Social Media and Social Mobilisation in the Middle East:
A Survey of Research on the Arab Spring

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Abstract

The role of the media, and especially the social media, in the Arab Spring has been extensively debated in academia. This study presents a survey of studies published in scholarly journals on the subject since 2011. We find that the bulk of the research contends that social media enabled or facilitated the protests by providing voice to people in societies with mostly government-controlled legacy media; helping people connect, mobilise and organise demonstrations; and broadcasting protests to the world at large and gaining global support. Some scholars, however, argue that social media played only a limited or secondary role, which ought to be viewed alongside other social, political, economic and historical factors. We also identify the spatial and temporal focus of the research and preferred theoretical and methodological approaches and draw attention to several blind spots that require further investigation.

Keywords

Since Mohammad Bouazizi immolated himself on a Tunisian street and sparked region wide protests against authoritarian regimes, social media's ability to mobilise masses to bring about social change has been hotly debated. The so-called 'Arab Spring' began in 2011 and closely followed the surge in popularity of

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Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and the like, making social media and their role in social mobilisation a particularly alluring subject of both idle speculation and rigorous research. Did social media instigate protests or did they merely facilitate them? Were they more influential in some parts of the region, or at certain points in time? How does their influence compare with other social, economic, cultural and political factors? What about the part played by traditional—now also called legacy—media, especially newspapers and television?

This study attempts to answer these questions by taking stock of empirical research on media and the Arab Spring published in peer-reviewed journals in the past six years. Scores of scholars from around the world have explored various facets of this subject, using a variety of research designs and methods. Their work offers a broad understanding of the role of social and legacy media in the Arab Spring and, more broadly, in producing social mobilisation for internal change in the Middle East. A holistic look at this body of scholarship also lays bare its blind spots—important areas that remain understudied—and opens up questions for future research to answer.

To collect the data for this study, we searched the EBSCOhost academic database for all articles using the terms 'Arab Spring' and 'media' published in peer-reviewed English-language journals. Other search terms such as 'Middle East', 'North Africa' and 'MENA Uprising' were also tried out, but they did not yield additional results. The search produced a total of 247 articles published between 2011 and 2016. After excluding all book reviews and articles in which either the Arab Spring or the media were mentioned only in passing, we were left with a final sample of 88 articles that explicitly focused on understanding the role of social or legacy media in the Arab Spring, published in 64 different journals (see Table 1 for details).

The articles were analysed using Glaser and Strauss's (1967) method of constant comparison. Coding took place in three rounds. The first round produced a number of emergent coding categories, which were recoded into broader categories in the second round and finally collapsed into six thematically meaningful categories in the third round. These six themes are discussed in detail in the rest of the article, followed by a critical assessment and discussion of the key implications of our study.

Table 1. Research Published in Academic Journals on Media and Arab Spring

Total Number of Articles: 88	Total Number of Journals: 64
Published in	**Journals with most articles**
2011: 6	5: *International Communication Gazette*
2012: 19	4: *Journal of Communication*
2013: 23	3: *New Media and Society, Digest of Middle East*
2014: 18	*Studies, Index on Censorship, Cinema Journal,*
2015: 11	*Globalisations*
2016: 11	

Source: Authors' own.

Social Media as Harbinger of Social Change

The majority of articles argued that social media were the single most important cause of Arab Spring protests. Many of them emphasised the novelty of social media as a means of mass communication and how they altered the dynamics of the relationship between governments and citizens. The Arab monarchies and military dictatorships, these articles argued, had retained power for long by controlling the mass media and using them to manipulate public opinion; social media, however, took that control away from authoritarian hands and provided a voice to the public. This fundamental change had wide-reaching effects: making citizens better informed, turning them into activists, facilitating public organisation and collective action, and eventually helping the development of democratic institutions that could replace autocratic regimes.

As Aman and Jayroe (2013) noted:

> Since the early part of the twentieth century when electronic mass communication media was introduced, it has been managed by Arab governments who realize the importance of controlling and manipulating public opinion. The physical facilities and contents of their broadcasts are strictly controlled; staff have always been employees of the government. (p. 318)

The advent of social media, however, changed all that. For the first time, citizens in low freedom of press countries had gained a say in power politics.

