

# Tweeting Egypt

## The Social Media of the Egyptian Uprising

## Ahlan Wa Sahlan – Welcome to Tweeting Egypt

Welcome to Tweeting Egypt, a site for looking at how Twitter and other social media platforms play a role when it comes to narrating and analyzing the overthrow of former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.

### Video Interviews

This site is my capstone project made for American University's Honors Program. After witnessing the February 20th Movement in Morocco last spring, I was compelled to study the so-called "Arab Spring" uprisings more closely. In a course taught by Egypt expert and aspiring tweeter Professor Diane Singerman called "Egypt: Politics, Protest and Change" I came up with the idea for this website. I set to work in fall 2011, envisioning this site as an aggregator for social media data. It has become so much more.

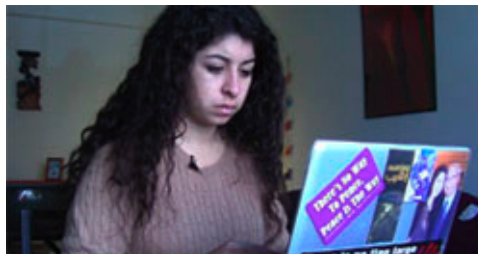
For a guide to the results see the "What You'll Find Here" page, listed under the welcome page in the left-hand sidebar.

DEAR EGYPTIANS,  
FAILURE IS NOT AN  
OPTION. #JAN25

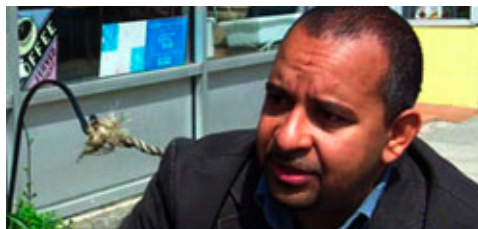
- WAEL GHONIM, @GHONIM

Over the months, its purpose evolved - at times broadening to include the general study of social movements in Egypt, then narrowing to just social media's use in movements in Egypt, and finally settling on my ultimate goal: determining the nature of Twitter's role in Egypt's uprising between January 14 and February 11, 2011, predicting its potential for driving political change in the future and problematizing tweets as a new medium. To answer these questions, I spoke with professors

Video interviews give users a first-hand glimpse of what I heard in my research.



Mariam Aziz discusses her experience as an Egyptian activist in Washington, D.C. during the uprising.



Professor Adel Iskandar reflects on the symbiotic role of Egypt tweeters and the foreign press.

Adel El-Adawy describes his technique for tweeting to promote his blog about Egyptian politics.

### Twitter Theory

4/29/12

in the Washington, D.C. area, interviewed activists and intellectuals, researched other movements, facilitated a Twitter list and Twitter account for monitoring tweets coming out of Egypt today, analyzed 40 articles published in foreign media during the uprising, learned about the history of the Internet as it related to developing countries, and explored studies of how new media shape communication.

What I found is presented on this site in a series of posts that aim to answer those questions and raise some of my own.

The site also includes resources for those interested in learning more about Twitter and starting their own tweeting.

The last step for finalizing the site was design. If you have suggestions about design or other information to share, please submit them via email and check out our "How to Contribute" page.

*Thank you for visiting!  
Explore, engage,  
enjoy.*

#### Twittering Egypt

These pages analyze aspects of Twitter and the uprising. From traditional social movement theory to questions of Twitter's reliability, these posts move outside the 140 character limit.

Click through to learn more about...

- ['An Amazing New Way to Blog About Your Cat' – Why Twitter Really Matters](#)
- [#Imperialism: Social Media's Western Origins](#)
- [Foreign Media's Use of Twitter](#)
- [Twitter and Theories of Contentious Politics](#)

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# Tweeting Egypt

## The Social Media of the Egyptian Uprising

## What You'll Find Here

Across the world, many are wondering, what – after years of protest – finally gave Egyptians the ability to overthrow Mubarak? What gave this and other social movements in the Arab world the strength and cohesion to overcome decades of oppression? There really is no single answer. Some will argue that social media tools deserve the credit for the overthrow. More, however, will say that these tools in a vacuum could not produce the overthrow of a regime. These tools were no doubt incredibly influential, but the fact remains that without the passion, skill and intelligence of the protest organizers, nothing would have come to pass. It is more correct, then to say as Sahar Khamis and Katherine Vaughn do, that the uprising “was characterized by instrumental use of social media” rather than caused by it (2011). The answer lies somewhere in between the two extremes

This site is rich in resources and information, but it can be a little overwhelming to dive right into that. Here is a guide to what I found during this project and where you can read about it.

Going to the topics page allows you to see all the analysis I did laid out into separate articles. When I started working on this website, I was interested in all types of social media, so I conducted more general analysis.

I found that Twitter, Facebook and YouTube forced some limitations on users in Egypt. First, there was the language barrier. Those three sites were primarily run by English-speaking actors and designed for English-speaking users. In my post on language, you learn more about what that meant for users.

Another problem was the sites' Western origins. I challenge readers to further study what effect that might have on Egypt and its movement, but in the context of post-colonial Egypt, this post notes some of the flaws associated with using tools designed in America.

Halfway through my research Twitter demonstrated how its roots in a capitalist, profit-driven society could be problematic for users when they announced their willingness and capability to work with dictators to censor tweets in certain countries. I wrote about this in a separate post.

Though I have studied Egypt, Arabic and Maghreb history, I am a journalist by trade, so the aspects of social media as a new way to convey and conduct the news fascinated me. I found that social media affected the news media in three main ways.

First, it acted as dissident media, giving a voice to the voiceless. My post on that discussed how dissident media has spurred revolutions throughout history, though I shy away from calling what happened in Egypt a revolution, because I believe significant regime change is still to come there.

Social media allowed for what's called “citizen journalism,” or news transmission that comes directly from an eyewitness to the public without a professional entity to filter it. I found this had both benefits and drawbacks; visual media posed its own set of challenges based on its nature.

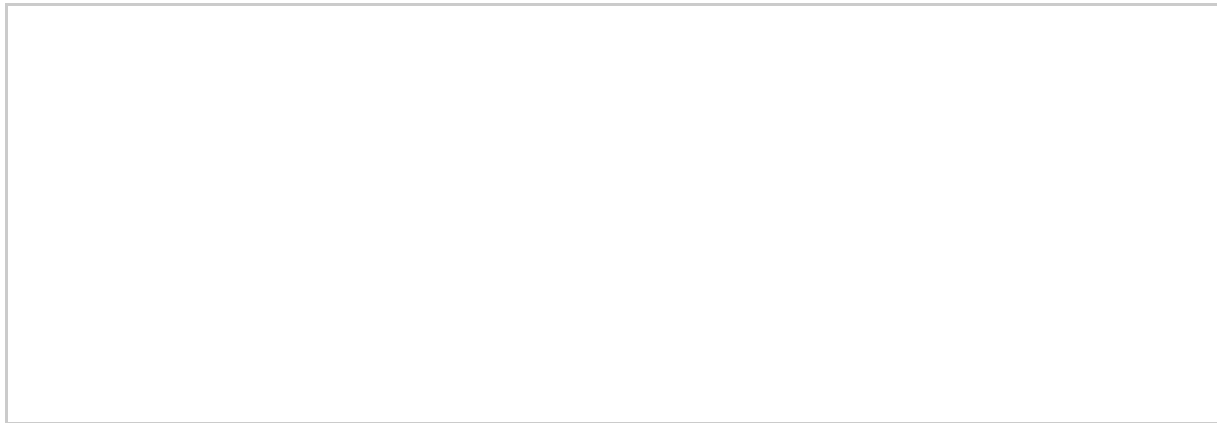
Finally, foreign media used Twitter within Egypt and tweets coming out of Egypt in new and significant ways. **This post** looks at how journalists interacted with Twitter at a time when budgets for foreign reporting were low and editors wanted content quickly. **My methodology** for this explains what articles I chose to include in this analysis.

Beyond media, my final analysis looked at Twitter's role and Twitter's potential in terms of facilitating social movements, which community organization sociologist Jonathan Christiansen defines as "organized yet informal social entities that are engaged in extra-institutional conflict that is oriented towards a goal." **I describe** how Twitter fits with traditional theories and where it falls short. **Another post** ties it all together, saying why Twitter really matters, even if it is not inherently democratic or a one-way ticket to overthrowing a dictator. As I say in that post, the culmination of my work as led me to believe that Twitter was used to a degree during the Egyptian uprising to solidify the movement, but it could be used more effectively in future movements. **The interviews** I conducted helped me understand that; watching them allows viewers to get a sense of the complexity and personal nature of the issues at hand.

Pages on **YouTube** and **Facebook** display empirical evidence that could be useful in broadening research from Twitter's effect on Egypt to social media's in general.

In addition to the analysis, the site offers some **resources** to help users get started tweeting and following as well. If you do join Twitter – or if you already have an account – be sure to follow this site **@TweetingEgypt** to find out what's new here and see updates on Egypt.

## Some Statistics About This Website



Since it was created in November 2011, Tweeting Egypt has been viewed 802 times, as of Sunday, April 29, 2012. It's busiest month was April 2012, perhaps because that is when I began promoting it on Facebook using an event. Prior to that time, I only used Twitter, word of mouth and the occasional Facebook status update to publicize it. The above graph came from WordPress, the hosting site that automatically tracks what are called "analytics" for the site.

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# Tweeting Egypt

## The Social Media of the Egyptian Uprising

## #Imperialism: Social Media's Western Origins

Most social media sites were developed in the United States by Americans with English speakers as their first intended audience. Twitter and YouTube both came out of California. Facebook's origin story coming out of Cambridge is a well-known story, having sprung out of Harvard as part of some alleged practical joke and clearly destined for an American audience. YouTube is also rumored to have shady origins. It started as a dating site called Tune In Hook Up. While there is no way to say if such a site would have been successful in Egypt, it is fair to say that most would find it does not fit with the moral values traditionally upheld in Egypt and other Muslim nations. The site adopted the name YouTube in 2005. Clearly it is a malleable medium that has grown and changed since it was Tune In Hook Up. It continues to host sexually-charged content, but it no longer targets a dating-based audience, and less controversial content abounds.



International Studies Professor Nivien Saleh's analysis of the history of the Internet supports the idea that these Western origins would affect Egypt negatively. In her book, *Third World Citizens and the Information Technology Revolution*, Saleh writes that the Internet began in America before spreading to Western Europe, the two areas that then were able to set the rules as to how this global information exchange would operate (2010). The G-7 countries (the U.S., the U.K., France, Germany, Italy, Canada and Japan) met in 1995 to discuss the goals of the Internet, without inviting representatives from other parts of the world (Saleh 2010). Clearly this excluded Egypt, but worse, it left the entire Arab world and other groups out of the process. Saleh says the governments of these countries excluded other actors in order to protect the interests of their large corporations (2010). They then made it clear that if excluded nations did not observe the standards the developed nations had set, they would be left out of this lucrative industry. Clearly sites like Twitter were created independently from one another so were not inherently privileging one country over another, but like the U.S. government, the creators designed their site with a Western audience in mind, as evidenced by some of its limitations.

It is unclear what the effect of using tools from a Western background could have had on the uprising. Did the Western origins of these websites in any way foreign-ify the organizational actions of the January 25 movement? At an appearance at American University, Egypt scholar Steven Cook said it was an interesting

question but one for which he did not have an answer. April 6 organizer Waleed Rashed could not think of any problems that he had with Facebook, though he did mention the original irksome matter of having hashtags in Roman characters.

When the government shut down the Internet in Egypt, Google and Twitter teamed up with a service called SayNow to allow users in Egypt to tweet using their phones. The service had previously existed, but Google and Twitter made it more readily available. It was a service accessible worldwide, but PCMag.com linked the new effort to the Egyptian plight. Why did Google jump on these efforts? Might it have had something to do with the fact that one of its own employees, Wael Ghonim, was one of the protesters kidnapped by Mubarak's regime? It is impossible to say for certain, and Google did not respond to a request for comment.

