



Assistance with University Projects? Research Reports? Writing Skills?

We have got you covered!

www.assignmentstudio.net

WhatsApp: +61-424-295050

Toll Free: 1-800-794-425

Email: contact@assignmentstudio.net

Follow us on Social Media

Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/AssignmentStudio>

Twitter:

<https://twitter.com/AssignmentStudi>

LinkedIn:

<https://au.linkedin.com/company/assignment-studio>

Pinterest:

<http://pinterest.com/assignmentstudi>

Is Social Media a Force against Political Oppression?

Essay in light of Recent Political Incidents

Introduction:

Social Networking, since the last decade has started to impact individuals' life on a macro scale. The websites are primarily directly impacting the social, economic, political and other spheres of a country. As noticed by many scholars, social networking on the internet has affected changes in the political elections and social considerations in both, developed and developing countries for instance Cook (2010) identified how social networking through mobile phones impacted political scenario in United States and Canada, Marandi et al (2010) discussed these social tools in context of changing preferences of upcoming generation in Iran. Shaheen (2008) in a similar study studied the powerful influence of social media in political activism that lead to overturning of government in Pakistan. In China, Guobin (2010) discussed how strongly social media and internet networking resulted in protests and clashes between individuals and governments. Moving forward, according to Attia et al (2011), recent political unrest in Middle Eastern countries of Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Syria, Yemen, Bahrain and Algeria can be attributed to social networking sites in general while Facebook, YouTube and Twitter in particular. These events have commonly been known as Arab Spring.

Social Media and Networking on the Internet – Defined:

Social Media has truly been able to change the way world communicates. The platform allows individuals to communicate effectively and quickly with others to share and gather information, topics and subjects that are of mutual interest. The term has been defined in many contexts. For instance, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) suggested the initial definition that resulted in the formation of social networks as a group of applications based out of the World Wide Web on the technology of Web 2.0 that allows creation and exchange of user generated content. Within the ambit of social media is the category of websites suggested as social networking. The most widely used and elaborative definition of social networking was given by Boyd and Ellison in 2007. According to the them (p 211), social networking is

*“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. Of course, the nature and descriptive terms applied to these connections vary from site to site.” (p. 211)

Social Media websites can be classified into different categories based on the nature of information sharing. The most distinctive characteristic of social media is the ability to communicate both ways between the users. Table 1 has been extracted from Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) and can be considered as an exhaustive, but not complete list of social media classification:

Table 1: Classification of Social Media Websites – Kaplan and Heinlein (2010)

Classification	Websites	Definitions
<i>Collaborative Projects</i>	<i>Wikipedia, Delicious etc</i>	<i>Enables collaborative and joint content building by many users working at different times and places</i>
<i>Blogs and Micro Blogging</i>	<i>Twitter, Wordpress etc</i>	<i>Allow users to be able to send a registered group of individuals messages at any time</i>
<i>Content Sharing Communities</i>	<i>YouTube, Flickr etc</i>	<i>Allow users to upload, share publically or privately media files</i>
<i>Social Networking</i>	<i>Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn etc</i>	<i>Allow user to add friends, share messages and information and join likeminded communities of mutual interest</i>
<i>Virtual and Social Gaming Worlds</i>	<i>Secondlife, Farmville etc</i>	<i>Allow users play games online with users connected from different places</i>

Due to limitation, we have discussed three widely used social media sites that have played a significant role in impacting social, political and cultural tangents of our lives. These include Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.

- 1- *Facebook*: Facebook was launched in 2004 as a social networking website exclusively for Harvard students. However according to the statistics, Facebook has now over 1.15 Billion active users around the world as of June, 2013 (Facebook, 2013). Less than 20% of the total users are from United States. This suggests the penetration of Facebook has been to all parts of the world. The website allows users to interact with other users by sharing information, messages, joining of communities of mutual interests, play games and subsequently a tool for marketing and promotion. In June 2013, the website had an average of 600 plus million users accessing the webpage on daily basis.
- 2- *Twitter*: Twitter was launched in 2006. The platform allows users to connect to latest information of their interest through a terminology called “Tweet” which is unique to the application. (Twitter, 2013). According to sources, the website by the end of 2012 had 200 + global users with average 340 million tweets per day. Tweets can be explained as 140 characters short posts that allow subscribed users to follow it on real time basis. Further the subscribed users can follow real time status updates.
- 3- *YouTube*: YouTube was the first website that launched a platform for users to upload, share and watch videos online. The website was launched in 2007, and since then, the number of users and playback hours of videos have been increasing. According to the statistics, more than 1 Billion users visit YouTube website each month. Another surprising statistic is that more than 6 Billion hours of videos are watched each month i.e. almost an hour for every individual on earth (YouTube, 2013).