> Social media have become the scaffolding upon which civil society can build, and new information technologies give activists things that they did not have before: information networks not easily controlled by the state and coordination tools that are already embedded in trusted networks of family and friends. (Howard & Hussain, 2011, p. 48)

The articles drew attention to various aspects of social media as an enabler of social change. For instance, Howard and Hussain (2011) focused on social media's ability to organise political action by helping activists form extensive social networks and develop social capital on an unprecedented scale: 'Social media served as an instrument of local and national mobilization, communication, and coordination; helped propagate international revolutionary contagion; and contributed to the enhancement of a pan-Arab consciousness which facilitated the contagion process' (p. 36). In a similar vein, Soengas-Pérez (2013) observed that in this new way of communicating, 'individual actions focused towards group communication, personal suggestions and ideas working for a common goal' (p. 154). Focusing on the role of Facebook in the Tunisian revolution, Müller and Hübner (2014) argued that the social media offered a forum that promoted transparency and built shared awareness, 'creating a common cause and understanding that kept mobilizing Tunisian "netizens" to reclaim their rights as citizens, and, in the end to oust Ben Ali's regime''' (p. 28). The speed with which people were able to communicate increased several times thanks to social media, which 'allowed messages to travel in an immediate, instantaneous, and spontaneous manner' (Alqudsi-ghabra, 2012, p. 9).

A number of articles singled out women being the biggest benefactors of social media during the time of the Arab Spring. 'Women activists adopted social media practices that enabled them to articulate their identities in the public sphere and to participate in the uprisings in multiple ways, resulting in a sense of personal empowerment and collective potentiality that was fundamentally linked to the communicative platform' (Radsch & Khamis, 2013, p. 887). Women face culturally sanctioned constraints in many parts of the Arab world, especially when it comes to political involvement. Social media became a place 'where many women debate[d] on equal footing with men, where policy alternatives [were] discussed, and where regime secrets [were] exposed' (Cattle, 2016, p. 434). Empowered by free expression, these young women could speak and be heard publicly in a way that was rarely possible before. For example, the content analysis of Ali and Macharia (2013) of 93 million tweets about the Egyptian revolution found that social media allowed women 'to make their complaints and worries visible and simultaneously to revolt against the oppressive regime of Mubarak's government' (p. 364).

On the strength of these facets, social media not only undermined the authority of autocratic regimes but could also 'contribute to democratic consolidation beyond rebellion' (Breuer & Groshek, 2014).

> Netcitizens, bloggers, and organizers of all ages should be prepared to use their sharpened and tested skills to combat and counter their authoritarian governments, and force them to adapt to a democratic system—a system that strives toward social justice, peaceful resolution, and clear responsiveness to the massive cries for political and economic reform. (Aman & Jayroe, 2013, p. 341)

Limits of Social Media's Influence

In contrast, a number of articles questioned the significance being accorded to social media's role in Arab Spring protests. Most of these articles conceded that social media may have partly contributed to the uprisings, but argued that other economic, political and historical factors were much more important. The overall tone of these articles was that the uprisings were a long time in the making and would have occurred with or without the presence of social media. Some scholars also suggested, though, that social media companies tried to undermine the protests.

Fuchs (2012), for instance, argued that 'the Egyptian revolution was a revolution against capitalism's multidimensional injustices, in which social media were used as a tool of information and organization, but were not the cause of the revolution' (p. 389). On similar lines, Aouragh (2012) noted that 'preferring technology over human agency conveniently avoids dealing with the very issues many were protesting about, such as corruption, neoliberalism, and subservience to imperialism' (p. 151). The author described Egypt under Hosni Mubarak as a society that had become increasingly divided over time. The upper class had taken complete control of its politico-economic complex and was unwilling to share anything with the masses. Discontent had been rising and was bound to boil over.

Other scholars focused on the fundamental characteristics of social move-ments—many of which, they argued, played a more important role in Arab Spring than social media. One article described how 'the diffusion of grievances, the structural availability of protesters, and especially the embeddedness of protesters in pre-existing networks of civic associations were more significant than Twitter and Facebook' (Brym, Godbout, Hoffbauer, Menard, & Zhang, 2014, p. 286). Some authors claimed that social media activism does not contribute nearly as offline—or physical–civic engagement. For instance, 'sharing a dissident statement, sending a Like to a criticizing picture are not activities that go beyond the entry-level of political participation actions' (Serdar, 2013, p. 120).

