

# It was a "Facebook revolution": Exploring the meme-like spread of narratives during the Egyptian protests.

## Fue una "Revolución de Facebook": Explorando la narrativa de los meme difundidos durante las protestas egipcias.

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**ABSTRACT:** Considering online social media's importance in the Arab Spring, this study is a preliminary exploration of the spread of narratives via new media technologies. Via a textual analysis of Facebook comments and traditional news media stories during the 2011 Egyptian uprisings, this study uses the concept of "memes" to move beyond dominant social movement paradigms and suggest that the telling and re-telling, both online and offline, of the principal narrative of a "Facebook revolution" helped involve people in the protests.

**Keywords:** Activism, digital media, Egypt, social media, social movements.

**RESUMEN:** Éste es un estudio preliminar sobre el rol desempeñado por un estilo narrativo de los medios sociales, conocido como meme, durante la primavera árabe. Para ello, realiza un análisis textual de los principales comentarios e historias vertidas en Facebook y retratadas en los medios tradicionales, durante las protestas egipcias de 2011. En concreto, este trabajo captura los principales "memes" de esta historia, en calidad de literatura principal de este movimiento social y analiza cómo el contar y el volver a contar estas historias, tanto en línea como fuera de línea, se convirtió en un estilo narrativo de la "revolución de Facebook" que ayudó a involucrar a la gente en la protesta.

**Palabras claves:** Activismo, medios digitales, Egipto, medios sociales, movimientos sociales.

### 1. Introduction

Storytelling and narratives long have been an integral part of social

movements, with protesters and social movement actors often creating their own stories to counteract the lack of stories, or negative stories, about them

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in the mainstream press (Gitlin, 1980; McLeod & Hertog, 1999). Even as social movements attempt to shape media coverage, the media coverage shapes the movements themselves, with the media and movements in an ever-interacting relationship (Gitlin, 1980; Wolfsfeld, 1997). Within social movement literature, storytelling has been shown to be useful for creating a sense of shared identity, and for mobilizing people to action by making activism seem normative, or at the very least, attractive (Davis, 2002; Polletta, 2002). Bell (2010) referred to the importance of storytelling for uncovering biases; for creating new ways of looking at things; for resisting, or challenging, the status quo; and for working toward social change.

Framing also is an important part of storytelling for a social movement, as it aids in the construction of meaning by helping the audience – including potential supporters – understand who is the hero, what is the problem, and what are potential solutions (Benford & Snow, 2000; Entman, 1993). In today's Digital Era of online social media, storytelling has stepped into a new collective dimension, affording social movements a seemingly endless number of contributing authors, platforms, and even audience members. The use of online social media during the Arab Spring, the *Indignados* movement in Spain, and the Occupy Wall Street movement in the United States hint at a new form of and space for storytelling, demanding

further exploration of the role of narratives and new media technologies in activism, especially since, as Polletta (1998) noted, employing a narrative lens can lead to a better understanding of the mobilization that occurs before a revolution, as well as the consolidation of a social movement. As such, this study examines the role of online and offline storytelling during the Egyptian uprisings of 2011, exploring how protesters and supporters shared their stories online via Facebook, and how those same stories eventually made their way into mainstream media, enticing people to protest.

Using the concept of “memes” (Dawkins, 1976), which refers to the viral spread of ideas, this study qualitatively examines the discourse of Egyptian protesters and the news media to consider how social media were used for storytelling, replicating and virally spreading a narrative that helped create the conditions for uprisings not just in Egypt, but throughout the Arab world. A textual analysis of two of the most-active Egyptian dissident Facebook pages, as well as protest-related articles from *Al Jazeera English* and *The New York Times*, was used to probe the discursive narratives that emerged to create a shared story that helped form a collective “we” and, arguably, bring people to the streets in protest in Egypt and beyond. This study suggests that an approach that takes into account narratives and technology must be applied in order to better

understand how protest movements spread. An approach focusing on the importance of narratives and their role in creating normative action (Polletta, 2002) is especially important in light of the abundance of agenda-setting research that shows the media not only influence what the public thinks about, but also how the public thinks about something (McCombs, 2004). Also, this study will show why existing social movement paradigms are inadequate to explain what happened in Egypt. As this study suggests, it was the contagious replication of a narrative on Facebook and in traditional media that helped bring protesters to the streets in protest.

