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**Worldwide: The Role of Social Media in
Social Mobilization**

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Executive Summary

Academic and industry research on social media and on the role of social media in the Arab Spring provides some insight into the key issues that should be examined in efforts to track the efficacy of social media in mobilizing populations against governments and their policies throughout the world.

- Tracking the government's ability to disrupt opposition use of social media is a key intelligence challenge. Governments around the world vary in terms of their will and capability to take action.
- Social media may provide advance warning of initial protest activity, but the opportunities for detection can be fleeting, and social media appear to play a more important role in mobilizing support after initial incidences of protest.
- Assessing the impact of social media as a tool for social mobilization is difficult. Key issues to examine include the following: the specific social media strategy and tactics used by opposition groups; the evolving use of different social media tools as mobilization occurs; and the possibility that social media are able to tap into the emotions of their participants, which is likely to have greater persuasive impact. One should not assume that even the most open governments in the world cannot be surprised by "micro-mobilizations" in opposition to government policy and programs.
- Gaining international support for a cause is a key objective of any social media campaign plan. Gauging the tangible impact of such efforts is difficult, but necessary.
- Even successful mobilizations that result in regime change have a limited window for capitalizing on the popular energy that they create, perhaps in the range of 3 to 6 months. Close observation of mass mobilization events and efforts to institutionalize change can yield insights into how very dynamic and fluid situations evolve.



INSTITUTE FOR DEFENSE ANALYSES

GLOBAL COVERAGE ANALYSES PROGRAM – AFRICA

TRACKING AND ISSUE PAPER



THE IMPACT OF THE ARAB SPRING ON AFRICA

**WORLDWIDE: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA
IN SOCIAL MOBILIZATION**

SEPTEMBER 14, 2012

Worldwide: The Role of Social Media in Social Mobilization

The 2011 political upheavals in the Middle East and North Africa, characterized as the Arab Spring, have prompted considerable speculation about the relevance of those experiences to the onset of social mobilization and political instability elsewhere in the world. The effort to capture the relevant “lessons learned” is by no means complete, but academic and industry research on those events and on the social media phenomenon provides some insight into the linkages between the use of social media and the dynamics of social mobilization. While research – particularly on the characteristics and effects of social media – is ongoing and subject to revision, it nonetheless provides a reasonable basis for delineating the key intelligence issues that will need to be examined in similar circumstances in the future.

1. The government’s capability to disrupt opposition use of social media is an important, but not necessarily decisive, factor in whether social mobilization succeeds.

An academic study¹ of internet censorship in Tunisia prior to and during the downfall of former President Ben Ali has highlighted three factors that facilitated the government’s ability both to censor the internet and to stop that censorship immediately when the President decided to do so:

- The Tunisian government had built a centralized internet architecture, which allowed for quick and efficient changes in censorship control.
- A specialized unit was established within the interior ministry that had responsibility for making decisions about censorship.
- This unit had ready access to censorship technology through international markets, predominately Western firms.

Clearly all three conditions exist in a number of countries around the world, but widespread privatization of the telecommunications infrastructure means that centralized control of internet infrastructure does not exist in much of the world. At the same time, any government in the world that wants access to censorship technology can get it. Thus, the critical intelligence questions regarding government capability in most circumstances involve whether the concerned governments have established internet surveillance units and, if so, what their missions and capabilities are.

At one end of the spectrum, while the Chinese and Iranian governments have less control over opposition use of social media than they would probably prefer, they have in place robust programs for monitoring and censoring internet content and arrangements with service providers that facilitate a high degree of control. As a consequence, these two governments have been successful in limiting the ability of activists to engage in effective social mobilization.

