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# **The Influence of Social Media<sup>1</sup> on Social Movements: An Exploratory Conceptual Model**

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**Abstract.** Information and communication technology affects all issues in the modern world, including social movements. The impact of these technologies on such movements has been felt worldwide in recent years, affecting both developed countries, such as Spain and the United States, as well as developing countries, such as Brazil, Egypt, and Tunisia. Interestingly, the intensive use of the Internet and especially social media has been a common denominator in the popular demonstrations that have occurred in the past few years in the most diverse scenarios. Social movements appear to have been influenced by social media, particularly with respect to their organization and communication. Therefore, based on a review of the extant literature on the topic, this paper seeks to propose an exploratory conceptual model about the influence of the use of social media on social movements, whereby possible scenarios in which these social demonstrations tend to occur can be identified.

**Keywords:** Social Movements, Internet, E-Participation, Social Media.

## **1 Introduction**

Contemporary social movements<sup>2</sup> like so many other aspects of the modern world begin to suffer gradual transformation, starting to have similar characteristics, even when sparked off in completely different scenarios. Information and communication technology (ICT) has a dual role in this context, since the Internet is now used at times for the mere diffusion of information, and at other times as the very means by which the demonstrations are organized, in a process that feeds back on itself [1].

In the case of social movements, Internet and social media in particular facilitate the events and also brings them to international attention at an unprecedented pace, enabling the uprisings to be literally monitored in real time [2,3].

Among these movements, the highlights were those that took place in Istanbul, the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, the *Indignadas* in Spain, the 20 Cents movement in Brazil, among others. These movements were mostly composed of young people called to action through social media, without the presence of parties, trades unions, and traditional mass organizations [4,5].

In order to contribute to the understanding of the relationship between the use of the Internet and especially social media with the social movements, this theoretical

paper proposes the development of a conceptual model, rendering possible to discuss the potential and limitations of social media on social movements, thereby providing insights for the understanding and ongoing enhancement of academic research in this knowledge area.

## 2 The Context of Internet, Social Media, and Social Movements

The networks represent the new social morphology of our societies, since the diffusion of network logic substantially modifies the operation and the results of processes of production, experience, power and culture [6]. This society, named as the "network society" [7], uses information and communication technologies to establish its social structure. However, the Internet is a tool that develops but does not change behavior; on the contrary, behavior takes advantage of the Internet to broaden and organize itself into what it represents [8].

In spite of this, the Internet has proved to be an essential medium of expression and organization for the social demonstrations. It is a means of communication to which much of the world population has access, reconfiguring the map of relationships, in which ideas and information flow and some boundaries become fluid. In this respect, one argues that the importance of social networking sites (SNS) has grown so swiftly that they have become one of the tools of the social and political movements [9].

The popularity of the SNS, making them the most well-known websites in the world from October 2011 onwards, has contributed to a considerable extent to the spread of social demonstrations [10]. To give an idea of scale, in different regions such as the Middle East, Latin America, Europe, and Africa, SNS represented about 24% of all time spent on the Internet in 2011, an increase of 35% compared to 2010 [11]. Moreover, YouTube has become the most popular online video platform worldwide, offering two out of five videos viewed worldwide [10].

With respect to the social movements, one stresses the fact that major mass demonstrations of the population were organized by mobilization via social media and thereafter showed their strength with the massive presence of people on the street [12]. They were united around calls for change, such as the Arab Spring, which began in late 2010, the *Indignadas* movement in Spain in 2011, and the protests in Brazil in 2013. In these cases, there was no mediation of the mobilization along classic lines, namely political parties, trade unions and conventional communication channels [13].

One deals with a standard feature of the social movements, namely that they spill over from social media onto the streets [12]. Anger and indignation with the current reality is the trigger for this feature, though fear is a suppressor for the outbreaks. Fear, however, is overcome by sharing the indignation via the network, which generates the awareness that one is not alone. Based on that, enthusiasm arises, which fosters the hope that things can be different, after which mass mobilization occurs. Furthermore, the interactive dynamics of the highly interconnected modern world has established a favorable environment for the reinvention of democracy [14]. Social media enables social movements to spread extremely swiftly and comprehensively, with technology rendering the physical distance between participants irrelevant.

