Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to investigate the role of social media in communication discourse in the Islamic Middle East and North African (MENA) countries.

Design/methodology/approach – By applying the theory of social networks and a method known as critical discourse analysis (CDA) this study investigates the role of social media in the recent waves of popular unrest in the MENA region.

Findings – This study finds that social media not only played an important role in citizens’ participation in communication discourse and mobilization, but also that these media activities intensified in part because of the authorities’ failing rationales against protesters, as shown in the four-part CDA validity test.

Research limitations/implications – This study is limited to a particular time frame covering the recent democratic discourse in the MENA region for the period 2009-2011. While this research is limited to the case study of the MENA region, the author believes that lessons learned from this case study can be applied to other developing countries across the globe.

Practical implications – Social media tools available via the internet have provided web users across the globe effective tools and services to share and disseminate information by interactively collaborating with each other in digital communities through blogs, social networking and video sharing sites. In this context, social networks are considered to be effective media for communication discourse. The intensive use of social media networks among citizens’ of the MENA region indicate that the internet has the potential to be a multivocal platform through which silenced and marginalized groups can have their voices heard.

Originality/value – While the existing literature focuses largely on deploying Habermasian critical discourse analysis to media discourse within the context of democratic and well developed nations, this paper presents one of the few studies that extends the CDA method to non-democratic countries. As such it contributes to the existing knowledge and understanding of the mobilizing effects of social media in communication discourse.

Keywords Social media, Blogging, Critical discourse analysis, Social actors, Communication discourse, Social action, Middle East, North Africa

1. Introduction

This study is broadly and primarily anchored in critical research in information systems (CRIS), in that it seeks to critique the status quo through the exposure of
structural contradictions embedded in the social systems of the Middle East and North African (MENA) countries. As noted by Myers and Klein (2011), CRIS is concerned with social issues such as freedom, power, social control and values with respect to the development, use and impact of information technology. Stahl (2008) argues that CRIS is a paradigm or worldview that consists of beliefs about physical and social reality (ontology, social relations and human rationality), knowledge (epistemology and methodology) and the relationship between theory and practice for the sake of emancipation. The emancipatory capacity of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has been discussed by a number of scholars (Myers and Klein, 2011; Zheng and Walsham, 2008; Stahl, 2008; Silva, 2007; Kvasny and Richardson, 2006; Leonardo, 2004; Klein and Myers, 1999; Lyttinen and Hirschheim, 1998; Hirschheim and Klein, 1994; Nwenyama and Lee, 1997). Leonardo (2004) points out that, unlike traditional research disciplines, critical research is a multidisciplinary framework with the implicit goal of advancing the emancipatory function of knowledge. This paper emphasizes the emancipatory power and potentiality of ICTs by focussing on unjust and inequitable conditions in the MENA region and the barriers to emancipation or liberation of organizational actors from false or unwarranted beliefs, assumptions and constraints (Stahl, 2007; Wilson, 1997), including “ideology, psychological compulsions and social constraints” (Hirschheim and Klein, 1989, p. 1201).

The recent waves of popular unrest in the Islamic MENA countries have spread across the region by the means of civil resistance, anti-government demonstrations, civil disobedience and riots. These uprisings have been discussed widely on the internet, particularly in popular blogs, social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, video sharing sites such as YouTube and other international media and news agencies. The desire for freedom and democracy has never been so widely expressed in MENA's modern history or with such intensity and magnitude. This phenomenon may be compared with the collapse of the Eastern Bloc and the dissolution of the former Soviet Union beginning in the late 1980s when a wave of colorful democratic revolutions spread rapidly across eastern Europe and other parts of the former Soviet Union, broadly toppling the dysfunctional socialist regimes in the region. In this context, it is not surprising that the Green[1] and Jasmine movements in Iran and Tunisia, for example, remind us of Czechoslovakia’s Velvet Revolution in 1989, Georgia’s Rose Revolution (2003), Ukraine’s Orange Revolution (2004) and Kyrgyzstan’s Tulip Revolution in 2005. These events and other similar movements such as the 2007 Saffron Revolution in Burma have inspired many citizens in Iran and in the Arab world – particularly educated young people – to use new social media tools in their struggle for a fair and just society and for freedom and democracy.

Citizens in these countries are demanding major constitutional changes and democratic reforms, social and political openness and they are calling for a respect for human rights. Despite the differences in each of these countries’ level of social, cultural, political and economic developments, the events in the MENA region share many similarities and characteristics including the massive presence of youths and women in street demonstrations and the widespread use of the internet, including the use of social media web sites as a communication channel for organizing protest events.

Other overarching similarities between these events can be seen in the government, military and security forces’ violent responses to resilient pro-democracy movements, civil resistance and street demonstrations. A significant number of pictures and videos that were captured on cell phones and were posted on YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and
other blogs reveal an inside view to the brutality of military forces against peaceful demonstrators.

Due to the long-lasting univocal political structures in the region and the absent or weak presence of mainstream political opposition, many of the events in fact were the citizens’ collective reaction to living under oppressive conditions in an unjust society. In such an environment, digital social media tools were the most effective means of communication that grassroots citizen had in their campaign for freedom.

Through the ongoing series of political protests and civil resistance in the MENA region, civilians sought to remove their long-standing dictators and elites from power. The wave of resistance gained momentum in 2009 in Iran in the aftermath of the presidential election and, thereafter, the wave spread to other countries in the region. The events in Iran resulted in a civil resistance movement known as the “Green Movement of Iran.” A little more than a year later, the Jasmine movement of Tunisia succeeded in removing that country’s long-standing dictator, Ben Ali. The success of the Tunisian Jasmine Revolution spread hope to other Arab countries that civil resistance can result in social changes that promise to bring freedom and democracy. This phenomenon was experienced a few months later in Egypt and subsequently forced the resignation of President Hosni Mubarak. This success also fuelled other ongoing mass demonstrations, particularly in countries such as Bahrain, Jordan, Libya, Morocco, Syria and Yemen.

