

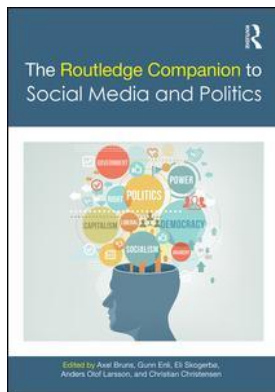
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### Structures of Feeling, Storytelling, and Social Media

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# 14

## STRUCTURES OF FEELING, STORYTELLING, AND SOCIAL MEDIA

### The Case of #Egypt

*Zizi Papacharissi and Stacy Blasiola*

#### Introduction

Every movement has its own story and every era is historicised via its own storytelling tools. For our era, social media platforms provide a variety of ways with which to tell, share and feel our way into developing stories. When we think about the meaning of social media for developing movements of a political, sociocultural, economic, or all-those-things-together nature, we must understand that what these platforms chiefly do is permit movements to frame their story in their own terms. In fact, they go one step beyond that: They permit each individual involved, affiliated, or interested in a movement to become a storyteller, contributing to the collaborative narrative woven online and offline about the movement itself.

Much has been written about the role of social media in uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, with particular emphasis on uprisings in Egypt that led first to reversal of the Mubarak regime and then to the downfall of the Morsi government. Some dismiss or downplay the existence of a causal relationship between use of social media and subsequent protests. People protested and brought down governments long before social media existed; Facebook and Twitter are simply places where revolutionaries congregate online (Gladwell 2011; Morozov 2011). Others maintain that use of social media accelerated the development of social movements in those countries in ways similar to those in which the printing press and other media facilitated revolutions in the past (Tufekci 2011; Ingram 2011). It is important to not lose sight of the fact that these are *human* revolutions, ultimately enabled by human cost and sacrifice, that had been accumulating and culminating over time (York 2011; Zuckerman 2011). Our own perspective suggests that these platforms do not make or break revolutions but rather, through their storytelling capabilities, afford movements voice and visibility that amplifies both the potential of the movement *but also the expectations associated with a given movement*.

Without a doubt, context matters. Moreover, whether these reprises will historically be claimed as revolutions can only be determined by long-term democratic outcomes. In the meantime, asking whether social media *caused* these uprisings misses the point. It also mischaracterises the nature of the media employed in the context of these upheavals. This chapter provides an overview of relevant research on how social media were utilised in recent Egyptian politics, by key political movements. In doing so, we synthesise research findings toward presenting propositions on the meaning, role, and impact of social media platforms in the context of recent Egyptian politics. The chapter is organised around what we know thus far, that is, what research has shown, and what questions remain unanswered.

### #Egypt

Although the wave of protests and uprisings that swept through the Middle East and North Africa in late 2010 and into 2011 became largely known as the ‘Arab Spring’, it is important to recall that “there has been no single Arab uprising, but rather a series of different uprisings, which have each taken a different course according the intersection of domestic politic” (El-Hibri 2014: 841). Thus, we take to the current task with the intention of focusing on the events that occurred in Egypt in the 18-day span of protests between January 25 and February 11, the day that marked the removal of the 30-year-long regime of President Hosni Mubarak, who had long kept the country under dictatorial rule. The Egyptian uprising became known to Westerners as ‘The Facebook Revolution’, and even in Egypt, “The politicized, Internet-savvy generation that organized the initial events is known as ‘The Facebook kids’” (Lindsey 2012: 54). That social media played a role in the events of the Egyptian uprising is clear enough, but numerous scholars have sought to understand the extent to which social media were used, by whom, and how. Needless to say, every movement possesses its own character, and to the extent that it adopts digital pathways to expression, its own digital footprint. Our focus on #Egypt highlights the unique and multiple textures of expression and connection of that movement, digital and non-digital. Our goal is to infer some broader conclusions about modalities of expression movements acquire online, but also to dispel the myths that all movements develop in identical ways that make or break revolutions online.

