

Social Media Lessons Learned for Political Engagement

In December of 2010 a man in Tunisia self-immolated in protest and what has followed has literally been explosive, as the lessons learned on the use of social media has been at light speed. Since 2010 a number of connected and seemingly unconnected events have changed the tone and texture of activism. Social media and digital technology is, both neutral and strategic terrain. The following points present lessons learned to date from several seemingly unconnected events; The Arab Spring, SOPA/PIPA, and NDAA.

Modern disobedience is rarely viewed as a political element, but a side element of radicalism, terrorism and plain civil disobedience.

Contemporary events compare with this history. Many local initiatives, grievances, grass-roots leaders and the appearance of fragmented authority, appear to stand in short duration. The State, Law Enforcement, and the Military stigmatize and describe these loose outbreaks as mass impetuosity without direction or form. The Occupy movement and its supporters is one such example.

Ranajit Guha, in *Selected Subaltern Studies and Elementary Aspects of Insurgency in Colonial India*, describes this as '*... multiple elements of conscious leadership, but no one of them predominates. ... the symbiosis of sarkar (someone of authority), sahuakar (banker or money lender) and zamindar (collector of land revenue, tax collector?), is a political-economic fact directing insurgency against one or all? The peasant detected a mutuality of interest and power (the triumvirate: in the eyes of the population, political character equals economic exploitation; the state views the resulting acts as banditry and not as a form of social protest of the political character and economic exploitation*'

Despite that some power concepts, groups or people have failed to rise above localism, sectarianism, or ethnicity, it does not take away from the essentially political character of the activity, but defines the quality of that politics by specifying limits. The State views each as local and separate instance, unless, like SOPA/PIPA, you gather 4millions of petition signatures inside of 84 hours and countless emails to Representatives, in which case politicians that ignored this would do so at the risk of their political career.

Social Media and Digital technology defy those limits, and connect other limits, at Quantum speeds.

Thus, the consultative process in past activism and insurgency had previously taken weeks and months, now, the temporization and weighing of pro and con has already been weighed and measured in the collective cloud of thought and idea, immediately transmitted via social media. For instance, the estimated number of active twitter users in the Middle East at the end of September 2011 was over 650,000. Globally, 1 Billion Tweets are estimated to be sent every four days. the estimated number of tweets is over 1million a day, 854 tweets a minute or circa, 14 tweets a second.

Within this cloud is a network of individuals and communities that identify with a single and or multiple unifying factors, such as: grievances over corruption, religion, governance and unemployment. The result of massing this unifying effect was evident in the Arab Spring,

Occupy and SOPA/PIPA. Conversely, from a US Domestic point of view, the unifying effect failed in its timing and synchronicity with House Bill HR 347, and the National Defense Authorization Act of 2012, as these two items effectively slipped past public scrutiny, despite very controversial elements that are contained within them.

We are all aware what Social Media has done in the Middle East. I think valid questions to ask are: Where is it going next? And can Social Media make the Electoral College in US Politics obsolete? My initial inclination is, perhaps.

The following is a list of lessons learned.

1. Ideology in both a loose sense and very wider sense bubbles and hangs in the social/population collective cloud (see item number 16). Social media is an effective tool to self radicalizes simultaneous multi-dimensional threats and groups.
2. Social media makes emotive escalation rapid to the point that it overwhelms, yet it can also be very transient. Timing and synchronicity with public mood with the urgency of an item is key. This is key because, before we can predict what people are likely to do, we must first understand what they believe about a situation and the outcomes they desire. The trends in the blogosphere, tweets and counter-tweets already make this evident of what the mood and character is like in this collective cloud.
3. Social media and digital technology have brought an escalation of global insecurity from multiple sources and locations. Social media and digital technology connect, engage and mobilize disenfranchised Diaspora that creates multiple simultaneous security challenges – local and international. It is for this reason that activism through social media is not viewed as activism or even civil-disobedience, but terrorism.
4. *Digital and social media make no distinction* between journalism, citizens that report in real time, activism and entertainment. The anonymity allows for one to cross over all thresholds at once and at will. This makes Law Enforcement and Security Specialists crazy and causes politicians to view this as banditry, terrorism, and militancy; hence the perception by those that govern that stricter legislative and lawenforcement measures must be enacted.
5. Social media and blogs have gone beyond a competition for internet market share to circumventing government control thru the use of a crowd-sourced narrative that is culturally in context with the wider idea and ideology, and are not restricted to a geographical area.
6. Tweet, counter-tweets, and social media are the means in which influence operations are conducted.
7. Digital technology and social media is the new political top cover. if you can influence the politics the economics will follow. This is a strange paradox in which gov't and military believe that only two 'imperatives exist for strategy: the economic imperative' or the 'military imperative.'
8. Social media is multi platform and a vortex.
9. The amount of internet penetration in a country is no longer a valid gauge.

10. Opinion shapers, influencers, celebrities, and folk stars come in various languages, cultures and locations. They can be simultaneously, spoiler, detractor and supporter.
11. Social media is the new first method of pre-emptive strike...if.... it can be coordinated and executed in synch with credibility within a cultural narrative that resonates.
12. Social media and digital technology is best suited to a 'Maoist' strategy in which the will of your opponent is quickly overcome through indirect means and psychological mass. The use of the "emotional narrative" goes from slow boiling to mass mobilization in moments, or from "Viral to Spiral" in which things violently spiral out of control.
13. Social media is truly a "population-centric" strategy; counterinsurgents or insurgents are not confined, locations for both are both local and global.
14. Social media and digital Technology is a low cost, highly effective means of exploiting political, economic and social vulnerabilities by developing and sustaining resistance against strategic Corporate or Gov't objectives. It is mass mobilization without borders.
15. Speed, mass, and objective are key military principles; Social media accelerates these at a "Mach" and exponential "Social-Emotional-Narrative" speed; John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt, created the concept of "Netwar" when they articulated this process as *"... swarming; a deliberately structured and coordinated way to strike from all directions"*
16. *Revolutions, revolts and insurgents can be created in days, not months; especially when the conditions for the grievance and platform for dissent already exist. This easily bypasses the traditional early vulnerable stages of mobilization in past insurgencies (See first bullet reference collective social cloud)*
17. The conditions that ultimately weaken or divide a govt/group already exist. Visualize an 'iceberg' in which 90% of those that feel disenfranchised bubble under the surface and what you actually see or hear might represent 10%. Social media and digital technology exploit those pre existing conditions in an exponential manner. The population's desire and will is better enabled and provides a more secure platform for the masses to resist without real fear of retaliation.
18. *Social media is both "favorable terrain" and "neutral terrain" in a law enforcement and military analytic sense. It is the same in a "market share" sense. You can gain and lose your support by as much as what you do and say, and fail to do and say.*
19. *The most profound revolutions to date were social media –population-centric resistance movements.*
20. *Revolution may not be the aim, but in most cases to date it has been the outcome.* Social media and the growing body of collective effort create a sense of inevitability of perceived outcome and regime change. The sense of narrative creates actions before consequences. Social media creates a sense of the "end of history" as the nuanced version of the narrative creates millions of identifiable personal stories, statements, or chronicles feed the proverbial beast. The ethics and universalism of the moment is greater than the parts.