#17Feb and the so-called social media revolution: a decade over the Libya's uprising

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Abstract

A decade after the end of the Gaddafi's regime in Libya, the country remains mired in a civil war and a humanitarian crisis. After more than 40 years under an autocratic rule, the Arab Spring was the promise of a transition to democracy with the guarantee of ensuring human rights and freedom of expression. In 2011, several actors advocated regime change and social media activism was mobilised in different approaches. As a result, the day that became known as #17feb was the beginning of the end of the Gaddafi dictatorship. This article endeavours to contribute to a reflection on the role of social media in the uprising and the post-revolution situation, considering activism and its propagandistic appropriation. Ultimately, this article aims to contribute to a historical record about the role of social media activism in the Arab Spring in Libya.

Keywords: social media activism; hashtags; Arab Spring; social media war

#17Fev e a denominada revolução nos média sociais: uma década após a revolta da Líbia

Resumo

Uma década após o fim do regime de Kadhafi na Líbia, o país continua envolto numa guerra civil e numa crise humanitária. Após mais de 40 anos sob um regime autocrático, a Primavera Árabe foi a promessa de uma transição para a democracia com a garantia de assegurar os direitos humanos e a liberdade de expressão. Em 2011, vários atores defenderam a mudança de regime e o ativismo através dos média sociais foi mobilizado em diferentes abordagens. Como resultado, o dia que ficou conhecido como #17feb foi o início do fim da ditadura de Kaddafi. Este artigo procura contribuir para uma reflexão sobre o papel dos média sociais na revolta e na situação pós-revolução, considerando o ativismo e a sua apropriação propagandística. Em última análise, este artigo pretende contribuir para um registo histórico sobre o papel do ativismo nos média sociais durante a Primavera Árabe na Líbia.

Palavras-chave: ativismo nos média sociais; hashtags; Primavera Árabe; guerra nos média sociais

Introduction

As a colonised country, Libya's history is similar to that of other nations once oppressed by colonialism a dictatorial system that purposefully implemented economic, class, gender, religious and ethnic inequalities to weaken peoples and favour colonisers. After gaining independence from Italy in 1951, the country became known as the United Kingdom of Libya, a monarchical constitutional system based on the heredity of leaders, and as such, established a dictatorship. The discovery of oil reserves and the consequent income from oil sales turned Libya into a wealthy nation. However, discontent emerged over the decades with the concentration of the country's wealth in the sphere of power.

As a consequence of discontent with inequality and extreme poverty, a group of military officers led by Muammar Gaddafi launched the Libyan Revolution in September 1969, deposing King Idris (Amaral, 2014). Gaddafi abolished the Constitution and proposed the 'Green Book', where he presented his political proposals to improve and develop the country. The wealth generated by oil allowed Libya to increase per capita income, which elevated the country to the top of the Human Development Index on the African continent. However, while the country improved economic conditions for the population, the government led by Muammar Gaddafi decided to invest in weapons and support terrorist groups operating in several Arab countries. In 1977, Libya became the 'Great Socialist People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya', which gave unlimited powers to Gaddafi and eliminated any glimmer of hope of implementing a democratic system in the country. In the 1980s, after a failed assassination attempt against Gaddafi, the United Nations imposed sanctions on the country.

What became known as Muammar Gaddafi's 'Permanent Revolution' was a dictatorship characterised by its brutality against its opponents. Gaddafi turned into an extravagant dictator who "banned private property and retail trade, censored the press, controlled the military, implemented sharia and persecuted dissidents. Libya's decades of international isolation have left the country without political alliances or national organisations of any type" (Amaral, 2014, p. 768). Libyan society was fractured and divided by kinship and region cleavages.

Libya's Constitutional Proclamation of 11 December 1969, postulates "Freedom of opinion is guaranteed within the limits of public interest and the principles of the Revolution" (Elareshi, 2020, p. 198). Therefore, freedom of speech and media was severely limited by government policies.

Dissemination of news or information that might "tarnish the country's reputation or undermine confidence in it abroad" (RWB, 2010/2016) can be punished with sentences like life prison sentences. The Penal Code also states the death penalty for "whoever spreads within the country, by whatever means, theories or principles aiming to change the basic principles of the Constitution or the fundamental structures of the social system or to overthrow the state's political, social or economic structures or destroy any of the fundamental structures of the social system using violence, terrorism or any other unlawful means" (Human Rights Watch, 2006, p. 28). Due to the strict controls, Libyan journalists practised self-censorship.

In 2007, the Libyan government authorised non-governmental media. Several newspapers were launched and a satellite TV service by a company associated with one of Gaddafi's sons. However, in 2009, the government nationalised the private media. In January 2010, Libya began censoring the Internet (Ghannam, 2011). Protests by the families of prisoners in the city of Benghazi were posted on YouTube, and the platform was blocked in the country. Independent opposition websites were blocked at the same time. In 2009 a single government-owned service provider offered Internet access. In the same year, Libya had 5 million mobile-cellular telephone subscribers (Amaral, 2014).