Perhaps the companies' motives are less important than a question of consequences. Should Google and Twitter be cheered for innovating to aid the protesters? Or should they have left the people to work around the repression their government inflicted on them?

Based on their writing about other modes of communication, it is probable that Jon W. Anderson and Dale F. Eickelman would see Twitter and Facebook as utile means for an overhaul of the social order and creation of a new Egypt. Writing in 1999 – before Facebook or even MySpace was created – they said the “proliferation of media and means of communication have multiplied the possibilities for creating communities and networks among them, dissolving prior barriers of space and distance and opening new grounds for interaction and mutual recognition” (Anderson & Eickelman 1999, p. 3). Even in his more recent writing, where he focused on practical implementation of the Internet rather than its theoretical implications, Anderson emphasized that he felt this aspect of the technology was relevant (2011, p. 20). The case of Google, Twitter and SayNow clearly illustrates a point Eickelman makes later in the book from the 1990s: that when the government shuts the door on one mode of communication, it forces society to make a dissenting medium. The only question here is, if these Western companies had not banded together to create the SayNow service, what other means would the Egyptian people have devised? Or would that have been the end of the Egyptian uprising?

While the purposes of these sites certainly do not exclude foreign audiences, some inequities of language and access do exist. The first example of this in terms of Twitter is its system of verifying accounts. The company itself has a verification service that it uses to tell readers if an account definitively belongs to the person it claims to represent. Twitter decides who to verify, however, and most of those figures tend to be aimed at an American audience. For example, Gloria Steinem, Eminem and Rick Santorum all have verified accounts, denoted with a light blue check mark next to their Twitter handles. Ahmed Maher, Ramy Essam and Alaa Abdel-Fattah do not. This becomes a problem in terms of how those tweeting in Egypt during the uprising could establish credibility.

Another example of the Western bias is seen in hashtags. At least at the beginning of the uprising, Twitter only allowed hashtags in Roman characters. Imagine for just a moment that the tables were turned, and Americans voluntarily and prolifically used a technology that forced them to write using Arabic letters. You can then see why this would be so exclusionary and have a profound effect on who could use Twitter effectively.

In her book, *Third World Citizens and the Information Technology Revolution*, Nivien Saleh describes the intricate ways in which foreign developers became involved with Egyptian communication technology over the past four decades. Read more about the historical relationship of Egypt and the Internet here. To put it simply, Saleh says that the process of integrating telecommunication technology into third world countries prior to the entry of the internet “disrespected the autonomy of peripheral citizens disproportionately” (2010, p. 53). She argues that the same thing happened again when the Internet was introduced outside the United States starting in 1994 (2010, p. 20).

From this bit of history, we can see how foreign technology companies have been entrenched in the very regime that the protesters sought to overthrow and actively participated in the marginalization of

Egyptians. It is important, then, to consider that social media institutions that helped dramatically advance the movement are also at least geographically associated with these foreign entities and perhaps this marginalization.

## One Comment on “#Imperialism: Social Media's Western Origins”

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# Tweeting Egypt

## The Social Media of the Egyptian Uprising

## #TimesAreChanging: Foreign Media's Use of Twitter



NPR's and NBC's new media go-to guys (Image Credit: joelogan/Flickr)

1. Twitter in Journalism
2. Using Twitter to Cover from Afar
3. Tweets as Facts
4. Using Tweets as News
5. Tweeting for Information vs. Fame
6. The Anonymity of a Handle
7. The Future for Twitter and Reporting

## Twitter in Journalism

Foreign correspondence is often glorified in the eyes of the Western public: picture the character Steve Martin in *Godzilla* with his tweed jacket, slicked back hair, furrowed brow and a pipe, for good measure. The illusion is that they are an elite crowd, full of mystery and with money to burn. But the real male and female foreign journalists face high-living costs, everyday danger, psychological disorders, and, as of late, layoffs. Their numbers have shrunk over the past two decades. John Maxwell Hamilton and Eric Jenner assert that with the exception of a few newspapers, all media outlets offer foreign coverage that leaves holes in the American public's understanding of other countries. "Economic pressures and technological innovations have changed the way in which foreign news is reported and consumed" (**Hamilton & Jenner 2004**). With fewer adults sitting down to watch the evening news and fewer media institutions willing to shell out money to support teams of correspondents, journalists have fewer boots on the ground in areas



that editors doubt will turn out high-priority news. That translates into reliance on new ways to obtain information from sources abroad. Twitter provides journalists with an option for doing just that.

In [a study](#) of 200 North American journalists, 69 percent said they use Twitter in their reporting ([Middleburg & McClure](#)). Whether as a reference to point reporters in the direction of an underground story or as a source itself, Twitter enriches coverage, adding a citizen-led dimension. Most newsrooms have a designated social media editor to curate this coverage, advertise the organization, and provide some form of social media training to their staff. Some – ABC News for example – have partnerships with social media analytics firms. ABC also uses social media in their coverage of American politics. For example, their [political stock market](#) tracks the number of times political figures are mentioned in Twitter and other spheres and gives them an index that varies based on their performance. That then helps editors and reporters to predict which candidate deserves the most coverage and who will do well in coming elections.

## Using Twitter to Cover from Afar

This trend of Twitter's influence on Western media is not limited to domestic news. After examining 40 articles from online, Western news agencies regarding the events in Egypt from the start of rioting on January 25 through the end of Mubarak's rule on February 11 ([read more about my methodology](#)), I determined that journalists during this time used Twitter in three main ways: first as sources of information, next as a phenomenon to be analyzed and reported, and lastly, as a tool to disseminate information on the ground. Forty-five percent of the coverage did not mention Twitter. I will discuss why that might be the case and the problems associated with trusting Twitter.

When it came to stories reporting the events going on in Egypt without providing analysis, Twitter came up 50 percent of the time and was sometimes used like an interview providing direct quotes. Out of 13 reporting articles that mentioned Twitter, 10 represented it as a viable news gathering tool and/or incorporated tweeted information into their coverage.

## Tweets as Facts

So-called "live blogs" took this technique a step further; online editors set up pages that directly published tweets about Egypt. Using tweets in reporting was convenient for journalists for two main reasons. First, the stories essentially wrote themselves. Journalists did not have to be on the ground to get these quotes; instead they could be in their offices in New York City, performing analysis while updates rolled in from unpaid writers. Secondly, the tweets by their very nature made for compelling reads. As I discussed in the section of this site devoted to theories of contentious action, the tweets were often raw and emotional. They established a personal connection between writer and reader that is hard to do when filtered through a professional journalist. This equation made for a chaotic written piece that is hard to decipher looking back, but at the time, readers and reporters could hear the stories of the tweeters develop as they happened. They watched events happen in real time, as of-the-moment as coverage has ever been. Often these were stories that would not have come out of the country if they had gone through the Mubarak-controlled mainstream media in Egypt. That made them exciting and newsworthy in the eyes of some foreign editors, granting them their place of honor on mainstream media organizations' websites.

## Using Tweets as News

A larger number of articles reported on or analyzed the phenomenon of tweeting without quoting from specific tweets. Some of these attributed organization of the protest to social media outlets with Twitter among them and reported on Mubarak's choice to shut down Twitter. On January 26, the BBC reported, "Twitter also played a key part [in the January 25 protests], with supporters inside and outside Egypt using the search term #jan25 to post news on Tuesday, but it was blocked later in the day." Nearly everyone I interviewed for this project said in some capacity that these news outlets had overblown the importance and prevalence of Twitter during this time.

## Tweeting for Information vs. Fame

One last popular way that Western journalists used Twitter during the Egyptian uprising was to promote or disseminate information. Many of the correspondents on the ground in Egypt used Twitter as a reporting tool, to spread news as they encountered it. Some news organizations kept track of their correspondents' whereabouts through their tweets. For example, in ABC News' story in which one of their correspondents was carjacked and threatened with being beheaded, ABC's Mark Mooney wrote, "Word of their harrowing ordeal came in a Twitter message from Hartman that stated, 'Just escaped after being carjacked at a checkpoint and driven to a compound where men surrounded the car and threatened to behead us'" (2011). Other articles at times referred readers to the Twitter accounts of their correspondents for reporting. While this serves the commonly sought goal of bringing consumers the news as fast as possible, it limits reporters' ability to provide context or in depth analysis. It also serves as a marketing tool to allow journalists to build their personal brand. That leaves it susceptible to sensationalism, as tweeters aim to use eye-catching phrases and search-friendly terms to up their tweets' popularity. These issues illustrate some of the main flaws of Twitter as an information-transmitting medium.

## The Anonymity of a Handle

There is another, worse flaw that may explain why almost half the articles did not mention Twitter at all. Inherently, Twitter hides the identity of those using it, which makes it largely untrustworthy as a news source. While it is true that in a way, the English-speaking tweeters who were quoted so often in Western news outlets came to serve as reporters themselves, it is problematic to call them journalists, as many have. When the world first witnessed social media being used as a tool for dissidence with the Iranian near-revolution, the media lauded Twitter and its users for their actions. At a foreign media conference in 2009, CNN International Correspondent Christiane Amanpour called the conglomeration of young people with social media tools, "a huge and valuable pool to nurture" (Smith 2009). The notion of citizen journalism implies that anyone with access to a keyboard and a sense of observation can be a trusted source of news. Indeed, such a person can serve as a source, but the news he or she delivers must first go through the filters employed by professional journalists before it can be useful to the public. News consumers have been trained not to question the stories laid out for them on the evening news each night. While a complete lack of critical analysis of news coverage is dangerous for anyone, it would be impossible for the average viewer to fact check every word that came out of Diane Sawyer's mouth. The profession of journalism exists to create that link between the trustworthy people on the ground and the viewer back home, while also

providing context and doing all this in an attention-getting manner. **In another section of this website** I go into more detail about this topic, but essentially, Twitter's structure makes it very difficult to know frauds from friends.

## The Future for Twitter and Reporting

As Egypt experienced great turmoil and change, the Western journalism industry also grappled with new challenges and opportunities. In an article called "Redefining Foreign Correspondence," John Maxwell Hamilton and Eric Jenner of Louisiana State University said in regards to the changing role of reporters sent to foreign soil, "The operative metaphor is evolution, not extinction" (2004). In order to adapt to these new challenges, reporters and editors will have to decide how to vet tweeters for trustworthiness, when to replace articles with tweets and vice versa, how much of their coverage should be based on information from social media and the importance of Twitter to such events as a whole. I assure you, these are not just hypothetical questions. At an interview for an internship with the Associated Press, along with traditional questions about overcoming conflicts and availability, I was asked how I use Twitter in my own reporting, how I would go about verifying something I saw in a tweet and whether I would ever publish something sourced only by a tweet. Move over, traditional media. Twitter has arrived, and it's time to listen to the tweets.

## One Comment on "#TimesAreChanging: Foreign Media's Use of Twitter"

1. Pingback: [Who to Trust? An Analysis of Citizen Journalism and the Egyptian Uprising « Tweeting Egypt](#)  
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# Tweeting Egypt

The Social Media of the Egyptian Uprising

## Methodology for #TimesAreChanging

i  
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To examine the foreign media's use of Twitter during the Egyptian uprising I found news articles from January 25 through February 11, 2011. I searched for the word "Egypt" on Google, using the date limiting function to exclude results from other time periods.

I excluded articles from before the start of the riots, because they did not appear to be discussing social movements there, as far as I could tell, and therefore seemed irrelevant to the rest of the coverage.

The 40 articles I examined came from what are considered to be mainstream news outlets in the United States and the UK, as well as Qatar-based Al-Jazeera and Israeli . The two exceptions to the mainstream aspect of this are articles that came from trade publications, one of which focuses on social media.