### **1.1 Egyptian dissidents online**

On January 18, 2011, one week before the streets of Cairo erupted in protest, 26-year-old Egyptian activist Asmaa Mahfouz uploaded a video to YouTube and Facebook, calling on Egyptians to join her in protest at Tahrir Square on January 25. Looking into the camera, her face veiled, she called for online and offline action:

If you think yourself a man, come with me on January 25th. Whoever says women shouldn't go to protests because they will get beaten, let him have some honor and manhood and come with me on January 25th... Your presence with us will make a difference, a big difference. Talk to your neighbors, your colleagues, friends and family,

and tell them to come... Go down to the street. Send SMSes. Post it on the net. Make people aware. (Goodman, 2011)

For the next week, Mahfouz, one of the founders of the April 6 Youth Movement, a group credited with helping organize the 2011 uprising, used social media to spread the word, uploading videos to YouTube even as exhortations to protest went viral on Facebook and Twitter. Then on January 25, dubbed the "Day of Rage," hundreds of thousands of Egyptians took over Cairo's Tahrir Square, protesting against the 30-year autocratic regime of Hosni Mubarak. Fed up with poverty, hunger, unemployment, and police brutality, the demonstrators continued relentlessly for 18 days until February 11, 2011, when Mubarak resigned as president (Asser, 2011; Abdelhadi, 2011).

The Egyptian revolution came on the heels of the successful uprising in Tunisia, where Facebook was used to help mobilize protests and force President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali to flee the country (Madriral, 2011). The so-called "Arab Spring" of 2011 (Khalidi, 2011), inspired by the successful revolts in Tunisia and Egypt, saw protests spread throughout the Arab world. Despite varying degrees of Internet access in each of these countries, social media like Facebook and Twitter were lauded as instrumental in helping organize, even

incite, this regional wave of protests (Attia et al., 2011) that cannot adequately be explained by the dominant paradigms of social movement literature, suggesting a need to move beyond traditional social movement approaches and further explore the role of the Internet and storytelling in protest movements.

## 2. Social Movement Paradigms

### 2.1 Collective Behaviorists

Della Porta and Diani (1999) outlined four perspectives in social movement theory: collective behavior, resource mobilization, political process, and new social movements. During the late 1800s and early 1900s, collective behaviorists saw collective behavior, or protests, as a response to grievances, structural change, or a disturbance of the social order (Blumer, 1939; Le Bon, 1896). For Le Bon (1896), collective behavior was spontaneous, irrational, unconscious, and unrestrained.

### 2.2 Resource Mobilization

Viewing it as a mistake to pathologize protesters, resource mobilization scholars moved away from the idea of collective behaviorism, abandoning any role emotions might play and emphasizing instead the collective's rationality. Collective action, thus, results from organization and mobilization of resources (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). From this perspective, social movements are defined as "normal, rational, institutionally

rooted, political challenges by aggrieved groups" (Buechler, 2000, 35).

### 2.3 Political Opportunity

The political opportunity, or political process model, is based on two basic premises: that social movements are a political, not psychological, phenomenon, and that social movements are a process (McAdam, 2000). Broad social and economic processes, whether a change in demographics or a shift in political power, are seen as giving challengers leverage and creating an opportunity for a social movement to form (McAdam, 2000). The nation state is what creates the opportunity structure (Tarrow, 1994).

### 2.4 New Social Movements and Framing

The New Social Movement (NSM) theory examines social movements as culture- and identity-based struggles (Melucci, 1996). Unlike the political process model, NSM is about identity construction, and the state is not necessarily targeted. NSM theory is used to explain identity- or culture-based movements that began emerging in the 1990s, such as the Zapatistas in Mexico or the anti-globalization/anti-neoliberalism movement.

Along with NSMs, scholars also began pursuing the idea of framing, wherein social movements organize their experiences via frames, which help construct reality (Goffman, 1974; Snow

et al., 1986). The problem with framing, however, is that it is a cognitive and overly logical process (Davis, 2002).

## 2.5 Narratives and memes

As such, a few scholars (e.g. Davis, 2002) have begun calling for more research into the role of narratives in prompting collective action in an attempt to move beyond framing and bring back the emotions and non-normalized aspects of social movements. This study attempts to begin to answer that call. Leitch (1986, 1) contended that “everyone knows what stories are,” and Polkinghorne (1988, 1) characterized narratives as the “primary form by which human experience is made meaningful.” Stories explain and persuade, helping individuals make sense of events in the re-telling of the tale (Davis, 2002). Fine (1995, 134) claimed that a social movement is “not only a set of beliefs, actions, and actors, but also a *bundle of stories*” (emphasis in the original). Stories “provide a legitimated basis of community and collective action” (Fine, 1995, 134), binding people together by creating a “collective we” and inciting emotions that could propel people into action (Polletta, 2002; Fine, 2002).

Also, because stories are shared, they create a sense that action is normative, thus helping create new collective actors (Polletta, 2002). In her study that compared the spread of the Southern Black student sit-in

movement to a fever, Polletta (1998) found that, regardless of the level of organization and planning that other scholars showed existed at the time (Morris, 1981), the movement participants told and re-told a story of spontaneity that helped mobilize protesters. By giving meaning to past, current and future events, narratives can build and strengthen collective identity and help explain the process by which a movement begins (Polletta, 1998). It is not necessarily relevant whether a narrative is accurate, as what is important is that it is the story people believe and retell that offers a reason for participation (Polletta, 1998).