In a few years, Gaddafi went from an anti-Western terrorist dictator into a semi-Western ally in the global war against terrorism and fundamentalist Islamism (Morris, 2014). However, limitations on

freedom of expression continued to be severe. The Freedom of the Press Index[1] rated Libya, in 2009 and 2011, as the most-censored country in the Middle East and North Africa. In 2010, the EIU Democracy Index rate Libya in 159 place, in a scale of 167 countries (Alqudsi-Ghabra, 2012). However, in 2011 a report from United Nations Human Rights Council[2] pointed to improvements in human rights, in particular in the treatment of women. Even so, the state strictly controlled the media, and Libyan law still provided limited freedom of speech.

A decade after Libya's uprising, this article proposes a reflection on the role of mainstream media and social media during and after the revolutionary process. Departing from the argument' social media war', the article argues the fallacy of the labels' Twitter Revolution' and 'Facebook Revolution' in a country where complex social and economic cleavages have mortgaged the transition to democracy and perpetuated civil war. Therefore, the article aims to analyse the role of social media activism in the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya and the post-revolution situation, considering the period from 2011 to the present day.

#17feb: The role of social media in Libya's uprising

As the mediatic ecosystem evolved to hybrid ecology (Jenkins, 2006), the impact of social media on democracy and public debate is high on the political agendas (Amaral, 2020), even though mainstream media still retain the role of gatekeepers for society in general (Amaral, 2016).

Revolutions in several Arab countries started to be breaking news in the worldwide media agenda at the beginning of 2011, as "social media has enabled actors to communicate directly and constantly across vast geographical distances, which increases the potential for cross-national diffusion between corresponding social movements" (Rane & Salem, 2012, p. 99). The 'Arab Spring' hit Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Syria, Libya, Jordan, Morocco, Algeria, Yemen, Oman and Djibouti. The Internet and social media were considered determinants for the 'Arab Spring'. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube were the epicentre of Arab regional social movements and encouraged protests worldwide (Amaral, 2016). Rane and Salem (2012) argue, "the actions of protesters in uploading information in English and ensuring news and images of the uprisings reached mainstream media suggests a consciousness that support from Western governments was considered important" (p. 101).

The public space on the Internet is complex and multifaceted, not finding a balance between anarchy and mixed democracy communication. Nevertheless, many cases highlight the power of Internet mobilisation. On Twitter, for example, is often the publication of real-time updates on world political events, such as the protests in Tehran and Moldova. Online social networks and social media sites are intermediate spaces not disconnected from the offline world (Amaral, 2016). Nonetheless, even though new technologies strengthen social activism, individual action and self-expression can be observed more frequently. The public sphere is fragmented across multiple platforms, and content seems to be more personal than social. As stated by Rogers, it is necessary "the understanding of the web as a network space, as opposed to the virtual space or online community space" (2009, p. 122). Considerate the social environments on the Internet as a macro network interconnecting micro-networks allows the virtual public sphere to be perceived as a whole and not just a cluster of communities, regardless of their ties. Social media is used as part of a re-appropriation of public space (Gerbaudo, 2012).

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1. Available at https://freedomhouse.org/ Retrieved on 15 November 2021.
2. Available at https://news.un.org/en/story/2011/09/389962-un-human-rights-council-recommends-reinstating-libyas-membership Retrieved on 15 November 2021.

The upheavals of citizenship in the digital environment often result from reconfigured activism in this social space, the Internet. Indeed, digital spaces enhance the shared social construction that materialises in new spaces where information circulates and promotes debate (Dahlberg, 2001). Social media platforms are tools that support movements and disseminate information, facilitating communication channels for diverse publics (Rane & Salem, 2012). These tools may establish asymmetric social networks based on content and conversation, reversing the traditional logic of the reciprocal social network, maximising and expanding the weak ties that make it possible to sustain and mobilise connective action (Bennet & Segerberg, 2012).

Following this perspective, Bennett and Segerberg (2012) postulate the 'logic of connective action' in opposition to the 'logic of collective action'. The authors argue that connective action results from personal actions framed in digital social networks.

According to Bennet and Segerberg, "this shift from group-based to individualised societies is accompanied by the emergence of flexible social 'weak tie' networks (Granovetter, 1973) that enable identity expression and the navigation of complex and changing social and political landscapes" (2012, p. 744). Granovetter's (1973) contribution to network structuring argues that weak ties are much more important than strong ties for social network maintenance and influence. Granovetter (1973) postulated the theory of weak ties and strong ties from a structuralist approach to social network analysis methodology. The author demonstrates that the actors who share strong bonds are usually part of the same social circle, while the actors with weaker ties are significant in that they establish the connection between different social groups.

Bennett and Segerberg identify a triple typology of collective and connective large-scale action networks. The first type represents "organizationally broken networks" characterised by collective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p. 756). Two other connective action network types contrast with the first one. The middle type of connective action involves organizationally enabled networks were "communication content centres on organizationally generated inclusive person action frames" (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p. 756). Another type is a more self-organising connective action network with "little or no organisational coordination of action" (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p. 756).

There are spheres of merging in this tripartite model of action networks. As noted by the authors, "personalised connective action networks cross paths (…) with more conventional collective action networks" (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p. 759). On the one hand, 'digitally network actions' emerge in a digital, social, cultural and political shift of modern democracies in which individuals are connecting and engaging with the public sphere through personal actions and options to express themselves (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Bimber, 2017). On the other hand, "personalised collective action formations in which digital media become integral organisational parts" tend to displace collective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p. 760).