The news outlets included newspapers, television companies, radio stations and online-only sources. All of the articles, however, were found online.

I divided the articles based on content into "Reporting" and "Analysis." There were 26 reporting articles and 14 analysis articles. The number of reporting articles was greater than analysis likely because of the lack of time between the events going on and the pieces' publication dates.

## One Comment on "Methodology for #TimesAreChanging"

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This entry was posted on April 14, 2012 by [Sarah Parnass](#) in [Twitter Theory](#).

<http://wp.me/p1VBbF-6G>

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# Tweeting Egypt

## The Social Media of the Egyptian Uprising

# An Uprising Before Your Eyes: The Benefits and Drawbacks of Visual Media



One of the Twitter's greatest benefits to its users is the ease with which it allows them to share visual media such as photographs and videos through interactions with other media platforms. In 2005, the video sharing site **YouTube launched** with a video of one of its founders in front of an elephant. Since then, the site has grown so that **as of February 2011**, it had 490 million unique users collectively spending 2.9 billion hours on the website per month.

YouTube videos became an integral part of the uprising as they popped up not only **in blogs** and on Facebook but in mainstream media coverage in January and February. But YouTube videos were also often spread via tweets. Looking back on the escalation of the movement in Egypt, visual media offers an amazing plentitude of empirical, primary source data but with some definite downfalls. Consider these **benefits** and **drawbacks** before using YouTube videos and **Flickr photos** in your research.

### Benefits

Visual media is useful from a historical perspective, because it offers clues to determine the validity of the information given about it. For example, if a blogger claims to be reporting from Cairo, but we can see the White House in the background of one of his videos (or some other landmark distinct to one place) we know this information is false. It is easier to verify visual media as a lie than it is to show that it is real, but it can be used to support claims. As long as there is concrete evidence in the video or some other form of

credibility attributed to the person posting, YouTube clips can be used to explore a myriad of facets of the uprising.

In April, Egyptian blogger [Zeinobia](#) demonstrated one way this can be useful. She [posted YouTube videos](#) of demonstrations outside of Tahrir Square to show that the movement was not geographically limited to central Cairo. The videos show specific places that can be tracked to a location, either supporting or undermining her claim. Timing, on the other hand, is more difficult to peg using landmarks. How do we know that Zeinobia gathered these videos from the time that she says? Sometimes newer buildings or sites of destruction can help determine this, but often outside verification must be done to see if an event happened at the time the author claims.

Aside from its benefits as a historical tool, visual media contributes to an emotional reaction from those on the ground, those who were there and those who are on the fence about joining the movement, which can be necessary to sustain a movement. Seeing a woman's face contorted in agony, bent over her son's corpse is more powerful than reading the name of one dead man. In an interview with CNN, [Wael Ghonim](#) [noted](#) the ease with which a video could be spread to "60,000 people on their walls" using Facebook, and even went so far as to thank Mark Zuckerberg for giving Egypt the power to do this ([Cohen 2011](#)). There is a collective effort to name each of those who died fighting in Egypt last year in [a Google Doc](#) that is very moving to read. But even that is just words on a page. The simple act of adding a face to a name gives a target audience – in this case, the Egyptian public once indifferent or reluctant to join the movement – something to relate to. This is the logic behind advertisements for charities that show faces of children without explaining the particular conditions of that individual.

This same emotional pull works in the process of developing foreign allies for the demonstrators, both during the uprising and in the rebuilding of the Egyptian state. Would Google have purchased SayNow and teamed up with Twitter to bring the revolutionaries a way to tweet via phone if they could not see the thousands of protesters filling the streets? Perhaps. A better question: would President Clinton have been able to ignore the genocide in Rwanda if there had been YouTube videos of men with machetes murdering their neighbors? Visual media can be embarrassing to authoritarian states, because it concretely reveals the operations of their nations. It evokes an emotional reaction in those thousands of miles away, engendering support for the actors in the videos who appear to be victims.

Finally, visual media tells a story rich with details that can help historian and others studying the uprising from afar to get a true sense of the movement's atmosphere. It gives them the chance to see through the protesters' eyes and better understand the conditions in which they were living. This can help us guess at motivations and mental states of actors in the movement at particular times in the uprising. It may also offer the clues to determining why a regime that was thought to be so strong and stable collapsed in a matter of weeks.

## Drawbacks

Despite these definite advantages to using social media to study the uprising, there are some factors that point to the fallibility of that data. As [Melanie Moore Kubo argues](#), media analysts are often wary of "emotional manipulation and...technical manipulation." This is the flip side to the advantage of being able to reach out emotionally. The sadness a consumer of visual media may feel looking at that photo of the mourning mother can cloud the viewer's judgement. April 6 organizer Waleed Rashed spoke about "selling" the idea of a revolution at an appearance at American University this fall ([Maher & Rashed 2011](#)). The organizers did just that. Using visuals to draw on a consumer's emotions is a key technique of both sales and propaganda.

But there is another element of control on the part of the medium's creator. When Kubo uses the phrase "technical manipulation," she refers to the doctoring or misappropriation of images that can be done to purposely mislead viewers. Historians and others studying the movement from afar can be easily manipulated by staged demonstrations or conflicts, speaking to the reliability question inherent in all online media. Read more about that [here](#).



With the powerful nature of visual media comes the idea that it can make an issue seem more widespread than it actually is. For example, if a video demonstrating police brutality against one young protester (such as [this very graphic video](#)) goes viral, it changes the way viewers think about police officers in Egypt in general, even if this was an isolated incident.

The last downfall of visual media has nothing to do with its effectiveness as a tool for historians and journalists. Rather, it could be unfortunate that visual evidence now exists with [the faces and voices](#) of many who contributed to the fall of Mubarak. Though he is out of power, arrest of protesters is a very real possibility. This was the case in Iran in 2009 (Morozov, 2011). In the U.S., the CIA is using Twitter to help piece together a picture of what is happening all over the world. The collection of words, twit pics and tweeted video all led the organization to predict the Egyptian revolution, [according to the director of the CIA's Open Source Center \(Dozier, 2011\)](#). This information is a powerful tool for those who would use force to maintain their own interests.

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# Tweeting Egypt

## The Social Media of the Egyptian Uprising

# Circumventing the Dominant Narrative: How Social Media Acted as Dissident Media

## Dissident Media

1. Dissident Media in History
2. Tools of Today
3. The Takeaway

Prior to the Arab Spring, social media was given little credit as a means for communicating information and news. That role was left to the broadcasters, print writers and magazine editors of old. In any society, however, there must be publications that write outside the margins of what is traditional and accepted. These nonconformists are called the dissident press. During the uprising that ousted Mubarak, social media tools Facebook, YouTube and Twitter acted as venues of dissident media, which allowed the general public to enter into the marketplace of ideas, considerably shaping the outcome of the uprising in Egypt.

### Dissident Media in History

In most modern nations there is a mainstream press that maintains institutional control by dispersing a popular message into the collective marketplace of knowledge, but there is also a dissident press that creates an alternative narrative, which can have a significant effect on the framework of a society. By marketplace of knowledge, I mean the sum of all the ideas that are produced, accepted and reproduced within a community. Until recently, this marketplace was still a difficult place to break into. Sarah Sobieraj wrote just last year about the pandering tactics activists adopt to appeal to the mainstream media. But the mainstream media rarely shows support for dissident movements. In the United States, the women's rights movement, the civil rights movement and the sexual revolution were all propelled by dissident publications (Streitmatter 2001), after previously being excluded from the mainstream market. American media expert and historian Rodger Streitmatter wrote in his book about revolutions in the U.S. that, "the dissident American press has, for almost two centuries, served as a robust and effectual force that has had substantial impact on the social and political fabric of the nation" (2001).

In Egypt, laws pretending to preserve freedom of the press while simultaneously restricting it have made dissident media nearly impossible since Emergency Law went into effect three decades ago (Hussein 2008). Yet in the U.S., dissident press has traditionally taken the form of magazines and newspapers printed and paid for by a volunteer staff. With the advent of the social media platforms Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, distribution has suddenly become faster and cheaper. Activists have less of a need to use the pandering techniques Sobieraj observed. On top of that, Naila Hamdy of American University of Cairo points out that the Internet is a harder medium for Arab dictators to track (2010). These alternative outlets provide those who would normally be marginalized the chance to share their experiences across continents.

"The introduction of new interactive digital media to the Arab societies has unleashed energy, creativity, and bottled up ideas that simply did not have an outlet before," Hamdy wrote, months before demonstrations erupted across the Arab world (2010, 58). Over the past year, Twitter and Facebook have served as the *Ms. Magazine* and *North Star* of the Arab world. Their unique accessibility accelerated the growth of social movements beyond any predictions. Through linking, coordinating and informing people around the world, Facebook, YouTube and Twitter assisted those making great change in the Arab World.

### Dissident Media Tools of Today

Before Twitter and Facebook came to fame in the Arab world, a large Egyptian blogging community with a strong political slant arose ([Etling, et al., 2010](#)). Egypt had one of the highest concentrations of bloggers of all Arab countries, and when the uprising came, these long form writers found their voices in shorter media like Facebook and Twitter while continuing to blog. @Arabist is an example of one blogger who crossed over into social media when these tools emerged.

One element that dissident media brings to the table that social media venues also bring is a sense of belonging. In the past, newspapers dedicated to those with a certain set of beliefs or common history united those groups by working as a forum to discuss their common issues and organize events. Facebook groups created a community that was similar to that element that is inherent in these other dissident media. As can be seen in the examples on the [Facebook portion of this site](#), groups offered Egyptian users the opportunity to discuss important, practical issues and to encourage each other with emotional declarations of pride and solidarity. These examples do not show one other usage common to both Facebook and more traditional media: Facebook groups helped to organize protesters by establishing a common setting and time for events. This could be comparable to finding a listing for a yard sale in a mainstream outlet or the specifics of a protest in a dissident medium. Facebook's ability to provide these aspects for protesters enabled them to both build a circle of followers and to sustain it during the uprising.

Twitter serves as another example of a new form of dissident media used to enact social change. Like Facebook, Twitter gives a platform to anyone who has a message to convey. Acquiring a Twitter handle is free, and once created, theoretically every tweet has an equal chance of getting read. Read more on that [here](#).

This is changing with the addition of "Promoted Tweets" – tweets that occur organically but can be paid for so that they appear at the top of searches or other newsfeeds. Yet these tweets are in the minority. For the time being, an 18-year-old unemployed Islamist's tweet has the same starting chance of being read as one from the Minister of Justice.

Skilled tweeters in the Arab World such as Middle East blogger, Mahmoud Salem, also known as @Sandmonkey use easily searchable terms and catchy usernames to acquire more readers. Salem, like some on Twitter, also uses fame garnered from his blog. At that point, however, it is not money, education or social status that increases tweeters' ability to be heard in the marketplace of ideas; they have as much chance of success in circulating their message as anyone. All tweeters are theoretically on equal footing, making Twitter a formidable weapon in the battle to be heard.

Through Twitter, international supporters can have a clear window into meetings, protests and the everyday lives of those motivating the reform movement in Egypt. Up-to-the-minute descriptions of protests in Egypt kept those in solidarity informed during protests this spring, but it also **emotionally engaged** those who were oceans away without fear of censorship to tone down the accounts of pain and violence. The same is true of YouTube where videos ranging from **protest songs** to **police brutality** spread like wildfire on Twitter. Both these sites continued to be popular tools in Egypt, long after Mubarak left office.

Unlike blogging, tweets are short – less than 140 characters. This requires the authors to be concise, but it also forces them to be more engaging. A long story in a blog entry can build up to an emotional reaction, but tweeters use short, hardhitting statements to make an immediate impact on readers. Read more on how

this played into the social movement's organization here.

