

## The social media trap

*Past President Stuart Notholt urges caution in using social media sources to interpret world events.*

Perhaps one of the most poignant moments of the so-called ‘Arab Spring’ was the interview of a confused and dishelved young female activist, newly off the streets of Cairo, where she had been jostled and abused for her ‘un-Islamic’ dress by post-election revellers. “This is not the revolution we fought for,” she observed plaintively.

Quite so. The ‘Arab Spring’ has rapidly soured, and what elections there have been have scarcely produced encouraging results. In the absence of a broader civil society – a free and responsible press, property rights, and an impartial and effective justice system – ‘democracy’ becomes a mere mob headcount.

In Egypt, voters split more-or-less evenly between the victorious Islamist candidate and a representative of the supposedly discredited old regime. The naïve failure of Western governments to anticipate the likelihood of this outcome represents a major policy error that will come back to haunt us. They cannot even claim ignorance. Opinion polling in Egypt has always shown strong sentiment in favour of a stricter implementation of *sharia* law, for the destruction of Israel, of insane conspiracy theories surrounding the 9/11 attacks, and a viscerally hostile view of Americans, Jews, and the West in general. Why would we assume that those sentiments would not be reflected in the ballot box?

One reason has surely been the over-emphasis given to social media in our interpretation of the Arab Spring. Tweets and amateur video clips from Cairo’s Tahrir Square *appeared* to show young, educated and middle-class Egyptians demanding democratic rights from a tired authoritarian regime. Everyone wanted that to be true. It may even have *been* true, but we were unwilling or unable to see the bigger picture - quite literally.

Given the dangers of war zone reporting, it is entirely understandable that newsrooms would prefer to harvest on-the-spot news from sources that do not involve journalists getting shot or beaten up. And social media certainly has its own power – it is raw, immediate, passionate.

But it also creates its own hierarchy. Official pronouncements become tainted propaganda while activists’ real-time tweets carry an aura of authenticity. Secondly, in many war zones, social media remains largely an urban phenomenon. Cities such as Damascus, Tripoli or Aleppo have internet access and a concentration of activists armed with smart phones. Conflicts that do not have these advantages, for example in Burma, Sudan, or the eastern Congo, still struggle to make an equivalent impact, even though the scale of death and human misery is much greater.

Announcing his package of £5 million in ‘non-lethal’ aid to the Syrian opposition, Foreign Secretary William Hague specifically highlighted support to be given to Syrian ‘citizen journalists’ – bloggers and tweeters, in other words. Our Institute has in the past voiced its grave concerns over the ‘citizen journalist’ concept, posing as it does severe risks to the accuracy, validity and impartiality of news gathered from such sources, as well as to the physical safety of the citizens themselves. These issues will, of course, be hugely magnified in a civil war scenario. Estimating the size of a popular protest is a notoriously inexact science under ideal conditions, let alone when we are left to interpret a fragmentary video filmed while bullets are flying.

As ‘citizen journalism’, at least in Syria, now carries the official sanction of the UK government, it is absolutely essential that we see more discrimination, interpretation, and forensic work being done by newsgatherers on what may otherwise be unrepresentative incidents or simply creative propaganda.

To take just one example, the YouTube footage <[youtube.com/watch?v=mX1fWp1U2O0](http://youtube.com/watch?v=mX1fWp1U2O0)> purports to show Syrian rebels seizing Bab al-Hawa, a border crossing with Turkey. This event was reported worldwide as having major significance. Yet the flag they are burning is a Palestinian one, which makes no sense at all. So what was really going on? The most likely hypothesis is that the ‘rebels’ were not even Syrians, but foreign *jihadis* who did not know the difference between a Palestinian flag and a Syrian government one – an interpretation that places a dramatically different cast on the whole episode.

Sometimes it may also be necessary drill more deeply into the reports of our fellow journalists, even those on the spot. When, in March 2012, a massacre of civilians was allegedly committed by the *shabbiha* (militia gangs aligned to the Syrian government) in the town of Baba Amro, the BBC’s correspondent likened the attack to the Srebrenica massacre and the Rwandan genocide. Such imagery, as it was surely meant to, must invoke in the listener a horrified emotional response to the mass-murder of unarmed innocents. But neither comparison can possibly be accurate. What gave Srebrenica its specific horror was that it took place under the noses of UN peacekeepers in what was supposedly a safe haven. That was not the case in Baba Amro. Rwanda saw the attempted extermination of the Tutsi minority at the hands of the Hutu majority. But whatever else it may represent, the Syrian regime is not a majority ethnic group suppressing a minority. If anything, it is the opposition factions that are responsible for the violent persecution of Christians, Alawites and other minorities in the current civil war.

The comparisons to Bosnia and Rwanda are not only emotive, however. They are highly politically charged. Here we are hearing a barely subliminal call for Western intervention. The view that ‘the West’ cannot ‘stand idly by’ hovers just below the horizon the minute past horrors and policy failures are invoked. Has journalism, which, following Srebrenica, successfully helped mobilize public opinion in favour of military involvement in the Balkans, developed a taste for framing public policy? And, if so, is that a good thing?

Certainly, following the Bosnian intervention, and the even more marked use of atrocity propaganda in Kosovo, insurgents have come to understand very clearly the value of a few well-timed massacres in provoking the foreign intervention they desire. Something of the sort happened in Libya, with dramatic consequences for the trajectory of that conflict. We need to be very wary of this phenomenon. Insurgent movements are rarely comprised exclusively of angels, and just because a protest group is able to work a smart phone or set up a Facebook page does not necessarily mean that they are good democrats.

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