In late 2010, with the publication of information on thousands of documents of US diplomacy came the #cablegate hashtag to index content and conversations. From this moment, the political intervention in social platforms use semantic classification and to promote social networking content has become a constant. A few months later, 'Arab Spring' started, and social media were a powerful weapon. However, leaks have not been published in all countries where protests occurred. As Comunello and Azera (2012) argued,

> The revolutionary wave that hit the Arab Middle Eastern countries in 2011 gave a strong impetus to a long process of socio-political transformations; this trend is bound to endure over time and will provoke significant change in the domestic environment of the countries involved, from regime change to the rise of new actors (e.g. new political parties), and to the rearrangement of economic and political elites (p. 454).

The series of demonstrations and revolutions seems to have started with the rebels' victory in Tunisia in January 2011, followed by the revolution in Egypt, also known as the "Lotus Revolution", held from January until 11 February 2011. The revolution in Libya was announced through the Internet to be on 17 February 2011 (Morris, 2014). The government started shutting down Libya's Internet services on 18 February. As the protests increased, Gaddafi shut down the phone networks. At first, the role of mobile devices has been significantly important, both in the exchange of messages and to transmit information over the Internet. Combined with this aspect, the satellites TV were also critical. As in other countries, Al Jazeera supported the rebels allowing the use of its satellites to publish information online, since the regime - like others like Egypt and Tunisia - cut Internet access in several areas of the country. In addition, some members of the hacker group *Anonymous* set up parallel networks to help Libyans circumvent censorship.

As social media was considered decisive as a medium to disseminate information, the power of hashtags was recognised, and the appropriation of this social practice characterised the use of own social platforms. The use of tools and practices such as indexing content for the viral spread allows us to understand that the objectives of social media appropriation were collective consumption and distributed production of media content. To communicate nationally was not an option. Therefore, activists and political groups started a 'social media war' (Amaral, 2014). The idea was to convey a clear message to the world: the Gaddafi regime would be overthrown. In this sense, social media was not a casual factor but rather a set of valuable tools for disseminating information and gathering supporters. Anonymous citizens also used social media to expose their perspective of what was happening in the country.

Algorithms are not stable instances, being part of networks of relations that mediate and influence their actions and reactions based on how they are programmed and by their reactions not predicted by human action (Kitchin, 2017). Therefore, the transformation of human actions into quantified data may predict behaviours and actions and respond accordingly (Gillespie, Boczkowski, & Foot, 2014), even though these responses may polarise discourses and, consequently, political imaginaries from emotions because they challenge values and beliefs. According to Bucher (2018), the algorithm is never a thing but rather 'becoming' from a relational logic because it is distributed technically and socially. This follows the idea that algorithms are multiple, so the central question regarding agency is when and not where (Bucher, 2018).

The political imaginary is altered by algorithms that have ethical, social and political implications (Bucher, 2018). Considering the social dimension of algorithms, how one understands the world, subjectivities and agencies are conditioned (Bucher, 2018). In this sense, the way algorithms condition the forms of political action and reflection in conflict contexts should be equated to the agential dimension enhanced by digital surveillance. Furthermore, "algorithmic decision-making processes" (Bucher, 2018, p. 55) arise from human and non-human judgments that disregard contexts. From here derives the idea that there is a need to think "dimension of thinking around the politics of algorithms-politics not as what algorithms do per se but how and under what circumstances different aspects of algorithms and the algorithmic are made available-or unavailable-to specific actors in particular settings" (Bucher, 2018, p. 55). The question focuses on how algorithms are enacted and how they react, promoting social and discursive responses from multiple actors whose agency is modified according to the algorithm and platform affordances (Bucher & Helmond, 2018).

In the case of Libya, at first, Twitter was the central platform mainly because it is not a social network but rather a network of content and conversations. It follows that there is a higher probability of content going viral and reaching multiple audiences, other social media services and even professional media. As in other cases, like Moldova or Iran, the power of hashtags was recognised, and the appropriation of this social practice characterised the use of Twitter by the opposition to Gaddafi. For exam-

ple, #feb17 was the most popular hashtag to indexed content and promoted a stream on the revolution in the country. In the second stage, the stream of information was also ensured through multiple pages and groups on Facebook.

In Libya, the Internet penetration rate was meagre. In fact "the Facebook penetration rate was slower in Libya as it increased from 4.3 per cent in the first quarter of 2011 to 6 – 7 per cent in the first two months of 2012" (Biswas & Sipes, 2014, p. 2). Accordingly, websites in the country avoid politics issues and activists, mainly in exile, who advocated for reform and freedom used proxy tools to circumvent censorship (Alqudsi-Ghabra, 2012). Therefore, the role of social media in Libya's uprising was mainly focused on reaching international audiences. Social media was a crucial element in Libya's uprising because of the state control of the media (Biswas & Sipes, 2014). For political groups and social activists, these platforms were an alternative source of information to the traditional media. As Biswas and Sipes stated, "during revolution, social media is utilised to maintain and expand the momentum of a political movement" (2014, p. 12). Papaioannou and Olivos (2013) emphasise that

> new cultural values based on human rights and political freedom, in particular participation in free elections, are disseminated via Facebook, highlighting Libya's transition from an authoritarian regime towards democracy. Second, Facebook is used to serve these collective goals through promoting civic journalism, encouraging freedom of speech and facilitating participation in civic and political activities. Facebook also supports among Libyan citizens an inclusive discourse which recognises equal representation of all regions in the country and its cultural and political significance in the emergence of a new democracy (p. 99).