Beyond conveying a message, Twitter and Facebook were used during the movement as organizational tools. Families tracked their sons and daughters in Tahrir through Facebook and Twitter (**Maher & Rashed 2011**). Organizers used Twitter first to tell protesters where and when to meet, then to throw security off the trail by distributing false information. In this case, the lies were spread deliberately as a tactic of protest.

But back in 2009, when Twitter was still in its infancy, a Virginia-based science writer picked up on the one drawback to these tweets. "When news of the H1N1 swine flu outbreak surfaced in late April, many people on Twitter spread panic and misinformation about the virus," Elia Ben-Ari wrote (**2009**). The lack of a censor means that it is easy to mistake bad information for the truth, whether or not it is distributed with that intention. This is one of the fatal flaws of **citizen journalism**.

Despite this susceptibility, it also means that all people can begin contributing to the construction of the truth, previously a privilege reserved for those in authority.

### **The Takeaway**

In 2007, the questions on the minds of the interactive media community in Austin, Texas were, "How do we build community? How do we use these tools to change the world?" (**Gallaga**). Tweepers, bloggers and Facebook users in Egypt have done just that.

The media they produce is powerful, but it is not always balanced or fair. As Arab media expert Lawrence Pintak wrote of the Egyptian blogging scene earlier this year, "The explicative-laced personal attacks on, and unproven allegations about, politicians, journalists, and other figures in 'official' circles...by many bloggers were meant as an electronic slap in the face for regimes that had long kept the media in chains to keep themselves in power" (2011).

Statements like these were used as part regime slap, part rallying battle cry during the uprising. Whether intentional or not, falsehoods spread via social media. They contributed to the movement and must shape the way historians **consider their sources** in studying these events.

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# Tweeting Egypt

## The Social Media of the Egyptian Uprising

# The Role of English in the Egyptian Revolt

The uprising to overthrow Mubarak was a grassroots movement, organized by educated youth but powered by those of all walks of life. Protesters used nationalism as a battle cry, rallying around the dream of an ideal Egypt, free of government corruption and reflecting the desires of the people. They had signs in Arabic, saying things like, “People of Egypt come down to the streets. Your country is important.”

But there was also an abundance of signs in English. So many, in fact, that it prompted one Yahoo Answers user to ask the question, “Why are All the Egyptian Protest Signs Printed in English?” It was an interesting question, if inaccurate.

Beyond signs, there were tweets, YouTube videos and blog posts that chronicled the uprising in English. One of the most important examples of this is the hashtag, #jan25, that started thanks to Twitter’s infrastructure and soon expanded to Facebook, YouTube and other platforms. It was a popular one, and it largely contributed to what entered into the discourse around the protests. What’s particularly interesting about it is that it does not use Arabic characters, nor does it use the Roman characters that resemble the Arabic word for the first month of the year. January in Egyptian Arabic is more like “yanayar” than “January,” so #yan25 might even have made more sense. Why would protesters rally around a phrase from a foreign language?

Protesters who wrote in Arabic but wanted their tweets in English had many options for this. Translation services for Twitter started coming out about two years ago when Google released its language API tools, or coding intended to allow pieces of software to communicate with each other.

This site is a perfect example of why organizers would do this: to get foreign attention, possibly leading to assistance in achieving their hope of overthrowing the regime and establishing a new sovereign leadership. In my interview with him this March, Georgetown University Professor Adel Iskandar said that the eyes of the foreign press and public became protection for those activists who would otherwise have been physically in danger for the statements they made against their government. This website was not made to help the Egyptian people; instead it intends to help others better understand the uprising, but with understanding and empathy for a cause, those who have the power to give are more likely to do so. Thus such help could come as an indirect result of chronicling the uprising.

One of the unintended consequences of this are that the foreign community played a large role in the uprising – continuing the identity confusion that persists in Egypt thanks to its history of colonization, foreign aid and encouragement of foreign investment. In fact, many of the Tweets using the hashtag #Egypt came from outside the MENA region, according to empirical data collected by Deen Freelon, a professor of communications at American University.

Of course, the uprising was not only documented in English. Tweets and Facebook groups in Arabic abound – both transliterated into Roman characters and in the Arabic alphabet. April 6 leader Waleed Rashed has helped lead to Twitter to changing its rules about hashtags. It received direct encouragement of

this initiative from Arab groups on the internet.

Ultimately, to get a true study of the uprising and understand on every level how this came about, it is important to consider both Arabic and English sources. To do this, there are a number of translation websites available, but I would recommend having a native Arabic speaker – preferably Egyptian – reading and translating these pieces of data, not a computer.

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# Tweeting Egypt

## The Social Media of the Egyptian Uprising

# Traditions and Tweets: How Twitter Fits Theories of Contentious Politics

## Social Movement Theories and Twitter

1. Introduction
2. How Twitter Was/Is Used
3. How Protesters Usage Fit with Established Theories of Contentious Action
4. Framing
5. Organization
6. Cost/Benefit Analysis
7. Necessary Elements Beyond Twitter
  1. Oppression
  2. Pre-Established Institutions
8. Questions

### Introduction

While many in the media have asserted judgments as to how important Twitter was during the uprisings, few have recognized the sheer challenge this question presents. How can we retroactively measure what drove thousands to enter Tahrir Square while others stayed home? How do we know what factors motivated Egyptians to take unfamiliar risks? To answer these questions – or at least to understand what potential answers to these questions could be – it is useful to return to established social movement theory and to compare Twitter's usage and capabilities with historical expectations for organizing in Egypt.

To start, we need a basis for understanding how Twitter works in Egypt. It is also worth noting that none of the techniques exercised via Twitter alone could have engendered an uprising of this magnitude. Certainly, the Twitter phenomena directed political change in Egypt. Yet the word direct, as used here, does not mean "force" or "solely cause;" it indicates that these activists pushed certain actors in a direction. During a trip to Tunisia with a delegation of American students, I participated in a series of debates with Tunisian students this March, in which we discussed this idea. Our groups became stuck on this idea: was social media the driving force behind the Arab spring uprisings, or was it simply a guiding factor? One of the reasons it clearly was not the former is because of the small number of Internet and Twitter users in the country. As Adel El-Adawy and Adel Iskandar both note in their interviews, Egyptians with access to the Internet are in the minority. Though Egypt makes up the second-largest chunk of Internet users in Africa, that chunk comprises less than 27 percent of the country's total population, according to Internet World



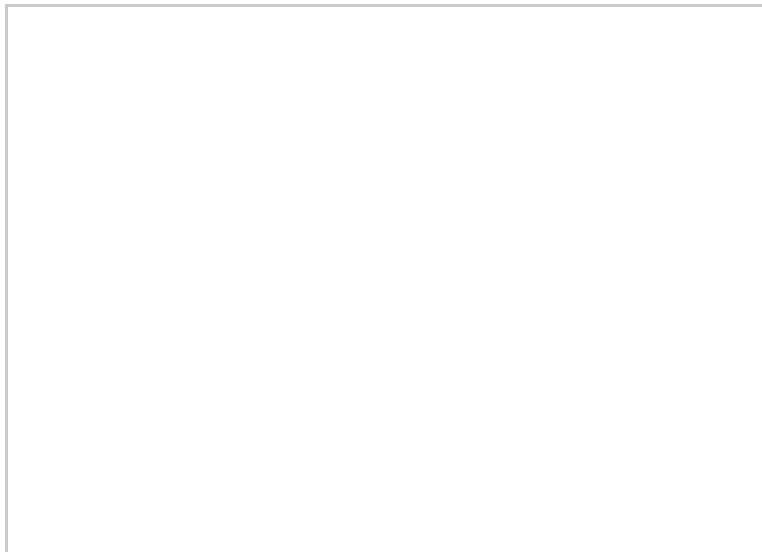
**Stats (“Egypt” 2012).** Between January and March 2011, the Dubai School of Government reports that .15 percent of Egyptians actively used Twitter – less than 150,000 people (Seksek 2011). Though the report does not say how researchers determined a user’s location or level of activity, it is safe to say that tweeting is not widespread in Egypt. This lack of what media experts call “saturation” indicates that there had to be other factors in the organization of these protests. Empirical research should be done to further determine the numbers involved with Twitter’s role in the uprising. The following information describes how the website was used in Egypt and how it could work, rather than how many used it.

### How Was It Used

During the January and February demonstrations, the Twitterati in Egypt used Twitter in three main ways as outlined by DC-based Egyptian computer scientist Alaa Shaker, “Twitter serves as an instant call for help, whether to rally people, grab attention, or call for assistance/supplies” (2012). Within this framework, tweets use news articles, personal opinions and connections to other types of media to complete these functions. Shaker went on:

“Picture this example, a member of the parliament says a few controversial words regarding a certain topic. Twitter goes crazy with comments from people watching it, drawing more attention to the issue. A few hours later, those few minutes are available on YouTube, and that clip goes viral on Facebook. People go into a huge frenzy of comments, analysis, speculations, criticism and sarcasm on the three social media tools. A little later jokes come from Twitter, caricatures flowing in Facebook, and funny voice-over clips on YouTube. Next step would be notes shared on Facebook discussing the topic, along with screenshots of consecutive tweets from Twitter. Hours later, an official statement comes on behalf of the parliament, minister, state, or a political party regarding what happened, in response to the people – that’s how social media shapes politics in Egypt as we speak!”

To deconstruct this a little, users posted political commentary on Twitter and also used it to interact with other social media that provide avenues for communication beyond text. This spread awareness of each event and as each of those who originally saw the event reacted, others then reacted to their reactions. This is just one example of the category of content posted on Twitter, but it is a good example of the evolution of a tweet in Egypt’s social movement sphere.



### How Protesters Usage Fit with Established Theories of Contentious Action Emotions of Protest

Because of Twitter’s imposed limit of 140 characters, tweets are often simplified, punchy statements that provoke emotion, which can be important in starting and sustaining a movement. The tweets coming out of Egypt during this time used the few characters allotted to produce especially emotional messages that fulfilled those requirements for motivating acts of contention. Ron Aminzade and Doug McAdam, sociology professors at University of Minnesota and Stanford University, respectively, argue “that otherwise

favorable environmental circumstances...will not produce a movement in the absence of heightened emotions" (2001). They continue to argue, and I agree, that emotions are not the opposite of rationality, but rather they are used to help make logical decisions. Philosophy Professor at University of Colorado-Boulder Alison Jaggar wrote that an "individual experience of emotion focuses our attention selectively, directing, shaping and even partially defining our observations," and therefore the decisions we make based on those observations. Gigi Ibrahim (@Gsquare86) provides us with an example of one of the emotion-evoking texts on Twitter from the uprising.

On February 2, she tweeted, " I WILL NOT LEAVE TAHRIR TONIGHT so stop telling me to do so! We need more people in TAHRIR NOW!! Get here for our freedom!!! #Egypt." This emotional text works on two levels. First, it appeals to those who had not yet come to protest by dangling as bait an open-ended, positive concept, "freedom," and implying blame if that goal is not achieved. It says that if the reader chooses not to come out, that will result in a deprivation of freedom for an undefined but collective "we." In addition to the emotional "push" needed to draw an individual into a movement from the get go, McAdam and Aminzade emphasize that emotional kicks are necessary to keep an actor motivated throughout the doldrums of a movement. The fact that Ibrahim was herself being told to leave the square signals that she could have been hoping to motivate others to stay as well. If so, her use punctuation and capitalization would have the potential to do so by exciting readers. Linguistics professors Marianne Celce-Murcia and Elite Olshtain write that exclamation points usually denote intense emotion (2000). In online speech, capital letters are generally taken to signal intense emotion as well and are in fact accepted as the virtual equivalent of shouting. California Partnership for Achieving Student Success bans this rhetoric in its online forums, lumping it in with "insults, name-calling or inflamed speech." Thus Ibrahim's conveyed emotion would have been contagious for protesters being forced to consider leaving the movement as she was by people who told her "to leave Tahrir tonight." This is just one example of techniques used to draw out protesters through emotion. Other tweets throughout the period also used emotional punctuation and language. They further included mentions of family members and graphic photos and video at times that could provoke emotional reactions necessary in social movement mobilization.

