BETWEEN NETWORKED MOBILIZATION AND THE LIMITS OF DEMOCRATIZATION: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE ARAB SPRING

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Abstract

This article examines the role of social media in political mobilization during the Arab Spring, focusing on Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of the network society and cyberdemocracy, it investigates the contribution of digital platforms to protest organization and the structural limits of their impact on post-2011 democratization processes. The research adopts a qualitative, analytical, and comparative approach, based on a literature review and analysis of secondary data. The findings indicate that social media acted as catalysts for collective action by facilitating the circulation of information and horizontal mobilization, especially among young people. However, their democratizing effects were conditioned by national institutional and political factors, producing distinct outcomes: democratic regression in Tunisia, authoritarian reconsolidation in Egypt, and political-institutional fragmentation in Libya. The article concludes that, although central to mobilization, social media were not sufficient to guarantee democratic consolidation.

Keywords: International Politics. International Law. Foreign Relations.

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ENTRE A MOBILIZAÇÃO EM REDE E OS LIMITES DA DEMOCRATIZAÇÃO: O PAPEL DAS MÍDIAS SOCIAIS NA PRIMAVERA ÁRABE

Resumo

O artigo analisa o papel das mídias sociais na mobilização política durante a Primavera Árabe, com foco na Tunísia, no Egito e na Líbia. Com base nos referenciais da sociedade em rede e da ciberdemocracia, investiga-se a contribuição das plataformas digitais para a organização dos protestos e os limites estruturais de seus impactos nos processos de democratização pós-2011. A pesquisa adota uma abordagem qualitativa, analítica e comparativa, fundamentada em revisão bibliográfica e análise de dados secundários. Os resultados indicam que as mídias sociais atuaram como catalisadoras da ação coletiva, ao facilitar a circulação de informações e a mobilização horizontal, especialmente entre jovens. Contudo, seus efeitos democratizantes mostraram-se condicionados por fatores institucionais e políticos nacionais, produzindo desfechos distintos: regressão democrática na Tunísia, reconsolidação autoritária no Egito e fragmentação político-institucional na Líbia. Conclui-se que, embora centrais para a mobilização, as mídias sociais não foram suficientes para garantir a consolidação democrática.

Palavras-chave: Política Internacional. Direito Internacional. Relações Exteriores.

ENTRE LA MOVILIZACIÓN EN RED Y LOS LÍMITES DE LA DEMOCRATIZACIÓN: EL PAPEL DE LAS REDES SOCIALES EN LA PRIMAVERA ÁRABE

Resumen

El artículo analiza el papel de las redes sociales en la movilización política durante la Primavera Árabe, con énfasis en Túnez, Egipto y Libia. A partir de los marcos teóricos de la sociedad en red y la ciberdemocracia, se investiga la contribución de las plataformas digitales a la organización de las protestas y los límites estructurales de su impacto en los procesos de democratización posteriores a 2011. La investigación adopta un enfoque cualitativo, analítico y comparativo, basado en la revisión bibliográfica y el análisis de datos secundarios. Los resultados indican que las redes sociales actuaron como catalizadoras de la acción colectiva al facilitar la circulación de información y la movilización horizontal, especialmente entre los jóvenes. No obstante, sus efectos democratizadores estuvieron condicionados por factores institucionales y políticos nacionales, dando lugar a desenlaces diferenciados: regresión democrática en Túnez, reconsolidación autoritaria en Egipto y fragmentación político-institucional en Libia. Se concluye que, aunque centrales para la movilización, las redes sociales no fueron suficientes para garantizar la consolidación democrática.

Palabras clave: Política Internacional. Derecho Internacional. Relaciones Exteriores.

Introduction

The emergence of social media at the beginning of the twenty-first century profoundly redefined modes of communication, social organization, and political participation, especially in contexts marked by restrictions on freedom of expression and by authoritarian regimes. Embedded in the logic of the network society, as formulated by Manuel Castells (2012), these digital platforms began to operate as central infrastructures for the circulation of information, the articulation of collective demands, and political mobilization. In this scenario, the Arab Spring stands out as one of the most relevant empirical cases for analyzing the relationships among technology, collective action, and democracy in the digital age.