Diaspora played a critical role in the online dissemination of the Libyan revolution. For example, a website based outside Libya (www.libya-watanona.com), written in English and Arabic, published information on what was happening in the country, the progress of the rebels in front of the war, crimes committed by troops loyal to Gaddafi as well as reported support from the international community opposition to the Libyan government. Another trendy website from the regime's opponents was LibyaFeb17 (www.libyafeb17.com), managed by two Libyan raised in the UK. The website published videos, mainly filmed by mobile phones of Libyans in the country, showing the violence in Libya and praising the need to make the revolution.

Anonymous activists have used Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube to demand a 'Day of Anger' on 17 February 2011 (Cottle, 2011). In that month, the Libyan Youth Movement created an account on Twitter named 'ShababLibya'[3]. "We are young Libyans in and outside Libya inspired by the youth of Egypt & Tunisia doing our best to help rebuild our country" was written, back then, in the profile bio. In 2020, the account changed their profile bio to "We reported the Libyan uprising during the Arab Spring". This was the most popular Twitter account about the Libyan revolution. Libyan Youth Movement also created a Facebook page[4], still updated and with more than 54.000 followers, to post current information on the situation in Libya using international sources and publicise activities taking place all over the world regarding ideas on the implementation of democracy in Libya (Morris, 2014). In addition, their YouTube channel[5] has posted 461 videos until 2014, mainly filmed in Libya during the revolution and videos from international television channels concerning the situation in the country. On 17 February 2011, another account was created on YouTube: 'The Day of Rage (Libya)'[6]. The channel's creators are unknown and have uploaded 30 videos, between 17 and 27 February, with violent images of what was happening in the country's streets – mainly in Benghazi and Bayda. These videos had 114.440 views back then.

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3. Available at https://twitter.com/ShababLibya
4. Available at https://www.facebook.com/LibyanYouthMovement/
5. Available at https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCd_lSHxhLCogUIO_lffrjEA
6. Currently not available.

In 2011, there were about 12,700 channels on Libya on YouTube. The Gaddafi regime has also used social media to spread its message. YouTube was the most widely used platform. The channel 'Peace for Libya'[7] posted videos by Moussa Ibrahim, Muammar Gaddafi's government spokesperson. 'Libya SOS'[8] claimed to disclose the truth in Libya by publishing alleged videos of NATO attacks. The channel was connected to a blog, a war diary reporting what was happening in the country from supporters of the Gaddafi regime's perspective. The blog 'Libya SOS'[9] was updated until May 2014.

Although the Facebook page with more followers is 'Libyan Youth Movement'[10], 'Libya Protest News'[11], and '4Libya'[12] were also very popular inside and outside the country. The two accounts are now disabled but were particularly active until the capitulation of the Gaddafi regime. 'Libya Protest News' posted information about the ongoing revolution. '4Libya' was an open page to followers posted about the events in Libya. Pictures, videos and discussions were the main content. Unfortunately, many of the Facebook pages were deleted after the revolution.

The most popular Facebook groups were 'Day of Anger in Libya', which has been deactivated, and 'Libyan Freedom and Democracy Campaign', also offline. The posts and discussions are mainly in Arabic. Libyan Freedom and Democracy Campaign positions itself as an international organisation to promote the rights of the Libyan people and the right to elect their leaders.

Citizen journalists in Benghazi developed an alternative and independent media: 'Libya Alhurra'[13] broadcasted the revolution via satellite Internet connections. Their message was "Libya today in the ongoing demonstrations - we will never stop until Libya is liberated from the tyrant Muammar Al Qirdavi". Gaddafi loyal forces killed the founder of Libya Alhurra, Mohammed Nabbous, on 19 March 2011.

Mainstream media also participated in the 'social media war'. For example, Al Jazeera and CNN were *live blogging* from Libya, posting texts, videos, audio and pictures from Tripoli and the cities where they took place the most significant combats between rebels and forces loyal to Gaddafi. In several tweets, it is also reported that NATO used social media as a source of information for defining potential targets for airstrikes in Libya.

The issue does not seem to be if the uprisings would occur without the Internet but rather if they would have the same influence across the world (Amaral, 2016). Goldstone (2011) points out that

> The wave of revolutions sweeping the Middle East bears a striking resemblance to previous political earthquakes. As in Europe in 1848, rising food prices and high unemployment have fuelled popular protests from Morocco to Oman. As in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union in 1989, frustration with closed, corrupt, and unresponsive political systems has led to defections among elites and the fall of once-powerful regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, and perhaps Libya. (p. 8)

As previously stated, the use of Twitter was massive inside and outside of Libya. The 'art of revolution by Twitter', as Western mainstream media advocated, does not make the revolution in Libya a 'Twitter Revolution' (Amaral, 2014). However, using this social media tool to disseminate streams of information around the world about the revolution is undeniable. This is mainly because the activists started to use the hashtag #Feb17 to remember the same day in 2006 when the Gaddafi regime's security forces killed a dozen protesters in Tripoli. The hashtag was symbolic and also symbolised the end of an era.