Byun and Hollander (2015) argued that if social media were indeed the most important cause of the Arab Spring, then higher levels of Internet connectivity and social media country-wise should correlate with higher levels of unrest. Using an experimental design, however, they found no correlation between a country's Internet connectivity and Twitter and Facebook penetration on the one hand and level of unrest on the other.

Some scholars went a step ahead and drew attention to the ways in which social media undermined protest movements. Youmans and York (2012) argued that the policies of social media companies are designed to complicate collective action efforts. They used the example of Wael Ghonim, who became an internationally known figure for promoting pro-democracy protests through social media in Egypt. Ghonim initially wished to remain anonymous, fearing backlash from the Mubarak government, but Facebook deactivated Ghonim's page stating that their policy prohibited the use of pseudonyms in accounts or pages.

Nevertheless, there was also pushback against these arguments. Scholars who were more positive about social media contended that their impact must not be overlooked. 'Being unduly skeptical about the political influence and transfor-mative potential of social media renders them no more than instrumentalities and thus mere adjuncts to usual politics, rather than the carriers of new kinds of activism, and facilitators of practical citizenship' (Axford, 2011, p. 682). The article claimed that reductionism regarding social media's role in the Arab Spring ignored 'the potentially transformative impact of media whose influence on consciousness and behavior may be hidden by their routine use in the lives of millions of people' (p. 682).

Social Versus Legacy Media

While the majority of articles dealt with social media, a significant number of articles also focused on legacy media. Many of them argued that Arab newspapers and television channels, typically operating under state control, delegitimised protests and presented a largely pro-regime perspective. This was often contrasted with the 'independent' viewpoints available on social media, and some articles even argued that legacy media organisations, whose reporters lacked access to protesters, depended on social media to know what was going on and to even get content for their own coverage.

Hamdy and Gomaa (2012) conducted a content analysis of news reports published in four major Egyptian newspapers in January–February 2011, and found that the newspapers framed the protests as a conspiracy against the Egyptian government. Reports depicted protesters as 'delinquent and violent youth who did not have the national good at heart' (p. 198). Their goal was clearly to support the state and label the movement as hateful and chaotic. Broadly, state-controlled Arab media was characterised by uncertainty and ideological or sectarian divisions, which 'created a fertile environment and eager audience for sensationalist media that fanned rumors, incited hatred against political adversaries, and fueled divisive and demonizing narratives' (Aday, et al., 2013, p. 97).

Traditional news organisations lacked sufficient access to report during the Arab Spring due to government restrictions, 'rendering their reporting reliant on social web' (Ahy, 2016, p. 103). Al Jazeera would often replay videos obtained through social media throughout Egypt's 18 days of sustained protests leading to the resignation of Mubarak on 11 February 2011 (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012).

A number of studies looked at how legacy media outside the Middle East covered the protests. Not surprisingly, many scholars found that Western media outlets framed the uprisings differently from Arab media organisations. Elena's (2016) content analysis of the coverage of counter-protests that led to the ouster of the democratically elected Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt discovered that CNN regarded the coup as a 'necessary evil' while Al Jazeera English emphasised the Islamist government's democratic legitimacy. Another article argued that CNN focused a lot more on women and their role in the Arab Spring than Al Jazeera (Dastgeer & Gade, 2016). This finding reaffirmed that 'the coverage of the Islamic World in Western media has a strong focus on Muslim women' while that Arab media was culturally more male-oriented (Dastgeer & Gade, 2016, p. 444).

Du (2016) focused on media coverage in Hong Kong, Taiwan and China and found that Chinese media was the only one that 'chose not to take a news perspective that is favorable toward the uprisings'. The article also noted that China's media coverage, unlike the others, attributed the political instability to 'social and economic problems rather than to political dictatorship and tyranny' (Du, 2016, p. 110).

Spatial and Temporal Emphasis

Nearly a third of the articles focused on Egypt. Abul-Magd (2012), for example, compared the Egyptian revolution in 2011 to earlier revolutions that had taken place in Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine, and pointed out the similarities such as the non-violent nature of protests and the use of Internet to mobilise the masses. Egypt also provided authors with its own history of public protests; its citizens have held large demonstrations opposing the oppression of Palestinians and the Iraq war in years past (Tawil-Souri, 2012). Some scholars even focused on the critical day of 28 January 2011, when the Mubarak regime cut off Internet access to the public, which only angered shocked citizens and led to a dramatic escalation

in protests (Hassanpour, 2014). Quite a few articles also looked at Tunisia, where the protests had started (e.g., Breuer & Groshek, 2014; Pompper, 2014; Wolover, 2016). Other studies had a broader spatial scope, focusing either on select three or four countries (e.g., Alqudsi-ghabra, 2012; Bruns, Highfield, & Burgess, 2013; Soengas-Pérez, 2013) or dealing with the phenomenon of Arab Spring as a whole.