What Polletta (1998) neglects to explain, however, is how the narrative of the sit-ins spread from campus to campus, thus mobilizing students across the U.S. South. To address this shortcoming, this study employs the concept of a “meme.” A meme – similar to a gene that transmits biological information – refers to an idea, belief or image that spreads virally within a culture (Dawkins, 1976). An evolutionary biologist, Dawkins (1976) used the science-based concept to explain the rapid transmission of cultural phenomena. Like a gene, memes can self-replicate and mutate as they carry cultural ideas and information. And like in evolution, the “best” memes are those that are replicated and spread – and thus highly infective – while the other lesser memes become extinct.

Internet memes, quite logically, are spread via the web. Marshall (n.d.) argued that the immediacy and limitlessness of the Internet has resulted in a “premium on short, catchy memes” (para. 11), as evidenced by the thousands upon thousands of YouTube videos of people dancing the Harlem Shake or hundreds of Reddit photos of a grumpy looking cat. But memes are not just for pure entertainment alone. Culture jammers – jamming is a form of activism that “turns corporate power against itself by co-opting, hacking, mocking, and re-contextualizing meanings” (Peretti, 2001) – in particular have relied on catchy, contagious Internet memes for activism. For example, when Nike refused to allow culture jammer Jonah Peretti to customize his shoes with the word “sweatshop,” the email exchange between Peretti and Nike became a meme that went viral on the Internet, spreading across email listserves and blogs before finally making its way into mainstream media, and eventually, impacting cultural beliefs and behavior related to consumerism and labor (Peretti, 2001). At the core of culture jamming is the notion that a successful meme will resonate with the public, causing a reaction that transforms narratives and, ultimately, behaviors and practices (Peretti, 2001).

### **3. Second-level agenda setting**

Better understanding the meme-like spread of narratives via digital and “traditional,” or analog media is important in light of the fact that

abundant previous research shows the media play a significant role in telling the public what to think about. This well-known media effects theory, known as agenda setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), predicts the media’s influence on the public’s perceptions of the most important issues of the day. In other words, the media’s agenda influences the public’s agenda (Wanta & Ghanem, 2006). More recently this theory has evolved to include the idea of second-level agenda setting effects, or the notion that not only do the media influence what the public thinks about, but the media also influence how the public thinks about something – its attributes (McCombs, 2004). As such, attributes the media assign to an object, person, issue, etc., tend to be the same attributes the public assigns to the same object, person, or issue, etc. (McCombs, 2004; Guo, Vu, & McCombs, 2012). So if the media adopt a certain narrative, it is likely the public will, too. Of course, in today’s digital ecosystem, the possibility exists that narratives adopted and spread online will make it into traditional media (Peretti, 2001), thus also influencing how the public thinks about something. While this paper does not attempt to quantitatively show second-level agenda setting effects, it can be argued that the online narrative of a “Facebook revolution,” linking the attribute of the importance of Facebook with the protests in Egypt, perhaps helped set the attribute agenda for traditional media and the way they framed the Egyptian protests,

which influenced – and was influenced by – the way social movement leaders, university-educated protesters and international observers thought about the uprisings. As online social media and traditional media assigned importance to Facebook's role in the protests, so, then, arguably did the public, which adopted and spread the narrative of a "Facebook revolution."

#### **4. Activism and the Internet**

In today's Web 2.0 world, online social media are the latest way for a narrative to spread. Social media, or social networking sites (SNS), are defined as an online service that allows users to create semi-private or public profiles and navigate other users' profiles, thus building a network with users with whom they share some common link (boyd & Ellison, 2007). With more than 500 million active users – about 70 percent from outside of the United States – Facebook is the largest social network site (Facebook, 2011). In Egypt, a country of 80 million where about 17 percent of the population has Internet access, Facebook claims 5 million users, the most of any country in the Arab world (Malin, 2011). Of those 5 million users, 3 million are under the age of 25 (Malin, 2011).

Although their creation had nothing to do with activism, SNS have become the most common gateway into activism, according to a 2009 survey by DigiActive (Brodock et al., 2009). Much previous research considered

the role of the Internet in activism to be that of a facilitator, enhancing the repertoire of existing activist tactics and allowing for the easy and immediate dissemination of information and mobilization of supporters (Juris, 2005; Vegh, 2003). While many scholars contend that online interactions cannot produce the levels of trust required to sustain any kind of collective action (Diani, 2000; Polat, 2005), more recent research has shown that in fact the Internet can help promote a collective identity and sense of community necessary for mobilizing people not just online, but also offline (Hara, 2008; Wojcieszak, 2009).