As one states, occupation of the public space is essential at a given point for the visibility of the social movement, even though the origin and support structure of the social movement is in the open territory of the Internet and its social media [12].

Moreover, social movements mediated by the Internet intentionally have no leaders or hierarchy, mimicking the horizontal playing field of the Internet and reflecting distrust both of established leaders as well as of crises of representation [12]. Therefore, one points out that social movements enabled by social media are popular P2P (peer-to-peer) movements, in other words they have the same features as a point-to-point protocol computer network [15]. Thus, they arise when the decentralized and horizontal communication capacity of society makes it possible to build communities, share ideas and – in the case of demonstrations – express indignation. It is also stated that networks composed of many connection points and actors can be established anywhere and that all its points need to use compatible programs to connect to each other as, for example, Facebook [15]. This means that different actors can be in different places, though using the same social networking platform to link up. It is also stressed the importance of P2P processes arising from the high degree of connectivity of social media in real time (mobile phone, Internet, Twitter, and Facebook) for synchronization of a collective intelligence in what one calls the third reinvention of democracy and politics [14].

In the next section, it will be set forth the methodological procedures undertaken in this article to propose an exploratory conceptual model aiming at addressing the relationship between social movements and social media.

### 3 Methodological Procedures

After having defined the topic of this theoretical essay, the search for literature started. The first phase of this process was trying to find papers published in the leading journals of Information and Communication Technology. This search was not fruitful. Only a literature review on *Information, Communication, and Society* written by Garrett [16] about the subject of this research was found. One broadened the scope of search and included the principal journals in the field of sociology, anthropology, communication, marketing, politics, etc. The *Journal of Communication* and *The Communication Review* both dedicated a special issue on social media and political change. *The Journal of Communication* titled its issue: *Social Media and Political Change: Capacity, Constraint, and Consequence* and covered a wide range of protests.

After the review of the results accrued from the first search phase, a more general search among journals from different disciplines was undertaken, including backward and forward search as suggested by Webster and Watson [17]. This search resulted in 64 articles, all containing the following key words, independently or combined, namely: social media, manifestations, social protest, uprising, rebellion, Arab Spring, Tunisia, Egypt, Iran, Brazil, Occupy movement, and Occupy Wall Street.

The papers were classified based on their contents. That is, some articles address the structural factors related to the use of social media on social movements, i.e. the contextual conditions of each country wherein the popular movements took place. On the other hand, others articles tackle the contextual factors related to the use of social media on social movements, namely the factors considered closest to the movements per se, being them specific moderating factors that can help revealing the evolution and dynamics of social movements mediated by social media.

In order to comply with the suggestions accrued from Webster and Watson [17] and Okoli and Schabram [18] on literature review development, one analyzed the papers trying to triangulate them [19, 20, 21], as well as find commonalities and differences

both in theory and methodology used. Attention was also paid to their recommendations for future research, as recommended by Webster and Watson [17].

After that, the aforementioned structural and contextual factors accrued from the papers analyzed were consolidated into an exploratory conceptual model to be tested in further studies.

## **4 Social Media and Social Movements: A Proposal for an Exploratory Conceptual Model**

As already said, this article aims to develop an exploratory conceptual model to analyzing the influence of social media use in the organization of local social movements. This conceptual model consists of structural and instrumental factors discussed below and identified by means of the main contributions of the extant literature on social movements mediated by ICT that occurred in several countries since 2011.

### **4.1 Structural Factors**

Based on the analysis of the extant literature about the subject addressed in this paper, one can realize the importance of structural factors on the using of social media on popular movements. These structural factors in the conceptual model are the contextual conditions of each country, namely the macro elements that demonstrate the overall living conditions and political activity in the nation. They can foster the emergence of agendas and ideas (e.g. improved living conditions, better transport, and the fight against corruption), as well as their dissemination to society in general. They include the technological, political, and socioeconomic context, as listed below according to the extant literature analyzed.