Most of the studies focused on the early part of the Arab Spring, especially the first two years. Their empirical data was gathered between 2011 and 2013, looking at the uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia and their immediate aftermath. Groshek (2012), for instance, interviewed Egyptian citizens from 23 January to 30 January 2011. Hassan, Kendall and Whitefield (2015) conducted a survey in 2012 after the first parliamentary elections in Egypt after Mubarak to determine how media consumption affected democratic attitudes. Srinivasan's (2014) rare look at 18 months after the revolution examined how new media technologies can 'provide a lens into Egypt's political evolving environment' (p. 79).

Theoretical Perspectives

Research on media and the Arab Spring is not theoretically rich, with less than a fifth of the articles explicitly using a theory to explain their findings and fewer still attempting to contribute to theoretical development. Articles that did employ a theoretical approach, however, relied on a wide range of perspectives borrowed from media sociology to political communication to cultural studies.

Some of the articles that looked positively at the impact of social media on the Arab Spring drew on Habermas's (1989) theory of the *public sphere*, which argues that open conversations among members of the public are vital for the development of civil society and democracy. Although Habermas's conception of the public sphere involved casual discussions in eighteenth century European cafes and deliberations in newspaper columns, these articles argued that social media had provided twenty-first-century Middle East with a parallel infrastructure for discussion and deliberation. DeVriese (2013) noted that the concept of public sphere was the key to 'understanding the role of social media in redefining civic engagement and reshaping political spaces' (p. 118). Salvatore (2013) noticed 'the connectedness built among people through communication forums and media, to turn into a self-sustaining political mobilization that brings to full fruition the critical potential of debate and contentions' (p.220).

Tudoroiu (2014) took it a step further and combined the idea of public sphere with the *revolutionary wave approach* to explain why protests spread so quickly from one country to another. He argued that 'the Arab world witnessed an extremely coherent process of revolutionary contagion whose liberal and democratic ideology was disseminated transnationally by social media' (p. 346) and the revolutionary wave approach helped explain 'a number of important features of the Arab Spring perceived as a unitary political phenomenon' (p. 361).

In contrast, Wolfsfeld, Segev and Sheafer (2013) argued that 'one cannot understand the role of social media in collective action without first taking into account the political environment in which they operate'. They used the *political*

contest model to answer what came first—politics or media—and concluded that 'a significant increase in the use of the new media is much more likely to follow a significant amount of protest activity than to precede it' (pp. 119–120).

Some studies drew on the idea of *norm diffusion*. Norms are understood as values and expectations that actors share with each other. Harrelson-Stephens and Callaway (2014) interpreted Arab Spring protests as the diffusion of human rights norms—and social media as the vehicle through which this diffusion took place. Pompper (2014) used norm diffusion along with *gender role incongruity theory* to understand the differences between print media, news wires and blogs in the representation of Tunisian women revolutionaries. The study found that 'print and wire media consistently clung to traditional female gender stereotypes, repre-senting women as emotional, communal, and nurturing mothers and wives, whereas blog content represented women as fully engaged agentic leaders and citizens' (p. 487).

Legacy media coverage was more often studied using *framing theory*, which suggests that journalists and media organisations, intentionally or not, emphasise certain aspects of social reality while marginalising other aspects (Du, 2016; Elena, 2016; Rennick, 2013). These studies were typically critical of international media coverage of the Arab Spring. Another article utilised cultural theorist Stuart Hall's perspective on ideology to problematise 'Western democratic ideals' and 'media representations of cultural Others' (Lawless & Chen, 2016 p. 188).

