



ARAB SPRING CONTENT & CONTEXT

The Arab Spring looks set to be one of the pivotal events of this decade. Social media has been in the spotlight as a source of information in the protests that have swept across the Middle East, particularly Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Libya, Yemen and Syria. Although social media tools have been vital for surfacing content, the way news has been distributed, authenticated, put in context and then used in online conversations reveals how broadcasting and social media can blend together nowadays to provide a far-reaching, powerful and inclusive presentation of news to a worldwide audience. Technology consultant **Roger Stone** looks at how social media has fed into, as well as fed off, traditional media

The Arab Spring has focused the world's attention on protestors who have practically no access to tightly controlled traditional media in their own countries. So they have been using tools such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, often accessed via mobile phone to enable them to organise and to make their voice heard to the wider world; and traditional broadcasters as well as new media players have been tapping into the messages to provide news and analysis around the globe as well as back into the originating countries.

This provides a counterpoint to the common viewpoint of social media as a convenience tool for the developed world to use on the latest tablets – it demonstrates how social media can provide basic communications and community

building, enabling everyone to fight for basic human rights.

SOCIAL MEDIA

While repressive states in the Middle East have generally been able to control the newspapers, radio and TV, they have been far less successful at stopping those opposing them from organising and communicating via mobile phones and the internet. Despite their attempts to block or filter network traffic, protestors are always finding ways round the restrictions and rulers are constrained by their own communication needs.

While state controlled media continued to deny the extent of protests until virtually the moment that the regimes fell, they lost control of the flow of news. The demographics of the Arab World are such that 50% of the population is below the age of 25 and

significant urbanisation is allied to high mobile phone penetration (e.g. 90% in Egypt and 95% in Tunisia – please note: since many people have more than one phone, a penetration of 100% does not imply that everyone has a phone). This means that there are millions who are ready and able to demonstrate against their conditions and the corruption of their rulers and they have the tools in their hands to organise protests.

Much has been written about the extent to which social media has been used, but a few examples remind us of its impact:

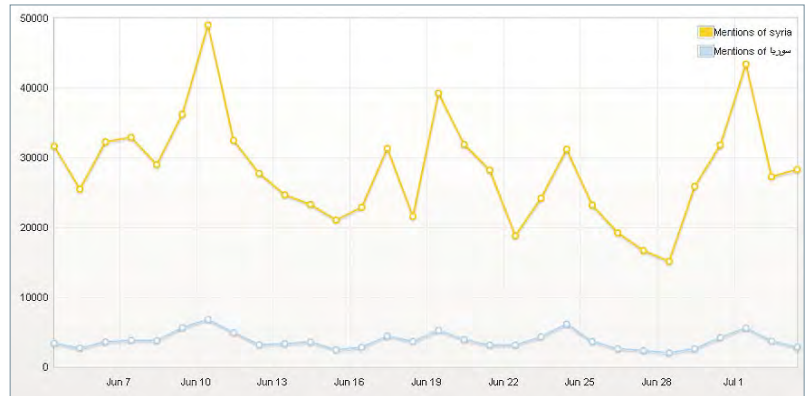
- Asmaa Mahfouz posted videos on YouTube challenging Egyptians to go to Tahrir Square on January 25th. These acted as a catalyst for the protests and her Facebook page attracted 80,000 followers.
- There are 120,000 followers of the “We are all Khaled Said” page on Facebook which used the death of a 28 year-old Egyptian at the hands of the police as a rallying cry for the revolution.
- There have been 15,362 Tweets that use the hashtag #ArabSpring & 34,789,924 Retweets, as shown in the imaginative France24 YouTube video “The Birds”.
- Freedom4566, which groups together YouTube videos from protestors in Syria, has received 220,000 views.

However, it is interesting to note that the figures are generally in the tens or hundreds of thousands, and not the millions which often measure the audience sizes of traditional broadcasters, one of whose roles is to amplify key stories so that they reach a much wider audience.

BREAKING NEWS

Social media has immediacy and spreads at the speed of the internet but it still does not have the reach of traditional broadcast media for major international news. There may be two billion people with internet access, but they are still a minority in the countries involved in uprisings, many of whom listen to or watch international broadcasts

France24 and Al Jazeera actively use citizens as reporters



for objective reporting of events in their own countries.

Outside the Middle East, few people would find details of the uprisings on the internet unless broadcasters were presenting them as lead stories.

There is also the question of language: although English is currently the dominant language for social media, even on topics relating to the Arab Spring (see Figure 1), broadcasters provide news in the hundreds of languages that their audience speak. In addition, the average internet user does not have the connections, time or resources to know whom they can trust when stories break, whereas the broadcasters have long, honourable traditions of building up contacts, verifying sources and authenticating news.

