THE ROLE OF THE INTERNET IN THE ARAB SPRING

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The article discusses the influence of the Internet as one of the most critical information infrastructures to facilitate social networking for planning, inducing and enhancing coherent effects of the protests in states located in North Africa and the Middle East, during the so-called "Arab Spring" revolutionary social movements. The first part summarizes the political events in the region since the end of 2010 to the present with emphasis on the social impact in Tunisia and Egypt, where the role of the internet has been shown as strongly related to the population turmoil.

The essay further analyzes the impact of network use in correlation with the statistical distribution of users based on geographic and population layout. Some assumptions are made on how the Internet has been evolving in a "key enabler" sparking the riots in the Arab world, delivering appropriate support to the actions and responses of the parties involved in the street conflicts.

The authors highlight a number of consequences caused as the result of using the Internet technology by the socio-political actors during the Arab Spring demonstrations, including the most important point as the most active of the social networks in the development of the relationship between the individual and the state - formally recognized by the international community.

Keywords: *Internet; Arab Spring; social networks; Twitter; Facebook; YouTube.*

S tarting on December, 17th 2010, when the Tunisian Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in a supreme protest against the ultra rigid autocracy in power, the international community was shocked by the news of what came to be later known as the "Arab Spring". The Arab world erupted in outrage

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spreading the chain of protests against Governments and their national autarchic regimes, the actions being mostly driven by members of the youth movements. Several Presidents including Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, Muammar Gaddafi in Libya and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia were forced to resign while similar tests amid some major protests took place and still continue today in countries such as Yemen, Morocco, Syria, Bahrain, Algeria, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait and Oman. The Arab Spring protests may also include minor but connected activities in Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Mauritania and Western Sahara, as well as movements from the borders of Israel and the Palestinian territories.

In this context, the Internet as whole, instant messaging applications, also the Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and other social networking solutions supported by Internet information infrastructure easily became tools that facilitate the expression of feelings, channelling and directing fears and determination of individuals in a rising tide of social awareness. All these tools are exactly what the wording indicates – drivers of change. They do not replace nor were any moment meant to replace the will of the communities of users who, based on a collective consciousness as a result of individual tragic experiences, transforms suffering or dissatisfaction, from individual obsessions in mass movements. Personal computer or mobile phones connected within the networks offers new ways of turning much faster, spontaneous reactions into a coordinated coherent set of actions.

Geopolitical and social context

How could this happen? How and why was it possible for a seemingly passive young generation to become aware of its power standing up against the repressive regimes? What role was played by the Internet, in this context, as a facilitator and information infrastructure for social network applications, fully used during these popular riots? By exploring the similarities, differences and cascading effects developed when individual uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East occurred, we could try to answer these questions and, in particular, to identify the role of the Internet in the context of these revolutionary events known as the Arab Spring.

Journalists and, mass media in general, have often been involved in such moments of social and political upheaval, spreading the news through various channels. However, the relatively recent wave of unrest in the Arab world is different. The media has been mostly overrun by the fact that the success stories from Tunisia and Egypt have been spread like wildfire abroad in many other countries with authoritarian regimes, through social networks on Internet. Furthermore, the new means of information delivery in public domain facilitated a

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cascade of social disobedience in many countries with fervent dictatorship rulers, but also succeeded in enabling the use of the Internet and social networks as a single and effective way to supporting of virtual civic organization.

