The Role of Social Media in the democratisation of the Arab World

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Abstract

The paper tries to link the gap existing in between the role of social media and democratization in the Arab world through the theory of social constructivism. It reveals why various scholars have perceived democracy to be incompatible with the Arab world, which eventually made it difficult to understand the sudden emergence of pro-democracy protests, particularly in countries like Tunisia and Egypt. It further explains what social media is, primarily taking into account the social networking sites like Twitter and Facebook. It gives instances of how social media defied the earlier notions of being marginal or elitist and rather endowed a platform for the Arabs to voice their opinions and dissent, which they were unable to do so with the traditional Arab media. The paper scrutinizes democratic institutions in the Arab world as a structure and the emergence of social media as a process rather than a platform. The question of identities and interests of the Arabs are explained on the lines of family, clan, tribes, and ethnicities, religious and non-religious contexts. The impact of identity and interest in the process of transforming structures is further analysed.

Keywords: Social Media, Democracy, Identities and Interests, Social Constructivism, Arab Uprisings

Introduction

For decades, the western hegemony has academically questioned and entertained, the notion of Arab world being incompatible with the liberal ideas of democracy. Comparing the West Asian political system with other nascent democracies emerging with the end of Cold War, scholars like Lisa Anderson have concluded that Arab regimes have out rightly abandoned 'even token deference to the established validation of democratic institutions'. Very often, such observers have attributed the so-called reluctance of embracing democracy, both in

terms of culture and politics, to the understanding and prevalence of Islam. [1] The very idea of Islamic revival has been diagnosed as being antagonistic to the western definition of democracy, a paradigm that the religion itself bluntly opposes. Several reasons are endowed for understanding this political phenomenon of reluctance, like the Arab states being poor and on the other hand, the ones with phenomenal 'oil power' have strict state and bureaucratic control like the systems prevalent in Saudi Arabia. [2] Thus, scholars like Anthony Cordesman have declared, to what so ever degree possible, that the main enemy of the Arab countries is their own government. Such simplistic understanding, often quite easily validated, fails to figure out the common ground between the divergent attributes of the government and the citizens administered. [3] At the same time, United States, which silently avoids delving into the consequences of genuine democratization in the Arab world, has allowed fixed elections and a questionable fakery of human rights, eventually endowing a fig leaf that permits its client regimes to continue with their power game. Impeding or facilitating democracy entails in-depth understanding of the structure and process of democratization in the Arab world, which need to be an ingrained process rather than a forced, abstract or self-endangering phenomenon.

Undoubtedly, there is a quantitative and qualitative dearth of democratic institutions in the Arab world. Though, one can also not negate the absence of intellectual, critical and objective analysis of this situation, the reasons causing this gap to understand the longevity of this context. Very few Arab scholars themselves have tried to question this phenomenon by using their own political vocabulary, which in turn, have created a cerebral vacuum, often filled by the western hegemonic discourses. Since the analysis is often external, it fails to take into consideration the meaning of democracy in the Arab world from an indigenous perspective, entailing the aspects of good governance, rule of law, free speech and fair elections. Even scholars like Mustapha Tlili have written on 'Arab Democracy being a possible dream', which to a certain extent, tries to debate on the reality of the application of this ideal from a utopian perspective rather than embracing a bottom-to-top approach. [4] Rather than investigating the reasons, scholars have inundated the academic space by concluding that 'Arab world stands in disarray' or 'the crumbling of inter-Arab relations.' [5] Instead of democracy, what Arab governments, in their view, have been offering are mere political concessions to continue their political legitimacy. Additionally, the basic question has shifted to the rationale that can Arab governments modernize because of Islam. Since, secularism is one of the main proponents of democracy, understanding the blend of religion and politics seems unfathomable, at least in the current discourse of critical analysis. But the crumbling of stereotypes regarding the Arab world has slowly started to emerge due to the increasing literacy rates and access to media in the past decades. [6] In this entire dialectics

[1] Anderson, L (2001), *Arab Democracy: Dismal Prospects*, World Policy Journal, 18(3), 53-60

[2] Huntington, S.P. (1984), Will Countries Become More Democratic? Political Science Quarterly, (99)

[3] Cordesman, A. (1999), Proceedings from Eighth U.S.-Mideast Policymakers Conference: Transitions in the Middle East, Retrieved from http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/me_transitions%5B1%5D.pdf