Methodological Approaches

Many of the articles did not follow any formal methodological approach, describing their empirical method simply as political or historical analysis. In the rest of the corpus, content analysis—both qualitative and quantitative—was commonly used. For instance, in a study that examined how the First Ladies of Arab regimes were covered in the media during the Arab Spring, Ibroscheva (2013) employed a qualitative textual analysis after collecting data 'using Lexis Nexis, as well as blog entries, online news outlets and news aggregate websites, such as Google News' that yielded a sample size of 128 articles (p. 874). Harlow (2013) 'employed a textual analysis approach to examine how protesters, supporters, and the media talked about the Egyptian uprising' (pp. 67–68). She analysed Facebook posts from the 'We Are All Khaled Said' group page, as well as reports from Al Jazeera English website and articles from *The New York Times*. Wolover (2016) performed keyword searches to collect articles from *The New York Times*, *The Guardian* and Al Jazeera English that appeared between 11 November 2010 and 28 February 2011 for a qualitative textual analysis that provided insights on 'what the journalists cited as the causal factor of revolution and how they discussed the Internet's role' (p. 190).

Quantitative analyses were also common, like the one executed by Bruns et al. (2013) that tracked the hashtags #egypt and #libya from 23 January 2011 to 16 February 2011 through the Twitter Application Programming Interface (API).

Another quantitative content analysis examined the coverage of Arab Spring in Belgian newspapers and broadcast media to find out how they display diverse sourcing practices (Van Leuven, Heinrich, & Deprez, 2013).

Other articles used survey and in-depth interviews. Soengas-Pérez (2013) distributed a series of online surveys to 30 young people of Tunisian, Egyptian and Libyan decent, living or working in Barcelona, Madrid or Santiago de Compostela from the time the uprisings broke out until the dictators where ousted. These people were later interviewed to help better understand the role of social media in the Arab Spring, specifically the 'efficacy of technology as a communication tool in underdeveloped societies that have been subjected to repressive regimes for decades' (Soengas-Pérez, 2013, p. 150). To examine how Egyptian citizens used social media to participate in political protest, questionnaire-based interviews were conducted in Arabic with 1,200 people who participated in the Tahrir Square demonstrations, constituting perhaps one of 'the largest samples of protestor surveys conducted under such difficult conditions' (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012, p. 368). Another article implemented a mixed methods design, consisting of

> semi-structured interviews with 16 Tunisian bloggers and Internet activists, followed by a second quantitative phase that utilized survey questionnaires, with the goal of learning about Tunisians patterns of political attitudes and internet use, as well as self-descriptions and assessments of online/offline protest activities. (Breuer & Groshek, 2014, p. 33)

Conclusion

Our survey of research suggests that social media played a multi-pronged role in the wave of protests that came to be known as the Arab Spring. First, and perhaps most importantly, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and other such modes of communication made citizens believe they had a 'say' in public affairs. Their very presence helped common people feel empowered—something they had never felt in the autocracies that witnessed the uprisings. Second, social media allowed people to connect, mobilise and organise on a large scale against their regimes, which they had found extremely difficult, if not impossible, to do in the past. Third, social media's global reach not only allowed activists across Arab nations to share ideas and strategies with each other but broadcast the protests worldwide, helping them gain global support—which, in turn, galvanised even more Arab citizens.

Some scholars have rightly argued that social media's influence ought to be viewed in consonance with other social, economic, political and historical factors. However, our research shows that little attention has been paid to some fundamental limitations of social media's impact. Allowing people to connect over Facebook or Twitter is not the same thing as helping them develop a collective consciousness that sustains over long periods of time. Protesters in Egypt, for instance, could not agree on anything beyond wanting Mubarak out of power. Egypt's experience of democracy was fleeting as a result. The Muslim Brotherhood

government that came to power in the post-Mubarak elections faced its own wave of protests—also facilitated by social media—and this eventually allowed the military to retake control. Egypt's revolution was thus undermined by a long-standing social rupture between Islamists on the one hand and secularists and the Coptic Christian minority on the other. The revolutionary wave in countries such as Syria and Bahrain was similarly undone by social tensions—typically between Sunnis and Shias.

Scholars who argue that social media caused the protests have had little to say so far on why social media could not help people overcome such differences and work towards a common agenda with clear priorities. Traditional forms of media and communication have, in fact, done so in the past. Anderson's (1983) study of the emergence of nationalism in eighteenth century Europe, for instance, shows that newspapers and novels played a vital role in helping people across long distances develop a shared sense of identity and gradually come together to constitute nations as 'imagined communities'. Habermas (1984) has argued that communication allows people to develop a shared understanding of what is right and what is wrong—or what he called 'communicative rationality'—which then leads to a shared plan of public action–or 'communicative action'.