The protests were not only to overthrow the Governments, the dictatorship leaders, but also took into account other issues such as human rights violations, corruption among the highest authorities, high rate of unemployment, extreme poverty, economic decline and lack of education. Arab Spring protesters openly recognized the role of Internet support, as a basic infrastructure for their actions. During the days of protests in Cairo, an individual participating in events described how important was the Internet for organizing political unrest: *"we used to use Facebook to schedule protests, Twitter to coordinate, and YouTube to tell the whole world about them"*. Even former Moammar Gaddafi's counsellors advised him to submit his resignation through the Twitter network. However, it is not the digital networks that had Hosni Mubarak removed from office. Egyptians who occupied the streets of Cairo made this change. One could say the mobile phones and the Internet were used only for cascading the calls of freedom in Northern Africa and the Middle East. As Suharto's fall during the Indonesian Revolution of 1998 is associated with the creative use of mobile phones by the revolutionaries, the fall of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali of Tunis and Egypt's Mubarak may be considered as Internet enabled processes for social mobilization [1].
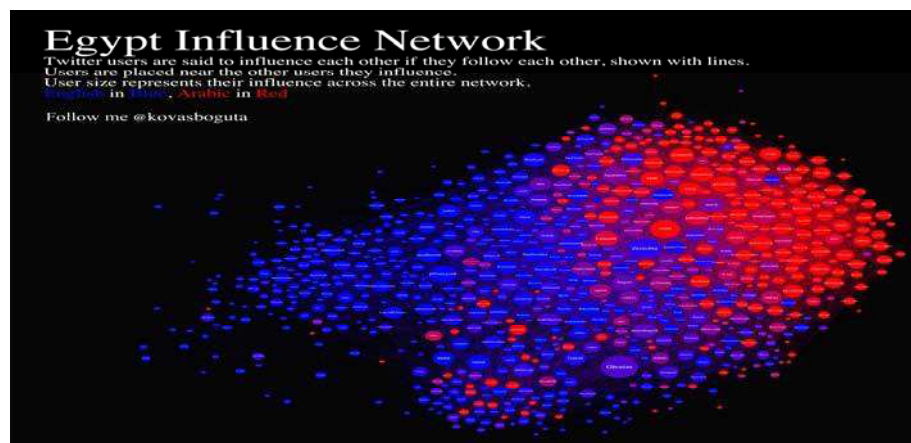

Figure 1. *Cascade effect in Twitter during the uprising in Egypt*
Source: http://www.miller-mccune.com/politics/the-cascading-effects-of-the-arab-spring-28575/ at 19.02.2012

During this civil unrest, in almost all major Tunisian cities, protesters used the Internet, particularly Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to their advantage. These sites were used not only to support the gathering of the people in the street, but also to provide them with a direct link to share their mobilizing ideas. Social networks have proved to be a very efficient tool for information sharing and advice based on the hands-on experience gained by the protesters, heavily obtained on the "battlefield", as for example, tactics of confrontation with the security forces. The Government and the protesters quickly discovered how the Internet could be used, but for different purposes. Bearing in mind that the national media has always been controlled by Government the only way for the protesters to voice their claims throughout the world remained the digital environment provided by the Internet. Therefore, when the Government decided to block access to Facebook, Twitter and other websites of social networks, it has proved rather an escalation measure, than one of relaxing the spirit. Protests in Egypt had begun in 2005, before Mubarak's re-election, when a Christian Egyptian named George Ishak set up with some of his colleagues a movement called Kefaya (Enough) to protest against the constitutional provisions which did not limit the number of mandates for the President.

Then, in the spring of 2008, there was a strike of protest in the City of Mahalla, which caused an aggressive reaction of the Egyptian Government, but at this time of the strike a new and effective instrument was used by the Egyptian protesters: the Internet. While the official media sustained the Government version, the world witnessed the emergence of a new class of reporters: the bloggers[1].

Not trusting the way in which the events in Mahalla had been depicted in the official media, many bloggers transmitted real time news using local Internet websites directly on the "*battlefield*", sharing information and blogging intensively even for assisting the leaders to better negotiate the final terms of the agreement with the Egyptian Government. Finally the Mahalla events were not concluded in favour of the workers, but succeeded in establishing the first step in launching a social movement called "*Youth Movement April 6*", in the form of a Facebook user group on the network, to denounce *"the unfairness of their Government towards the working class"* [2]. Inspired by the example of the Egyptian movement, a similar one

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[1] *blog* – english word (web log = diary on Word Wide Web) is a personal diary published on the World Wide Web consisting of discrete entries ("posts") typically displayed in reverse chronological order so the most recent post appears first. Blogs are usually the work of a single individual, occasionally of a small group, and often are themed on a single subject. *Blog* can also be used as a verb, meaning *to maintain or add content to a blog*. http://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blog.

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was set up in Tunisia. The Tunisian youth movement representatives were contacted by their Egyptian counterparts via Facebook in order to communicate and share experience. Similar features, goals and methods of information exchange had been adopted by the youth movement *Otpor*, against the Slobodan Milosevic regime as well.

