Free Speech in
the Age of Twitter

Fighting for an Open Internet

By Jillian C. York

In the final weeks of 2010, an uprising, set off by the self-immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi in the southern town of Sidi Bouzid, stirred in Tunisia. With international media largely banned from the country, coverage of the growing protests was confined to on-line media, namely blogs, Facebook, and Twitter. Using the Twitter hashtag #SidiBouzid, media-savvy activists worked around the clock to inform the world of the uprising and drew increasing international media attention to the story.

Twitter played a vital role, too, in the uprisings that ensued in other Arab countries. In Egypt, besides utilizing Facebook, activists employed the hashtag #Jan25 to promote the mass demonstration that launched the Tahrir Square revolt. As the protests began, Twitter was ablaze with activity, as demonstrators first tweeted with jubilation, then later with dismay as activists were arrested and news websites blocked. By the end of January 25, Twitter itself was among the sites censored; on January 26, it was joined by Facebook.

When the Egyptian government shut down the Internet on January 27, some feared a bloodbath. Without the Internet, without the ability to keep the world's witnesses informed, they surmised, atrocities would go unrecorded, unseen until too late.

But Egyptians were resourceful in defying the blackout. They took advantage of Small Message Service (SMS or texting) functions on sporadically available mobile telephone networks, and reverted to dial-up Internet connections on unaffected landlines. Their tweets were picked up by international media organizations such as the *New York Times*, *Christian Science Monitor*, the *Guardian*, CNN, and Al Jazeera, and thereby helped ensure that the voice of Egyptians would not be silenced.

▷ Laptop computer on a café table, Cairo, Jan. 27, 2011. *Peter Macdiarmid/ Getty Images*

Central to their efforts was Twitter. The microblogging platform, home to a modest community of Egyptian users that has since grown, collaborated with Google to create

Speak2Tweet, a service that enabled Egyptians to call an international phone number and leave a voicemail message, which would then be transcribed and tweeted, and distributed across multiple Internet platforms. The service, released on January 31, capitalized on Google's then-recent acquisition of voice recognition tool SayNow. Speak2Tweet attracted ten thousand followers in a few weeks. The initial messages, at the height of the Internet blackout, were picked up, translated, and spread widely by mainstream media.

Twitter has emerged as an important tool for digital organizers in the past few years. The platform's abbreviated nature—allowing short messages of no more than 140 characters—makes Twitter simple to use. Its architecture, which enables users to send messages from third-party services such as Tweetdeck, as well as via mobile phones using SMS, makes it relatively resistant to censorship. The function of hashtags, which group tweets by subject, allows users to create intentional conversations that enhance the effect of the messages.

Twitter's popularity in the Arab Spring brought it greater recognition, but it had already changed the face of social interaction. Tweeting celebrities have discovered an effective new way to communicate with fans, while corporations talk directly with consumers outside the bounds of traditional advertising and marketing channels. Countless communities have formed around certain topics and events, such as the #Journchat hashtag that brings journalists and students together to discuss the craft, or the hashtags for Monday Night Football enthusiasts in the United States. Politicians have grasped the tool's utility, too. The account for President Barack Obama's reelection campaign, @BarackObama, has nearly eleven million followers. Policy makers from American congresswoman Claire McCaskill of Missouri to European parliamentarian Marietje Schaake of the Netherlands have taken advantage of the tool to interact with constituents and promote their own efforts. The U.S. State Department has used Twitter in its public diplomacy efforts—and has even created an Arabic-language account to more effectively cover the Middle East user base.

Tool of Protest

Some reporting on the Arab Spring has depicted digital activism in the Arab world as a new phenomenon. In fact, the origins of Arab digital activism can be traced back more than a decade, to Tunisia, which has the distinction of being the first Arab country on-line (in 1991), the first to arrest a blogger (in 2000), and the first to have a ruler overthrown partly through the efforts of digital activists (in 2011).

In 2004, a Tunisian activist posted a video, using the pseudonym Astrubal, remixing a popular 1984 Apple Computer advertisement to depict angry Tunisian citizens rising up against the regime of President Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali. The video, which

piggybacked on the earlier efforts of Tunisian activists both on-line and off, was simple but innovative, expressing a widely shared sentiment without words.

The next few years saw an explosion in the use of digital tools by Arab activists. In Egypt, anti-torture campaigners like Wael Abbas bravely posted videos of police brutality on YouTube. That incurred the wrath of Egyptian authorities. It was also deemed too graphic to YouTube moderators, who initially removed the video for violating the site's content policy. In Morocco, an anti-corruption activist known only as the Targuist Sniper caught police taking bribes on camera, spurring Moroccan authorities to copy his methods in an effort to clamp down on petty corruption.

