

**The Role of Technology and Social Media in  
Strengthening Resistance Movements:  
A Comparative Analysis of the Revolutions in Iran  
and Egypt, 2009-2011**

**by**

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B.A. (International Relations), University of California, 2006

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines the impact of technology on the democratic uprisings in Iran in mid 2009 and in Egypt in early 2011. This paper argues that the lower level of online censorship in Egypt facilitated the success of Egypt's opposition movement, whereas the more extreme digital barriers in Iran led to the failure of Iran's protest group. Three major elements of each uprising will be analyzed and contrasted – the motivations behind each movement, the formation of mass protests and the regime response, and technological trigger points during the protests that had tremendous affects on the outcome of each uprising. Future research concerning the relationship between technology and democratization should focus on the specific technological tools used by protestors and the level of preexisting freedoms in each country. While technological innovation is not the sole necessity for fighting corrupt and repressive regimes, it certainly aids those seeking to enact change.

**Keywords:** Egypt; Iran; technology; social media; uprising; resistance movements

# Dedication

For Mom and Dad.

## **Acknowledgements**

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# Chapter 1.

## Introduction

A number of authoritarian states have recently been challenged by fervent opposition groups seeking shifts in their respective country's political direction. A debate has since emerged regarding the potency of new media and information technology in altering the balance of power between repressive regimes and civil resistance movements. New technologies have played major roles in the transformational events that have taken place in the Middle East in recent years and will likely continue to have a profound effect in these countries and beyond. Recently, communication between individuals in non-permissive environments and with the outside world has clearly changed due to the widespread adoption of social networking tools such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Advancements in technology have led, in part, to the commodification of information which has changed the nature of popular resistance throughout the world. Concurrently, repressive regimes seek to quell the surge of technological adoption in their countries by censoring and monitoring information flows as well as restricting access to popular communication tools during volatile times. The effectiveness of the digital information revolution in promoting democratization, however, remains uncertain.

A comprehensive understanding of the relationship between technological innovation and democratization will lead to better analysis from scholars and improved policies from governments in response to the revolutionary events that continue to unfold around the world. Technology's affect on society and politics is now more transformational than ever because the commodification of communications devices, such as mobile phones and laptops, and the Internet has allowed populations in the developing world to access information that had previously been out of reach. This project will focus on the role of new technologies in fomenting unrest during the 2009 Iranian presidential election and juxtapose this with the role that the technological revolution played in the recent events in Egypt that removed Hosni Mubarak from power in early 2011. The two cases that will be discussed in this project have been chosen because they both clearly represent the revolutionary potential of communication

technologies. The time frames examined will stretch from the months before the uprisings to the tumultuous weeks that followed the initial protests. The majority of planning and protest activity by the opposition groups in each case took place within this range. While many similarities exist between these two events, this paper will predominantly focus on their differences, as the protest movements in each country concluded very distinctly.

This comparative case study will examine three major elements of each uprising – the motivations behind each movement, the formation of mass protests and the regime response, and technological trigger points during the protests that tremendously impacted the outcome of each uprising. Analyzing the motivations leading up to the uprisings will show the mixture of both spontaneity and premeditation found in each protest movement. During the period leading up to the initial protests, Egypt's opposition was far more organized than that of Iran, however, once tensions escalated following the initial protest, the opposition movement became more chaotic. As witnessed in Iran, the regime response was crucial to the ultimate outcome of the movement as the violent authoritarian state was able to stem the momentum gained by the opposition. The limited amount of Internet and technological filtering by the Egyptian government before and during the uprising – relative to the higher levels of obstruction levied in Iran – was unable to quell the impact of technological tools used by Egypt's protestors. The major trigger points of each uprising, discussed in more detail below, were influential in the final days of each movement and provided protestors with the motivation needed to galvanize and confront their oppressors more intently. In Egypt, this moment was crucial to the success of the protestors, while in Iran this moment did not provide a lasting boost to the opposition movement.

In each case, the analysis of these three elements will be followed by an examination of the broader relevance of communication technologies and the Internet to the uprisings. In Egypt, technological tools were crucial to the development of the opposition movement in online forums and were prominent throughout the protests of early 2011. This was, in part, due to the limited restrictions placed on Internet activity by the Egyptian government in the years leading up to the protest movement. In Iran, the significance of technology to protestors was inflated by outside media sources.

Technology played a minor role in the events that followed the 2009 Iranian presidential

election because the Internet was heavily restricted by the government leading up to the election. This limited the familiarity that Iranian citizens had with the Internet and dampened any broad threat to the regime that could have been constructed online. Internet activity was drastically different in Egypt and Iran during the period leading up to each uprising as the Internet was used by wider segments of society in Egypt than it was in Iran. This factor leads to the argument presented in this paper that communication technologies and the Internet had greater effects on the Egyptian uprisings of 2011 than the Iranian events in 2009 because online activity was less restricted in Egypt. Egyptian society was more vulnerable to a democratic movement toppling the government because Egyptians were more entrenched in cyberspace and because communication technologies were available to a larger number of Egyptian citizens than to Iranians.

This paper begins by assessing the levels of technological development and adoption in each country over the past decade. This section will analyze technological statistics from 2000 to 2009 that develop a more comprehensive understanding of the impact that technology has had on both Egyptian and Iranian societies during this period. These findings illustrate that widespread Internet usage is mostly a recent phenomenon in both countries and can be costly for significant segments of each population. Chapter 2 will review existing scholarly studies that focus on the relationship between communication technologies and resistance movements. Examining the strengths and weaknesses of past studies will allow this paper to examine this topic more specifically and will place technology and democratization in a historical context. Chapter 3 will detail the revolutionary events that took place in Iran in 2009, focusing specifically on the mass protest movement, the response of the Iranian regime, and the trigger point of the death of the young activist Neda Agha-Soltan, as explained above. Chapter 4 will look at the 2011 Egyptian revolution, examining the background and trigger points of the revolution, the online origins of the resistance movement, and the trigger point of Wael Ghonim's release from prison. Chapter 5 will provide concluding remarks, detailing the use of social media by each opposition group, the major mobilizing events during the revolutions, and each government's response to the mass demonstrations.

## Technological Adoption in Egypt and Iran

This section will briefly outline the rate of technological adoption in Egypt, Iran, and the greater Middle East over the past decade. The technological landscape in both countries has changed dramatically over this period, allowing more citizens to gain access to the Internet and communication technologies. Developing countries, such as Egypt and Iran, still face numerous obstacles to achieving reliable technological infrastructures, such as cost, speed, and security. Communication technologies can certainly have a more substantial presence in these nations once their respective technological infrastructures mature. The data presented below will help to comprehensively explain the role of technology in Egypt and Iran and the differing impact that technology had on each country's uprising.

In 2000, Jon Alterman authored a paper contending that "in the Middle East, it would be a mistake to predict that the bulk of the region's people will be 'wired' – connected to the Internet and other interactive communications, constantly sending and receiving signals through the electronic ether – anytime soon" (Alterman 2000). Alterman qualified this statement with the explanation that the Middle East still had the potential to reach the levels of technological development experienced in the Western world (Alterman 2000). For Alterman, the information revolution that had begun in the developed world would eventually reach the Middle East, just not anytime soon. Specifically, Alterman noted that "the Middle East [was] undergoing its own information technology revolution – it [was] simply different than that occurring in the West" (Alterman 2000). Evidence over the subsequent decade, detailed below, would both substantiate and counter Alterman's claim.

Internet usage was prevalent throughout the region even before the turn of the twentieth century. The earliest Middle Eastern adopters of the Internet's innovative technological capacity were media companies (specifically newspapers), governments, and religious organizations (Anderson 2000). The Internet was embraced tentatively by residents in the Middle East, however, primarily due to the immense cost of technological adoption. Notwithstanding the fixed cost of owning a computer, a few hundred dollars if not higher in most parts of the world, gaining access to the Internet is an expense that the majority of people in the Middle East are unable to afford. A study

