

From Arab Spring to Shahbag: The role of Social Media in Terms of National Crisis

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Introduction

25th November, 2007! I was working for an international media organization, so I used to receive many emails every day. But I received a quite unusual email from one of colleagues on that day. The email asks me to check how many friends my colleague has and it also wanted me to look at his photos. At first I thought that it may a junk mail, but I was quit unsure. So I asked my colleague about the email. Then he answered me that it is a facebook invitation and facebook is a social networking site. Although understood nothing about the website, but I accepted the friend request and that was my first facebook experience. After some days I received the same types of email from my other colleagues and accepting all the requests I found that I have almost fifty friends in my account. Meanwhile, I found that my colleagues were uploading their photos, updating statuses and commenting each others' posts. I was a little bit confused to upload my photo on facebook for security concern. But one day my colleague suggested me to upload photo setting up privacy. The suggestion helped me and I uploaded one of my beautiful photos. Thus, I started to explore social media in a unique way!

Meanwhile I was receiving friend requests from strangers and my classmates as soon as I uploaded my profile picture. The most interesting thing was, one day I have got a friend request from an old school friend who had no communication with me for 10 years. She said that facebook has some searching option with name and address, using the tool she discovered me on facebook. I started to have the full test of social networking and facebook became a part of my daily life. Although I had Yahoo Messenger account, but it was not that much interesting as much facebook is. What I wrote above is only about facebook, there are many other social media tools that became popular at the same time for different purposes. For example,

- Social Networks: Facebook, Twitter, Google+, Sixdegrees, Myspace, AOL
- Micro-Blogs: Tumblr
- Photo Sharing: Flickr, Instagram, Pinterest
- Professional Networks: LinkedIn
- Traditional Blogs: Blogger, WordPress
- Video Sharing: YouTube, Vimeo (Figure 1)

It is been nearly Seven years; I have become a facebook freak. I cannot think of a single day without facebook and facebook has become very easy with Smartphone that connects you 24 hours. Today I have thousands of friends and followers. But now facebook is not only limited to uploading photos and commenting on posts, facebook has got many other dimensions too. Of which dimensions, social movement is the most important. I see whenever any issue goes against our country, people tend to post their protestation on facebook and raise awareness among other users on facebook. I personally posted many such protestations on facebook. But what is tremendous that, facebook or social Media have become a very strong tool for any

revolutionary movement. If we talk about Arab Spring [1], social media was the main tool to unite the protesters. So, if someone asks what is Social Media? According to my experiences with social media, it can be said that Social Media are the platforms on the internet where people interact freely, share and discuss information about personal and various socio-political issues using a combination of verbal, pictorial and audio-visual expression.

The history of Social Media is as old as around 45 years. According to Dr. Anthony Curtis, "CompuServe was the first major commercial Internet service provider for the public in the United States [1]. Using a technology known then as *dial-up*, it dominated the field through the 1980s and remained a major player until the mid-1990s". He added that the first email was delivered in 1971. After that one after another invention of networking sites enriched social media. For example, The America Online(AOL) opened in 1985; in 1997 Blogging begins, SixDegrees.com lets users create profiles and list friends; in 2002 social networking site Friendster opened in the US, AOL had 34 million members; in 2003 another Social networking site MySpace and professional networking site LinkedIn opened; in 2004 facebook, Flickr, Digg opened. But the social media bloom was found in 2009 where Facebook reached as the most-used social network having 200 million users worldwide. Meanwhile many other social media such as



Figure 1: Social Media tools.

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Youtube, Twitter opened. These are the short history of Social media [2].

Now the question comes how do the social media become a tool to unite protesters? Well, the stuffs we share on social media with the intention of public relations go with a viral attitude. For example, I have 5000 friends and 5000 followers on facebook; I have posted a protestation on a recent issue that goes against our country and if the post can provoke others' mind too, then imagine what can happen with the post! What can be happened with post is that may be the post will get thousands of likes, hundreds of comments and hundreds of shares. And these are not limited to only my post, those who share, comment, like the post will get the same attention from their friends too. Thus the post will get a viral attention among facebook and it may go to other social media tools such as Twitter too. Apart from these, there are many options of creating an individual group, group chatting, group messaging, group sharing, and group invitation for any event. For example, someone called a rally on a specific date and place; Social media can quickly invite all friends of anyone without any cost.

