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Final Paper Term Paper: "Social media: A Catalyst for Yemeni Contagion."

Although Yemen was accustomed to conflict – dating as far back as the 19th century when the British and Ottoman empires clashed over control of South Yemen - the Arab Spring uprisings ushered in an unprecedented use of social media as a tool of revolution. [1] Yemeni citizens (comprising of members of the Joint Meeting Parties, a coalition of formal opposition parties, and technologically-savvy youths) fed up with the oppressive and authoritarian regime of President Ali Abdullah Saleh and his General People's Congress and inspired by the success of the protests in Egypt and Tunisia, took to the streets of the capital city, Sana, in protest the day after the Egyptian regime collapsed. [2] The use of Web 2.0, described by Frangonikolopoulos and Chapsos as a "plethora of social media available on the Internet, including blogs, photo and file sharing systems, and social networking sites," enabled rebels to approach the revolution in a way that wouldn't have been possible without it. [3] Although the social, political, and economic environment of Yemen was the initial motivation for a revolution, social media was a vital element during the Yemeni Arab Spring in the organization and coordination of protests, domestic and international spread of information, leading to the acceleration of the Arab Spring revolution and mobilization of protesters.

Because the Yemeni people were incredibly discontented with the social, political, and economic environment of their nation, they were initially motivated to act. Due to a lack

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[1] Manfred W. Wenner. "Yemen." Encyclopedia of the Modern Middle East and North Africa. Ed. Philip Mattar. 2nd ed. Vol. 4. New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2004. 2385-2391. Gale Virtual Reference Library. Web. 14 Feb. 2016.
http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CCCX3424602909&v=2.1&u=umd_towson&it=r&p=GVRL&sw=w&asid=1aed57aad85b33e7bf355315387b6e04

[2] Kamal Eldin, and Osman Salih. "Roots and Causes of the 2011 Arab Uprisings." *Arab Studies Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (Spring 2013): 184-206, accessed 28 March 2016,
http://eds.a.ebscohost.com/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=4422c4c1-3742-4999-a6cd-d11e3687a454%40sessionmgr4003&vid=2&hid=4213

[3] Christos A. Frangonikolopoulos, and Ioannis Chapsos. "Explaining the Role and the Impact of the Social Media in the Arab Spring." *Global Media Journal: Mediterranean Edition* 7, no. 2 (Fall 2012): 10–20. URL:
http://eds.b.ebscohost.com/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=9bfbf12a- 8a1c-4074-bbf1-75b7f02170fe%40sessionmgr111&vid=2&hid=122

of institutional development, Yemen was split into North and South in the early 19th century, only unifying in 1990, and leading to a civil war in 1994.[4] Similarly to other dictators, Saleh solidified his corrupt grip on Yemen by ensuring his close allies had positions of power with the Yemeni governmental system. According to Osman Salih and Kamal Eldin, the regimes of the Arab World "secured systematically economic and social discrimination, and political exclusion along ethnic and sectarian lines," which added an intensified level of suffering and discontent among the Yemeni people.[5] In addition to this, abduction, involuntary disappearances, unwarranted arrests, torture and unfair trial, unlawful killings and various other human rights violations were also common occurrences in this regime. Basic individual liberties like Freedom of the Press, Freedom of Expression, and Freedom of Organization and Association weren't allowed either, with journalists writing unflattering pieces about the Saleh regime getting especially harassed by the government in Yemen.[6] Environmental issues were intensified by Yemen's growing population putting extra pressure on the natural resources, leading to water shortages and desertification.[7] As a nation with high unemployment and poverty rates – 59.5% of Yemeni population was living in extreme poverty in 2012 – a large portion of the poor living in rural parts of Yemen relied on agriculture for income, making the intensifying water shortages and desertification even more devastating for the Yemeni people.[8]

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[4] James Gelvin, *The Arab Uprisings: What Everyone Needs To Know*. New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012, 94.

[5] Osman Salih and Kamal Eldin, "Roots and Causes of the 2011 Arab Uprisings," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (Spring 2013): 187, URL: http://proxy-tu.researchport.umd.edu/login?ins=tu&url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mth&AN=87607038&site=eds-live&scope=site

[6] Ibid.

[7] Christos A. Frangonikolopoulos, and Ioannis Chapsos, "Explaining the Role and the Impact of the Social Media in the Arab Spring," Global Media Journal: Mediterranean Edition 7, no. 2 (Fall 2012): 11, URL: http://proxy-tu.researchport.umd.edu/login?ins=tu&url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ufh&AN=90537626&site=eds-live&scope=site

[8] Ibid.