This empirical study uses social network theory to better understand the role of different social actors in the context of social media in the MENA region. The critical discourse analysis (CDA) method, as a form of critical research, is applied to analyze the meanings and context generated through the process of communication discourse and their impacts on mobilizing citizens for democratic change in the region. Framed within a material/social and language environment, conversation is the site where the process of sense-making occurs and where agency and text, symbols, speech and other communicative objects are generated to better understand the meaning of discourse (Taylor and Robichaud, 2004). In this context, the CDA method allows us to gain insights into how the use of social media as a platform for engaging citizens in public discourse transforms citizens-to-citizen dialogue into mobilization of the masses, particularly when citizens want to confront the authorities in power.

2. The framework

Figure 1 illustrates the theoretical framework of this study and depicts the interface between generalized social representations and the individual uses of such representations in social perception, interaction and discourse (Van Dijk, 1990). At the center of this model is the social actor group which may include any organization or individuals who use social network sites to get their messages out to the public. In the context of this study, this group represents mainly bloggers, grassroots journalists and other opinion makers who are actively involved in communication discourse, as depicted in Figure 1. This group plays an important role in building meanings and openly criticizing the elites in power. This group manifests its presence in social media in both active and passive capacities thus enabling them to disseminate articles and to post pictures and video that capture the events as they occur as well as to respond to their government’s messages and to support other activists in other regions. In particular, their success stems from the fact that they were actively involved in creating a two-way discussion reflecting the discourse disseminated through digital media and street-level protests and demonstrations. Some of the members of this group
also play an important role in mobilizing the masses for democratic change in their respective countries and/or even across the region.

Other social actors are non-governmental organizations (NGOs) including environmental groups, human rights and women’s rights activists. It is also important to note that despite the fact that authorities and political actors in power and their agencies have a strong physical presence in the traditional media, they have also extended their power and presence into the digital world. As argued by Stevenson and Greenberg (2000), this group of socio-political actors is more likely to take advantage of information and other communicative resources than other groups. Many powerful elites including the leaders of official political parties, presidents, speakers in parliaments, military, religious and other powerful leaders have an online presence through their own websites and/or blogs.

The second component of this framework (depicted in Figure 1) comprises social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, blogs). Social networks, particularly social media, are a key means for acquiring and disseminating information and knowledge about various matters of concern. The actors of the social media may represent political parties which otherwise have a weak or vulnerable presence in the physical world due to the lack of institutional democracy and the fact that the political structure of MENA countries has favored a handful of well-organized elites. Perhaps the largest presence on the social media networks is that of the grassroots journalists including bloggers and other individuals who are active on various social networking sites.

The third component of our framework is the political structure. Kitschelt (1986) argues that political structures are compromised of specific configurations of resources, institutional arrangements and historical precedents for social mobilization, which facilitate the development of protest movements in some instances and constrain them in others, as we have seen in the MENA region. However, political structures do not completely determine the course of social movements. The long-standing political leaders and elites in power attempt to impact the social movements in the region by mobilizing their resources including the massive use of national broadcasting agencies and newspapers. In many cases they impose heavy media filtering including the
temporary shutdown of internet connections in order to restrict citizens’ access to
available information and, in particular, to disrupt communication discourse.

Both social actors and political structures have active presence in social networks. As argued by Stevenson and Greenberg (2000) the social actors may impact political structures and vice versa. However, because of the non-democratic characteristics of political structures in MENA countries, oppositional views have limited influence on political structure. Social actors who have different views from those who are in power can express themselves openly and freely through social networks. As a consequence, social media are the main loci for discourse, as depicted in Figure 1.

Van Dijk (1990) argues that discourse is a form of language use involved in social interaction and is interpreted as a complete communicative event in a social situation. Lyytinen and Hirschheim (1998) argue that communicative action takes place by the means of language or another sign systems through which mutual understanding about the world is achieved. One of the main outcomes of discourse is the process of building meaning which may result in a form of action. An empirical study conducted by Donnellon et al. (1986) shows that despite interpretational differences among organizational members, communication discourse has enabled members of groups to create equifinal meaning through which organized action can be followed.

Stevenson and Greenberg’s (2000) agency and social networks paradigm evaluates the roles of social actors and interest groups in mobilizing masses within the context of democratic institutes in which the socio-political structures endure and tolerate the formation and activities of opposition groups and other social actors. It also acknowledges the legitimate rights of opposition groups to participate in political discourse with the aim of influencing the decision-making processes by challenging the existing power. However, in the context of MENA countries where democracy does not exist, the relations between social actors on one hand and the elites in the power on the other differ substantially from those of democratic societies. While in the latter there are opportunities for the opposition to articulate their political agendas, in the former, any act by social actors to mobilize the masses against the rulers or for a more just and fair society is considered an act of an enemy and therefore illegitimate and subject to prosecution. Figure 1 was adopted and modified from the original work of Stevenson and Greenberg (2000) to reflect the current political situations in the MENA region and to highlight the relationships between the social actors and the political structures mediated by ICTs (e.g. social networking sites).

2.1 Communication discourse and social action

According to Habermas (2006), mass media based on the technologies of mass communication constitute a source of power. As such social media provide citizens in many developing countries including MENA region a platform through which to practice democracy in the form of public discourse without the limits of time, place or other physical conditions (Hacker and van Dijk, 2000). Reaching mutual understanding is the foundation of public discourse as argued by Habermas. According to Habermas (2001, pp. 136-7), within the context of theory of communicative action “every communicative actor has to commit to fulfilling universal claims to validity. Insofar as she participates in communication (i.e. a process of reaching understanding) at all, she cannot avoid raising the following claims:

(1) to express herself intelligibly;
(2) to make something understood;
(3) to make herself understood in doing so; and
(4) to reach a mutual understanding with another.”