***Figure 2.** Egyptian protester in Tahrir Square*
Source: http://www.nato.int/docu/review/2011/Social_Medias/Egypt_Facebook/EN/index.htm

After the resignation of President Ben Ali of Tunisia, on 14 January 2011,"*The Egyptian Youth Movement April 6*" considered an opportunity to turn the annual protest of the national police day into a much larger event. The Facebook web-page was used to mobilize the support of the population. Over 100,000 people signed the virtual endorsements. The demonstrations of 25 January were huge - thousands of people gathered in Tahrir Square in downtown Cairo. The organizers used their pages on Facebook and virtual groups to mobilize people for the daily demonstrations. The protesters exchanged messages and ideas on how to cope with tear gas bombs, how to annihilate the armoured police vehicles, how to equip themselves for street demonstrations, etc.

The events from both Tunisia and Egypt showed that the Internet can be a very effective weapon, one that was a challenge for both Governments. In these cases, free access to the Internet allowed on the one hand for the dissemination of information and photos depicting acts of violence against the demonstrators, authorities and, on the other hand, the exposure of authorities in the face of public opinion worldwide, including criticism from human rights organizations. At the same time, the sudden decision to deny access to the network had the reverse effect than the one expected and led to escalating the conflict and, strained by warnings and lack of information, the people decided once more to move in very large numbers to public markets to see and understand how the events develop.

Similar to the ones in Egypt and Tunisia, further revolts were initiated in Syria, Libya and Yemen. In Libya, the uprising turned into civil war, in which one of the most eccentric dictators of history, Muammar Gaddafi was killed. The President of Yemen, Ali Abdullah Saleh, surrenders in November 2011, while Bashar Assad of Syria does not want to resign, despite domestic and international pressure.

The use of network and information infrastructure effects for socio-political purposes

As shown below, there is no direct link between the number of Internet users and the anti-governmental riots from the Arab countries. The events were influenced especially by the specific social grievances caused by the internal public policies of the authorities targeted during the Arab Spring as well as due to the different scale and means of repression used against these social movements.

Instead, it may be concluded that the organization, the number of participants in the protests, the speed with which each relevant event occurred in different countries were heavily influenced by the actions carried out in this virtual social environment facilitated by the Internet.

Table 1 – Internet use in the Arab world (Arab States, where the Arab population represents the majority)

No	Arab Countries	Population (Estimated in 2009)	Internet Usage (Dec/2000)	Internet Usage (2010)	% Population (Penetration)	User Growth (2000-2010)	(%) total
1	Egypt	78.866.635	450.000	12.568.900	15,9%	2693,1%	18,7%
2	Morocco	31.285.174	100.000	10.300.000	32,9%	10200,0%	15,3%
3	Saudi Arabia	28.686.633	200.000	7.700.000	26,8%	3750,0%	13,4%
4	Sudan	41.087.825	30.000	4.200.000	10,2%	13900,0%	6,2%
5	Algeria	34.178.188	50.000	4.100.000	12,0%	8100,0%	6,1%
6	Syria	21.762.978	30.000	3.565.000	16,4%	11783,3%	6,2%
7	United Arab Emirates	4.798.491	735.000	2.922.000	60,9%	297,6%	5,1%
8	Tunisia	10.486.339	100.000	2.800.000	26,7%	2700,0%	4,2%
9	Jordan	6.269.285	127.300	1.500.500	23,9%	1078,7%	2,6%
10	Kuweit	2.692.526	150.000	1.000.000	37,1%	566,7%	1,7%
11	Lebanon	4.017.095	300.000	945.000	23,5%	215,0%	1,6%
12	Oman	3.418.085	90.000	465.000	13,6%	416,7%	0,8%
13	Qatar	833.285	30.000	436.000	52,3%	1353,3%	0,8%
14	Bahrain	728.709	40.000	402.900	55,3%	907,3%	0,7%
15	Yemen	22.858.238	15.000	370.000	1,6%	2366,7%	0,6%
16	Palestine (West Bk.)	2.461.267	35.000	355.500	14,4%	915,7%	0,6%
17	Libya	6.324.357	10.000	323.000	5,1%	3130,0%	0,5%
18	Iraq	28.945.569	12.500	300.000	1,0%	2300,0%	0,5%
19	Eritrea	5.647.168	5.000	200.000	3,5%	3900,0%	0,3%
20	Somalia	9.832.017	200	102.000	1,0%	50900,0%	0,2%
21	Mauritania	3.129.486	5.000	60.000	1,9%	1100,0%	0,1%
22	Palestine (Gaza)	1.551.859	-	-	-	-	-
	TOTAL	349.861.209	2.515.000	54.615.800	20.8%	5836,9%	

