



Social Media and Its Role in Promoting Change in Morocco

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Abstract: Social networks, such as, Facebook and YouTube have been used lately as tools to cause social change, to participate in social and political activities, and to tell the entire world about one's attitudes and points of view. They contribute in the emergence of a new individual, who is a producer of information and who is able to become more socially and politically aware of what is surrounding him/her. Social media have come to function as the alternative media serving citizens rather than governments' agendas.. This is possible since people are welcomed to voice their views and to participate in political and social activities via these new media platforms. However, a small category of Moroccans declare that they are not to deny the important role social media play in causing real changes in society, but they see that social media are not enough to guarantee real democracy in Morocco.

Keywords: Democracy Facebook, Information Technology, Social Media, Social Networks

1. Introduction

In the year of 2000, the chairman and chief software architect of Microsoft Corporation, Bill Gates, declared that in its early years, the Internet was restricted and accessible just to a small community of researchers and information technology departments of research. He added that, by then, hardly anyone imagined that the Internet would play such an efficient role in our lives, or thought about the idea that anyone is going to possess a personal computer via which the individual becomes regularly connected in the global network (Gates, 2000). Likewise, just several years ago, people could not imagine that Internet users would be able to register their presence in many social networks wherein they communicate with each other and with the entire world. They could not fancy the fact that the Internet will create an era whereby people become producers, and diffusers of information. Evidently, they could not predict the fact that Internet users will operate as citizen journalists who produce information and forsake the traditional media that produce it.

In the present time, while people are discussing issues such as democracy, social change, political awareness, and freedom of speech, they absolutely evoke the role of social networking sites in facilitating and realizing these ends. People start to feel that they are involved in the process of

realizing these aims. Of course, this becomes clear when people are no longer exposed just to one way flow of information by which people remain passive consumers of information. Traditional media platforms are mostly state-owned, controlled, and dedicated just to a small portion of the community. On the contrary, social networks mostly are not state-owned; they are uncontrolled, and opened for everybody to voice his opinions. Consequently, the world witnesses the emergence of some social practices such as citizen journalism and online or cyber activism. These issues exemplify the emergence of a new individual who is no longer passive, rather who is socially and politically more active than ever. From these hypotheses, my research paper is going to be approached.

In this regard, the use of social networking sites has largely proliferated in recent years in the region of North Africa and especially in Morocco. Moroccans immigrated to the virtual world in huge numbers lately. After being just spaces for establishing simple conversations between individuals, social networking sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube unfold as tools by which Moroccans express their attitudes, share information, and challenge state censorship (Haug, 2011). It is argued that such networks have become "an electronic mouthpiece for cyber activists to speak out in defense of the freedom of expression online and in the media in Morocco" (Ben Gharbia, as cited in Jankari, 2009).

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Definitions

“A social network is an online service, platform, or site that focuses on building and reflecting of social networks or social relations among people, and it realizes a kind of interaction over the Internet” (Wikipedia). According to Boyd and Ellison (2007) SNS are characterized by consistent technological affordance that meets with the practices and interests of the people. These technological features make social networks appear as “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). This definition accurately reflects the services that the most active SNSs like Facebook and Myspace are offering. SNSs considered an area wherein people represent themselves digitally (Boyd, 2007), creating their profiles, visiting other’s profiles, uploading videos, images, and importantly using SNSs as free platforms to express their attitudes.

Of course, services vary and differ from one social network to another. While some sites allow people to share videos and images, others just allow for instant messaging. Even there are mobile-specific SNSs (e.g., Dodgeball) but some web-based sites can not completely be accessed in mobiles (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). Some SNSs allow people to communicate either synchronously or asynchronously whereas some social networks e.g., Facebook allow people to have both ways of communication. That is, people can send each other messages and videos instantly. Also, they can send each other e-mails, videos or just leave comments to be checked later by the recipient. Methods and ways of communicating in these SNSs differ and vary according to the technological affordance that each site offer, still, the end is almost the same, which is having a say, transmitting attitudes and accessing free, public, and social platforms.

