


Spring 2011

## #reformjo: Jordanian Tweets for Social Reform

Megan Daily  
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# **#reformjo: Jordanian Tweets for Social Reform**

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for:

Jordan: Modernization and Social Change

School for International Training

Spring 2011

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Student: Megan Daily

Signature: Megan Daily

Date: May 7<sup>th</sup> 2011

### ISP CODES

Regional Studies: Middle East      521

Mass Communications                      111

Political Science                              523

### Keywords

Social Media, Twitter, Social Movement, Social Reform

*"We are today abetted by the enormously encouraging democratic field of cyberspace, open to all users in ways undreamed of by earlier generations either of tyrants or of orthodoxies."*

-Edward Said

*"Social Media are the machine guns of social agitation"*

-Adam Gopnik

*"Suddenly it seems that all the world is a-Twitter."*

-Newsweek

## **Abstract**

### **#reformjo: Jordanian Tweets for Social Reform**

Megan Daily

What can be said in 140 characters or less? During what has been dubbed the “Arab Spring”, Twitter has been heralded as the catalyst that sparked revolutions. Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Bahrain and others have utilized this microblogging site to express opinions, share links, and inform the world what is happening. In the past few months, the number of Jordanians on Twitter has risen sharply. During the course of my research, I aimed to discover if there were “elite users”, people whose opinions had more weight or significance in this dialogue as the Twitter community tends to develop with a distinct hierarchy of leaders and followers. Interviews combined with focus groups were used to first gain a general impression of the current dialogue then to obtain an in-depth, nuanced view. My findings indicate in Jordan, the newness of the medium is hindering the community on Twitter that is actively seeking change through a tweet dialogue. Jordan does not have a precedent or diversified base to build upon for Twitter to play a tangible role in reformation at this current time. In addition, Jordanian college-aged students whom many herald as the drivers of social change are not using Twitter. The platform of Twitter users needs to expand to include more of the population for a fruitful discussion of social change to incur. While 140 characters themselves cannot reform a society, those proclaiming the message can take strides.

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## Terminology

Twitter, is a created space that requires its own “twitter-specific” vocabulary. To completely describe this Internet forum some commonly accepted terms created by users will be utilized. Definitions were adopted from the Twitter Glossary when possible.

- **Twitterverse**-the cyberspace area of Twitter, encompassing users and Tweets.
- **Tweep**-an account holder on Twitter, also known as Twitterers or Tweeter.
- **Tweet**-a message posted on Twitter containing less than 140 characters.
- **Follow**-to follow someone means to subscribe to their Tweets or updates.
- **Mention**-mentioning another user in a Tweet by including the @ sign followed by their username. This serves to alert the other user directly of something.
- **Retweet**-the act of forwarding another user’s Tweet to all of your followers.
- **Hashtag**-the # symbol is used to denote keywords or topics in a Tweet. People use hashtags before keywords in their Tweet to categorize them and for Tweets to show more easily in the Twitter Search. For example in the following Tweet #ReformJO, #Amman, and #JO are all hashtags:



**SuzieAlkhatib** سوزان

"The greatest gift we can give to our children is to raise them in a culture of peace." #ReformJO #Amman #JO

10 hours ago

## Introduction

Twenty-one years ago, Ronald Reagan proclaimed, “The Goliath of totalitarianism will be brought down by the David of the microchip”.<sup>1</sup> Even social experts such as Rupert Murdoch yielded to the digital temptation conveying, “Advances in the technology of telecommunications have proved an unambiguous threat to totalitarian regimes everywhere,” he claimed.<sup>2</sup> The world has not experienced a period of political unrest like the Arab Spring of 2011, since the Berlin Wall fell in 1989. While the existence of the Internet does not guarantee more freedom and democracy, this technology enables for faster and cheaper communication and coordination. The Middle East is changing, regimes have fallen in Tunisia and Egypt, governments are being challenged in Bahrain, Libya, and Syria, and protests have erupted across the region.

Seven years ago Jack Dorsey sent the world’s first tweet, “just setting up my twttr.”<sup>3</sup> Twitter comes under heavy fire for its frivolousness and celebrity usage, for example Paris Hilton recently tweeted, “No no I didn’t go to England, I went to London”.<sup>4</sup> However, when applied to the correct circumstances such as an uprising in the Middle East, Twitter can be a valuable tool. In 2009, the application of Twitter for democratic and freedom purposes was first documented in Iran and was heralded as the “Twitter Revolution”.<sup>5</sup> Pick up a newspaper and

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<sup>1</sup> Evengeny Morozov, “Texting towards Utopia: Does the Internet Spread Democracy.” *Boston Review*, April 2009. <http://bostonreview.net/BR34.2/morozov.php>.

<sup>2</sup> Evengeny Morozoy, “Texting towards Utopia: Does the Internet Spread Democracy.”