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The list in table 1 is sorted descending from the "Arab State" with the highest to the lowest level of Internet use (according to the latest data available). Internet users from Egypt -12,568,900 as of 2010, are on the first place with the most important number of users (18.7% of the total users of the "Arab world"), followed by Morocco and Saudi Arabia.
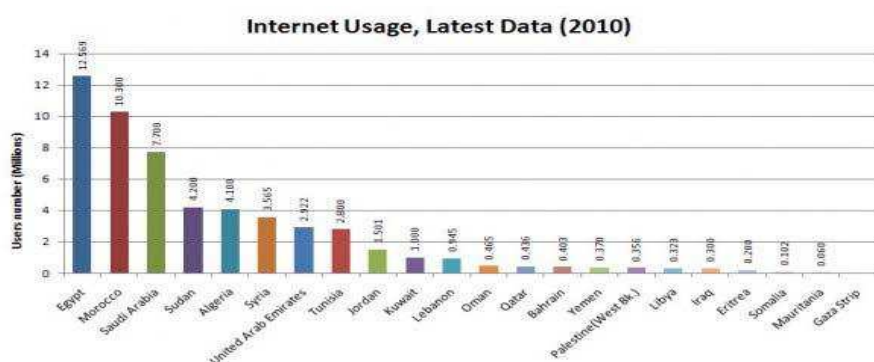

Figure 3. *The Internet users' situation in the main Arab countries from North Africa and the Middle East*

Source: http://sbaydoun.files.wordpress.com/2010/03/statistics-internet-usage-arab-countries.jpg

Statistics on the use of the Internet in the Arab world is shown in the figure above. One of the conclusions may be that in the State with the most users of the public data networks the street events had the highest magnitude on the basis of a near uniform opinion of the population against the authorities. Where there was not a significant presence of Internet users the authorities succeeded in developing a fragmentation of the population, part of it promoting the official views until the Government split the social supporters of the regime and opposing parties, as was the case of Libya.

Figure 5. *The Internet – a facilitator of socialization on high-tech support*

A specific feature of the social movements enabled by the Internet is that, although initially they seem to experience great fear of repressive measures, individuals assisted by an enhanced information exchange network could easily get confidence and assume collective risks to actively support and participate in the protests.

On the other hand, sometimes the Internet could also facilitate the repression of the social movements as well. Offline tracking methods are difficult and less efficient compared with the ease of online surveillance by monitoring communication channels on the Internet. In some cases the Internet service providers are making available the IP addresses of social networking users to the authorities, for monitoring normal message exchanges as well as instant messaging such as *Yahoo Messenger* or *Skype*.

At the same time, the pressure causes adaptation. Ben Gharbia[2] declared that the Tunisian regime's online censorship created a generation of activists who know how to escape controls. The activists have learned how to circumvent monitoring, while the Arab Governments are concerned about the use of dedicated software for the suppression of dissidents in order to counter the uprisings. The phenomenon resembles an armaments race online.

The chart below presents the highest percentage of the population that has access to the Internet in the United Arab Emirates, followed by Bahrain and Qatar.
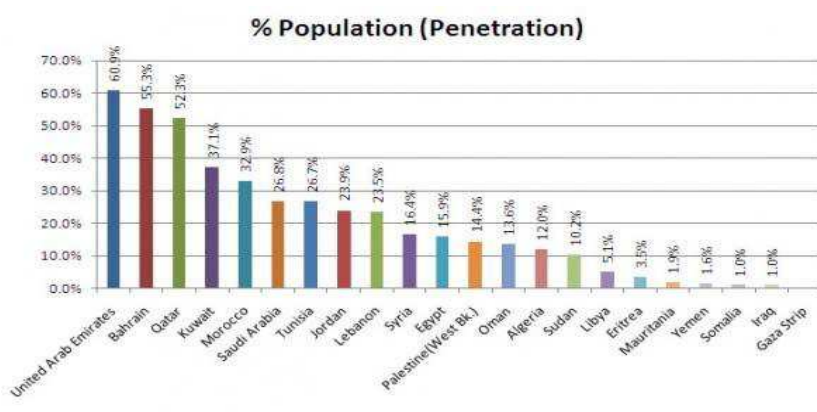

Figure 4. *Penetration of Internet use in the registered population (%)*
Source:http://sbaydoun.files.wordpress.com/2010/03/statistics-internet-usage-arab-countries-penetration.jpg

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[2] Sami Ben Gharbia – Tunisian blogger who was born at Bizerte, Tunis in 1967, today living in The Netherlands as a political refugee since 1998, http://sitemaker.umich.edu/infosurgentstunisia/sami_ben_gharbia.