2.2. History

The history of SNSs is characterized by a shift in terms of the way people utilize these social networks. A brief look at the past and present of social networking sites is to make us end with the following argument: SNSs nowadays are serving other ends other than keeping mere online interactions between people.

The first social networking site was launched in 1997. Sixdegrees.com is the first website wherein people first came to list their profiles, provide a list of friends and then establish contacts. And it was closed in 2000 due to economic reasons (Boyd and Ellison 2007). Many other SNSs were launched from 1999 up to 2006: LiveJournal, BlackPlanet, and AsianAvenue were launched in (1999), LunarStorm, and MiGente (2000), Ryze, and Cyworld (2001), Fotolog, Friendster, and Skyblog (2002), LinkeIn, Couchsurfing, Myspace, Hi5, and Last FM (2003), Flickr,

Piczo, Mixi, and Facebook (Harvard only), and Hyves (2004), YouTube, Xanga, Bebo, Ning, Facebook (high school networks), AsianAvenue, and BlackPlanet (2005), Cyworld, Twitter, Facebook (for everyone), and MyChurch (2006) (Boyd and Ellison 2007). Some of the aforementioned SNSs were closed and some were closed and relaunched after. Due to space limitations I cannot discuss every single website in isolation.

The Internet itself was not created at first hand to be that accessible for everybody so, likewise, social networking sites were not predicted to play such a huge role in the modern societies. In the previous paragraph, I have mentioned that Facebook, in 2004, was accessible just for Harvard university students, before it was accessible for high school students in 2005. And In 2006 everybody in the world can sign into the website (Boyd and Ellison 2007).

Boyd and Ellison (2007) contend that the most SNSs primarily were there to support pre-existing social relations. That is, SNSs play the role of “bridging Online and offline social networks” (Boyd and Ellison 2007). Similarly, sites like Facebook are used to maintain existing offline relationships and connections between people (Boyd and Ellison (2007). Still, in this time, our vision of social networks especially Facebook and YouTue has been changed through time. These networks unfold themselves as the new or the social media that compete with the traditional or old media (television, radio, and newspapers, etc). Social networking sites are, nowadays, used for business, education, and also for social and political activities (Wikipedia).

2.3. Social Networks in Morocco

Facebook and YouTube are classified number one and number three respectively in the top 10 most visited websites in Morocco (Alexa.com), that is, the majority of Internet users in the country are social networks’ users. Facebook is the network wherein people communicate, share information, and organize campaigns, whereas YouTube is a video-sharing network wherein Moroccans become citizen journalists and post and say what they can not dare say in the traditional media. Several examples are to be mentioned in the pages to come.

According to (Facebakers.com) Facebook, which is the most active social network, holds more than 3.711.000 Moroccan users and so Morocco ranked the third in the Arab world after Egypt with 8 millions and Saudi Arabia with 4 millions. Chrit (2011) argues that:

In Morocco, Facebook is not considered a mere network for social communication, rather it becomes an independent and open political space wherein everybody can distinguish between two types of citizens: (1) Facebookers who are able to weed out fear and defeat blackout, who follow uncensored news and establish free communication with the world, and (2) classical citizens who receive news from the traditional media outlets like TV, radio, and newspapers.

The above mentioned statement shows blatantly the difference between a passive, uncommunicative, and classical consumer of the traditional media content, and on

the other hand a prosumer, and a user of social networks who is able to produce and generate information.

Many writers and journalists inside and outside Morocco agreed upon the fact that the majority of the Moroccan youth tend to trust the social media and forsake the traditional ones. Aboubakr Jamaï (2011) argued that in Morocco “Digital media are becoming an agora where unfettered voices for change can express themselves”. He adds that ‘tamed traditional media are being superseded by nascent and economically struggling but editorially daring news websites’. That is, the media landscape in Morocco witnesses “the marginalization of mainstream media and the mainstreaming of marginal media” (Bouziane, & Ibrahine, 2011).