Social networking sites also have been shown to encourage sociability online and offline (Ellison et al., 2011), and to be positively related to increased civic participation (Park et al., 2009; Pasek et al., 2009). Further, some studies suggest that online activism can be a precursor to offline activism, allowing collectives to form and movements to take shape that otherwise might not have occurred but for new technologies (Harlow, 2012; Juris, 2005). For example, a comparative study of activists in Latin America and the United States found that SNS facilitate the transformation of online activism into offline activism, and vice-versa (Harlow & Harp, 2012). Other scholars have focused on the role of social media in the Arab Spring, such as Lim (2012) who considered the way Facebook was used to create

online and offline networks that facilitated mobilization, and Meraz and Papacharissi (2013) who analyzed news framing and gatekeeping on Twitter during the Egyptian uprisings. Despite burgeoning research, however, much remains unknown about how the Internet, and in particular, online social media, are not just facilitating and supplementing, but perhaps even inciting, offline activism (Rolfe, 2005; Wojcieszak, 2009). Earl and colleagues (2010) noted that some research suggests the Internet is prompting a sea-change in the way we think about activism, with online participation in activism and online organizing of collective action indicating an ability to create lasting model changes, rather than simply scale changes. As such, this study considers how online narratives might be influencing activism, as the narratives that spread meme-like via social media and traditional media during the Egyptian uprisings helped tell the story of a Facebook revolution, and that meme arguably helped prompt mobilization. Investigating the importance of technology and narratives is important since the role of the Internet in the Egyptian revolution is not easily explained by existing social movement scholarship (i.e. resource mobilization theory or new social movements).

Thus, in light of the preceding literature on narratives, memes, and online activism, this textual analysis examines social media and traditional media to answer the following two

research questions:

**RQ1:** What stories did protesters tell on English-language Facebook?

**RQ2:** What stories were replicated in English-language traditional media?

Examining these stories is important for understanding how social media and traditional media were used to spread a narrative, bringing more protesters to Egypt's streets, and perhaps even encouraging mobilizations in Yemen, Libya, Syria and other Arab countries.

## 5. Background

The 1972 student movement, bread revolts and Iraq protests notwithstanding, Egypt witnessed little protest activity during the last half century (Bayat, 2003; Shorbagy, 2007). After President Hosni Mubarak came to power in 1981, he implemented an emergency law that restricted public demonstrations and the dissemination of posters and fliers (Fahmi, 2009; Lerner, 2010). To get around these restrictions, many young activists turned to the Internet as a way to spread information and mobilize the public (Fahmi, 2009; Lerner, 2010). As Lim (2012) noted, online social media have played an important role in Egypt's street protests for nearly a decade, with most protests between 2004 and 2011 involving some element of online activism.

Whether Mahfouz's YouTube videos



and the April 6 Youth Movement that formed via Facebook, or Wael Ghonim, a young, Egyptian Google executive who started the Facebook group "We Are All Khaled Said" – the "most popular dissident facebook group in Egypt" (Lim, 2012, 241) – to protest the police killing of blogger Khaled Said, there is no denying social media played a key role in the Egyptian protest movement, which the media dubbed a "Facebook revolution" (Mahmood, 2011). In the spring of 2008, activists created the April 6 Facebook page to support striking workers in the industrial town of El-Mahalla El-Kubra (Fahmi, 2009). Within weeks, the Facebook group had more than 70,000 followers, mostly young, educated Egyptians concerned with issues related to free speech, government corruption, and the poor economy (Revolution in Cairo, n.d.). In previous years the movement organized a relatively small march and demonstration on January 25 – the national Police Day (Revolution in Cairo, n.d.). But in 2011, galvanized by the recent Tunisian uprising, Mahfouz, as noted earlier, used the Facebook page and YouTube to mobilize record numbers of protesters. Besides the April 6 Youth Movement and its Facebook page with more than 80,000 followers (Dreyfuss, 2011), Ghonim's Facebook group "We Are All Khaled Said" was considered key in mobilizing the 2011 protests, and in May that year the group even won the jury award for best social activism campaign from the Deutsche Welle

Best of Online Activism awards (The Bobs, n.d.). "We Are All Khaled Said," with versions in both English and Arabic and more than a million followers combined, was started to call attention to the June 2010 brutal murder by police of 28-year-old Egyptian businessman and blogger Khaled Said. Said, who posted online a video of corrupt police officers divvying up seized drugs and cash, was tortured and then murdered. Photos of his mangled body then were posted online to disprove the police story that Said died after swallowing a bag of marijuana (Heaven, 2011). By the end of January, when Ghonim posted a call for protests on the 25<sup>th</sup>, the "We Are All Khaled Said" Facebook page had about 380,000 followers, making it the "country's largest and most active online human-rights activist group" (Giglio, 2011). Attributing the historic protests to Facebook, Ghonim told CNN, "This was an Internet revolution. I'll call it revolution 2.0."