[4] Tlili, M. (2001), Arab Democracy: A Possible Dream? World Policy Journal, 18(3), 47-68

[5] Khashan, H. (1991), The Limits of Arab Democracy, World Affairs,153 (4), 127-135

[6] Muslih,M & Norton, A.R, (1991), The Need for Arab Democracy, Foreign Policy, (83), 3-19

involved, scholars have failed to validate the fact that the very idea of 'democratisation in the Arab world' was actually coined way back in 1996 when the Qatar based Al Jazeera channel was established. This emergence evidently reveals that the longing for Arab democracy has been inherent in the mind-set of Arabs themselves, rather than being a loophole or flaw that cannot be mended. [7] The voices of dissent by Arabs themselves, which unfortunately do not figure out much in the western academic discourses, reveals the identities and interests of the citizens, demarcating them with the authoritarian governance. It also reflects the jaundiced point of view of the western opinion makers, especially when it comes to their embryonic understanding of the Arab democracy. So, now any declaration announcing Islam to be incompatible with the notions of democracy reveals the lack of empirical research and quantitative analysis in this perspective. Indeed, the 'new kind of newness' in the Arab world had braced up in the last two decades, hinting that pro-democracy protests and revolutions were inevitable. What was questionable, and had to be, was the process or trajectory that would have been followed. The power and resistance dynamics, as scrutinized was building up, eventually waiting for a 'tipping point' in the ways in which scattered, regional and leaderless dissent had started to resurface in countries like Egypt, Tunisia, Bahrain and others. In short, the Arab world was indeed waiting, in its own way, to shed off being the metaphor 'white man's burden' and usher out with its own identity, no matter how challenging and disruptive the process might be. [8] Eventually, the break out of pro-democracy protests in the light of Arab uprisings, galvanising dissent across borders from Tunisia to Egypt, from Libya to Syria, from Bahrain to Yemen, did the trick. It challenged the notions of democracy, revealed the actual hindrances in implementing the concept and bestowed the intellectual platform with several discourses to ponder upon.

Arab Uprising: The Context

The emergence of Arab uprisings in December 2010 from Tunisia ignited a new wave of dissent, structuring of thoughts and academic debate. Few scholars like Egyptian Amr Hamzawy, called it 'revolutions for democracy' while Syrian scholars like Burhan Ghalyoun referred it to as 'Arab awakening of the people against their despotic regimes.'[9] While others like Kurt Weyland compared it with the 1848 revolutions, as both these so-called waves of democratisation had emerged at dramatic speed across the respective regions, but eventually ended up yielding limited results. [10]

In this massive furore of making sense of what these uprisings meant to the Arab world and the outside world, in general, led to intensive scrutiny and critical analysis. It also ignited a manic debate in Washington, which was trying to reflect on the 'irrational exuberance eventually followed by gradual despair'. Instead of analysing the real changes that were still taking place in the region, the initial deep-rooted political problems in the Arab world were

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[7] Rinnawi, K. (2006), Cyber uprising: Al-Jazeera TV channel and the Egyptian uprising, Language and Intercultural Communication, Language and Intercultural Communication, 12(2), 118-132

[8] Kaviraj, S. (2005), Outline of the Revisionist Theory of Modernity, European Journal of Sociology, 46 (3), 497-526

[9] Lynch, M. (2011), The Big Think: Behind the Arab Spring, Foreign Policy, (190), Retrieved from http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/11/28/the-big-think-behind-the-arab-spring/

[10] Weyland, K. (2012), The Arab Spring: Why the Surprising Similarities with the Revolutionary Wave of 1848? 10(4), 917-934

still given more prominence in comparison to the nascent political openings that had simultaneously emerged. These political openings, as rightly pointed out by Nathan J. Brown could be assessed only in the long range. These political openings included the change of attitude and understanding of rule of law, competitive elections and political freedoms. In the intellectual thirst for quick-fix solutions, concrete and irreversible, the new dialogue process of pro-reform agenda which has sprouted out in the Arab world was being ignored. Unfortunately, the slow pace of the real changes were often missed, or ignored as they could not be understood by the lens they were epistemologically looked upon. [11]