Beginning in 2010, a series of popular uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East called into question historically consolidated autocratic regimes, revealing the centrality of social media in organizing protests, disseminating denunciations, and constructing public narratives of resistance. Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya stand out in this process both for the intensity of the mobilizations and for the fall of their respective authoritarian leaders, even though they followed profoundly different political trajectories in the post-revolutionary period. This diversity of outcomes highlights the need for an analysis that goes beyond technodeterminist interpretations and considers the structural limits that condition the democratizing effects of digital media.

Although authors such as Castells (2015) and Bennett and Segerberg (2013) have emphasized the role of digital networks in organizing collective action, these approaches, while fundamental for understanding networked mobilization, do not always systematically incorporate the institutional and political conditions that shape democratization processes. Conversely, studies focused on the aftermath of the Arab Spring often neglect the role of communicational dynamics in the outbreak of the mobilizations. This dissociation reveals an analytical gap that this article seeks to address.

In this context, this article seeks to answer the following research questions: to what extent did social media, as the communicational infrastructure of the network society, contribute to political mobilization during the Arab Spring, and what structural limits conditioned their effects on democratization processes in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya? The hypothesis is that social media played a decisive role as catalysts for mobilization and collective action by reducing organizational costs, expanding the circulation of information, and enabling horizontal forms of political coordination; however, their impacts

on democratic consolidation were conditioned by institutional, political, and military factors specific to each national context.

Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative, analytical, and comparative approach, grounded in a literature review of classic and contemporary authors in political sociology, communication, and digital democracy studies, as well as in the analysis of secondary data and institutional reports. The articulation between theory and empirics makes it possible to understand the Arab Spring not merely as a conjunctural event, but as an expression of broader transformations in the forms of collective action and political participation in the network society.

This article contributes to the literature by proposing an integrated analysis of the debates on the network society, connective action, and the institutional outcomes of the Arab Spring. Unlike approaches that emphasize only the mobilizing character of social media or adopt technodeterminist perspectives, this study demonstrates that the political effects of these technologies are conditioned by specific institutional structures and power dynamics. By articulating a comparative analysis of Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, the work shows that digital mobilization, although central, is not sufficient to explain the divergent results of democratization processes.

The article is structured into five sections in addition to this introduction. The second section presents the concepts of network society and cyberdemocracy, discussing their impacts on contemporary democracy. The third section contextualizes the phenomenon of the Arab Spring, highlighting its main causes and characteristics. The fourth section analyzes the importance of social media in the organization and dissemination of protests. The fifth section examines the political developments that led to the fall of the autocratic regimes of Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt. The sixth section consists of the final considerations, which synthesize the main findings of the research, assess the formulated hypothesis, and indicate limits and possibilities for future investigations on democracy and political mobilization in the digital age. Finally, the bibliographic references that supported the preparation of this study are presented.

1. Network Society, Social Media, and Democracy

The social transformation toward the network society is one of the most striking phenomena of recent decades, expressing a profound reorganization of social, economic, and cultural relations based on communication systems

globally interconnected by Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). It is therefore not merely a technological change, but a structural alteration in the way information circulates, social interactions are established, and processes of power and participation are organized.

Manuel Castells (2012), in his seminal work *The Rise of the Network Society*, conceives of the network society as a new social morphology in which networks become the central structure through which contemporary societies function. According to the author, these networks simultaneously reconfigure economic production, the experience of power, and cultural practices by placing information and knowledge at the center of social and political dynamics (Castells 2012). In this sense, ICTs not only expand communicational possibilities but also transform the very foundations of social organization.

The logic of networks implies that communicational flows and technological connectivity operate as articulators of social practices, replacing, in many contexts, rigid hierarchical structures with more flexible, distributed, and adaptable arrangements. This configuration enables the continuous integration of individuals, groups, and institutions into circuits of interaction in which information, values, and meanings circulate intensely and in near real time (Knell 2021). Thus, the network society is characterized as an open and dynamic system capable of incorporating innovations without compromising its structural coherence.

This process directly affects the experiences of time and social space. Digital networks allow simultaneous interactions in different contexts and locations, redefining the way subjects perceive and experience communicational and social processes (Castells 2012;Knell 2021). This reconfiguration is also manifested in the growing interdependence between offline life and digitally mediated interactions, a phenomenon widely analyzed in digital sociology and digital society studies (Serpa 2021).