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7. Currently not available.
8. Currently not available.
9. Available at http://libyasos.blogspot.com/
10. Available at https://www.facebook.com/LibyanYouthMovement/
11. Currently not available.
12. Available at https://www.facebook.com/4Libyaa/
13. Available at https://libyaalahrar.tv/

Diaspora positions are anchored in emotions and affections (Krause, 2008, 2011; Bickford, 2011). As Krause (XX) argues, emotional judgement is entirely linked to moral judgement, which allows for the understanding that "shared purposes" and "common interests" (Bickford, 2011, p. 1025) of groups or communities are not neutral. On the contrary, they universalise purposes (Bickford, 2011). From this stems the adherence of Western mainstream media to a single idea, so it is necessary to "consider emotion and partisan thinking as morally appropriate elements of democratic communication" (Bickford, 2011, p. 1026). Emotions have enabled broader debates that regulate people's attention and enable individuals to engage in political conversation (Krause, 2011, Bickford, 2011).

Social media activism: an end of an era and the beginning of another

The labels 'Twitter Revolution' and 'Facebook Revolution' fulfilled many newspaper titles. However, demographic issues, as well as social and political patterns between countries, were very diverse. Compare substantially different economies and cultures become habitual although created fallacies (Amaral, 2016). Activists and opposition of dictatorial governments used technology to mainstream their political messages. Though should the echoed in the global sphere without the Internet? Was social media the main tool for the revolution? "There is no consensual answer. Yet it became clear that the political developments in the Arab showed that the youth used the Internet as a political platform and a tool to mobilise people for change" (Amaral, 2014, p. 768).

Reardon (2012, p. 24) argues that "while Facebook, Twitter and YouTube certainly played a role in the way the Arab Spring unfolded, their influence was far less critical than many had suggested". According to the author (Reardon, 2012, p. 24), "when you consider that the protesters tended to be young, tech-savvy and included women, that is a strong argument for social media as a cause". Harlow (2013) argues that 'framing' is vital for social movements. It follows that the dominant narrative of a revolution through social media has been used as a form of storytelling to promote buy-in to causes by creating a "new collective dimension, affording social movements a seemingly endless number of contributing authors, platforms, and even audience members" (Harlow, 2013, p. 60). Accordingly, social media became political tools to promote change in the Arab world and the Arabian Diaspora. Nevertheless, mainstream media such as Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya television channels have been central to revolutionary processes (Alterman, 2011).

Although the first demonstrations and unrest began in February 2009 with foreign workers and angry minorities protesting in the main square of Zawiya, the anti-Gaddafi movement only started in January 2011 in Bayda, Derna, Benghazi. The protesters were disappointed with the delays in the building of housing units and political corruption. In January 2011, inspired by the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, the writer and political commentator Jamal al-Hajji wrote a support request for freedom in Libya on the Internet. He was arrested on 1 February. In early February, Gaddafi gathered with political activists, journalists and media entrepreneurs and warned them that they would be held responsible for the possible chaos in the country if they supported the protesters.

As the Libyan regime was based on a clan's society, rebels enkindled the protests in eastern provinces (Amaral, 2014). At first, the rebels were composed primarily of civilians. Then, teachers, students, lawyers, oil workers, police officers and soldiers joined the rebels. Finally, the Islamism group Libyan Islamic Fighting Group is also part of the rebel movement and the Obaida Ibn Jarrah Brigade.

The notable manifestations in Libya began on 15 February 2011, and pro-Gaddafi tribes and secret police killed protesters. The demonstrations hostile to government intransigence and brutal repression against protesters degenerated in a revolt that spread rapidly through the eastern part of the country, traditionally opposed to Gaddafi. The New York Times reported, in April 2011, that two of the sons of Gaddafi endeavoured a transition to a constitutional democracy, which could involve the step-down of

the father from power (Amaral, 2014). Saif al-Islam Gaddafi has pointed to be the potential leader of the transition. However, the rebels rejected the proposal, and NATO took command of military operations in Libya. After the reported defeat of pro-Gaddafi forces, Saif al-Islam remained in hiding in the country's south until his capture in November 2011.