Once in complete agreement, which encompasses all four components (Habermas, 2001), reaching mutual understanding with others can help the individual arrive at other levels of social activity, namely the organization of social actions (Habermas, 1989). Hacker and van Dijk (2000) argue that ICT enables citizens to address the social, cultural, political and economic issues that matter to them with regard to institutional politics; if they so desire, citizens can even try to create their own political system and/or organize social actions to bring these issues to the larger public.

As such, communication discourse is a central component of sense-making processes and organization (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2005) and of the framing of a situation, as depicted in Figure 1. The framing of a situation defines the construction of “social reality” (Scheufele, 1999) by new media or specific socio-political movements. Through the process of communication discourse, social network participants try to make sense of events happening in their physical environment. As argued by Donnellon et al. (1986), despite differences in interpretation among participants, communication discourse links meanings and actions (see Figure 1). In this arrangement, communication discourse enables members to create shared meaning from which organized action can follow and members can modify and/or adjust the previously shared meaning through the cycle of discourse. This process helped citizens in the MENA region to discuss and analyze social events as they occurred and allowed discusssants to accumulate shared meanings and to organize future actions. Fiss and Hirsch (2005) argue that sense-making and framing are conceptually related to each other in such a way that the framing of knowledge involves many aspects of sense-making. In this context, framing and sense-making combine to create the meaning (Fiss and Hirsch, 2005) of events as will be discussed later. The ultimate results of such processes are their implications in the form of social actions as well as their reflexive capacities which impact other components of our model, as depicted in Figure 1. Users are involved in adding their entries using sense-making capacities through posted articles, pictures, videos, messages and comments to better understand and gain knowledge to answer questions such as “What helped? What hindered? What are the barriers? What do you conclude? What emotions/feelings relate? What would help? What things need to be discussed here that aren’t being discussed? Whose voice needs to be heard that is not being heard?” (Dervin, 1998, p. 9). The ultimate outcome of such discourse is to build capacities in mobilizing citizens for social actions and for the sake of socio-political changes. What we have seen in the MENA region is a shift from participants as passive observers and/or posting soft critique articles on blogs and other social networking sites (see Etling et al., 2009) to participants having a more active role in mobilizing masses for social actions in the material world. It is also important to note that the social actors were active in using other means of communication such as sending out e-mails, SMS and telephone conversation to inform each other of the planned events as well as sending out their messages to the authorities directly. This includes, for example, conducting online petitions directed toward authorities requesting respect for human rights by making them accountable for the unjust social, legal and political conditions, conducting interviews with international news agencies as well as sending their messages to various international human rights organizations. The overwhelming amount of posted materials on social networking sites (as will be discussed in the upcoming section) were to support the ongoing street
demonstrations and to support freedom and democracy regardless of the country under study. The outcomes of such actions have been reflected and further discussed in social media as depicted in Figure 1. Arrows in this figure may represent both positive and negative impacts. For example, the ultimate responses from the “political structures” to such intense online activities and discourse as experienced in Iran, Tunisia, Egypt, Syria and Yemen, were severe network restrictions and increased internet content filtering and censorship. In other cases where the internet content filtering was not sufficient due to massive network traffic, authorities ordered the temporary shutdown of internet access and e-mail services (Quinn, 2010; Huffington Post, 2011).

3. Stages of discourse development
Figure 2 shows the ladder of socio-political development in MENA region and the stages of progression in communication discourse. In the first stage, an event which responded to an unjust socio-political situation (a young and educated man burned himself as a protest to the unemployment situation in Tunisia) was captured in videos and photos which were posted on social networking and video sharing sites. Soon the footage and surrounding events became the main topic of discourse on a variety of social media sites (stage II). As a result of such discourse we can see an amplified demand for social actions not only on the social networking sites but also on blogs and other critical web sites. The discourse expresses that the political establishment and the head of state be accountable for the unjust socio-political situation in these countries thus transferring the discussion from the streets of Tunisia to a global sphere. In particular, the younger generation in the MENA region is echoing similar demands for respect for human rights, calling for a free and transparent election and constructive reforms of their countries’ election processes. The key demands at this stage were for human rights to be respected, the rule of law under which all agencies including the military must abide, and for the protection of free speech.

As a result of this discourse we are witnesses to organized mass demonstrations through the integrated social networking cells that bridge the virtual and the physical worlds (stage III). It is also important to note the active role of women as opinion makers and organizers and for their roles as key activists on the frontlines as speakers and opinion makers and, in many cases, as the leaders of demonstrations. The governments of the MENA countries responded with severe and cruel punishment

