Social Media as a Source of Information: An Exploratory Study of Young Libyans’ Perceptions of the Impact of Social Media in Libya during the Period 2011-2015

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Abstract
As one of the Arab Spring countries, Libya has lived through fast-moving events in which Facebook and other social networking sites have played a major role in delivering news, and shaping peoples’ attitudes towards current events and revolutionary change. This significant change in the mechanisms of delivering information and spreading news is considered problematic by many Libyans due to the conservative nature of the society that often resists dramatic changes. The proposed research primarily seeks to answer questions about young Libyans’ perception of the impact of social media in Libya in relation to the revolution and post-revolutionary period (2011-2015).

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1 Introduction
From 2011 the Arab countries experienced a wave of revolutionary protests with a spillover of effects from one country to another. These events have been dubbed the “Arab Spring” by optimists and the “Arab Revolts” by others (Hussain & Howard, 2013). Internet and social media played a crucial role during the revolutions and in the post-revolutionary period. In early 2011, when Libyan people chanted “the people demand the fall of the regime”, nobody would have expected that Libyans, who lived under Al-Gaddafi’s control for forty-two years, would be capable of grabbing the whole world’s attention and globalizing their voice. Libya is one of the Arab Spring countries where it has been argued that social media function indirectly as a communication channel between people to distribute information and news. Social media platforms played a vital role in getting information out of Libya, even during the period of internet blackout, to be beamed back into the country, as well as to the rest of the world, by news organizations such as Al-Jazeera channel (Scott-railton, 2011).

However, although there is widespread discussion of the role of social media in Arab Spring countries, research into its role in the Libyan revolution still remains limited. This study aims to fill this gap in the literature by seeking to develop a rich understanding of young Libyans’ perceptions of the impact of social media for spreading information, news and shaping attitudes during the revolution and post-revolutionary period.

2 Literature review
There have been many attempts to explain the story of the Arab revolutions, but the majority of research has centered on the claim that new media such as Facebook and Twitter made a big difference to events (Howard & Hussain, 2011). Since the rise of internet technologies in Arab countries, social media have changed the nature of the communication landscape and the existing means of information and news consumption. The barriers to distribution of information have reduced, and anyone with an internet connection has become able to contribute in the flow of information and generate content to be consumed by others (Abdelhay, 2012). Governments face new challenges in controlling information access as these new decentralized communication technologies cannot easily be dominated by one side. This can make governments susceptible to being toppled (Edmond, 2013). In the Arab Spring countries, despite restricted internet access in some countries, a techno-savvy generation that was eager and motivated to see the end of long-lasting regimes were able to circumvent the Internet censorship (Salem & Mourtada, 2011) and make regime change possible to happen.

The wave of massive protests throughout the Arab countries in late 2010 and early 2011 has drawn the attention of researchers and professionals to attempt to explain this phenomenon, trying to demystify its motivations and mechanisms. The majority of research has focused on the role that new media might have played in instigating and accelerating the events of the Arab Spring (e.g. Yli-Kaikala, 2014; Khondker, 2011; Hussain & Howard, 2013). Elsewhere, some commentators have suggested that the role of social media has been overstated, arguing that it played not a critical role, but only an
instrumental role in empowering citizens to produce social change (e.g. Chebib & Sohail, 2011; McGarty, Thomas, Lala, Smith, & Bliuc, 2013). Others make connections between new media and political activism (e.g Srinivasan, 2014). Further, connections have been observed between “old” and “new” media. For example, in Arab Spring countries, both of them enhance each other and shape complex interrelationships (e.g. Aday, Farrell, Lynch, Sides, & Freelon, 2012; Lim, 2013; Christensen, 2013; Robertson, 2013). Yet, there is a lack of studies about citizens’ perception of the perceived role of social media in the context of Libyan revolution. This might be because of the instability and the spread of weapons on the ground which makes the conduct of such research still risky. The proposed study will be undertaken to gain an in-depth understanding of young Libyans’ experience and learn about their perceptions of social media for spreading information, news and shaping attitudes during the revolution and post-revolutionary period.

3 Research Design and Methodology
A qualitative case study design will be employed to explore in depth how young Libyans feel about the use of social media during the revolution and beyond, allowing them to talk about their views, feelings and experience. Data will be collected through semi-structured interviews based on a snowball sample of young people between the ages of 24-35 inside Libya (in Tripoli, Benghazi and Sebha city), and within the Libyan diaspora in the UK. In addition, a sample of public Facebook pages will be chosen for content analysis. This study focuses only on Facebook because it is the most popular platform used in Libya. Careful consideration will be given to choose pages which vary according to their political ideology. Analyzing the actual posts can help the researcher to throw light on the connections between social media coverage and public perceptions.

The research raises complex ethical issues and dilemmas related to safety and privacy. In conflict zones, the situation is unpredictable and dynamic. Therefore, we decided to monitor the security situation constantly and analyze risks, particularly by listening to local information. Three ways will be used to approach participants depending on the situation on the ground: in person interviews, Skype interviews, and telephone interviews in the case of having any difficulties with the Internet connection. A consent sheet will be provided to all participants including a brief about the nature of the study before the interview is conducted. Interviewees will not be asked to sign the consent forms in their real names for safety reasons. Participation in this study will be completely voluntary.

With regard to analyzing public Facebook posts and comments, the study will follow the Ethics Guidelines for Internet-mediated Research of the British Psychological Society. The most important principle to be taken into account is minimizing harm by ensuring anonymity and confidentiality. This can be done by “paraphrasing any verbatim quotes so as to reduce the risk of these being traced to source, and participants identified” (British Psychological Society, 2013). The ethical issues related to conducting the research will be presented on the poster.

4 Findings
A pilot study encompassing semi-structured interviews with 5 young people from Tripoli and the Libyan diaspora in the UK, and content analysis of the “Libyan Women” Facebook page during the period of the revolution (February to October 2011) will be undertaken in order to explore the general attitudes, test the research design, and modify the research instruments.

5 References