As the Tunisian case demonstrates, having such control does not guarantee regime stability, but where control is lacking, a government's ability to shape social media will likely be both more visible and less effective. The Indian government's efforts in August 2012 to block the propagation through social media of messages that could incite communal violence illustrate the challenges involved. In order to implement the government's intent, the Indian Department of Communication and Information Technology had to issue four directives to Internet Service Providers that ordered them to block access to more than 300 online locations.²

But even where governments lack a robust ability to control opposition use of the internet, they still have means to counter their activities. In the April 2009 election protests in Moldova, for example, the government executed partial shutdowns of mobile phone and internet service and conducted "information wars" on Twitter in such volume that activists found it difficult to find useful information.³

2. Social media may provide advance warning of initial protest activity, but the opportunities for detection may be fleeting; social media appear to play a more important role in mobilizing support after initial incidences of protest.

While debate continues on the issue of whether social media provided advance warning of protest activity with regard to Arab Spring,⁴ it is worthwhile to distinguish between the roles of social media in:

- Organizing initial protest activity;
- Expanding the popular base for sustained protest;
- Strengthening an ethos of social solidarity; and
- Building international networks of support.⁵

With regard to the organization of the initial protests, social media have proven in Moldova and elsewhere to be effective in organizing "flash protests" – suggesting that they may serve in some circumstances as a leading indicator. Unfortunately, the lead times can be limited to less than a day or even hours. And, it is not necessarily clear in the early days of protest whether a movement will gain sufficient traction.

In terms of broadening domestic support, an academic study⁶ of the social mobilization that occurred in Spain during April-May 2011 suggests that social media

activity is a lagging indicator. Based on an analysis of activity on Twitter between April 25 and May 25, the study documents that on-line support for the protests only took off after the first set of mass demonstrations occurred in Spain's main cities on 15 May. In short, social media in some circumstances may serve as an accelerant, but not necessarily as the catalyst.

Finally with regard to facilitating a sense of social solidarity and building an international network, the experiences in Egypt and Moldova suggest that they tend to be consequent to significant incidences of protest activity. The Moldovan study noted earlier indicates that the primary role of Twitter was to internationalize "the Revolution" during its last stage by spreading word about it to the West, particularly Western media.

3. Assessing the effectiveness of social media as a tool for social mobilization requires a good understanding of opposition strategy, the evolution in the use of different social media tools over time, and their potential ability to tap into the emotions of the participants.

There is little doubt that protest leaders use social media for organizational purposes and that these efforts can provide insight into their strategies and activities, including potential warning of coming events and their engagement with more mainstream media to encourage popular support.⁷ Assessing the degree to which social media are successful in stimulating greater levels of social mobilization is a more challenging analytic issue. This challenge, which is not unique to social media, reflects the difficulties of measuring – particularly from a distance – the impact of any form of mass communications.

Academic studies measuring the impact of social media cannot at this point be regarded as conclusive, but they nonetheless yield some potentially useful insights.

The strategy and tactics that an opposition group uses to exploit social media may be critical. One examination of the role of social media in the downfall of former President Mubarak of Egypt⁸ highlighted the different strategies – one more inclusive and one more closed – of two sets of activists in organizing opposition and resistance activities. One group developed an elaborate structure of dozens of Facebook pages in both English and Arabic that cascaded down to the governorate and district levels. The other group created an Arabic-language Facebook page in which a single individual anonymously authored very simple messages; the author and the audience were largely unknown to one another. These two different strategies appear to have reflected differences in the audiences that the two organizations were trying to engage. It is not evident from this account which of these approaches was more effective, but each would likely have greater success under some circumstances than others, depending upon the security environment in which they were forced to operate.

Assessing the influence dynamics within social media networks is a major challenge; such dynamics appear to be dependent on a combination of the technology being used, the environment in which it is operating, and the time cycle of social mobilization. In cases where the mass media are not censored, Twitter in many respects functions like an additional broadcast medium for their content. An analysis of almost 2 million tweets in 2009 found that the mass media providers were able to reach a majority of the Twitter audience on their own and that grassroots users expanded that reach very little.⁹ A critical role was, however, played by what the authors called “evangelists” (opinion leaders) who were able to reach out another 25 percent of the audience.