#### **4.1.1. Technological Context**

From the literature review conducted, one have noticed that several authors point to the importance of access to ICT by society as a way of having independent sources of information, sharing such information, and acquiring greater knowledge about leaders and governments [6,12,22,23,24]. In addition, access to ICT provides opportunities to express opinions, support social movements and even coordinate initiatives [16]. These authors support the existence of a strong linear relationship between the degree of Internet penetration in a given country and the current social movements.

In this manner, the technological context is used in the conceptual model for definition of the degree of Internet penetration in a given country. In preparing this construct, an international index can be used covering aspects such as: degree of territorial Internet signal coverage via the telecommunications infrastructure; degree of openness of the regulatory framework by means of universal access policies, especially for economically prejudiced people; degree of digital education of society such that individuals can exercise their civic rights independently and autonomously via the Internet.

The International Telecommunication Union Development Index [25], more commonly known as the ICT Development Index of the International

Telecommunication Union (ITU) - the UN specialized agency for information and communication technologies - is an international index that takes into account the above aspects. Therefore, it might be used (among others) as a *próxis* for measuring this construct.

#### **4.1.2. Political Context**

Based on the studies of several authors [26,27,28,29,30], the political context of a country, namely its degree of democracy, influences the social movements that take place there. Therefore, it is relevant to analyze the political context associated with the degree of democratic freedom in a given country. Thus, when preparing this construct, an international index can also be used covering aspects such as: breadth of the electoral process; degree of independence and representativeness of Powers; degree of freedom of speech and press; degree of protection of human rights; degree of social participation.

Thus, the index of democracy compiled by The Economist (Democracy Index) [31] might be used (among others) as a *próxis* for measuring this construct, as it assesses democracy (or lack thereof) in 167 countries on a regular basis.

#### **4.1.3. Socio-Economic Context**

For several academics [12,32,33,34,35], the socio-economic conditions of a country interfere directly in the collective actions of its citizens, who express their complaints and/or conceptualize their participation in social movements, inviting others to join them. Thus, the socioeconomic context – that defines the economic conditions that influence the quality of life of society in a given country – is also used in the proposed conceptual model. In the creation of this construct, an international index might be used to assess aspects such as: degree of economic activity relating to the production of goods and services and degree of distribution of income throughout society. Thus, the Human Development Index (HDI) – a statistical tool used to measure the overall development of a country in its social and economic dimensions – might be used (among others) as a *próxis* for measuring this construct [36].

That index sets out to measure the development of a country in accordance with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The calculation of same combines four main indicators: life expectancy for health; expected years of schooling; average years of schooling for education; and gross national income per capita for the standard of living.

## **4.2 Instrumental Factors**

Based on the analysis of the extant literature about the subject addressed in this paper, one can also realize the importance of instrumental factors on the using of social media on popular movements. These instrumental factors in the conceptual model are those considered closest to the movements per se. They are specific moderating factors, which may help to reveal the evolution and dynamics of social movements mediated by social media.

By using the literature review, the following factors can be considered to be instrumental: the agenda of claims; the traditional media; the repression of the demonstration; and the international repercussion, as explained below.

#### **4.2.1 Agenda of Claims**

Social movements occur for various reasons, such as political, social, and economic claims, which reveal the hope for new eras of self-determination after the struggle, demonstrations, and riots [35]. In addition to the increasing dissatisfaction with the dictatorial regimes, youth unemployment, corruption, poverty, inflation, social exclusion, and violent repression are among the main reasons for the revolts [35].

The beginning of movements on the Internet occurs as a result of existing economic, political, and social conditions [12]. In other words, the agenda arises from the moment citizens, who are either dissatisfied with the economic and social conditions and/or with repression, express their indignation via social networks, or when indignation is provoked by some image showing repression that spreads rapidly via social media and, in the current Internet jargon, 'goes viral.' [12]

In turn, one points out that the concerns of the people are shared by means of tools (platforms like Facebook and Twitter) that increase the intensity of social connection, thereby fomenting social movements [37]. Furthermore, an increase in the intensity of information flow (the number of times that people listen to the issues) and in the emotional intensity (how individuals experience the perception of events) lead to an increase in the likelihood of radicalization [38]. Thus, there is a strong connection between social media and the agenda of claims of the movements.