The specialists of West Asian region and media pundits also used the wrong lens to perceive the various identities and interests that function in divided societies of the Arab world, unlike the homogenous states of Tunisia and Egypt. In countries like Libya, Syria, Yemen and Bahrain, the regimes are made of sectarian, ethnic and regional minority. But what is still interesting is that in spite of these differences; the political upheavals arose across these countries, simultaneously. One cannot negate the fact that a common political Arab identity did exist, in spite of them staying in 20 different Arab countries.[12] The intellectuals were eventually confused by the rise of two phenomenon happening simultaneously. On one hand there was the rise of sectarian and ethnic tension and on the other hand, the strong pan-Arab sentiments were also surprising enough. It was and still is difficult to connect the dots, understand the power balance between the two and make solutions. What in this entire analysis, of the lack of it, came forward was definitely the absence of understanding the inter-subjective relation between identities and interests of the common Arabs.

Here it is important to deal with the Arab nomenclature of defining identities and interests, based on kinship, religion and ethnicity. For example, the term '*asabiya*' denotes the strong sense of solidarity prevalent in kinship groups that includes family, clan and the tribe. While, the terms like '*watan*' and '*Qawn*' deal with the national identity. '*Umma*' on the other hand reflects the 'religious community' while '*milla*' describes the non-religious community. [13]

In addition to these prevalent factors of Arab identity, the factor of interests was being influenced by certain 'interests' that continue to function. These interests include state nationalism, Islamism, Shiite empowerment, self-assertion, pan-Arabism, globalisation, democratisation, human rights activism and others.[14] Thus to critically understand the multiple layers of histories and meanings behind the current uprisings in the Arab world, it is essential to acknowledge the identities and interests that are in play in the region. Thus, the paper argues that since this acknowledgement has not been made by the academic

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[11] Brown, N & Hamzawy, A. (2007), Arab Spring Fever, The National Interest, (91), 33-40

[12] Gause, F.G. (2011), Why Middle East Studies Missed the Arab Spring: The Myth of Authoritarian Stability, Foreign Affairs, 90 (4), 81-90

[13] Hudson, M.C. (1977), Arab Politics: The Search for Legitimacy, Connecticut: Yale University Press

[14] Pandya, A & Laipson, E. (2008), Transnational Trends: Middle Eastern and Asian Views, The Henry L. Stimson Centre, Retrieved from http://www.stimson.org/images/uploads/research-pdfs/Stimson_ch3.pdf

scholars, they are unable to relate to what actually caused these Arab uprisings and if, social media did play a role in it.

If the scholarly acumen continues to lack the theoretical and conceptual developments of activism related with identities and interests in Arab World, it will become quite herculean to study the impact of such pro-democracy protests in the longer run. The lack of inter-subjective understanding further deepened the cleavages of understanding and comprehending these protests that had vertical, horizontal and even lateral mass appeal. Adding to the caveats was the unpredictable and contemporary nature of these protests, in terms of their strength, location and portrayal. But it did, shift the study of Arab democracy from initial shades of occultation and prejudice to limelight and prominence.

At the same time, scholars like Hamid Dabashi (2012) even argued that Arab Spring had put an end to post-colonialism and it's now necessary to discover and create new verbatim, definitions and meanings of revolutions, liberation geography and governance.[15] Undoubtedly, the international world did run out of metaphors to describe the want of the process of Arab democratisation even though, it did become pregnant with ideals of empowerment and emancipation. Thus, trying to reveal the role of social media played in these Arab uprisings, the paper tries to explore new definitions and meanings of identities and interests, within the process of democratisation. The further study would reveal how social media was analysed in the due course of Arab spring and why the connection between democratisation in the Arab world and the role of social media can still not be found, owing to the lack of understanding of identities and interests of the Arab citizens.

Role of Social Media in democratisation of the Arab World

The term social media refers to a range of internet-based as well as mobile services that help the users in online exchange of data, contribute in the content generated by the users and join/follow online communities. The internet services primarily associated with this social media can be divided into various categories like blogs, social bookmarking, social networking sites, status update services, wikis, virtual world content and media sharing sites.[16] Out of these, this paper primarily deals only with the social networking sites like Facebook and twitter, which aid in constructing a public or semi-public virtual space for the articulating one's opinions and voices.