In this scenario, the network society becomes a fundamental explanatory framework for understanding current sociopolitical transformations, especially with regard to forms of democratic participation and the reconfiguration of the public sphere. The centrality of information and knowledge directly influences political practices and mechanisms of citizen participation. At the same time, algorithms, digital platforms, and technological devices introduce new challenges, such as the intensification of political polarization, the deepening of inequalities, and the need for regulatory and governance models capable of mitigating adverse effects on democracy (Fuchs 2023).

This structural reconfiguration significantly affects the very concept of democracy. Batista *et al*. (2017) recall that the classical concept of democracy

dates back to Ancient Greece, especially the Athenian experience, in which political participation was restricted to free citizens understood as subjects endowed with full rights. In this sense, the authors distinguish the concept of "citizen" from that of "people," while emphasizing that elements such as political participation, civil society, and social movements remain central to the relationship between society and the state, even though they have been resignified over time by historical and technological transformations.

In the network society, these transformations intensify with the rise of the Internet and, subsequently, digital social media, which expand the possibilities of political interaction and public opinion formation. Castells (2015) argues that the Internet constitutes the central infrastructure of contemporary global communication by allowing individuals to act simultaneously as senders and receivers of information, breaking with the unidirectional model of traditional political communication. This decentralized communicational environment creates conditions for new forms of political engagement based on connectivity, the accelerated circulation of information, and the networked articulation of social actors.

It is in this context that the concept of cyberdemocracy emerges, understood as the expansion of democratic practices through digital technologies. For Grosselli (2012) and Lopes and Freire (2010), the Internet constitutes a space for democratic debate in which connected citizens participate in political discussions, access government information, and build collective positions. Cyberdemocracy, in this sense, does not replace representative democracy, but reconfigures it by incorporating new forms of technologically mediated participation.

Melo and Albuquerque (2020) highlight that the cyberdemocratic environment is characterized by greater freedom in the circulation of information, the intensification of interaction between the State and society, and the strengthening of collective intelligence among citizens. These dynamics contribute to a reformulation of democracy, marked by the expansion of spaces for public debate and the diversification of forms of political participation. This perspective dialogues with Recuero (2000) by emphasizing that digital networks should be understood not only as technical structures, but as spaces of sociability in which social ties, discourses, and symbolic disputes are constructed.

Social media assume a central role in this process by functioning as hybrid public arenas that articulate interpersonal communication, mass media, and collective action. Chadwick (2017) observes that these platforms are part of a hybrid media system in which political actors, citizens, and institutions

dispute narratives, visibility, and legitimacy in the public sphere. Bennett and Segerberg (2013), in turn, argue that digital networks favor forms of connective action, in which political mobilization occurs in a more personalized, decentralized, and flexible manner, although not always institutionalized.

However, the expansion of participatory possibilities promoted by social media does not occur without tensions. Authors such as Sunstein (2017) and Van Dijck *et al*. (2018) warn of risks associated with the fragmentation of the public sphere, the formation of information bubbles, and the concentration of power in large digital platforms. These phenomena may compromise the quality of democratic debate by restricting the diversity of perspectives and favoring processes of political polarization. Thus, the network society expands channels of participation while simultaneously imposing new challenges on contemporary democracy.

Despite these limitations, several studies emphasize the potential of social media to confront political apathy and bring citizens closer to decision-making processes. Dutra and Oliveira (2018) suggest that cyberspace may be understood as a new digital agora, in which relevant issues are debated and dramatized, contributing to the formation of political positions among so-called "cybercitizens." Melo and Albuquerque (2020) reinforce that this prominence role does not imply a return to direct democracy in the mold of Ancient Greece, but rather the consolidation of a social democratic model that strengthens ties between civil society and the State.

In this sense, Lopes and Freire (2010) argue that cyberdemocracy exceeds the limits of local democracies by assuming a transnational character, enabling the formation of public opinion on a global scale. This phenomenon does not represent the weakening of the State, but the constitution of a new political space characterized by intense communicational flows and expanded access to information. Thus, democracy in the network society must be understood as a constantly transforming process in which social media act simultaneously as instruments for expanding participation and as arenas of political and symbolic dispute.

Accordingly, the dialogue among these authors shows that the network society profoundly redefines the foundations of contemporary democracy. Social media, inserted in this context, are central elements in the rearticulation of the public sphere, expanding the possibilities of engagement and deliberation while also demanding critical approaches capable of confronting their structural limits. Understanding these phenomena therefore requires an integrated analysis of technology, communication, and politics, recognizing the complexity and contradictions inherent in democracy in the digital age.

