Twitter Revolutions

<**Subheading**>

Draft

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“The absence of structure, leadership, and formal organization, once considered a weakness, has become a major asset. Seemingly chaotic groups have challenged and defeated established institutions. The rules of the game have changed.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

“Of course Tunisia was a wikileaks and twitter revolution. Just like the commodore 64 overthrew the Shah.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

**Introduction**

Few stories are more enchanting than the tale of David and Goliath. It is a good yarn where the haughty and powerful are brought down by the plucky, intrepid—and ostensibly weak. It is thus unsurprising that millions around the world remained glued to their television sets during CNN, BBC, and al Jazeera’s breathless coverage of the recent cascade of falling North African regimes, dubbed the ‘Arab Spring.’ Most remarkable were the January 2011 protests in Cairo’s Tahrir Square. Though the majority of the tens of thousands of protesters that filled central Cairo were middle class students and office workers, compared to the well-armed military and security forces arrayed in opposition, they might as well have been shepherds. The protestors brought cell phones, tents, and banners to the rallies, seemingly frail armament in comparison to the government’s tanks, tear gas, and automatic rifles. Yet in the end, as the world looked on, one of the region’s most unyielding leaders was forced to concede to the protesters’ demands and flee office. Much like the fall of Tunisia’s Ben-Ali just a few weeks before, the announcement of Hosni Mubarak’s departure after 30 years of iron-fisted rule was treated with jubilation in the streets.

Many observers, both inside the country and out, applauded the protesters’ steely determination and seemingly effortless powers of organization and mobilization. But how, it was asked, did the weak achieve such a feat when the movement claimed no revolutionary leader in the mold of Lenin or Mao, nor even a cadre of leading bureaucratic managers, to pilot the charge? Conventional theories of revolution stress that it is only when disciplined, well-organized contenders, capable of mobilizing popular support against the government and overthrowing the regime’s control of society, that revolution can occur.[[3]](#footnote-3) Yet each Arab Spring case was notable for the absence of a gallant leader converting the masses to the cause. In Egypt the uprising’s most popular figures were a grandfatherly lawyer and a Google software engineer, neither of whom showed any interest in rallying the masses to their personal banner. In Tunisia the most popular figure was Mohamed Bouazizi, a 26-year old street vendor whose self immolation set they entire spasm of revolution in motion. He, too, raised no armies and paced no protests. Nor did any case boast an elite cadre of logisticians coordinating resources in the pursuit of a political goal. The timing and location of protest events was repeatedly left in the hands of the protesters themselves. As such, these uprisings appeared to have happened spontaneously and without centralized direction. Yet they nonetheless proved remarkably potent.

That traditional revolutionary theory was taken by surprise by these developments is no understatement. Ever since Lenin demonstrated—in both theory and practice—the utility of elite ‘vanguards’ in a revolutionary struggle, disciplined, hierarchical organization has been considered indispensable to revolutionary success.[[4]](#footnote-4) In a word, the longstanding conclusion is that revolutions needs effective *leadership*.[[5]](#footnote-5)

“Leadership is fateful for movement development at every stage and turning point. Movement successes and failure—their growth and decline, their heritages for the future and their mark on history—are all intimately tied up with their forms of leadership, the quality of ideas offered and accepted, the selections from repertories of contention, organization, strategy and ideology they make."[[6]](#footnote-6)

A quick survey of the historical record confirms this. “It is doubtful,” writes Walter Laqueur, “whether the Chinese Communists would have won if Mao had indeed been killed in the late 1930s, as the Soviet press announced at the time. It is almost certain that the Yugoslav partisans would not have lasted beyond winter 1941 but for Tito, and the Cubans were the first to admit that without Castro the invasion of Cuba would have failed."[[7]](#footnote-7) According to mainstream revolutionary theory, if a body of individuals wishes a powerful regime to fall, substantial organization and formalized institutional structures will be required to overcome the substantial obstacles in their way. Meanwhile, scholars like Gramsci tell us that pure spontaneity never exists; there are always leaders and initiators, even if are nameless figures forgotten by the historical record.[[8]](#footnote-8) Absent structured leadership, conventional revolutionary theory tells us, there is nothing.

