

# The dangers of social media revolt

Dissidents using Facebook and Twitter have been traced and arrested by authoritarian governments.

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*While social media played a crucial role in Egypt's uprising, government phishing schemes may have compromised the Facebook accounts of dissidents in Azerbaijan and beyond*

Since the term "Twitter revolution" was coined in the summer of 2009 to describe the Iranian Green Movement's use of the microblogging site, the nomenclature has been used in an unfortunate manner, applied to any sort of use of such tools during times of protest.

But while Twitter, Facebook, and even Google Docs were used in the recent revolts in Tunisia and Egypt, most experts agree that they are tools, not catalysts for revolution.

Nevertheless, praise has been disproportionately bestowed upon these Silicon Valley giants by mainstream media, with little mention of the potential dangers of using such tools.

To find evidence of such risks, we need only look to Azerbaijan where, just last week, the moderator of a Facebook page calling for protest in the country was arrested, or to Tunisia, where dissidents' Gmail and Facebook accounts were phished by the government in the midst of the revolt.

## **Risky business**

More recently, Moroccans complained of having their Facebook accounts hacked, possibly by the government, or possibly by pro-monarchy forces.

Though some risks are inherent to the architecture and policies of social media tools--Facebook's "real name" rule, for example, or the lack of HTTPS across most sites--others are a matter of use, and a lack of forethought to the permanence of online postings.

Imagine for a moment that Egypt's protesters had not been successful in ousting Mubarak; the myriad photos, videos, and tweets posted by Egyptians, many with identifiable information, would remain online for the security service to pore through.

And with cameras omnipresent during protests, anyone who shows their face is at risk, as protesters learned after Burma's Saffron revolution: intelligence agents scrutinised citizen videos to track down participants.

But even those individuals who remain largely anonymous online run the risk of being tracked down for their activities. In 2008, a young Moroccan engineer by the name of Fouad Mourtada was arrested for impersonating one of the monarchy's princes, Moulay Rashid, on Facebook.

Facebook claimed they did not hand over the young man's information to authorities, which suggests that it was obtained through another method, most likely deep packet inspection, a technique common in China and Iran.

### **Sketchy friends**

One of the most easily-avoided risks is in a practice inherent to the concept of social media: making new friends. In the United States, creditors have taken note of users' willingness to meet new people online and have utilised sites like Facebook to befriend--and then track down--their clients.

Though many social media users are prone to accepting requests from people they may not know well, activists could be at a higher risk as they attempt to build up their networks for a cause.

Some, like *Net Delusion* author Evgeny Morozov, suggest that authoritarian regimes have the upper hand: In a chapter of his book entitled "Why the KGB wants you to join Facebook," Morozov cites the example of a Belarusian activist whose real-life activities (including travel and organisational connections) were easily gleaned by the KGB from his online presence.

Though Belarus--by all accounts an authoritarian regime with a history of spying on its citizens, online and off--may be an extreme example, the lesson is that average users are potentially putting themselves at risk every time they disclose an affiliation, post about a trip, or share a photo album.

But the potential risks of social media hardly outweigh the benefits, and for every phishing attempt or government spying case there is a success story of social media for activism: The Egyptian Facebook page that drew awareness to torture and mobilised thousands; the Syrian students whose cell phone videos of teachers abusing students led to the teachers' dismissal; every rabble-rousing campaign to free an imprisoned blogger.

Rather than discourage use of social media during times of protest, these cautionary tales should instead invoke greater awareness and lead to better education on the risks present, and better, safer practices.

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