Social media: following EU public diplomacy and friending MENA

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BACKGROUND

New technologies are impacting policy and changing the landscape of diplomacy, governance and international relations. Social media has become an important limitless resource to connect and inform people, transcending borders and impacting all demographics. It presents a real-time stream of information in which one source can instantaneously broadcast to many sources and stimulate debate on a personal level. These developing communication methods have dramatically changed politics: democratising the flow of information, exponentially increasing awareness and quickly globalising ideas and concepts. In the Arab Spring, social media facilitated action in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, providing a free and accessible method of organising and coordinating demonstrations.

While uprisings throughout history have been successful without the internet and smart phone, technological advancements from the printing press to the guillotine have enabled opposition groups to make gains on existing regimes. Social media is one such advancement that has played an important role as an informative organisational tool, both within the MENA region and also externally, as an unedited information resource circumventing government censors and directly informing foreign actors. Although a digital paper trail can be exploited,

manipulated or used to repress, there is an overall benefit from open accessibility. Recently the United Nations, drawing from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, stated that all people have the right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers. The conscientious technology of social media should be embraced and supported by all actors at all levels.

As the Arab Spring fades to summer, the revolutionary technology of social media will continue to play a role in government and civil society, requiring a change in policies both in Member States and in the EU, particularly in the foreign policy of the EU through the public diplomacy of the European External Action Service (EEAS). An effective public diplomacy would improve the EU's response to the crises in the Mediterranean in tandem with humanitarian aid and military action. It is recommended that the EU, through the EEAS, engage citizens both inside the EU and around the globe, through the same medium which enabled protestors to topple autocrats and dictators: social media. This policy brief seeks to explain the importance of social media in the political landscape of the Arab street, briefly discuss the use of social media in public diplomacy and finally suggest social media prospects for EU external action through the EEAS.

STATE OF PLAY

New platforms of social media did not cause the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia, or protests in Syria and Yemen; yet, the role of these communication technologies cannot be underestimated in the Arab Spring particularly when considering the population's 'youth-bulge'. A demographic analysis

of the protestors in the MENA region depicts a youth-led revolt which is reflective of the overall regional population: in Egypt the median age is 24 and in Tunisia it is 30. Young people are often more accepting of new technologies and are more subject to social norms and peer pressures that may enforce use of

online networks and internet trends which has introduced social media into the protestors' toolkit.

Ev'rywhere I hear the sound of marching, charging feet

From MySpace to Google+, the platforms of social networking have changed over time, following trends and new developments. A quote from Twitter sums up the useful websites: *@jaredcohen: One Egyptian says, "Facebook used to set the date, twitter used to share logistics, YouTube to show the world, all to connect people" #jan25*

The most popular social networking website, Facebook, officially reports 750 million worldwide active users. It is the world's most trafficked website, accessible in 70 languages and consuming 700 billion minutes per month. A multitude of free services are offered on Facebook, allowing users to connect to 'friends', sharing status updates, photos, videos, links, chat and more. In return, users receive a 'News Feed' of incoming data shared by friends and other pages you 'like'.

The second most popular social media website, Twitter, is a microblogging platform with 200 million registered users. Messages called *tweets* are up to 140 characters are posted on a user's page and can be linked to topics by using a *hashtag* (#) symbol or linked to users by a *reply or mention (@) symbol.* Twitter prompts users to answer the question 'What's happening?', which generates 200 million tweets per day. This simplicity enables Twitter to be both a social networking site and a new broadcast media site, allowing users to connect while also serving as an instantaneous source of news. Users can 'follow' a Twitter feed but registration is not required to view *unprotected* (public) tweets. Updates are published directly from users, christened *citizen journalists,* but tweets are not necessarily approved or verified. One such example of an unapproved Twitter reveal is the announcement of Osama bin Laden's death, which was tweeted before officially announced; an example of an unverified Twitter reveal is the false report by *Fox News* of the assassination of President Obama.

Regardless of the political status of a country, Facebook and Twitter as social media are immensely popular on both sides of the Mediterranean: roughly 150 million Facebook users are within the EU and 21 million are in MENA. Updates posted online can offer insight into general public opinion and offer a predictive number of supporters. A protest event in Cairo, which was posted on Facebook, had 43,000 people registered to attend as of 28 January; 'We are all Khaled Said,' the Facebook page said to be the spark of protests in Egypt, now has 1.5 Million 'likes'. Significantly, the Egyptian

government reacted to protests by blocking mobile services and 'shutting off' the internet, indicative to a fear of these resources.

