

# Eight years after Egypt's revolution, here's what we've learned about social media and protest

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Eight years ago on this day, Jan. 25, the world watched transfixed as protesters in Egypt poured into the streets and squares demanding change from the corrupt authoritarian regime of President Hosni Mubarak. The event set off a snowball of subsequent protests and sit-ins, which culminated in Mubarak's ouster 18 days later.

At the time, the Egyptian and other Arab Spring uprisings were given epithets such as "Facebook revolutions" and "Twitter revolutions," in reference to the central role that social media seemed to have played in bringing them about. Before long, researchers also chimed in, arguing that social media platforms had transformed the dynamics of movements organizing in the Arab world, making these revolutions possible.

Others were more skeptical. They pointed out that revolutions had been organized many times in the past without the help of these digital tools, and that though social media was clearly used during the Arab Spring, it was hard to show that it had any real effects.

Nearly a decade later, are we any wiser? Did Facebook and Twitter play any meaningful role in bringing down the Mubarak regime? In a recent study, we found that they did but that their importance was more limited than some of the breathless early coverage suggested. Specifically, we look at how social media was used to organize one key event — the Jan. 25, 2011, "Police Day" protests in Egypt that set the revolution in motion.

In our article, we argue that Facebook and Twitter helped bring about three aspects of this protest's success: its considerable turnout, its national scope and its grass-roots appeal.

Most important was Facebook. In 2008, the leaders of a budding Egyptian youth movement, the 6th April Youth, realized how useful the platform could be to recruit new members. They used their Facebook group to build a following, as did the administrators of affiliated groups.

Then in January 2011, inspired by the successful revolution in neighboring Tunisia, they called on these followers to join them in the streets on Jan. 25. Organizers created a Facebook event, where they provided detailed instructions about where to go and what to do, and even listed the phone numbers of human rights lawyers who would be on call. This coordination helped give the event its impressive sense of national scope — with events erupting simultaneously in multiple locations around the country.

Twitter was less helpful for organizing the protest, but on the day of the event itself, the microblogging platform allowed activists to send live updates about where demonstrators were headed and which areas to avoid. These updates crucially facilitated the spontaneous convergence of marches across Cairo on Tahrir Square, which was never part of the original plan.

The activists, forced out by a violent police sweep, did not remain in the square that night. But the Jan. 25 event had inspired Egyptians across the country with its size, scope and sense of authenticity. Three days later, on Jan. 28, they came out in even greater numbers, retook the square and refused to leave until Mubarak stepped down.

Eight years later, are the dynamics that we uncovered in Egypt still relevant? Oklahoma might seem an odd place to begin looking for parallels to Tahrir Square. But it turns out there are striking similarities between the teachers' strikes in Oklahoma in the summer and the Jan. 25, 2011, protest. Just as in Egypt, amateur activists in Oklahoma were inspired by a nearby wave of contention — striking teachers in West Virginia, rather than a democratic revolution in Tunisia — to create a Facebook group that quickly garnered tens of thousands of followers, and then used that group to organize a statewide walkout.

Social media platforms have also continued to be effective in authoritarian environments. As activists last year challenged regimes in Togo, Nicaragua and Honduras, they relied on Facebook's groups and events features to stage their events, and Twitter's hashtags and trending topics to share updates unavailable in formal outlets. In recent anti-government protests in Sudan, Facebook has been a crucial organizing tool, with pages run by activist groups such as Girifna serving as some of the only forums for disseminating information and planning new events.

Indeed, government responses themselves have pointed to these platforms' importance. In Togo, the government shut down mobile Internet services. And in Honduras, the government passed a law to facilitate the monitoring and censorship of social media content.

As new platforms have emerged and existing ones have been redesigned, so, too, have activists innovated creative new ways to put them to use. For example, messaging apps like WhatsApp and Telegram — unavailable to Egypt's Tahrir generation — were used extensively by tech-savvy activists in Armenia last year to organize the spontaneous marches that toppled its dictator.

Another good example is Facebook Live, Facebook's video-streaming function that was rolled out in August 2015. Activists quickly adopted it, using it to provide gripping and visceral real-time coverage of their protest activities and to circumvent heavily biased state-controlled coverage. In Nicaragua, for example, the anti-government movement gained its early momentum when a journalist was shot while covering the protests via Facebook Live.

Overall, then, social media seems to be as helpful for organizing protests today as it was in Egypt eight years ago. With the recent conversation over these platforms having shifted to "fake news," Russian hacking and political polarization, the anniversary of the Jan. 25 protest serves as an important reminder that social media, when put into the hands of tech-savvy activists, can still serve as a vital tool for seeking change, freedom and justice.