The success in the use of social media in various revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia has drawn tremendous international praise. It is clear that social media has been an integral tool for freedom of expression in these countries, and has provided demonstrators with a vital tool for expression, organisation and communication. It must be noted however, that while social media has enabled significant advances in freedom of expression across the Arab world, it did not provide the motivation for an actual revolution to occur. This remains with other political and social forces, as lawyer and journalist Jeffrey Ghannam observes, "Deep-seated social ills - repression from the top and political and economic frustration from below - are at the core of protest sweeping the Arab world". The preconditions required for a revolution to occur have been around before the emergence of social media, but only now are the voices of oppressed peoples being heard. Social media should then not be perceived as the cause of these revolutions and hence a form of free speech 'gone mad', but instead should be viewed as a viable and useful tool for pursuing social and political change.

Social media has been an important communication tool in expressing and articulating the need for social and political change that have been held for decades prior to the revolutions. It is simply a new and powerful form of free speech. To describe these advances as an example of free speech 'gone mad', is to severely undermine the progress that the Arab people have made in asserting their inherent rights through new and emerging outlets. Due to social media, the voice of Arabs and other oppressed peoples are no longer passive or weak, but are active and powerful. It is a liberating and influential tool, empowering people through free speech and freeing them from the shackles of oppression.