I am going back to Arab Spring now; because the viral revelation I described above, Arab Spring had the same experience. According to a research of University of Washington, "during the week before Egyptian president Hosni Mubaraks resignation, for example, the total rate of tweets from Egypt — and around the world — about political change in that country ballooned from 2,300 a day to 230,000 a day. Videos featuring protest and political commentary went viral — the top 23 videos received nearly 5.5 million views. The amount of content produced online by opposition groups, in Facebook and political blogs, increased dramatically." The research also added "in the case of both Tunisia and Egypt's revolutions, discussion spanned borders. In the two weeks after Mubaraks resignation, there was an average of 2,400 tweets a day from people in neighboring countries about the political situation in Egypt. In Tunisia after Ben Alis resignation, there were about 2,200 tweets a day" [3] (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Arab Spring.



Figure 3: The internet blackout in Egypt on 28 January, 2011.



Figure 4: Shahbag movement.

On the other hand, Eaton commented in an article, "The Egyptian government's unprecedented decision to cut off the internet on 28 January (Figure 3) was a testament to the gravity with which it treated the threat of internet activism". So it is clear that sometimes Social media become threat in terms of a protestant against any counterpart.

We do not need to go away from our country in terms of the role of social media during national crisis. I we talk about Shahbag movement, then I have say that social media had the vital role to unite people at Shahbag. Shahbag is the focal point of the capital Dhaka. According to a BBC report, (<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-21383632>) "The shahbag is one of the biggest protests in the country's history; Protesters used social media to boost numbers at the rally- And this was the first triggered by social media in Bangladesh" (Figure 4).

There are many Similarities between Arab Spring and Shahbag movement. Firstly, both movements' Protesters have used social media to raise awareness among people, thus they have been able to boost numbers at the rally. Secondly, in both protests, it was found that people who are mostly apolitical had very strong anger towards the ruling body, so they had part in these two movements actively. Thirdly, these two movements have continued to be until the demands of protesters were fulfilled.

So it is proved that Social media have a significant impact over people. Otherwise these two big movements would not be possible to take place within short time. Just as television turned a nation of people who listened to media content into watchers of media content, the emergence of social media has created a nation of media content creators. According to 2011 Pew Research data, nearly 80% of American adults are online and nearly 60% of them use social networking sites. More Americans get their news via the Internet than from newspapers or radio, as well as three-fourths who say they get news from e-mail or social media sites updates, according to a report published by CNN. The survey suggests that Facebook and Twitter make news a more participatory experience than before as people share news articles and comment on other people's posts. According to CNN, in 2010 75% of people got their news forwarded through e-mail or social media posts, whereas 37% of people shared a news item via Facebook or Twitter. Normally what we see in case of any political movements, these movements are planned, called by a specific group of people and organizers take a certain time to organize the movements. Political parties also invest money to organize these sorts of movement and sometimes political activists get economically benefitted in return to join the movements. This is vice versa in case of such movements as Shahbag and Arab Spring. In case of Shahbag movement and Arab Spring, there were no prior leadership; people have expressed their anger personally towards the ruling body on

social media and simultaneously they decide to deploy in place and thus an automatic leadership was grown up. If they were not using social media, these movements would not have been so larger in this short time. As Shahbag and Arab protesters had followed the demands from their heart, so getting any economical benefit for joining the movements were unquestionable; general people took part in the rallies spontaneously. Although, the leadership and success of the movements were questioned afterward. In light of the above discussion, it can be said that many protestations against any national crisis may take place only on social media, and protesters may not be found on any ground. There are many national or international sign petitions which can be

the best examples of it. For Example, sign petition on “Tipaimukh dam must be stopped” where 50,000 people of both countries have signed on the internet. (<http://www.change.org/petitions/united-nations-tipaimukh-dam-must-be-stopped>).

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