Scholars like John G. Browning have illustrated the paradox that comes into play while analysing the role of social media in the democratisation of the Arab world. On one hand, the overthrow of authoritarian regimes in Tunisia and Egypt (before the counter-revolutions took place) has been caused by people themselves rather than the social media platforms. On the other hand, significant empirical evidence suggests that the contribution of social

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[15] Dabashi, H. (2012), The Arab Spring: The End of Post colonialism, New York: Zed Books
[16] Dewing, M. (2010), Social Media: An Introduction, Library of Parliament, Retrieved from http://www.parl.gc.ca/content/lop/researchpublications/2010-03-e.pdf

media in mobilising the efforts and dissent of the people cannot be underestimated. [17] For example, the video revealing that Tunisian vendor Mohamed Bouazizi had set himself on fire on December 17, 2010, went viral and within a month it received 196,000 Twitter mentions, thereby acting as a catalyst in the pro-democracy wave that swept the country, eventually leading to the toppling of the regime of President Zine El Abidinine Ben Ali. [18] Jennifer Preston reveals how the Facebook Page 'We All Are Khaled Said' commemorated the injustice suffered by the 18-year-old businessman due to police corruption in Alexandria, Egypt and making it the 'biggest dissent Facebook page in Egypt.' With more than 130,000 people following the page, it endowed the Egyptian people with a rare platform to vent out their outrage against the government. [19] During the 2011 protests in Egypt, an activist stated that 'we use Facebook to schedule the protests, Twitter to coordinate it and You Tube to tell the world.' [20] In fact, in order to honour the essential role played by social media, an Egyptian father Jamal Ibrahim even named his new-born daughter 'Facebook'. [21]

Thus, two important processes were simultaneously taking place in the Arab world with respect to the role of social media. Firstly, the emergence of social media highlighted that a neutral platform where the ongoing dissent against the authoritarian regimes was now into force. This revealed that somewhere, the traditional Arab media had failed, as it had slowly become the mouth-piece of the government and was unable to any longer connect with the citizens. The Arab Social Media Report of 2011 stated that both in Tunisia and Egypt 94% of Tunisians and 88% of Egyptians chose to get their news from social media tools. On the contrary, only 40% of Tunisians and 36% of Egyptians trusted the state-owned traditional media channels for getting their daily news. [22]

Secondly, the excessive euphoria of the role of social media by calling the 'Arab Spring' as 'Facebook revolutions' or 'twitter revolutions' was also misleading. This second line of thought was penned down by scholars like Evgeny Morozov in his book 'The Net Delusion' where he warms that the democratising power of this emerging new media, instead of brining democracy and freedom, will bring about the entrenchment of the authoritarian rule itself. He talks about two delusions—'cyber utopianism' and 'internet centrism'. The idea of 'cyber utopianism' excessively believes that internet is emancipatory while 'internet centrism' questions the core belief that politics and modern society can now be framed in

[17] Browning, J.G. (2013), Democracy Unplugged: Social Media, Regime Change, and Governmental Response in the Arab spring, Michigan State International Law Review, 21(1), 66-86, Retrieved from http://digitalcommons.law.msu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1105&context=ilr

[18] Ibid.

[19] Preston, J. (2011, 5 February). Movement Began With Outrage and a Facebook Page That Gave It an Outlet, The New York Times, Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/06/world/middleeast/06face.html?_r=0

[20] Kaldor, M., Moore, H.L., Selchow, S., (2012), Global Civil Society: Ten Years of Critical Reflection, London: Palgrave Macmillan

[21] Hartley-Parkinson, R. (2011, 25 February), Meet my daughter 'Facebook': How one new Egyptian father is commemorating the part the social network played in revolution, The Daily Mail, http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1358876/Baby-named-Facebook-honour-social-network-Egypts-revolution.html

[22] Dubai School of Government, (2011), Civil Movements: The Impact of Facebook and Twitter, Arab Social Media Report, Retrieved from http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/dsg/unpan050860.pdf

terms of the usage of internet.[23] At the same time, inundating social media as an ideal agent of democracy has led to two consequences. Firstly, the authoritarian regimes have also started to skilfully use its power in propagating its ideas, declarations and rules which the citizens are bound to obey. On the other hand, if the regimes are unable to tap its power, they are merely cracking down its usage by blocking the websites or social media platforms. [24] Definitely, it has ultimately led to the 'quintessential 21st-century conflict' as penned down by The New York Times reporter Nicholas D. Kristof. [25] The conflict was promulgated by the upcoming factor that social media was no longer a tool for the elitist, alternative or the marginal. [26]