The launch of Twitter in 2006 initially went unnoticed in the region. Even as it began to catch on, its use was hampered by poor support of the Arabic language on the platform and, later, by a lack of support on third parties, such as those developing applications for Apple's iPhone. But in 2008, Twitter gained wider attention in the Middle East following the detention by Egyptian authorities of American journalism student James Buck.

The police hauled Buck into custody while he was reporting on worker protests in Al-Mahalla Al-Kobra, a city in the Nile Delta region north of Cairo. En route to the police station, Buck pulled out his phone and surreptitiously tweeted the word "arrested." Over the course of a few hours, he sent updates about his situation via Twitter, which were then picked up and passed on to other audiences by Egyptian bloggers. That, in turn, attracted the attention of mainstream journalists, and probably helped secure Buck's release. Afterwards, Buck used Twitter to publicize the detention of his translator, Mohammed Maree, who was also eventually released, albeit three months later. At the time, Twitter co-founder Biz Stone called Buck's story compelling, noting that it "highlights the simplicity and value of a real-time communication network that follows you wherever you go."

Later in 2008, activists in Palestine and abroad used the hashtag #Gaza to raise awareness of the plight of Palestinians during Israel's 'Operation Cast Lead' in Gaza, often sparring with pro-Israel users of the service. The Israeli government recognized the impact of the #Gaza hashtag, and even called the first Twitter press conference in an apparent response to it, with officials at the Israeli consulate in New York answering questions on Twitter about the Gaza conflict. On the first anniversary of the Israeli operation, solidarity activists succeeded in causing the topic to show up on Twitter's 'Trending' list, a sidebar that tracks prominent hashtags and terms being used on the site.

'Twitter Revolution'

In Iran, protesters took Twitter activism to a new level. Following what was widely believed to be the rigged reelection of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in June 2009,

angry Iranians took to the streets, chanting "Where is my vote?" Eventually, millions of protesters swelled in Tehran and other Iranian cities. Iranians used Twitter to help organize what became known as the 'Green Revolution' (named after the campaign color employed by opposition leader Mir Hossein Mousavi) and provide up-to-the-minute reports from citizen journalists. International media organizations, whose reporters were restricted from covering events on the ground even if they were present in Iran, increasingly took to citing Twitter accounts of the protests and police crackdown in their reports. Paraphrasing jazz poet Gil Scott-Heron's composition "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised," social commentator Andrew Sullivan memorably declared, "The revolution will be twittered." Iranian protesters, Sullivan argued, "can bypass your established media; they can broadcast to one another; they can organize as never before."

But Iran's uprising was not the first to be dubbed a 'Twitter revolution.' Earlier in 2009, scholar Evgeny Morozov used the term to refer to protests in Moldova over fraudulent elections and discontent with Communist rule. He noted that protesters were tweeting at a "record-breaking rate." Though Morozov later, famously, questioned the use of the term, it was—for better or worse—here to stay.

Movements credited to social media spread beyond the Middle East in 2011. The 'M15' protests in Spain demanding political and economic reform were first announced on Twitter, while the social justice protests in Israel spread with the use of the hashtag #J14. In San Francisco, where a longstanding campaign against transit police had stagnated, the use of social media managed to suddenly resurrect the issue. The 'Occupy' movement, which started in New York City in September and has spread throughout the United States, Western Europe, and beyond, has made use of Twitter to attract followers and provide on-the-ground accounts of the activists' actions.

Twitter's architecture gives it certain advantages. While Facebook, and similar platforms, are enclosed, with content largely or even wholly placed behind a log-in wall and accessible only to other users, Twitter is inherently public. As science fiction writer William Gibson has observed, Facebook is like a mall, while Twitter "actually feels like the street. You can bump into anybody on Twitter."

Twitter's openness provides utility not only to activists, who can seek out like-minded individuals easily through the site, but also to mainstream journalists, who are increasingly looking to Twitter for sources, information, and perspective. Twitter, indeed, has created a special format for the media. NPR journalist Andy Carvin, formerly a social media strategist, has used the tool to curate news from the various Arab uprisings. Many journalists tweeted reports directly from Tahrir Square.

Perhaps more important than Twitter's architecture, however, is its commitment to free speech. In contrast with many other Internet companies, it has adopted a strict

no-censorship policy and intervenes only when users post illegal content. Twitter also scores free-speech points by allowing users to remain somewhat anonymous. While their IP addresses are logged (meaning that legitimate requests by law enforcement authorities can lead to the identity of users), individuals using the site can choose to identify by whatever name they choose, allowing a degree of anonymity for safer operation under repressive or threatening conditions. By contrast, Facebook and Google+ require the submission of real or common names as a condition of registration, and regularly remove those reported to be using pseudonyms.