To a new wave of activists and scholars, however, the proliferation of ‘new media’ has made the necessity of tightly organized leadership a thing of the past. Whereas the success of previous revolutions—the American (1776), French (1789), Russian (1917), and Chinese (1949)—relied on a strict hierarchy of leaders and followers, present efforts require no such structure. Instead, the traditional functions of an organized leadership have been replaced by popular collaboration, a phenomenon itself made possible by new social networking platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Technology, it is argued, has transformed collective action. No longer is centralized direction necessary for group mobilization and coordination. The rise of “Internet and wireless communication” provides “both an organizing tool and a means for debate, dialogue, and collective decision making.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Digital technologies are used to organize offline physical protests, but also online sharing of information, blogging, online fundraising, audio visual collection and sharing, bulletin boards, blogs, and so forth. Facebook and other social media permit decisions to be made by popular consensus, rather than a reliance on traditional leaders like Castro and Lenin or backroom cadres. The consequence is “organized spontaneity”[[10]](#footnote-10) or “flash activism.” In a world of technological-empowered "smart mobs," people can "act in concert even if they don't know each other."[[11]](#footnote-11) In this way, new media is seen as having created a “paradoxical blend of coordination and decentralization—almost leaderless and often temporary forms of organization that nevertheless display what popular science writer Steven Johnson (2001) has termed the ‘collective intelligence’ of a united, purposive group.”[[12]](#footnote-12) In other words, “Organizers no longer need to cultivate the ongoing allegiance of participants to a movement or organization, and can instead mobilize rapidly, at a low cost, without a standing membership.”[[13]](#footnote-13) According to this view, the role that formal leaders and hierarchical organizations once played has been supplanted by blogs, websites, and SMS texting.[[14]](#footnote-14)

The assertion that such technologies have made ‘leaderless’ organization possible dates back to the 1990s and the early days of the World Wide Web. The web-organized anti-WTO protests of November 1999 in particular (the so-called ‘Battle in Seattle’) were said to demonstrate the potential for social media to create active, participatory, and non-hierarchical networks. But only in recent years did the concept really enter the mainstream. The watershed event was Iran’s 2009 political upheaval. As tech savvy Iranians took to the streets in protest of Ahmedinejad’s controversial election win, *The Atlantic*’s Andrew Sullivan began a series of blog posts with a piece entitled “The Revolution Will Be Twittered.”[[15]](#footnote-15) This article ignited a rush of similar claims, each arguing that technology had made possible a unique form of revolution.[[16]](#footnote-16) Perhaps none were more gushing that the editorial page of the *Wall Street Journal*, which claimed that “the Twitter-powered ‘Green Revolution’ in Iran…has used social-networking technology to do more for regime change in the Islamic Republic than years of sanctions, threats and Geneva-based haggling put together.”[[17]](#footnote-17) Mark Pleife, former deputy national security advisor in the Bush White House, went so far as to campaign for Twitter’s nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize, arguing that “without Twitter, the people of Iran would not have felt empowered and confident to stand up for freedom and democracy.”[[18]](#footnote-18) The US State Department even requested Twitter delay scheduled maintenance on its Web site, lest the protesters lose their ability to coordinate amongst themselves.[[19]](#footnote-19)

**Rise of the Starfish[[20]](#footnote-20)**

This enthusiasm for social media rests on its power to transform the cost of collective action in two distinct ways. The first is near-costless mobilization.[[21]](#footnote-21) Once communications infrastructure like cell phone towers and fibre optic cables have been put in place, and concomitant platforms, such as mobiles and social networking websites like Facebook and Twitter, have been broadly disseminated, communication amongst group members is nearly instantaneous and takes place with almost nil operating costs. Lower mobilization costs make it easier for people to get together. Facebook technology, for example, makes group formation “ridiculously easy.”[[22]](#footnote-22) Prospective groups today face a “new ease of assembly.”[[23]](#footnote-23) This in turn makes possible larger groups in both numbers and size.\* In other words, we should expect far more social collaboration and collective action because technology have driven the costs of large-scale interaction to unprecedented lows.

The evidence certainly suggests an unprecedented degree of social interaction has accompanied the growth of social networks. The degree to which the world is presently networked is remarkable. There are now more than 6 billion mobile telephone subscriptions, with a stunning worldwide penetration rate of 87% of households, including 79% in the developing world.[[24]](#footnote-24) In 2002: people sent more than 31 billion email messages every day. By 2006: more than doubled. Mid-2009 203 million Americans were texting 2.5 billion messages per day.[[25]](#footnote-25) Today 35% of the world’s population is online, up from just 18% in 2006.[[26]](#footnote-26) Even in the developing world, 20% of homes boast internet in their homes. Cisco estimates there could be almost 15 billion devices connected to the internet in circulation by 2015, up from 7.5 billion in 2010.[[27]](#footnote-27) Social media platforms have benefited enormously from this explosive growth. At 800 million users, Facebook now has as many active users as did the entire internet in 2004.[[28]](#footnote-28) By the end of 2012 the number of messages on Twitter is expected to exceed 500 million per day.[[29]](#footnote-29) More importantly, social media appears to consume an inordinate amount of time spent online. Every month, between 10 and 12 million people around the globe play the online game ‘World of Warcraft.’[[30]](#footnote-30) Today nearly 4 in 5 active Internet users visit social networks and blogs. These dominate Americans’ time online, now accounting for nearly a quarter of total time spent on the Internet.[[31]](#footnote-31) Neilsen research tells us that in May 2011 alone, Americans spent 53.5 billion minutes on Facebook. This is equivalent to a considerable amount of social interaction.