Understanding the critical role played by social media in spreading cognitive dissonance becomes comparatively easier to understand by scrutinising the framework used by Simon Mainwaring. His framework takes into account three levels of analysis like vertical threshold, horizontal expansion and compounding effect. In the vertical threshold analysis, he states that presently there are 21 million users of Facebook in the Arab world. In spite of the limited internet penetration in the Arab world, as compared to United States or Europe, social media was gradually overcome by its vertical expansion through important Facebook pages such as those of Khaled Said and youtube video shared by activists like Asmaa Mahfouz that went viral. [27] Secondly, the horizontal expansion of social media was accelerated by the active participation of well-educated youth, lawyers, judges, doctors and women in reaching out to mobilise more people. The real-time tweets and facebook posts were able to reach out to a larger audience base, which traditional Arab media was unable to do so. In the meanwhile, they were able to generate two-way communication process which played an active role in building opinions regarding dissent, its structure and function. Thirdly, the compound effect of social media from Tunisia to Egypt, from Libya to Yemen, from Bahrain to Syria was helpful in connecting more and more people, who were suffering due to their respective authoritarian regimes. It helped in achieving the density needed to disseminate courage and counter the 'media blackout' which was faced in these countries when the regimes tried to block these sites. The most important role, however, played by social media was being able to differentiate in between the ideals and interests of these countries. The shared values of citizens from different genres, classes, ethnicities, sects and ideologies was revealing how much they were concerned about the future of their country—a kind of concern which was never reflected in the earlier demonstrations. Thus, the power

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[23] Morozov, E. (2011), The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom, New York: Perseus Book Groups

[24] Chatfield, T., (2011, January 9), The Net Delusion: How Not to Liberate the World by Evgeny Morozov – review, The Guardian, Retrieved from http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/jan/09/net-delusion-morozov-review

[25] Kristof, N. D. (2009, 17 June), Tear Down This Cyberwall, The New York Times, Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/18/opinion/18kristof.html

[26] Taki, M., & Coretti, L., (2013), The role of social media in the Arab uprisings – past and present, Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture, 9(2), Retrieved from https://www.westminster.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/220675/WPCC-vol9-issue2.pdf

[27] El-Baghdadi, L. (2011), Meet Asmaa Mahfouz and the vlog that Helped Spark the Revolution, Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SgjIgMdsEuk

monopolises were being challenged and at the same time, the understanding of self-interest was being empowered.[28]

Social Media and Democracy: Structure and Process

The role of social media on the political processes such as democracy has not been well understood. There are two reasons behind this existing tension. Firstly, social media is to a certain extent, a nascent medium, which keeps transforming itself at a massive scale with the passage of time. At the same time, even the understanding of democracy per se, differs from scholar to scholar. The manner in which this term itself is operationalized leads to disputes over its prospects and evaluations.[29] Rather than adopting Schumpeter's idea of democracy rooted in competitive elections, the paper emphasizes on Rozumilowicz's definition of democracy that deals with multiple forms of participation. [30] Since social media helps in the creation and transfer of informed discourse, which plays an important role in democratic government, its utility value gets further enhanced. In the coming decades, political optimism associated with social media might lead to the creation of public sphere and eventually a new form of democracy, too. At the same time, if it is not materialised properly, it can lead to an unfettered discourse which might be a source of disequilibrium, and eventually result in more irrational and chaotic outcomes.