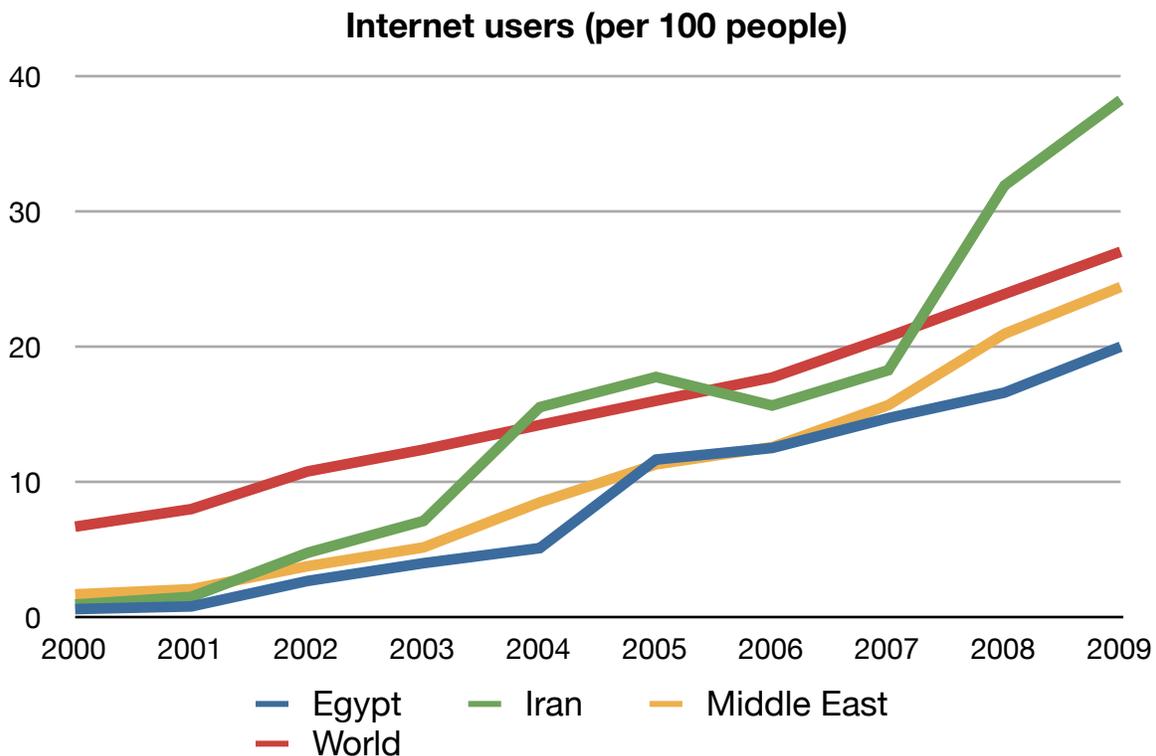
conducted in 2000 by Ali Houissa found that the monthly subscription rates for Internet access in Egypt and Iran were \$38 and \$238, respectively (Houissa 2000). This was markedly higher than Internet rates in the United States, which at the time were \$20 per month (Houissa 2000). The explosion of Internet cafes throughout countries like Egypt has partially mitigated the costs of getting online, although having Internet access in one's home remains out of reach for the majority of people in these countries.

The success of the revolution in Egypt and failure of Iran's opposition group was influenced, in part, by each government's response to Internet usage over the past decade. The Egyptian government viewed the Internet more favorably during its early years by "building Internet connections while promoting the establishment of local Internet service providers" (Alterman 2000). Most significantly, though, was the government's promise not to monitor its citizen's Internet activity as well as not banning newspaper articles from the Internet that had been banned in print form (Alterman 2000). Leaders in Iran took a different approach to dealing with the openness of the Internet, however. Beginning with the regime of Mohammad Khatami in 1997, "the authorities began to clamp down on free expression in both the traditional media and online" ("Freedom on the Net 2011: Iran"). A 2001 decree issued by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei strengthened the government's grasp on all Internet activity. This decree, which was formally put into law, required that all Internet service providers (ISPs) suspend their Internet connections and purchase a license to operate from the government ("Internet filtering in Iran"). ISPs were then forced to "purchase their bandwidth from government-controlled Access Service Providers" ("Freedom on the Net 2011: Iran").

Alterman's 2000 paper found that Internet usage rates in both Egypt and Iran were extremely low. Alterman concluded that around 3 percent of Egyptians were active online; it was assumed, however, that this figure was inflated due to the Internet usage of expatriates (Alterman 2000). Internet penetration in Iran was even harder to gauge, as Alterman could only conclude that "it is certainly low" (Alterman 2000). According to the World Bank's World Development Indicators, Internet usage in both Egypt and Iran has skyrocketed over the past decade. As expressed in Figure 1, the world average for Internet users per 100 people in 2000 was 6.7 while Egypt and Iran stood at 1.0 and 0.6 users per 100 people, respectively ("World Development Indicators"). In 2005, the world

average grew to 16.0 with Egypt remaining below at 11.7 and Iran leapfrogging the world average to 17.8 ("World Development Indicators"). While usage rates in Iran continued to skyrocket to 38.3 in 2009, 11.2 higher than the world average, Egypt lagged behind at 20.0 ("World Development Indicators").

**Figure 1.**

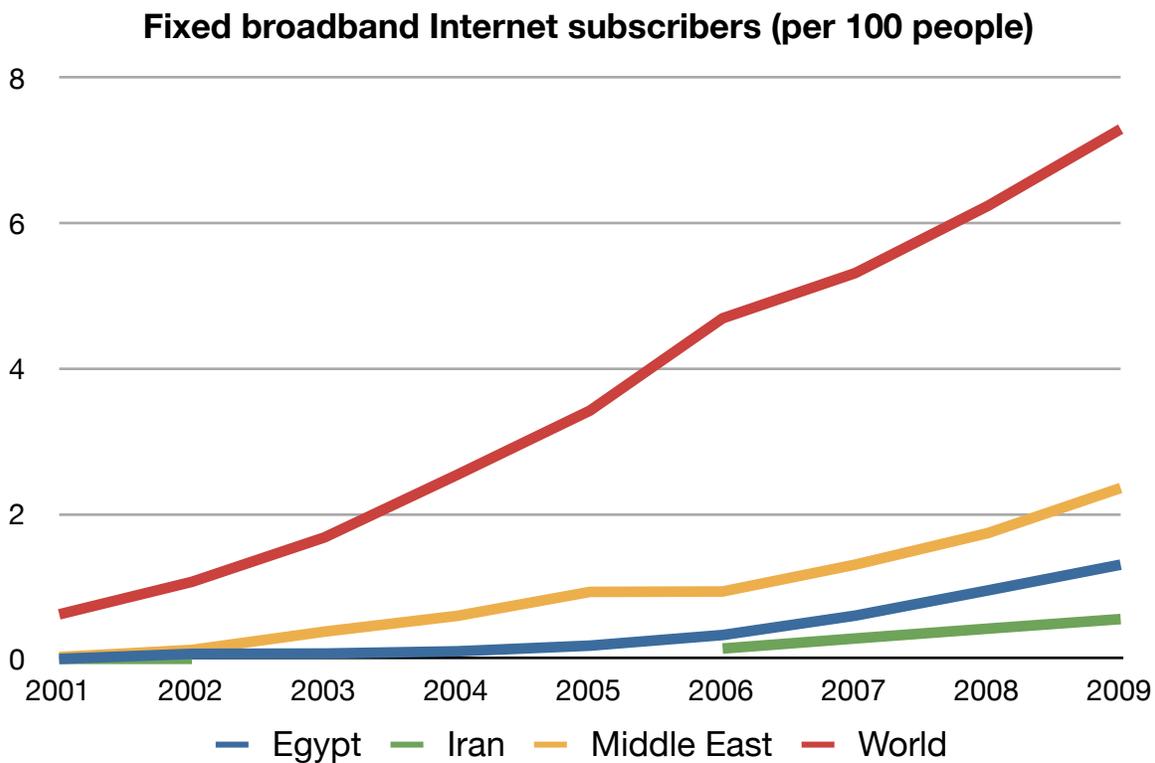


*Source: World Bank World Development Indicators, 2011*

Even though Internet usage in Egypt and Iran has soared over the past ten years, each country remains plagued with issues of connectivity speed and security. According to the World Bank, both Egypt and Iran have experienced below average growth in the number of fixed broadband Internet subscribers per 100 people. Broadband Internet is becoming necessary to access many websites on the Internet, including popular social media networks such as YouTube. In 2001, with the world average at 0.61 subscribers per 100 people, the totals in Egypt and Iran were barely calculable, both hovering very close to zero, as illustrated by Figure 2 below ("World

Development Indicators”). In 2009, the world average rose to 7.3, however both Egypt and Iran lagged behind measuring 1.3 and 0.55 (“World Development Indicators”). The speed of Internet connectivity is a significant limitation to online activity in both countries, as the lack of high-speed connections restricts people to behaviors that are not data heavy, such as e-mail use.

**Figure 2.**



*Source: World Bank World Development Indicators, 2011*

Another central component to reliable Internet usage and the growth of a country’s technological capacity is the security of personal information online. The World Bank measures this by calculating the number of secure Internet servers per one million people. In 2001, the world average was 21.8 secure servers, with Egypt standing at 0.2 and Iran at 0.02 (“World Development Indicators”). By 2010, the situation had barely improved in these countries, as the world average of 155.7 dwarfed the totals in Egypt and Iran of 2.2 and 0.7 (“World Development Indicators”). The lack of security

surrounding Internet use in both countries is a significantly limiting factor in the overall growth and adoption of technological communications.

Assessing the technological capability of countries in the Middle East remains a challenging proposition for scholars and observers. For some in the region, mainly the wealthy elites who have ties to the western world, gaining access to the Internet is not a difficult prospect. For those who do not have the financial capacity to purchase computers or a reliable Internet connection, access to the online world remains a challenge. Statistics from the past decade paint a hopeful picture, however, as higher numbers of Middle Easterners have become introduced to the open and revolutionary potential of the Internet. The following chapter will explain the recent history of this topic by outlining and examining a variety of literature that has focused on the relationship between technology and democratization.

## Chapter 2.

# Analyzing Recent Studies on Technology and Resistance Groups

The impact that information and communication technologies have on coercive regimes and resistance movements has sparked considerable debate among social science scholars. Do modern forms of communication provide support for despotic leaders or do they empower local resistance movements seeking change? This section will discuss the findings of broad quantitative studies that have been conducted to determine the importance that technology has on protest movements and the democratic process. While most preexisting literature that has examined the relationship between technology and social movements has focused on time periods before the recent surge in social networking usage – around the mid-2000s – these studies will provide a comprehensive foundation for the analysis of communication technologies and political uprisings.

