Opinion, by Centre Director, Professor Sarah Joseph

Social Media and Human Rights

This year, revolutionary fervor has swept the Arab world, and the role of social media therein has been widely lauded. But does social media deserve those plaudits?

One prominent sceptic is the *New Yorker's* Malcolm Gladwell. He argues that social change is brought about by high risk meaningful activism, like the civil rights movement in the US. In contrast, he says that social media promotes weak ties and low risk activism, so-called 'slactivism'. He also argues that social media generates loose networks which lack the hierarchies and strategic direction needed to promote significant social or political change.

In contrast, NYU professor Clay Shirky argues that the formation of a vibrant civil society and public sphere, essential prerequisites to a healthy democratic culture and revolutionary change in an autocratic state, is a two-step process. Access to information and the media is the first step. The second step, where one forms political opinions, is active debate and conversation. Social media is a powerful disseminator of information and facilitator of mass conversation, as it generates 'many to many' communication and can be used to synchronize actions by those many.

The shutting down of social media outlets, such as the internet and mobile phones, can also entail great economic costs. Furthermore, the 'cute cat' theory of digital activism holds that it is difficult for governments to shut down popular sites where people share photos of cute cats: it can turn the apathetic into the curious and into potential activists.

How has social media played out in the Arab uprisings? The general cause is mass dissatisfaction with terrible rule and dire economic prospects, especially for a massive and increasingly educated and tech-savvy youth population. In mid December 2010, Mohammed Bouazizi protested the police shutdown of his small business by setting himself on fire in the town of Sidi Bou Zid. His plight spread all over the net, sparking, in Shirky's language, outraged conversations which grew into the mass demonstrations which overthrew Tunisia's long-standing dictator on January 14.

From the tweets of the time, one can see a wellspring growing from the tag, #sidibouzid, adopted in honour of Bouazizi. Facebook users in Tunisia increased by 8% in the first two weeks of January. By 14 January everybody was paying attention. On that day came a prescient tweet from Al Jazeera journalist Dima Khatib: "no Arab leader is sleeping tonight, #sidibouzid has invaded their bedrooms". Twitter was instantly abuzz with a new tag, #jan25, signaling major upcoming protests in Egypt and a 'we can do it too' attitude. And they did, overthrowing Mubarak on February 11. Of course, there have also been other, thus far less successful uprisings, erupting and persisting (or simmering) in Yemen, Syria, Libya, and Bahrain.

Responding to Gladwell, it is interesting to note that the Arab protests have lacked a hierarchy. Traditional opposition bodies, like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, had nothing to do with the organization of the protests. Instead, the organizers were people like Wael Ghonim, administrator of the Facebook page, "We are all Khaled Said", established in honour of a young man beaten to death by Egyptian police. Ghonim helped the protests to come about and has become a face of the revolution, but he didn't "lead" it.

Another criticism of social media and revolutions, from people like Evgeny Morozov, is that it can be an authoritarian as well as a pro-democracy tool. For example, Iran, Belarus, and China have used the internet to identify, locate and target dissidents. This shows that revolution is always a dangerous business, and social media can be high-risk, contrary to Gladwell's assertions. Clearly, a "Twitter Revolution" will find it hard to succeed if a regime responds with serious brutal force as did Iran in 2009 or Syria right now.

Just as social media conveys information, it can convey misinformation. Pro-human rights forces might be matched by authoritarian or other unsavoury messages. After all, the platforms are neutral and can be used for good and bad causes. In response, there is the traditional pro-speech argument that hopefully "good speech" drowns out "bad speech".

A final point to note is that social media platforms are run by private businesses. Is it appropriate to place faith in such bodies as facilitators of a revolution? After all, the status quo often suits big business.

In the Arab revolutions, the behavior of Google has largely been praised. With Twitter it set up a 'speak2tweet' service to get around Egyptian restrictions on the internet in the early days of the protests. Twitter has been openly proud of its role in the revolutions and in promoting freedom of expression generally. In contrast, Facebook has not publicly embraced the revolutions, such as Ghonim's page. Facebook seems ambivalent and perhaps even confused about its role regarding human rights and revolution.

Social media played a major role in galvanizing and organizing protesters in the Arab world. It helped to break down the tight controls that certain States had over information and communication. Its 'weak activism' has facilitated serious risk-taking by thousands under some of the world's most oppressive regimes. One cannot say whether the revolutions would have or could have happened without social media. I suggest it would have been slower, and probably a lot harder.