Rigorous academic enquiry is trying to highlight that social media is causing political processes, but at certain levels the lack of empirical evidence as well as theoretical linkage, is unable to bring out the real context. But before delving into this link, it is necessary to start with the understanding that technology, even in the past, has been shaped in accordance to interests of those in power. [31] The masses have been struggling, creating and re-configuring new technological platforms only to deal with this power dynamics. What is interesting to note is whether or not, the social media has been able to create a new information age, as put by Manuel Castells, where the existing political processes and structures can be transformed or fundamentally changed. [32]

Analysing this dynamics of structure and process, scholar like Tim Unwin have attributed three attributes to social media—space-time liberty, sharing liberty and access liberty. Firstly, space-time liberty reveals how social media helped people, from different parts of the world to connect with each other, in spite of the space time barrier. Secondly, in terms of sharing liberty, the social media helps in changing the balance of the distribution of power. Rather than the 'top-bottom' approach used by media corporations in the dissemination of information was challenged. Thus, it aided in the co-creation of information by the sharing of ideas, voices and opinions. Thirdly, the dynamics of 'access liberty' reveals how social

[28] Manwaring, S. (2011), Exactly what role did social media play in the Egyptian Revolution? The Fast Company, Retrieved from http://www.fastcompany.com/1727466/exactly-what-role-did-social-media-play-egyptian-revolution

[29] Karl, T.L. (1990), Dilemmas of Democratization in Latin America, Comparative Politics, 23(1), 1-21

[30] Jebril, N., Stetka, V., & Loveless, M., (2013), Media and Democratisation: What is Known about the Role of Mass Media in Transitions to Democracy, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Media%20and%20Democratisation.pdf

[31] Habermas, J., (1978), Knowledge and Human Interests, London: Heinemann

[32] Castells, M., (2000), The Rise of the Network Society. The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture, Oxford: Blackwell

media caused dramatic reduction in the cost related to information creation and thereby, making it accessible even to the poorer people. Thus, these three different forms of liberty have impact on the political process also, for both the government and the citizens based on their levels of participation.[33] Clay Shirky writes how after the rise of internet in the 1990s, social media has become the part and parcel of everyone's life, starting from activists, regular citizens, nongovernmental organisations, software providers and governments. Thus, the ubiquitous nature of social media does affect the interests of all these involved parties, ultimately endowing it a very significant role in political processes. [34]

Social Constructivism: Linking the Gap between Social Media and Arab Democracy

Innumerable scholars, media pundits and journalists have tried to link the gap between social media and its role in the democratisation in the Arab world. The gap still exists because of certain factors, out of which, most primarily is the absence of social media users from the Arab world itself to come out in the forefront and structurally reveal the manner in which this platform helped them to strategize. The reflective understanding in between the structure of democratic institutions and social media seen as a process rather than a platform also tends to be another major challenge, which no other theoretical framework apart from social constructivism can bridge. The understanding of the identities and interests of the Arabs also needs to be taken into account while dealing with this kind of theoretical analysis. It is only then we can answer the question why the same social media ended up having different results in various Arab countries. Thus, in order to understand and fill this gap, the theory of social constructivism is used in this paper to bring the various variables to a common ground.

In spite of the surprising transformation in which social media is developing, day after day, the lens to analyse it, has to a certain extent, remain constant. This constancy is based on the shared commitment to rationalism and empirical explanation rather than newer forms of theoretical understanding or linking. The paper argues that even till now, we are unable to formulate an understanding or whether or not, the social media can cause democratisation in the Arab world due to our fixation with the theories that emphasize more on structure (anarchy and distribution of power) than process (interaction and learning). Since identity and interests cannot be changed by process and institutions, it is necessary now to not take them for granted.

The paper argues that explaining the role played by social media in democratisation of the Arab world cannot be understood if we do not understand the identities and interests of the Arab citizens. Rather than understanding what their family, clan, tribal, religious and non-

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[33] Unwin, T. (2012), Social Media and Democracy: Critical Reflections, Background Paper for Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference, Colombo, Retrieved from
http://www.cpahq.org/cpahq/cpadocs/Unwin%20CPA%20Social%20media%20and%20democracy.pdf
[34] Shirky, C. (2011), The Political Power of Social Media: Technology, the Public Sphere and Political Change, The Foreign Affairs, Retrieved from http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67038/clay-shirky/the-political-power-of-social-media

religious affiliations are, that are creating their identities and interests, and we would be not doing justice by treating them in a homogenous manner. After all, identity issues have been dominating the Arab world, for a very long time, in spite of it not being documented and analysed at a very large extent due to the external scrutiny of western scholars. Thus, instead of a rationalistic point of view, it is the reflective notion of understanding democratisation in the Arab world that has to come to the forefront.