![Figure 2. Stages of discourse development](image-url)
despite the pacifist nature of the demonstrations. Security forces and military were dispatched to crackdown on street demonstrations (stage IV). As a consequence, many demonstrators were killed, wounded and arrested during the clashes with military forces. However, the elites in power used a variety of techniques to quell the demonstrations from promises to reform, to the intensive use of military to end the demonstrations through the use of force. The more brutal actions from the security forces, the more radical the demands (stage V) for political and social changes from the street demonstrators’ slogans and from the unfolding discussion on social media sites. This is a turning point from peaceful demands for reform in earlier stages to an antagonistic demand for regime change. This was a common process in all countries in the MENA region despite some differences, particularly in countries such as Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen. In other countries such as Iran and Bahrain the military and elites in power were temporarily successful in cracking down on the street demonstrations but we could see a shift from the physical to the digital world. In digital communities the discourse among many different groups and individuals has intensified. In this context we can also see more radical views about the socio-economic and political situations and demand for regime change compared with earlier stages where the main focus was social reform. In Libya, however, the situation was unique in the sense that the street demonstration turned into military clashes with demonstrators which resulted in the involvement of coalition forces in Libya. As a consequence, an immediate armed conflict between demonstrators and the government forces transpired, circumventing a multivocal communication discourse through social networks. Figure 2 shows these separate but interrelated stages from the perspective of their intensity within a timeframe. In fact, the recent political events the MENA region demonstrate agenda-building activities initiated by the actions occurring in the physical world and further developed through communication discourse on social media. Smith et al. (2001) argue that political protesters are ultimately interested in shaping the agenda-building process by helping to define how issues are represented in the media. In this context the communication discourse plays a central role in determining the success of political protest (Smith et al., 2001). Cobb et al. (1976) argue that the process of agenda building is associated with the ways in which different groups of a population become aware of and eventually participate in political conflicts whether the issues are initiated by individuals or groups in the general public or by political leaders. In this context, the role of social media is particularly important mainly because the mainstream media were under heavy governmental control and censorship. These media published and broadcasted different views from the events occurring on the streets. Their views were mainly anchored with governments’ and military’s view of the events in which peaceful demonstrators were called the agents of enemies with the ultimate goal of destabilizing society and destroying the country’s unity and its socio-economic development. This view is discussed in greater detail in the following section.

4. CDA and social networks
To better understand the role of meaning as generated through the process of communication discourse and its impact on mobilizing social actions, a method known as CDA was deployed. CDA is based on Habermas’ theory of communicative action as discussed above. The main objective of using CDA methodology is to distinguish the emphatic pattern in the use of language from the ideological and/or authoritative perspectives and their relationship to democratic discourse (see Figure 3). In this
context, CDA allows us to identify the perspective from which a speech, a written text or a symbol will facilitate mutual understanding among people of different cultures and beliefs (Wei-Hao, 2008). In particular, the Habermasian discursive action tries to discover and evaluate the arguments proposed for or against a message, in terms of its clarity, truthfulness, correctness and appropriateness (Lyytinen and Hirschheim, 1998). As such, CDA may be used to reveal systematic communicative distortions in which power relations underlie discourse (Cukier et al., 2008, 2009). This study claims that those who try to distort communication discourse through authoritative command are those who are facing serious challenges from their own citizens – citizens who were commanded for decades and do not trust their leadership. These citizens are demanding constitutional changes. The recent wave of street protests and demonstrations in the MENA region confirms citizens’ mistrust of their leadership. In this context, CDA will help us to critically investigate the use of language and its implications for emancipation. It interrogates texts to understand the deep structures, systematic communicative distortions and power relations that underlie discourse (Cukier et al., 2008). Dellinger (1995) argues that CDA has turned the study of language into an interdisciplinary tool that can be used by scholars from a variety of backgrounds. Most significantly, it offers researchers the opportunity to adopt a social perspective in the cross-cultural study of media texts. Calhoun (1999) argues that discourse on validity claims is important since truthfulness, sincerity and rightness drive discourse forward in a cumulative fashion toward “truth and certainty, even if these are only approached asymptotically” (p. 50).
Cukier et al. (2009) use Habermas’ discourse theory to validate claims made by popular media in the context of e-learning technology in higher education. Integrating Habermas’ theory of communicative action into CDA methodology, the authors interrogate the comprehensibility, truth, legitimacy and sincerity of claims made by popular media. These elements are used to construct a framework for analyzing empirical observations within the context of communication in speech or text. Comprehensibility deals with the pragmatics of language in terms of syntax and symbolic representation, while truth is concerned with potential violations of the truth claim.

Further, legitimacy addresses the norms and social context embedded in the claim; sincerity deals with examining the consistency of the claim (i.e. that what is said is what is meant). Stahl (2007) suggests the importance of focussing on language when investigating the link between ideology and ICTs. For example, metaphors can be employed to advance a particular point of view and obscure or ignore equally valid alternate perspectives. Metaphors can “take on a life of their own [and] be turned into reifications” (Stahl, 2007, p. 40).

We used CDA methodology to investigate the texts of government officials in the MENA region when they confronted social unrest and citizens’ demand for political and social changes.

4.1 Data collection and research approach
We analyzed 3,635 messages posted on Farsi and Arabic blogs as well as on Twitter and Facebook and video sharing sites such as YouTube. These texts, pictures, audio and video clips document the citizens’ demand for freedom and democracy and the state officials’ responses to those demands. Three assistant researchers fluent in Farsi, English and Arabic translated messages posted on social network sites from Farsi and Arabic into English for the purpose of this analysis.

In step 1, the empirical data were searched in Facebook, Twitter, blogs and YouTube. We were particularly interested in messages and articles posted in Farsi and Arabic. In step 2, an English transcription for each message was created and saved as a PDF. In step 3, the PDFs were imported into ATALS.ti software (version 6) for analysis. ALTALS.ti allows for not only a textual content analysis but also allows us to analyze other meaningful web objects (e.g. a video, audio, picture, graph, banner or poster and so on). For example, a video clip is marked as critical because it captures a street demonstration where slogans against the elites in power were used. As noted by Habermas (2001), there is a linkage between primitive linguistic expression and non-linguistic gestures and action: “Communicative symbols express behavioral expectations and thus remain rooted in a context of action, whereas non-linguistic actions are connected to linguistically interpersonal relations as the fulfillment or non-fulfillment of behavioral expectations” (p. 140). In step 4, the content of documents was analyzed and coded (e.g. keywords associated with events). Finally in step 5, the codes were exported to Excel in Comma Separated Value (.csv) format for frequency analysis (see Table A1).

Two types of documents emerged: first, messages and statements published by authorities and their supporters; and second, messages posted by citizens, which are explained below.

