

How weak ties can lead to real revolutions (Tunisia and social media)

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Sign of the times

The [uprising in Tunisia](#) shows us something that [POLIS/LSE research](#) has been describing for years: social trends drive media trends and together they have political impact – and the flow is multi-directional – politics or media trends can help shape social realities, too. It's what my colleague [Sonia Livingstone](#) calls 'co-evolution'.

Sometimes that process appears to speed up at moments like the uprising in Tunisia or the protests in Iran. At that point media appears more catalytic than perhaps it really is. You can't have the sudden shifts without the longer-term processes.

But this is certainly not to dismiss the role of media or social media. Quite the opposite.

Tunisia (like most of the so-called Arab World) has a [youthful population profile](#). The demographics mean that social media is more likely to have an impact on that sector of the population. It is also the demographic cohort which traditionally drives activist movements. In Tunisia Facebook has 18% penetration – add that to mobile phones and the rest and you have the tools that younger people like to use to communicate. Throw in the power of independent cable TV (Al Jazeera) and you have the mediation to amplify and co-ordinate anger based on unemployment, poverty, and repression.

Value of Weak Ties

The interesting point about this more nuanced, long-term view of media and political change is that it reasserts the value of what are often dismissed as 'weak ties'. The pessimistic perspective on this idea is that by joining a Facebook group that is calling for change you are doing very little to actually make it happen. In fact, it could make real change LESS likely to happen because you will feel that you have 'done your bit' by clicking on the 'I Like Revolution' button instead of getting off your butt and joining the crowds in the streets. I would argue the opposite. In the co-evolutionary, incremental model of mediated political change we can see how joining a Facebook group is a pre-condition, albeit not a direct cause of 'real' activism.

Even 'weak ties' have the practical benefit of spreading information, of making people feel part of something. It gives them a sense of solidarity and for some, the 'permission' to go further. The added advantage is that new internet-based forms of mediation can be created by the activists themselves. They can link so much more easily into other networks. They can then use those interconnected channels to accelerate the process and initiate real world impacts such as a demonstration. But it's much harder to have that end result without the first 'weak ties'.

Real Causes

This is not an argument claiming that Facebook (or Twitter, or Wikileaks) caused the Tunisian uprising. Cable TV was probably as important as anything else in media terms. Real conditions such as poverty were the real causes. But when we look at the dynamics of political change we have to factor in social media in. For the Arab world with its increasingly Internet-engaged youthful generation, this is growing in significance.

So please, yes, let's stop talking about Twitter Revolutions or Wikileaks Uprisings. In an [excellent article](#) Luke Allnutt suggests that those claims say as much about our own narcissism as they do about what's happening in places like Tunisia. In my review of [Evgeny Morozov's book Net Delusion](#) I make it clear that I share his critical approach to analysing the impact of the Internet upon democracy.

But let's also stop the fatuous and ultimately reactionary obsession with trying to deride or deny the value of social mediation in the process of political change. Common sense and many case studies show us that these interactive digital technologies offer efficient, flexible and effective tools to communicate and campaign. As [Allnutt also points out](#) "social media did have an important role to play here".

The situation in Tunisia is still in the balance. Any democratic outcome will have to be hard-won and carefully nurtured. But if it works, [then as experts warn](#), the real conditions are there throughout the region for this good example to spread. Despite the best efforts of authoritarian regimes to restrict freedom of expression or even to use the new technologies to clamp down on dissent, I think that networked communications plus developing social realities make change more not less likely.

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