We do know from general research on the use of Twitter that addressivity and conversational markers shape the direction of information flows via Twitter. Networked publics are further textually rendered through the use of hashtags that define a topic or a direction for information sharing. Research generally indicates that content in select hashtags follows a power-law distribution in terms of popularity, time, and geo-location (Singh and Jain 2010). Locality further shapes the tone and tenor of flows organised by hashtags. Local tags may display denser social connectivity between posting users (Yardi and boyd 2010a). In conversations around controversial topics, replies between like-minded individuals tend to strengthen group identity, whereas replies between different minded individuals reinforce in-group and out-group affiliation (Yardi and boyd 2010b). For emerging movements, locality and homophily effects may play a part in accelerating the formation of network ties that enhance the spreadability of information.

Further research underscores the connection between shared geo-locality and communal bonds strengthened via Twitter posts, permitting forms of “peripheral awareness and ambient community” (Erickson 2010: 1194). The practice of following opinion leaders on Twitter has been likened to emerging disciplines of listening in social media,

characterised by background listening, reciprocal listening, and delegated listening (Crawford, 2009). In this manner, the practice of listening may strengthen connectedness with others (Henneburg et al. 2009), resemble the practices of conversation (Honeycutt and Herring 2009; Steiner 2009), and add elements of physicality to web design (Hohl 2009). For burgeoning and ongoing movements, Twitter may serve as an always-on social environment that sustains conversations between homophilic and discordant publics, and these conversations frequently become more intense and spreadable when further sustained by a local connection or other shared interest.

During protests, uprisings, or periods of political instability, Twitter is frequently used to call networked publics into being and action. Understandably, the homophily encouraged by Twitter lends itself to calls for solidarity among publics, imagined or actual, that share a common set of goals. The enhanced connectivity experienced between Twitter users with shared geo-locations may further help activate and deepen ties during uprisings. Ultimately, the ambient nature of this social awareness environment lends itself to providing an always-on, interconnected web of information that mobilised actors might utilise, serving as more efficient and “electronic word of mouth” (Jansen et al. 2009: 2169). At the same time, it permits individuals to change the dynamics of conflict coverage and shape how events are covered, and possibly, how history is written (Hamdy 2010).

Under these circumstances, platforms like Twitter force a radical pluralisation of news dissemination and democratic processes (Dahlberg 2009). In regimes or during times when media are controlled, inaccessible, or not trusted, platforms like Twitter permit individuals to bypass traditional gatekeepers and contribute directly to the news process. News streams generated through the organic use of hashtags combine input from a variety of actors in ways that introduce *hybridity* into the news system. They encourage accidental or coordinated collaborations between journalists and citizens tracking the same story that further blur boundaries between information, news, and entertainment and introduce hybridity in the balance of power that shapes news production (Chadwick 2013). Moreover, the “broad, asynchronous, light-weight and always-on” aspect of platforms like Twitter afford individuals “an awareness system [with] diverse means to collect, communicate, share and display news and information, serving diverse purposes . . . on different levels of engagement” (Hermida 2010: 301). The ambience, homophily, and strengthening of bonds between those sharing a geo-local connection are essential in understanding the sociotechnical texture of Twitter, especially in situations that call for individuals to mobilise and show solidarity. They provide an always-on, ambient storytelling infrastructure that enables networked agents to presence their own takes on events ongoing and of the past. They thus shape the *storytelling infrastructure* of the platform.

Thus, given what we know about movements and the dynamic of Twitter, we turn our attention to current research to examine what findings have shown specifically about social media and the Egyptian uprising, and to shed light on questions yet to be answered.

