REFLECTIONS ON THE REVOLUTION

Can social media improve government-business dialogue in the Middle East?

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In the spring of 2011, a few months after the onset of unrest that sparked the regional political revolutions now dubbed the Arab Spring, technology commentator Don Tapscott posed a question about the region that had been on many people's minds: "Can social media help to build new governments?"

To take the question one step further: given social media's role in tearing down the old regimes, could those same platforms now play an equally important part in building new systems for governing? Could Arab governments use social media to organize, for example, virtual town halls that would allow their citizens and businesses to question policymakers and create outlets to report on vital community issues?

The growing importance of social media in the region is supported by a slew of evidence, including a 2012 Pew Research Center report which found, among other things, that the populaces in Lebanon, Tunisia, Egypt, and Jordan used social media to discuss politics nearly twice as frequently as their equivalents in the West, and to converse about religion and community issues nearly six times more than in western Europe.

Arabic is the fastest-growing language on Twitter, although it still accounts for just a little over 1 percent of total worldwide message traffic, according to Paris-based researcher Semiocast. The Arab Social Media Report, published by the Dubai School of Government, found that between one-third and half of Middle East users of social networks believed their participation helped to change community behavior, while around half believed that they had become more tolerant of other people's views as a result of engaging via social media.

The revolutionary mood naturally has governments in the region on edge. But behind the ubiquitous grainy YouTube footage of protests, there is a less dramatic but equally revolutionizing story: social media's role in how governments and public figures are communicating with their constituencies.

In March 2013, for example, the federal government of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) announced its first reshuffle in five years. In a regional first, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, UAE Prime Minister and Ruler of Dubai, broke the news via Twitter (@HHShkMohd). As an active Twitter and Facebook user (he's second only to Queen Rania of Jordan among Arab public figures, and she has the 4th most "followed" Twitter account among world leaders), Sheikh Mohammed's news underlined the importance of social networks to a growing cadre of Arab leaders. Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Foreign Minister of the UAE, recently conducted a Twitter interview with prominent

Dubai-based TV personality Mahira Abdelaziz; former Lebanon Prime Minister Najib Mikati regularly conducts Twitter chats with his followers, and Lebanon President Michel Sleiman stands out as one of the very few regional heads of state who tweets personally.

After the Egyptian revolution, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) in Egypt was quick to set up a Facebook page where it posted its announcements, and the Egyptian prime minister's Facebook page has now survived two governments: one under the SCAF and another under the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood.

It is becoming abundantly clear that there is an opportunity to build some form of participative government, even in countries that have historically shunned this approach. But it is early days.

"Leaders and officials taking to social media and engaging directly with people should be an incentive to other government institutions," says veteran journalist Randa Habib, Director, Middle East and North Africa at Agence France Presse (AFP). "However, in most of the Arab countries, institutions are not empowered enough to take bold steps, which is why we mainly see those using social media expressing the official government line and taking no risks. While we are witnessing a slight improvement in the discourse, the road ahead is very long."

At the same time, social networkers have sprung up to point out where government departments are slow or inefficient (or even corrupt), and there are government ministers, in countries such as Jordan and Saudi Arabia, who are engaging directly with bloggers in order to better understand the concerns of business.

Jordanian entrepreneur Samih Toukan, founder and CEO of Jabbar Internet Group and one of the founders of Maktoob.com (which became an Arab world online success story when it was sold to Yahoo! in 2010), frames the imperative for governments to communicate in terms of solving the serious economic challenges the region faces.

"The Arab world needs to create more than 22,000 jobs per day to battle unemployment, especially among its youth, which represents the majority of its population," Toukan explains. "It is no longer feasible for governments in the region to try to solve the problem by employing people in oversized ministries, agencies, and police or defense forces. The traditional private sector will also not be able to absorb such huge numbers [of workers]. We need to look at non-traditional solutions and this is what entrepreneurship and small- and medium-sized enterprises can offer."

Toukan sees this happening by fostering an environment that facilitates business formation. Governments that recognize the risks of attempting to suppress freedom of expression online will find that their

But this is not just about governments or leaders tweeting or posting on Facebook. There appears to be a formal push by some governments to engage more actively with citizens online, and not simply use social media to monitor activists and dissidents. Bahrain, for example, uses social media such as Facebook to raise awareness about its smartphone-based applications through which citizens can access online services. A health service app provided free by eGovernment Authority Bahrain now offers an interactive map for hospitals, health centers, and pharmacies.

This points out the real difficulty for both governments and business at this historical juncture for the region: the pace of change has to be very finely judged. For countries that have long been governed by a delicate mix of tribal consensus and institutional bodies, it could be easy for incumbent governments to get it wrong.

Businesses, meantime, want to survive the Arab Spring while shying away from politics. But they would do well to pay attention as more governments see value in genuine digital engagement. This is particularly true, for example, with policies to attract foreign investment, where small businesses and locally-owned corporations have a great deal of influence and have been spurring governments to move more quickly and enact reforms.

energies are better spent on making their services more efficient and giving citizens (and expatriate residents) avenues to voice their concerns and suggest solutions to problems. Entrepreneurs and multinational corporations alike would then find it attractive to set up businesses, train more employees, and allow young people to innovate and excel.

For those businesses looking for opportunities in this changing political landscape, the key is to have the right monitoring systems to track the impact on their markets, and respond effectively to evolving government positions.

Critically, businesses will feel more secure and able to plan long-term when they believe that governments are listening to the population's concerns and taking appropriate action. This will encourage people to focus less on protesting and more on building their economies. Companies will also be able to use these new channels to engage with governments on the topics that matter most to them – and make their own contributions to building stronger economies. ◓

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