## Framing

Social movement theorist Sidney Tarrow says that in addition to mobilizing emotions, the framing of a situation is also an important factor in creating a cohesive movement (2011). Tarrow, building on the work of David Snow, uses framing to mean the setting of parameters for what is occurring in a given environment: who are the bad guys? Who are the good guys? Is a government committing a crime, or is it acting in the best interests of the people? Those in favor of the people's movement in Egypt had the advantage in terms of framing the conflict on Twitter, because Mubarak's government underestimated its power. They acted in contrast to 2009 Iran where government officials created fake accounts to disrupt the narrative protesters attempted to create (Morozov 2011). The anti-Mubarak tweeters sent out messages that cast their movement as the underdogs and the regime – extending to the police and military – as Goliath. Blogger Mohamed El Dahshan tweeting from the handle @TravellerW did this in his tweets by describing the soldiers as "vicious," the protesters as "unarmed," and the counter movement as "armed gov thugs" (Idle & Nunns 2011). Twitter gave the anti-Mubarak movement a free forum to set the terms of the conflict.

## Organization

Another way in which Twitter contributed to the practice of contentious action in Egypt was by working as a tool for organization. To understand that a movement must be organized falls under the umbrella of rational choice and resource mobilization theory, as Myra Marx Ferree noted (1992). Twitter allowed organizers to build emotionally- and politically-linked communities, through following and retweeting. In 2007, anthropologist Jon W. Anderson wrote that in the post-911 world, regime repression had dashed hope for the Internet as an "opportunity for democratic participation, or at least for more participation, in a region sorely wanting such opportunities," in the eyes of many scholars. But Anderson went on to describe the Internet's potential for creating a sense of community as it did in Silicone Valley during its infancy.

Seeing messages tweeted and retweeted, as well as hashtags like #Jan25 that linked tweets to a specific cause, established the idea that there was a collective group not just in Tahrir Square but in cyberspace, dedicated to ousting Mubarak.

In addition to organizing a feeling of comradery, Twitter helped with everyday organizing such as information dissemination. Just before 11 in the morning on January 25, 2011, Manar Mohsen said to her followers, "Those tweeting about the protest in Egypt, please use the hashtag #Jan25 in order to spread any information." This and other hashtags enabled those observing or participating in the protests to easily find information that those involved in the movement wanted them to know. Mariam Aziz, a young Egyptian student who was studying abroad in the U.S. said that Twitter was a good tool for simply knowing whether her friends were alive or dead. Individual status updates like this are important in a community setting and in an institution like a contentious social movement. A tweet from Nevine Zaki on February 5 about her "ID, tear gas mask & trash bags" prepared other activists for what they should bring to the protests. There was also notification about dates, places and plans such as Wael Khairy's tweet on February 5: "Christians will pray in Tahrir tomorrow and we shall circle them and protect them as they have protected us." The downside to this aspect of Twitter was that any monitoring activists' accounts could see this information, and there have been reports that government actors would spread false alerts to throw off the movement. This very same thing, however, can happen with traditional forms of organization and thus does not delegitimize Twitter's power to promote these events.

As far back as April 2008 the Egyptian protesters were labeled a "leaderless movement." This phrase is still used in contemporary coverage of the January 25 uprisings, but it is problematic (El Amrani 2008). In an interview with Britain's The Times Wael Ghonim reflected, "Having no leadership was a big plus because the regime had no leader to negotiate with. If we had had leadership we might have ended up with a different kind of dictatorship" (Campbell 2012). But of course, he himself was one of the leaders, before being kidnapped by the Egyptian police. He ran the Facebook page "We are All Khaled Said," which is often credited with being one of the first social media rallying points for Egyptians. Ghonim's name was unknown while he ran that site, but such invisibility did not make him less of a leader. Those tweeters who disseminated information about protest locations, rallied supporters with inspirational messages and passed along recordings of the protests' realities directed the shaping of the movement and with it the course of history.

### Cost/Benefit Analysis

Another notion in the Rational Choice/Resource Mobilization schema is the idea that in order for individuals to join a movement, they must understand it as being more beneficial for them than maintaining the status quo. In the case of Egypt this took two forms: tweets seeking to persuade readers that the protesters' victory was imminent and tweets indicating that those who were not already out were missing something spectacular and unique. An example came from Hossam, @3arabawy. On Feb 4. He tweeted, "come to tahrir if you can and watch history in the making. #jan25." In a way, this speaks to both types of cost/benefit defining tweets. Telling readers they have the chance to "watch history in the making" implies that this is an important, unmissable opportunity, and the use of #jan25 indicates that those who support the other side will be on the wrong side of the history he mentions.

Tweets that worked within cost/benefit structures also fit in with theories of emotion, because McAdam and Aminzade indicate, based on Saul Alinsky's teachings, that events and communication can change the way an individual perceives potential for his or her own success. They can be "generators of hope, while simultaneously undermining the fear that ordinary citizens had understandably felt in the face of what seemed to be arbitrary and all-powerful regimes" (McAdam & Aminzade 2001). The reason these two fields overlap is because emotions can be thought of as essential parts of rational decision-making processes.

### Necessary Elements Beyond Twitter

Of course there are many reasons why these tweets were not the only factors behind the uprising. As I stated before, lack of access alone made Twitter a limited tool. But beyond that, the people of Egypt could not have mobilized had they only read about oppression recently. There are factors we can discern went into the uprising: a history of sustained oppression throughout the country despite promises of reform, pre-established institutions that were prime for mobilizing groups and of course, the spark that Mohamed Bouazizi lit in Tunisia in December 2010. Beyond these there are still questions as to why certain events evolved the way they did.

## Oppression

The first factor that unquestionably contributed to the coalescing of a social movement to overthrow Mubarak was the oppression that his rule symbolized for Egypt. His critics portray Egypt under Mubarak's nearly 30-year rule as a bleak picture. The Emergency Law that he put in place restricted basic rights, and a lack of police oversight meant that there were few assurances that a hardworking, honest citizen could live life without interruption. When accused of violating human rights, Mubarak's regime at times offered concessions. Any reforms the state offered came back hollow. For example, in 2004, Egypt's legislature agreed to give up its state security courts. Steven Cook writes that this decision, however, had very few tangible results, essentially just changing the name of the court handing down the decision rather than offering a more relaxed rule ([2007](#)). In 2006-2007, a textile company paid off its dissatisfied workers and fired one employee rather than dismissing the entire trade union committee as protesters had asked ([Beinin 2011](#)). Alaa al-Aswany gained fame for his fictional portrayal of how a lack of social mobility under the corrupt regime could drive youth to Islamic extremism ([2004](#)). In January 2011, Egyptians turned that strength and emotional resolve on their oppressor.

Oppression was especially acute for the youth in Egypt. Aldon Morris sets up his "Origins of the Civil Rights Movement" by saying that Southern blacks in the 1950's experienced a "tripartite" of oppression: political, economic, and personal ([1986](#)). Youth in Egypt experienced that same tripartite. In political movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, they were largely ignored because of their age. They were disenfranchised economically because of a bulge in population and a system that values age and experience. In [2007](#), Ragui Assad and Ghada Barsoum wrote, "Young people are among the lowest-paid workers, often taking poor quality jobs in which they receive few benefits...and do not earn enough to start families and complete their transitions to adulthood." Diane Singerman argues that this lack of economic agency prevented Egyptian youth from marrying, moving out of their parents' living quarters and establishing independent lives, essentially prolonging their childhood ([2007](#)). That led to personal limitation in terms of sexual freedom and self-determination. The youth bore the brunt of oppression in Egypt, and perhaps that is why they were so ready to engage on January 25.

## Institutions

Despite the repression of opposition groups that Egyptians endured under Mubarak, multiple active institutions flourished under his rule. Among these were the Muslim Brotherhood, the Jama'a Al-Islamiyya and the combination workers/youth movement. The Muslim Brotherhood is widely regarded the largest and oldest religious organization in Egypt, drawing on mosques to gain the trust of members and establish ties while repaying its supporters with the social services lacking from Mubarak's state. The Jam'a Al-Islamiyya – though more radical and relegated to the margins than the other movements – practiced elements of social movement theory for four decades ([Meijer 2011](#)). The workers' movement in Egypt predates the April 6 movement, but that name generally encompasses them both. According to Joel Beinin, over two million workers engaged in contentious action between 1998 and 2009 ([2011](#)). As Beinin and Frédéric Vairel noted, April 6 drew on the popularity and organizational power of the Facebook group "We are all Khaled Said," which had 130,000 members ([2011](#)). When it came time for these separate movements to organize and act in solidarity, each of the groups came together, both in spirit and in person. The verdict is still out on whether emotions can be as strongly provoked via the Internet as they are in person. Internet users tend to be less inhibited in their comments to people. This would seem to imply an emotional disconnect from what is experienced virtually versus in person. But from the other perspective, those on the receiving end of these comments do not seem to experience the same gap. Professors at a research center in

the U.S. coined the term “cyberbullicide” to refer to

“suicide indirectly or directly influenced by experiences with online aggression” ([Crees 2012](#)) Even still, this history of meeting in person that most of the groups had could only strengthen their ties when added to their digital presence. What’s more, they had practice avoiding and confronting the regime, which meant they had an understanding of how to work largely in secret and of what the outcome would be during direct interaction with Mubarak’s forces. Without that knowledge, experience, and pre-existing network of actors, the uprisings in Egypt would have amounted to nothing.

Tunisia’s unexpected revolution was the straw that broke the camel’s back in Egypt. The two countries shared geography, ethnicity, language and religion. When Egyptians saw that a grassroots movement made primarily of peasants could oust a corrupt dictator, it broke the idea impressed upon them that they should have to live under oppressive rule, upsetting the status quo. In Marsha Posusney’s assessment of moral economy theory, that recognition that people are being denied fairness, either as a discrepancy between past and present state responsibilities or from one community to another, is essential for inciting protest ([1993](#)). Of course, another aspect of Posusney’s theory is that protesters will not seek to “redefine the terms of exploitation,” and Egyptians did just that ([1993](#)). Her theory, then, does not explain why Egyptians have continued to protest, even after overthrowing Mubarak, which put them at the same level as Tunisia, in a sense. Posusney does help us understand why the uprising happened at that moment in history. Essentially, Tunisians’ success gave their Egyptian counterparts hope.

### Further Questions

Having explained the three reasons we know for certain contributed to the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak in addition to efforts on Twitter, it is time to turn to those unanswered questions. It is without a doubt that a lack of opposition from the military enabled Egyptians to achieve what they did ([Pollack 2011](#)). It is unclear why members of the military turned their backs on the Mubarak regime and chose not to shoot on protesters. According to Steven Cook, the military’s identity largely revolved around the officers’ willingness to “march in lockstep to counter perceived challenges” to the president’s power ([2007](#)). Why then did they validate the movement by letting it persist? Looking further into Cook’s assessment of the military offers one option. He wrote that the militaries in Egypt, Algeria and Turkey dedicated themselves to self-preservation; this could have been a motivating factor. Some analysts argue they did not want to stand on the wrong side of history. Others say those protesting in the streets had personal ties to the military; they were neighbors, classmates and family members. But none of the evaluations I have seen assess in an empirical way what influenced the individuals. No one has approached the soldiers one-by-one and asked, what turned you against your leader? How did you decide whose life was worth saving? In the future it would be helpful to understand the media that the Egyptian military followed. If they had Internet and engaged in tweeting, it would be within reason to assume the same emotional evocations that brought members of the public into Tahrir Square would sway the decision-making facilities of the SCAF.

