CS 6474/CS 4803 Social Computing: Activism, Social Movements

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It started with a retiree. Now the Women’s March could be the biggest inauguration demonstration.
The Revolutions Were Tweeted: Information Flows during the 2011 Tunisian and Egyptian Revolutions
Summary

• Analysis of Twitter information flows during the 2011 Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings
  • Tunisian demonstrations from January 12–19, 2011
  • Egyptian demonstrations from January 24–29, 2011
• Identify “key actor types,” e.g., MSM organizations, individual journalists, influential regional and global actors, and other participants who actively posted to Twitter on these two revolutions
• Study contagion of information by each actor type
• Examine relationship between traditional news media and social media in the two revolutions
We assumed that an organization’s Twitter account plays a different role than an individual account, often serving as the official voice of a group, company, or organization. We define organization accounts as the following: MSM, non-media org, Web news org, and bots (which, in many cases, are controlled by automated programs representing no individual interests). All other actor types are considered individual accounts. In comparing organization accounts to individual accounts in our datasets (see Figure 2), we found that roughly 70% of the actors in each dataset are individuals.

Table 1. Twitter User Behavior: Number of Followers and Level of Activity per Type.

To understand further how different actor types behaved, we looked at their tweet to retweet ratio (see Tables 2 and 3). This is an indication of how often different actors’ tweets are retweeted by their followers. We take this to be a measure of how well actors engage their audiences. At the low end of this metric are “other” users, who are able to elicit retweets approximately 30% of the time, compared to 88% for MSM accounts. Additionally, Twitter accounts of organizations (MSM, Web news org, and non-media org) have substantially higher retweet rates (i.e., flow sizes) than do individual accounts.
To understand the impact of actor types on the information flows, we look at two important attributes: source and size. An information flow's source refers to the user who first posted the content. If we look at the distribution of information flows across source types, the differences in dynamics between the Tunisia and Egypt datasets are prominent (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Distribution of information flows by source type for Tunisia and Egypt.

Note: Bars represent the number of threads (as a % of total threads) in each dataset that were seeded by an actor of the given type.

We define an information flow's size as the total number of participatory tweets, namely, tweets that are close copies or retweets of the information flow source (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Information flow sizes for Tunisia and Egypt.

Note: Bars represent the median number of tweets in threads that were originated by an actor of the given type.

When considering the Tunisia dataset, Figures 3 and 4 suggest that, while more journalists than bloggers served as sources for information flows in Tunisia, those flows started by bloggers were substantially larger in size. This suggests that bloggers played an important role in surfacing and disseminating news from Tunisia, as they had a substantially higher likelihood to engage their audience to participate, compared with any other actor type. Additionally, the Tunisia dataset showed less engagement from MSM, journalists, or activists, compared to Egypt.

When looking at the Egypt data, there are very clear distinctions: MSM, journalists, and activists were much more engaged in information flows, serving as the main sources of flows much more than in the Tunisia dataset. Additionally, they drew larger participation from their audience, as measured through flow size. Meanwhile, although non-media orgs account for being the source of 5% of all flows (26 out of 500), they had the largest average size, most notably a flow started by the official WikiLeaks account, which read:

"WikiLeaks did more for Arab democracy than decades of backstage U.S. diplomacy."


Sub-Flows

In order to gain another dimension of understanding of the flow of information on Twitter and the relationship between actor types in our data, we examined what we call sub-flows. Each information flow is made up of multiple sub-flows. A sub-flow between user A and B (A → B) exists if user B retweeted text that user A had previously posted.

By collapsing every sub-flow within all chosen information flows, we see recurring patterns of retweet behavior among actor types. In the ten most common sub-flow paths between coded actors across both datasets, journalists, activists, bloggers, and "other" actor types are the most prominent (see Table 4). This reinforces the claim that, while organizational actors have larger followings on average, individual actors are much more likely to play an active role in information dissemination.

Table 4. Ten most common sub-flows for each dataset (Tunisia left, Egypt right).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-flows (Tunisia)</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Sub-flows (Egypt)</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Activist → Activist</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Journalist → Activist</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journalist → Other</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Journalist → Other</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journalist → Blogger</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Journalist → Blogger</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activist → Blogger</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Activist → Other</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other → Blogger</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Activist → Activist</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journalist → Activist</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Other → Other</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blogger → Blogger</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Activist → Blogger</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blogger → Other</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Blogger → Blogger</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journalist → Journalist</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Journalist → Journalist</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activist → Journalist</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Blogger → Activist</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Social media and the decision to participate in political protest: Observations from Tahrir Square
Summary