But it is not only a matter of newfound ease in communicating ideas and expressing common interests. The managerial aspect of organization—coordination—has faced a similar decline in associated costs. Social media tools have made possible highly sophisticated group organization without need for the complex institutions that have traditionally been required.[[32]](#footnote-32) There are two reasons for this reduction in the coordination burden. First, social media technology makes possible the "spontaneous division of labour,” where individual effort is assigned not by direction from above but rather the actor’s own appreciation of their skills and duties to the organization.[[33]](#footnote-33) Wikipedia stands as the foremost example of this phenomenon. According to Wikipedia’s own figures, the site offers 21 million articles in 283 languages and an estimated 365 million readers worldwide.[[34]](#footnote-34) The web information company Alexa estimates that Wikipedia is the sixth most popular site on the internet,[[35]](#footnote-35) boasting 2.7 billion monthly page views in the US alone.[[36]](#footnote-36) Roughly 100,000 members actively contribute to the project, adding new articles and editing existing entries. Yet their participation is managed entirely without organized leadership or direction. Articles are conceived, written, and revised according to group member’s wishes themselves. The savings on management costs are profound. This massive undertaking is achieved with an annual budget of just $28 million.[[37]](#footnote-37) In contrast, the traditionally structured *Encyclopædia Britannica* offers roughly half a million articles from 4,400 contributors.[[38]](#footnote-38) Another point of comparison is management staff. Whereas the Wikimedia Foundation, which overseas Wikipedia and other wiki sites, such at Wikiquote and the Wikimedia Commons, employs 75, the *Encyclopædia* has roughly 400 international staff.[[39]](#footnote-39) The staff:contributor managerial ratios are therefore 1:11 for the traditional *Encyclopædia* and 1:1,333 for Wikipedia, a result several orders of magnitude in difference.

Remarkably, despite the absence of authority, the quality of Wikipedia’s articles tends to improve over time. This is largely the product of the second dynamic lessening the burden of coordination: self-policing. Groups with members in constant communication are more likely to develop trust.[[40]](#footnote-40) This is evidenced by the growth of firms like Airbnb, ZipCar, and Rentcycle. “For the first time in history, the age of networks and mobile devices has created the efficiency and social glue to…[enable] the sharing and exchange of assets from cars, to nikes to skills to spare space.”[[41]](#footnote-41) This trust, in turn, breeds a sense of common identity and a strong sense of what behaviours are acceptable and what are not. Deviants of this normative code are either punished or expelled. To return to the Wikipedia example, group members remain constantly on the look out for vandals, deleting malicious edits as soon as they are uncovered.[[42]](#footnote-42) Because of the mammoth degree of social collaboration, as well as the instantaneous nature of the technology itself, print outlets cannot hope to compete with Wikipedians’ speed in correcting, expanding, and footnoting.”[[43]](#footnote-43) A 2005 study in *Nature* found an average of four errors in Wikipedia entires, compared to three in *Britannica*.[[44]](#footnote-44) This suggests self-policing can be nearly as effective as traditional, hierarchical forms of organization.

Together these forces conspire to make the idea of ‘leaderless’ organization possible. With mobilization so cheap and coordination effectively decentralized, no longer must a group rely on a strict hierarchy between leaders and followers. The traditional form of leadership, with a relatively permanent cadre of individuals issuing commands for the rest of the group to follow,[[45]](#footnote-45) has been done away with. To use a biological analogy, this is the replacement of a vertebrate, complete with brain and central nervous system, with a starfish, a creature whose cells live and die without central direction. The main functions of group organization have been democratized by these network and social media technologies. It is a network “held together by public communications, the Internet being a prime example.”[[46]](#footnote-46) In this sense leaderlessness does not imply an absence of coordination and direction, but rather that decisions regarding them are deliberated widely and considered by a large number of individuals operating under a condition of equal authority. Decisions will be made, but by the group, rather than a single individual or small leadership clique. These are not organizations with a formal leadership structure: “They have influencers, not bosses who give orders.”[[47]](#footnote-47) To use the Occupy Wall Street movement as an example, there is an explicit rejection of the traditional form, given the fear of the emergence of inner circles, exclusion, and 'more of the same.'[[48]](#footnote-48) “In the Occupy movement," the protesters make clear, "*We are all leaders*.”

The Arab Spring is seen by proponents of non-hierarchical organizations to exemplify the contemporary irrelevance of strongly institutionalized leadership. These movements, it is argued, were in fact better off precisely *because* they lacked a strict hierarchy and structure. “The revolution [in Egypt] was successful,” write Michael Hais and Morley Winograd, “because it had no leaders, only coordinators of bottom up energy.”[[49]](#footnote-49) Against established regimes, “The absence of structure, leadership, and formal organization, once considered a weakness, has become a major asset.”[[50]](#footnote-50) In fact, leaderless organization has become not only possible, but also strongly preferred. The “belief of the emerging generation” is in “democratic values, in the ability of people to government themselves, free from dictation from above.”[[51]](#footnote-51) The generation that grew up with these networking technologies—called ‘Digital Natives’ by Marc Prensky[[52]](#footnote-52)—have known only the freedom to pursue their interests without interference. They will therefore not tolerate traditional forms of hierarchy. “We all want that sense of freedom, but this generation has learned to expect it.”[[53]](#footnote-53) The central claim is thus that, because of new social media technologies, rather than a Lenin or a Castro, the crucial ingredient for those yearning for revolution is now a Blackberry mobile and a Facebook account.