Moroccans use social networks to generate their own media contents, practicing new kinds of journalism, and becoming citizen journalists. Thanks to the low entry barriers of social media, young Moroccans use the latter to inform, mobilize, campaign, recruit, and build coalitions. Moreover, the “social media triggered a revival of the watchdog function of the media and paved the way for it to act as a fourth estate in monitoring political abuses by the regime”. Above all, any medium that is able to make people think about taking to the street is obviously the most effective medium ever and nothing else later”.

Cyber activism takes new shapes in Morocco. Activists organize campaigns in Facebook and create pages to support their demand. “All against the Prime Minister’s family” is one, among others, which started with 20.000 members. It denounces the presence of one family in the current government, which controls many government ministries and budgets. In other cases, the video-sharing site YouTube permits many Moroccan figures to ‘broadcast themselves’ in efforts to demand dignity, democracy and the eradication of corruption.

All these activities come into existence thanks to social media. Internet users recognize the fact that via social networks they can make truth visible to all people in the Moroccan society, they can unfold their frustration and condemn the injustice the Moroccan society suffers from.

Altogether, the point raised in this article shed some light on the issue of how social media contributes to promote democracy in Morocco. In the present time, while people are discussing issues, such as democracy, social change, political awareness, and freedom of speech, they absolutely evoke the role of social networking sites in facilitating and realizing these ends. People start to feel that they are involved in the process of realizing these aims. Of course, this becomes clear when people are no longer exposed just to one way flow of information by which people remain passive consumers of information. Traditional media platforms are mostly state-owned, controlled, and dedicated just to a small portion of the community. On the contrary, social networks mostly are not state-owned; they are uncontrolled, and opened for everybody to voice his opinions. Consequently, the world witnesses the emergence of some social practices such as citizen journalism and online or cyber activism. These issues exemplify the emergence of a new individual who is no longer passive, rather who is socially and politically more

active than ever.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Questions

The aim of this investigation is to find answers to these questions.

1. Are social networks the real media through which democracy can be promoted in Morocco?
2. Can social networks’ users in Morocco contribute in the eradication of injustice?
3. Do Moroccans gain more social and political awareness from their use of social networks?
4. Given this digital evolution (the age of social networks), can we talk about a real social and political change in Morocco?
5. How do Moroccans perceive the contribution of social networks, such as Facebook and YouTube, in mobilizing dissidents in the current Arab revolutions of 2011?
6. Do Moroccans enjoy more freedom of expression on the new/social media platforms?

3.2. Participant

The investigation targets more than 300 respondents from Moulay Ismail University, Meknes. The aim behind choosing university students is that social networks’ main users are of the age of the university students. Besides, university students supposedly are the portion that actively uses social networks and the Internet in general. What is crucial is that the participant should be an active user of social networks, such as Facebook, YouTube, and/or Twitter.

3.3. Instruments and Social Measures

Suitable and Specific measures were employed in this paper for the sake of collecting the data that will answer the research questions:

3.3.1. Demographic Variables

The demographic variables included age, gender, education, and whether the respondent is employed or not, all these variables are of course to reflect specific attitudes and perceptions concerning the research topic.

3.3.2. The efficiency of the New Media as Opposed to the Traditional Media

This constituent was measured by asking the respondent questions like the following: “What is your main source of information, the social media or the traditional media?”, “How do you find the new media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube, More accurate and objective than the traditional media, Less accurate and objective than the traditional media, or as accurate and objective as the traditional media?”, “whether the fact that some famous TV stations like Aljazeera and CNN rely heavily on the social networks’ media content means: (1) That social networks have become the central source of information, (2) the

traditional media have lost so much of their power of bringing news, (3) social networks become a more effective alternative of the traditional media, and/or (4) The traditional media utilize the content of social media just because of the current political circumstances in the Arab world (2011)? ”, “whether Social networks provide unedited and unfiltered information or not? ”, and finally “ whether Everybody is welcomed to have a say in social networks or not, while it is not the case with traditional media?”. All these are followed by a space wherein respondents can add additional information.