In circumstances where the mass media are either censored or distrusted, the dynamic may be different.

- An analysis of the use of Twitter during the 2011 Egyptian uprising highlighted the role of Twitterers, including international journalists, who were communicating from Cairo, but also noted the important role played by those located elsewhere in propagating a spirit of social solidarity in the campaign against Mubarak and the use of Twitter by activists in Cairo to convey tactical information to their colleagues.¹⁰
- In the events in Moldova of 2009, the initial protest activity was organized through social network services (SNS) and short message service (SMS), but later efforts to disseminate information about the protests involved a wide variety of tools, including cell phone posting of YouTube videos, internet radio, internet broadcasting from a Romanian television station, and Twitter.
- A study of the use of social media in Singapore to organize a student protest found that Facebook was a useful tool for quickly and inexpensively organizing the activities of a group of people that was previously acquainted, but gaining the involvement of a broader set of individuals had to rely on well established blogs and the traditional media.

Even text-based social media may have some capacity to spread emotions (“emotional contagion”) through the internet. In the world of advertising, the ability to tap into the emotions of the audience is viewed to be a particularly effective way of influencing behavior. A study by Facebook found that the posting of messages with emotional content on Facebook pages prompted others to post similar content.¹¹ While a single study should not be regarded as conclusive, the possibility that social media have the ability to produce an emotional response is important with regard to social mobilization since many of the acts involved (e.g., participation in a demonstration) require significant commitment of time and perhaps some elements of risk. The impact that social media can have is likely to be greater when social mobilization takes

advantage of the emotional impact that images can have. In this context, tracking the flow of messages via YouTube may be more indicative of future mobilization success than patterns evident in either Twitter or Facebook.

The use of social media for “micro-mobilization” almost inevitably results in periodic “surprises” that can catch even the most open governments flat-footed. Micro-mobilization refers to the mobilization efforts by individuals and small groups. A recent academic study that examined two such micro-mobilizations in the Netherlands found that, although the government was generally aware of the concerns being expressed, they were caught off guard by the speed with which social media allowed significant reframing of the debate about long-standing and well-known policy issues. In an observation of particular relevance as governments around the world face significant pressures from their populations over economic issues, the study assessed: “The possibilities that new media provide to individual citizens and small groups of citizens in combination with a diminishing lack of trust in the functioning and policy results of governments, will increasingly confront public managers with all kinds of strategic surprises that fundamentally question the implementation of policy programmes for which they are responsible.”¹²

4. Gaining international support for a cause is a key objective of any social media campaign plan, but determining impact is a challenge.

The Arab Spring experience – including the ongoing civil war in Syria – has demonstrated that social media can play an important role in giving international visibility to a cause and conveying a sense of immediacy for action. Given the successes that social media have had in “internationalizing” contests for power within nations, there is every reason to expect that this will continue to be a part of future campaign plans. Translating that visibility and sense of immediacy into concrete action can, however, be a challenge. Moreover, the possible linkages between popular engagement via social media and through other means are at this point not well understood. With the various uncertainties involved, probably the best that the intelligence community can do is to be alert to signs that social media are stimulating participation by the relevant diaspora, facilitating fundraising, and shaping debate among key international players about crisis engagement.

5. Social mobilization may only succeed in rallying the national population for a limited period of time; tracking the details of key events and efforts to institutionalize change can yield insights into how these very dynamic and fluid situations evolve.

Despite the significant political and economic effects of Arab Spring, the durability of social mobilization that is facilitated by the use of social media cannot be taken as a

given. Some efforts to use social media to orchestrate activity in opposition to the government – such as those of 2009 in Iran – simply never achieve success. In other cases, such as the Spanish protests of 2011, one would have a difficult time identifying the current residual effects of a series of protests that at one point in time were seen as having national, if not European-wide, significance.