Twitter's ever increasing user base, coupled with its functionality and protection of free expression, has made it the platform of choice for activists. Twitter's openness allows topics to quickly go viral with just a single tweet from a well-known person, a function often leveraged by well-connected activists. Its simplicity makes it easy to search for breaking news; activists and journalists alike follow Twitter closely to be on top of events. And its ease of use from mobile phones makes it easy to check and update.

Fighting Internet Censorship

Free expression is on shaky ground in the Internet age, with more than fifty countries censoring the Internet in some way. Egypt's complete shutdown during the Tahrir uprising set a new precedent for stifling speech; while the Syrian regime, embattled by protests since March, has utilized tools made by American companies to monitor its citizens' on-line activities. Almost all Middle East and North African governments engage in Internet censorship of some kind.

While Twitter's policy has always been not to mediate content between users (users who report other users for bad behavior receive a note to that effect), the company's commitment to free expression was tested in 2011 by the release of secret diplomatic cables by Wikileaks. Birgitta Jónsdóttir, a member of parliament in Iceland, announced on Twitter in January that all of her account information, including direct messages, dating back to November 2009, had been demanded of Twitter by the United States Department of Justice in its investigation into Wikileaks. The demand, backed by a federal court order, sought the mailing addresses, billing information, connection records, session times, and IP addresses used to connect to her Twitter account; some of which is information that Twitter does not even track. The order requested the same information for the accounts of various activists as well as for that of Wikileaks itself. In addition to the demand for information, Twitter was placed under a gag order to prevent the company from informing the concerned parties about the U.S. government demand. Twitter, however, chose to fight back. It asked that the gag order be lifted, and the request was granted.

Commenting on its position, Twitter issued a statement on January 28, 2011, titled "The Tweets Must Flow." It said: "Our position on freedom of expression carries with it a mandate to protect our users' right to speak freely and preserve their ability to contest having their private information revealed. While we may need to release information as required by law, we try to notify Twitter users before handing over their information whenever we can so they have a fair chance to fight the request if they so choose . . . We will continue to increase our transparency in this area and encourage you to let us know if you think we have not met our aspirations with regard to your freedom of expression."

Twitter was tested again in August 2011 when, following a week of rioting in Britain, Prime Minister David Cameron suggested that censorship of social networks might be necessary to stop the violence. Twitter, along with Blackberry and Facebook, met with British Home Secretary Theresa May following Cameron's comments. While no statement was made by Twitter afterwards, the British government's calls for censorship ceased.

The impulse to censor is by no means confined to authoritarian regimes. Regulations being drafted in various countries, including France and New Zealand, would disconnect users from their Internet service providers entirely if they used the Internet in the violation of copyright statutes. The governments of Britain and Australia have leveraged their power over Internet service providers to enforce censorship of obscene content.

With private companies—such as Google, Twitter, and Facebook—increasingly playing host to public speech, the on-line public sphere is increasingly privatized. Their social networking tools have made global discourse simpler, but the policies of the companies behind the tools are rarely in compliance with Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states: "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers." In fact, privately owned companies are often all too willing to cave in to pressure and shut down speech, as occurred last year when Amazon, PayPal, and others denied service to WikiLeaks.

In the face of censorship—threatened or real—human rights and civil liberties advocates have taken up cyber arms. They are fighting against restrictive legislation, such as the Protect IP Act in the United States, which would give the government greater powers to shut down websites deemed to be engaging in on-line piracy. If enacted, prosecutors could seek court orders seizing domain names of offender sites, and requiring search engines, advertising networks, and payment transaction firms to cease dealings with them. Advocates are also working, through projects like the

Global Network Initiative and the International Digital Economy Accords, to convince companies that human rights and free speech are good for their bottom lines. Meanwhile, there is a need for tighter regulation of surveillance equipment. American and other Western companies have for years exported their wares with impunity to authoritarian regimes. The European Union recently enacted legislation to restrict the export of such software, while rights groups in the United States are lobbying for similar measures.

Activists themselves are showing resolve in the face of censorship. Nascent groups, such as the Tunisian Association for Digital Freedom (ATLN), as well as more established organizations like the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR), are promoting digital rights. Independent activists are regularly addressing threats to free expression in their own countries. In the U.S., they are exposing hypocrisy in government policies, such as the Commerce Department export controls enacted on Syria that effectively deny Syrian citizens access to vital communications tools like Google's Chrome browser and Java. One recent campaign targeted the hashtag of a Silicon Valley human rights and technology conference, in an attempt to drum up attention. Still others engage in 'hacktivism,' conducting attacks against websites for a cause.

Egyptian activist Hossam El-Hamalawy blogged an important observation in 2008. "The Internet is only a medium and a tool by which we can support our 'off-line' activities," he said. "Our strength will always stem from the fact that we'll have one foot in the cyberspace, and, more importantly, the other foot will be on the ground." Yet activists have become acutely aware of the importance of on-line expression. Their struggle now includes the cause of an open Internet.