These processes unfold over long periods of time. Conceived in this way, mass media are not merely instruments for the transmission of predetermined ideas and interests held by pre-constituted subjects; instead, mass media produce those subjects in terms of their identities, which in turn shape their interests. The Arab Spring experience showed that long-held identities—religious versus secular, Islamic versus Christian, Sunni versus Shia—meant a lot more to people than instant connections formed on social media. Twitter and Facebook managed to bring people to public squares for a few days or weeks, but they did not produce new rationalities, new identities or new imaginations. Future research needs to investigate why this was the case.

Another glaring gap in this body of scholarship is the absence of longitudinal studies. Almost all the research we found in our survey is cross-sectional—or focused on a moment in time. But the vagaries of the Arab Spring necessitate an approach that emphasises how protest movements evolved over months and years. In Egypt, for instance, the anti-Mubarak uprising was followed by protests that were anti-Brotherhood and sometimes explicitly pro-military. In Syria, protests started peacefully but eventually transformed into civil war. Understanding how the issue agendas of these and other such protest movements transformed over time on social media is an important research question, especially for scholars who have argued that social media's impact is constrained by other factors. Such analysis can shed light on the interplay of multiple causes and potentially lead to a more precise understanding of the degree and nature of social's media role in bringing about social change.

The role of legacy media, especially local and regional Arabic newspapers and television channels, also needs greater scrutiny. It is not surprising to find that legacy media controlled by autocracies took a pro-regime stance during the Arab Spring and framed protesters as deviant or inept. Even in democracies, legacy

media are known to do so (Benson, 2013; Gitlin, 1980). What is interesting is the possibility that they may have still ended up inflaming the protest movements. As agenda-setting theory has long argued, *what* the news media talk about can be more important than *how* they talk about it (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). By just covering the protests, legacy media could have put them on the public agenda and caused people to join the protesters, including many who did not have access to social media. That is why pro-regime domestic media in some authoritarian countries such as Mainland avoid covering domestic protests altogether (Shahin, Zheng, Sturm, & Fadnis, 2016). A more detailed examination of the specific effects of legacy media would lead to a more nuanced understanding of the interplay of multiple factors behind social mobilisation.

Theoretical indigence is another weakness of extant research on media and the Arab Spring. As noted earlier, only a fifth of the studies we found used a theoretical perspective. The ones that did were largely limited to theoretical approaches that have originated in the West and have historically derived empirical support from studies of American and European media. Especially glaring was the absence of postcolonial approaches in our corpus of articles. This is not surprising for two reasons. One, the field of social media studies in general remains more descriptive than theoretical. Two, although postcolonial scholars have often turned attention to legacy media (Kraidy, 2005; Parameswaran, 1999; Said, 1981), social media have largely escaped their notice so far.

The Arab Spring constitutes an ideal context for postcolonial scholarship to start filling this gap. Postcolonial theory can approach this area of research in a number of novel ways, raising vital and hitherto unasked questions. Does social media use in the Middle East constitute a form of *mimicry* of the West (Bhabha, 1994)—and is that a reason why connections formed over social media failed to forge new forms of collective consciousness in the region? Or, are the norms of social media use—with their focus on individual profiles and personal impression management (Krämer & Winter, 2008)—so fundamentally atomistic that they cannot produce sustainable collective identities? These are vital questions that not only bear upon social mobilisation for change in the Middle East but also on the future of contentious politics in the Global South, questions that a postcolonial intervention can help answer.

It is important here to note the limitations of our study. We have focused on peer-reviewed English language journal articles, which means that articles published in non-English scholarly journals as well as books on the subject—in English or other languages—were outside the scope of our study. Second, our choice of keywords likely excluded any articles on the rise of Daesh in Syria and their use of social media for recruitment and other purposes. Although Syrian protests started as part of the Arab Spring, they soon transformed into civil war. The absence of research on Syria from our corpus also indicates that scholars did not use the term 'Arab Spring' to refer to Syrian uprising at all. Nonetheless, the Syrian civil war represents its own kind of social change, and one in which social media have potentially played a significant role as well. Research in that area requires separate and exhaustive survey and analysis.

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