Safranek (2012) suggested that the biggest attraction of the three social media’s discussed above is the premise that an average person with little exposure to technology can access these successfully, conveniently through a

smart phone and the content on them can be entwined. For instance, videos that are posted on YouTube can simultaneously be shared on Facebook and Twitter. In other words, large number of individuals can be reached effectively at very low cost.

Social Media and Politics:

Political parties and leaders across the globe have started to use social media as a strong medium to achieve political goals. For instance, all the candidates in recent presidential elections in United States of America relied heavily on social media including Facebook, Twitter, MySpace and YouTube to achieve political objectives such as 1) involving prospective voters in a reiterative two way communication 2) to enhance interaction and keep voters updated of political campaigns 3) to provide a platform for voters to encourage participation in online communities and 4) lastly to financially support the campaign (Robertson et al, 2010). Consequently, for presidential elections in Iran in 2009, the decision for public was to choose between keeping the already in power president for another four years or to bring about a liberal reformist. The movement that constituted of younger Iranian members stood behind one candidate whose campaign was largely promoted through social media (Safranek, 2012). However, as a result, the already in power government restricted access for public to Facebook and interrupted mobile phone networks to hamper the campaign. As argued by Levy (2008) social media tools including have allowed regular individuals to be part of the larger political process, which otherwise they would not have been able to do so. Furthermore, the social media presents individuals with exponential opportunities for retrieval and dissemination of political information to engage in political campaigns at very low cost. Social media users can actively subscribe to live information and feeds about their political leaders and parties and allows them to keep updated and informed without having to visit a political gathering.

Protests in Democratic Governments vs. Authoritarian Regimes:

Much of the literature that has discussed political movements has marked a clear distinction between democracy and authoritarian rules. Democratic protests can be categorized as open to contention under which usually non-violent organized protests are carried out to voice dissent against political situation and is considered as part of the main stream politics. While under the authoritarian regime, the task of carrying out an organized civil protest is significantly harder as suggested by Meyer and Tarrow (1998). According to the authors, the biggest challenge faced by public is organize freely and openly, to be able to communicate their sentiments and messages to other public. Also the risk of carrying out such activities has a higher cost associated to it since authoritative regimes tend to suppress voices that show dissent against them.

Social Media and Political Oppression:

In early 2001, Ahrens contended that new information technology in the form of World Wide Web, mobile communications and other sources are transforming the way in which political activists communicate, collaborate and demonstrate their stance. Within decade since then, we have been able to witness this in many developing and developed countries.

Much of this change can be attributed to the strength of social media to remove socio-economic barriers. One does not need to be somebody to be somebody on a social networking website to make a difference. Giroux (2009) in relation to the Iranian political movement on social media argues that Facebook, Twitter and YouTube have re-formed younger generation on the ability to build social relationships and subsequently acquire understanding of producing, mediating and diffusing information. This era has resulted in creation of visual imagery through screen culture which is considered as equally spectacular. Therefore, consequently, the state power has become weaker and prone to minimal control on the circumstances. Also, Giroux suggested that these social mediums have triggered a new political energy that created new relationships between media, public, technology and politics. As agreed by Etling et al (2010), mass population protests are not a new

phenomenon, but digital tools facilitating in their creation through formation of civil society groups, mobs, and civil organizations is a new and strong facet of this paradigm. Some of the significant political events in which mass population have been able to gather and generate an impact have been detailed below:

1- *Moldova*: The first most recognizable and powerful protest that took place to challenge a political situation was in Moldova, 2009. Activists successfully brought political unrest in the newly elected country by mobilizing individuals through Facebook and Twitter. Mungiu-Pippidi & Igor (2009) have mentioned the incidents in detail. According to them, on April 6, 2009, protests broke out on the city after disputed general elections. In a matter of 24 hours only, protestors along with opposition leaders started to gather in front of parliament office. The numbers grew from 10,000 to 30,000 in a city of only 900,000. There was no coverage on the main stream media of the protests, however, Facebook and Twitter facilitated in spreading the word, pictures and videos on real time basis. Although the participants in the protests failed to induce a change in leadership or conduct reelections, they were able to get world's attention while digital activism gained significance as a basis of political power (Amin, 2009).