2. The Arab Spring and the Role of Social Media in Political Mobilization

The Arab Spring designates a broad cycle of social mobilizations, popular protests, and political conflicts that emerged from 2010 onward in North Africa and the Middle East, constituting one of the most expressive processes of political contestation of the early twenty-first century. Far from being a homogeneous event or one confined to a single country, this phenomenon must be understood as the result of the convergence between long-term structural conditions, such as authoritarian regimes, persistent socioeconomic inequalities, and systematic practices of political repression, and recent transformations in the modes of communication and collective organization characteristic of the network society. In this sense, Bijos and Silva (2013) observe that the very designation "Arab Spring" establishes a symbolic analogy with the Prague Spring, evoking the idea of political rupture and resistance to consolidated authoritarian systems.

The political context preceding the outbreak of these uprisings was marked by a deeply repressive scenario, traversed by growing popular discontent in the face of the loss of civil rights, high unemployment rates, structural poverty, and endemic corruption. As Elias (2023) analyzes, these elements acted as driving factors for the claims that gave rise to popular street movements in several countries of the Arab world. This interpretation dialogues with Castells (2015) and Joffé (2011) by emphasizing that the 2008 global economic crisis aggravated existing vulnerabilities in the region, intensifying youth unemployment, inflation, and the rising cost of living, especially with regard to food and energy prices.

In this scenario, young people emerged as central actors in the mobilizations. Hoffmann and Jamal (2014) demonstrate that youth unemployment reached critical levels, accompanied by precarious educational opportunities and the absence of prospects for social mobility. Elias (2023) reinforces this interpretation by pointing out that, in countries such as Egypt, the absence of stable employment, the precariousness of public services—such as health and education—and the perception of a blocked future produced an environment of collective frustration that gradually eroded the fear historically imposed by authoritarian regimes. Accumulated indignation thus became political action.

The symbolic trigger of the Arab Spring occurred in Tunisia, more precisely in the city of Sidi Bouzid, with the self-immolation of street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi on December 17, 2010, after repeated confiscations of his means of subsistence by local authorities. As Elias (2023) emphasizes, Bouazizi's

funeral gathered thousands of people and became an initial landmark of the demonstrations, which were amplified by popular revolt against government corruption and state repression. Ramos (2015) interprets this episode as a narrative of strong collective identification, in which individual suffering came to symbolize the social condition of broad segments of the population. Castells (2015) adds that Bouazizi's act acquired particularly significant symbolic value among young people subjected to structural unemployment and the systematic denial of dignity.

The fall of Tunisian president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, after more than two decades in power, revealed the movement's potential for regional contagion. From Tunisia, the mobilizations quickly spread to countries such as Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria, Bahrain, and Jordan, and also provoked protests and incidents in nations such as Algeria, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and Sudan (Esteves 2012; Elias 2023). Although distinct in their outcomes, these movements were widely recognized as expressions of democratic demands centered on the struggle against poverty, corruption, unemployment, police repression, and systematic disrespect for human rights.

In Egypt, between 2010 and 2011, social media assumed a decisive role in organizing and disseminating protests against the regime of Hosni Mubarak, who had governed the country for more than three decades. Elias (2023) highlights that Egyptian youth used social networks intensively to demand the end of the regime, denouncing police abuses, social injustices, and the structural corruption of the state. This process demonstrates the centrality of digital media as infrastructures of political mobilization in the network society. Castells (2015) interprets these mobilizations as expressions of networked collective action, characterized by the absence of centralized leadership and by horizontal communication mediated by the Internet, while Bennett and Segerberg (2013) understand them as forms of connective action based on the flexible articulation of individuals through digital platforms.

Another relevant aspect of this process was the capacity of digital media to connect a plurality of identities across different spaces simultaneously, allowing local experiences to acquire national and international resonance. In Egypt, this youth protagonism was decisive for the occupation of Tahrir Square in Cairo, where approximately one million people, mostly young, gathered to demand a more just, democratic, and free society. This episode illustrates how social media acted not only as communication tools, but also as symbolic and organizational catalysts of political mobilization.

