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Lebanon in Times of Change:
An Analysis of the Role of Social Media in "October the 17th Revolution"

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Smartphones and social media platforms played an important role in triggering the "Arab Spring" a decade ago, as they contributed to mobilizing and transmitting information and images inside and outside of the Arab world. Some even considered those as tools for the protests, while observers questioned the role of the digital revolution and technological progress in sparking the popular protests that took place in several countries.

In the analytical article below, we review the "17th of October Revolution" in Lebanon, protests of which erupted in 2019, addressing some of the facts and occurrences from the perspective of digital platforms and activists in the cyberspace. This article will examine several axes: platforms' role in initiating protests and controlling the street's rhythm, platforms becoming an alternative to traditional media, and the fake news that spread among activists.

Lebanon's Spring... A "WhatsApp Revolution"?

Lebanon's spring - in comparison to other Arab countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Syria – came about late. It started on 17 October 2019 when Lebanon witnessed an unprecedented wave of huge nationwide protests. People took to the streets with a variety of demands. They aimed to re-establish a Socio-Economic System, change the political system that is accused of corruption, and abolish sectarianism with its accompanying structural propositions. Some of these demands formed a common ground between the demonstrators, despite their diversity, while other demands received different opinions. It is agreed, however, that the direct cause that instigated the protests at that time was the Lebanese government's plan to impose taxes on the WhatsApp calling facility.

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For many, the WhatsApp issue sparked the protests, with some even calling the events "the WhatsApp revolution."

During the early evening hours of Thursday 17 October 2019, Lebanese citizens began circulating pictures of roadblocks with burning tires at the southern entrance to the capital, Beirut, protesting the Lebanese government's decision to impose a tax of 20 cents a day on online calling via WhatsApp and similar applications (Telegram, Messenger, Viber...). Few hours later, the protests escalated, roads were cut off, whilst WhatsApp notifications on Lebanese's mobile phones increased. Less than 24 hours later, the Lebanese government cancelled the planned tax on WhatsApp.

It became clear, though, that the planned WhatsApp tax was nothing but the last straw, as the demonstrations that had initially started with the news of a WhatsApp tax continued, with hundreds of thousands people taking part in the protests that followed. Slogans were raised, stressing that the demonstrations were not only in response to the imposition of taxes on the WhatsApp service, as was rumored or portrayed. Rather, these protests were the result of an accumulation of events. Although these demonstrations led the then Prime Minister Saad Hariri to submit the resignation of his Government 12 days following the outbreak of the protests, those protests continued for several months before receding in the spring of 2020 for several reasons. These reasons included the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the formation of a new Lebanese Government headed by Hassan Diab, and the suppression by security forces of several demonstrations that were punctuated by riots.

Mobile Journalism and Alternative Media

Since the beginning of the Lebanese protests, the term "citizen journalism" emerged on social media, meaning that every citizen would act as a journalist on their own, use their camera to cover events, and promptly post news and footage on social media. Those mobile journalists covered areas that witnessed movements and action far from the capital, Beirut, and even far from the lens of traditional media. They took the responsibility of conveying the true picture of the events, as some activists accused some media outlets of deliberately covering up the occurrences for ulterior motives - perhaps political as they stated. An example of this, was the poor coverage of the sit-ins in front of the Central Bank of Lebanon.

It is of significance to refer to a new study, by Maharat Foundation, that monitored media orientation in Lebanon since the October 2019 revolution, including

the growing role of alternative media and influencers. The study examined the results from the televisions' coverage of the 17 October revolution's demands on its first anniversary. The study found that news concerning the October revolution and people's demands in news bulletins was very sparse, since the "October Revolution" was explicitly only mentioned in 9 news items out of 123.

Furthermore, protests at that time were not confined to areas inside Lebanon. Rather, they spread abroad. Lebanese expats organized and participated in protests. They also filmed and photographed those demonstrations, and the images were utilized by traditional local and international media, which gave an impression that the protests received both internal and external momentum.

