Conference Presentation

Designing Social Media using Social Media: Lessons from a Syrian Community

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Reference

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Designing Social Media using Social Media: Lessons from a Syrian Community

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Abstract
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Prologue
In early 2011, after following the escalation of the Tunisian and the Egyptian uprisings, the eyes of Syrians were turned south: small protests were starting in the cities of Daraa and Damascus. Prior to this there had been a significant increase in online activism, mainly by bloggers and Tweeters who shared their opinions highlighting a group of issues: political prisoners, corruption of governance, lack of freedom of speech, and the lingering emergency law. During that time I watched a Facebook page created under the name of “The Syrian Day of Rage”, which called on several occasions for protesting on the “Day of Rage”, only to materialize when people took to the streets in...

1 Personal narration and the pronoun “I” refers to the first author, while the pronoun “we” refers to the research group.

2 This was the first title to be given to days of protest in the events. Subsequently, Facebook users participated in deciding the title of each Friday to follow according to ongoing events.
the city of Daraa after the arrest of young boys for writing anti-regime slogans on city walls. Numerous videos of protests were shot using mobile phones, uploaded to Youtube, and then shared on Twitter and Facebook. This practice became widespread with the escalation of protests and violence, and eventually became the main source of recorded footage that Arab and international media could obtain about the events.

There is a lot to be told about the numerous reasons and circumstances of the Syrian uprising. The idea that I want to highlight is that although social media played (and still play) a significant role in mediating popular action, technology needs always to be considered as a part within a larger set of conditions and social activity. This argument has been sounded in academia with the old debate on technological determinism, and publications in the field of Sociology of Technology [2], and it can also be observed in the discourse of local and cyber activists as well3. Such large-scale movement in Syria took place motivated by an accumulating history of corruption, governmental pressure, poverty, and deteriorating social conditions. Therefore, examining the role of technology in such context requires considering technology as an element integrated within an ecology of relations and interactions.

In addition to that, and when speaking about the design of social media, there is a challenge in finding an appropriate level of focus: an overly macro-level analysis risks missing local concrete details important for design, while an overly micro-level analysis risks being anecdotic, and beneficial only to the cases under study.

**Introduction**

In our research around the design of online tools to support social change and development, we attempt to balance the above considerations. Hence, we chose to adopt a community-based approach to inform design: we take a “local community” as a unit of analysis to study the appropriation of online tools, along with the relations, aspirations and local circumstances of community members. Thus, by participating and observing interactions between members of a local community and their use of technology, we aim at developing an account to inform the design of tools to further support members in leading their activities.

This level of focus allows us to narrow down our study to concrete use cases and stories, while being able to design for groups of people to support their initiatives. Another reason behind taking this approach comes from working in a development organization in Syria, and from interviewing local experts in development [4]. That work showed that initiatives that enabled local communities in Syria to participate in defining and implementing their own change process were more sustainable and had higher impact. In this project, we are currently in a transition phase where we intend to move towards design activities in the near future.

In the following, we describe the research context and our approach in observing the community. We then present a future opportunity to conduct participatory design of social media tools using the very tools that the community already appropriated. This entails that, instead of solely working to enlist local community members to participate in pre-configured design

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3 For instance, a term used by many Syrians on social media is “Facebook activist, to distinguish between people present online, and people who work on the ground. This appellation highlights how social media is a part of a much wider reality.
activities, we also learn to appropriate their ways of communication to use in the design process.

**Research context: CTVC**

Our ongoing research case is about a growing local volunteer community we will call by the acronym CTVC. It is mainly formed by (but not limited to) Syrian undergraduate students interested in exploring and using modern Internet tools to support learning and collaboration, and to contribute to enhancing the local realities in Syria and the Arab world. Members of CTVC hold several activities, including: weekly presentations to introduce ideas about collaboration and the Internet; collaborative workshops to learn new skills; and online discussions and resource sharing. The largest CTVC Facebook group hosts approximately 3000 online members, while participation in ground activities ranges between medium-size audiences (ca. 100 attendants) to small collaborative groups (5 to 15).

The community makes heavy use of online social media: they use Facebook groups to communicate, share resources, organize and announce future activities; they collaborate on Wiki pages to write online content; they write in blogs to report on ongoing activities and projects; and they use Youtube and Flickr for uploading videos and pictures of these activities.

**Research approach**

For studying CTVC, I am participating with community members on their Facebook group pages by taking part in their discussions. In the meanwhile I am collecting screenshots of ongoing online interaction and content that is a product of its members’ activities (e.g. blog posts, wiki articles, photos, videos). I am also in contact with several members over text-chat and email which helps in explaining the observed material.

For analyzing this data we are adopting a Grounded Theory approach [3] while benefitting from the work of the American sociologist Howard Becker to explore the data and guide our inquiry [1]. As opposed to deductive hypothesis-testing, this approach allows for theory to emerge from field observation, which encourages close listening to community members to deliver their vision into subsequent design activities. It also enables us to discover opportunities for appropriating our own methods along the way. In the following, we present one of these opportunities for conducting design activities by appropriating the same online social spaces used by community members.

“Meta” spaces

As mentioned above, CTVC members make heavy use of Facebook to communicate, share resources, organize and conduct future activities. The community has several sub-groups that all share the interest in modern Internet tools to support collaboration, but differ in their application of these tools according to their disciplinary focus [figure 1, 2]. Each of these groups has its own Facebook group page where members communicate and share [figure 3].

From observing the CTVC community and its online activity during the past few months, it became increasingly evident that there was a common pattern in the way members manage the community: among the discussions, there are (almost) always discussion threads concerned with organization: "When are we..."
going to meet?"; "Who volunteers to take pictures in the presentation today?"; "I suggest that in the next week we collaborate on translating article X to Arabic". Some members of CTVC call these "meta discussions", and therefore we will use this term to describe them as well. It is also often the case that due to the frequent need to have "meta discussions" in a group, members would create a new "meta" Facebook group to host discussions around organization and decision making.

"Meta" spaces are also common when looking at other online collaborative platforms. In Wikipedia, a "talk" page is associated with every article where contributors can discuss developing the article and controlling its quality. This includes coordinating edits, requesting supporting references and referring to guidelines [6].

Using Meta Spaces for Collaborative Design
Since discussions on meta spaces cover organization and decision making, then this could also include discussions around future design. This becomes clearer when we consider design discussions as "meta" discussions. Indeed, when conducted with community members, the design of social media can be considered as a process of reflexive decision making, concerned with changing and tweaking the technical environment to support future social activity. As an example, in addition to the talk pages associated with Wikipedia articles, the Wikimedia foundation has a "meta" wiki to enable the community to collaborate on coordination and documentation in addition to planning and analysis of future Wikimedia activities [5]. In CTVC we can see a similar pattern, where the same social platform (Facebook) used to support ongoing community activity is used to discuss its future appropriation and design. In fact, CTVC members already have two Facebook group pages to discuss the future design of a new social platform that would better support their work in ways that Facebook does not satisfy [figure 4].

We begin to see that community members in CTVC (and in other communities collaborating on social media) continuously develop their norms and channels of communication, and this includes creating meta spaces to discuss organization and make decisions. The necessity and existence of such meta spaces in CTVC presents an opportunity to collaborate on future design. Using such ways of communication adapted by community members themselves, we hope that this would both encourage members to participate and allow us for adapting collaborative design methods appropriate for their local context. We therefore intend to join these meta spaces to collaborate with the community on designing future social tools.

References