• The paper presents a survey study of Tahrir Square protests.
• It shows that Facebook provided new sources of information the regime could not easily control.
• Social media was crucial in shaping how citizens made individual decisions about participating in protests, the logistics of protest, and the likelihood of success.
Both papers focus on social movements in an authoritarian regime. People concerned about persecution may not tweet or use Facebook. Are there specific measures social media platforms can adopt to allow them to participate?
What risk do bots pose to social movements?
Tufekci and Wilson surveyed people’s Facebook use during the Tahrir Square protests. What are the strengths and limitations of snowball sampling?
Discuss how social media platforms have been disrupting activism and social movements in contrast to traditional activism.
“Because of social media we reach people in the smallest corners of America. We are plucking at a cord that has not been plucked forever. There is a network and a hashtag to gather around. It is powerful to be in alignment with our own people”

- Cullors-Brignac, one of the cofounders of the BLM movement, to the CNN
#SocialMovements on Twitter

- Community
- Awareness
- Organization
Twitter and Social Accountability

- Reactionary and in real time
- Personal causes/passions championed
- Better Engaged & Aware of Issues
That's Old News!
How social media is replacing traditional journalism as a news source

The Truth About News Sources
- Over 50% of people have learned about breaking news via social media rather than official news sources.
- 46% of people get their news online at least 3x a week.
- As of 2012, online news revenue has surpassed print newspaper revenue.

8 News Stories that Broke via Social Media
- Egyptian Uprising: Facebook
- Announcement of the royal wedding: Twitter
- Newt Gingrich running for U.S. president: Twitter
- Hudson River Plane Crash: Twitter
- Protests killed in Bahrain: YouTube
- Whitney Houston's death: Twitter
- Hillary Clinton won't be in a 2nd term Obama cabinet: Twitter
- Osama bin Laden raid and death: Twitter

The 1st person to tweet about the Osama bin Laden raid was a neighbor who, while complaining about the noise next door on Twitter, unknowingly tweeted about one of the biggest news stories of the decade.

Where do People Get Their News Overall?
- Social media makes a strong showing as an online news source.
  - Facebook: 59.5%
  - Twitter: 19.9%
  - YouTube: 12.7%
  - Google+: 11.6%
  - Other: 42.8%

Since 2009, traffic to news sites from social media platforms has increased
- 57%
- 9%

Of adults who get news on a digital device use Facebook or Twitter to get that news very often

Championing a Cause

- Tweeting awareness to a worthy cause through
- Online petitions

Chris Reimer
@RizzoTees
New media dude, keynote speaker. I love you more than bacon.
@falkharrison VP Social Media, @marquetteU grad, former CPA & CFO, thinker, red wine drinker
SL Louis, MO: http://www.chrisreimer.com
Engagement & Advocacy

- Political or Social Cause Engagement/Awareness
- 2012 Pew Study Social Media's Influence on Politics
- 2011 Ogilvy Georgetown Study of Dynamics of Cause Engagement
- MacArthur Foundation and the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning study of youth and participatory politics
Online social change: easy to organize, hard to win

Zeynep Tufekci at TEDGlobal 2014

https://www.ted.com/talks/zeynep_tufekci_how_the_internet_has_made_social_change_easy_to_organize_hard_to_win#t-4052
Why social media is reinventing activism

- ‘Feel good clicking rather than make a change’ – Kessler

- ‘Slacktivism’: The act of participating in obviously pointless activities as an expedient alternative to actually expending effort to fix a problem
Example of poor activism - Kessler

- Red Cross: 208,500 ‘likes’ on FB

- Online donations accounted for 3.6% (private donations)
More loose Ties lead to more activists

“You’re not going to get everyone who liked your Facebook page to volunteer their summer, building schools and helping out, but it’s still all part of that journey.” – Craig Kieldburger

“Social media opens the megaphone so much wider… when you finally look at that spectrum, we’ve got more people who are finally making a journey.” – Craig Kieldburger
Stages in Social Movements

- **Preliminary stage** - people begin to become aware of a threatening problem.
- **Coalescence stage** - people begin to organize and start making the threat known to the public.
- **Institutionalization stage** - organizational structure develops.
Class Exercise II

What can social media platforms do to support real activism, beyond “slacktivism”? 
“[…] Then I saw Brown’s body laying out there, and I said, Damn, they did it again! […] I’m not just going to tweet about it from the comfort of my bed. So I went down there.”

- Johnnetta Elzie, BLM protestor
The Role of Social Media in Mobilizing Political Protest

Evidence from the Tunisian Revolution

Anita Breuer
The Dynamics of Protest Recruitment through an Online Network

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The recent wave of mobilizations in the Arab world and across Western countries has generated much discussion on how digital media is connected to the diffusion of protests. We examine that connection using data from the surge of mobilizations that took place in Spain in May 2011. We study recruitment patterns in the Twitter network and find evidence of social influence and complex contagion. We identify the network position of early participants (i.e. the leaders of the recruitment process) and of the users who acted as seeds of message cascades (i.e. the spreaders of information). We find that early participants cannot be characterized by a typical topological position but spreaders tend to be more central in the network. These findings shed light on the connection between online networks, social contagion, and collective dynamics, and offer an empirical test to the recruitment mechanisms theorized in formal models of collective action.
Class Exercise III

a) What are the strengths of being able to use social media to mobilize and recruit for protests?

b) What are the limitations?