Among the pages that emerged on social media was the "Alternative Media" page, which defined itself as "interested in portraying news of the October 17 protests with transparency, far from media's blackout around the protests from time to time." The page published news about the calls for the closure of public facilities, after roads were opened, following the resignation of then Prime Minister Saad Hariri. The page also published news and videos around the protesters' field movements. It is worth noting that this page undertook a poll about the possibility of clearing the streets and "monitoring the Lebanese authorities for a specific period of time." In doing so, the page would have exceeded the role of media coverage, and rose to surveying people to ascertain their position on the demonstrations.

At the same time, the "Akhbar Assaha" account, covered all news and occurrences related to the demonstrations and sit-ins in various Lebanese regions, since according to the page "some Lebanese media outlets opted out of adequately covering the sit-ins". The page succeeded in transmitting videos of demonstrations in distant towns, ignored by traditional media and it also re-published videos posted by people on their pages.

Demonstrations Map

Keeping up with the demonstrations was not limited to traditional social media platforms, as developer Marc Fara created the "lebanonprotests" website, which utilized an interactive map of the demonstrations and of the blocked roads throughout Lebanon. The map showed the size of the demonstrations in each region. The site allowed its visitors to provide it with the location of new demonstrations and their coordinates, in addition to a link proving the authenticity of the news.

Misinformation and Fake News

When speaking of social media platforms at times of protests, it is necessary to

highlight the issue of fake news being circulated, which is one of the main factors in shaping public opinion. According to specialists, it was among the tools that contributed in burning out the "You Stink" movement in 2015 (Lebanese protests that erupted due to the garbage crisis at the time) and later contributed to the dispersal of the "October 17 Revolution" working groups.

In October 2019, a large number of photos, audio recordings, videos, and news were pumped, which included misinformation, or anything that would increase panic and anxiety among the Lebanese people. Perhaps the most prominent piece of news during the first twenty-four hours of the movement was a circulating image that was used to call for the mobilization of demonstrators in the capital Beirut, with activists claiming it was from one of the gatherings in downtown Beirut. Later on, it became evident that the photo was actually from Tangiers Morocco and dates back to 2015. Misinformation and misrepresentations were common and varied from news and visual material relating to the demonstrations to news about the political class in Lebanon. There was support as well as opposition to posts on social media.

Journalist and Fact-Check trainer, Mahmoud Ghazayel, sees that "the street interacted with falsified and misleading news, each in their own way. Some of the demonstrators found misinformation as a way to consolidate their beliefs about what is happening, while others became aware of the false news being circulate and the impact of such falsified news on the Lebanese people and their daily lives." According to Ghazayel, the "October Revolution" witnessed two types of misinformation: the first was embodied in an information overload spreading easily through instant messaging platforms without restrictions. The second type of misinformation was deliberately put out there by local political parties and some external parties. It was manifested in the high tone of the rhetoric rejecting exposure to state officials, reaching the point of using slogans such as "prohibitions" and "red lines".

The information was accompanied by an attempt to mislead public opinion and divert its attention from the economic crisis that started to appear in Lebanon in November 2019, so the Lebanese digital space began circulating fake news - attributed to the Internal Security Forces – that blamed foreign nationalities for thefts or smuggling money across the border.

Among the large amount of false news that was promoted on digital platforms, Ghazayel monitored some of it, such as using video clips from an on-set filming of a movie about ISIS and claiming that they are from one of Beirut's regions. And

perhaps what caught the attention of many was the participation of a large number of journalists in misinformation campaigns through their accounts, as they insistence on keeping their tweets and posts to be viewed by hundreds of thousands of their followers. Not only that, even "The National News Agency" - the official spokesperson of the Lebanese Ministry of Information - participated in campaigns to mislead public opinion, when it said that demonstrators threw stones and sticks at a security convoy in downtown Beirut, while in fact the convoy was for one of the politicians, whose bodyguards initiated the occurrence by shooting an area where the protesters gathered.