**Can the Starfish Win a Revolution?**

This is, to say the least, a controversial claim. Asserting that revolutionary ambitions are better served by decentralized collaboration than well-disciplined hierarchy flies in the face conventional assumptions about the utility of centralized leadership. To test for the validity of this insurgent hypothesis, we analyze two cases of the Arab Spring. In each we look to see whether or not new technologies made the ‘leaderless’ organization of revolutionary activity possible. Did social media technologies permit revolutionary groups to work “without the managerial imperative and outside the previous strictures that bounded their effectiveness.”[[54]](#footnote-54) Showing this will require the demonstration of two things. First, that social connections were high, interactivity was great, and that this in turn permitted decentralized collaboration amongst those connected on the network. Second, if this is the case, where such decentralized leadership structures successful in the achievement of the collective aims? In other words, even if leaderless organization is made possible with new technology, does it bring a worthy return to those who adopt it?

*Case Study Methodology*

Tunisia and Egypt were selected as our cases because both countries boasted relatively high rates of social connectivity, particularly in regional comparison. If anywhere during the Arab Spring there was to be a ‘twitter revolution,’ it would have taken place in Tunisia and Egypt. In fact, on the face of it, social media appears to have played a crucial role in the downfall of these two long-standing, autocratic regimes. In particular, protestors of both countries used these new technologies to speedily organize demonstrations and disseminate information widely. This occurred despite—or perhaps because of—government efforts in both countries to censor communication, leaving civilians with few alternate options for credible sources of information and news updates other than real-time transmission from social media tools.[[55]](#footnote-55) Remarkably, in protesters in both cases did *not* turn to established organizations, such as political parties. Instead, they created their own. “What happened in Egypt and Tunisia were instances of governmental change forced by a largely spontaneous social movement that erupted into the streets, with very little organization or leadership.”[[56]](#footnote-56)

A second commonality is what drew protestors of the Middle East and North African region (MENA) to new social media as a tool for political activism in the first place. The intrinsic factors behind the Arab Spring protests are contextual and vary across the countries of the MENA region. Nonetheless, the case studies we focus on share a key common denominator: a frustrated online community of youth, which itself is a probable cause for the successful use of social media and new technologies as tools for political activists. The use of these media tools developed by young digital literates created new public spheres for discussion, presenting the old regime with new challenges on unfamiliar terrain. Indeed, the power of the youth and the non-technological factors that united the protestors are showcased in these countries as the “aging ruling party [was] unable to control a population bulge of young adults affected by high unemployment, food inflation, corruption, an absence of political freedoms and generally poor living conditions.”[[57]](#footnote-57) These fora provided individuals with a ‘safe’ place where they could voice their collective angst against decades of repression. The combination of numerous Facebook pages, Twitter feeds, and Youtube videos all share the same underlying message: ‘you are not alone in your grievances against the state.’

At the same time, we must also recognize that the social media-connected ‘twitterati’ of both cases represented a relatively small number of the total population. It is important to remember that all the blogs, tweets, and Facebook posts in both countries “represents a very small snapshot of society that is inherently biased towards the more affluent, literate and impassioned portion of the population.”[[58]](#footnote-58) The table below demonstrates that, “In 2009 in Tunisia and Egypt there were only 34.1 and 24.3 internet users per 100 inhabitants respectively. Furthermore, in Egypt only 7% of inhabitants are Facebook users, while 16% use the platform in Tunisia.”[[59]](#footnote-59) This caveat is particularly important, given the credit to which this small (in relation to the much larger offline population) online community, consisting of urban, middle and upper class citizens, has been credited with igniting the fire and sparking the momentum of the movement, using cellular devices to transmit videos of events in real-time in order to inspire and organize other dissidents to join in voicing their criticisms of the government. It is argued that, distinct from what constituted ‘old-style’ leadership of charismatic personalities and opposition parties with clear-cut revolutionary mission objectives, a new vanguard is emerging in the form of a cyber-group. Indeed, information is diffused through “key domestic elite innovators who create social networks.”[[60]](#footnote-60) ‘Cyber-utopians’[[61]](#footnote-61) were all too eager to conceptualize the MENA uprisings as ‘Facebook’ or ‘Twitter Revolutions.’ However, as the following case studies illustrate, there is no necessary correlation between social media, Internet freedom, and the success or failure of social movements.

Table 1.0 **Information and Computing Technology (ICT) in the MENA Region**



\*Sources: *International Telecommunication Union* 2009 and *Social Map*. Table from Alex Comninos. ‘Twitter revolutions and cyber crackdowns.’ *Association for Progressive Communications*, June 2011.