Jacob Groshek is eager to note that “technological developments, especially communicative ones, have long been positioned – and even romanticized – as powerful instruments of democracy” (Groshek 2010). Discussions about technology and democratic movements are not just contemporary. The past century, in particular, has seen a range of innovative tools, introduced as new media, that possess the capacity to strengthen democratic efforts around the world – notably telegraphs, radios, telephones and televisions (Becker 2001). These innovations are central to the political uprisings that took place in both Egypt and Iran. The literature analyzed below supports the notion that the events which took place in mid 2009 and early 2011 would not have occurred without the presence of the Internet in these countries.

One of the first broad quantitative studies to address the topic of the Internet, technology, and democracy was conducted by Chris Kedzie in 1997. Kedzie analyzed data from 144 countries to “compare the strength of traditional predictors of democracy including economic development and education, human development and health, ethnicity and culture, as well as indicators that represent pre-Internet ICTs [information

and communication technologies], and studies them against the strength of Internet prevalence” (Best and Wade 2009). This study concludes with the suggestion that the Internet is a stronger and more accurate predictor of democracy than more traditional economic predictors (Kedzie 1997). The most glaring drawback from Kedzie’s research, however, is that the data used in the project is from 1993, a year when the Internet was in its infancy in the developed world and almost nonexistent in developing countries. Kedzie’s study sets the foundation for literature focusing on the relationship between technology and political movements. The breadth of this study as well as its bifurcated analysis of traditional indicators of democracy and more contemporary technological metrics make Kedzie’s research immensely useful to this comparative study. While the time frame examined by Kedzie is considerably earlier than the period being examined in this paper, Kedzie is able to establish a relationship between technological innovation and a country’s overall level of democracy, a finding supported by this paper.

In a more recent analysis, Toby Ten Eyck disapproves of quantitative studies that seek to explain variations in political protests across countries yet do not include information and communication technology metrics. Ten Eyck is surprised at the lack of importance given to information technologies when examining protests and democratic movements because “there is reason to believe that information technologies do play a part in the political protest at the ‘street’ level” (Ten Eyck 2001). Ten Eyck’s study examines a mixture of demonstrations, strikes and riots that occurred in 86 countries between 1970 and 1977. As with Kedzie’s study, Ten Eyck’s data collection presents limitations since computer networks and the Internet were not central to the information and communications landscape during the 1970s (Ten Eyck 2001). Ten Eyck’s study also includes another significant limitation; while Ten Eyck’s analysis was comprehensive for the period from 1970 to 1977, mobile phones are not included in the research as they did not exist during this era. The lack of information concerning mobile telephony further classifies this study as outdated by modern research standards. Ten Eyck, however, maintains that the findings are relevant and outwardly applicable to other studies and time periods (Ten Eyck 2001). Although Ten Eyck’s study does not focus on the most contemporary data available, this type of research is necessary for understanding the historical connection between technological innovation, political movements, and democracy. As with Kedzie’s analysis, this study is enlightening for its ability to highlight

the importance of technology to protest movements in past decades. While Ten Eyck brings the topic of technology and revolution to the fore, the limited technological metrics in his study makes his research less applicable to this cross-case study.

A study conducted by Michael Best and Keegan Wade assesses the broader impact of communications technology, specifically the Internet, on democratic movements in 180 countries from 1992 to 2002. Best and Wade use statistical methods to determine the relationship between Internet prevalence and the overall level of democracy in different regions around the world. Ultimately, the authors' research indicates "a substantial relationship between Internet usage and democracy [even when] accounting for region and socioeconomic development" (Best and Wade 2009). Best and Wade also conclude that while regional disparities do exist between Internet usage and democratization, the findings ultimately support "the existence of a positive relationship between democratic growth and Internet penetration" (Best and Wade 2009). As with the previously mentioned studies, Best and Wade's analysis is limited for two reasons: first, the data does not go beyond 2002, thus not including more contemporary communications tools such as Twitter and Facebook; and second, the authors omit the potential impact that mobile phones had on democratic progress, a vital element of any modern political uprising. Putting these limitations aside, however, Best and Wade's work is critical to the examination of technology and democratization efforts around the world. Their findings of a positive relationship existing between the Internet and democratic movements parallel the findings of this paper. As with the research conducted by Kedzie, Best and Wade present a convincing argument for the significance of communications technology to protest movements. With the advent of widely-adopted social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, the relationship between these two indicators has seemingly increased since the 1990s and early 2000s, as this paper will show. The work presented by Best and Wade suggests that a positive linkage between technological innovation and the success of political protest movements has historical significance.

Jacob Groshek has conducted the most contemporary macro-level quantitative study of the democratic impact of the Internet and communication technologies across 72 countries from 1954 to 2003, finding a more diminished relationship between the two. Groshek concluded that "Internet diffusion was not a specific causal mechanism on

national-level democratic growth during the timeframe analyzed” (Groshek 2010). While Groshek acknowledges the importance of researching communication technologies and democratic progress, he argues that “the diffusion of the Internet should not be considered a democratic panacea, but rather a component of contemporary democratization processes” (Groshek 2010). Groshek’s study found that only 3 of the 72 countries examined – Mexico, Croatia, and Indonesia – demonstrated levels of democracy higher than those statistically predicted. In addition to his quantitative findings, Groshek conducted qualitative studies to “identify whether the Internet acted as a specific causal mechanism that may have contributed to democratization processes” (Groshek 2010). Groshek’s qualitative analysis ultimately found no significant evidence that democratic growth was somehow contingent on Internet activity and the level of technological development in the countries observed. In this study, Groshek contends that technological advancement and the Internet are products of democratization. This is in contrast to the prevailing idea, argued in prior studies, that communication technologies have been precursors to higher levels of democracy. Groshek is correct to explain that technology and the Internet are not panaceas for democratic reform. The examination of the uprisings in Egypt and Iran in this paper, however, does not contend that communication technologies are the sole reason for why these protests groups amassed. The Internet by itself is not a panacea for democratization, but as witnessed in Egypt and Iran, it does play a crucial role in allowing disaffected citizens to assemble, air their grievances, and enact social change.

Groshek’s examination of the relationship between democracy and communication technologies is the most comprehensive and contemporary study to date. Groshek concludes that it is “therefore only prudent to consider the Internet a potentially potent but underutilized democratic tool, one that is only as useful as the citizens who employ and implement it for political purposes” (Groshek 2010). Making a clear distinction between the saliency of communication technologies and that of individuals, Groshek posits that “virtuosity and democratic agency are not inherent in media technologies, no matter how interactive or participatory. Rather, these exist in individuals, and in the crucial applications and uses they make of communicative technologies” (Groshek 2010). Indeed, there is no inherent or immediate democratic influence resulting from new media and technology, but these tools can be adopted by

individuals and groups in countries around the world to further their reformist goals. While social media and communication technologies were not the sole reason for why protestors gathered to protest their respective governments, they were the most significant tools that the Iranian and Egyptian opposition movements possessed.

Consistent in all previously mentioned studies is their reliance on data collected prior to the mass global adoption of Internet communication technologies. Even though this study of Egypt and Iran focuses on a more contemporary period, the reviewed literature remains relevant because they explain the connection between technology and political protest in a historical context. All major new media technologies that have been crucial to recent online activism efforts, such as Facebook (2004), YouTube (2005), and Twitter (2006), were created after 2003 (Joyce 2010). The Meta-Activism Project has collected data of 1,005 cases of digital activism taking place over 114 countries through its Global Digital Activism Data Set. This study has concluded that

“real growth in the use of digital technology for campaigning and public political speech did not see a significant increase until 2006. While part of this jump may be due to increased reporting of digital activism, rather than increased frequency [...] anecdotal evidence also supports the conclusion that online political activism did not come into its own until after 2003” (Joyce 2010).

The new era of digital activism that began following 2003 peaked with the protest movements in Iran and Egypt. While the historically positive relationship between technological innovation and democratization movements has been well-documented, recent efforts at digital activism, which have not been highly examined, have benefited greatly from the spread of the Internet, social media, and other communication technologies.

Groshek also published a report in 2009 that observed macro-level data for 152 countries from 1994 to 2003. The conclusions from this project, however, are in slight contrast to the findings of his 2010 study. Groshek’s analysis concludes that “increased Internet diffusion was a meaningful predictor of more democratic regimes” (Groshek 2009). Most notable is the finding that partially democratic countries where Internet adoption is more prevalent experience a greater democratic effect than countries that exhibit low levels of democracy. Groshek finds that a high correlation of Internet diffusion and democracy exists in “developing countries where the average level of sociopolitical

instability was much higher” (Groshek 2009). Groshek concludes with cautionary recommendations for Western policymakers, arguing that, while the potential for the Internet and communication technologies to foster democratic change should be acknowledged, possible adverse effects of promoting technological advancement should also be considered. Groshek explains that the greatest threat of Internet adoption manifests in countries under authoritarian rule. For Groshek, “the democratic potential of the Internet is great, but actual effects might be limited because Internet diffusion appears conditional upon national-level democracy itself” (Groshek 2009). Groshek’s 2009 study is essential to the examination of the political uprisings in Egypt and Iran as the success of each movement was ultimately dictated by the level of democracy in each country. Social media and the Internet had the potential to be transformational in both Egypt and Iran, but the outcome was highly contingent on the democratic freedoms within each country. The findings of this comparative study support, to a high degree, Groshek’s 2009 study on Internet diffusion.