2- *Iran*: Soon after April's incident in Moldova, another political movement started to take place in Iran in a matter of two months only. Amin (2009) has explained the events that caused social media to again play a strong role in gathering activists for a political case. According to Amin, Neda Agha Soltan was headed to join an anti-government protest in the city of Tehran, Iran in June 2009. The protest was to condemn recent presidential elections that were being thought of as disputed. Stuck in the traffic, as soon as she got off from the car, a bullet shot was heard and Agha Sultan was killed instantly. Bystanders were able to capture video of the incident and that was soon uploaded on YouTube, Facebook and Twitter. This grabbed attention of the main stream media from Iran as well as global news channels including CNN and New York Times (Amin, 2009).

Amin (2009) further explained that the video went viral on the internet and became a symbol for anti-government movement in Iran. The social media was successfully able to amplify the incident for the world to see. Though, the image of Agha Soltan's death was not the exposure Iranian government wanted the world to have. Quoting Amin (1999, p 64);

"In a country notorious for its media censorship, the emergence of online social networking sites and cell phone cameras now allows citizens to bypass state-censored media instantly and transmit a message or video clip to countless others at little or no cost. Digital media has enabled average citizens, including the two bystanders at the scene of Agha-Soltan's death, to provoke outrage and motivate millions of people to their feet at the touch of a button"

The ruling regime understanding the strength of social media tried to counter digital activism through a number of tactics. From controlling the content and censorship on local news channels and papers, the government has taken steps like blocking and delaying content available on social media websites such as Twitter and YouTube. Furthermore, the government has shaped a cyber-army with the purpose of removing party related information and tracking and making arrests for individuals responsible for dissemination of such information (Amin, 2009). Also, government has mobilized 15000 recruiters of Basij paramilitary force to counter and suppress demonstrators in Tehran (Hughes, 2011)

However, Etling et al (2010) suggested there are other angles to the Iranian social media movement that cannot be ignored. According to them, though apparently there was a lot of noise about the role of Twitter in Iranian protest, however, recent evidence suggests that the conversation about the Iranian president was mostly occurred in the West and not by the Iranians themselves. This may lead to a more controversial picture as questions arise about the real stakeholders triggering this movement. Social media was covering the events as they were being unfolded in order to gain foreign support for the movement.

- 3- *Tunisia – Jasmine Revolution*: Though being able to gain attention on the global scale, the above two protests failed to bring about the desired change in governments. However, Tunisia’s Jasmine Revolution in 2011 just after Iranian protest is a true example of strength that can be achieved through social media. The incidents with timelines can be looked upon at the Al-Jazeera website under Timelines Tunisia Uprising (2011). On Dec, 2010, Mohammed Bouazizi who was a local fruit seller set fire to himself as an act of frustration and unemployment. As suggested by Cottle (2011, p 648):

“... a desperate act of defiance following his denied attempts to work as a street vendor to support his family – he lit a flame that soon burned in capitals and cities across much of the Arab world. The scenes of his self-immolation captured by passersby and posted on YouTube as well as those of the mass protests that followed his funeral, quickly circulated in Tunisia and beyond”

The incident was captured on mobile devices by people in proximity and the video went viral on the internet. This provoked immediate protests throughout the city of Sidi Bouzid and other parts of Tunisia. On January 5th, 2012, Bouazizi died in the hospital. This incident fueled the already burning Tunisian population (Timelines: Tunisia Rising, 2011). By mid-January, the protests reached the central city of Tunis. Ben Ali, the president against which the revolt was taking place responded by ordering an overnight curfew. The protests grew stronger and stronger spreading from one city to the whole of country. On January 14th 2011, Ben Ali fled from the country not understanding the situation that was totally out of government’s control. As narrated by Safranek (2012), Tunisian population proved to be the first Arab nation with all the civic pride and education that they can oust a leader by taking on the streets. Although, Ben Ali regime tried to censor and block social media websites, it could not entirely block the internet access. Therefore, seasoned and expert cyber users identified loopholes in sharing information on global social media sites with greater reach. Eventually, Ben Ali had to resign and a trial is expected to run against him for money laundering and

corruption. Tunisia's revolution, also known as the Jasmine Revolution ignited from the social media was the first successful protest in actually creating a significant wave to topple government.

- 4- *Egypt*: Demonstrations are very common in Egypt otherwise. The government has allowed protestors to stage small scale protests on streets and university campuses to vent out their frustration and oppression. Usually these demonstrations were peaceful. As soon as the protests become violent, they were aggressively controlled by the Central Security Forces (Youssef, 2011). However, we cannot deny the fact the Tunisian Jasmine Revolution also played a significant role in inspiring and uprising of Egyptian Revolution.

