

What role did social media and capable devices have on the ongoing events in the Middle East?

Kris Sangani investigates.



IT IS remarkably easy for oppressive regimes to bar foreign journalists. Even when they are allowed into these countries, they are accompanied by minders, intimidated and harassed, and if they take photos or video that the authorities do not like they are ordered to hand over memory cards or tape.

But when security forces are faced with a myriad camera phones, the job becomes far more difficult. By the time they have beaten back the mob and smashed a few devices, the images will already be uploaded to Facebook or Twitter. Then it will be shared and duplicated and, like celebrity gossip, it will be impossible to censor.

The events in Egypt, Syria, Tunisia, Bahrain and Libya – and the subsequent

cascading sequences in other countries in the region, have demonstrated the futility of the state in controlling the dissemination of information that they do not like.

One protester tweeted: “We use Facebook to schedule the protests, Twitter to coordinate, and YouTube to tell the world!”

In January, Google employee Wael Ghonim returned to Egypt. At the time, Ghonim had been running a Facebook fan-page about Mohamed ElBaradei, the Egyptian-born head of the IAEA. But he was secretly using this site to promote democracy and organise protests in Cairo.

Ghonim mysteriously disappeared on 27 January during the nationwide protests in Egypt. Many bloggers then started a

campaign to locate his whereabouts. These were widely tweeted and retweeted.

Eventually he was released on 7 February after 11 days in detention. He was greeted with cheers and applause when he stated: “We will not abandon our demand and that is the departure of the regime.”

In an interview with ‘60 Minutes’, Ghonim said: “Our revolution is like Wikipedia, OK? Everyone is contributing content, [but] you don’t know the names of the people contributing the content. This is exactly what happened.”

Mash-up

“Revolution 2.0 in Egypt was exactly the same,” Ghonim said. “Everyone contributing



ثورة

*REVOLUTION 2.0

An opposition supporter holds up a laptop showing images of celebrations in Cairo's Tahrir Square, after Egypt's President Mubarak resigned in February 2011

small pieces, bits and pieces. We drew this whole picture of a revolution. And no one is the hero in that picture."

That phrase may go down in history to describe the role of technology in the uprising. This is apt in describing how social media allows snippets of information to be glued together to create a collage of events.

The events took governments and experts in the Middle East and around the world completely by surprise despite the fact that Twitter and Facebook had been used to protest about the 'rigged' Iran elections in 2009. Even still, governments in the region were confident that their influence over the broadcast and print media would dampen popular pressure for democratic reform.

Media restrictions

Censorship over local media varies from country to country in the Middle East and North Africa. Some impose total control of the traditional media, which tend to act as the mouthpiece of their particular regime. But in some countries, such as Lebanon, Jordan, Kuwait and Morocco, journalists are permitted some freedom. Even still, there is always some element of bullying and coercing and, as such, these countries' young populous have a distinct distrust of their country's state run media.

This lack of credibility also means that the region's digital savvy youth are likely to turn to the unrestricted world of Twitter, Facebook and Youtube. It allows them to share their views without censorship, as well

as share their ideas, pool and mash information together, and talk to the world. These social networks have provided the springboard for what the Arabs have dubbed the 'Jasmine Revolution'.

But that's not to say that the broadcast media has not benefitted or played a role. Where correspondents were banned or movements were closely monitored, activists were able to bypass these constraints by sending videos shot on mobile phones to international news services such as the BBC and Al-Jazeera. These are then beamed back via satellite all over the world – including the very same oppressive regimes. It is impossible for the authorities to attach a minder to each citizen with a phone. >



Social networks play a role in disseminating the techniques to overcome any type of Internet censorship

< Given the importance of social networking, it was most successful in countries with a higher degree of Internet penetration. According to the World Bank, Egypt had 16.9 million Internet users in 2009 out of a total population of 89 million. In 2004, Egypt only had 3.4 million users. Where countries have low Internet penetration (such as Mauritania), they have largely been insulated by the Arab Spring.