Missing from both of Groshek’s macro-level analyses is the potential impact of mobile phones on political protests and democracy. Fabien Miard has filled this research gap by conducting a macro-level quantitative study to determine the impact that mobile phones have on political activity. As evidenced by the lack of data concerning mobile phones in the aforementioned studies, Miard contends that this is a crucial element of modern political protests and that “little systematic research beyond loose collections of case studies has been done so far” (Miard 2009). Using data from the Cross-National Time-Series Data Archive, Miard focuses on three prominent forms of political activism: major government crises, anti-government demonstrations, and riots. Miard examines these phenomena in 191 countries from 1991 until 2006. Miard concludes that mobile phone density has had a minimal impact when referenced against his three categorized forms of political activism.

Results change, however, when Miard introduces other variables into his analysis, such as GDP per capita and population size. While population size has a noticeable impact on each of the political protest variables, GDP per capita has an insignificant relationship with each factor except for riots, where a strong negative effect exists (Miard 2009). This leads Miard to conclude that political activism has neither a negative nor positive correlation with mobile phone diffusion. Miard heavily critiques

existing studies of information technologies and political protests, claiming they are “overrated and that generalization by means of a global comparative case study is not possible” (Miard 2009). Although Miard’s findings do not support positive or negative correlation between mobile phone adoption and political activism, he recommends that future quantitative studies incorporate two factors: (1) examine the impact of mobile phone usage in democratic as well as repressive regimes, and (2) place a greater emphasis on mobile phone and Internet communication technologies in addition to traditional technology variables already being used (Miard 2009). While Miard’s findings are not as applicable to this paper as the previously mentioned studies, his critique of existing studies as overly generalized is apt. The study of technology and democratization needs to move away from developing a single broad theory that can apply to all countries and should instead focus on the minutiae of each case, examining the underlying causes that allow unrest to foment and opposition groups to succeed or fail.

A 2010 book by Philip Howard focuses on how information technology infrastructure promotes democratic transformation in Middle Eastern countries that have predominantly Muslim populations. Howard developed democracy and technological adoption indices for 74 countries for the period from 1994 to 2008. Howard’s technological index incorporated a number of variables, including “mobile phones, Internet users, Internet hosts, personal computers, national Internet bandwidth, and broadband Internet users” (Howard 2010). To compute the technology index for every country Howard examined each variable against a country’s GDP (Howard 2010). Howard’s final calculation illustrates the relationship between the economic output of a country and its level of technological adoption (Howard 2010). The statistical evaluation of Howard’s data set reveals that across the Middle East, “6 percent of the variation in democratization can be explained by technology diffusion” (Howard 2010).

Howard’s analysis further elucidates that in addition to a more developed communications infrastructure, active individuals and community groups are crucial for the success of democratic transformation. Howard aims to show that “an active online civil society and good state information infrastructure in small countries with well educated populations has resulted in democratic transitions” (Howard 2010). These countries all possess the same crucial element: an active online civil society. For

Howard, “having such an active online civil society, along with having a comparatively small population or a comparatively well-educated population, proves to represent almost two-thirds of the cases studied” (Howard 2010). Howard concludes that it is these wired civil societies, comprised of large mobile phone and Internet user bases, that have direct causal relationships with democratization efforts (Howard 2010).

Howard’s study is the most applicable to this comparative analysis between Egypt and Iran because it both focuses specifically on Muslim communities in the Middle East and on recent technological data up to the year 2008. Howard’s findings are similar to those of Groshek’s 2009 study in that he notes the significance of an active online civil society as being a key ingredient to democratic reform. Howard’s study helps to better understand the impact that technology had on the events in Egypt and Iran. As described in further detail later in this paper, the online communities in Egypt and Iran were strikingly different. The level of government filtering of digital content in Egypt was minuscule in comparison to the role of the government in Iran. Also, Internet usage in Iran is not as broad as it is in Egypt, but is limited to the country’s wealthy elite. Howard’s notion that a wired civil society has a more substantial impact on the level of democratization in a country than a civil society that is not active online helps explain the different outcomes of the Egyptian and Iranian revolutions.

Howard further notes that in countries with large Muslim populations, “those with a rapidly expanding information infrastructure experienced either democratic transitions or entrenchment. This conclusion makes an explicit link through which technology diffusion can contribute to democratization” (Howard 2010). Howard ultimately suggests that the study of communications infrastructure and democratic transitions is limited by research comprised of statistical analysis alone, instead supporting the fusion of qualitative and quantitative research methodologies. More specifically, Howard asserts that “perhaps the best reason to proceed in a qualitative and comparative way is that the categories of ‘democracy’ and ‘technology diffusion’ are themselves aggregates and proxies for other measurable phenomena” (Howard 2010).

Many previous studies that have examined the impact of technology on political protest movements have found a positive relationship between the two variables. Central to this comparative study, though, is the premise that technology will have a greater

impact in communities where communication technologies, such as the Internet, are not restricted or filtered. The composition of the online community in Egypt and Iran were markedly different, due primarily to the digital restrictions imposed by each government. Ultimately, government intervention and the extent to which civil society was active online in each country had a dramatic impact on the outcome of each uprising. The findings of this paper are supported, to some degree, by each of the aforementioned studies and will hopefully further the scholarly analysis of this subject. The subsequent section will analyze in greater depth the opposition movement that emerged following the Iranian presidential election in 2009.

## **Chapter 3.**

### **Iran: The Failure of an Overestimated Opposition Movement**

This section will examine three major elements that led to the failure of the Iranian opposition movement following the 2009 presidential election – the motivations behind the mass uprising, the formation of mass protests in June and December of 2009 and the subsequent regime response, and the triggering point of Neda Agha-Soltan's death being broadcast on YouTube. While the failure of Iran's protest movement cannot be solely ascribed to one element, the combination of each of these events can help explain why the repressive Iranian government was successful in thwarting the youthful political uprising.

Internet usage leading up to and during the revolution in Iran took on a different form than it did during the events in Egypt. In Iran, the Internet was used far more extensively by the wealthier and socially elite segment of society than by low- and middle-income groups. The government response to the instability that followed the 2009 re-election of president Ahmadinejad was quick and virulent, leaving the opposition movement instantly weakened. As detailed below, the recorded death of Neda Agha-Soltan immediately surfaced on YouTube and became a trigger point for the opposition. This event had the potential to breathe new life into the fatigued protest movement, but instead resulted in a small wave of new protests that were rapidly crushed by Iranian authorities. To best understand the motivations behind the uprising, it is crucial to outline the initial factors that prompted the mass social movement against the government.

#### **The 2009 Iranian Presidential Election**

On June 12, 2009, the Islamic Republic of Iran held the tenth presidential election in its history with four candidates taking part. The candidates were evenly divided between conservatives and reformists, the two conservatives being incumbent Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Mohsen Rezaee, and Mehdi Karroubi and Mir Houssein

Mousavi occupying the role of the reformists. Iranian elections are inherently limited as the Supreme Leader, in this case Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, decides how many candidates will run for office and exactly who will be eligible candidates (Ansari 2010). The political platforms for each candidate are thus restricted to the ideological doctrine prescribed by the Supreme Leader. The two most prominent candidates to emerge from the initial grouping were Ahmadinejad, representing the Alliance of Builders and Mousavi, representing the reformist Green Movement. Outside observers claimed that the two men were poor candidates as Ayatollah Khamenei wielded immense power over them during the entirety of the election. Foreign scholars and journalists analyzing the Iranian election focused heavily on the demographics of each candidate's supporters. In stark contrast to the poorer, more rural composition of Ahmadinejad's supporters, those backing the candidacy of Mousavi were typically wealthier, more urban, and far more tech savvy than the average Iranian citizen (Ansari 2010).

The morning following the election, with two-thirds of the total vote counted, it was announced that Ahmadinejad had won the election with 62 percent of the vote to 34 percent for Mousavi (Kamalipour 2010). The election results were heavily disputed, however, both within Iran as well as abroad. As Kevin Cross notes, following Ahmadinejad's claimed victory, "Mousavi took on the rhetoric of a radical confronting an elected government he deemed illegitimate" (Cross 2010). To assuage the rising tensions amongst the reformist opposition, the Guardian Council, a small clerical authority approved by the Supreme Leader to assure that all political appointments comply with Shari'a law, announced that a recount of disputed votes would take place (Kamalipour 2010). Nearly two weeks later, it was concluded that Ahmadinejad had rightfully won the election, ultimately deepening the radicalism of Mousavi and the reformist opposition (Cross 2010). Displeased with the election outcome, Mousavi's comments and actions became more inflammatory, sparking the concurrent radicalization of his supporters. Since many of Mousavi's followers were young, tech savvy citizens that had already been predisposed to the Internet and new social media websites such as Facebook and Twitter, cyberspace became a natural medium for organizing the opposition, disseminating pertinent information, and airing grievances about the lack of government transparency following the election. Cross characterizes those who claimed election fraud and took on the powerful Iranian government as "a

movement, a politically minded collection of individuals united around a conspiracy theory, rather than a party united by a political theory" (Cross 2010).