It is also important to ask how word of these protests spread. Georgetown Professor Adel Iskandar described being in Egypt during the demonstrations and seeing movements explode in size, very quickly. He said he saw people running out of houses, even as he was trying to run away from the danger. If word was not coming from Twitter, was it cell phones? Word of mouth? What does the method of communication say about the organization of the movement?

Finally, if Twitter had been more widespread, it is interesting to wonder how events might have unfolded differently. Now that we are beginning to unlock the capabilities of Twitter as a tool for social movement organization, what can we expect in the future? Will oppressed groups outside the country expand access to Twitter and learn from the Egyptians? Should Egyptians themselves fight to increase the number of followers and tweeters in their country? Or will state powers like Egypt’s new military regime use this knowledge to develop better techniques for repressing political change? One thing is certain: time will tell.

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# Tweeting Egypt

## The Social Media of the Egyptian Uprising

# Who to Trust? An Analysis of Citizen Journalism and the Egyptian Uprising



(Image Credit: Gigi Ibrahim/Flickr)

If we recognize social media as a form of dissident media, we can also see how it works as the ultimate grassroots campaign, giving voice to anyone and everyone with access to the internet. This uprising drew on the strength of disenfranchised youth like Asmaa Mahfouz. It could not go through mainstream institutions because that was exactly who it worked against. For those reasons – both access and need – citizen journalism played an important role in the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak. But professional journalists, too, helped spread the story of the young would-be revolutionaries to the rest of the world (read more about how foreign journalists used Twitter here). In order to understand the role of each, it is important to explore the benefits and drawbacks of both techniques.

### Benefits of Citizen Journalism

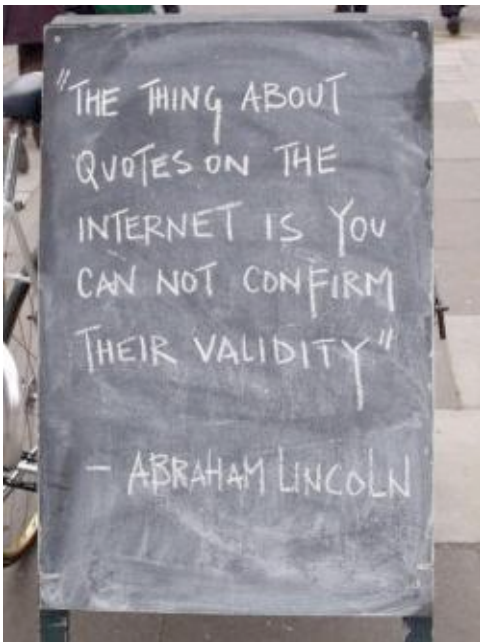
As I mentioned before, especially in the case of a grassroots movement, it is important to get a version of events unfiltered by the state-run media. Tweets from those protesters on the ground in Egypt act as



incredible primary sources. They are powerful, visual pieces that circumvented the mainstream narrative.

One advantage citizen journalists had over professional journalists at the time was access. At the beginning of the riots, the government went after journalists, and as the protests wore on, even some of the protesters began to attack the professional press, though I will refrain from theorizing about their motivations for that. Acting as a citizen journalist, however, was as easy as calling an international number on your cell phone or tweeting from your lap top.

These protesters did not have to hunt through tweets to try to track down sources; they could talk to their neighbors and friends or even just share their own experiences. It was a direct and pure form of reporting that brought the reality of the uprisings to readers across the world.



(Image Credit: eresig/theBerry)

But aside from the positive possibilities of citizen journalism, there are some factors that have caused media analysts to question whether it is truly valuable. The most difficult problem to get around is the question of accountability. There is no way to say who is actually there, on the ground, speaking the truth if there is no publicly-known identity connected with that user. Those who became prolific recorders of the uprising would try to establish credibility by linking YouTube, Twitter and Facebook accounts with blogs, as if to establish a consistent identity. This corresponds to what Twitter recommends for those wishing to verify their identity for readers. Twitter has a verification service itself which it uses for well-known figures – generally Americans. Egyptian revolutionaries and bloggers – even those with thousands of followers, like Mahmoud Salem – do not have verified accounts. The exception to this rule is Wael Ghonim, who worked as an executive for Google before being arrested for his participation in Egyptian protests. Twitter suggests that for users to individually demonstrate that they themselves are who they say they are, they should link to official websites with which they are associated, such as the New York Times. Clearly this is a problem for citizen journalists who have no way of linking to any such website.

This question of reliability flew to the forefront of the mainstream media last summer when a blogger who had claimed to be a Syrian lesbian revealed that he was in fact a 40-year-old American man studying the Middle East in Scotland. His entries detailed a fictional daily life, including being put under arrest in Syria. He was convincing enough even to an Associated Press reporter after a month of communicating. For some, the sheer falsity of his heart-wrenching stories called into question the reliability of all bloggers. Others, like American University Communications Professor Deen Freelon and NPR Social Media Senior Strategist Andy Carvin say this incident was simply a fluke that will help media consumers be more careful overall.

Even if there were a way to know that everyone tweeting was telling the truth it would not rule out the question of bias. An individual's personal feelings on an issue color the way they frame narratives, whether on purpose or not. Protesters tweeting during the movement had a clear goal in mind, making social media at times more like propaganda than journalism. As Waleed Rashed said at an address on American University's campus in Washington, D.C., organizers were "selling" the uprising. They had no responsibility to point out the flaws of the movement or to critique themselves. In the context of studying these pieces of evidence after the fact, it would be very easy to mistakenly slant a narrative of events in favor of the protesters as they were, for the most part, the ones proliferating the message about the events, not the army, police or Mubarak, who does not even have a Twitter account.

Finally, citizen journalists themselves face a basic problem in that they at times lack access to places and sources. Though citizen journalists can go places where professional journalists are barred, they likely do not have access to necessary fact checking materials, contacts in the media or resources to assist in palliating their work for the masses. Professional journalists work for years to cultivate their contacts and reputation.

Their reward for this is the trust of their readers and sources. Citizen journalists lack the experience necessary to demonstrate their trustworthiness and quite frankly lack the credibility as well.

## One Comment on “Who to Trust? An Analysis of Citizen Journalism and the Egyptian Uprising”

1. Pingback: [#TimesAreChanging: Foreign Media’s Use of Twitter « Tweeting Egypt](#)

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# Tweeting Egypt

The Social Media of the Egyptian Uprising

## Twitter's Censorship Problem

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On January 25, 2011, then Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak shut down Twitter in Egypt. Three days later Twitter's co-founders, Biz Stone and Alexander Macgillivray published [a blog post](#) reiterating the company's commitment to freedom of expression and even going so far as to say, "Tweets may facilitate positive change in a repressed country" without specifically calling out Egypt.

In the post they emphasized that transparency and respect for free speech were essential for Twitter to work in this way.

This is confusing when you consider that one year later, [a follow up post](#) said that the company will now hide tweets from audiences in certain countries while keeping them available in other countries if they are asked to do so. As leaders at Twitter did not respond to inquiry for comment, I can only assume this was a decision made with money in mind. Rather than see themselves shut down permanently in a place like Egypt, the Twitter execs are adapting, showing the flexibility of their platform.

This seemingly contradicts what Twitter's core value, "to defend and respect each user's voice," as they cave to pressures from repressive regimes they previously claimed to be able to help overthrow. Strangely, this sort of cognitive dissonance mirrors that which al-Arabiya English columnist [Guy Golan notes](#) as being a strong part of anti-American sentiments in the Arab world.

Professor Adel Iskandar assured me that Egyptians have other options for social media sites should Twitter continue to serve the interests of dictators rather than users. Perhaps it is worth noting that Twitter claims to not have enforced this new policy just yet. That being said, the very fact that it exists is cause for pause among those tweeters living in countries with a tradition of restricted speech. If the free market works as it should, user demand will overcome Twitter's oppressive adherence to dictators' whims.

## One Comment on "Twitter's Censorship Problem"

1. Pingback: [Why Twitter Really Matters « Tweeting Egypt](#)

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This entry was posted on April 14, 2012 by [Sarah Parnass](#) in [Twitter Theory](#).

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# Tweeting Egypt

The Social Media of the Egyptian Uprising

## Why Twitter Really Matters

### ‘An Amazing New Way to Blog About Your Cat’ – Why Twitter Really Matters

*After nine months of research and analysis, these are my conclusions.*



(Image Credit: Sarah Parnass/The Littlest Barista)

1. Twitter: What It's All About
2. Twitter in Egypt
3. Twitter As a Democratizing Force
  1. Pursuing the Metaphor
  2. Further Problems
4. Other Potential Uses
5. Why Twitter Really Matters

**Twitter: What It's All About**

There has been a lot of discussion as to what Twitter's significance might or might not be. With a name like Twitter, it's hard not to wonder. When Twitter first emerged on the Internet scene in spring 2006, technology gurus lumped it in with now-defunct websites Kiko, Imeem and Eyespot, as well as moderately successful sites StumbleUpon and Meebo. "Sounds like the cast of *Pee Wee's Playhouse: The Next Generation*," wrote **Kevin Maney of USA Today**. In 2007, social media genius site Mashable called it "**an amazing new way to blog about your cat**" (**Cashmore**). Just two years later, American media was citing Twitter as the driving force behind a revolution in Iran. **Lev Grossman of Time Magazine** wrote in June 2009, "When Jack Dorsey, Evan Williams and Biz Stone founded Twitter in 2006, they were probably worried about things like making money and protecting people's privacy and drunk college kids breaking up with one another in 140 characters or less. What they weren't worried about was being suppressed by the Iranian government."

## Twitter in Egypt

The same could be said for Egypt in 2011. On January 25, then President Hosni Mubarak shut down Twitter in Egypt, provoking a reaction from the company's founders (read more about **here**). While some argue that the fact that demonstrations continued after Mubarak shut down the Internet during the uprisings proves that social media could not have had a large role in the uprisings in Egypt, it is worth noting that Egyptians in civil society had a lot of practice operating under Mubarak's radar.

Islamic fundamentalists including the Muslim Brotherhood have a long history of dancing around their government's stipulations to operate on the legal sidelines or in secret (**Ibrahim 1982**). Some Egyptian tweeters, too, evaded the state's oppression at that time, using foreign connections that would not be attributed to Egypt to sustain the flow of their tweets. Some also used a tool set up by Google in collaboration with the now defunct SayNow that allowed users to tweet from their phones. Not everyone had access to these opportunities. Several activists with whom I spoke in Egypt and Tunisia had not heard of the service. Regardless, it would be inaccurate to say that after Egyptians were disconnected from the Internet they stopped using Twitter.

## Twitter As a Democratizing Force

Some argue that Twitter is a force for democracy and that it inevitably helps countries to democratize. To examine that question, it is important to keep in mind the definition of democracy. Setting aside the inherent problem that there are a myriad of schools of thought that define democracy differently, let's assume this refers to the 18<sup>th</sup>-century ideal of democracy. Joseph Schumpeter identified democracy as a system that "realizes the common good by making the people itself decide issues through the election of individuals who are to assemble in order to carry out its will" (1942).

## Pursuing the Metaphor

By that definition, Twitter, itself, is undemocratic. It has no elected officials and is instead "ruled" by a team of four executives and a corporate board (**Bloomberg 2012**). That being said, it is true that in an ideal democracy, every person gets one vote, worth as much as anyone else's, and this vote can be compared to a voice in the same way that a Twitter user's tweets can be seen as a voice. Each person who has access to an account starts off with zero followers, so they therefore have an equal voice to begin with, just like a citizen in a democracy. If a user decides they value another user's voice, they will choose to follow it. How the tweeter attracts those followers – for example, by identifying as a celebrity – gives unequal advantage, but this theoretically has nothing to do with the infrastructure of Twitter and is also true in a democratic society. The only flaw in this theory is that Twitter does choose to verify some accounts, meaning they conduct an investigative process to confirm that the person tweeting is who they identify as being (more on that **here**), which influences a user's assessment of the value of that account. So by and large there is no bullet-proof explanation for how Twitter itself is democratic.