However, the use of social media by broadcasters has brought new challenges in verifying stories. Andy Carvin of NPR in the US has become known as a “curator” of tweets dealing with the Arab Spring. He knew the Middle East well enough to have made contacts with half a dozen key bloggers in whom he built up trust. Their output made him aware of the start of the Tunisian uprising and he began to monitor the increasing online messages about uprisings in the Middle East. Starting from his core group, he reached out to their contacts and gained a wider picture, all the time questioning them, asking for more details or for verification, and building up an overall picture of the reliable sources and what was really

happening. His investigations even enabled him to track down and expose the author of the “Gay Girl in Damascus” blog as an American living in Scotland, after discovering that the author was not known in Damascus.

France24 and Al Jazeera provide examples of broadcasters who actively use citizens as reporters. France24’s “Les Observateurs” programme signs up those who are interested in becoming a friend of the station. Some are chosen by editors to act as reporters on certain topics or in certain areas of the world. “Observateurs” have provided important sources of news on the uprisings. Al Jazeera has similarly been using citizen reporters but in a much more focused way in key areas. They try to anticipate areas of interest and become involved with communities on the ground. Since Al Jazeera has had its satellites jammed, its offices closed and some journalists arrested, they have had to be innovative in news gathering and have even given Flipcams to some people on the ground so that they can provide video footage.

But in encouraging user input, Al Jazeera have come up against another challenge posed by using social media – how to select good content from a huge range of input. During the Egyptian revolution they received up to 400 videos per day, requiring a significant increase in their online team to deal with the traffic and to extract information from the background noise - Esra Dogramaci of Al Jazeera speaking at the recent BBC Social Media



◀ Left Comparative mentions of Syria in English and Arabic on social media

▶ Advertisement from France 24 campaign "The Birds"



Summit used the equation: (information – noise) + context = responsible journalism.

Yahoo! Maktoob, Yahoo!'s site in the Middle East, tackles the issue of the amount of background noise in a different way. While not a traditional broadcaster, Yahoo! has agreements with broadcasters and news agencies such as BBC, Al Jazeera, Reuters and AFP, to broadcast their news online and it has a huge community of 50 million users. In order not to be swamped by the amount of user input, Yahoo! have selected and trained 1000 volunteers to filter content for them. Whether by working outwards from a trusted group of contacts or selecting suitable people from applicants, NPR, France24, Al Jazeera and Yahoo! demonstrate different methods of verification and sifting of content, all of which rely on building a strong social media network.

Reporting on the Arab Spring has produced many great examples of broadcasters adapting to the new immediacy and flow of information via social media while managing to add validation, context, authority, perspective and access. The most innovative are using their stories to engage their audience and to gain further feedback. NPR's Andy Carvin demonstrated how questioning elicits more insight to help validation or to add depth.

Yahoo! by its very nature has stories embedded within an active community of users and it aims to mesh content and user experiences. "The new generation does not have a strong affiliation to ideologies but builds up relationships of trust using social media" explains Hosam El Sokkari, Head of Audience, Yahoo! Middle East.

LIKELY TRENDS

The mix of social media and broadcasting has had a profound impact on the changes taking place in the Middle East. The political situation continues to evolve rapidly in ways that are difficult to predict, and it is almost as difficult to predict how traditional broadcasting and digital tools will develop an even richer mix of services for their audiences. However we can suggest some likely trends:

- Protestors will continue to find ways round government restrictions on free communication. Although governments will become more adept at closing down particular elements of the internet, protestors with outside help will find new ways to set up do-it-yourself internet services and to encrypt their messages.
- Social media companies will become more aware of their influence on news and will acknowledge more responsibility

More tools will become available for broadcasters to check the authenticity of reports



for this "public" service.

- More and more professional broadcast services will form relationships with key bloggers or influencers in social media, so that they are linked in to changing events on the ground as they happen. They will provide training to these contacts as Al Jazeera is already starting to do.
- More tools will become available for broadcasters to check the authenticity of reports coming from unknown sources. There will be easily available tools for checking that videos are original just as existing tools like Tineye check images against those previously published online. We can also expect more automated monitoring of messages to check the overall sentiment, as well as the use of keywords.
- Broadcasters will increase investment in the people and tools to monitor social media traffic, with research on stories being driven more by inbound information.

The Arab Spring looks set to be one of the pivotal events of this decade and it also highlights some of the trends that will drive broadcasting during this time. ■

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