As protests swelled in the days following the election it became clear that Iranian citizens were losing faith in their government, or at least becoming more comfortable with vocalizing their displeasure. In particular, the previously revered Supreme Council was questioned by many Iranian religious authorities, further dividing and hampering political influence of the clergy (Ansari 2010). The unrest that followed the disputed election would not be quelled by religious fatwas, but required brute military force. The division amongst Islamic leaders in Iran gave way to and facilitated the rise of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard (IRGC), a branch of the Iranian military founded to prevent internal dissent and rebellion, immediately after the election (Cross 2010). While the IRGC was able to save the regime through brutal and oppressive force, some scholars believe that this weakened and delegitimized the theocratic rule of Iran's leaders to many within the country (Alfoneh 2009). The brutal crackdown orchestrated by the Iranian regime pushed many protesters to seek out support on the Internet. For many dissatisfied Iranians, cyberspace also functioned as a space to formulate opposition strategies and strengthen political bonds. As Cross detailed, reformers flocked to social media, particularly Facebook, in an effort to counteract their oppressors, but "as the theocracy crumbled, the IRGC developed its own capability, technical capacity, and will to assert itself in cyberspace" (Cross 2010).

## **Mass Protests and Regime Response**

Following the election on June 13, 2009 that declared Ahmadinejad the winner, spontaneous protests broke out across Iran, driven in part by the adoption of new technologies by the opposition movement. Protests occurred intermittently between the June 2009 election and the end of the year, but most violent clashes took place during the first weeks following the election. As the number of protestors grew in the wake of the disputed election, the protest movement, led by Mousavi, became far more organized. The largest protests, which took place in the week following the election, were estimated by local news sources to include hundreds of thousands to over a million protesters (Kamalipour 2010). These immense protests were immediately repressed,

however, as the Iranian regime sent thousands of police forces and basij, the Iranian voluntary militia, to the streets to calm tensions and restore order (Ansari 2010).

While the protests remained drawn out in the weeks following the election, the crackdown by the regime significantly disrupted the opposition's momentum, leading to a gradual waning of protests until December of 2009. The most significant protests against the regime to occur after the initial election protests took place in December 2009 following the death of Ayatollah Montazeri, a prominent Iranian scholar, theologian and advocate for human rights and democracy (Dabashi 2005). There were two periods when the regime cracked down on the opposition: the weeks immediately following the election and the days following the death of Ayatollah Montazeri (Cross 2010). The most noticeable method used by the Iranian regime to suppress large social movements and gatherings was arresting protesters and members of the opposition. The regime responded to the funeral of Ayatollah Montazeri by arresting protestors en masse, with the estimated number of arrests over 20,000 (Ansari 2010). A tactic used by the regime in both the June and December protests was arresting suspects before planned protests took place. Cross notes that "many of those arrested were cyber dissidents. Although these December protests were much smaller than the June protests, the number arrested was greater than in June" (Cross 2010). The targeting of citizens actively involved in online Internet communities, was also central to the regime's crackdown of the opposition movement.

In addition to arresting protestors the Iranian regime responded to what it perceived as cyber threats by creating a new cyber police unit that instituted an elaborate approach to control information (Tait and Weaver 2009). Through this unit, the government implemented several measures to curb the flow of digital information, starting before the announcement of the June 13 election results. This strategy included three primary elements: blocking SMS capabilities, significantly slowing or completely halting Internet download speeds, and jamming foreign satellite TV reception (Mortensen 2011). Digital activists on the Internet posed a great threat to the Iranian regime before, during, and after the contested election. As tensions surrounding the legitimacy of the election heightened, the Iranian government placed a ban on independent and foreign media, turning local Iranian activists into essential sources of information (Mortensen 2011).

## The YouTube Death of Neda Agha-Soltan

One week into the protest, the momentum gained by the young and agile opposition movement took a dramatic turn. On June 20th, 2009, a young, Western-dressed philosophy student by the name of Neda Agha-Soltan was murdered in the streets of Tehran during an early evening gathering (Sreberny 2010). Neda was neither the first nor the last to die during the failed Iranian revolution of 2009. What made her case so noteworthy, however, was that her death was captured vividly and gruesomely on a mobile phone video camera. Within minutes, the video had been quickly uploaded from the scene of the shooting to both Facebook and YouTube (Tait and Weaver 2009). The video of Neda's death spread rapidly within Iran as well as abroad as western news media anointed Neda a 'YouTube Martyr', repeating the narrative that she was the true unifying symbol for the opposition, finally giving the movement a much-needed identity (Parker 2009).

The video clearly depicts Neda as she lays on the ground with a bullet through her chest, struggling to stay alive. The rapidity with which the video travelled through cyberspace made this incident "one of the most potent threats faced by the Iranian regime in 30 years" (Tait and Weaver 2009). The Iranian regime responded quickly by banning "the victim's family from holding an Islamic funeral, apparently for fear of creating a figure that could unite and revive the battered opposition" (Tait and Weaver 2009). Within Iran, the response to Neda's death was tremendous as she was depicted on posters with the caption 'We are Neda' (Mortensen 2011). The lionization of Neda also extended to Facebook and other social networking sites as members uploaded her image as their profile picture and made groups commemorating her life while also assailing the brutality of the Iranian regime (Mortensen 2011). Neda quickly became the rallying cry for the fatigued opposition, both in the streets as well as online. The significance of this triggering point to the opposition movement cannot be discounted. The death of Neda galvanized protestors and provided them with a rallying cry.

Following her death, reformist presidential candidate Mehdi Karroubi solicited his followers on Facebook to gather in Tehran for a large-scale demonstration to protest Neda's death and the unwarranted savagery of the government (Sreberny 2010). Hours later, however, riot police wielding tear gas and live ammunition dispersed the crowd that was nearly 1,000 members strong (Kole 2009). While the tragic death of Neda Agha-

Soltan provided inspiration for the beleaguered protest movement due to the tremendous power of contemporary Internet communications tools, official security forces and the volunteer basij were relentless in their physical oppression of those opposing the state. Neda's death was not in vain, as it thrust the Iranian rebellion even further into the international limelight. Even with the momentum gained from Neda's death, the opposition movement was eventually overcome by the power and ferocity of its oppressor. The government response to the outpouring of support for the opposition movement following Neda's death was crucial in curbing the momentum of the uprising. If the protestors were to realize their demands of a new, fairer election that would lead to a more open and democratic Iran, it would have resulted from the momentum gained from Neda's death. The success of the government's response, however, exposed the Iranian protest movement as small in number and unable to garner enough support throughout Iranian society to enact social and political reform. Neda's tragic death provided the uprising with the best opportunity to rally its base and while it was briefly successful in doing so, it became clear that the protest movement was far too small in numbers to overtake its oppressive government.

## **Social Media's Overstated Impact in Iran**

Western media outlets were quick to define the period following the 2009 presidential election as 'The Twitter Revolution' due to the impact that the social networking site was having on local events. Although the government erected numerous barriers to communication technologies, "Iranian protestors circumvented the strict governmental control on digital communication and shared their experience of the regime's brutal handling of opponents in recordings on social networking sites" (Mortensen 2011). The importance that social media, particularly Twitter, played in the post-election protests remains uncertain, however. Evgeny Morozov notes that "it is, indeed, quite easy to dismiss the Twitter Revolution as a product of the wild imagination—or, perhaps, the excessive optimism—of our self-anointed Internet gurus and visionaries" (Morozov 2009). Morozov is apt in questioning the veracity of information and news gleaned from social media and other modern sources of information. Because social networking websites have become central to everyday life in western society and because western media outlets have become enamored with social media as a news

source, it is easy for outside observers to focus on the technological elements of the Iranian uprising. Social media and the Internet are tools that are clearly understood and widely used in the west which is why a preponderance of the news coverage surrounding the events in Iran gravitated around this subject. Even though western observers view global events through this familiar lens of social media, this approach will not necessarily be reputable, informative, or reflective of the broader movement taking place.

While the role of Twitter was certainly significant in propagating knowledge of the abuses being perpetrated by Iranian authorities, it also muddled the information being transmitted, making it even more difficult to discern actual events and statements from the fictional variety. Morozov concurs by explaining that “by its very design Twitter only adds to the noise; it’s simply impossible to pack much context into its 140 characters” (Morozov 2009). The glorification of Twitter updates and other new media websites by banned Western news outlets was also problematic for more demographic reasons. Supporters of Mousavi relied heavily on modern technologies such as Twitter to promote their message, but Twitter’s user base in Iran was composed primarily of liberal, technologically savvy, pro-Western students and young adults (Milani 2010). While this demographic might be heavily represented amongst Mousavi’s supporters, they remain a small and atypical segment of Iranian society, not reflecting broader trends in Iran. In fact, prior to the election and subsequent protests, it was estimated that in a country of seventy million people, only 20,000 Iranians were active members on Twitter, or a fraction of one percent of the population (Milani 2010). The online activity of this group of elite Iranians is most certainly in the minority and possibly only loosely connected to the protestors amassing in the streets. These tech savvy individuals were frequently the only source of information coming from inside Iran during the post-election crackdown, however, making their content even more crucial to information starved citizens around the world. The information that was being transmitted through Twitter may or may not have had any relation to the events that were taking place in the streets. The amount of attention given to the impact of social media by western media, however, augmented the protest movement, making it appear larger and more capable than it actually was.