The revolution will not be tweeted?

The debate over the link between social media and activism gathered force following the failed Green Revolution in Iran. Many 'cybersceptics' believe that social media connects people based on weak ties and does not promote the type of passionate engagement necessary for real change, calling those who support a cause online but are not willing to take action, 'slacktivists'. While substantive comprehensive research examining social media with respect to the Arab Spring has not yet been published, theories of social media and future prospects are commonly drawn from innovative thinkers, knowledgeable analysts and Twitter Dashboards. The prospects for research are vast, and it is expected more studies will analyse the level of stability in a country relative to the quantity of expression online.

Whether the revolution will start online may be subject to interpretation and should be further analysed, nevertheless, one available insight is the Al Jazeera Twitter Dashboard which tallies tweets in the region and serves as a connecting platform between social media and traditional media. This site charts the quantity of tweets in several countries into a colour-coded line graph, available in three time periods: the previous hour, day or week. Using quantity instead of quality to determine significance, it provides a feed of the source tweets offering a real-time illustration of what is being tweeted and where. This data reveals an increase of tagged tweets on significant protest dates and in response to notable speeches by leaders.

In another political realm, social media proved useful to the election campaign of President Obama, beginning on Facebook in February 2007. In the online campaign social media was used to raise campaign funds, build a relationship with voters, and provide immediate feedback. A team of staff members worked to provide prompt feedback and rapid updates. This style of organisation was *copy/pasted* in January 2011, when citizens in the MENA region used the same methods and platforms. Though these activists lacked strong individual leaders, political strategists and campaign funds, social media enabled protestors to replace the results usually drawn from monetary capital with a broad base of volunteer support.

It is clear that social media is a useful tool to organise protest, which helps to increase participants without budgets and without a prominent single leader. Social media is an adaptable, accessible and easy to use

tool, not a *cause*, which can be used to impact the political landscape.

We all want to change the world

As the spring fades to summer, the EU can more clearly express its role in the MENA region by increasing its public diplomacy through social media tools within the EEAS and the EU Delegations. Though strategic communications structures are still being developed within the EEAS and time must be allowed for these strategies to be put into practice; there is an opportunity for the EU through the EEAS to unite external representation in social media and develop a dialogue with civil society, in line with recent proposals made to strengthen links with civil society in the EU's neighbourhood.

Encouraging democracy in the MENA region is clearly in the interest of the EU and public diplomacy can be used to realise this potential. Public diplomacy seeks to engage and influence foreign public audiences to encourage support for an external government objective, which accompanies external actions. It is not public affairs or an information strategy; instead it is influencing a foreign audience through multiple methods, mediums and tools. This type of outreach should not be confused with the already existent Directorate Generals of Information Society and Communication. Public diplomacy is an exchange at the level of the individual, in two-way communication, which carefully promotes ideals and desires. The MENA region engages between citizens online; the EU must also acknowledge and reciprocate through social media to better promote policies and increase accessibility.

Public diplomacy draws on 'soft power' which is the power of attraction, not coercion, to influence others to want what you want. Soft power requires the resources of an attractive culture, admirable political climate, and legitimate foreign policy; it is not the threat or use of force, payments or contrived strategies. The EU has the 'soft power' to feed public diplomacy, particularly in the MENA region, and the EEAS has the opportunity to unite external EU action to better market itself as an actor through strategic communications.

The EEAS currently reaches out to public audiences through press releases, statements and missions by the High Representative (HR). This is not enough. The EEAS should first develop a public diplomacy directorate or unit with a dedicated staff and resources. A public diplomacy strategy should be developed to clarify goals and objectives as well as to state how EU public diplomacy can interact and correspond with existing Member State public diplomacy. Social media must be incorporated as part of a strategic approach to public diplomacy, as it offers a new platform to strengthen the interaction between the Service and external citizens in a more friendly and casual manner than an official statement.

In a political climate where everyone from the Taliban to the Pope is on Twitter, it is important for the EU to heed the lessons of the Arab Spring and further develop its online outreach. In a sense, it is a reciprocal benefit: the EU can learn from citizens of the MENA region how to effectively use social media, and in turn, the MENA citizens can interact with the EU on social media.