### The Role of Social Media in #Egypt

Previous scholarship reflects a range of opinions concerning the level of influence that social media played in the Egyptian uprising. Western mainstream media were fairly quick to attribute much of the success in mobilising masses to the organising efforts made on Facebook and Twitter. Scholarship on the area, however, paints a different,

more cautious picture. Some warn that over-emphasising the role of social media is the result of focusing too intently on digital traces that may not be representative of the overall efforts of protestors (Aday et al. 2012), and that may only capture the role of affluent Egyptians (Nunns and Idle 2011). Others have argued that efforts made by the longstanding and frequent use of blogs by Egyptian activists paved the way for the 2011 uprising (el-Nawawy and Khamis 2014) and those efforts were simply extended to social media spaces such as Facebook and Twitter (Howard and Hussain 2011). Tufekci and Wilson (2012) argue that social media should be treated as one component of an evolving system of political communication in the Middle East and North Africa. In Egypt in particular, the influx of uncensored satellite television, privately owned print and online newspapers, and the growth of Internet accessibility—and ultimately the rise of social networks—all contributed to a shift from the monopolistic, state-controlled news environment to a pluralistic media environment that enabled oppositional viewpoints to spread (Khamis 2011). McGarty and colleagues (2014) succinctly state what the majority of scholars who investigated this topic have concluded or argued: As with all protests, the efforts made on the ground are what overthrow regimes, and so the Egyptian revolution was not a product of social media, but rather social media were one of several new technologies that enabled and facilitated social change.

Bolstering the position that social media should not be overly credited with the revolution's success are the modest Egyptian social media adoption numbers that preceded the uprising. Only an “infinitesimal proportion of the Egyptian population (.001%)” were Twitter users (Wilson and Dunn 2011: 1250), and only 4.7 million Egyptians had Facebook profiles. Despite these figures, social media acquired a starring role in Western perceptions of the Egyptian revolution, and its use among Egyptians may have taken a more significant role as local, state controlled media were restricted from accurately reporting on events on the ground (Arif 2014; Nunns and Idle 2011). Additionally, after the primary protests on January 25, Facebook in particular saw a jump in the number of Egyptian users (Aouragh and Alexander 2011). To understand how social media were utilised in the Egyptian uprising and to gauge its importance in motivating Egyptians to offline action, scholars have taken a number of methodological approaches from surveys and interviews of people on the ground, to content and network analyses of tweets, videos, and blogs. Questions have addressed who was using social media, what types of content were shared, and which messengers rose to prominence.

### **Observers and Participants: The People of #Egypt**

Because any Twitter user is capable of using a hashtag and few users attach geo-location to their tweets, simply counting the number of tweets tells little about who was participating. Thus, researchers sought to gain a better idea of who was contributing and where those users were located. Twitter conversations about the Egyptian uprising circulated via two prominent hashtags: #Egypt and #jan25 (Wilson and Dunn 2011). Using the profile information collected from users who tweeted #Egypt, Howard and colleagues (2011) discovered that early on, most tweets were generated outside the region, but after January 25 and as Mubarak's resignation loomed, outsiders' participation dropped and those in the region began to account for the majority of tweets. Analysis of the dominant languages used in prominent hashtags support Howard and colleagues' (2011) findings. Several studies indicate that the majority of tweets in #Egypt and #jan25 were Latin based (Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira 2011; Meraz

and Papacharissi 2013; Wilson and Dunn 2011). Expanding on this, Bruns, Highfield, and Burgess (2013) examined #Egypt tweets over time and found that early on, although Latin based languages dominated, a few weeks after Mubarak resigned, non-Latin based languages became dominant. These findings support Lotan et al.'s (2011) research, which determined that early tweets were written in English to help spread protestors' messages to external, mainstream media outlets.

In addition to media outlets, external non-Arabic speaking observers became participants in the Twitter discussions when they chimed in or showed support. Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira (2012) attribute the influx of non-local participants to the blending of news, opinion, and drama that created an affective news stream of tweets and encouraged commentary from participants and non-participants alike. Bruns and colleagues (2013) argue that the subsequent and significant shift in language also reflected a shift in attention as English-speaking countries turned their consideration elsewhere, and users of the hashtag became primarily Arabic speaking.