Twitter and other social media networks remain minimally effective tools for enacting social change in the most severely repressive states. In more open societies,

where governments do not relentlessly control access to the Internet and other communication technologies, using these sites to foment mass unrest is a possibility. In Iran, however, the constant threat of the regime intervening and erecting barriers to online access makes this a difficult proposition. The mass gatherings that manifested following the election can not be ascribed solely to the impact of Twitter. As witnessed in the Egyptian revolution in early 2011, Twitter and other social media networks do have the potential to facilitate spontaneous mass gatherings, but in the case of Iran the events were not spontaneous. Instead, the mass protests that rocked the capital Tehran in the weeks following the election were “carefully planned and executed by the Moussavi camp” (Morozov 2009). While the events during Egypt’s revolution took an unplanned form, initially fueled by social media networks, Iran’s post-election crisis was premeditated and not formulated at the outset by citizen outrage on Twitter and Facebook. While social networking and communication technologies certainly facilitated the Iranian uprising in June of 2009, its broader relevance to Iranian society was minimal. The violent response by Iran’s leaders, instead, made any perceived Twitter or Facebook revolution impossible as anyone who used these sites as an organizational tool could be targeted by the government. The inability of Iran’s protest movement to realize change can be attributed in part to the lack of a broader ‘wired society’ as previously explained by Philip Howard and Jacob Groshek. Had a greater number of Iranian citizens been engaged and active on the Internet, perhaps the 2009 uprising would have been more resistant to the pressures of the state. Democratic reform in Iran did not fail outright because the country lacked a large digital activist group, but this did become a significant impediment towards change, a marked difference between the opposition movements in Iran and Egypt. The following section will dissect the Egyptian opposition movement that was able to wrest power away from the regime of Hosni Mubarak.

## Chapter 4.

### **Egypt: The Digital Origins of a Grassroots Revolution**

This section will examine the Egyptian uprising of early 2011 that paralyzed the ruling Mubarak regime and successfully orchestrated a change of power at the highest level of government. Three central components that led to the successful overthrow of Hosni Mubarak will be discussed and contrasted with similar elements of the 2009 Iranian uprising – the motives that facilitated the opposition in the months before the uprising, the mass demonstrations that were borne in online forums, and the galvanization of the protest movement following the release of Wael Ghonim from prison.

The most striking difference between the two events can be found by looking at triggering moments that occurred while each of the protests were in full force. In Iran, this moment was the death of Neda Agha-Soltan which had a marginal impact on the outcome of the uprising. In Egypt, Wael Ghonim's release from prison was the trigger point that intensified the opposition movement, proving to be crucial to the ultimate success of the revolution. In both cases, the intensity of the initial days of the uprisings had left protestors weary, pessimistic, and lacking direction and clear leadership. These triggering moments had the potential to reshape each movement by giving protestors a renewed focus. In Iran, the momentum gained was only temporary, while in Egypt the efforts of the opposition movement were intensified, leading to a dramatic reshaping of the Egyptian political landscape. The role of technology was central to both the death of Neda and the rise to prominence of Wael Ghonim and dramatically intensified the uprisings to levels that would not have been possible without the Internet and communication technologies. To better understand the entire political movement in Egypt it is necessary to examine the initial motivations of protestors that led to mass demonstrations in early 2011.

## Precipitating Events of the 2011 Uprising

The Egyptian revolution, while not predicted, had been deemed a potential outcome by many Middle Eastern scholars in the years leading up to the events of early 2011. While the timing of a possible overthrow of the Egyptian government was uncertain, the motivations behind any civil unrest had been evident for a long time. A recent publication by the International Crisis Group characterized the brewing dissatisfaction in Egypt as coming from “the urban poor [who] have long lamented rising prices, low wages and the widening gulf between them and the rich, who increasingly have fled the clogged and dirty urban streets for gated communities” (“Popular Protest in North Africa”). The economic and political situation that developed in Egypt over the past sixty years has left many citizens frustrated about the high levels of corruption, the lack of political accountability, and the ubiquitous and relentless internal security force that has beset Egyptian society.

A number of factors triggered public dissatisfaction with the Mubarak regime leading up to the revolution. In November 2010, an election was held that purportedly included massive amounts of fraud and physical intimidation of certain voting regions by state police forces (Mayton 2011). This produced a politically volatile period in the months prior to the protests and signaled to many within Egypt that Mubarak was reaching the end of his rule and possible succession. The consequences of this failed election were severe, as the elected parliament was without an opposition moving forward (Mayton 2011). Mubarak’s inability to convene a legitimate and complete parliament led Egyptians to believe that he intended to promote his son from within the ranks of the Egyptian government to be the presidential successor (Mayton 2011).

A second contributing factor was the attack on a church in Alexandria on December 31, 2010 in which 21 people died and dozens more were injured (“EGYPT: Alexandria Bomb Blast”). This lapse in security resulted in riots in both Cairo and Alexandria that involved thousands of Egyptians. Citizens directed their anger primarily at two government bodies: the interior ministry and the domestic security force. Prior to the blast there had been specific threats made on the Internet by militants, a fact that intensified public dissatisfaction with the heads of each body (“EGYPT: Alexandria Bomb Blast”). Rioters placed blame on the interior minister and the head of the domestic

security services, claiming that they had inadequately prepared for the protection of important religious sites ("EGYPT: Alexandria Bomb Blast").

Although internal elements were crucial in fomenting public dissatisfaction with the Mubarak regime, the overthrow of President Zine el Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia was seen by many as the major impetus needed to push Egypt to the brink of rebellion. The ousting of the Tunisian President immediately resulted in a renewed sense of urgency and furthered the activist movement against Mubarak in Egypt (Charlton 2011). Weeks of protests throughout Tunisia concluded with the rapid departure of President Ben Ali for the safe shores of Saudi Arabia on January 14, 2011. The rapidity in which the Tunisian opposition ousted its sitting president gave Egypt's revolutionaries the belief that "protests were possible but that they could succeed and that state institutions were weaker than they appeared" ("Popular Protest in North Africa"). The actions in Tunisia were able to empower not only the figureheads of the Egyptian revolution, but also a plethora of citizens who were not necessarily political activists, but still held a deep-seated resentment of the corrupt and ineffective Egyptian government. Immediately following the successful departure of President Ben Ali in Tunisia, some Egyptians attempted to mimic the self-immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi that sparked the Tunisian protests in hopes that it would ignite similar protests in their country (Charlton 2011). In an effort to contain the political fallout that was beginning to permeate through Egyptian society, Mubarak's ruling National Democratic Party recommended that the regime avoid "issuing any statements, or taking any measures, that could upset citizens or add to existing pressures in the near term" ("Egypt government scurries"). While the Egyptian government revealed that stemming any potential repercussions from the Tunisian rebellion was crucial to its survival, it failed to subdue the overwhelming revolutionary fervor that was percolating throughout Egypt.

## **Organizing Civil Unrest Online**

Months of political instability and a growing sense of independence from the oppressive Mubarak regime reached a tipping point in late January 2011. Stimulated by recent events within Egypt as well as abroad, young activists took to the Internet to express their disaffection with Egypt's political, social, and economic situation by pushing

for mass protests on January 25th, the National Police Day holiday (Mayton 2011). The call for mass demonstrations originated from two groups formed on the social networking site Facebook, the 6 April Youth and We are all Khaled Said groups. The 6 April Youth group was created in 2008 to promote protests in support of a labor strike in a small industrial town, but remained intact through the 2011 revolution (Mayton 2011). The We are all Khaled Said group arguably had a more dramatic impact on the outcome of the mass protests. This group was created by Wael Ghonim as a memorial to Khaled Said who died in the custody of the Egyptian police following his arrest on June 6, 2010 (Preston A10). Egyptian activists were forced to organize online because “in Mubarak’s thuggish regime, a gathering of more than five people could land you [...] in jail if you didn’t have a permit” (Wolman 2011). The often draconian rule of Mubarak had made any mass gathering or political protest practically inconceivable, but the success of Tunisia’s activists strongly encouraged those in Egypt to take their protests to the streets. The interest garnered by these two Facebook groups was instant as within a matter of days more than 80,000 Facebook users within Egypt agreed to take part (“Popular Protest in North Africa”).

The protests on January 25th, scattered throughout the country and concentrated in the capital Cairo, took on immense size. The importance of communication technologies and the Internet in formulating these gatherings and allowing them to adapt to local security situations was unequivocal. To complicate the situation for the state police force, protests were scattered throughout Cairo making them harder to control (Charlton 2011). Local police were easily caught off guard by the protestors who “mised the police by announcing then quickly changing locations, alerting participants to new [protest] sites via Twitter, text message and mobile phone” (“Popular Protest in North Africa”). The January 25 protest, an idea conceived online by thousands of Facebook users, was an enormous success in the eyes of the activists. Not only did protestors outnumber local police forces, but some protest sites did not have a police presence at all (“Popular Protest in North Africa”). Protests spanned from the northern tip of the country in Alexandria to the southernmost major city of Aswan. It was in Cairo, however, where the most potent revolutionary spirit was formed as thousands of Egyptians amassed in Tahrir Square, a central and heavily symbolic site in downtown Cairo.