*Tunisia*

December 2010 marked the start of the Arab Spring uprisings, triggered by the self-immolation of a young, unemployed Tunisian man, Mohamed Bouazizi, expressing his dissatisfaction with the way the oppressive regime at the time was running the economy. What started out as the frustrations of a few soon came to be representative of the larger Tunisian population’s concerns, with a socio-economic focus on “unemployment, high food prices, and a general sense of alienation, particularly among the [youth].”[[62]](#footnote-62) Their rage against the government was further amplified when then President Ben Ali responded to peaceful protestors with violence. Tens of thousands of Tunisian youth took to the streets, demanding the resignation of Ben Ali. One argument of why tech-savvy youth played such a prominent and effective role during the protests was due to the “ease with which younger people cope with new communication platforms such as Facbeook, Twitter, and Youtube.”[[63]](#footnote-63) Howard *et al* conducted an empirical examination of the correlation between online conversations and the mass protests taking place offline during the uprisings across the MENA region. Their evidence, as shown in the graph below, illustrates that online conversations frequently preceded mass protests. For example, “In Tunisia, 20% of blogs were evaluating Ben Ali’s leadership on the day he resigned from office, up from just 5% the month before.”[[64]](#footnote-64) Interesting to note here is the increasing level of dialogue taking place online, and how that subsequently shifted direction shortly after Ben Ali resigned from his position. What differentiates demonstrators organizing themselves through online forums as opposed to traditional offline manners is the ability to remain essentially unnoticed from the authoritarian political environment.[[65]](#footnote-65)

Figure 1.0 **Percent of Tunisian Blogs With Posts on Politics (By Keyword)**.



\*Source: Philip N. Howard *et al.* “Opening Closed Regimes – What was the Role of Social Media During the Arab Spring,” *Project on Information Technology & Political Islam*, January 2011 (Working Paper).

Tunisia led the way for subsequent revolutions in the region, with vigorous online activity combined with numerous demonstrations resulting in the eventual overthrow of Mubarak’s regime in Egypt, and Gaddafi’s dictatorship in Libya. The Tunisian movement remained apolitical and non-partisan, with traditional political parties (ie Ennahda) while advertising their support for the insurgency, kept at a distance. “Political parties participated at first indirectly, rallying their grassroots activists to support the movement. These political organizations supported the movement, but their support was not very steadfast and had limited effect.”[[66]](#footnote-66) Indeed, the online community of protestors took great measures to prevent the elevation of any one individual or party, potentially positioning them to “hijack or personalize their struggle for freedom. These youths worked to build trust and cooperation among the networks of the social forces who were fighting for freedom.”[[67]](#footnote-67) While the revolutionary movement lacked a clearly defined revolutionary group or charismatic figurehead, some individuals within the digitally literate online community played key roles in mobilizing the protestors.[[68]](#footnote-68)

A catalytic moment during the Tunisian revolution was when Ben Ali could no longer count on the support of his own police, army and senior officials as they too had been mobilized by the online community and the protestors they inspired.[[69]](#footnote-69) “When Ben Ali called for the military forces to help stop the protests, they refused to obey and joined the civilian population.”[[70]](#footnote-70) Although by the end of the month, Ben Ali’s 23-year rule over Tunisia soon ended following these series of events, the online ferver did not subside. Following Ben Ali’s departure, numerous political parties (of all sizes) emerged, rushing in to fill the political vacuum. Online activists continued to protest against those who seemed all too eager to assume a position of power, and this same rage was carried out and demonstrated on the ground by the offline community. When Mohamed Ghanouchi (having returned to Tunisia after spending two decades in exile) publicized his political ambitions, demonstrators again turned to social media tools: this time to give warning to the leader of the moderate Islamist party, Ennahda. Indeed, “The critical mass of Tunisia-related activity on Twitter happened after Ben Ali fled.”[[71]](#footnote-71) What followed was an even larger turn-out of demonstrators than those preceding the fall of Ben Ali with over 100,000 people brought together by groups networking on Facebook, calling for freedom and liberty.[[72]](#footnote-72) Having witnessed the unity and speed with which the Tunisian people were able to topple their authoritarian ruler, a feat accelerated through use of new technology, social media and other online tools, Egyptians gained confidence, inspiration and a new strategy against Mubarak.