A culmination of these factors led to an increased level of dissatisfaction which can be explained by examining the cultural incongruence hypothesis. As explained by Gadi Wolfshed, Eled Segev, and Tamir Sheafer, this is the gap between the level of democratic values wanted by citizens and the actual level of democracy in their country; the wider the gap, the wider the instability of a nation.[9] The cultural incongruence hypothesis, when applied to Yemen (a country rife with instability), could account for why people were motivated to physically occupy the streets of Sana in the first place.

It's crucial that the reasons Yemeni people were prompted to risk their physical well-being by participating in social media movements are fully understood before further exploring social media's role crucial in the Yemeni Arab Spring demonstrations. Although it's possible to track down social media users through IP addresses and cookies, social media offered protesters a sense of anonymity that wasn't available in the physical occupations of Yemen's public sphere.[10] People also felt safer from harm because a sense of security created by the sheer number of online protesters.[11] Lastly, Yemeni citizens experienced an extent of freedom through social media, and a consequent exposure to the rest of the world, that hadn't previously been available to them.[12] The taste of freedom Yemenis found online increased the urgency for the end of Ali Abdullah Selah's dictatorial regime. In terms of the Arab Spring, the online protest movement can be defined as a social non-movement. According to Frangonikolopoulos and Chapsos, a social non movement is the collective action of non-collective players.[13] These movements are comprised of large numbers of ordinary civilians

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[9] Gadi Wolfsfeld, and Eled Segev, and Tamir Sheafer, "Social Media and the Arab Spring: Politics Comes First," *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 18, no. 2 (2013): 116, DOI: 10.1177/1940161212471716

[10] Stephanie Davison, "An Exploratory Study of Risk and Social Media: What Role Did Social Media Play in the Arab Spring Revolutions?" *Journal of Middle East Media* 11 (Fall 2015): 21,URL: http://proxy-tu.researchport.umd.edu/login?ins=tu&url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ufh&AN=108996561&site=eds-live&scope=site

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Christos A. Frangonikolopoulos, and Ioannis Chapsos, "Explaining the Role and the Impact of the Social Media in the Arab Spring," *Global Media Journal: Mediterranean Edition* 7, no. 2 (Fall 2012): 13, URL:

whose fragmented but similar activities cause vast social change, despite these practices being "rarely guided by an ideology or recognizable leaderships and organizations."[14] Social non-movements by developing the will of the collective – which in the case of the Yemeni people was the desire for freedom.

The use of social media, specifically Facebook and Twitter, enabled Yemeni rebels to organize and coordinate various protest actions. Social media is defined by Theodor Tudoroiu as a "communication network based on the combined use of Web 2.0 applications, cellphones, and satellite television that allows the production and exchange of user-generated content in ways potentially leading to the formation of virtual networks and communities."[15] Blogs, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram are examples of popular social media sites. Just as strength is often found in a physical societies where a collective identity is created, members of the online community were empowered through the networks created through social media. Groups also created unity amongst the protesters as they shared grievances and experiences and created a more unified collection of people.[16] The online social non-movement's lack of formal leadership of compelled all participants to directly engage with the content, and forced them to take personal ownership of the actions.[17] This shared sense of ownership was key in enhancing unity of the Yemeni demonstrators. One

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[14] Ibid.

[15] Theodor Tudoroiu, "Social Media and Revolutionary Waves: The Case of the Arab Spring," *New Political Science* 36, no. 3 (September 2014): 347, doi:10.1080/07393148.2014.913841

[16] Stephanie Davison. "An Exploratory Study of Risk and Social Media: What Role Did Social Media Play in the Arab Spring Revolutions?" *Journal of Middle East Media* 11 (Fall 2015): 18. URL: http://proxy-tu.researchport.umd.edu/login?ins=tu&url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ufh&AN=108996561&site=eds-live&scope=sitehttp://eds.b.ebscohost.com/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=cd53df76-2d8c-4d95-9793 57b686a3c542%40sessionmgr198&vid=2&hid=104

[17] Christos A. Frangonikolopoulos, and Ioannis Chapsos, "Explaining the Role and the Impact of the Social Media in the Arab Spring," Global Media Journal: Mediterranean Edition 7, no. 2 (Fall 2012): 14, URL: http://proxy-tu.researchport.umd.edu/login?ins=tu&url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ufh&AN=90537626&site=eds-live&scope

activist said the media collectives that developed online provided "an opportunity for interaction [between diverse groups of Yemeni people] that never existed before."[18] As social media is free, it drastically reduced the cost of coordination and made involvement in the protests possible for people from a far wider economic standing.