Around 1,206 or 33.2 percent of posted messages either posted new material about the events as they occurred (stage I in Figure 2) or were posted in response to the authorities’ broadcasted messages/rhetoric (stage II in Figure 2). About 786 messages
(21.6 percent) were directly related to mobilizing messages encouraging people to join the organized rallies or to continue their presence on the streets. These messages contained exact dates, times and locations about the street protests occurring across many major cities in the MENA region (see stage III in Figure 2).

Also, 541 messages (14.9 percent) were directly related to the authorities’ rhetoric and statements about the events and street protestations. Messages posted by supporters of the regimes and/or by people who had a neutral view about the events were also placed in this category (see Table AII). In addition, 818 messages (22.5 percent) were related to radical social action, revolution and demand for regime change (stage V in Figure 2) including possible armed conflict against the regime. Messages of this nature were bolder, particularly when the military were heavily engaged in violent confrontations with live ammunition against protesters (stage IV, in Figure 2).

The remaining 284 or 7.8 percent of the messages were classified in the “others” group. Messages in this group pertain mainly to the critical artistic responses to the events and include a range of creative items such as posters, banners, poetry and text, songs and video clips expressing the oppressive political situation and supporting civil unrest. Some of these videos used the posted video clips created by grassroots journalists in stage I and were remixed and revised to deliver stronger messages for the sake of mobilizing the masses (stage III) for democratic change. The results of the above frequency analysis with regard to citizens’ responses are shown in Table AI.

4.2 The CDA analysis

In the following section, the widely discussed statements published by authorities, military officials as well as religious leaders are investigated. Figure 3 represents the process of CDA analysis as the discourse is tested against the four validity claims.

In June 2009, Iranian President Ahmadinejad, whose recent reinstallation was much disputed, called the peaceful demonstrators who took to the streets, “dirt and dust” (Tait, 2009), further fueling anger among many citizens and other social actors who demanded a recount of their votes and a fair and transparent election. His speech incited a new wave of mass demonstrations in Tehran and other major cities and these were mainly organized through social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter. Many artists, poets, musicians and grassroots journalists posted their artwork and video clips responding to his insult (YouTube, 2009). Two years later, President Al-Assad of Syria called citizens “germs” as they protested against his government and demanded freedom and democracy.

All dictators in the region used a common language, as was widely discussed on social networking sites, blogs and other social media outlets. We see the authorities calling protesters the “agents of enemy,” “outlaws,” “criminals,” “bandits,” “drug traffickers” and other metaphors which distort and disguise their desire crackdown on protesters and to put an end to the ongoing demonstrations. A simple search on YouTube for posted video clips taken by grassroots journalist in the region clearly demonstrates the brutality of the military and security forces against demonstrators, following the leaders’ threatening messages. For example, a search on YouTube conducted on June 23, 2011 for discussions of Iran’s protest (2009 onward) and protests in Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and Yemen in 2011 returned over 90,000 video results documenting the events in the region as they occurred. As a Bahraini wrote, “We deserve a better life and future but the government’s brutal actions against demonstrators who wanted these simple things made us realize that we do not have any freedom in this country.” Another common practice by the government
officials in MENA was to temporarily shut down the internet and mobile cell phone systems in order to restrict citizens’ access to social media and the ongoing discourse as well as to limit organizers’ ability to inform other citizens of upcoming events. This practice was widely used in Iran during the 2009 waves of street demonstrations and thereafter by other governments in the region. In addition, there are many reports that online activists were arrested and/or expelled from their work or university. For example, a Bahraini student was expelled from university and another young woman was sentenced to one year in jail for making a political comment on Facebook, another for making a public protest speech and one web activist was sentenced to life imprisonment for posting comments about the human rights violations in Bahrain (International Freedom of Expression Exchange (IFEX), 2010). There are also many other reports of mass arrests of bloggers and other web activists in Iran, Egypt, Yemen, Tunisia and Syria according to international agencies such as Reporters Without Border (RWB) (2011) and Freedom House (2011).

As discussed on social media sites as well as in news agency interviews with the opposition leaders, the main characteristics of demonstrations in the region (except for Libya) were an emphasis on non-violent, civil disobedience, peaceful demonstrations, strike actions and other means of civil resistance. Many of these civil actions turned into violence due to the authorities’ or military’s intolerance of any critique against the status quo. In almost all of the uprisings from Iran in 2009 to Egypt and Libya and Syria in 2011, the nations’ government and security forces attacked demonstrators with live ammunition. Many of the video clips posted on YouTube, blogs and other social networking sites clearly demonstrate the brutality of governments and security forces against demonstrators. For example, in Egypt the widespread political protests which demanded the removal of President Mubarak and his government, have led to violence and the suppression of opposition forces. This situation ultimately started the events in Tunisia and was not only discussed among many Facebook users but also broadcasted by international news agencies such as the popular Al Jazeera news agency in the Arab world. The same responses have come out of other countries and have been discussed widely among Facebook users in Iran, Bahrain and Morocco (Tremlett, 2011). The ultimate result has been a brutal crackdown on peaceful demonstration which has radicalized the social movements in this region. The demonstrators’ slogans and actions ultimately turned from requesting social-political reforms and fair and transparent elections to demanding a regime change (see Table AI) in many countries such as Iran, Bahrain, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Tunisia and Yemen.

It is important to note that the use of Arabic language has been one of the major drivers in the recent movement in this region (except for Iran) as it is the common language used among social media followers, particularly on Facebook and Twitter. For example, it is estimated that there are nearly 19 million Facebook users (Internet World Stats, 2011; Preston, 2011) in the Arab countries of this study (Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Libya, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia and Yemen), many of whom participate in discourse by creating a supportive network community on Arabic sites such as Facebook and Twitter. The main theme of these discussions was that totalitarianism in the region is close to its end. Table I presents this study’s approach to validating the authorities’ claims using responses and comments posted on social media web sites.