Without wanting to overstate the case, a reasonable argument can be made that, even where social media play a role in broader social mobilization that brings down a government, the effects are uncertain. The events of Arab Spring have been described by one scholar as fitting within the context of what he has called “time-bubbles of nationalism.”¹³ In his words, such time-bubbles are “capsules of collectively experienced time, on the whole rather sudden in onset, lasting for a while, then declining back to banal normality.” These sorts of symbolic events are precisely the types of mobilizing activities that social and other media sometimes play a role in facilitating. Within this framework, peak events, such as the early 2011 protests in Tahrir Square against the Mubarak government, prompt an emotional upsurge of national solidarity that energizes efforts to bring down the government, but have limited durability (in the range of 3 to 6 months) after the regime is removed.

To the degree that this “time-bubble” framework has applicability to social media-facilitated regime change, it has a number of important implications for assessing the longer term change that may result:

- Given that “time-bubbles” are short-lived, there is a pressing need to institutionalize desirable change as quickly as possible. As the euphoria of the revolution fades, there is greater potential for disagreement and fracture among previously unified groups. Tracking the speed and breadth of institutionalization can provide critical insight into the durability and direction of long-term change.
- To the degree that efforts against the government lack such unifying peak events, the change will be more violent, prolonged, and uncertain. Libya and Yemen, in this scholar’s view, reflect this reality.
- A better understanding of the specific dynamics of mass mobilization events may yield important insights into the longer term evolution of social mobilization campaigns. Observations on such details as the symbols used in protests, the means employed to bring crowds together, the emotions expressed at such events, and their durability may provide insights into how very dynamic and fluid situations may evolve.

- ¹ Ben Wagner, "Push-button-autocracy in Tunisia: Analysing the role of Internet infrastructure, institutions, and international markets in creating a Tunisian censorship regime," Telecommunications Policy, 36 (2012), pp. 484-492.
- ² Reporters Without Borders, "India—Internet censorship in response to communal violence and rumors," Trust Media, 29 August 2012.
- ³ Volodymyr V. Lysenko and Kevin C. Desouza, "Moldova's internet revolution: Analyzing the role of technologies in various phases of the confrontation," Technological Forecasting & Social Change, 79 (2012), pp. 341-361.
- ⁴ OSC Analysis, "White Paper: Middle East Social Media—Analytical Lessons Learned," 14 October 2011, pp. 2-3.
- ⁵ See Lysenko and Desouza. While they use a slightly different framework for "the easily distinguishable phases of revolution," their commentary highlights the varying roles of social media in the different phases of social mobilization.
- ⁶ Sandra Gonzalez-Bailon, Javier Borge-Holthoefer, Alejandro Rivero, and Yamir Moreno, "The Dynamics of Protest Recruitment through an Online Network," Scientific Reports (15 December 2011)
- ⁷ "White Paper," pp. 4-5.
- ⁸ Nivien Saleh, "Egypt's digital activism and the Dictator's Dilemma: An evaluation," Telecommunications Policy, 36 (2012), pp. 476-483.
- ⁹ Meeyoung Cha, Fabricio Benevenuto, Hamed Haddadi, and Krishna Gummadi, "The World of Connections and Information Flow in Twitter," *IEEE Transactions on Systems, Man, and Cybernetics—Part A: Systems and Humans*, 42 (4), July 2012.
- ¹⁰ Kate Starbird and Leysia Palen, "(How) Will the Revolution be Retweeted? Information Diffusion and the 2011 Egyptian Uprising," *ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work*, February 11-16, 2012.
- ¹¹ Adam D. I. Kramer, "The Spread of Emotion via Facebook," *ACM SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, May 5-10, 2012, pp. 767-770.
- ¹² Victor Bekkers, Arthur Edwards, Rebecca Moody, and Henri Beunders "Caught by Surprise?" Public Management Review, 13:7 (2011), pp. 1003-1021.
- ¹³ Randall Collins, "Time-bubbles of nationalism: dynamics of solidarity ritual in lived time," Nations and Nationalism 18 (3) (2012), pp. 383-397.

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