*Egypt*

**Conclusion**

We can infer several key conclusions from these cases. The first is that leaderless organization holds the potential to bring down even an iron-fisted a regime. This contradicts those who claim online organization is a reflection of weak ties rather than strong.[[73]](#footnote-73) That social media in both cases succeeded in mobilizing protesters, despite the potential of grave danger to their personal safety, suggests that it is possible to build trust in an electronic space. This is turn can be transformed into a series of mass demonstrations that, when coupled with a security apparatus unwilling to deploy the full extent of its coercive power, can force a regime from office. This combination of protest, paralysis, and government fall is not without historical precedent. The Russian Revolution of February 1917 came, according to the socialist leader Alexander Kerensky, “came of its own accord, unengineered by anyone, born in the chaos of the collapse of Tsardom.”[[74]](#footnote-74) Dissatisfaction with the state simply grew to such a point that the ring could no longer hold and the state collapsed.[[75]](#footnote-75) This took most by surprise, including the Bolsheviks. Lenin himself never thought he would see a revolution in his lifetime. Yet turned it out, as Lenin noted that fateful year, that the “Power is in the streets. You just have to pick it up.”[[76]](#footnote-76)

The second lesson of the Arab Spring, however, is that while leaderless organization can do much to cast power down into the streets, it offers little assistance for the task of picking it up. In other words, while leaderless, online collaborators can do much to facilitate state paralysis, their work—disseminating written and video evidence of government abuses, making appeals to the international community for support, organizing protests, and so forth—does not by itself allow for the *capture* of the state. Doing so simply requires more discipline and organization than decentralized collaboration can offer. “History,” after all, “has not normally been kind to revolutions."[[77]](#footnote-77) This is because the state boasts tremendous powers of coercion at its disposal.[[78]](#footnote-78) Central armies do not lose unless they have been broken down, often from traumas outside those of what the revolutionaries inflict. The advent of Facebook and Twitter do nothing to change the reality that no revolutionary force is likely to break an army in the field. Social media adds no tanks or guns to the guerilla’s armament.

Just as noteworthy is what happens when a state implodes. The state’s mailed fist cannot be deployed to the field if it disintegrates beforehand. In such circumstances of government collapse—whether achieved by spontaneous collaboration or not—the path is left open for others to seize the throne. This moment is crucial for advocates of leaderless organization, for absent strict discipline, it is likely any officials chosen by the collaborative, decentralized group will fall prey to better-organized and more ruthless rivals.[[79]](#footnote-79) This is precisely what happened in Russia. The Bolshevik takeover in 1917 would not have been possible without first the steady bloodletting of the Imperial Army at the hands of the Germans in World War I. And while it was a spontaneous uprising that ended the Tsarist regime, it was the Lenin’s lean and disciplined Red Army that subsequently monopolized the spoils in October of that year. Remarkably, the same has been borne out in the cases studied here. Tunisia and Egypt…

“were instances of governmental change forced by a largely spontaneous social movement that erupted into the streets, with very little organization or leadership. Promises of political reform were made in response to the demonstrations, and if these promises are kept, then the movement will have produced some degree of political reform in addition to the successful ouster of the dictator. So popular movements can push the governments of Tunisia and Egypt in the direction of more inclusive democratic political institutions. But this process, and these limited outcomes of political change, seem to fall far sort of the idea of ‘revolution’.”[[80]](#footnote-80)

Let us remember that a “revolution is the successful overthrow of the prevailing elite(s) by a new elite(s) who after having taken over power (which usually involves the use of considerable violence and the mobilization of masses) fundamentally change the social structure and therewith also the structure of authority."[[81]](#footnote-81) Ultimately, a true revolution is an event where a brand new regime takes power, not just a new government. The Tunisian and Egyptian cases were therefore not a matter of transformative revolution. Social media and leaderless organizations did much to help end the governments of the day, but did—and could not—offer a practical alternative in their stead. Twitter and Facebook took the Arab Spring movements as far as they could go, and no further.