#### **4.2.2 Traditional Media**

Traditional media which performs the mediation of reality by means of formal journalism – collecting and disseminating information on events, within and beyond national borders – suffered from the inversion in the flow of news [39]. Social media with input from the public began to influence the content of the traditional media, which transmitted information on the manifestos, scheduling of gatherings, and images and videos taken during the protests [40].

One highlights the fact that during the social movements, as participation and trust of the population increased in relation to the news posted on social media, public trust in the traditional media vehicles diminished [37]. A search then began for information on social media (videos, photos, and declarations) that did not appear to be edited and that had been obtained by ordinary people. This established an inversion in the flow of news, where content and/or the agenda of claims produced by the public, which were posted on social media, were reproduced in the traditional media. Thus, the traditional communication media began to use information available in the social media to establish the agendas of their news [37].

Interestingly, those who do not yet have access to social media take advantage of the traditional media, such as newspapers, magazines and television, to get information on the social movements. Moreover, public acts gain visibility through media coverage and give the participants added incentive to stage further demonstrations [41].

### 4.2.3 Repression of Demonstrations

When there is suppression of protests, either by the government or by the media, social media is increasingly used for sharing text, video, audio, and photos of the events. A quest for the legitimation of the movements with the support of the population has been detected. The evidence of truculent oppression leads to heavier traffic on social media, with numerous shared photos and videos, accompanied by indignant texts posted by the population [42]. Besides, when repression is related to social media, as was the case in Egypt, ironically this action can exacerbate the revolt and make the citizens angrier, thus promoting greater interaction between them and leading them to seek new hybrid communication tactics to overcome the barriers imposed by the repressive government [43].

### 4.2.4 International Repercussion

In their studies, several authors stress the strong ties between new technologies and the international political world, highlighting the dissemination and monitoring of news through social media to promote the spread of ideas and tactics for protest swiftly and efficiently across national borders [44,45,46]. Thanks to network technology, the mobilizations can achieve transnational scale in record time [47]. Moreover, digital tools, including networks and mobile technology, are evidence of a snowball effect, which is only possible because of the structure and design of modern digital communications that transcend the traditional geopolitical boundaries [48].

As a result of the aforementioned analysis, the reference sources that have supported the choice of both the structural and instrumental factors, as well as their components, are presented in a consolidated way in Figures 1 and 2 below.

<b>Structural Factors</b>	<b>Reference Sources</b>
Technological Context	[6,7,26,27,28]
Political Context	[26,27,28,29,30]
Socio-Economic Context	[12,32,33,34,35]

**Fig. 1.** Reference Sources for the Structural Factors



<b>Instrumental Factors</b>	<b>Reference Sources</b>
List of Claims	[12,14,35,38]
Traditional Media	[39,41]
Repression of Demonstrations	[42,43]
International Repercussion	[44,45,46,47,48]

**Fig. 2.** Reference Sources for the Structural Factors

#### **4.3 Exploratory Conceptual Model of Influence of the Use of Social Media in Social Movements**

From the structural and instrumental factors explained above, an exploratory conceptual model of influence of the use of social media in social movements can therefore be proposed, as shown in Figure 3.