Social constructivism challenges the notion of dichotomous privileging of structure over process. Structure exists as the framework while process takes place inside of it. Both are fundamentally not seen as the same, with structure given more importance. But ultimately, transformation of identity and interests through the process can also lead to the eventual transformation of the structure. Social constructivism thus, gives more importance to the process rather than the structure. It validates the necessity of complex learning and re-definitions to further broaden our focus. To carry this line of thought forward, social constructivism debates that process too is as important as structure. For example, in the context of social media causing democratisation of the Arab world, the paper designates the 'institutions of democracy' in the realm of 'structure' while social media as the 'process' involved. The current understanding of scholars till now, have always given more privilege to the 'institutions of democracy' rather than social media. There are several reasons behind it. Firstly, social media is a newer concept which is still being ignored. Secondly, it is still uncertain where to fit social media as a concept, paradigm or a discipline. Thirdly, the utility of social media is more or praxis than theory, thereby finding it even more to be compared with democracy. This paper tries to state that 'democratisation in the Arab world is possible due to social media, only if its utility can be linked with the identity and interests of the Arabs. It takes the theory of social constructivism for study as constructivists share a cognitive, inter-subjective conception of the process in which identities and interests are endogenous to interactions.

Scholars like Alexander Wendt who has been the main proponents of social constructivism state that identity politics is the politics of difference.[35] Thus, in the case of Arab world, all citizens have multiple identities. These multiple identities are divided on the lines of ethnicity, sectarian divides, ideologies, religion and nationalities. Transformation or the common ground in between these multiple identities have never taken place in the past because the neo-realist and neo-liberal frameworks have taken the question of identities and interests for granted. Just like the identities, the interests are also multiple, connected with the economical, political and cultural divides.

One of the reasons why the role of social media was not understood properly in the case of Egypt where counter-revolutions took place after the initial January 25, 2011 protests is because the transformed identities and interests were not understood. Thus, the theory of social constructivism when applied, shares an inter-subjective and cognitive understanding.

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[35] Wendt, A. (1999), Social Theory of International Politics, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

By looking at social media, on the other hand, in the form of a process helps in looking at its role through the lens of knowledge and learning, which keeps on evolving with time.

But the main question is to find out that stage when it becomes social and relational to each other. People act towards object, including other actors, on the basis of the meanings that the object has for them. For example, Arabs in Tunisia acted towards social media differently than the Arabs of Bahrain, because of the meaning it had for them. Wendt defines identities as relatively stable, role specific understandings and expectations about self. Also, actors are able to acquire identities by participating in collective meanings. Though, under routine circumstances, we assign meanings on the basis of institutionally defined roles. But in the cases of dissent or protests, identities and interests that come out in the open, especially in the Arab world, have a lot to deal with family, clan, tribal, ethnic, religious and non-religious linkages. One of reasons why no theoretical framework was able to link the role of social media and democracy in the Arab world was because of the difficulty in defining the protests and eventually that leading to identity confusion. The stability of democratic institutions in the Arab world can only take place when identities and interests of the Arabs are stable. The functioning and evolution of new democratic institutions in the Arab world can happen only when they are in tandem with the transformation of identities and interests.

Conclusion

The pro-democracy protests that started off in December 2010 in the Arab world are still unfolding, be it through counter-revolutions, new government set-ups or even nascent forms of protests. The western and Euro-centric notions of democracy, which in itself are marred with ambiguity, need to be addressed especially in dealing with the Arab world. It is always easier to proclaim that Arab world is not competent enough to incorporate democracy rather than looking at the flaws in both the concept and the region, as any form of incompetency is a mutual process.

The paper tries to explain why defining social media into water-tight compartments of being emancipatory or revolutionary makes it difficult to scrutinise the nascent, singular and diverse roles played by it as a process and not as a mere platform. Thus, the theory of social constructivism is used in this paper to further broaden the debate without adding intellectual incoherence into it. The identities and interests of the Arabs are as important as the concept of democracy or social media and no form of dichotomous privileging should be used.

Hence, the paper stresses that it is the role of social media which leads to the creation and the eventual acceptance of the identities and interests of the Arabs. It is high time that the Arab world is not viewed through the western hegemonic discourses which blame Islam to be incompatible with democracy. Rather, the concept of democracy should be understood with the lens of identities and interests of the Arabs themselves, who have struggled to create the pro-democratic protests reach out at the global platform.

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