## Further Problems

To say, despite that flaw, that it is still a force for democratizing is not wholly without merit, but it is ultimately problematic. On the one hand, Twitter is, as the Internet has traditionally been, a tool for circumventing the traditional, regulated media. In Serbia in 1999, an Internet-based radio station demonstrated this power by reporting after the state shut down other media ([Faris and Etling 2008](#)). Tweepers in Egypt did this by dispersing information about protests even as the state television reported that those in the streets were pro-Mubarak ([Aziz 2012](#)). It also lowers the cost of participating in a democracy by giving activists a platform for speech in the media, which would normally only be accessible to a select few ([Faris and Etling 2008](#)). In a study of media coverage around politically-charged issues in China, Yuqiong Zhou and Patricia Moy determined that Internet users have the ability to change the way an issue is framed in public discourse and the amount of coverage it receives ([2007](#)). Though the researchers argued these results might not be applicable in other cases, it seems Twitter's performance in Egypt would be a perfect example of this. My discussion of the foreign media's use of Twitter demonstrates how it contributed to global discourse of the situation. Finally, Twitter protects those individuals who would normally be punished for speaking out against an authoritarian regime by offering them a degree of anonymity. When used by democracy-seeking actors, Twitter is no doubt a powerful tool.

### Other Potential Uses

On the other hand, to call Twitter "democratizing" excludes its potential to promote other schools of thought and ultimately gives it too much credit. If Twitter were an inherent force for establishing a democracy, there would be far fewer dictatorships in the world as many people in repressive regimes (Morocco, Bahrain, Iran) can attest. In fact, Twitter is just a tool for communication that can be manipulated by any school of thought, as we are now seeing through the presence of Salafi activists on Twitter. While it is true that Twitter can be used to reframe global and societal discourse, anyone can establish a web presence to switch that framing. During Iran's upheaval in 2009, the world saw how an authoritarian regime used Twitter to further its own agenda. Evgeny Morozov writes in his book, "The Net Delusion," that the Iranian government set up fake Twitter accounts to undermine its pro-democracy opposition and ultimately quashed the dissenters ([2011](#)). Its flexibility highlights another weakness of the argument that Twitter is democratizing: Twitter is only as strong as the activists behind it. Just as the printing press cannot be given full credit for the strength of Martin Luther's 95 theses, tweets did not give January 25 its popularity. There must be other forces at play in order for any movement to be successful.

### Why Twitter Really Matters

So while it is not only naïve but unfair and ignorant to say that Twitter was the straw that broke Mubarak's back, establishing democracy in Egypt, we should not underestimate its importance, either. Egyptians are still in the midst of determining what form their government will take, and some, including presidential candidate Omar Suleiman, argue that the country is "not ready" for democracy, regardless of what might be tweeted ([Karon 2011](#)). Yet, Twitter is a tool with great power to **motivate, organize and mobilize individuals**. Despite its lack of saturation, both the Mubarak regime and the Western media were initially fooled into thinking Twitter usage was widespread and powerful. With its tendency towards speed and brevity, Twitter convinces the reader that it is full of activity, a force to be reckoned with. This false bravado confirms to Saul Alinsky's first rule of power, "power is not only what you have but what the enemy thinks you have" ([1971](#)). Further as Pamela Oliver and Gerald Marwell indicate, "the existing state of knowledge sharply constrains collective actions, and the discovery or invention of a new way of doing things [i.e., Twitter]...can suddenly alter activists' choices" ([1992](#)). It is impossible to say whether activists would have stormed the streets of Cairo and stayed there, increasing in numbers, for 18 days without Twitter. That does not mean that Twitter caused a revolution, but we cannot rule out its potential for catalyzing movements in the future, based on its performance last spring.

To answer the original question, Twitter does not matter because some people say it creates democracy. Rather, Twitter matters, because of its power to expand democratic participation, organize movements, motivate participants and reshape discourse – its power to mobilize people; to organize them; to enhance information and thus solidarity in a movement. Twitter's role in Egypt matters, because, to an extent, it demonstrated how this power could be used on a grand scale. In the future, activists could build on the



Egyptian model to use Twitter in a more widespread, effective fashion. If that is the case, it could undoubtedly effect dramatic change. That is why the points I make and questions I raise in this website really matter.

## One Comment on “Why Twitter Really Matters”

1. Pingback: [Circumventing the Dominant Narrative: How Social Media Acted as Dissident Media « Tweeting Egypt](#)

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# Tweeting Egypt

## The Social Media of the Egyptian Uprising

## Video Interviews

Now that you have an idea of how Twitter was used in the uprisings, hear from these Egyptians who used social media firsthand to experience the events of last January.

Mariam Aziz did not have a Twitter account during the uprising, but she understands how it was used – at times just to make sure friends and family were still alive.

Mariam is an Egyptian student abroad in the United States. Since Egypt's initial January 25 protest, she has been one of a small group of people organizing and attending solidarity protests in Washington, D.C. Mariam was happy to see Mubarak go, but she says there are still many concessions to be made, deaths to be honored and lives at stake.

During the original uprisings, she used Facebook as her main means of organizing the protests and spreading the word. Since December, she has begun following Tahrir on Twitter.

While Adel El-Adawy believes social media played a strong role in what he calls the Egyptian uprising, he does not believe that it was the only factor.

Adel is an Egyptian student studying in the United States. He was here during the uprising that ousted Mubarak, so he had to experience the energy and unity of Tahrir Square remotely.

At the urging of his professors at American University in Washington, D.C., Adel started a blog he writes and edits with a team of other students in the U.S. The blog demonstrates their perspectives and comments on politics in Egypt. It allows the students to put forth their ideas in a way that would otherwise be difficult from abroad.

Adel uses social media like Twitter ([@AdelAdawy](#)) and Facebook to promote his blog. He sends tweets with article links to scholars in the field and others he thinks would be interested. Some, like Middle East scholar [Marc Lynch](#), will tweet back, gaining Adel more recognition and credibility.

In this video, he discusses some of the ways that he uses Twitter. In the video he uses some statistics, some of which are correct. It is true that only about 27 percent of Egyptians have access to the Internet, according to Internet World Stats. Even fewer than one percent of the population had Twitter at the time of the uprising, however. There were about 12,899 users who identified as being on Twitter, according to social media tracking company Sysomos, out of a population of more than 80 million. Sysomos [tweeted](#) that during the uprising Twitter use in Egypt increased by 60 percent.

Georgetown University Professor Adel Iskandar started out his interview by cautioning that Twitter's role in the Egyptian uprising is often overstated. He said many protests seemed to spring out of nowhere, with participants thronging the square despite a lack of access to Twitter.

He would know. Iskandar witnessed protests in February 2011 firsthand.

With that forewarning aside, Iskandar described how the "Twitterati," or more popular, English-tweeting users, built messages that echoed more broadly thanks to Twitter. They interacted with foreign media, eventually creating a symbiotic relationship in which the press depended on these tweeters for news, and the Twitterati depended on the attention of the world outside Egypt for protection from the regime.

Iskandar said that Twitter created a sense of solidarity among protesters, too.

To read more about these uses for Twitter and how they fit in with traditional theories of social movements, check out the post called "**Traditions and Tweets.**"

## One Comment on "Video Interviews"

1. Pingback: [Traditions and Tweets: How Twitter Fits Theories of Contentious Action « Tweeting Egypt](#)  
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# Tweeting Egypt

## The Social Media of the Egyptian Uprising

## Your Own Two Tweets

Keeping my eye out for anything Egypt on the Internet for the past nine months has allowed me to spot some pretty amazing things. Not all of them fit into my research, but I think they are still worth displaying. The resource pages listed below can help you to discover interesting things about the uprising and social media for yourself. They can also help you to start tweeting. Here are some links that I think are important and worth perusing:

### **Guide to Tweeting for Beginners**

My own personal guide to getting started on Twitter. Originally written for use by the English desk at Agence Maghreb Arabe Presse, the Moroccan state-run news agency, updated after the release of “new” Twitter.

### **Egypt and Social Media**

Links to tweets from the uprising, a demonstration of what can be done with tweets to document personal tragedies and human rights violations, photos from Feb. 11, the Flickr of a great Egyptian freelance photographer and several other great resources.

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# Tweeting Egypt

## The Social Media of the Egyptian Uprising

## Tweeting for Beginners

### A Beginner's Guide to Twitter

1. What is Twitter?
2. Why is Twitter important?
3. Twitter vocabulary
4. How to tweet
5. Getting followers/following more people
6. Advanced Twitter

### Section 1: What is Twitter?

Twitter enables people and organizations to communicate quickly with short messages. It is a great tool for self-promotion and dissemination of the news.

### Section 2: Why is Twitter important?

Twitter, like Facebook, has recently proven itself useful as a tool for organizing and transmitting news stories. It is a great way to reach young and international audiences for free. It is often used as a marketing tool, because it allows for rapid repetition of a message. In the past few months, Twitter has become an essential part of communications in the Arab World, with both revolutionaries and conservatives swapping stories, stating their opinions and building a community. La MAP should be part of that community.

### Section 3: Twitter Vocab

**Tweets:** 140-character messages that people and organizations transmit instantly, with text, links, videos, photos or any combination of all of the above.

**Followers:** People and organizations that sign up to receive or *follow* your tweets. They are the equivalent to Facebook friends. Your tweets automatically appear on your followers' homepages as soon as they open Twitter in their *Twitterfeeds*. An updated tally of your followers and how many people/organizations you follow will appear in the top left sidebar after you sign in to Twitter next to your *Twitterfeed*.

**Handle:** This is another word for your username. This website's is @TweetingEgypt. My personal handle is @WordsOfSarah. It is a good idea to make this your name, your company's name or some combination of the two. That makes it easy to find.

**Twitterfeed:** The list that you see on first opening Twitter in the center of the page is called your Twitterfeed or Newsfeed. It shows all the most recent tweets from the people/organizations that you follow, and it updates instantly (at least in theory – it might be delayed based on the speed of your Internet connection). If you have had Twitter open for any length of time, a box will appear at the top telling you how many more tweets have appeared on your feed since you first opened it or last updated. Click on that box to see the new tweets.

**Retweet:** This is both a verb and a noun. It is the action you complete when you click the two arrows that form a square above a tweet, sending it out to your followers' Twitterfeeds. So for example, you can retweet something the New York Times posts, and you can also have a certain number of retweets, meaning that number of people have passed your tweets onto their followers.

**@Mentions:** These are tweets in which someone has referenced your organization specifically by adding the @ symbol to your username in their tweet. You can see all your most recent @mentions by clicking the @Connect tab at the top of your twitterfeed. That will give you two options on the left of the screen: select "interactions" to see @mentions, retweets and people that have recently begun to follow you.

**Lists:** If you want to regularly look at what a user tweets, but you don't want their tweets to appear in your Twitterfeed or to show up as someone you follow (for whatever reason), you can add them to a list. To add someone to a list, go to their profile (you can do this by clicking the picture next to their handle and clicking it again when it pops up in front of your Twitterfeed), click the gray square with the silhouette of a man's head and shoulders on it and select "Add or remove from lists..." A window that says, "Your lists" will pop up. Either check off the box next to the list to which you want to add the user or click "Create a list." This will prompt you to give the list a name, brief description and to decide if you want it to be private or public. If it is public, anyone can choose to "follow" your lists (essentially adding it to their own lists). If it is private, no one will see it except you.

**Direct Message:** Direct messages are like 140-character emails that will only be seen by the sender and the recipient. You can only send and receive direct messages with people who both follow you and who you follow. If they do not follow you, you cannot direct message (or DM) them. Also, if you do not follow them, you cannot DM them.