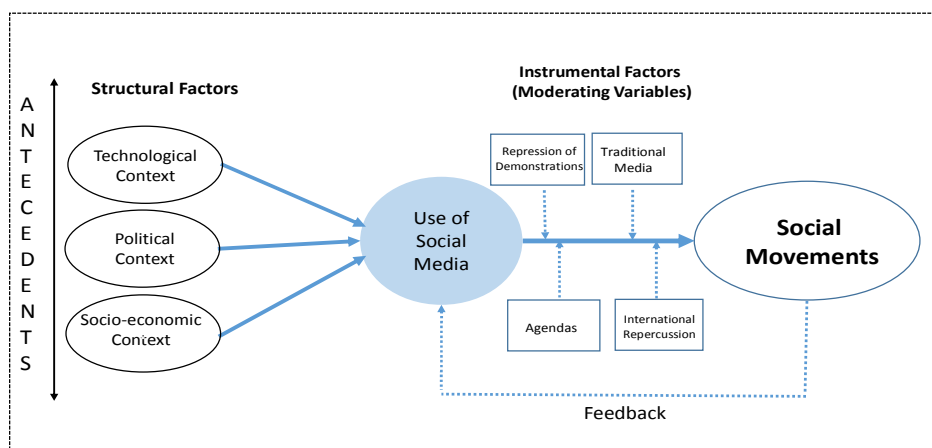
According to the proposed exploratory model, the analysis of social movements in each country must consider the dynamics of the sundry structural factors, namely the technological, political, and socio-economic scenarios, as well as their modification over the course of time. For example, in the case of the technological context, an increasing trend in the degree of Internet penetration in a country signifies greater access to information. Thus, with access to ICT, citizens acquire information, self-organization and self-mobilization spontaneously that they did not previously have [12]. In the case of the political context, by using, for instance, the democracy index of The Economist, it is possible to evaluate a country according to the following indicators: "full democracy," "imperfect democracy," "hybrid regime", and "authoritarian regime" [36]. Moreover, one can analyze the regression, progression or stalemate of the country's democracy index, in addition to considering the causes for this. These include: poor economic performance; decreased public trust in political institutions; increased violence and drug trafficking; democratically-elected leaders replaced by technocrats; among others [36].

In the case of the socio-economic context, the classification of the country in relation to its Human Development Index, for instance, makes it possible to analyze its evolution or involution, and compare it with that of other countries where there were also social movements mediated by ICT. The decrease of this index may signify increased unemployment among young people, increased levels of poverty and violence, which can lead to the indignation of citizens and demonstrations on the Internet in response to the prevailing economic, political, and social conditions in the country [12].

With respect to the instrumental factors, it is necessary to analyze to what extent these specific items – namely the agenda of claims, traditional media, repression of demonstrations, and international repercussion – contribute to the increased dissemination of social movements via the social network.

These instrumental factors are relevant, since it has been realized from the literature review that the evolution of social demonstrations occurs in an interactive manner. That is, they begin with specific agendas aired in minor protests, which increase in size as they suffer repression and/or suffer repercussions in the media [45,46,47], until

they become widespread protests with international repercussions. This process of evolution of social movements occurs as an escalating force driven by social media. In other words, the interactions increase in line with the way that these factors interact with the main players in the demonstrations, and so on [14].



**Fig.3.** Exploratory Conceptual Model of the Influence of Social Media Use in Social Movements

In this context, the occurrence of a feedback process is detected in which the social movements increasingly foster the use of social media. This, in turn, is configured and reconfigured by the information disseminated among the players, namely the demonstrators, thereby providing feedback for the next social protests, such as, for example, the sharing of actions in the protests and dissemination of agendas.

## 5 Final Remarks

This theoretical paper proposed an exploratory conceptual model in order to evaluate how the use of social media influences the social movements of a country, by considering its degree of Internet penetration, the maturity of its democracy, and the socio-economic conditions of its citizens. Thus, the influence of the use of social media can be evaluated by assessing the technological, political, and socio-economic scenarios. These contexts, identified in the literature review on social movements and social media, are the macro elements that are proof of the living conditions in general and socio-political activity in the country and are therefore considered to be the structural factors.

In addition to the structural factors, one was identified from the literature review the need to use elements inherent to the movement per se, acting as specific moderators that can assist in understanding the evolution and dimension of social movements via social media. These elements are considered to be instrumental factors, namely agenda of claims, traditional media, repression of demonstrations, and international repercussion.

Thus, the proposed exploratory conceptual model might enable analysis of the influence of the use of social media in social movements in order to identify possible scenarios where demonstrations tend to evolve, scrutinizing their antecedents and

possible causes, and establishing if there is a pattern in the emergence of these social movements mediated by social media.

Lastly, as this is an exploratory and theoretical paper, further research must test the proposed conceptual model by means of analysis of social movements mediated by ICT that have occurred in different political, socio-economic, and technological scenarios.

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<sup>1</sup> A definition of Social Media can be found at <http://webtrends.about.com/od/web20/a/social-media.htm>, accessed on March 10, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> A definition of Social Movement can be found at <https://www.ebscohost.com/uploads/imported/thisTopic-dbTopic-1248.pdf>, accessed on May 25, 2015.