## 5. Methods

This study employed a textual analysis approach (Berger, 2000) to examine how protesters, supporters, and the media talked about the Egyptian uprising. The time frame for analysis was Jan. 24, 2011, the day before the first massive Egyptian protest, through the end of February, shortly after Mubarak resigned. Analysis was conducted on all English-language Facebook posts from the April 6 Youth Movement's fan page, and the "We Are

All Khaled Said” group page. These pages were chosen because, despite being mostly in English, they had hundreds of thousands of followers and were the most integral of all Facebook pages to organizing and promoting protests (Lim, 2012). Reports from the *Al Jazeera English* website and articles from the online archives of *The New York Times* that included the terms “Egypt,” “protest” and “Mubarak” also were included in the analysis. These traditional news outlets were chosen because they are international in scope with readers and reporters throughout the world. Although all the content analyzed was in English, despite Egypt being a predominantly Arabic-speaking nation, this study still is relevant and important for examining how English-language traditional media and English-language Facebook users framed the protests as a “Facebook revolution,” thus creating and helping spread this meme-like narrative among social movement leaders, university-educated protesters and international observers.

Informed by the literature regarding social movements and social media, articles then were culled further, resulting in a purposive sample of texts that were specifically related to protest coverage. A purposive sample is based on the “researcher using his or her judgment to select the sample” in order to fulfill a particular purpose and thus is not generalizable (du Plooy, 1995, 62). Still, the result was a

sample of articles relevant to this study.

Then, using a discourse analysis approach, the articles and Facebook posts were examined interpretatively for any themes that might emerge (van Dijk, 1991; Fursich, 2008). Hall (1977, 322) defined discourse as “sets of ready-made and preconstituted ‘experiencings’ displayed and arranged through language” that are used to construct reality and provide meaning. The themes and patterns that emerged then were interpreted within a broader social and cultural context relevant to the Egyptian protests (Hall, 1975).

## 6. Findings

### 6.1 Facebook

When analyzing Facebook for RQ1, which questioned what stories protesters were telling on Facebook, three major themes of youth, social media, and regionalism emerged that combined to form the contagious, memetic narrative that a Facebook revolution of the youth was sweeping across the Arab world. This narrative made its way into comments protesters and supporters posted on Facebook, and people commenting on Facebook cited this narrative as contributing to their desire to want to join the protesters in the streets.

The importance of youth appears in the name of one of the Facebook groups itself: April 6 Youth Movement.

The "info" section of the April 6 Youth Movement Facebook English fan page read:

We are a group of Egyptian youth from different backgrounds, age and trends gathered since the renewal of hope in 6 April 2008 in the probability of mass action in Egypt which allowed all kind of youth from different backgrounds, society classes all over Egypt to emerge from the crisis and reach for the democratic future...

The posts on this fan page also echoed the idea that this was a youth movement. For example, a Feb. 9 post from a female quipped, "I hope that you accept 'non youth' in the group." In another post, also from Feb. 9, a male user wrote, "I spent 4 days in Tahrir Square... All these *kids* want is the right to pick their own president in free and fair elections" (emphasis added). One of the Jan. 26 posts from the "We Are All Khaled Said" Facebook page referred to a "brave young Egyptian Female blogger" and another mentioned a "young Egyptian girl protesting with her young sisters and family." By emphasizing youth in a country where most Facebook users are under the age of 25, the movement thus was portrayed as being both of and for the young people, encouraging their participation by giving them ownership.

Besides emphasizing the role of youth, the Facebook users also highlighted the idea that the revolution was not just about Egypt, but was for the Arab world as a whole. From a Feb. 10 post, one male said, "Thank you Tunisian and Egyptian people for starting a popular protest and now a revolution that will make every tyrant in the World feel that their days are numbered." And on Feb. 6, a female posted, "Your revolution is very important in Iran... A Democratic Egypt helps all nations in the Middle East to move towards democratic societies." Similarly, on Jan. 31 another male wrote, "The world is changing people. When this revolution succeeds, we are going to see chaos all over the Middle East, Asia, Cuba, South America. And all those who have been pushed for too long, now it is the time to rise up." Also, in a post from Jan. 30, a female noted, "You are transforming not just Egypt, but the region and world." Likewise, on Jan. 26 "We Are All Khaled Said" posted, "Domino effect: Yemenies are down in the streets going after their freedom." Broadening the frontiers of the movement served to encourage participation by a creating a sense that "everyone else is doing it, so why shouldn't I?"

