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Social Media, the Young Generation, and the Arab Spring: An Analysis of the Role of Communication Technologies in the Context of Political Dissatisfaction

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Extended Abstract

This article provides a comprehensive analysis of the transformative role of communication technologies, from traditional print media to modern digital platforms, in shaping political mobilization and collective action, with a particular focus on the Arab Spring. It argues that while literacy and print media were foundational to the democratic public sphere, digital technologies like mobile phones and social media have exponentially amplified the power to organize, coordinate, and disrupt political action. The article synthesizes key theories from scholars like Castells, Smelser, and Rheingold to build a framework for understanding how these technologies facilitate rapid mobilization, circumvent state control, and create new forms of "smart mobs"

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and digital public spheres. However, it also cautions against technological determinism, highlighting the dual-use nature of these tools for both democratic empowerment and the spread of misinformation, polarization, and violence. The analysis concludes that the Arab Spring epitomizes this new paradigm, where deep-seated political grievances, a youthful population, and ubiquitous digital tools converged to create a powerful, albeit complex, force for political change.

Traditional scholarship on the democratic public sphere emphasized the role of print media and literacy. This article shifts the focus to the disruptive political potential of modern digital technologies. Its central objective is to analyze how social media and mobile phones have redefined collective action, using the Arab Spring as a primary case study. It seeks to move beyond techno-optimism by exploring both the empowering and destructive capacities of these tools in contexts of political dissatisfaction.

Network Society Theory (Manuel Castells, 2007, 2023): Posits that digital networks have replaced traditional hierarchies as the core organizing structure of society, facilitating new forms of power, identity, and collective action.

Theory of Collective Behavior (Neil Smelser, 1962): Provides a classic model for understanding the determinants of collective action (e.g., structural conduciveness, generalized beliefs, mobilization). The article updates this model by inserting digital technology as a key factor in spreading beliefs and enabling mobilization.

Digital Public Sphere (Schafer, 2015): Builds on Habermas to examine the transformation of public discourse online, acknowledging its potential for democratization while highlighting challenges like algorithmic polarization and disinformation.

Smart Mobs (Howard Rheingold, 2002): Introduces the concept of impromptu, self-organizing groups capable of coordinated action through mobile and digital technologies.

Media Dependency Theory (DeFleur & Dennis, 2002): Suggests that people's reliance on media increases during times of social conflict and change, a dependency now shifted towards social media platforms.

This article employs a theoretical and descriptive analysis, synthesizing ex-

isting literature and case studies (e.g., the Arab Spring, the Philippine "Edsa Revolution"). It draws on a wide range of sociological and communication theories to build a multi-faceted framework for understanding digital mobilization.

Historical Precedents: The article notes early examples of mobile-led mobilization, such as the 2001 protests in the Philippines coordinated via SMS.

The Arab Spring Case Study: The self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia and the viral spread of the event on social media is identified as a critical "accelerating factor" (per Smelser) that ignited widespread protests across the region. Studies by Howard et al. (2011) and Karasapan (2013) are cited to show the key role of Twitter and Facebook in real-time information dissemination, documentation of state violence, and regional coordination.

Dual-Use Technology: The core finding is the dual-use nature of these tools. They empower "self-mobilized citizens" (Doran, 2011) and create flexibility for movements (Ghaffari et al., 2013) but also facilitate the spread of misinformation, extremism (Huszár et al., 2021), and can be used for crime and terrorism.

Shifting Academic Perspectives: Research has evolved from early optimism (Rheingold, 2002) towards a more realistic understanding of the challenges, including the commercial, non-democratic structure of platforms (Fuchs, 2023) and their role in political polarization.

Demographic Factors: Research by Saad (2012) is cited, indicating that age, gender, and education level directly influence mobile phone use and, consequently, susceptibility to mobilization for protests.

The Arab Spring serves as a powerful illustration of how long-standing political grievances (structural conduciveness) can be ignited by a single event and rapidly amplified through digital networks, overwhelming authoritarian regimes unprepared for this new form of horizontal, leaderless mobilization.

The article concludes that digital technologies are not a primary cause of revolution but are powerful accelerants and facilitators. They have fundamentally altered the landscape of political action by:

Dramatically reducing the cost and increasing the speed of coordination and information sharing.

Circumventing state-controlled media and traditional hierarchical organizations like political parties.

Creating a new, digital layer of the public sphere that is global, instantaneous, and often chaotic.

However, this new power is ambiguous. The same infrastructure that supports pro-democracy movements also amplifies hate speech, misinformation, and extremism. The future of digital collective action will likely depend on combating these negative forces while harnessing the technology's potential for open and democratic engagement. The conclusion calls for a nuanced understanding that avoids both technological determinism and simplistic optimism, recognizing that technology amplifies existing human intentions—both for good and for ill.

Key words: Arab Spring, Mobile Phone, Social Networks, Smart Mob.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in conducting this research study.