In June 2010, Facebook appeared on the scene of Egyptian political situation. A young blogger names Khalid Said was brutally murdered by police officials. Said was responsible for putting up a video of policemen on his blog in which they were identified as taking confiscated drugs. This incriminating video resulted in killing of Khalid Said by the hands of police officials (Bhuiyan, 2011). Howard and Hussain (2011) have narrated the incidents of Egypt Revolution. According to the authors, Wael Ghonim, a local Google executive started a community on Facebook with the name of "We are all Khalid Said". The objective was to keep Khalid Said's memories alive. The page immediately received 500,000 members showing anger and frustration over the incident and cruelty of police officers. The page was hosting images of Said's corpse with clear evidence of torture and violence. As suggested by Howard and Hussain (2011), just as the images of Bouazizi were passed from mobile phones and social sites in Tunisia, similarly, images of Said's body were passed on from mobile phone to thousands of other mobile phones and webpages. Again, just as Agha Soltan in Iran was taken as a protest icon after being shot, similarly Khalid Said's page became a focal point for dissent, anger and pity. The page became the foundation of a logistical tool and a source of strong virtual community for the followers (Howard and Hussain, 2011).

Attia et al (2011) have presented a chronology of Egyptian Revolution incidents. According to the authors, Jan 14, 2011 was the time when Ben Ali flees from Tunisia after four weeks of successful demonstration. However, the call for protests in Egypt was continually being made from Jan 14 to Jan 24 on Facebook and Twitter by activists. The first major and successful protest took place on 25th Jan, 2011 in Cairo with thousands of participants. The large turnout created a strong impact and a call out for even a larger protest throughout Egypt on 28th Jan. With the fear of toppling of government, Hosni Mobarek's regime ordered blockade of all social websites and cell phone networks from 26th Jan for 6 days. This had an adverse effect, as the protestors planned to stay back day and night at Tahrir Square in Cairo and all over Egypt. As a result, more than 1.2 Million protestors gathered all over Egypt on 28th Jan. Subsequently, Mobarek had to address the nation and he promised a new government. On February 2nd, just after 4 days, government forces violently killed many protestors. This triggered the already intensified demonstrations with numbers of activists increasing to 20 Million throughout Egypt. This also led to increasing demands by the activists. As a result, Mobarek handed over powers to the vice president on February 10th but refusing to step down. This decision provoked the protestors and they threatened to surround Mobarek's residencies and palaces. February 11th is marked as the major success of Egyptian Revolution. Mobarek stepped down from all ranks and the Egyptian Army of Supreme Council took over the charge of the state (Attia et al, 2011).

Critiques of Social Media Revolution:

With the new phenomenon of social media revolution in politics, debate has triggered between scholars, politicians and social scientists whether this is a sustainable approach or not. One of the biggest critiques has been Malcolm Gladwell who suggests that social networking relationships are not strong enough to generate motivation that is required for a sustained and high risk behavior necessary for a real social change (2010, 42).

“the platforms of social media are built around weak ties. Social networks are effective at increasing participation by lessening the level of motivation that participation requires”

As agreed by Morozov (2011, p 18)

“Revolutions depend on people, not on social media, and the internet promotes both democracy and thwarts it”

Morozov (2011) continues that governments, especially in authoritarian regimes gives impression to public through social media that they are actually listening to their opinions, which otherwise may not be the case. Furthermore, Morozov continues suggesting that blogospheres that have been used to uncover governments' corruption have been made part of the campaign by strong authorities to cover the same corruption. Also, in relation to the Middle Eastern revolution successes in Tunisia and Egypt, Morozov states that internet and social media may not be able to play the same strong role in the democratic setup as it has in authoritarian regimes.

Conclusion:

According to Shirky (2011), considering social media as a “silver bullet” to bring about all the necessary political change is not a conclusive argument. There cannot be a fixed a rule for the success of social media to stand against political oppression as the overall situation depends on a number of factors including the size, ethnic diversity, availability of information technology and cyber infrastructure, education and literacy rate of the population and above all, the amount of cyber censorship that prevails in a given regime. In most of the cases, the outburst of protests also depends on the willingness of state to use force in order to quench protests. For instance, in case of Egypt, the protestors grew as they realized that Egyptian army would not turn against peaceful demonstrations (Shirky, 2011). Furthermore, social media according to Shirky should be considered as a long term tool that has the capacity to strengthen public and political sphere. Social media can

serve as a foundation to bring together increased coordination among loosely knitted social groups and can bring about an impact that was previously reserved to larger organized social organizations.