In addition to youth and the domino effect in the Arab world, the importance of Facebook was noted on the social network site itself, reflexively spreading the meme that it was a Facebook revolution. For example, the

day before the first massive protest, on Jan. 24, “We Are All Khaled Said” posted: “Please follow me on Twitter (alshaheed) and on the Facebook page here. If you haven’t already invited all your friends, please do this now. 25th January is our big day.” By day two of the protests, Jan. 26, the site was calling for people to send in videos of demonstrators, and was incorporating the Twitter hashtag “#Egypt” into its Facebook posts: “We’re reaching the point where we can say #Egypt is in a state of revolt... Please invite all your friends to join & like this page.”

The importance of the role of the web in the protests also emerged on the April 6 Youth Movement fan page. On Jan. 31 a male posted, “I’ve joined Facebook especially for [the] April 6 Youth movement.” Facebook users also commented on the Internet blackout. One female wrote on Jan. 28, “The services of Facebook, Twitter and cell phones – paramount for the organization of the protests – have been interrupted by authorities.” That same day, “We Are All Khaled Said” posted, “Facebook is now officially FULLY blocked in Egypt. Please tell people to use proxies...With Facebook & Twitter closed, imagine what can people do now other than go out and join protests.” It becomes apparent, then, that for these protesters and supporters posting on Facebook, they considered social media to be playing an integral role in the uprisings in Egypt and elsewhere. The story they

repeatedly told was not just of youths protesting in the streets, but of youths coming to the streets because of Facebook.

## 6.2 Al Jazeera English and The New York Times

When textually analyzing the *Al Jazeera English* and *The New York Times* coverage of the Egyptian protests for RQ 2, what stories were told in traditional media, the importance of the role of social media, youth as leaders, and the domino-effect again emerged as the most frequent narratives. Headlines like “Online activism fuels Egypt protest” or “Movement Began With Outrage and a Facebook Page That Gave It an Outlet” drove home the idea that the Internet was a key player in the protest movement. For example, a Feb. 21 report from *Al Jazeera* said: “Youtube, Facebook and Twitter have become the new weapons of mass mobilization; geeks have taken on dictators; bloggers are dissidents; and social networks have become rallying forces for social justice.”

A Feb. 1 report, “Blogging on the Nile,” said social media and bloggers had “sowed the seeds of a multi-media uprising,” as “blogs, Twitter, Facebook and mobile phone footage have all played some part in mobilizing the crowds.” And in “The media battle for Egypt,” from Feb. 5, the author wrote that the “biggest political protests in Arab history... came together online.”

The same narrative that it was a social

media movement also was apparent in coverage in *The New York Times*. The Feb. 22 article, "TV Viewing Leads to Zimbabwe Arrests," noted that the Internet was "one of the tools that helped organize the mass protests in Cairo." Likewise, a Feb. 21 article, "Egyptians Were Unplugged, and Uncowed," outlined the role of the web with interviews of protesters about what it was like when Mubarak implemented an Internet blackout in the early days of the protests. "The Internet was an irreplaceable part of Egyptian life," the author wrote, noting that the cutoff from Facebook and Twitter is what brought out even more people to the streets. "It was the first time for me to feel digitally disabled," a 26-year-old was quoted as saying. "Imagine sitting at your home, having no single connection with the outer world. I took the decision, 'this is nonsense, we are not sheep in their herd,' I went down and joined the protests." Likewise, a Feb. 6 article, "Movement Began With Outrage and a Facebook Page That Gave It an Outlet," noted:

Mr. Said's death may be the starkest example yet of the special power of social networking tools like Facebook even – or especially – in a police state. The Facebook page set up around his death offered Egyptians a rare forum to bond over their outrage about government abuses... Facebook and YouTube also offered a way

for the discontented to organize and mobilize.

Another narrative that became apparent in the traditional media coverage, just as was seen in the Facebook posts, was the idea that the protests in Egypt were part of a regional revolution that started in Tunisia and was marching its way across the Arab world. For example, a Jan 25, 2011, report from *Al Jazeera English*, titled "Egypt protesters clash with police," started off by saying, "Inspired by Tunisian demonstrators, thousands of Egyptian protesters on Tuesday gathered in Cairo and other major cities, calling for reforms and demanding the ouster of President Hosni Mubarak." The story went on to quote several protesters who credited Tunisia with motivating them to demonstrate. As the article "Egypt burning," from Feb. 24 said, "Anger had long been brewing in Egypt...But it was only when another Arab country, Tunisia, rose up against its tyrant that the Egyptian activists attracted mass support."

