Scholars Re-Examine Arab World’s ‘Facebook Revolutions’

By IFRISULA LINDSEY

I N JANUARY 2011, Laila Sher- en Saik realized something momentous was happening in the Middle East when her server crashed.

Ms. Saik, at that time a graduate student in the University of Southern California’s media arts and practice program, had been monitoring digital activism in the Middle East for several years. When protests began in Tunisia, she says, “I began collecting data immediately.” After the incident with her server, she quickly transferred it all to the cloud, and kept on building the database that would eventually become her dissertation.

Today R-Shield, the site’s name is the Arabic pronunciation of “ar- chives,” contains 18 billion tweets in English and Arabic and years’ worth of Facebook, YouTube, and websites data. Every minute, it processes about 100,000 new tweets. Ms. Saik compares English and Arabic hashtags as well as different hashtags referring to the same event. She says she now sees interest patterns. Anyone can log into the R-Shield site and do a number of searches and comparisons, using tools developed by Ms. Saik and several collaborators.

At the moment, Ms. Saik doesn’t have the resources to make the full archive available to a large public. If she did, she says, she’d turn it into a tool that anyone could use to answer many of the shifting questions regarding the relationship between social media and political mobilization in the Arab world.

“It’s difficult to tell the story of the Arab Spring without talking about social media,” says Philip N. Howard, a professor in the department of communications at the University of Washington. But “after years of excitement and effervescence,” he notes, “we’re in a much more jaded or critical stage of inquiry.”

Working on his book (with Musa- mimi M. Hussain) Democracy’s Fourth Wave? Digital Media and the Arab Spring, Mr. Howard developed a causal model that weighed access to new communication technology in Arab countries alongside other socioeconomic factors. He concluded that access was part of the basic infrastructure needed for collective action to take place. But by the time the book was published, in 2013, those mass mobilizations for change had seemingly collapsed.

Today, out of half a doz- en Arab countries that witnessed uprisings, only Tunisia has managed to see its democratic transition through. Across the region, the blog- gers and activists who helped plan and publicize protests were sidelined by Islamist parties and military regi- ments. They have been silenced, imprisoned, or driven into exile.

NOW KNOWING WHAT TO DO NEXT

Scholars are now asking a differ- ent set of questions: How did those huge and hopeful social movements finders? Why were they unable to achieve political gains? How is social media being used today by re- surgent autocratic governments and by terrorist groups?

Zeynep Tufekci, an assistant professor at the University of North Car- olina at Chapel Hill’s School of Informa- tion and Library Science, argued in a recent paper that the ability to “scale up” quickly that social media offers to protest movements means they don’t have to do the hard and necessary work of building tradition- al organizations that know how to make decisions collectively, change opinion, and mobilize on the ground. They can go big and fast on social media without spending a lot of time on the ground.

Ms. Tufekci has studied how people in the Arab Spring mobilized, and those who would later be<hurdled out of power.”

“THE ELITES HAVE LEARNED”

“The protesters used information technology to catch political elites off-guard,” says Mr. Howard. “Today the elites have learned, and started investing very heavily in us- ing social technology as a means of social control rather than conver- sation.”

He has been looking at the way elites use automated social media tools to neutralize their opponents online (they can do so, for example, by flooding a Twitter hashtag with extraneous material).

Dalia Orbach, a research fellow and visiting scholar at Harvard University’s Berkman Center for Internet and Society, is interested in observing the big- gest differences pre- and post-up- risings, and in figuring out what the main online communities in Arab countries are today, and how they communicate with each other.

Ms. Orbach also studies how digital activism has been organized, coordinated, and disseminated, or hijacked by other actors. “The Arab Spring was always a war of resources,” she says. Now, with more government money and support for digital activism, some governments are trying to engage their citizens through social media, while others are trying to silence them.

Unfortunately, “social media can become an effective tool not only in the hands of proponents but oppo- nents of democracy as well,” notes Tamar Salameh, an associate pro- fessor of political science and interna- tional affairs at the Lebanese American University. “It’s possible that the online campaign of fear being waged by terrorist groups is another blow to the chances of democ- raticization in the region.”

STUDYING ISIS

Mr. Salameh wonders how social media users build resilience against antidemocratic images, and avoid information with images of viol- ence. “What kind of counter- campaign can balance this out, to allow people to still share the voice of protest and peaceful mobilization?”

Other scholars, analyzing the online activities of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and trying to under- stand how it has adapted to the Internet to figure out how effective social media really is as a recruitment tool. British and American experts say they discovered that they were searching for three teenage girls believed to have traveled to the group. Ms. Saik warns against thinking that one can easily answer who is recruiting and looking at social media. But she says R-Shield has been used as a resource for academic study, for instance, to figure out how ISIS spreads its ideology differently according to gender.

This fall, Ms. Saik will join the facul- ty of the University of California at Santa Barbara’s film and media studies program. She hopes to find the funds to make all of R-Shield’s data publicly available, to turn it into an interactive resource where every- body could build their own archive.”

Laila Shereen Saik built a database of digital activism in the Middle East as part of her dissertation at the U of Southern California. What if Egypt’s President Mubarak hadn’t turned off the Internet? What if the Hezbollah party hadn’t taken power in Lebanon? What if-as so many people have wondered-how things had turned out differently?