Empirical data corroborate this youth protagonism. According to the *Arab Social Media Report* (Dubai School of Government 2011), in 2010,

78% of Facebook users in Tunisia and Egypt were between 15 and 29 years old, while in Libya this percentage reached 67%, showing that the so-called "cyberactivists" were mostly young. In this context, individual actors stood out and began to play a relevant role in the circulation of information. One example was political analyst Sultan Al Qassemi, who used Twitter to narrate events in Tunisia and later in Egypt. According to Borges (2012), the exponential growth of his audience reveals the capacity of social networks to transform individuals into central nodes of informational diffusion.

Given the centrality of the Internet in the propagation of protests, authoritarian governments began to adopt strategies of digital repression. Castells (2015) describes this process as a "cyberwar," characterized by Internet shutdowns, the removal of content on platforms such as Facebook, and the censorship of activist pages. Even so, as Borges (2012) observes, demonstrators found ways to continue disseminating information, resorting to mobile phones and sending videos outside the country, which shows that the Internet went beyond its role as a political instrument and also became a means of resistance.

Even in contexts in which the Internet was temporarily interrupted, such as Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, the circulation of information was not completely contained. The broadcaster Al Jazeera played a fundamental role by retransmitting content from social networks, breaking the information blockade imposed by the regimes. As Lian (2013) points out, many Western media organizations, unable to maintain correspondents in Egypt, began to retransmit images broadcast by the channel, which further expanded the international visibility of the protests.

Another emblematic episode of mobilization in Egypt was the murder of blogger Khaled Said, beaten to death by police officers after denouncing corruption cases involving state agents. The authorities' attempt to characterize his death as suicide generated strong social indignation. As Souza (2014) observes, images of his body circulated intensely through digital networks, driving protests and demonstrations. From this episode emerged the We Are All Khaled Said movement, created by Wael Ghonim on Facebook, which became an important space for political articulation. According to Luz (2014), it was through this group that mass protests were organized, including the January 25, 2011 mobilization in Tahrir Square, known as the "Day of Rage."

The articulation among youth, social media, and collective indignation thus reinforces the understanding of the Arab Spring as a phenomenon intrinsically linked to the logic of the network society. As Van Dijck *et al*. (2018) argue, digital platforms constitute central arenas of political dispute, in

which visibility, power, and collective action are articulated. In the case of the Arab Spring, these arenas enabled the transnational circulation of demands, the partial overcoming of state censorship, and the construction of a global narrative of resistance, although one marked by limits, contradictions, and disputes.

Accordingly, by articulating classic contributions and recent studies, it becomes possible to understand the Arab Spring as a multifaceted historical process in which structural conditions of oppression and inequality intertwine with the communicational transformations of the network society. In this context, social media emerge as central elements in redefining the forms of mobilization, resistance, and political participation in the contemporary Arab world.

From this set of contributions, it can be observed that the network society not only redefines the circulation of information and the constitution of social bonds, but also reconfigures modes of political participation and disputes for visibility and legitimacy in the public sphere. Social media, by operating as hybrid and transnational arenas, can expand repertoires of engagement and collective coordination while also exposing tensions associated with platform governance, polarization, and asymmetries of access and influence (Chadwick 2017; Van Djick *et al*. 2018).

3. The Fall of Autocratic Regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya

As explained in the previous section, the mobilizations that emerged from 2010 onward inaugurated a new cycle of sociopolitical contestation in the region, driven by demands for better living conditions, broader political participation, and the overcoming of repressive practices, even though they produced different outcomes in each national context. It was from this context that the fall of historically consolidated autocratic regimes was triggered, such as those of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia, Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, and Muammar Gaddafi in Libya (Bijos and Silva 2013, 59). The following table categorically exemplifies the aforementioned events:

Table 1 – Triggering events, consequences, and political outcomes of the Arab Spring

Country	Triggering event	Date	Consequence	Time in power	Demonstration	Outcome
Tunisia	Self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi as a protest against the confiscation of his work goods by the authorities	December 17, 2010	Deposition of dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali	Since 1990	Jasmine Revolution	Ben Ali was sentenced to 35 years in prison; the presidential election was scheduled for the end of 2014
Egypt	Protests motivated by the Jasmine Revolution and influenced by the torture, beating, and death of young Khaled Said by the Egyptian police	January 25, 2011	Deposition of dictator Hosni Mubarak	Since 1981	Days of Rage, Lotus Revolution, or Nile Revolution	Mubarak faced criminal proceedings in Egypt; two presidents elected after Mubarak were deposed; the provisional government came under the new president Abdel Fattah Sisi
Lybia	Protests motivated by the Jasmine Revolution	February 2011	Deposition of Muammar Gaddafi	Since 1969	Lybian Civil War or Lybian Revolution	Gaddafi was captured and killed at the end of 2011, ceding power to the National General Congress

Source: Elias (2023, our translation).