PROSPECTS

The right to access the internet has been substantiated through intergovernmental organisations, NGOs, independent analysts and nation states. The United States Department of State, under Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, created the Internet Freedom Initiative in January 2010. Clinton outlined a new policy of a '21st Century Statecraft', stating that the *freedom to connect* is similar to the freedom of assembly in cyberspace. The State Department runs 'tech camps' in various countries to train activists, and also facilitates an international exchange called 'TechWomen' to empower women in online action. The EEAS and the HR should similarly engage foreign publics in social media, encourage the freedom to connect, and offer assistance in support of this democratising technology.

Overall the EU has already opened an exhaustive list of accounts on social media including: Facebook,

MySpace, Hyves, LinkedIn, Twitter, Blip, Flickr, Picasa, Daily Motion, YouTube and Vimeo. Numerous EU Institutions, Commissioners, policies and projects are promoted using social media; this policy brief will focus on those under control of the EEAS.

Another brick in the wall?

The EEAS created a [Facebook page](#) in mid-May 2011, which currently has 1,774 'likes'. Updates are posted around once per day, and comments are ignored, it is a one-directional communication. On Twitter, the EEAS maintains two accounts: [@eu_eeas](#) and [@EUHighRepSpox](#). Both Twitter accounts are not effectively used or promoted. In comparison to the 4,132 who follow the EEAS on Twitter: 34,800 people follow Swedish Foreign Minister [Carl Bildt](#), 46,319 follow UK Secretary of State William Hague and 9 million follow Barack Obama.

The @eu_eeas is a one-directional account tweeting links to official press releases and statements. Twitter is better utilised to exchange views, interact and provide personal reflection. The @EUHighRepSpox is a bit less formal and a bit less frequent, posting statements from the HR, such as this one: 'Catherine Ashton: We need 'deep democracy' to take root #eeas'. But this is still too formal and restrictive, it doesn't link to any particular region or country and it is therefore not relevant. The conversation taking place online is casual, continually evolving and changing with user contributions, and uses appropriate linking hashtags (such as #jan 25 or #egypt).

Many officials, organisations and politicians are successful and popular on social networks because they interact, devoting resources and personnel to maintaining a dialogue. The EEAS Twitter account does not respond directly to mentions (@) or *retweet* postings, ignoring the conversational interactive nature of Twitter. If HR Ashton were to open a personal Twitter account, instead of speaking through a spokesperson or in formal statements, it would greatly improve her image and perceived engagement, and offer the chance for increased accessibility and needed insight into her work.

In many other countries, social media is used both in official public diplomacy programs and in more personal leader accounts. Russian President Dmitry Medvedev visited the Twitter headquarters and set up an account in English @MedvedevRussiaE (107,149 followers), and in Russian, @MedvedevRussia (362,453 followers). The Quai d'Orsay, @francediplo has 88,918 followers. @IndianDiplomacy, the 'Official twitter account of Public Diplomacy Division of Ministry of External Affairs, India' has 11,880 followers. @khalidalkhalifa, the English twitter account of the foreign minister of Bahrain, has 39,580 followers. The EEAS should look to these examples to develop and streamline its digital communications, both as a Service and through the HR herself.

The times they are a-changin'

The entire network of the EU on social media should be interconnected, indexed and officially verified. On both Twitter and Facebook the EEAS should promote other EU sites, liking or following pages of the European Parliament and the European Commission, figures such as Herman Van Rompuy, all Commissioners, and even citizens to show interest and facilitate interaction.

It is recommended that the EEAS post multiple types of media and creatively engage in a less formal dialogue on social media. Press releases and official statements are not useful when posted to Twitter, instead the EEAS should link to external sites, retweet relevant postings from other users, offer a personal perspective on current events, and more effectively use hashtags to link tweets to subjects. It should also strive to be 'verified' as an official Twitter account. In addition to these Twitter suggestions, on Facebook, the EEAS should post photographs and videos of the HR in the field, and request the Wikipedia-drawn duplicate page to be removed.

Social media should also be incorporated in outreach and public diplomacy in the EU delegations. The EEAS maintains eight delegation pages on Facebook, only Tunisia is in the MENA region. Given the success of Facebook and Twitter in the region, every EU delegation should have an account on both of these sites to directly engage in public diplomacy and to interact with citizens. Communications should be in local languages as well as English.

Facebook and Twitter have proved to be a tool for developing civil society and strengthening civic activism in the public sphere. Technology usually lags in government organisations compared to civil society, and it is still 'early days' for the EEAS, but a clear social media strategy should be developed within the EU's public diplomacy. More frequent updates, direct responses and greater availability of informal information will ensure that the EEAS is a 'friend' to freedom of expression and better 'follows' the Arab Spring.

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