

Facebook revolutions? My foot

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Will the media experts or Messrs BBC & CNN enlighten us as to why Facebook magic did not work in Libya. Why Qaddafi regime had to be NATO-bombed and not 'Facebooked'?

Warning: I am writing this piece out of irritation. I think irritation is pretty legitimate inspiration under irritating times.

Five hundred people, mostly youth, laid their lives on the streets of Tunis. Thousands of Tunisian revolutionaries spent their youth in Ben Ali's horrible dungeons. When Bouazizi's torched body set the House of Ali on fire, media experts exclaimed: Faaaaaacebook!

My reaction was: my foot.

I don't waste time in front of idiot box. But I learnt from friends and comrades the way mainstream TV channels attributed Tunisian revolution to Faaaaaacebook.

Ben Ali had hardly landed Saudi Arabia, a deafening noise simply began to pollute the global public sphere. The only intelligible phrases, amid this clamour, were: Egypt and Faaaaaacebook.

My reaction was: my foot.

All of a sudden, the noise went silent.

Libya!

Let me pose some irritating questions at this point:

1. Will the media experts or Messrs BBC & CNN enlighten us as to why Facebook magic did not work in Libya. Why Qaddafi regime had to be NATO-bombed and not 'Facebooked'?
2. Yes, it was Asma Mahfouz' Youtube call that paved the way for Al-Tahrir sit-in. But why Youtube calls in the past did not attract any Cairo mob? Why only after the Tunisian revolution?
3. Why in Iran Facebook, Twitter, Youtube and SMS did not bring down Mehmud Ahemdinejad?
4. Saudi Arabia, of all the Arab countries, is most deeply penetrated by the Internet. Why Facebook did not ruffle any section of the population in Saudi Arabia?
5. Why have WikiLeaks not been able to stop US occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan while Daniel Ellsberg's whistle blowing brought Vietnam War to a screeching halt?

And most importantly: why all the media experts in all these media faculties at elite Western campuses remained silent for years and did not tell Arabs to Facebook the tyrants?

We have instead come to know that high-profile academics at London School of Economics were

meeting the Libyan despot to garner some petro-dollars.

Reality of media myth:

While revolutions were unfolding in Arab world, I happened to meet **Serge Halimi**. Director of *Le Monde Diplomatique*, Halimi is an expert mainstream never welcomes. For them, he is subversive, an extremist. I interviewed him for Viewpoint.

Farooq Sulehria

“FS: The Arab revolutions are being attributed to Facebook and Tweeter. Your comments.

SH: I wonder if it is not a bias of the people working in the media. There is, however, always a tendency to explain revolution by its communication system; it is also a job you can perform from your armchair, with your laptop, without going anywhere, interviewing anyone.... Reformation is explained by printing press, Iranian revolution had audio tapes while Kennedy's victory over Nixon is attributed to former's better TV appearance. Journalists love this because it puts them at the centre of the stage. One cannot say that means of communication do not play a role. But I am always reluctant to assign communication a central role. The danger is that we may forget important factors, the structural factors, for instance, such as income distribution, union power, demographics, trade, financial flows, etc. These factors play a major role. When there was a potential for revolt in Arab world as a result of structural factors, the Facebook and Tweeter gave this potential an outlet.

FS:What about the role of WikiLeaks in stimulating Arab revolutions?

SH: In case of Tunisia, I wonder if it had been any different if a major newspaper had published a cable from US embassy on Ben Ali's and his family's corruption. It might have the same effect. People would have written leaflets out of these reports and distributed them. Now a days, we set a meeting by email. Earlier, we might have met by an appointment on telephone. But still we have met in the same conditions”.

The power attributed to media is an overblown myth. Alternative or mainstream, media merely reflect the balance of power in a given society. Often a technology, in its infancy, is out of bourgeoisie's control. During this phase, subaltern classes may make use of a technology. However, bourgeoisie asserts itself after a time. The press in Britain, for instance, was a realm of revolutionaries and working classes. The ruling class, initially, tried to hush it up through repression. The 'knowledge taxes' were imposed. Revolutionary journalists were flogged and tortured. Nothing, however, worked. Finally, the free market was unleashed on working class press. The cost of newspaper production went beyond the means of working classes. The free market stifled the revolutionary press in England.

The *Ellsberg Papers* were able to stop the Vietnam War because Daniel Ellsberg blew the whistle when streets across the USA and Europe were echoing with the slogan, 'Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh. We shall win'. The WikiLeaks did not find any matching response on the streets.

The Youtube call in Egypt would not have been paid any heed perhaps for another period in the absence of Tunisian revolution. In Tunisia, a revolution would not have been possible in the absence of UGTT (General Union of Tunisian Workers), a vibrant left, an Islamist network and an engaged civil society. In Libya and Saudi Arabia, a civil society is simply missing. In Iran, the regime was able to survive because a) it had some social base unlike Ben Ali and Mubarak b) the reformist leadership did not want to bring down the system hence betrayed at a crucial moment.

In short, revolutions and counter-revolutions are neither caused nor effected by way of communication tools. It takes a Marx, a Lenin, a Trotsky, a Rosa, a Gramsci to understand a revolution. Paranoid media experts and their Facebook-explanations raise more questions rather than answering any.

P.S.

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