### **Affective News Streams: The Content of #Egypt**

Analyses that examined the content of social media messages in relation to the Egyptian uprising conclude that in addition to using social media to communicate information about the protests, participants and observers bonded over an abundance of sentiment expression. These tweets, mixing sentiment, opinion, and live reports of events on the street created an affectively fuelled news stream that sustained an online home for the movement, even when there was little news to report about the movement itself. Specifically, #Egypt sustained an ambient, always-on news stream for the movement with a pulse of its own, working alongside events within and outside Egypt and affectively supporting the movement's growth (Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira 2012). To this point, in their content analysis of #Egypt tweets, Meraz and Papacharissi (2013) discovered that

most tweets were not just news or opinion, but typically a blend of emotionally charged opinions on news or news updates to the point where it was difficult to distinguish news from opinion and from emotion, and doing so missed the point. (Meraz and Papacharissi 2013: 18)

In a visual content analysis of the most viewed YouTube videos, Arif (2014: 157) found that the image of Khaled Said's beaten face was used as an "icon of outrage" to generate emotional responses that inclined viewers to the notion "if it can happen to Khaled Said, it can happen to me". This sentiment was also reflected in the title of the Facebook page 'We Are All Khaled Said', which was created by blogger, activist, and Google executive Wael Ghoneim (Vargas 2012). This Facebook page was used throughout as an organisational tool for protestors and as a space for individuals to express their 'virtual dissidence' (Allam 2014). According to Lim (2012: 241–242), the page created a "schemata of interpretation" for individuals in that "the story and images of the torture of Khaled Said personified the injustice and brutalities of the Mubarak regime and thus intensified the emotion of the oppositional movement". In conjunction with messages of dissidence, participants included emotional appeals to national identity in tweets and posts through the use of songs and slogans that reflected national pride (Eltantawy and Wiest 2011).

In their survey of Tahrir Square protestors, Tufekci and Wilson (2012) found that of those who had a Facebook profile—about half the sample—nearly all of them used their profile to communicate about the protests. Those messages included confirmation that one would participate, and in some cases, information about where and when protests would occur. However, fearing that security forces were actively monitoring social media sites Facebook and Twitter (Lindsey 2012), organisers sometimes used social media to spread disinformation about the specifics of protests (El-Hibri 2014), turning to more private communication methods such as email, SMS, and word-of-mouth to acquire and share the accurate locations and times of the protests (El-Hibri 2014; Tufekci and Wilson 2012).

In addition to their organising role, social media were also used to document and record protestors' experiences. Facebook posts were a place for participants to disseminate their own photos and videos of the protests (Howard and Hussain 2011; Tufekci and Wilson 2012). In some instances, personal Facebook videos were then pushed to YouTube where they attained widespread diffusion. This was the case for popular activist Asmaa Mafouz who posted Facebook videos in which she explained to friends and family her decision to protest and how others could participate (Wall and Zahed 2011). Once videos were posted to YouTube, they were viewed by outsiders and in some cases ended up appearing on mainstream news (Wall and Zahed 2011).

Just as messages in one social media space were often connected to or shared through other social media, protests in Egypt were connected to events elsewhere in the region. Egyptian activists posted words of support to Tunisian activists in the days preceding the Egyptian revolt and those words were echoed back by Tunisians who then lent their support to Egyptians (Eltantawy and Wiest 2011). Additionally, on Twitter, hashtags for the Egyptian protests were used in conjunction with hashtags related to neighbouring events, such as those in Tunisia, Libya, and Bahrain, in a manner that connected participants (Meraz and Papacharissi 2013).

### **Creating the News: Citizen and Journalist Use of #Egypt**

Throughout the revolution, broadcast and online media outlets appeared to rely heavily on the use of material that was sourced from various social media sites. Tweets appeared on the scrolls of major news organisations' broadcasts, and videos pulled from YouTube were featured in news coverage. In Egypt, state-controlled media were prohibited from airing the protests and local Al Jazeera operations were suspended by the Egyptian government. Despite these efforts to curtail reporting, a number of media outlets provided thorough coverage of the events (Hermida et al. 2014). These circumstances led researchers to examine how traditional and social media worked together to shape the presentation of the revolution in the news. Researchers have questioned how social media influenced journalistic practices, and how individual citizens and activists rose to prominence.

