

Debate flares on 'Twitter revolutions', Arab Spring

WASHINGTON, USA: How important were Twitter, Facebook and other social media in toppling regimes in the Arab Spring uprisings?

Amid a fierce debate in academic circles, an upcoming book argues that social media and new technology made a key difference in successful uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt and helped foster grassroots movements in other Arab nations.

The book by Philip Howard and colleagues concludes that digital media was "consistently one of the most important sufficient and necessary conditions" for the Arab Spring movements.

"There was a longstanding democracy movement in these countries that for many years tried many tactics but none of them worked," Howard told AFP. He maintained that new media made a difference because it "has so fundamentally changed the way people think about their options."

The Arab Spring movements "involved a networked public of generally younger folks," which was "structurally different" than prior movements headed by a charismatic leader, Howard said. Howard, a University of Washington communications professor who is visiting at Princeton, said authoritarian regimes had been accustomed to controls on traditional media but were unable to keep up with the rapid pace of Twitter and Facebook organising at that time.

The impact of social media

Democracy's Fourth Wave? Digital Media and the Arab Spring, written with Muzammil Hussain, counters the conclusions of other academics who found that the impact of social media were exaggerated in the West. Earlier research led by Sean Aday of George Washington University concluded that new media "did not appear to play a significant role in either in-country collective action or regional diffusion" during the 20 uprisings.

"This lack of impact does not mean that social media or digital media generally were unimportant," they say in a report for the US Institute of Peace last year. "But it does mean that at least in terms of media... (especially Twitter), data do not provide strong support for claims of significant new media impact on Arab Spring political protests."

The 2012 study said the tweets and Facebook posts probably did more to spread information outside the affected countries and could have led to "a boomerang effect that brought international pressure to bear on autocratic regimes."

Social media usage

A separate study led by Juergen Pfeffer and Kathleen Carley at Carnegie Mellon University found that "the pattern of spread of the revolutions was not related to the pattern of social media usage." "In other words, the social media did not cause the revolutions," they wrote.

Many activists in the region maintain that social media helped keep up the momentum of the protests that

began in Tunisia, toppled two more dictators in Egypt and Libya, and continue to shake the region. And a study by Zeynep Tufekci of the University of North Carolina and Christopher Wilson of the United Nations Development Program supported that notion.

"Social media in general, and Facebook in particular, provided new sources of information the regime could not easily control and were crucial in shaping how citizens made individual decisions about participating in protests, the logistics of protest, and the likelihood of success," they wrote in the *Journal of Communication*.

Some researchers point out that social media's power appeared to be limited to organising protests and failed to help those people create a stable government after the uprisings. George Washington University's Marc Lynch said social media became polarizing after regimes fell in Egypt and Tunisia.

"While social media boosters envisioned the creation of a new public sphere based on dialogue and mutual respect, the reality is that Islamists and their adversaries retreat to their respective camps, reinforcing each other's prejudices while throwing the occasional rhetorical bomb across the no-man's land that the center has become," he said in a Foreign Policy magazine blog.

Even those who credit social media in the Arab Spring say it seems unlikely that the popular uprisings can be replicated in other places, because regimes have found new ways to control and track dissidents. "It is a bit of a game," Howard said. "Democracy activists used digital media to catch dictators off guard, but we're now in a situation in the 'late spring' countries where the regimes figured out some of the tricks."

He added that "the Facebook and Twitter story may be over because authoritarian regimes have learned how to use these for control" but that it would be a mistake to give up on social media. "There is always some new tool, because there are democracy activists who are desperate," Howard said. "I don't know what it's going to be, but I think there will be some predictable surprises."

Source: AFP