Specific Twitter hashtags and Facebook groups were used to reinforce solidarity of the Yemeni protestors. Data reflected in R-Shief's Historical Tweet Visualizer reveals that on days of great significance, Yemeni people immediately turned to Twitter to articulate their grievances. This is very apparent when members of Saleh's regime opened fire on protestors in Change Square in Sana'a on September 19th, 2011, killing 22 people and wounding 350. This day, known as "Yemen's bloodiest day", yielded 33,109 tweets and 21,072 retweets after a mere 4,047 tweets just two days before.[19] The word most tweeted on this day was "protesters" and "massacre." This shows how people took to Twitter to express their despair and outrage about the brutal killings of the protesters, and found unity in the grief and trauma the Yemeni protesters and citizens felt as a result of the attack. Incidents such the attack on protestors in Change Square caused a great spike in Twitter activity, which added to the momentum created by the rebels' physical occupations of various locations in Yemen. Facebook groups were created to coordinate and organize the physical protests. These online groups mobilized demonstrators from merely being active in the virtual realm to being active in the physical one.

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[18] Stacey Phillbrick Yadav, "The "Yemen Model" as a Failure of Political Imagination," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 47, no. 1 (February 2015): 145, URL: http://proxy-tu.researchport.umd.edu/login?ins=tu&url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edb&AN=100871391&site=eds-live&scope=site

[19] Martin Chulov, "350 injured in bloodiest day of Yemen uprising," *The Guardian*, last updated September, 20, 2011, URL: http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/sep/19/yemens-bloodiest-day-yet

Furthermore, observers of the demonstrations became physical participants in the protests because of the dramatic rise of citizen journalists.[20] Majority of Yemeni people that were involved in the uprisings consisted of middle-class, urbanized, relatively well-educated, and underemployed, technologically-savvy youth and many women. They acted as civic journalists by documenting the goings-on of the protests, and uploaded the content to social media sites and online news networks like Al Jazeera. In fact, citizen journalists actually provided majority of the online media content of the Arab Spring protests, reflecting the importance of social media and various online forums during this time.[21] These journalists were empowered because of technological advances in the development and the availability of smartphones, which allowed everyday civilians to have permanent access to recording devices.

Due to the widely democratic nature of the Internet and social media, information about the protests were rapidly and effectively distributed domestically and internationally, which gained increased sympathy and support for the protesters from both Yemeni and foreign people. Ameen Jaber Sailaan's personal testimony reinforces this. Recorded in *Voices of the Arab Spring: Personal Stories from the Arab Spring*, Sailaan was a cyber activist who was in charge of distributing various media on social media networks to spread awareness about the injustices that were happening in Yemen.[22] Sailaan, an active protestor in the Yemeni Arab Spring, was responsible for running Facebook pages like Forum of the Free Yemeni to facilitate debates and discussions, and disseminate information about the protest movement at a more rapid pace. The Yemeni rebels were also able to form a link to the Syrian rebel army through Facebook pages such as the Forum of the Free Yemeni –

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[20] Theodor Tudoroiu."Social Media and Revolutionary Waves: The Case of the Arab Spring." *New Political Science* 36, no. 3 (September 2014): 354. doi:10.1080/07393148.2014.913841
[21] Ibid.
[22] Asaad Al-Saleh*, Voices of the Arab Spring: Personal Stories from the Arab Revolutions*. "The Emerging New Yemen," New York, New York, Columbia University Press: 2015, 174

increasing the solidarity amongst protestors across international borders and into the Arab World as an entire entity.[23]

Sailaan's testimony discredits the claims of cyber-skeptics (also known as techno-realists), who believe that social media creates a false sense of identity, thus preventing people from physically protesting.[24] Malcolm Gladwell asserts that social media movements encourage "slacktivism" because he believes it lulls people into a falsely believing they're actually doing something positive to implement prolific change.[25] He states that online communities "[make] it easier for activists to express themselves but harder for that expression to have any impact," and that successful activism requires a well-developed hierarchy (which the Arab Spring online protest movement lacked), like the strong leadership seen in the Montgomery Bus Boycott in the 1950s.[26]

Through Sailaan's testimony, it's apparent that social media was actually instrumental in creating pan-Arab solidarity, not one of the factors hindering it as suggested by cyber-skeptics. Far more people have become cyber-enthusiasts – people who believe social media empowers the citizens of nondemocratic societies and enables revolutions to adopt new strategies – because of such testimonies like Sailaan's in the wake of the Arab Spring.[27] Clay Shirky, a Professor at New York University and passionate cyber-enthusiast, believes that political freedom has to be accompanied by a civil society literate enough and closely-

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[23]Ibid.