3.3.3 The Role Social Networks Play in Social and Political Awareness Rising

This component was measured by stating 6 points preceded by the following statements: “Thanks to social networking sites, especially Facebook and YouTube...”. The Likert scale that ranges from strongly agree, to agree, to neutral, to disagree, to strongly disagree was used so that the respondents will answer according to it.

4. Results

4.1. The Major Findings of the Study

The purpose of the discussion part is to state the major findings of the study and to interpret and turn the data gathered into clear ideas. It is also a space to reveal what hypotheses are confirmed and which ones are opposed. In addition, clarifying the importance of the study as well as acknowledging its limitations have to be dealt with in this context.

Mainly, this investigation zooms on the role social media play in reducing injustice and promoting democracy, especially in Morocco. To know whether social media are really qualified to be considered alternative media or not, respondents had the chance to reveal how they perceive both the social media and the traditional media. Though a huge number of the Moroccan society immigrated to the blog sphere wherein they get rid of their passivity and start to show up as real participants in the media landscape, an important number of the respondents show their commitment to the old media platforms. This is clear when channels like Aljazeera do exist in the current time. So, people keep consuming the traditional media in an attempt to seek, maybe, professional journalism. To illustrate, more than 80 % of the respondents are TV viewers. On the other hand, all the respondents are social networks users. Though this commitment to the old media platforms, the majority of the participants see that the content produced by social media is more objective. About 67% of the participants support this view. People think that the content of the social media is more objective in the sense that it is produced by citizens and represents citizens and it is there to serve citizens, whereas what the old media channels produce is there, maybe, to serve other agendas.

Lately, the Moroccan society witnesses that some famous TV stations like Aljazeera and CNN start to enrich their

newscasts by the media content of social networks. This is quite clear when these channels broadcast YouTube videos that were recorded by citizen journalists in the street. The majority of the respondents see that the above mentioned statement means that social networks become the main source of information, and that famous channels like these have lost so much power of bringing news. An important portion of the respondents went so far and think that social networks become a more effective alternative of the traditional media. The fact that just 33 % of the respondents think that the traditional media utilize the content of social media just because of the current political circumstances in the Arab world does not invalidate the idea that social networks are really an efficient alternative of the traditional media platforms. So far, question 7 is answered and hypothesis 6 is well confirmed and supported.

Question 3 asks do Moroccans gain more social and political awareness from the use of social networks. In this regard, More than 85 % agreed with the idea that people are now able to get involved in political discussions that are held online, more than 87% agreed with the fact that thanks to social networks people can engage in political activism, 85% of the respondents see that social networks’ users have the chance to express their views freely, and more than 90% contended that the new media platforms provide free space for people to exchange feedbacks and comments. These privileges that people benefit from are obviously there to enhance people’s social and political awareness. Everybody knows that just very few people are able to have a say in the traditional media platforms. On the contrary, every social network’s user is welcomed to participate in political discussions, to engage in political activism, to get more freedom of speech, and to exchange feedbacks and comments with other social networks’ users. All these are clearly illustrated in the content which is generated by citizens, a content which is broadcasted online via networks like Facebook and YouTube. All these elements are of course there to give birth to a well informed citizen both on the social and political level. Consequently question 3 is well answered and H4 is completely supported.

At the present time, the Arab nations have been witnessing a radical social and political change due to some revolutions that are caused by people against the ruling regimes. Undoubtedly, the role the Internet and especially social networks play in facilitating and making the revolutions succeed is blatant to every Internet user in the world. Because of all these, I thought about dedicating a part in my research that deals with the role social media play in the so called Arab spring. The majority of the respondents in this investigation (93%) agreed that social networks have really helped demonstrators to organize more and make their voice heard. Furthermore, more than 85% of the participants did agree that Social networks have encouraged people to take to the street. In other words, street activism was reached and realized via online activism. During the Arab revolutions, people were deprived in many areas of the Arab world from accessing the net, so, for more than 80% of the respondents

shutting down the Internet during the Arab revolutions explains the central role the SNSs play in such political events. Add to this, the respondents showed a great consensus on the idea that Social networks give people in the Arab world the chance to emancipate themselves from their silence, and revolt against authoritarian regimes.