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Statistics of Internet "penetration" in Arab countries (as a percentage of the population) show that technology does not guarantee any revolution as poverty is not a criterion for their success. The American journalist Katherine Zoepf [4] pointed out that the Internet penetration is much greater in the countries of the Persian Gulf than in Egypt or Syria. However, Egypt and Syria have had riots, while Saudi Arabia has not. Why? The answer is obviously linked to the big money from oil that can buy a better standard of living for the Saudis, that it so feeling less need to change the Government. Ahmed Omran, a Saudi blogger, said money from oil won't last forever and will not solve all the problems of the country. But he admitted that it can "buy time" for the regime. So, poverty may be needed to push people to revolt.

On the other hand, sometimes poverty prevents manifestations against Governments by preventing access to technology. Oula Alrifai, a Syrian activist, and Mary Jo Porter, a Cuban translator for bloggers, explained how Internet access is expensive and awkward in these countries. In Syria the home Internet access is too expensive for most people, so they must share the connectivity to the Internet cafe, a situation in which the Government can monitor all the online activities. In Cuba, two hours of Internet access at a coffee shop cost 20 dollars. For many Cubans that represents the 1-month salary, and one text message costs 1 USD. In North Korea it is even worse. Marcus Noland, Deputy Director of Peterson Institute for International Economics, declared that the country is not able to sustain the capacity to support telecommunication traffic on the Internet with the outside world, even if the regime would allow this. Even if Somalia was mentioned at the end of the table showing "the penetration of Internet" in the Arab States, it would have the highest rate of growth reaching 50.900% (from 200 to 100,000 users in approx. 9 years), followed by Sudan and Syria.

In some cases it was found that people use the Internet to express their own grievances, while in other cases the network is used for entirely different reasons, the users joining the new ideas of change sharing the burden of those whom they are getting in contact with.
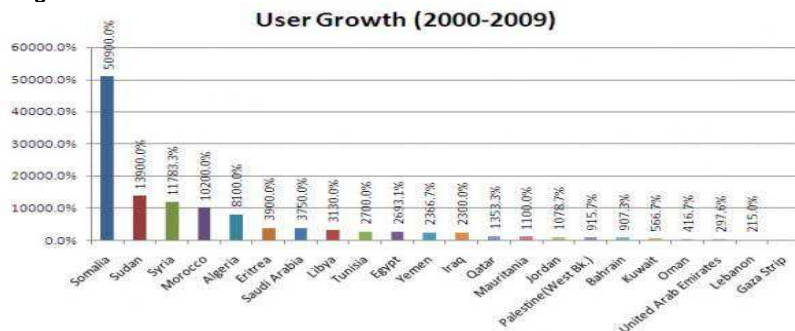

Figure 4. *Increasing access to the Internet in the Arab States*
Source:http://sbaydoun.files.wordpress.com/2010/03/statistics-internet-usage-growth-arab-countries.jpg

Increasing use of the Internet statistics in the Arab countries is shown in Figure 4. The debate remains open with regard to the accuracy of the data, but they offer still the most authorized and realistic perception about the situation[3].

Based on these statistics and the statement[4] made by the Egyptian Wael Ghonim in Tahrir Square to the CNN voicing the protesters' viewpoint, it should be admitted that the Arab Spring came to be a massive wave of protests precisely due to the outcome of the Egyptian and Tunisian riots, supported by the information disseminated in almost real time using the available software tools in public networks. In addition, these demonstrations echoed quickly, at a smaller scale in Saudi Arabia and Sudan. Mobilisation of young people on the Internet was moved into the street, the social networks, especially Facebook, being the first push of those who later came to protest.

Geography remained still important even in the context of the Internet virtual networking. Geographical distribution of users impacted the online traffic at least as it could be done by 3G[5] mobile technology coverage at the physical state borders, regardless of their restrictive policy with respect to the communication services provided by those networks.