Similarly, a Jan. 28, 2011, report from *Al Jazeera English*, "Online activism fuels Egypt protest," noted how Facebook and Twitter messages from protesters and supporters around the world were striving to help the Egyptians, in spite of the Internet blackout:

In the hours before the Internet was unplugged, activists used

social media inside the country and relayed their messages using contacts in other countries. Online activists from unisia shared information about how protesters could pour Coca-Cola on their faces as a method of protecting themselves if police use tear gas. Others offered help by submitting emergency numbers for use in case protesters are arrested.

The regionalism of the revolution also is repeated in a *NYT* Jan. 30 article titled “The Syrians are watching,” which said, “The news from Cairo brought a flutter of excitement to this country... Could the domino effect that spread from the streets of Tunis to Cairo soon hit Damascus?” Echoing the idea of a domino effect, a Feb. 12 article, “Algeria protesters push for change,” noted: “Mubarak’s resignation on Friday, and last month’s overthrow of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali... have electrified the Arab world. Many are left wondering which country could be next.”

As stated in a Feb. 21 *Al Jazeera* report, “Perhaps the Arab moment has come. It’s clear that the genie is out of the bottle. I think change is coming to the Middle East, to the Arab world.” Similarly, a *New York Times* article from Feb. 22 titled “Qaddafi’s forces strike with fury as unrest grows” highlighted the regionalism of the protests in Libya, noting, “The rebellion is the latest...of the uprisings that have swept

across the Arab world with surprising speed in recent weeks.” And as April 6 Youth Movement member Walid Rachid was quoted in a Feb. 14 *New York Times* article, “Tunis is the force that pushed Egypt, but what Egypt did will be the force that will push the world.”

Finally, the third narrative that emerged in *Al Jazeera English* and *The New York Times* was that what happened in Egypt was a youth revolt. On Jan. 26, *Al Jazeera* ran a report, “Can Egyptians revolt?,” that emphasized the role of young people:

They were spontaneous protests fed by public anger, disenchanted youth, and the Tunisian example. Pictures and information fed from Egypt on Twitter, Facebook, and international TV channels showed a new image of Egypt... There is a new generation.

Stories from both news outlets repeatedly emphasized “youths,” “young people,” and the “new generation.” In a *New York Times* Feb. 14 article, “From 9/11 to 2/11,” the author noted that “Revolution of the Youth” was one of the monikers given to the Egyptian uprising. As a Feb. 14 *NYT* article, “A Tunisian-Egyptian Link That Shook Arab History,” said, Facebook gave birth to a:

pan-Arab youth movement dedicated to spreading

democracy in a region without it. Young Egyptian and Tunisian activists brainstormed on the use of technology to evade surveillance, commiserated about torture and traded practical tips on how to stand up to rubber bullets and organize barricades. They fused their secular expertise in social networks with a discipline culled from religious movements and combined the energy of soccer fans with the sophistication of surgeons.

## 7. Discussion and Conclusion

As shown by this textual analysis of English-language Facebook comments and news reports from *Al Jazeera English* and *The New York Times*, the major narratives that emerged in the discourse were that of the importance of online social media, the role of youth, and the international influence of the Egyptian protests, which spurred other countries to action. Using these narratives, the protesters on Facebook and those quoted in traditional media helped mobilize more protesters by telling the story of a regional revolution of the youth that started with social media. As this textual analysis demonstrated, the telling and re-telling of this narrative, which spread meme-like between social media, traditional media, and the streets, helped create a collective "we" that enticed more people to action, with Facebook users commenting that they joined the uprisings in part

because of the story being told via social media. As the second-level of agenda setting effects suggests, the public will follow the media's lead, and assign the same attributes to something as the media did (McCombs, 2004). In the case of the Egyptian protests, this study shows how just as online social media and traditional media attributed the protests to Facebook, so did the protesters themselves. The ability of online social media to instantaneously tap into multiple social networks allowed for the meme-like spread of this narrative. Social media provided the platform that allowed the meme of this contagious narrative to spread, not just online and to other countries, but to the mainstream media, as well. Giving further weight to Polletta's (1998) conclusions about the Southern Black student sit-in movement, regardless of whether in fact what happened in Egypt truly was a "Facebook revolution," this is the narrative that spread and that people believed, arguably helping create a reason for those people to participate in the Arab Spring uprisings.

As such, the Internet no longer can be considered just a tool for social movements. More than simply a tool in the activist's repertoire, online social media served as a space for collective action where protesters and supporters could share their stories and mobilize each other by creating a sense that action was normative (Polletta, 2002). What happened in Egypt seems to be a

case of a story told online and spread offline, as the narrative of a “Facebook revolution” caught on across social media, and then was retold in the streets, and then the mainstream media, as a meme. The discourse of Egyptian protesters, their supporters, and traditional media replicated the narrative that the revolts were made possible because of Facebook, and that they themselves had joined in part because of Facebook.