The use of metaphors and rhetoric such as “enemies,” “outlaws,” “conspirators,” “perpetrators,” “hallucinogenic drugs,” “anti-religious,” “elements working for western, etc.,” “velvet revolution,” “the advocates of sedition” and “steady hands...
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Guiding questions to identify</th>
<th>Claims</th>
<th>Potential distortion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Comprehensibility</strong></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>C1. Is the communication sufficiently intelligible?</td>
<td>Outlaws wanted for criminal offenses</td>
<td><strong>Confusion</strong> The claim is a threatful warning to justify power dominance. As a Twitter user wrote, “our demand is only of freedom”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C2. Is the communication complete?</td>
<td>If anti-government protesters continue their acts it will be a civil war if they persist</td>
<td>It is one-way communication from the ones that order to the ones that are expected to obey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C3. Is the level of detail too burdensome for the reader or hearer?</td>
<td>Young people on drugs are for the violence in the country</td>
<td>The claim is not used to reach mutual understanding with others, or to collaborate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Truth</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T1. What is said about the citizens’ demands?</td>
<td>Radical and blasphemous intellectuals who are trying to infiltrate the country</td>
<td><strong>Misrepresentation</strong> The claim is made for strengthening the elites in power and avoiding social and political reforms Falsehoods are presented as fact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T2. Are the issues and options clearly defined?</td>
<td>This kind of behavior stems from ill-wishers, mercenaries and elements working for western and Zionist secret services</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T3. What benefits have been identified and assessed?</td>
<td>We are watching these acts and we are taking the necessary legal action against the perpetrators</td>
<td>The state is the only source of truth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T4. What evidence has been provided to support these arguments?</td>
<td>The incidents occurring inside the country have misled some of those outside our borders, who imagine Iran to be the same as Georgia</td>
<td>Citizens’ rights to access and disseminate information freely is suppressed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T5. Has the relevant information been communicated without distortion or omission?</td>
<td>Enemy spent 10 million dollars in Georgia to start a velvet revolution</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T6. Are there ideological claims which are unexamined?</td>
<td>Internet and Facebook infuse western culture and ideology in to the preferred Islamic context</td>
<td>Islamic ideology benefits interest groups in power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Legitimacy</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L1. Who is speaking, who is silent, what are their interests?</td>
<td>Questioning the credibility of statesmen goes beyond the bounds of decency</td>
<td><strong>Illegitimacy</strong> Long-standing unelected officials are speaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guiding questions to identify</td>
<td>Claims</td>
<td>Potential distortion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Validity claims</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L2. What is not said about the critics?</td>
<td>It saddens us that they are wrong and away from righteousness</td>
<td>Citizens’ rights to freedom of expression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L3. What is assumed or implied?</td>
<td>It is not right to accuse the country of corruption based on some Zionist reports and sources</td>
<td>Any critics of the power establishment and the religious leaders is illegitimate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L4. What is missing or suppressed in the discourse?</td>
<td>This administration, despite the excellent services it has rendered, came under unjust attacks</td>
<td>Unelected officials speaks and citizens’ rights, alternate perspectives obscured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L5. How are the decisions legitimized?</td>
<td>The president’s ideas are closer to mine</td>
<td>Citizens’ votes are not the main source of legitimacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L6. Who is involved? Who is not involved?</td>
<td>The enemies target the belief and trust of people on the system</td>
<td>Conservative hardliners and other interest groups in power are involved, however; public opinion, especially opposing opinion, is not involved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L7. What are the stakes and interests involved or excluded?</td>
<td>We fight the enemies of religion, homeland and the nation</td>
<td>Excludes human rights activists, ethnic minorities, NGOs, women’s rights groups, political parties, young people, religious moderates and religious minorities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Sincerity: metaphors and descriptors**

| S1. Do metaphors and connotative words promote or suppress understanding? | Conspirators spreading “germs everywhere that cannot be eradicated yet” | False assurance |
| S2. Do metaphors and connotative words create false assurances? | We would not leave any opportunity for the expression of “dirt and dust” | Compares protesters with “germs” indicates an antagonistic approach toward people’s demand for freedom and democracy and obscures the questionable morality of using force to crackdown on street protests |

We fight the enemies of religion, homeland and the nation

Excludes human rights activists, ethnic minorities, NGOs, women’s rights groups, political parties, young people, religious moderates and religious minorities

**False assurance**

Comparing protesters with “germs” indicates an antagonistic approach toward people’s demand for freedom and democracy and obscures the questionable morality of using force to crackdown on street protests

Calling protesters as being “dirt and dust” is an insulting phrase against people who asked for a fair recount of their votes

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**Table 1**

Social media and the social movements
are used as a pretext for involving military and security forces to brutally crackdown on demonstrators. These words and phrases were widely discussed on social media web sites such as the Facebook, Twitter and other blogs. All dictators of this study have used similarly threatening language, allowing the security forces and military to get involved in cracking down on demonstrators by singling out those who try to destabilize the security of nation.