Consequences

The results expected by local population and the international community have not been equally identified in all the Arab countries in which massive protests erupted, even though sometimes they were paid by shedding blood, destabilization of the economy and political unrest. In January 2012, the international press noticed that the fall of three Governments happened during the Arab Spring. During this period of massive protests, with an obvious echo in the Arab world, other leaders announced their intention to conclude their mandates. The President of Sudan, Omar Al Bashir, announced that he would no longer run for the presidential elections in 2015, but even so, the Sudanese want to remove Bashir from power as soon as

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[3] Source: http://internetworldstats.com/stats.htm, on 18.02.2012.
[4] " That was an Internet Revolution. I named it the Revolution 2.0", http://www.nato.int/docu/review/ 2011/Social_Medias/Egypt_Facebook/EN/index.htm, on 19.02.2012.
[5] 3G or 3rd generation mobile telecommunications is a generation of standards for mobile services fulfilling the International Mobile Telecommunications-2000 (IMT-2000) specifications by the ITU. Application services include wide-area wireless voice telephone, mobile Internet access, video calls and mobile TV, all in a mobile environment.

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possible. The situation is in fact about the same in almost all the Arab World: people do not have faith anymore in the promises of their leaders, searching with all diligence to remove them from power. In Syria, for instance, protests began on March 15, 2011 and until today they have not been concluded. Then, in Iraq, the protests were crushed or diminished in intensity as early as august 2011, the Iraqi winning factions gaining only the promise of Prime Minister Maliki, that he would not run for a third term and also some promises of Province Governors and local authorities for their dismissal. The Arab Spring also included a social movement brutally crushed in Bahrain, through local intervention and external support, provided on call by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, the protests of Oman unmercifully repressed, other smaller protests and riots in Algeria and Sudan, and "prophylactic" changes in the Government of Jordan, as well as preventive measures of liberalization in Morocco. After reaching its peak the phenomenon seems to not be completed yet, moving and extending as a disease across the borders. One could say that the Arab Spring was the result of protests on the Internet, implementing a common online scenario with people interacting on the networks, particularly on Facebook, but also on Twitter, then, going out in the street. The increasing time spent by the Tunisian youth on the Internet became even longer once the protests began, spreading all kinds of video, photo and text materials, designed to motivate and convince the rest of the people to go out to the street. The Arab Governments' fear regarding the power of the Internet to bring people onto the street existed and some of them even blocked Internet access, but without much success, the online activists managing, finally, to make their voice heard and to bring people to the streets. Therefore, when we speak about the Arab Spring we can recognized the role which the Internet played, even though, most likely, the people got to the streets not only because of the Internet, but also for a common cause, developed over the years in what they are looking for [5].

In this context, the leaders of the Group of Eight (G8)[6], gathered at Deauville on 26-27 May 2011, launched a partnership with the invited countries from the

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[6] The Group of Eight (G8) is a forum for the governments of eight of the world's largest economies. The forum originated with a 1975 summit hosted by France that brought together representatives of six governments: France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States, thus leading to the name Group of Six or G6. The summit became known as the Group of Seven or G7 the following year with the addition of Canada. In 1997, Russia was added to group which then became known as the G8. The European Union is represented within the G8 but cannot host or chair summits.

Middle East and Northern Africa to support the political and military reforms. "The Deauville Partnership is based largely on the new partnership of the EU in the region, as it is clearly shown in the Summit Declaration", was claimed in a joint statement made by the President of the European Council Herman Van Rompuy and Commission President José Manuel Barroso, who represented the European Union at the Summit. The initial commitments include economic guarantees of 20 billion dollars worth from the multilateral development banks. 25% of this amount will come from the European Investment Bank. In addition, all members of the G8 will provide substantial bilateral assistance, which includes subsidies under the EU budget for neighbourhood policy (EUR 7 billion, of which EUR 1.24 billion represents additional funds proposed by the European Commission). The Summit recognized the unique role of the Internet as an instrument to promote democracy and economic growth. For the first time at the level of first rank leaders and executives in the field of Internet, it has been agreed on a series of key principles relating to Internet development orientation, including freedom and multilateral governance.

This official recognition at the highest level could lead to radical changes in its structure, architecture, even the philosophy of developing and using the Internet. One thing is for sure, – the role of the Internet in people's lives can no longer be ignored and where the international community would expect less this evolving technology has substantially influenced significant changes in the state political order or rocked solid regimes previously perceived as positive in the geopolitical and social environment.

On the other hand, a political strategy, and especially one with revolutionary character, which is not adapted to technological solutions, is a strategy doomed to failure. What was therefore shown? That there is no revolution on the Internet, but rather a manifestation of the revolutionary spirit facilitated by the Internet (Network Enabled Revolution). Though unable to create revolutions, the Internet is also part of the revolutionary changes in our world in the dynamics of social communications.

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