[24] Gadi Wolfsfeld, and Eled Segev, and Tamir Sheafer, "Social Media and the Arab Spring: Politics Comes First," The International Journal of Press/Politics 18, no. 2 (2013): 124, DOI: 10.1177/1940161212471716

[25] Sarah Joseph, "Social Media, Political Change, and Human Rights," *Boston College International & Comparative Law Review* 35, no. 1 (Winter 2012): 149. URL: http://proxy-tu.researchport.umd.edu/login?ins=tu&url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=73308765&site=eds-live&scope=site

[26] Ibid.

[27] Gadi Wolfsfeld, and Eled Segev, and Tamir Sheafer, "Social Media and the Arab Spring: Politics Comes First," The International Journal of Press/Politics 18, no. 2 (2013): 116, DOI: 10.1177/1940161212471716

connected enough to discuss issues affecting the public.[28] While cyber-skeptics insist that social media activism prevents participants from properly engaging with political issues, it's clear that the use of social media has merely transformed how people form political ideologies and aided in a new way of shaping public opinion.

The quick dissemination of information about the injustices that occurred in Yemen during the uprisings was also due to social media amplifying the message of its users.[29] Demonstrated through various social amplification and ripple theories, social media platforms (like Forum of the Free Yemeni) magnified the potential danger to the Yemeni people.[30] This, in turn, triggered people who would have otherwise not heard about the goings on to act. The Social Contagion Theory, which asserts that ideas and behaviors are contagious within networks, is another concept that explains how media content spread so quickly through online communities.[31] The contagion was enhanced because of the universal accessibility of the Web, rendering issues like distance and/or limited ability of certain communities to obtain information because of the lack of resources powerless.

Social media served as alternative sources of information that came from outside the dictatorial control of the Arab World's 'approved' media content. Yemen's authoritarian government, despite being able to control the internet access in Yemen, wasn't able to prevent the rest of the world from viewing the media content uploaded of the uprisings available on the web. The stories, images, and videos uploaded to Facebook, Twitter, and

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[28] Sarah Joseph, "Social Media, Political Change, and Human Rights," *Boston College International & Comparative Law Review* 35, no. 1 (Winter 2012): 152. URL: http://proxy-tu.researchport.umd.edu/login?ins=tu&url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=73308765&site=eds-live&scope=site

[29] Stephanie Davison. "An Exploratory Study of Risk and Social Media: What Role Did Social Media Play in the Arab Spring Revolutions?" *Journal of Middle East Media* 11 (Fall 2015): 11. URL: http://proxy-tu.researchport.umd.edu/login?ins=tu&url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ufh&AN=108996561&site=eds-live&scope=sitehttp://eds.b.ebscohost.com/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=cd53df76-2d8c-4d95-9793 57b686a3c542%40sessionmgr198&vid=2&hid=104

[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid.

YouTube posted by Yemenis spread to citizens of other countries which "increased pressures for democratization and social reform" – accelerating their protest movement.[32] Alliances like the Friends of Yemen, which consists of various international communities including the U.K., donated over $6.4 billion to Yemen's reconstruction as result of the pressures placed on the governments of foreign countries by their citizens.[33] Other implications of the attention Yemen gained because of social media included the historical decision to name an influential female Yemeni protester, Tawakkul Karman, as the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize winner – reflective of the revolutionary change that was sped up through social media.[34]

Online activists faced many obstacles. For the demonstrations to gain sufficient momentum, it was crucial that people perpetually acquired updated information throughout the protests. Because of Yemen's severe poverty, a large majority of the population had little to no access to the internet content that was spurring on the contagion. Yemen's physical geography also posed a problem because it forced people to live in dispersed clusters, making traveling expensive and time consuming. However, protesters defeated this challenge by one person in a community accessing the real time information uploaded by citizen journalists on behalf of a group, and then sharing it with the aforementioned people.[35] The Saleh regime also capitalized on social media's power. The regime, learning from mistakes by Egypt's and Tunisia's regimes, managed to identify key actors in the demonstrations through tracking