Analyzing the previous table, it is possible to identify both common structural patterns and particularities in the processes of mobilization and political rupture in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt. The comparative analysis shows that, despite historical and institutional differences, the cases share central elements, such as the long permanence of authoritarian leaders in power, the recurrent use of state violence, and the intensification of social discontent in the face of persistent economic and political crises (Bijos and Silva 2013; Elias 2023).

In Tunisia, the catalytic episode of the mobilizations was the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in December 2010, an event that acquired strong symbolic value by expressing, in an extreme form, collective frustrations related to unemployment, corruption, and the arbitrariness of state authorities (Castells 2015). The deposition of Ben Ali, who had governed the country since 1990, not only marked the beginning of the regional revolutionary process,

but also consolidated Tunisia as the initial reference point of the Arab Spring. The designation "Jasmine Revolution" reflects the symbolic construction of the movement, while subsequent developments indicate attempts at institutional reorganization, although permeated by persistent socioeconomic fragilities (Luz 2014; Guedes 2021).

In Egypt, popular mobilizations were also driven by the death of the young Khaled Said, as explained in the previous section. The case became a symbol of repression under the Hosni Mubarak regime and contributed to the expansion of the protests initiated in January 2011 (Preston 2011; Luz 2014). Mubarak's prolonged period in government, which began in 1981, reveals the centralization of political power and the absence of effective mechanisms for alternation, factors that intensified popular discontent. Although the demonstrations, known as the Days of Rage or the Lotus Revolution, resulted in the president's deposition, subsequent political developments revealed the fragility of the transition process, culminating in the consolidation of a new authoritarian regime under military leadership (Guedes 2021).

The Libyan case presented a substantially different dynamic. Influenced by events in Tunisia and Egypt, protests against the regime of Muammar Gaddafi were harshly repressed, with the armed forces supporting the government, which had remained in power since 1969 (Luz 2014). The escalation of violence led to the transformation of the demonstrations into an armed conflict of major proportions and to the approval of Resolution 1973 by the United Nations Security Council, which authorized international military intervention in the country. The capture and death of Gaddafi in October 2011 symbolized the collapse of the regime, but did not result in political stability, inaugurating a prolonged period of institutional fragmentation and insecurity (Luz 2014; Guedes 2021).

In this sense, Table 1 contributes to a comparative understanding of the Arab Spring by showing that, although the protests were driven by similar structural causes, such as prolonged authoritarianism, state repression, and social dissatisfaction, their political results varied significantly. The joint analysis of the cases shows that factors such as the stance of the armed forces, the degree of violence employed by the regimes, and the intervention of external actors were decisive for the different outcomes observed in post-Arab Spring processes (Bijos and Silva 2013; Patel *et al*. 2014).

In addition to internal transformations, the Arab Spring was characterized by the transnational spread of sociopolitical demands. According to Patel *et al*. (2014), this process was favored both by the positive symbolic impact of the initial mobilizations, which achieved their objectives in the short term,

and by the historical, political, and economic similarities among countries in the region. The existence of a common language and shared experiences of authoritarianism facilitated the circulation of ideas, strategies, and repertoires of collective action across different national contexts.

The media, especially social networks and international media coverage, played a central role in spreading revolutionary ideas, accelerating the contagion of protests from one country to another (Ryan 2014). As Tavares *et al*. (2014) point out, this "contagion effect" went beyond the regional limits of North Africa and the Middle East, influencing social movements in other parts of the world, such as Occupy Wall Street in the United States and the Indignados movement in Spain, evidencing the global reach of the mobilizations initiated in the Arab world (Lopes 2013).