1. Ori Brafman and Rod A. Beckstrom, *The Starfish and the Spider: The Unstoppable Power of Leaderless Organizations*, (New York: Portfolio, 2006), p7. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. @NeilBhatiya (Neil Bhatiya), cited in Jillian C. York, “Not Twitter, Not Wikileaks: A Human Revolution,” (<http://jillianyork.com>) (January 14, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution*, (New York: Random House, 1978). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Whereas the ‘spontaneous’ organization of Rosa Luxembourg’s communist movement failed in their German revolution, Lenin’s vanguards proved victorious over first their social democrat and later Tsarist reactionary rivals. See V.I. Lenin, *Selected Works in Three Volumes*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1967); Liebman 1970; Elliott 1965; and Luxembourg 2004. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. A useful definition of ‘leadership’ comes from 84 social scientists from 56 countries. It is the “the ability to influence, motivate, and enable others to contribute to the effectiveness and success of the organizations of which they are members.” House et al 2004. More specifically, we are concerned with the tasks of inspiration and organization. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Barker et al, “Leadership Matters: An Introduction,” in Barker et al, *Leadership and Social Movements*, p22-23. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Walter Laqueur, *Guerilla: A Historical and Critical Study*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishing, 2009 [1976]), p379. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (eds), (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971, p196. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Manuel Castells, “The New Public Sphere: Global Civil Society, Communication Networks, and Global Governance,” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 616: 78 (2008), p86. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Alan Scott and John Street, “From media politics to e-protest: The use of popular cultural and new media in parties and social movements,” *Information, Communication and Society*, 3 (2001), p215-40. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Howard Rheingold, *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution*, (New York: Perseus, 2003), pxii. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Andrew Chadwick, “Digital Network Repertoires and Organizational Hybridity,” *Political* Communication, 24 (2007), p290. Johnson’s work can be found at Steven Johnson, *Emergence: The Connected Lives of Ants, Brains, Cities, and Software*, (London: Allen Lane, 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Jennifer Earl and Katrina Kimport, *Digitally Enabled Social Change: Activism in the Internet Age*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), speaking of Daniel Bennet and Pam Fielding, *The Net Effect: How Cyberadvocacy Is Changing the Political Landscape*, (Merrifield, VA: e-advocates Press, 1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. SMS stands for Short Message Service. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Andrew Sullivan, “The Revolution Will Be Twittered,” *The Atlantic*, (June 13, 2009). Two days later Sullivan argued Twitter is “the critical tool for organizing the resistance in Iran.” Andrew Sullivan, “Twitter *Maintenance?*”, (June 15, 2009). A similar article is Blake Hounshell’s “The Revolution Will Be Tweeted,” *Foreign Policy*, (July/August, 2011). Of course, the most popular opponent of this notion is Malcom Gladwell, “Small Change: Why the revolution will not be tweeted”, *New Yorker*, (October 4, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See the remarkable spike in the use of the phrase ‘Twitter Revolution’ at http://www.google.com/trends/?q=twitter+revolution. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *Wall Street Journal* editorial, “The Clinton Internet Doctrine,” (January 23, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Cited in Golnaz Esfandiari, “The Twitter Devolution,” *Foreign Policy*, (June 7, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. The assumption was technology has made this spontaneous uprising possible, and opponents of Tehran feared its disruption. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. The starfish analogy comes from Brafman and Beckstrom, who liken decentralized organization to a neural network. There is no brain to yea or nay decisions. There is no centralized command. Ori Brafman and Rod A. Beckstrom, *The Starfish and the Spider: The Unstoppable Power of Leaderless Organizations*, (New York: Portfolio, 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Mobilization is the matter of communication between actors for the purpose of expressing common interests and working towards common goals. Coordination, in contrast, is the managerial task of directing a mobilized population works in common direction, towards the group goals. Together mobilization and coordination consist of the basic tasks of organization. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Shirky, *Everybody*, p118. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Shirky, *Everybody*, p48. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. International Telecommunications Union,

“The World in 2011: ICT Facts and Figures,” (available at <http://www.itu.int/ITU> D/ict/facts/2011/material/ICTFactsFigures2011.pdf). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Aaker and Smith, *Dragonfly*, p53. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. International Telecommunications Union,