The use of threatful language by dictators in the MENA region also shows their intention to hold power with all available resources and tools, violating the basic human rights of their own citizens for freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. As Table I illustrates, the authorities’ response to citizens’ demand are not comprehensible, truthful, legitimate or sincere. An example from each category has been used to briefly illustrate our assertions. The comprehensibility claim asks, is the communication sufficiently intelligible? The claim is a threatful warning to justify power dominance. These claims are not made to achieve mutual understanding or collaboration. Rather, the claims are made in order to justify power dominance. As a Twitter user wrote, “our demand is only of freedom” (translated from Arabic). We argue that this is a communication distortion. The truth claim asks what arguments and evidence are provided to support a claim? The leaders in MENA claim that the protest actions street demonstrations are organized by radical and blasphemous intellectuals who are trying to infiltrate their countries or those who are outside their borders to impose a velvet revolution as was the case in Europe. In his speech after the presidential election, the supreme leader of Iran claimed: “I have been hearing enemies saying repeatedly that the elections will be fraudulent […] The enemies target the belief and trust of people on the system […] This trust is the biggest investment of the Islamic republic […] This [presidential] election is a political defeat for your enemies” (Transcript, 2009). The use of word “enemy” is repeated by other authorities in the region. However, the list of enemies is long and in some cases confusing. For example, authorities in Iran, Libya and Syria are clear about their enemies. According to these leaders their enemies include countries such as the USA, Israel and other western countries. However, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain declare Iran as their main enemy due to the Shi’a Muslim uprisings in their countries. This is a misrepresentation of citizens’ demands for freedom and democracy and is used for the sake of strengthening the elites in power and neglecting social and political reforms. It distorts communication with the ultimate goal of convincing citizens that the authorities and the state are the sole sources of truth. The legitimacy claim asks, who is speaking, who is silent and what are their interests? Authorities claim that questioning the credibility of statesmen goes beyond the bounds of decency and away from righteousness. As argued in many comments posted on social media web sites, this is a distortion that reflects the strategic power plays of unelected officials, particularly the long-standing presidents in office, religious leaders and the military to promote their own agendas at the expense of citizens’ freedom. Last, the sincerity claim asks how the rhetoric of the claims, especially the use of metaphors and descriptors, promotes or undermines understanding. Authorities have claimed that the democratic movements in the region are about to spread “germs” or are of type of “dirt and dust” striking an antagonistic approach toward citizens’ demand for freedom of speech and fair and transparent elections. This type of language converts the communication discourse used to reach mutual understanding and collaboration (Klein and Huynh, 2004) into a power-dominated communication (Cukier et al., 2008). This power-dominated communication emphasizes a one-way exchange between those who command
(military or civil authorities) or demand (religious leaders) and those who should obey (citizens). This rhetorical approach helps to consolidate power in the hands of the authoritarian elites and disenfranchises the citizenry by justifying the restrictions on freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. The same rhetoric is used similarly to justify constraints on internet access and restricted communication discourse in social media web sites. Habermas (1989) points out that “the principle of the dogmatists is represented by faith in things for their own sake: thus an indirect faith in their own self which is dispersed and borne only by objects” (p. 33). Hirschheim and Klein (1994) point out that the psychopathology of human cognition is usually reinforced by certain external social conditions, and that one of the dominant sources of external distortion is the information processing bias exerted by authority and other forms of power and ideology.

The cumulative evidence of our CDA analysis suggests that the authorities’ rationales against protesters fail the four part validity test. Therefore, it is not surprising to see, despite the authorities’ promises, warnings as well as military involvement in cracking down on street demonstrations, these actions did not help to stave off discourse with citizens or to reach mutual understanding; rather, radicalized citizens demand freedom in the virtual world as well as in the physical. The authorities’ antagonistic approach in solving social and political issues has transformed citizens’ demands and street demonstration slogans from requesting for socio-political reform to regime change and an end to corruption and repression. This transformation constitutes a new meaning in discourse which ultimately promotes more radical actions as we have seen in major cities across the region.

Table AII illustrates a snapshot of typical examples of the metaphors and rhetoric used by protesters in response to authorities. The table was constructed based on the frequency analysis table as depicted in Appendix 1; however, some of the responses that could be classified as cyberbullying or abusive words and phrases from both sides (supporters and opponents) were intentionally omitted from the table.

5. Conclusion
Digital communication technologies like the internet and its various applications and communication tools such as e-mail, blogs and social media web sites such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, provide citizens in repressed countries opportunities to participate in communication discourse by creating equifinal meaning which ultimately contributes to organized civil resistance and social actions. A new generation of socio-political activists has developed in the MENA region which is comprised of mainly educated youths who, through the process of democratic discourse, became active players in the complex processes of political activities against their nations’ oppressive regimes.

While the events in Tunisia and Egypt resulted in political changes in these countries, events in other countries such as Iran and Bahrain did not succeed in making any institutional changes. On the other hand, the intensity of citizens’ participation in demanding changes in legal, political and social matters and the intensive use of social media indicate that the internet has the potential to be a multivocal platform for silenced and marginalized groups to have their voices heard. This paper is one of the first to use Habermasian CDA to examine the role of social media within the MENA. By using social network theory and the CDA method to test for validity claims, the paper offers an avenue for understanding the state authorities’ claims and the civil society’s demands. Our CDA analysis shows that despite the differences among the countries in the MENA region, the dictators and the elites in power utilize a similar language of
denial in response to citizens’ demand for constitutional reform and democratic changes. These authorities’ discourse fails to meet the four validity claims of our CDA validity test. Using social media, social activists in the region were able to organize many popular events including mass demonstrations in the region, but also to mobilize people to use communication discourse against dictators’ claims and against the denial of democratic changes and that is why their social actions may be best understood as citizens’ mistrust of authorities and elites in power.

Note
1. The supporters of liberal candidate Mousavi in Iran carried green signs during the presidential campaign and thereafter to protest against the fraudulent results of the June 2009 election.