The medium- and long-term analysis indicates that the consequences of the Arab Spring were lasting, but deeply asymmetrical. Although the mobilizations emerged from similar repertoires of contestation against authoritarianism, corruption, and socioeconomic deterioration, subsequent outcomes revealed divergent trajectories, in which the role of institutions, the armed forces, and constitutional arrangements proved decisive in shaping the contemporary configuration of each state (Bijos and Silva 2013; Patel *et al*. 2014).

In Tunisia, the period immediately after 2011 was initially interpreted as a promising transition cycle, marked by the opening of the political system and attempts to limit the concentration of power. However, the persistence of socioeconomic dissatisfaction, associated with party fragmentation and a crisis of governability, created conditions for a process of democratic regression. The exceptional measures adopted by President Kais Saied from July 2021 onward reconfigured the balance between the Executive and the Legislature and have been widely analyzed as a movement of power recentralization and weakening of institutional control mechanisms. The 2022 constitutional referendum reinforced this reorientation of the institutional pact, affecting the separation of powers and the system of political guarantees constructed after 2011 (Koehler 2023; Boussen and Lakhal 2022).

In Egypt, the fall of Mubarak did not result in lasting democratization. Specialized literature points out that, after 2013, the regime led by Abdel Fattah al-Sisi consolidated a process of authoritarian reconcentration, characterized by the reduction of civic space, the strengthening of coercive instruments, and institutional reconfiguration in favor of robust decision-making centralization. The 2019 constitutional amendments expanded presidential prerogatives and weakened judicial independence, with direct impacts on political rights and guarantees (Hofmann 2021; ICJ 2019). This process can

therefore be interpreted as a form of consolidated authoritarianism, which does not represent a mere restoration of the previous regime, but rather a reengineering of power structures.

In Libya, finally, the Arab Spring resulted in the rupture of the regime without the establishment of a unified state authority capable of organizing the political transition. The collapse of the government in 2011 was followed by political-military fragmentation, competition among centers of power, and recurring governance crises, prolonging the country's instability. Initiatives sponsored by the United Nations have sought, since 2020, to establish an institutional road map for unification and the holding of elections, but the absence of consensus on the constitutional and electoral framework has remained a structural obstacle to the process (International Crisis Group 2021; United Nations 2024; UNSMIL 2025; United Nations Security Council 2023). In this context, the central consequence of the Arab Spring in the Libyan case was the replacement of centralized authoritarianism by a fragmented and competitive political order, marked by high institutional vulnerability (Luz 2014).

From a comparative perspective, the three cases demonstrate that the impacts of the Arab Spring cannot be understood solely from the initial revolutionary moment, but above all from the way institutional structures, civil-military relations, and constitutional arrangements were reconstituted after 2011. The divergent trajectories of Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya reveal the limits and possibilities of processes of political change in contexts marked by prolonged authoritarianism and deep social inequalities.

4. Final Considerations

The investigation developed throughout this article began from the understanding that the emergence of the network society represents a structural inflection in forms of social organization, political communication, and the exercise of power. As discussed on the basis of Castells (2012; 2015), this transformation is not limited to the introduction of new technologies, but redefines social morphology itself by shifting centrality from traditional institutional hierarchies to decentralized, dynamic, and interconnected communicational networks. In this context, social media assume a strategic role as central infrastructures for the circulation of information, the construction of public narratives, and the articulation of collective action.

It was in light of this framework that this study sought to answer the following questions: to what extent did social media, as the communicational infrastructure of the network society, contribute to political mobilization during the Arab Spring, and what structural limits conditioned their effects on democratization processes in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya? The analysis combined theory and empirical evidence to demonstrate that digital connectivity exerted significant influence on modes of mobilization, without, however, determining in a linear or automatic way the political outcomes observed after 2011.

The research findings indicate that social media acted as important catalysts of political mobilization during the Arab Spring. By reducing organizational costs, accelerating the dissemination of denunciations, and allowing the connection of dispersed individuals and groups in horizontal networks, these platforms favored forms of collective action compatible with the logic of the network society. This dynamic was expressed with particular intensity among young people, who appropriated digital media to articulate protests, share experiences of repression, and construct narratives of collective indignation. In this sense, the cases analyzed corroborate the theoretical contributions of Castells (2015) and Bennett and Segerberg (2013) by evidencing the emergence of networked collective actions and connective actions characterized by horizontal communication, the absence of centralized leadership, and organizational flexibility.