The success of the January 25 protests sparked interest in subsequent demonstrations that took place on January 28th, designated the Friday of Anger. Realizing the immensely positive impact that communication technologies had on the protestors' ability to congregate, the Mubarak regime cut both the Internet and mobile telephone networks for the majority of Egyptians on the day of the second demonstration (Charlton 2011). While the government's efforts did create barriers for the protestors, selecting Friday as the day for gathering diminished the impact of the communications blockage because many citizens were already amassing in mosques for traditional Friday prayers ("Popular Protest in North Africa"). The blocking and congesting of communication networks could also have given protestors the incentive to congregate outdoors, as there was little to accomplish by staying at home. While the government's actions did create obstacles for those attempting to gain up-to-date information on the protests, it may have ultimately been a boon for those attempting to gather disgruntled citizens in the streets.

The coming week would see momentum vacillate from one camp to the other as crackdowns by the state police force were met with even larger gatherings. On February 1st, a 'million man march' took place in the streets of Cairo that injected energy into the emotionally and physically exhausted protest movement (Lidman 2011). The enormity of the February 1st protest finally provoked Egyptian state media to begin covering the events as they unfolded. The official television channel was clearly supporting Mubarak, however, and initially disregarded the protests by only discussing the concessions made by the government and not televising the demonstrations taking place in the streets (El-Bey 2011). The lack of protest coverage by state media was not problematic during the initial days of the revolution, as television station Al Jazeera, based in Qatar, was streaming events live as they unfolded to those within Egypt as well as around the world. A week into the protest, however, the Egyptian government blocked the transmission of Al Jazeera and ordered the closure of the company's Cairo branch (Williams A9).

The atmosphere in the streets radically shifted over the course of the revolution, morphing from festive and defiant to uncertain and divided. The protestors in Tahrir Square had to defend themselves from assaults by pro-Mubarak supporters throughout the revolution, heightening many activists' level of anxiety and dissuading more moderate citizens from venturing to the square (Englund and Fadel A1). The impact

that the protests were having on the Egyptian economy – a month’s worth of lost income for many – further paralyzed Egyptians who simply wanted an end to the tumultuous period. The longer the protests went on, it seemed, the more marginal of an impact they would have as moderate Egyptians would eventually return home. The direction of the revolution would take one final turn, however, with the release from prison of Wael Ghonim, the creator of the ‘We are all Khaled Said’ Facebook group and an executive at Google (Preston A12).

## **The Face of a Revolution and the Fall of Hosni Mubarak**

Ghonim’s technology background, extensive enough to land him a job at Google’s regional headquarters in Dubai, fueled his interest in cyber activism. In late spring 2010, Ghonim offered to manage the Facebook fan page of Mohamed El Baradei – a leading opposition figure in Egyptian politics – a task where his skills gained as Head of Marketing for Google’s Middle East and North Africa branch were undoubtedly useful (Giglio 2011). El Baradei’s Facebook fan page grew quickly under Ghonim’s guidance as he used it to canvass Facebook members for ideas about how to best enact democratic reform in Egypt. Ghonim would frequently interact with the group’s members via text and video, allowing the fans of El Baradei to vote on certain topics and agendas, fostering reform-minded collaboration online and setting the foundation for future cyber dissent. Ghonim felt Facebook was the best platform to enact change in Egyptian society because “voting [was] the right way to represent people in a democratic way” (Giglio 2011). Amassing supporters through a Facebook fan page was, in Ghonim’s mind, the ideal method to subvert Egyptian police authorities because “once you are a fan, whatever we publish gets on your wall [...] so the government has no way to block it later. Unless they block Facebook completely” (Giglio 2011).

The death of Khaled Said in June 2010 motivated Ghonim to further his Facebook cyber activism by creating the “We Are All Khaled Said” group. The response to Ghonim’s online efforts was enormous as the constant stream of news, photos, and videos intrigued many citizens who were dissatisfied with the widespread police brutality in Egypt. Most significant to the rapid expansion of cyber dissent in Egypt was “Ghonim’s interactive style combined with the page’s carefully calibrated posts – emotional,

apolitical, and broad in their appeal – [which] quickly turned it into one of Egypt’s largest activist sites” (Giglio 2011).

In an effort to remain non-partisan Ghonim managed the Facebook page anonymously, only going by the title El Shaheed, or The Martyr (Giglio 2011). Any association with El Baradei or the Muslim Brotherhood could have limited the group’s broad appeal and discouraged certain groups from participating in the protest movement. Concealing his identity protected Ghonim from the Mubarak regime and added to the allure and mystery in participating in this form of online activism. Ghonim’s purpose in assuming a pseudonym was “to increase the bond between the people and the group through my unknown personality. This way we create an army of volunteers” (Giglio 2011).

The collapse of the Tunisian government on January 14th encouraged Ghonim to use the foundation of cyber activism that he had constructed over the past year as an impetus to topple the ruling government. By this point, the ‘We are all Khaled Said’ Facebook page had amassed more than 350,000 members, each of whom was invited to participate in the national Police Holiday on January 25th (Giglio 2011). Three days after the invitation was sent out, 50,000 people had eagerly confirmed their willingness to participate (Giglio 2011). The success of the activist movement, however, was far from guaranteed at this point. While some felt that Egypt was on the precipice of an Internet revolution and others felt that the role of Facebook was overblown, Ghonim remained uncertain, claiming “I don’t know [...] I’m doing what it takes to make my country better” (Giglio 2011).

The last thing that Ghonim wanted to do during this process was assume public leadership of the nascent revolution. Deflecting the notion that he was in charge of the protesters and also directing their revolutionary zeal, Ghonim asserted that the protest movement that was rocking the foundation of Egyptian society remained leaderless and was better off for it. In an interview with Newsweek magazine, Ghonim emphasized that “what you don’t understand, and it seems what you don’t want to understand, is that this protest doesn’t have real organizers. It’s a protest without a leader” (Giglio 2011). Ghonim fervently believed in the anonymity of the protest’s organizer because it allowed the movement to grow independently without the threat of “being hijacked – by

politicians like El Baradei, groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, [or] perhaps even by Ghonim himself” (Giglio 2011).

Fascinatingly, Ghonim was initially able to orchestrate all of this from the security of his home and office in Dubai. Ghonim would not be denied a participatory role in the revolution, however, as he flew to Egypt in time to participate in the mass demonstrations on January 25th (Giglio 2011). While Ghonim’s presence was certain, his security was far from assured. On January 25th, along with hundreds of thousands of citizens throughout Egypt, he enthusiastically joined the first demonstration (Giglio 2011). The energy of the movement shifted the day following the gathering, however, as activists began to disappear and the Mubarak regime began blocking Facebook and mobile telephone communications for much of the country (Bradshaw 2011). On January 28th, the government shut off the entirety of the Internet, except for one Internet service provider, creating an obstacle for the organizational efforts of Ghonim (Bradshaw 2011). Later that day, Ghonim was arrested by the local police force and moved to an undisclosed location (Cohen 9).

Ghonim’s whereabouts were unknown for more than a week as “an exhaustive search of local prisons and hospitals turned up nothing” (Giglio 2011). Rumors spread about Ghonim’s role as organizer of the protests following the extensive search and the release of a statement by Google acknowledging that Ghonim had gone missing (Hennessey-Fiske 2011). Ghonim’s friends and family worried that his role as El Shaheed would jeopardize his safety even further. On the streets of Cairo, however, as word spread of Ghonim’s purported role, protestors “announced him as their symbolic leader [and] Facebook pages titled ‘We Are All Wael Ghonim’ began to emerge” (Giglio 2011).

On February 7th, following eleven days of incarceration by the state police force, Ghonim was released from prison. While in police custody, Ghonim had no knowledge of the fomenting revolution occurring throughout his country, but upon release became the face of the youthful protest movement. On the same day of his release, Ghonim was interviewed by Egyptian television station DreamTV in an emotional exchange (Cohen 9). Ghonim’s comments galvanized the most radical and moderate of the protest movement, giving “the protests a sympathetic and recognisable face, particularly for the

middle classes from which many of the revolt's organisers were drawn" ("Popular Protest in North Africa"). A resistance movement that had labored through weeks of protests that had failed to result in the removal of President Mubarak finally had the strength and determination needed to topple their ruling autocrat. The televised interview of Ghonim had a similar immediate impact to the Egyptian uprising as the recorded death of Neda Agha-Soltan had on protestors in Iran. Both groups were shocked into taking further action against the state following each event. While the impact in Iran was muted due to the government's brutish response to the reinvigorated movement, Egypt's opposition had just experienced the unifying moment that would allow it to realize its objectives.

Throughout the weeks of demonstrations, strikes, and riots, the role of the Egyptian military, revered by many in Egypt, had been unequivocally neutral. Military commanders saw the military's role as neither a brace for the flailing Mubarak regime, nor as a tool of the protestors, but as peacekeepers that needed to maintain a secure civil society (Murphy 2011). In the end, however, as Mubarak's removal seemed all but certain, the military controlled the fate of the defeated yet defiant leader. Many inside and outside Egypt had feared that Mubarak's fall would result in enormous bloodshed, however the civility of the protest movement and the neutrality of the military precluded this from happening. Instead, on the evening of February 11th, recently appointed Vice President Omar Suleiman announced on state television that Mubarak had renounced his presidency and had transferred all powers to the military (Kirkpatrick 2011). The revolution that had begun with such enthusiasm three weeks prior had ended in a far more subdued fashion with Mubarak shirking his post, leaving all of Egypt to revel in the streets.