Unlocking the data stream

Governments in the Middle East have tried to curtail Internet activity in the past. Last year, a spate of countries, led by the United Arab Emirates, threatened to block BlackBerry email, messenger and Web if manufacturer Research In Motion (RIM) did not provide access to communications to the authorities. Saudi Arabia followed suit, and others were not far behind.

As well as citing security concerns, the authorities also cited morality issues. BlackBerry handsets have become the must-have gizmo for Saudi youth, enabling them to connect with members of the opposite sex in a deeply conservative society.

About 80 per cent of Saudi-based BlackBerry users are individual users and 20 per cent are enterprises, while these ratios are basically reversed in developing nations.

In 2009, Emirates Telecommunications (Etisalat) introduced what it called a software upgrade to BlackBerry handsets. RIM claimed that it was an unauthorised telecommunications surveillance application. Etisalat eventually climbed down and removed the software upgrade – but not before relations had already soured between RIM and the UAE authorities.

New professionalism

In an online blog Nabil Al Sharif, former Minister of State for Communications, recently wrote: “The most important

outcomes of the Arab Spring has been the destruction of the old media regime.”

Al Sharif believes that a new international standard of professionalism and objectivity will be created from dust of the old state-run or state-controlled media that will be credible and independent.

However, Al Sharif warns that the role of social media should not be overstated. One must be careful not to overstate the role of social media.

All this is well, but what will be the affect on the communications industry? Like everywhere else, consumers in the Middle East are migrating from simple feature phones to more powerful smartphones, which have enabled much of the social networking activity during the uprisings.

Could there be a backlash on the industry? Has recent events impacted the ability of mobile operators to launch new value and services such as Twitter, IM and other social network apps and capabilities.

In the Middle East

Abhinav Purohit, a telecommunications analyst for IDC in the UAE, explains that the Middle East region is dominated by large state-owned operators (such as Etisalat in UAE, STC in KSA and Omantel in Oman etc.).

“Most of these operators have either a direct or indirect government backing and thus, they need to toe the line set by them. This usually limits the ability of operators to freely launch and/or deploy services – especially the new upcoming social networking services.”

Recent examples of these have been seen in countries such as Egypt, where operators such as Vodafone were forced to send pro-government messages, and Bahrain, where ISP 2 Connect was banned by the regulator. Coincidentally, it was founded by an opposition politician.

“I would say that although the launch of service is not really controlled by the

E&T reported on the use of consumer devices back in issue 15 published in October 2010



government, the continuation of these can get severely impacted at times and might not be favourable for the government,” says Purohit.

In fact, although the Middle East region is generally open for some social networking services, there are some implied restrictions that operators need to consider. Examples of these include limited access to websites such as Facebook.

“These restrictions are in place due to the conservative regimes adopted by most of the Middle East telecom regulators which in turn follow the dictates from their respective governments,” adds Purohit.

As is the case with most things, the more you suppress things the more there is public emotion to use them. The same is the case with social networking services. Social media is a global phenomena now – with just one click you can reach out to the masses.

Overcoming Internet censorship

The Middle East region has a high expat population who have been exposed to the social media in their native countries and look forward to the similar sort of services while in the Middle East. When this is restricted, people turn to other means to access these websites, such as proxy settings, to overcome the problem of Firewalls.

This is not new, but social networks play a role in disseminating the techniques to overcome any type of Internet censorship.

For example, in Egypt, where initially text messages and then subsequently mobile services were restricted by the incumbent regime, messages and updates on social media websites such as Facebook and Twitter were used to coordinate the activities of the demonstrators.

But the proprietors of Facebook and Twitter appear, so far, to be unfazed by all the interest that their creations have stirred in the world of geopolitics.

For example, Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg has played down the role the site played in the Arab Spring protests.

Speaking at the e-G8 summit of digital leaders in Paris last month, Zuckerberg spoke of the protests that saw revolutions occur in Tunisia and Egypt and many other Arab nations revolt against ruling regimes.

“Facebook was neither necessary nor sufficient for any of those things to happen. It would be extremely arrogant for any specific technology company to claim credit.

“People are now having the opportunity to communicate, that’s not a Facebook thing. That’s an Internet thing.” *