However, the comparative analysis of Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya reveals that the mobilizing potential of social media encountered significant structural limits when confronted with the institutional arrangements and power correlations prevailing in each national context. Although digital connectivity contributed to the fall of autocratic regimes, subsequent political outcomes were profoundly asymmetrical. In Tunisia, an initial cycle of political opening was followed by a process of democratic regression and power recentralization; in Egypt, mobilization resulted in the reconsolidation of an authoritarian regime under a new institutional architecture; and, in Libya, the rupture of the regime gave way to a prolonged scenario of political-military fragmentation and state instability. These results reinforce the idea that networked mobilization, by itself, is not sufficient to guarantee democratic consolidation, with factors such as civil-military relations, state capacity, and constitutional design proving decisive.

Another central aspect evidenced by the research concerns the insertion of social media into a hybrid media system, as proposed by Chadwick (2017). The Arab Spring showed that digital platforms do not operate in isolation, but in constant interaction with traditional media, political institutions,

and transnational actors. This articulation expanded the visibility of the mobilizations, partially broke information blockades imposed by authoritarian regimes, and allowed the transnational circulation of narratives of resistance. At the same time, this hybrid system produced new democratic vulnerabilities, such as fragmentation of the public sphere, intensification of polarization, and asymmetric disputes for visibility, aspects widely problematized by Sunstein (2017) and Van Dijck *et al*. (2018).

In light of this set of evidence, it is possible to affirm that the hypothesis formulated in this study was corroborated. Social media intensified the mobilization and coordination of collective action during the Arab Spring, confirming their role as central communicational infrastructure of the network society. However, their democratizing effects were conditioned by political-institutional factors and by the dynamics of the contemporary media ecosystem, in which openness and vulnerability coexist. Thus, the research reinforces a non-determinist reading of the relationship between technology and democracy, moving away from interpretations that attribute an automatically emancipatory role to digital media.

In this sense, the findings make a critical contribution to the existing literature. Contrary to interpretations that attribute to social media a central and, at times, sufficient role in political transformation, the results presented here demonstrate that such approaches tend to underestimate the weight of institutional structures and power relations in defining political outcomes. Likewise, analyses centered exclusively on post-revolutionary processes reveal limitations by disregarding the role of communicational dynamics in the outbreak and intensity of mobilizations. By articulating these two analytical levels, this work addresses the gap identified in the literature, showing that networked mobilization and institutional results should not be analyzed separately, but as interdependent dimensions of the same process of political transformation.

From an analytical point of view, this study demonstrates that understanding the political impacts of social media requires the integration of communicational dynamics and institutional conditions, overcoming the fragmentation predominant in the literature. By systematically articulating the concept of the network society, debates on cyberdemocracy and connective action, and the comparative analysis of the political outcomes of the Arab Spring, the article shows that social media must be understood simultaneously as a condition of possibility for contemporary political mobilization and as a space of dispute marked by power asymmetries, whose effects depend on the institutional and social structures in which they are embedded.

In broader terms, the analysis of the Arab Spring advances the understanding of democracy in the digital age by demonstrating that processes of political change cannot be explained exclusively either by technology or by institutional structures in isolation, but by the complex interaction between both. The network society expands repertoires of engagement, accelerates cycles of contestation, and redefines the public sphere, but it does not eliminate the centrality of institutions, political pacts, and correlations of force in defining democratic trajectories. In this sense, the study contributes to the contemporary debate by indicating that the challenges of digital democracy lie not only in the use of technologies, but in the capacity to articulate connectivity, political inclusion, and democratic institutionality in a sustainable manner.

As a final development, this study opens space for new research agendas that deepen the understanding of the relationships among the network society, social media, and democracy in contexts of political transformation. Future investigations may comparatively explore how different institutional architectures and digital governance regimes shape the effects of networked mobilization over time, as well as analyze the role of algorithms, content moderation, and the political economy of platforms in configuring the digital public sphere.

In addition, empirical studies that incorporate mixed methods, combining network analysis, digital ethnography, and institutional investigation, may contribute to clarifying how everyday practices of social media use are articulated with broader processes of political change, especially in authoritarian or hybrid contexts. By expanding the view beyond the initial moment of mobilization, such research can offer relevant contributions to the debate on the limits and possibilities of democracy in the digital age, strengthening a critical and non-determinist approach to communication technologies.

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