“The World in 2011: ICT Facts and Figures,” (available at http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/facts/2011/material/ICTFactsFigures2011.pdf). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Martin Giles, “Special report: Beyond the PC,” *The Economist*, (October 8, 2011), p16. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Pingdon,”Facebook now as big as the entire internet was in 2004,” (October 5, 2011), available at http://royal.pingdom.com/2011/10/05/facebook-now-as-big-as-the-entire-internet-was-in-2004/. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Ludwig Siegele, “Welcome to the Yotta World,” *The Economist: The World in 2012*, p126. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Adam Holisky, “World of Warcraft Subscriber Numbers Dip 100,000 to 10.2 Million,” *WoW Insider*, (February 9, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Neilsen, “State of the Media: The Social Media Report,“ (Q3, 2011). According to comScore, social networking sites have been a powerful driver of this behaviour. In 2007, social networking represented about 1 out of ever 12 minutes spent online. By 2011 that had risen to 1 out every every 6 minutes. comScore, “The Network Effect: Facebook *et al* Reach New Heights in May,” (June 15, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Surowiecki, *Crowds*, p212-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Shirky, *Everybody*, p118. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Wikipedia, “Wikipedia,” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia#cite\_note-AlexaStats-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Alexa, “Wikipedia.org Site Info,” http://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/wikipedia.org?range=5y&size=large&y=t. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Hunter Walk, (February 5, 2011). ["Please Read: A Personal Appeal TO Wikipedia Founder Jimmy Wales"](http://techcrunch.com/2011/02/05/wikipedia-affiliate-links/). TechCrunch.com. Retrieved September 24, 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. This computes to just $280 per contributor or $13 per article. Wikimedia Foundation, “2011-2012 Annual Plan Questions and Answers,” http://wikimediafoundation.org/wiki/2011-2012\_Annual\_Plan\_Questions\_and\_Answers#What.27s\_the\_total\_budget\_in\_this\_year.27s\_annual\_plan\_and\_how\_does\_it\_compare\_with\_previous\_years.3F. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. This information, ironically enough, was gleaned from the *Encyclopaedia*’s Wikipedia site. Sales and operating figures for the privately held company are not disclosed. The staff figures below are the estimate for Encyclopedia Britannica Inc. The *Encyclopedia’s* paper edition was discontinued in March 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Data from the Wikimedia Foundation’s Wikipedia page. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Brafman and Beckstrom, *Starfish*, p90-91. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Rachel Botsman and Roo Rogers, *What’s Mine in Yours: The Rise of Collaborative Consumption*, (HarperBusiness, 2010). “There is a growing movement of people who are more interested in renting and not buying: accessing and not owning.” Cited in Ron Conway, “Where Angels Will Tread,” *The Economist: The World in 2012*, p127. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Martin Wattenberg and Fernanda Viegas, of IBM, have studied how quickly vandalism has been discovered and rectified. In some contentious topics the restoration takes less than two minutes. See the “History Flow” project at http://www.research.ibm.com/visual/projects/history\_flow/. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Katherine Mangu-Ward, “Wikipedia and Beyond,” *Reason* (June 2007), p256. The case did, however, also attract a series of site vandals, who continued the pranks. Removed by the vigilanties, but kept striking, such as replacing the picture with one of Hitler, and so forth. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Jim Giles, “Special Report: Internet Encyclopaedias Go Head to Head,” *Nature* 438 (December 15, 2005), p900-901. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Authority, in turn, is the acceptance by followers that the leader has the right to issue such commands. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. W.J. Hostein, “Online, the Armies Have No Borders,” *New York Times*, (April 28, 2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. W.J. Hostein, “Online, the Armies Have No Borders,” *New York Times*, (April 28, 2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Heather Gautley, “What is Occupy Wall Street? The History of Leaderless Movements,” *Washington Post*, (October 10, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Michael Hais and Morely Winograd, “Victory for Egypt’s Leaderless Revolution,” *HuffingtonPost*, (February 11, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Brafman and Beckstrom, *Starfish*, p7. “the advent of the Internet,” they tell us, “has unleashed this force….Seemingly chaotic groups have challenged and defeated established institutions.” [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Michael Hais and Morely Winograd, “Victory for Egypt’s Leaderless Revolution,” *HuffingtonPost*, (February 11, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
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53. Don Tapscott, *Grown Up Digital: How the Net Generation Is Changing Your World*, (McGraw-Hill, 2009), p74-96. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Shirky, *Everyone*, p24. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Philip N. Howard *et al.* “Opening Closed Regimes – What was the Role of Social Media During the Arab Spring,” *Project on Information Technology & Political Islam*, January 2011 (Working Paper). Available online: <http://www.scribd.com/cthomler/d/66443833-Opening-Closed-Regimes-What-Was-the-Role-of-Social-Media-During-the-Arab-Spring> [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. *Understanding Society*, Feb 9 2011, “Is there a revolution underway in Egypt.” [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Douglas Short. “Libya, Ghaddafi and the Arab Spring,” *Advisor Perspectives*, October 21, 2011. Available online: <http://www.advisorperspectives.com/commentaries/dshort\_102111a.php> [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
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62. Bruce Maddy-Weitzman, “Tunisia: Exemplar or Exception?” *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, January 2011, Available online: <http://www.fpri.org/enotes/201101.maddy-weitzman.tunisia.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Yousri Marzouki *et al*. “The Contribution of Facebook to the 2011 Tunisian Revolution: A Cyberpsychological Insight,” *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, February 2012, Available online: <http://gsite.univ-provence.fr/gsite/Local/lpc/dir/marzouki/Marzouki&al.FB.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
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65. Yousri Marzouki *et al*. “The Contribution of Facebook to the 2011 Tunisian Revolution: A Cyberpsychological Insight,” *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, February 2012, Available online: <http://gsite.univ-provence.fr/gsite/Local/lpc/dir/marzouki/Marzouki&al.FB.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. “Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (IV): Tunisia’s Way,” *International Crisis Group*, Middle East/North Africa Report No. 106, April 28, 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Horace Campbell, “Echoes from Tunisia and Egypt: Revolutions without self-proclaimed revolutionaries,” *Pambazuka News*, February 3, 2011. Available online: <http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/features/70670> [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
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72. “Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (IV): Tunisia’s Way,” *International Crisis Group*, Middle East/North Africa Report No. 106, April 28, 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. See, for example, Gladwell, “Small Change”; and Morozov, *Delusion*. Gladwell argues that low cost, decentralized, weak ties of internet no match for high cost, strong ties, of face-to-face. Morozov worries that online collaboration is more attuned to fostering ‘slacktivism’ than tangible activism. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Cited from Brinton ’38 p103. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. By 1917 military postal censorship (just as it had the French army) warned commanders of the prevailing mood, and told of “an overwhelming desire for peace whatever the consequences.” John Keegan, *The First World War*, p333. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Grogin. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. *Huntington* ('71a), p5. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. See, for example, Chorley; Huntington. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. They can, however, put a leadership forth. Deliberative bodies, such as Occupy Wall Street, may decry permanent ‘leaderships’, but they can and have selected spokespeople to speak on their behalf. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Daniel Little, “Is There a Revolution Udnerway in Egypt?”, *Understanding Society*. At understandingsociety.blogspot.com. Little describes these movements as “’people-power’ political transformations, not revolutions.” [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Zimmerman 1983, (p298). [↑](#footnote-ref-81)