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[32] Christos A. Frangonikolopoulos, and Ioannis Chapsos, "Explaining the Role and the Impact of the Social Media in the Arab Spring," *Global Media Journal: Mediterranean* 7, no. 2 (Fall 2012): 12, URL: http://proxy-tu.researchport.umd.edu/login?ins=tu&url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ufh&AN=90537626&site=eds-live&scope

[33] "'Friends of Yemen' Meeting Delivers US$1.5 Billion Boost to Yemen's Transition Process," *The World Bank*, last modified September 27, 2012, http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2012/09/27/friends-of-yemen-meeting-delivers-one-point-five-billion-boost-yemens-transition-process

[34] Osman Salih and Kamal Eldin, "Roots and Causes of the 2011 Arab Uprisings," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (Spring 2013): 194, URL: http://proxy-tu.researchport.umd.edu/login?ins=tu&url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mth&AN=87607038&site=eds-live&scope=site

[35] Theodor Tudoroiu."Social Media and Revolutionary Waves: The Case of the Arab Spring." *New Political Science* 36, no. 3 (September 2014): 359. doi:10.1080/07393148.2014.913841

their internet activity, and caused divisions by creating fake rebel accounts that had false

protest details on it.[36]

Despite social media intensifying the momentum of the Yemeni Arab Spring

demonstrations, protesters weren't able to achieve quick success. Yemeni rebels never fully

developed their own revolution.[37] Because they limited their occupation to Sana'a and never

marched to the presidential palace, the impact of the protest was also limited.[38] In addition to

this, street protesters were split between anti-regime and pro-regime people, which led to a

stalemate and further dragged out the process.[39] Another factor that hindered progress of the

uprisings was the western world's reluctance to support protesters because they feared a

power vacuum in Yemen would be taken advantage of by Al-Qaeda.[40] With the increase of

Al-Qaeda's influence, the global threat of terrorism and potential abuse of human rights also

rises.

Yemen is currently still in a highly fragile state. Although the Arab Spring was

successful in ousting Saleh, reform is still a work in progress. The demonstrations caused a

large amount of displacement, especially around Sana'a, which has intensified Yemen's

instability.[41] However, proactive steps have been taken to improve the conditions of the

country and the quality of life facilitated by the constitution. Held in 2013, the National

Dialogue Conference (NDC) aimed to revise the constitution and clarify the agreed aims of

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[36] Osman Salih and Kamal Eldin, "Roots and Causes of the 2011 Arab Uprisings," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (Spring 2013): 201, URL: http://proxy-tu.researchport.umd.edu/login?ins=tu&url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mth&AN=87607038&site=eds-live&scope=site

[37] Ibid.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Erin Mooney, "Flight, fragility and furthering stability in Yemen," Forced Migration Review 43 (May 2013): 42, URL: http://proxy-tu.researchport.umd.edu/login?ins=tu&url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=88419191&site=eds-live&scope=site

the process.[42] 30% of the 565 parliamentary seats were reserved for women, reflecting the progress made towards gender equality as a result of the attention brought by the Arab Spring.[43] As well as this, Yemeni youth groups 20% of the seats.[44] The result of the NDC was a far more inclusive constituency that better supports the aims of youth and women, because equal citizenship in Yemen finally became a subject of conversation. Although the result of the NDC was an undeniable step towards implementing reform in Yemen, there's still a far way to go to account for the abuses of the Saleh regime and create a fully inclusive democracy.

Ultimately, it's crucial to understand that social media is merely a tool which was used by the protesters to liberate and by Saleh to oppress. While social media was certainly not responsible the Arab Spring Uprising's initiation, it served as a crucial catalyst and provided protesters with the means to advance the movement through gaining intensified momentum and mobilizing participants. Social media also validated the interpretations of the Yemeni people and enabled them to find solidarity within online communities. Due to the enormous number of people that could were connected online, these virtual networks gave actors in the demonstrations a sense of safety. Online activists took risks because their discontent with the political and economic situation in Yemen, and the urgency for liberty outweighed the potential harm they could face as a result of their role in the demonstrations.

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[42] Ibid.

[43] "Is Yemen a New Model?" *Journal of International Affairs* 67, no. 1 (Fall/Winter 2013): 202, URL: http://proxy-tu.researchport.umd.edu/login?ins=tu&url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=f5h&AN=92960956&site=eds-live&scope=site

[44] "Is Yemen a New Model?" *Journal of International Affairs* 67, no. 1 (Fall/Winter 2013): 203, URL: http://proxy-tu.researchport.umd.edu/login?ins=tu&url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=f5h&AN=92960956&site=eds-live&scope=site

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