Some media critics went further and call the Arab revolutions a Facebook revolution or a Twitter revolution. Still, others see that the above mentioned idea is a kind of belittling the efforts of the people who were killed during the revolutions. In other words, it is unfair to call mass revolutions Facebook or Twitter revolutions. In an attempt to seek the respondents' opinion about this issue, they were asked whether the Arab revolutions would not have occurred without social media or not. Unsurprisingly, more than 32% of the respondents remained neutral and more than 35% are against this fact. Thus, the majority of the respondents in this survey did not overestimate the role social media play.

When the respondents were asked whether these social media platforms really contribute in promoting democracy in the Arab world, the majority of them (42.85%) were neutral. Hence, it is reasonable enough to conclude that the respondents did not deny the efficient role social media play in reaching many goals, but realizing the real democracy remained such a hard task to perform so far. Consequently, question 5 was answered and H5 is partially supported in the sense that people think that social media can bring many changes but not to the extent that they can guarantee democracy in the Arab world.

Zooming on the Moroccan case in this paper was in the last part of the survey. The respondents were asked several questions so as to know whether, for them, social media really are contributing in the process of promoting democracy in Morocco or not. To start with, half of the respondents agree that Morocco has been undergoing an important political change thanks to Social networks. 67% of them see that in Morocco, social networks are not mere networks for communication; rather they are open space for political participation. Concerning the freedom of speech and expression in Morocco which is the first step towards the realization of democracy, the majority of the respondents think that Social networks do really provide a new space for freedom in Morocco and that freedom of speech is realized in Morocco in the sense that everybody can appear on Facebook or YouTube and say whatever he/she wants. Moreover, more than 67% of the respondents believe that thanks to social media, the Moroccan individual has the chance to be politically more active.

The above written paragraph answers both question 4 and 6 in the sense that the respondents do really agree that social networks has contributed in causing a change in the political landscape in Morocco. In other words, social networks become a suitable sphere for political participation that the Moroccan youth benefited from. Question 6 asks "Do Moroccans enjoy more freedom of expression on the new/social media platforms"? The respondents see that of course people enjoy more freedom of speech as they access the net and social networks. The new practices, such as

citizen journalism and cyberactivism that I discussed in the literature review illustrate how the Moroccan youths come to create their free media platform online by posting provocative videos to be viewed by the whole world. Simultaneously, H 3 that says "through social media, Moroccans have the opportunity to voice their opinions, and thereby freedom of expression increases in Morocco" is well supported.

Respondents reacted differently to the statement that says 'Facebook is the new enemy to the authoritarian regimes'. Though more than the half of the respondents expressed their agreement with the idea, about the third of them declared that Facebook cannot be taken as a true enemy to authoritarian regimes for the simple fact that Facebook is just a mere tool for communicating information. Some other few participants see that the true enemy to authoritarian regimes is neither Facebook nor YouTube; rather it is Youths who exemplify a real threat to authoritarian regimes.

As for the question: Can you describe in few words how social networks like Facebook and YouTube have contributed in reducing injustice and promoting democracy in Morocco?", the predominant rate of the respondents reacted upon the question positively, that is, they support the fact that Facebook and YouTube have contributed in reducing injustice and promoting democracy in Morocco. They give examples they see that cause positive changes in the political landscape in Morocco. For them, these online campaigns against sights of injustice in the country and these discussions that people organize online enrich the political awareness of people and lead them to think critically about social and political issues.