Thus, considering the way the movement participants and supporters, and even the media itself, told the story of the events in Egypt, it becomes clear that the traditional paradigms of social movement research are not adequate for explaining this multi-country Facebook uprising in the Arab world. While collective behaviorism was dismissed for its portrayal of protesters as pathological and irrational, there remains some usefulness in this approach. The spread of protests from Tunisia then to Egypt and beyond is more in line with the contagious crowd mind of which Le Bon (1896) wrote, than with the calculated approach of the political opportunity model, or the planned and resource-driven organization inherent in the resource mobilization model. Further, the thin, informal networks and loose ties of Facebook, which were integral in the case of Egypt (Lim, 2012), are incongruous with the formal organizations required from a resource mobilization perspective. Likewise, the years of repression and oppression in

Egypt had not suddenly changed overnight to open an opportunity that would make protesting seem a successful possibility, as the political opportunity model dictates. Additionally, the domino effect of revolts that started in Tunisia and then spread goes against the political opportunity paradigm, which is bound by opportunities within a particular nation state. It is implausible that whatever political opportunities existed in Tunisia also existed in Egypt and Libya and Syria. Further, if the same political opportunities that prompted a social movement in Egypt also prompted one in Libya, it would follow that the Libyan protesters, like the Egyptians, also would have been successful. Instead, the protesters in Libya were brutally repressed, indicating, according to this model, that no political opportunities in fact existed. Yet still, protesters continued to take to the streets, suggesting that something else was inciting them to action.

The fact that the success in Tunisia and Egypt served as inspiration for other nations that saw opportunity and the possibility of a successful uprising is more in line with the notion of memes and narratives, than with any of the dominant social movement paradigms.

It is possible that scholars might look back and conclude that indeed a political opportunity existed, or that the April 6 Youth Movement was more formally organized or well funded than



previously believed. But that will not change the fact that the protesters themselves believed this to be a Facebook mounted, youth-led movement that took hold across the Arab World thanks to the use of social media. Just as Polletta (1998) found with the Black Student sit-in movement, the narrative is what took on meaning for participants, and that shared narrative is what brought them to the streets. As this textual analysis showed, young, technology-savvy Egyptian protesters learned of the Tunisian uprising, and then used online social media to encourage a similar revolt in Egypt. The more this narrative spread, creating a norm to participate, seemingly the more people took to the streets, in Egypt and in neighboring countries.

This study is limited in that it looks only at English-language posts on Facebook and English-language reports from *Al Jazeera* and *The New York Times*. Despite this, the Facebook pages chosen were integral to the revolutionary movement, with hundreds of thousands of followers, meaning that the people commenting on and reading the pages were part of the movement, and their comments should not be dismissed just because they are in English. Similarly, *Al Jazeera* and *The New York Times* are both national outlets read by people in Egypt, and quoting directly from Egyptian protesters, again justifying the use of these news outlets, despite their being in English. As mentioned

previously, analyzing the English-language Facebook comments and traditional media news stories helps illustrate how framing the uprisings as a "Facebook revolution" lead social movement leaders, university-educated protesters and international observers alike to adopt the same attribute agenda, where Facebook became inextricably linked to the protests. Also, while this is a qualitative study with a purposive sample, and thus not generalizable, it still is important for demonstrating the way a narrative about the role of Facebook emerged and spread, helping mobilize protesters. Future studies should examine Facebook and media content from Arab-language sources. It also would be worthwhile to consider what narrative appears in other Facebook-driven mobilizations elsewhere in the world, and whether the narrative of a Facebook, region-wide revolution of the youth will change depending on the outcome of the revolts in Libya, Syria and elsewhere.

As Polletta (1998) noted, the power of the narrative for prompting activism lies not in its accuracy, but in its believability and retelling. In the case of the Egyptian protesters' narrative, the Internet allowed the story of a Facebook revolution of pan-Arab youths to function as a meme, spreading through social media and into traditional media. The rapid spread of this meme, enabled by the Internet, added to its contagiousness, encouraging protesters from Egypt and elsewhere in the Arab

world to take to the streets in protest. Thus, it became the story of a movement born online, nurtured online, and even replicated online, but yet that still came to fruition offline, sparking real-world repercussions in multiple countries. It seems, then, that in this Digital Era of Facebook activism, it is time to reconsider existing social movement paradigms, and further explore new frameworks that help explain mobilizations by taking into account the power of online social

media for spreading viral memes and prompting waves of protests. Technology did not cause the uprising in Egypt, but social media accelerated change by facilitating, encouraging and prompting mobilization, as protesters shared their stories and thus made protest normative, encouraging demonstrators to participate by spreading the narrative of a Facebook youth revolt across the Arab World – something to which they all could relate.

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