But were the protesters and the tweeps able to deal with the false news? "Not necessarily" says Ghazayel: "many of them wanted to believe any kind of false news about opponents, just because it cemented their belief that politicians are unlimitedly corrupt."

Despite all the misinformation observed on social media, Ghazayel sees that "no political party can be held responsible, especially without a proper examination of such misinformation that spread extensively at that time by research centers." Although big platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have more than once warned about networks that were being managed from outside Lebanon, seeking to mislead public opinion through some fake accounts or publications, with a coordinated political approach.

Did Social Media Control the Streets?

Day after day, the important role of social media in the Lebanese protests became more apparent. Social media became a tool that seemed to set and control the movements of the Lebanese streets. The Lebanese people followed – moment by moment - the track of movements in areas far from the Lebanese capital, most of which were not depicted by traditional media. Activists held their phones dearly, posting news on social media. Thus, "Twitter" and "Facebook" conveyed the messages of Beirut protestors to their fellows in the South and North. It should be stressed here that the role of social media has exceeded and gone beyond a mediator that conveys news, turning into a space of raging debate between the supporters and opponents of the latest scenes on ground. So, what role did social media really play during the Lebanese protests? According to specialists, social media played the role of political parties, by mobilizing, directing, and organizing the groups. Smartphones turned into a tool that for some individuals to convey their directions to the people on the street, calling for road-blocks or sit-ins in front of public institutions.

The Lebanese people kept on watch for messages being sent to them via What-sApp with no identified source, one time talking about a call to block roads or other direction. One would have imagined that the blocking of roads was a driven and calculated process.

Propaganda and Counter-Propaganda

While activists took to social media, as a platform to call for mobilization and ac-tion, an opposition movement emerged, seeking to portray counter ideas and highlight some of the pitfalls of the demonstrations, such as the blocking of ro-ads. This counter-mobilization resorted to means of communication to create a specific event or situation, which in classical media translates as "propaganda and counter-propaganda". The propaganda against the demonstrations took on a skeptical approach about what the demonstrators were doing, until the platforms witnessed an unprecedented violent confrontation, using all tools of treachery and psychological warfare.

An example was the spread of the "revolution bus" idea, where buses were used to transport protestors from North to South Lebanon. This idea drew a torrent of criticism from activists, who objected the idea and told everyone that this bus was reminiscent of the "Ain al-Remmaneh Bus" incident, which was targeted on 13 April 1975, sparking the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war.

The conflict on the cyberspace between supporters of the so-called "revolution bus" and its opponents began on social media and later moved to protests on the ground. Thus, the virtual world became a place where public opinion was shaped between supporters and opponents of the bus. Among the most used hashtags in Arabic tweets about this topic were #revolution_bus and #discord_bus. The issue around the "bus" became so magnified, that the official account of the US embassy in Beirut later tweeted about the matter and denied rumors that the "revolution's bus" was American-funded.

Conclusion

To conclude, social media platforms played a prominent role in the Lebanese revolution, and were a double-edged sword: sometimes by breaking the media blackout and bringing the voice of activists and their demands to the world, and sometimes by using such platforms as means to mislead public opinion and dis-perse the movement. Unlike the revolutions of the Arab Spring, the Lebanese protests and movements did not last long, about a few months, with hundreds to some thousands of protestors. However, social networking sites mobilized de-

monstrators in more than one event, and "17 October" date turned into a historical moment that led to the emergence of collective awareness among different social categories, especially among youths. After more than two years since the outbreak of the Lebanese protests, the economic and social situation in Lebanon is deteriorating further and further, and resentment on social media platforms is increasing day by day, and observers are wondering: Will Lebanese people return to the streets in the future? Will activists succeed this time in using communication platforms to convey their message and keep it away from misleading campaigns? Answers to those questions are yet to be clear, perhaps in the coming days or months.