Even though digital migration was still in its early years in Libya, the use of social media for external dissemination of protests revealed the tribal and regional cleavages in the country. The Internet penetration rate in the country was low, and, as of June 2010, only 5.4% of the population had access (Amaral, 2014). This data demystifies the argument that social media were the basis of the uprising in Libya and the labels of 'Facebook Revolution' or 'Twitter Revolution'. Moreover, the role of mobile devices has been significantly important, both in messaging and for conveying information across the Internet. However, as Duncombe (2011) emphasises

> the protests and the violent government crackdown were filmed using camera phones and quickly dispersed onto social networking sites, the images of which were then picked up by various news outlets outside of Libya. This indicates Libyans had access to such technology prior to the uprising and earlier than the start of the "Arab Spring" movement, so again this representation of ICTs as "new" and developing alongside the uprising themselves, and therefore responsible for it, is problematic. (p. 5)

Several Facebook pages and hundreds of thousands of tweets have supported the protest, but since 18 February 2011, the regime has disabled the Internet, hoping to smother manifestations. However, the protests increased, crowning in bloody clashes between rebels and people loyal to Gadhafi (Amaral, 2014). Although users on social media encouraged a fierce opposition to the regime claiming for free expression, Gaddafi's government replied with harsh repression and arrests. Consequently, the rise of independent social media in the Diaspora increased citizen engagement within communication technologies (Morris, 2014). Therefore, social media also were used as a 'watchdog' of the official Libyan press and disseminated information to the Western world. Twitter became an arena for directing campaigns against public figures and political actors, while the government tried to use the same tool to convey the idea that Saif al-Islam would take power and install a democracy in Libya.

The appropriation of social media was a method of propaganda for both rebels and the regime. For example, the so-called 'YouTube war' revealed how political dissidents and activists against Gaddafi used the platform for disseminating their message, often with fake content. As a result, "there were many suspicions as to the contents published and confirmation of information was increasingly difficult, with armed rebels on the ground to hinder the work of media professionals" (Amaral, 2014, p. 770).

The propaganda war has widespread across social media platforms. Fake news and disinformation were shared by false accounts that pretended to be ordinary users, looking for the speed in disseminating the message and the credibility that information transmitted by peers usually confers (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Also, through hashtags, streaming of false information were widely disseminated on Twitter.

On 18 February 2011, the Libyan government ordered a complete Internet shutdown for almost 7 hours. The second Internet shutdown occurred on 3 March. Duncombe argued that "Gaddafi employed his 'Electronic Army''to track down and arrest those who were using social media to publicise the events happening in Egypt, Tunisia and Bahrain at the time" (2011, p. 6). Journalists and bloggers faced severe repercussions for expressing an independent opinion and publishing reliable and impartial information. Several social media campaigns demanded rights for Internet users, journalists, citizen journalists and bloggers. The Gaddafi regime severely repressed digital dissidents. The imprisonments were emblematic of control of digital space. Hence, the Libyan Diaspora has often been the source of what was happening inside the country for the outside world and international audiences. The Libyan Youth Movement in the Diaspora reported directly to Twitter and Facebook and tagged the messages with the hashtag #feb17 (Morris, 2014).

During the first major mobilisation, Libya's state-owned TV did not mention the anti-government protests and showed demonstrations supporting Gaddafi. The signal of the TV satellite operator Nilesat was blocked on 23 February 2011. Alhurra TV, an Internet television channel founded by Mohamed Nabbous at the start of the Libyan civil war (Cottle, 2011), was capable of circumventing government blocks on the Internet and broadcasting live images from Benghazi. Libya Al-Ahrar TV, is a satellite TV channel broadcast from Doha (Qatar), was created in March 2011 by the National Transitional Council and had correspondents throughout the country. Libyan rebels used the radio to communicate and provide information to the population. Many new magazines and newspapers emerged through the Libyan civil war, while state-owned newspapers emphasised pro-Gaddafi demonstrations. Almost every newspaper was written in Arabic, except The Libya Post, the first English language publication in the country. Nevertheless, "Libya's non-violent social movement for freedom and democracy was relatively quickly overtaken by armed resistance fighters, which increased the uncertainty of the uprising" (Rane & Salem, 2012, p. 106).

The country collapsed into a civil war, and the idea that social media platforms empowered the revolution in a transnational sphere became prevalent (Amaral, 2014). For example, as a demonstration of solidarity to the pro-democracy demonstrations, Twitter users started to tag their tweets with the hashtag #feb17, which symbolises the Libyan revolution. In addition, Western mainstream media relied on tweets to report the current events in the country, given that few journalists were able to broadcast from the country. Therefore, "the role of hashtags in the Libyan revolution was relevant as it promoted adherence to social and political movements, ensured information streams, indexed messages to contents and disseminated information by communication channels that promote collective action through social interactions" (Amaral, 2014, p. 770).

After the NATO intervention in Libya, rebels started to impose severe punishments on their critics, which led to a backlash on social media and the Libyan youth movement in the Diaspora. In August 2011, Internet access was available again after five months. In October 2011, the capture of Gaddafi and his death at the hands of the rebels was posted on YouTube. The dictator's death appeared to put an end to the civil war. Nevertheless, ten years after, Libya is still facing the need for political reconstruction, widespread corruption and scarcity of essential goods.

The first parliamentary elections after the fall of the Gaddafi regime were in June 2012. However, until 2014 civil war continued in different provinces of the country. From 2014 to the present day, the nation faces the so-called Second Civil War in Libya, with several armed groups vying for power and economic control.

As media professionals began to redirect attention to Syria, social media platforms have become the only medium to disseminate information on the actual situation in Libya. In addition, the youth in the Diaspora returned to play an essential role after the disillusionment with the fall of Tripoli to the rebels.