References


**Further reading**


### Appendix 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency analysis</th>
<th>Common responsive keywords and phrases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>33.2 percent of protesters’ messages in response to authorities'/militaries' rhetoric</td>
<td>New constitution, free and fair election; freedom from corruption; human rights; freedom of the press; release of political prisoners, public and fair trial for those responsible for the current socio-political and economic problems; equality between men and women; end discrimination against ethnic minorities; end discrimination against religious minorities; civil disobedience; civil resistance; non-violent movement; police should protect people and not elites in power; abolition of the supreme state and security court; general strikes; where is my vote?; end political repression; we are protesters not agents; end political executions; the paramilitary Basij is against people; end massacre of peaceful demonstrator; internet is shut down; SMS is down; etc. … and also political statements from opposition groups, opposition leaders, political parties and human rights activists condemning governments’ violent actions against peaceful demonstrators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21.6 percent mobilizing messages in support of continuing street demonstrations</td>
<td>A long list of planned demonstrations in the major cities of region encouraging people to join the rally: date, time and location</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.9 percent authorities’ messages found in social media among regime supporters or people who were neutral (see also Table AII)</td>
<td>We do not want another Yugoslavia in our country; we do not want another Islamic Iran; think of tomorrow when Islamic fundamentalist are in power; protesters are agents of Israel, USA and the western countries to destabilize our economy and our country; Mubarak is a saver of our nation; Gadafi is a true patriot; Al-Assad and his supporters will ultimately win the battle; Ahmadinejad had the majority of votes; the agents of enemy do not have any place in Iran; protesters in Bahrain are the agents of the Islamic Republic of Iran</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22.5 percent argued for a radical action and revolution against dictators</td>
<td>Our people are killed on the streets; no more talk; no more promises; you must go; regime change is the ultimate solution to freedom and democracy; revolution; a new constitution; abdication of rulers; if you do not leave the office peacefully you will be removed by force; Ben Ali must go; Mubarak must go; Al-Assad must go; Ahmadinejad must go; Saleh must go</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.8 percent critical arts</td>
<td>Many posters, banners, cartoons, art videos, songs, poems and statements about people who were shot dead on the street (martyrs) were distributed in support of demonstrations and condemning the brutality of military and security forces against demonstrators. The popular music video “The Owner of This Land!” was created in response to Ahmadinejad calling protesters “dirt and dust”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table AI. Frequency analysis of keywords and phrases
Common citizens’ response posted on Facebook, Twitter, blogs and YouTube

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authorities’ metaphors and rhetoric</th>
<th>Protesters are germs (Al-Assad)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Protesters are a bunch of “dirt and dust” (Ahmadinejad)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protesters are a bunch of “outlaws,” “criminals,” “bandits,” “drug traffickers” (Gaddafi)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>President Zine el Abidine Ben Ali and Prime Minister Mohamad Ghannouchi, sent messages out through radio and TV broadcasting promising an effective anti-corruption program, lower food prices, to create jobs, respect freedom of speech, including the formation of a political party, lifting restrictions on the press and internet as well as opening up the political system. And to end firing guns at people. Protesters took the pardons granted and continued their illegal activities. They are trained on all types of vandalism. They want the worst for our dear country, and it’s people’s unity, safety, security and stability (King Hamad, Bahrain)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protesters are the advocates of sedition (King Abdullah)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is a fine line between freedom and chaos, enemies are seeking to tarnish our reputation, what happened throughout these protests extends beyond looting, chaos and fire to a larger scheme aimed at shaking stability and an attack on legitimacy (Mubarak)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table AII.

Authorities vs protesters

We are millions of people demanding freedom; the world will not waver Al-Assad must go; the Syrian people must be free to choose their own destiny Many protesters responded in the social media to this phrase calling the corrupt authorities “dirt and dust”; Ahmadinejad a disgrace on Twitter message followed by 500 comments. Some song writers, artist and cultural activists created songs, posters, poems and music videos in response and distributed their work on the internet. A song called “we are the owner of this land” was the most popular response to Ahmadinejad’s message distributed on Facebook and YouTube (one of the video clips received over 141,500 views) Who is still with Gaddafi? only his sons and few others; by the way, who’s on drugs?? That’s right! this is exactly what you have done to people; Ben Ali, out; Ghannouchi, out; Ben Ali promised not to fire at people with live ammunition, but they are still using live ammunition against us We have the right to peacefully protest against corruption and unjust social conditions; end discrimination against Shia Muslims; this is our country we have rights for free assembly; peaceful protesters are confronted with live ammunition How long do you want to blame your wrong doing on others? You are the ultimate power in this country and not the others People want a real functioning democracy and not a long-standing dictator; enough is enough; leave the office; the one who destabilized our beloved country is you and your government; peaceful assembly is our right!

(continued)
Authorities' metaphors and rhetoric

The path of reform which we have chosen is irreversible and cannot go backward. We will proceed with new steps that affirm our respect for the independence of the judiciary. I lean toward freedom for the people in expressing their opinions as much as I hold on to the need to maintain Egypt's safety and stability (Mubarak).

We will not allow another velvet revolution in our country; we will stand firm against any anti-religious act of the enemy in our Islamic society (the military statement in Iran). Those who break the law are responsible for the bloodshed and any form of unrest, they are the hands of the enemy (Khamenei, Supreme leader of Iran).

Common citizens’ response posted on Facebook, Twitter, blogs and YouTube

Egyptian Government shut off all internet and phone services and any means of digital communication; Egypt is officially isolated from the world; they want to hide the ruthless crackdown of the peaceful revolution; Egypt is under siege; no internet!

Our demand is a free and fair election. You hijack our votes under the pretext of preventing another velvet revolution; only dictators would want a silent and univocal society, what kind of religious leader you are? you ordered the killing of your own people, you do not have religious legitimacy anymore, it is unacceptable, a person who calls himself a religious leader, sends military and paramilitary personnel to persecute, attack and kill peaceful demonstrators; protesters simply want a fair and just society; without any supervision the leadership needs to be transparent; the supreme leader’s message was a clear go-ahead to military to make tomorrow’s protest bloody.

Table AII.

Social media and the social movements

49
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