Finally, it is critical to understand the fact that protests such as Egyptian and Tunisian are end of a process, rather than replacement of the current system. Political freedom once achieved needs to be mature enough to understand the opinions of the society while subsequently; society needs to be educated and literate enough to comprehend on the issues presented to them. Social media has been able to give “hope” to groups that felt powerless against oppressive and brutal regimes and providing them with a level playing field (Shirky 2011).

References:

Ahrens, F. (2001). For activists today, it's marks, not Marx. *The Washington Post*, 20

Amin, R. (2009). The Empire Strikes Back: Social Media Uprisings and the Future of Cyber Activism. *Kennedy School Review*. 10, 64-6

Attia, A.M., Aziz, N., Friedman, B. and ElHusseiny, M.F. (2011). *Electronic Commerce Research and Applications*. 10, 369-374

Bhuiyan, S. (2011). Social Media and Its Effectiveness in the Political Reform Movement in Egypt. *Middle East Media Educator*. 1, 17.

Boyd, D.M, and Ellison, N.B. (2007). Social network sites: definition, history, and scholarship. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*. 13(1), 210-230

Cook, C. (2010). Mobile Marketing and Political Activities. *International Journal of Mobile Marketing*. 5 (1), 154-163

Cottle, Simon. (2011). Media and the Arab Uprisings of 2011: Research Notes. *Journalism*. 12(5), 647-659

Etling, B., Robert, F. and Palfrey, J. (2010). Political Change in the Digital Age: The Fragility and Promise of Online Organizing. *SAIS Review*. 30(2), 37-49

Facebook. (2013). Facebook Statistics. Available: <https://newsroom.fb.com/Key-Facts>. Last accessed October, 2013

Giroux, H. A. (2009). *The Iranian Uprisings and the Challenge of the New Media: Rethinking the Politics of Representation*. Available at: <http://www.counterpunch.org/2009/06/19/the-iranian-uprisings-and-the-challenge-of-the-new-media/>. Accessed on: October, 2013

Gladwell, M. (2010). Small Change. *The New Yorker*. Oct, 42

Guobin, Y. (2010). Online activism. *Journal of Democracy*. 20(3), 33–36.

Howard, N.P. and Hussain, M.M. (2011). The Role of Digital Media. *Journal of Democracy*. 22(3). 35-48

Hughes, J. (2011). Will Arab Worlds Freedom Wave Reach Iran Or China? *The Christian Science Monitor*, 19

Kaplan, A. M. and Haenlein, M. (2010). Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of Social Media. *Business Horizons*. 53(1), 59-68

Levy, J. (2008). Beyond boxers or briefs? *Phi Kappa Phi Forum*, 88(2), 14–16

Marandi, E., Little, E., and Hughes, T. (2010). Innovation and the children of the revolution. *The Marketing Review*. 10(2), 169–183

Morozov, E. (2011). Technology's Role in Revolution: Internet Freedom and Political Oppression. *The Futurist*. 18-21

Mungiu-Pippidi, A. and Igor, M. (2009). Moldovas "Twitter Revolution". *Journal of Democracy*. 20(3), 136-42

Robertson, S. P., Vatrappu, R. K., and Medina, R. (2010). Off the wall political discourse: Facebook use in the 2008 US presidential outlook. *Information Polity*, 15, 11–31

Safranek, R. (2012). The Emerging Role of Social Media in Political and Regime Change. *Proquest*. March. 1-14

Shaheen, M. A. (2008). Use of social networks and information seeking behavior of students during political crises in Pakistan: a case study. *The International Information and Library Review*. 40(3), 142–147

Shirky, Clay. (2011). The Political Power of Social Media: Technology, the Public Sphere, and Political Change. *Foreign Affairs*, 90(1), 1-9

Timeline: Tunisia's uprising. (2011, January 23). *Al Jazeera English*, Africa. Retrieved from <http://english.aljazeera.net/indepth/spotlight/tunisia/2011/01/201114142223827361.html>

Accessed on October 2013.

Twitter. (2013). *About Twitter*. Available: <https://twitter.com/about>. Last accessed October, 2013

Youssef, M.C. (2011). Recent events in Egypt and the Middle East: Background, direct observations and a positive analysis. *Organizational Dynamics*. 40. 222-234.

Youtube. (2013). *YouTube Statistics*. Available at <http://www.youtube.com/yt/press/statistics.html>.

Last Accessed October, 2013.