The opposition to Gaddafi, who took power, understood the role of social media and satellites. Internet cuts aim to end communications with the outside world. Nevertheless, the attempts were frustrating because users could get to social media platforms via SMS and virtual private networks, as well as proxy servers that allowed secure remote access to the Internet (Amaral, 2016). Attempts to limit communications with the outside world not only failed as it highlights in social media that there is another need for change.

For a while, mainstream social media continued to play an essential role in disclosing the country situation. Moreover, social media started to be complementary to satellite TV that is assumed to be partial. Despite the hashtag #feb17 referring to February 2011 and the beginning of the revolution, it continues to index content on the Libyan situation.

In the post-revolution situation, the Libyan Youth Movement still updates the Twitter page with information about political and economic reforms in the post-revolution reconstruction and civil rights

(Biswas & Sipes, 2014). This Twitter account often refers to international political sources. However, bloggers and citizen journalists continue to be harassed, and the authorities and militias still control internet access, according to Reporters Without Borders, Humans Rights Watch and Amnesty International.

Freedom House reported an increase of online threats and violent attacks on journalists between May 2013 and May 2014, stating that the press was still under pressure by the new regime. In addition, the activist organisation Libyan Youth Voices identified that youth activist and blogger Tawfik Bensaud was assassinated. In an interview with the Huffington Post[14], Benaud claimed that "a military movement alone can't solve the crisis; there must a civil movement that works parallel to it. If youth are given a chance, they can find a peaceful solution. My message to Libya's youth is, you are powerful and you can make change. You just need to take the opportunity and act". Tawfik was killed on 19 September 2014, a day that became known as 'Benghazi Friday'. In 24 hours, ten activists, journalists and law enforcement officials were killed. Although it is still unknown who carried out the assassinations, it is believed the rebels are now fighting the new regime.

In February 2015, Human Rights Watch reported a "war on the media". According to the organisation,

> journalists also continue to face legal hazards not only because sweeping Gaddafi-era laws restricting press freedom have not been repealed but also on account of newer laws restricting freedom of expression promulgated by Libya's interim authorities since the end of 2011. Prosecutors have pressed criminal charges against journalists and civilians have pursued lawsuits against them for slander, insult, and libel. (2015)

Since the end of the 2011 Libyan Revolution, which overthrew Muammar Gaddafi, violence has involved various rebel groups and the new state security forces. There was an ongoing armed conflict since then, and in two different moments (2011-2014 and 2014-actual). The forces aligned with the Libyan parliament and General Khalifa Haftar are fighting Islamist forces. Islamists had controlled the General National Congress since Nouri Abusahmain was elected president in June 2013. In December, Congress voted to enforce sharia law in the country. On 14 February 2014, General Khalifa Haftar, who served on the group that overthrew Gaddafi, ordered the Congress to dissolve, but his demands were ignored. The other conflict began in May 2014. On 18 May, members of a militia allied to general Khalifa Haftar attacked the building of the General Congress in Tripoli with anti-aircraft weapons and rockets, forcing parliamentarians to escape from the building. Khalifa Haftar called 'Operation Dignity' to the 2014 Libyan Civil War.

The second civil war in Libya is ongoing, with four groups contesting control of the country: Council of Deputies - internationally known as 'Libyan Government'; the government Islamist entitled New General National Congress based in Tripoli; Shura Council of Revolutionaries from Benghazi led by Islamist militia Ansar al-Sharia; and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant's Libyan provinces, which controls Sirte - the hometown of Gaddafi.

On 28 July 2015, a court in Tripoli condemned to death Gaddafi's son, Saif al-Islam, and eight other suspects accused of war crimes associated with the 2011 revolution. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch criticised the trial, considering "serious violations" against international law. A court of the Council of Deputies convicted Saif al-Islam. However, Gaddafi's son was tried in his absence as a former rebel group held him in Zintan since 2011.

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14. Available at https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/international-political-forum/libya-politics_b_5823324.html Retrieved on 21 November 2021

Until today, the country remains divided and faces a war. However, despite internal and Diaspora use, social media are no longer central to disseminating information. As a result, the Arab Spring label fell, and the Western mainstream media removed Libya from their agenda.

Conclusion

In early 2011, and due to revelations made by Wikileaks, revolutions in the Arab world marked the media agenda. The so-called 'Twitter Revolution' and 'Facebook Revolution' sought to associate the revolutions with social media activism. However, the observation of these events allows us to affirm that the centrality of the professional media has not disappeared. On the contrary, it became evident that new gatekeepers emerged, with direct access to media and audiences and resources to new tools to exert their power of influence. Wikileaks will have been no more than a boost to these revolutions by exposing rulers' corruption and demonstrating the power of technology.

