

Social media revolutions

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ABSTRACT

This commentary explores how, despite the best efforts of social change groups, governments and marketing communications professionals, having people change their minds remains difficult. The author explores how social media served as a means for the "Arab Spring" movements in Egypt and Tunisia to communicate with Western media, thus raising the profile of the movement and keeping it top of the public, media and policy agendas. The author puts forward the idea that professional communicators should use hope instead of fear when marketing an idea.

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"When the power of love overcomes the love of power,
the world will know peace." – Jimi Hendrix

Despite the best efforts of social change groups, governments and marketing communications professionals, persuading people to change their minds remains a difficult thing to do. Generally speaking, when presented with information that contradicts our worldview, our first response is to dig our heels in deeper, and harden our convictions. And yet, revolutions do occur. People do change their minds. This year, Egypt faced an extraordinary transformation in eighteen days. Speaking frankly, Egypt is just one of many countries in which an unprecedented mass desire for freedom suddenly struck, despite the presence of dictators, poor human rights records, and a defeated population. Why now? Why Egypt? What forces came into play that could motivate and liberate an otherwise defeated people? What lessons are there to be learned for all of us who seek to affect public opinion?

Twenty-six year-old Mohammed Bouazizi, a Tunisian fruit-seller who set himself aflame in front of a local government building, has been called the fa-

ther of the “Arab Spring.” There is no question that the successful protests, triggered by his sacrifice, that ensued in Tunisia were an inspiration for Egypt.

The brutal police killing of 28-year-old Egyptian, Khaled Said, hit closer to home. An innocent young man, sitting in a café, unwilling to produce identification papers without due cause and brutally killed by police for his insolence, Said became the everyman of the cause. Like many deaths before, his would have gone unnoticed but for the use of technology and social media by alert citizen journalists and communicators.

The group “We are all Khaled Said” captured the imagination of young Egyptians and Facebook users worldwide. Its wall became a sharing point for news, information and organization. By the time Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak fell, the group had 77,000 members worldwide. Before that, another 134,000 had watched a call to arms video by a young woman named Asmaa Mahfouz (2011) which appealed to men’s “honour and manhood” to come to protests in Tahrir square on January 25.

Yet technology was only a small piece of the puzzle. It worked to connect people and spread ideas, but so did men on horseback traveling from town to town posting pamphlets on tree trunks during the American Revolution. The tools brought awareness and awareness released the passion.

Neither the tools of grassroots change nor organized propaganda could compare to the power of the human heart, ignited. What is fascinating here is that the human heart was ignited by a young man’s well-publicized sacrifice - publicity that was achieved through grassroots organizing, and the clever use of social media like Facebook and Twitter. In essence, what the social media campaign achieved was to communicate the importance of the Arab Spring to Western media. The awareness of the possibility for revolution was percolating in hearts and minds for months; what the social media campaign did, primarily, was tell a story that appealed to Western media who then gave it legs. This generated enough profile to allow pressure to mount in international media and legislative circles so that regime change might happen.

If the three levers of marketing are fear, hope and love, the easiest way to control the hearts and minds of the people has long been fear. Governments have risen to power and held it for ages with this one simple tool. It worked in Egypt for thirty years, and it kept the West supporting Mubarak long after his expiry date. But fear is no match for the fundamental human need to connect with others, to recognize the truth in our vulnerability, and feel united for a common goal. What social media provided was the medium through which a grassroots awareness campaign could ignite the population’s imagination to the possibility of freedom. The cumulative nature of social media, with its ubiquitous global availability and permanent history of interactions, made the groundswell palpable for activists, as well as citizens who wouldn’t normally participate in a protest. The social media tide also raised the issue’s importance

on the media, policy and public agendas to the point that it became visible to journalists and legislators abroad. Egypt's Facebook revolution presented a tantalizing story of freedom resting within finger-tip reach of long-suppressed but eloquent populations; a story that became a powerful grassroots movement, as well as top-down public diplomacy campaign.

The largest peaceful protest came after the television interview of Wael Ghonim, the Google employee and founder of the Facebook group "We are all Khaled Said," who was held in custody for the twelve days of the uprising. Until he was released, Ghonim, with no idea whether anyone had carried on the cause, lived only with the hope that the guards who held him would not abuse him and the hope that times were shifting. The young father cried as he relived the twelve days his family spent without knowing if he was dead or alive. Repeating, "The only motive we had was our love for our country," he spoke to other middle class Egyptians who generally had it too good to make waves and risk reprisal. Watching the bravery of this young man – willing to risk everything – probably played a great part in bringing the rest of the population to the idea that the moment for change had arrived.

Throughout history we have used propaganda for control. And yet no polished speeches from world leaders, no fear-mongering that might be, rightly or wrongly attributed to the Muslim Brotherhood, was able to douse the flames of hope and love rising up from the Egyptian people.

Social media has changed everything. Facebook, YouTube and Twitter were a vital channel to effect a values change in the hearts of Egyptians as well as in foreign media and legislators. The story of one young man's sacrifice, another's love of country and gentle patriotism, coupled with hundreds of thousands of supportive "likes", comments, tweets, blogs and video blogs from around the world, formed a hopeful chorus that made change seem inevitable. The social media coverage then served to keep the results of the Arab Spring in the public eye of the West for months afterwards. There are probably large pockets of average people around the world who monitor the aftermath in Tunisia and Egypt very closely. This level of popular international surveillance was unthinkable until the advent of social media and citizen journalism.

The lesson for professional communicators is straightforward: turn away from fear, which motivates people to hide and destroy and turn toward inspiring messages of love and hope, which motivate people to collaborate constructively and achieve progress.

References

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