## Section 4: How to "Tweet"

First, go to <http://www.twitter.com/> and sign in at the top right of the screen.

Write a message that is 140 characters (that includes letters, spaces and punctuation) or less in the box at the top left of the page that says "Compose new Tweet..." Be careful to keep the tweet under the character

limit! Tweets that are cutoff make you look like a rookie.

**Including a link** – Sometimes including a link can be difficult, because web addresses (also called URLs) use many characters. To avoid this problem, copy the link from the top of the article page, go to <http://bit.ly/> and paste the link into the white box. Then click “shorten.” A link that is shorter than the original URL will appear in that box; copy and paste that into your tweet. It will lead users to the article page that you indicated. Twitter will also sometimes shorten links for you.

**Mentioning Other Twitter Users in a Tweet** – One way to encourage other people and organizations to pay attention to your tweets is by mentioning others in your tweets. For example, if a tweet referred to the White House, you could link to their twitter account by typing the @ symbol + their handle.

Example: *I went to the @whitehouse today.*

**Using Hashtags (#):** Hashtags are used to make a phrase in a tweet easier to find when searching Twitter. They are often used by organizations who hope others will tweet about the same things they are, such as an event. They can also be used to establish a presence on Twitter, to give the greater community the impression that a lot of users care about the same thing. To include one in your tweet, type # + the phrase you want without any spaces.

Example: *#Egypt remains divided one year after Mubarak, but #Jan25 still going strong*

Shorter tweets are easier to read and more convenient for your busy readers. Taking out words such as “the,” “a” and possessive pronouns can keep you within your character limit without losing the meaning of the sentence.

To exit Twitter, click on the gray silhouette of a man’s head and shoulders at the top right corner of the page, and select “Sign out” from the dropdown list that appears. This also allows you to see if you have any direct messages.

## Section 5: Getting Followers/Following More People

For most organizations and many people, the goal of using Twitter is to get your message out to the most people possible. That means always increasing your number of followers. As said above, mentioning other users in your tweets is one way to increase your followers. Another more basic way is simply by following any user that you think might be interested in your tweets.

**Following Other Tweeters** – There are several ways to find new people to follow. Once you start following them, your handle will appear in their list of followers, and they will be likely to add you back. To follow other people try...

- Checking your list of followers, located in the upper right corner of your main Twitter page. If you see someone there that you are not yet following, click the white button that says, “Follow.” It should then change to a blue button that says, “Following.”
- Searching for tweets about your interests. Type a word into the box at the top of Twitter that says “Search” and hit enter or click the magnifying glass. This will bring you to all the most recent tweets that include that word. If that finds someone you would like to follow, click the picture next to their tweet. A window will appear. In this window, click the white button that says “Follow.” It should then change to a blue button that says, “Following.” The only case when this won’t be true is if the user has a private account. In that case, it will change to “Pending.” If your request to follow them is approved, their tweets will be added to your Twitterfeed.



- Searching for specific people. You can also use search to find specific people by putting their in the search box name, hitting enter and clicking the “People” tab underneath “Tweets” on the top left sidebar.

## Section 6: Advanced Tweeting

Twitter is, overall, one giant conversation. When you get comfortable using the basic functions of Twitter and establish a good number of followers, you can then use Twitter to start a conversation with your audience. Try tweeting questions that are open-ended (meaning they elicit responses other than yes or no) to learn more about your followers and to engage them. You can then use their responses to help you decide what to tweet about in the future.

Be sure to keep track of your @Mentions. Followers can act as fact checkers and copy editors, alerting you to the existence of typos or mistranslations, as well as bigger errors. Though criticism might seem harsh sometimes, you have to take in any feedback they give and use it however you can.

Twitter can even act as an alternative place to post content. Websites like <http://www.twitpic.com/> let you upload photographs and link to them in your tweets.

One last way to increase your followers is by tweeting about **Trending Topics**. These are keywords that Twitter has noticed are appearing more than any other words in tweets across the world. You can find a list of the most recent trending topics below the tally of your followers. Reviewing these will also help you to understand what your audience is most interested in at that moment.

**Good luck and happy tweeting!** – *Sarah Parnass*

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# Tweeting Egypt

## The Social Media of the Egyptian Uprising

## Egypt and Media Resources

Nine months is a long time to have your eye out for anything that says “Egypt” on the Internet. Invariably I found material that I could not fit into my conclusions. This collection of tools and works of art are here now to help you further your research.

**“The Idiot’s Guide to Egypt’s Presidential Elections 2012”** – A decent tip sheet put out by Egypt’s state-run news organization, Al-Ahram. It does not include a list of candidates, unfortunately.

**Search in Different Languages on YouTube** - Among nine other tips, Mashable brings you a guide to searching with different alphabets – including Arabic – on YouTube. Very helpful for those doing research on citizen journalism in the Middle East. The tips on searching better and keyboard shortcuts are also useful.

**Twitter Translations Center** - Users can volunteer to translate for Twitter. They are unpaid, but they can sometimes see products or features before the website releases them.

**#TagDef** - A database that offers user-generated definitions for popular hashtags. Downside: a lot of MENA-centric hashtags aren’t yet defined on the site. Upside: because it’s all user-driven, that can change if enough tweeters make the site a priority.

**#18DaysInEgypt** - A project with a mission similar to the one this site first had. The website has an incredible number of stories from inside Egypt using text, photos and videos to represent what is happening in the country through citizen journalism. The motto states, “You witnessed it. You recorded it. Now let’s write our country’s history.”

**Visualization of Tweet Data Around Jan. 25 Protests** - Bennett Resnik took social media data surrounding the protests that brought down Mubarak and made a visualization of the tweets and retweets, mapping the conversation, essentially. Each dot represents an instance of a retweet that included the hashtag Jan25. The visual allows users to see how interconnected tweeting was, supporting the idea that Twitter created a network or community. Read more about that [here](#).

**Chapter Two of Tweets from Tahrir** - This is a PDF of the second chapter of a book made up of tweets from the uprising during the same time period I studied. I reference the book on this site, and I highly recommend buying it or borrowing it from your local library. At the very least, though, this PDF shows the tweets from January 25, the first day of the massive demonstrations, and it gives readers a good idea of how Twitter was used throughout the two weeks.

The book was edited by Nadia Idle and Alex Nunns. It was published in 2011 by OR Books in New York City, N.Y.

**Account of Arrest and Torture via Twitter** - NPR's Andy Carvin used social media tool Storify to capture the account of one man's arrest and torture as he posted it on Twitter.

**Livetweet of Andy Carvin Lecture** - NPR's Senior Strategist for the Social Media desk Andy Carvin gave a lecture about his use of Twitter in a new form of journalism at American University in April 2012. He spoke about how he got started on Twitter, its role in Egypt, the benefits of citizen journalism and the changing media scene. I livetweeted the class, and a journalism professor at the University of New Hampshire aggregated my tweets using Storify.

**Photos from Feb. 11** - The Boston Globe's "Big Picture" blog displays 40 historic and heart-wrenching photos from the day Mubarak stepped down. The photos themselves raise questions about how this movement operated: why are so many of the protesters men? What will the effect of witnessing such violence and victory be on children who were in Tahrir Square? With so many people seen praying together, what role did religion play in building a community? This last question is addressed somewhat on this site in reference to Twitter and social movement theory.

**Photos from Egypt's Parliamentary Elections, Jan. 2012** - Freelance photographer Mosa'ab Elshamy has beautiful photos of Egyptians voting, campaign posters and other elements from the elections. His Flickr also has images going back to March 2011 of demonstrations, protest graffiti, etc.

**Generation Tahrir** - Here is a teaser for a film called "Generation Tahrir." Four journalists are putting together a film about the youth of the uprising, how they organized and what has changed one year later, if anything. (Note: the preview is in French, English and Arabic with French subtitles)

**Kazeboon** - Originally called "Askar Kazeboon" or "the military lies," this documentary tells the story of conflicts between activists and the military since the start of the January 25 protests leading up to the first anniversary of Jan. 25. It takes a distinctly anti-Mubarak, anti-SCAF standpoint so is problematic from a historical perspective but is interesting and moving nonetheless. Activists show it throughout the city,

including projected on the outside of the state-run media's office building. The version linked here has English subtitles.

**"The I Don't Understand Movie"** - With money from grassroots fundraising online, a young man makes a story about the identity confusion he feels living as both American and Egyptian, splitting a childhood between the two countries.

Blog at WordPress.com. Theme: Suburbia by WPSHOWER.

# Tweeting Egypt

## The Social Media of the Egyptian Uprising

## Meet the Tweeters

Be sure to watch **our video interviews** with Egyptians and Americans whose experience of the uprisings was colored by Twitter.

### Twitter Roll: Who to Follow

Here is a list of people to follow who are currently tweeting about the situation in Egypt. Also find this list in the left-hand sidebar at any point in browsing the site.

- **@Zeinobia** - Egyptian blogger behind the blog **EgyptianChronicles**. Tweets about happenings in whole Arab world with main focus on Egypt.
- **@TheBigPharaoh** - Egyptian blogger behind **BigPharaoh.org**. Tweets in Arabic and English. Focuses on Egyptian politics.
- **@natashaghoneim** - Egyptian journalist living in the U.S., provides perspective of Egyptian expats.
- **@ianinegyt** - American freelance journalist writing and video taping in Egypt. Livetweets protests.
- **@ashrafkhalil** - Writes for Times of London, Foreign Policy and The Arabist out of Cairo. Does not tweet his own words very often, but retweets interesting/useful/amusing information about Egypt.
- **@Sarahcarr** - Writes with humor and a hint of bitterness about clashes in Cairo. Her twitpics feature “people I would like to see shunned from public life.” Tweets are both in English and transliterated Arabic.
- **@sarahsworld** - Egyptian video blogger (**vlogger**). Tweets about politics and women’s rights in Egypt, mostly in Arabic but some in English as well. Praised for her wit and passion.
- **@DailyNewsEgypt** - Describes **itself** as Egypt’s only independent newspaper in English.
- **@monaeltahawy** - Columnist and public speaker who travels around North Africa and the Arab world. Currently en route to Morocco but will be back in Egypt in January.
- **@shadihamid** - Director of Research at the Brookings Doha Center & Fellow at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the **Brookings Institution**. Writes about Egypt for Western audience.
- **@kristenchick** - American journalist writing for the Christian Science Monitor. Covers Egyptian politics and protests.
- **@arabist** - Official Twitter account for **the Arabist blog**. Tweets links to new posts, but also asks and answers questions about Egypt. Based in Cairo.
- **@sandmonkey** - Popular Egyptian blogger in the midst of running a (satirical?) campaign for Parliament.
- **@Egyptocracy** - Egyptian blogger living abroad. Runs the **Egyptocracy blog** and YouTube channel.
- **@MagButter** - Egyptian blogger who **told the story of his detainment and abuse** at the hands of police via Twitter this November.
- **@ghonim** - Egyptian techie who works for Google, **said by some** to be a symbol of the uprising.
- **@mozn** - Mozn Hassan works for Egyptian gender advocacy group Nazra. She tweets both in English and Arabic, though mostly retweets.
- **@TEDataEgypt** - Egypt’s largest Internet service provider, established by Telecom Egypt

[Blog at WordPress.com.](#) Theme: [Suburbia](#) by [WPSHOWER](#).

# Tweeting Egypt

The Social Media of the Egyptian Uprising

## Other Social Media

Facebook and YouTube also had big roles to play in the Egyptian uprisings.



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# Tweeting Egypt

## The Social Media of the Egyptian Uprising

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Though it is unconventional for a site to have a bibliography, it seems irresponsible for a website that is trying to act as a resource to not cite its sources. Use this to further your exploration of social media and the Egyptian uprising.

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