Nevertheless, leaks were not published about all the countries where demonstrations took place. The succession of protests and revolutions seems to have started with the rebels' victory in Tunisia, but it has been fading over the months. In addition, to the revolutions in the Arab world, protests followed in the Western world, with encampments as a form of demonstration in several European and North American cities. Social media played an essential role in helping to promote civic participation and in the pressure exerted by societies on spheres of power. However, technology was, essentially, a means of dissemination abroad. The credibility made by the professional media was followed by the dissemination of content using various platforms and social practices, such as semantic classification through hashtags with a view to indexing content. The first appropriations of social media as a tool for disseminating political upheavals were #moldova and #iranelection, in connection with the demonstrations in Moldova and Iran, in 2009. The role of social mobilisation attributed to these platforms may not exist in total, but transmitting this message calls for the adhesion of other audiences. In these cases, the viral logic is closely associated with the community to dilute the complexity of reading loose information and dispersed narratives.

The organisation of the protests in the countries will very possibly have focused more on SMS, emails and personal interactions than on social media. The numbers of Internet accesses in the 'Arab Spring' countries demonstrate how it is impossible to argue that social media have been the main thrust of the revolutions in the Arab world and demystify the idea of the 'Facebook Revolution' or 'Twitter Revolution' from an internal perspective. The role of mobile devices was substantially important, both exchanging messages and transmitting information over the Internet. Also, satellite television had great relevance. The use of tools and practices such as content indexing with a view to viral dissemination makes it possible to understand that the objectives of social media appropriation were collective consumption and distributed production.

Furthermore, at this point, Twitter was the central platform because it is not a social media platform but rather a network of content and conversations. It follows that content is more likely to go viral and reach multiple audiences, other social media services and even professional media. The power of hashtags was recognised, and this social practice's appropriation characterised the use of social platforms themselves. In addition to identifying causes, hashtags made it possible to create movements such as #iranelection, #jan25 or #feb17 in the case of Libya, promote adherence to these, ensure streaming of information, index content and messages, and publicise the revolutions as an organised whole (even if, in practice, this was not the case). The role of social media seems to have been more than a means of organising protests, a tool for disseminating information (Amaral, 2016). Revolutions were made by the people, by political and civic organisations. Social platforms were instruments to maximise their actions, essentially in the external domain, through the transmission of messages. Arguing that social media were instruments that facilitated revolutions in the Arab world and protests in the West implies acknowledging that they boosted communication channels to promote collective action through social

interactions in a perspective of a public sphere sheltered from possible censorship. In fact, they helped create political communities around causes and strengthen ties that sustain and mobilise civic and political action, as in the case of the Diaspora, and favoured the dissemination of information during times of crisis.

The issue is not whether the revolutions would occur without the Internet, but rather whether they would have the same impact on the world (Amaral, 2016). Political western agendas also boost the revolutions on mainstream media and social media (Rane & Salem, 2012). This assumption is possible when considering the media coverage of the campers in Europe, for instance. And yet, in these cases, the use of the social was also massive. In Arab Spring, social media were crucial instruments to convey information, speeches, protests and images of brutal police reprisals. They were powerful tools to capture the attention of professional media and other countries and seek support in the populations (from the country itself, emigrants and nearby peoples, geographically and emotionally). As stated above, the starting point seems to have been the revolutions in Iran and Moldova and the appropriation of tools in these cases. At the end of 2010, with the publication of information from thousands of documents of US diplomacy, the hashtag #cablegate was created to index content and conversations. From this moment on, political intervention on social platforms use semantic classification and promote social content networks became a constant.

The Internet is a space of the public that decentralises the public sphere (Bohman, 2004). The micro-networks that allow the virtual public sphere to be perceived as a whole and not just a cluster of communities have a political meaning that anchors in "technological mediation of public communication" (Bohman, 2004, p. 133). Therefore, computer-mediated communication provides "a new unbounded space for communicative interaction" (Bohman, 2004, p. 134), promoting many-to-many communication. However, "computer-mediated communication offers a potentially new solution to the problem of the extension of communicative interactions across space and time and thus, perhaps, signals the emergence of a public sphere that is not subject to the specific linguistic, cultural and spatial limitations of the bounded national public spheres that have up to now supported representative democratic institutions" (Bohman, 2004, p. 134). Thus, these spaces suggest the integration of the public sphere in new instances. Therefore, the political dimension of micro-networks can be thought of considering that the nature of what is public and the public is changing (Bohman, 2004). Hence, the need to think critically about the public sphere and its multiple dimensions in digital spaces allows the creation of networks anchored to sharing meaning and emotions (Gerbaudo, 2012). Furthermore, "the global public sphere should not be expected to mirror the cultural unity and spatial congruence of the national public sphere; as a public of publics, it permits a decentred public sphere with many different levels" (Bohman, 2004, p. 139).

Much more than a means to organise movements, Twitter is a tool to disseminate information and an instrument that facilitates change because it enhances communication channels to promote collective action and is a public sphere sheltered from censorship other than direct – cut off access to the platform. Its ability to support asymmetrical content and social media makes it possible to strengthen strong ties and maximise and expand weak ties that sustain and mobilise collective action (Amaral, 2020). What seems relevant is not to understand if the revolutions would happen without the Internet, but rather if they would have the same impact on mainstream media and political agendas. As we tried to demonstrate in this article, in the case of Libya, this would not have happened. Despite the ongoing armed conflict, the Western mainstream media and Twitter's critical mass ignore the situation in the country. The current social media activism results from the Diaspora and seeks to mark internal and regional positions in a country that continues to face worrying levels in terms of humanitarian conditions.

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