At the time of the uprising, the use of social media by journalists was a relatively nascent development in the organisational routines of news work. In interviews with BBC workers who covered the Egyptian protests and the larger Arab Spring, Ahy (2014) describes a previously tumultuous relationship between news workers and social media. That relationship improved as a result of revamped work flows, whereby professional outlets leveraged their ability to acquire information via online tools and formalised processes to verify news reported by citizens through social media (Ahy 2014). Previous

work on journalistic practices revealed that news sources are a function of news values in that journalists are pushed by the demands of the profession to find sources that are trustworthy and authoritative, so they often turn to people in positions of power (Gans 1979). This workflow typically limits the ability of ordinary citizens or those operating outside of recognised institutions to influence the news. In their larger study of Arab Spring, Harlow and Johnson (2011) found that in the case of the Tahrir Square protests, the *New York Times* adhered to news norms by relying on established sources, a finding bolstered by Al Maskati (2012) in his study of six mainstream newspapers and their coverage of the Egyptian uprising. However, Harlow and Johnson (2011) showed that non-traditional media spaces such as the citizen journalist website Global Voices and the Twitter feed of *New York Times* reporter Nick Kristof were more likely to position protestors as legitimate sources. Similarly, a case study of tweets by NPR reporter Andy Carvin found that he favoured alternative voices in both @mentions and Retweets (Hermida et al. 2014). In their work on #Egypt, Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira (2011) found that in addition to media elites, who rose to prominence often as a function of their place in Twitter's overall network, citizen leaders were crowdsourced to prominence via retweets, mentions, and follows. Collectively these studies describe a networked system that links protestors, observers, and journalists alike.

Lotan and colleagues (2011) identified and analysed information flows related to #Egypt and #jan25 on Twitter. They found that tweets operated as an important bridge that helped connect news of events from within the region to outside areas, as mainstream media used Twitter to learn of developments. This bridging aspect feeds into what Meraz and Papacharissi (2013) describe as *networked gatekeeping*: “the process through which actors are crowdsourced to prominence through the use of conversational, social practices that symbiotically connect elite and crowd in the determination of information relevancy” (Meraz and Papacharissi 2013: 21). In other words, Twitter, in particular, provided a means for marginalised voices to gain visibility and generate alternate narratives (Hamdy and Gomaa 2012). As traditional media faced limitations in their ability to cover on-the-ground events, Twitter users worked together to push particular frames and individuals to prominence (Meraz and Papacharissi 2013), thus giving non-elites more control in what was considered newsworthy and how those events were framed. Similarly, YouTube was used to amplify the message of protestors, particularly when broadcast media were prevented from reporting on the protests (Arif 2014). As a result, social media afforded bloggers, protestors, and activists the opportunity to co-construct news alongside professional journalists (Lotan et al. 2011). These tendencies can be understood as a form of *networked framing*, that is, processes through which a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation attain prominence through crowdsourcing practices (Meraz and Papacharissi 2013; Papacharissi 2014; Papacharissi and Meraz 2012).

### What We Know

There are three things then we can learn, from research on how social media were used in a series of unfolding mobilisations that preceded and followed the downfall of the Mubarak regime. First, that a variety of socially oriented platforms serve as connective conduits. These facilitate avenues for coordination and planning, and burgeoning movements employ these platforms much like they have utilised media in the past, including radio, print material, zines, songs, and prose. Each movement differs in its



use of social media, so what we learn from #Egypt is relatable and comparable to other movements, but certainly not translatable and identical. Social media afford connective and expressive means.

As a second point, these platforms amplify and affectively drive a movement in a manner much grander, versatile, and diverse than previous media permitted, but typically in tandem with some form of offline mobilisation and always subject to context. Perhaps this is where we run the risk of overestimating the ability of social media to determine the outcome of mobilisation; it is not only voice and visibility for a movement that are augmented, but our own expectations that are amplified. To this point, it is worth noting that, even though each movement carries its own digital footprint—meaning that it makes use of online and digital means in ways that support its objectives and connect its publics—there is little sense in distinguishing between online and offline mobilisation. All forms of mobilisation are enabled by people, convening in a variety of spaces and taking action through a variety of means, none less or more real, or impactful than the other. Impact is generative, additive, and the result of combined efforts.