## **Technology's Vital Place in the Egyptian Revolution**

More so than the Iranian uprising in 2009, the Egyptian protest movement was better documented by foreign media outlets that more accurately estimated the size and strength of the opposition. During the failed revolution in Iran, a lack of adequate and reliable sources from within Iran prompted western media outlets to look to social networking websites Facebook and Twitter for local insight. This had the effect of overestimating the opposition movement in Iran by viewing the events primarily through

this familiar technological prism. This was not the case in Egypt, however. While tweets and status updates from Twitter and Facebook were examined by western media to develop a more complete picture of the events taking place around the country, news outlets were allowed to continue reporting from Egypt for the majority of the revolution. Al Jazeera was relied on heavily by outside observers, as it was one of the last reputable news networks that remained in Egypt. The Egyptian uprising was more comprehensively documented and analyzed than the rebellion two years prior in Iran, because much of what was occurring in Iran was unknown or unverifiable. The events in Egypt, however, were chronicled by credible news sources that were on the ground in the capital and elsewhere. This allowed governments, news media, and citizens around the world to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the movement that seemed to be unravelling Egyptian society.

Communication technologies and social networks were more central to the formation and success of the opposition movement in Egypt, than to protestors in Iran, even though technological factors were crucial to each uprising. In Egypt, social networking allowed protest organizers to lay the foundation for future mass civil unrest. In Iran, communication technologies and the Internet did not become vital to the opposition until after the protests began, as no clear protest movement had been organized online in the months leading up to the presidential election. A higher propensity for social change existed in Egypt than in Iran due primarily to the level of openness and freedom that each government granted to citizens. The distinctions between the uprisings in Iran and Egypt can be clearly explained by Philip Howard's argument, analyzed earlier in this paper, that societies whose citizens are active online have a greater chance of democratizing than countries where citizens are disinterested by or cut-off from the Internet. In these terms, Egypt's protest movement was successful because Egyptians were allowed greater leniency in online activities than citizens in Iran. The positive relationship between the technological capacity of a population and its proclivity to adapt more democratic characteristics can be explained by the uprisings of Egypt and Iran. Even though the role of social networks in Iran's movement inflated the perceived capabilities of the protestors, it remained central to the opposition's ability to communicate and congregate. Iran's rebellion would not have progressed as far as it did if the technological tools used by protestors had been absent. The failure of Iran's

movement and the success of Egyptian protestors is not due to how technology was utilized by each group, but a reflection of the preexisting freedoms within each society.

The most striking and impactful difference between the two attempted revolutions was the organic growth of Egypt's activist movement. Whereas the opposition group in Iran had been organized by the political elites during, after, and perhaps even prior to the country's 2009 presidential election, Egypt's protests were borne out of the dissent of everyday citizens organized, at first, exclusively on the Internet. In Egypt, sites such as Twitter and Facebook were instrumental in the initial success of the demonstrations and allowed the protest movement to grow to a size where the impact of the government's Internet and mobile telephone blockage was negligible. Because Egypt's revolt had roots on the Internet, much of the dissenting damage to the Mubarak regime had been achieved prior to the Internet stoppage. Egypt's protest movement reached a tipping point where the size of the protests had made the cessation of communication technologies inconsequential.

In both countries, opposition groups experienced a triggering point in the middle of the protest movements that energized the activist base and provided a new identity to the campaign. Protestors in Iran were fueled by the tragic death of Neda Agha-Soltan. The dissemination of the video of Neda's death on the Internet was a rallying moment for the Iranian Green Movement. The revitalization experienced by protestors was short-lived, however, as the government crackdown following her death remained intense. The Green Movement also lost momentum because Neda, this group's rallying cry, was not alive to further energize the activist base and prolong the protests. While Mir Houssein Mousavi adopted the figurehead role for this revolution, he was an elite politician who had a different relationship with his supporters than a leader who had risen from the masses. Had Neda's mobilizing moment not resulted in her death, she could have usurped this role. What Iran needed was a leader to rise from within the civilian protest movement – it's own Wael Ghonim.

The opposition movement in Egypt faced the opposite problem. At first the Egyptian activist movement lacked a unifying leader, like Mousavi had been in Iran. The emergence of Ghonim as the organizer of the initial protests as well as his emotional call for change on television shocked Egypt's protest movement into action. Ghonim was

instantly elevated to a high level within the burgeoning opposition group, ultimately giving a speech to thousands of supporters at Tahrir Square. Ghonim's release from prison was the triggering point that allowed protestors to achieve their goal and remove Mubarak from power. Ghonim had a more prolonged impact on Egypt's opposition group than Neda's death had on Iran's activist movement. While Neda was lionized by many and made the face of Iran's Green Movement, her death was primarily symbolic and she was not able to take a role as a leader of the protest movement. Ghonim, however, was able to become a central figure in his country's revolution and incite more citizens to protest.

The response of each government to the protest movements, while similar, were ultimately distinct enough to result in dramatically different outcomes. Each government used the tactic of blocking the Internet and cutting mobile telephone communication to slow down the protests. In both Egypt and Iran, however, some protestors were able to work around these obstacles with various Internet proxy tools. The communications blockages did prove to be problematic to some degree in each cases, however. The brutality of the Iranian government's response was unmatched in Egypt. The Iranian government set out to openly and brutally repress the demonstrations from their beginning. Many were killed or imprisoned, which led to a heightened level of fear and insecurity throughout Iran, most notably Tehran. In Egypt, however, the government did not had the support of the military, just the local police forces. While the government response to the demonstrations throughout Egypt were violent at times, the opposition movement advanced forward predominantly unharmed. Because Egypt's government was not able to brutally repress protestors, primarily because they did not control the military, the level of fear concerning retaliation was lower in Egyptian society than it had been throughout Iran two years earlier. The following chapter will offer concluding remarks and recommendations for future studies of technological capacity and opposition movements.

## Chapter 5.

### **Conclusion: Contrasts Between the Two Resistance Movements**

Throughout the transformational events that took place in both Egypt and Iran, social networking tools were widely used by those seeking to enact political change. The final outcomes in each case were drastically different, however, stemming primarily from the preexisting level of online censorship in each country. This paper has focused on the broader impact of technology on democratization efforts and the trigger points that can propel a political movement into a full-fledged revolution that has the ability to topple governments. This comparative case study of the uprisings in Egypt and Iran has explained the importance of communication technologies to past and current democratic movements. While technological adoption remains a crucial tool for opposition movements seeking to enact social change, its influence is highly contingent on the freedoms that exist for a country's citizens. As the cases of Egypt and Iran indicate, countries where citizens have greater liberties online will have a greater propensity for enacting democratic reform. The Internet and communication technologies have the potential to be revolutionary tools in developing nations, however, if countries do not have an active online civil society, the benefits gained from new technologies will be inconsequential.

Existing literature on the relationship between technological adoption and democratization efforts is well-defined and comprehensive. What is lacking in this field of study, however, is analysis of more contemporary trends in digital activist movements. The majority of studies have focused on previous intervals that are less applicable to the current period of modern digital activism that has paralleled the rise of social networking websites such as Facebook and Twitter. This study attempts to add a comprehensive analysis of contemporary trends in online activist efforts while also acknowledging the importance of past studies. Understanding the historical relationship between technology and democratization is crucial to the analysis of modern digital activist efforts. While much of the technological tools used by opposition movements have changed dramatically in recent years, the impact of these tools has remained significant. The

intent of this comparative case study is not to develop an overarching theory that can be applied to any uprising in the developing world, but is instead to illuminate the immense potential of the Internet, social networking, and communication technologies to modern day uprisings.

The study of technological adoption and democratization remains a nascent field where more analysis is certainly needed. The future examination of this relationship should not attempt to generalize the role of technology on opposition movements, however. While understanding the broader impact of technological innovation on society is important to scholarly efforts in this field, researchers should not attempt to construct one broad theory that will explain the impact of communication technologies on uprisings around the world. Instead, research should focus on both the specific technological tools being adopted and utilized by each opposition movement as well as the level of social and online freedom prevalent in each country or population being studied. These two elements are vital to understanding the local impact that technological innovation and adoption will have on protest groups. Certain technological tools might be more widely used in different parts of the world and therefore might not be applicable to the case being studied. As this paper has indicated, the level of preexisting freedoms in a country can be decisive in determining the success or failure of an uprising. Acknowledging the different societal restrictions and freedoms of each case is essential to improving the quality and applicability of research on technology and democratization.

What these two examples indicate is that revolutions occur due to a number of elements happening concurrently. In the cases of Iran and Egypt, neither technology, nor the composition of the protest movement, nor the response of the government is the sole reason why the revolution succeeded or not. Instead, it is the amalgamation of certain events and tactics that produce a successful rebellion. Each case has indicated, however, that the diffusion of technology and a greater technological capacity can facilitate anti-government movements. As witnessed in Iran, however, the level of repression levied by the government can easily counteract any benefits gained from technological adoption. It is clear that the number of anti-government movements should increase as developing nations continue to reach higher levels of technological capability. While technological innovation is not the sole necessity for fighting corrupt and repressive regimes, it certainly aids those seeking to enact change.

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