However, few respondents opposed the statement. They think that social networking sites can contribute in the realization of small achievements such as politicizing youths, exercising the watchdog function over the policy makers, and causing troubles to the state by mobilizing people, still, for them, realizing the real democracy is still beyond the reach of the whole Moroccan society, among which the social networks' community. As for the eradication of injustice, some respondents see that how the majority of the Moroccan youth make use of social networks is there neither to eradicate injustice nor to promote democracy for the reason that the majority of social networks' users utilize these media to discuss issues of their private life.

Consequently, both questions, number 1 and 2, were thoroughly answered from within the data gathered. And both H1 and H 2 were supported by the majority of the respondents. Though for very few of the respondents, both hypotheses were not supported in many ways.

4.2. The Importance of the Study

First of all, investigating the role social networks play in mobilizing people, in causing social and political change, and in drawing a road map towards democracy is still in its infancy. That is, there is not an important archive that includes writings about this issue, at least in Morocco. So it is a challenge to try to review the literature of such topic. The

aim behind stating all these is to show that this paper might be of much importance to the university students researchers. The paper also discusses current issues that the world is witnessing nowadays. Here I am referring to the Arab revolutions or the Arab spring.

The method of analyzing data was partially empirical which is there to provide reliable results. Integrating tables and graphs in the study is of much importance in terms of clarification. Combining both methods qualitative and quantitative was also fruitful in the sense that respondents were allowed to use their analytical competencies and thus provide the study with thoughtful ideas and sometimes with unpredicted point of views.

5. Conclusion

This study was pursued for the sake of discovering whether social networking sites such as Facebook and YouTube do really contribute to the promotion of democracy and to the eradication of injustice in Morocco.

To answer the previous global question, about seven research questions were meant to be investigated and thoroughly answered through designing and administering a questionnaire of four pages. About 112 well filled in questionnaires were analyzed empirically and interpretatively so as to find answers to the research questions.

Stating the findings of the study was preceded by providing a review of the literature that encompasses and studies a myriad of issues that have something to do with the role that social media or social networks are playing in our communities. In the review of the literature, comparing the traditional media with new media was of a great importance in an attempt to show that the 'technological affordance' of social media make them qualified to be taken as a successful alternative media. In the same way, social media emerges as a cyberspace that knows no physical boundaries. In addition to this, zooming on how people exploit the cyberspace was discussed in effort to explain how these social media were politicized by activists and citizens so as to voice their opinions, protests and objections. Focusing on the Arab revolutions was also vital in the sense that it was the best example to show how social media can realize what have been never predicted before. Generally, all the writers mentioned in the review agreed upon the idea that social media proved their efficiency in causing many changes on the social and political landscape in the world.

The findings of the study tell as that there is a great consensus that social media reflect an unprecedented objectivity in producing news in the sense that the social media content is always produced by citizens, represents citizens, and it is there to serve citizens. The Moroccan participants in this study see that traditional media have lost much of their power of bringing news, whilst social media become the more effective alternative. Also, Moroccans declare that they enjoy much freedom of speech as they access the net. In another context, for the participants, the Arab revolutions are the mirror that reflects the efficiency of the social networks.

Again, the majority of the respondents agree that social media really contribute in exposing the manifestations of injustice in Morocco and even help in reducing them. Likewise, an important number of the participants agree that democracy is on its way to be realized in Morocco thanks to the existence of social media in the social and political landscape in Morocco. However, it is important to mention that some participants, though very few, declare that social media can bring many changes in our society but not to the extent that they can guarantee a real democracy.

Not to be long, I can now declare that the findings of the investigation do really meet with the hypotheses built in the beginning of the study. Unsurprisingly, I guess, nobody can deny the priceless gift that these social networks give to people so as to save and/or recover their dignity. There is no better way to express myself in these last lines of my paper than to evoke the words of 30-years-old Egyptian activist Wael Ghonim in a CNN interview on February 9, 2011, he declares that "If you want to free a society, just give them Internet access."

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