Therefore, and as a third point, our attention must turn elsewhere: These platforms, each in its own way, change the process through which a movement tells its own story. They transform the ways in which journalists and citizens experience and cover events collaboratively, they pluralise the manner in which movements are framed and thus, they inform how a movement is perceived and eventually historicised. These are the conclusions we can draw from the events we have observed take place in Egypt and the corresponding research on #Egypt. We can then extrapolate and compare those findings to our general understanding of mobilisation and participatory politics in contemporary societies. Given these conclusions, we turn next to unknowns, the interesting questions that have emerged in the process of studying #Egypt that are worth of further research.

### What We Can Learn

As we consider the progression of political mobilisation in Egypt alongside the use of social media to network and presence the movement for change, three important directions for future research emerge. First, as media scholars know, there are events, and there are the stories that we tell about events that we have experienced or that we cannot experience directly. Lippmann (1922) famously referred to this distinction as the world outside and the pictures in our heads. Yet, every medium provides a different way for telling a story. Some scholars have referenced this distinction between the storytelling affordances of each medium by drawing a comparison between the concepts of mediatisation and mediation, and suggesting that the latter provides more “flexibility for thinking about the open-ended and dialectical social transformations . . . articulated new [forms] of digital storytelling” (Couldry 2008) and recognising how hybrid and new forms of storytelling may bridge formerly disconnected spheres of inquiry (Chouliaraki 2008; Livingstone 2009). Alongside those concepts, we could consider that the discursive mediality of each platform imprints each event with its own unique storytelling texture. We may in fact distinguish between different *events*, some rendered on the streets, others rendered textually via Twitter, and yet others mediated through TV and mainstream media. Alternatively, we may think of events that possess different forms of mediality and, as a result, offer distinct yet imbricated views of an event. It might be meaningful to consider how affective infrastructures of storytelling turn an event *into* a

story, and how these stories may sustain a variety of distinct, yet imbricated, events and perceptions of an event.

Second, given that that mediality of news streams generated about these events via social media tends to be generative, additive, and affective, the story (or stories) produced about an event are even more so multi-layered, polysemic, and pluralised. Journalists no longer have the privilege of being the first or the only ones to report on events. As their prominence as primary storytellers is renegotiated, what becomes (or should become) important for journalists is not being the first to tell the story but rather being the ones to fully curate and synthesise the multiple voices within the stories, even if that means being the last ones to tell the story itself. However, the intensity, or affect, generated by streams that develop as journalists and citizens collaboratively tell a story, sways both sentiment and expectations about the course of an event. And yet, affect itself is not an event; it is a layer to an event. What is problematic is reporting affect as the event, especially if that leads to drawing emphasis away from other layers of a story.

Finally, it is common during the course of an event, to be caught up in the accelerated pace with which stories are told and spread through social media. Yet, the intensity with which a story spreads is not equivocal to the speed with which institutional change may occur. In other words, virality describes the pace of story sharing, not the rhythm of societal change. Events are instantaneous, revolutions are slow, and change is gradual. This does not mean that platforms built to facilitate connection and expression cannot support mobilisation and change. They present structures of storytelling and as such are meaningful habitats for imagining and, potentially, enacting change. Storytelling (of the self, of everyday events, and of societies) enables sense making, and that is where the impact of these platforms lies. Legislative, economic, and political impact may emerge out how we put these technologies to use, and impact is always subject to context. But for the people telling these stories, and for the societies coming to life as these stories are told, the impact lies elsewhere. For publics that are convened online around affective commonalities, impact is *symbolic*, agency is claimed *discursively* and is of a *semantic* nature, and power accessed is *liminal* (Papacharissi 2014). It may seem like a transient route to transcendence, but it is not. Symbolic impact, semantic redefinition, and liminality have and always will be the precursors of change. In order for institutions to change, they must be reimagined first.

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