<sup>3</sup> “Are you a Tweeter or Twitter skeptic?” *The Guardian*, March 2011. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/mar/21/twitter-five-year-anniversary>.

<sup>4</sup> Kimberly Nordyke, “Hollywood’s Ten Most Stupid Tweets” *The Hollywood Reporter*, March 11, 2011, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/hollywoods-10-stupid-tweets-167752>.

<sup>5</sup> Jared Keller, “Evaluating Iran’s Twitter Revolution,” *The Atlantic*, June 18, 2010, <http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2010/06/evaluating-irans-twitter-revolution/58337/>.



there will be some comment about how Twitter and other social media sites have brought freedom to the oppressed. An anonymous blogger described it as, “You can feel real-time events coursing through this tiny data stream. Reuters can’t keep up. Even Al Jazeera can’t. The information isn’t vetted, I can’t tell if it’s right, but I can feel the pulse of change as I search on #Libya.”<sup>6</sup>

While this may be a revolution on Twitter, I make the argument that this is not a *Twitter Revolution*. Adam Gopnik, social commentator for the New Yorker, has asserted that, “Twitter, is the current manifestation of such ways of spreading the word as pamphlets used during the American Revolution, faxes during the Eastern European uprisings of the 1990s and Chinese rebellions of the 1980s and cassette tapes during the 1978-79 Iranian uprisings”.<sup>7</sup> However, that being stated, Twitter is a *tool* for people who are *causing* revolutions, and is not in of itself a revolution. For example, need to be able to instantly update fellow activists about what streets are being blocked off by the police? Tweet it. Want to show a video of police beating a protester? Tweet it. Want to establish the tone of dialogue in your country? If you have enough followers and are respected, tweet it.

While the Internet is becoming more common in Jordan, there is still a slight lag. Internet services are not a necessity and are still somewhat viewed as a luxury service. While the upper and upper-middle class have nearly all joined the online community, it is not a universal commodity. However, the government is pushing for countrywide usage of the Internet.<sup>8</sup> For

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<sup>6</sup> “At the Speed of Twitter: The Revolution Spreads to Libya, Bahrain, Yemen,” *The Wrap Media*, February 20, 2011 <http://www.thewrap.com/media/print/24896>.

<sup>7</sup> Rife, Susan L. “Twitter Doesn’t Create Revolutions Malcolm Gladwell says.” *Herald Tribune*, March 21, 2011. <http://www.heraldtribune.com/article/20110321/ARTICLE/110329911?Title=Twitter-doesn-t-create-revolutions-Malcolm-Gladwell-says>.

<sup>8</sup> Ghazel, Mohammad. “New ICT strategy to build on achievements of previous plan –

Twitter to be an effective means of communication and political forum there has to be a certain preexisting framework; there needs to be a large and diverse population using Twitter.

This transition from the majority being offline to now gaining Internet access is creating a highly evolving Jordanian Online culture. This shift is easily witnessed in Twitter by the user number statistic's recent explosion. In Jordan, the amount of people on Twitter is hard to triangulate, however, rough estimates place the total number of users between 4,000-5,000 with half of the created accounts being inactive.<sup>9</sup> This trend suggests that people are creating accounts to be a part of the popular movement. This has polarized the people who have joined Twitter. Either they truly desire reform and social advancement or they have merely joined to be a part of what is currently all the rage. This is a weakness of Jordan's Twitter, because those who want social change have to discuss and further their cause and try to "catch up" social users to join the cause.

Before the Arab Revolts in Tunisia and Egypt, authorities did not pay attention to what was being tweeted. However, current events have not just thrust Twitter in a media spotlight but have validated the usage of the site as a tool for social change. There has been a scramble to educate and inform police and government officials on the usage, purpose and application of Twitter. This new attention from authority figures could be viewed as a form of oppression as with increased surveillance, censorship often follows. However, the government cannot stop tweets and dialogue. The government can now feel the pulse of the country; Twitter can be viewed as another means to communicate people's demands to the government.

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minister," *The Jordan Times*, April 19 2011, <http://www.jordantimes.com/?news=36667>.

<sup>9</sup> Naffa Imad, "How Many Users in #jo." January 2011, <http://www.twitlonger.com/show/8e10m0>.

Jordan has many voices urging the government for changes, however there is no united base or foundation. Outside of cyberspace there is a well-known cultural divide between Jordanian-Jordanians and Palestinian-Jordanians. This divide has also made the online transition and manifested on social media sites. While this divide might be more apparent on Facebook, where Palestinians have created pages and groups that call for the Third Palestinian Intifada, there is a growing contingency on Twitter.<sup>10</sup> While these users are diversifying the population of Jordan's Twittersverse, they are not interested in promoting a Jordanian cause but are rather focused on issues across the Dead Sea. Not to say that this in of itself is a bad thing, or to suggest that the Palestinian issue is not important but this dilutes the concentration of Jordanians tweeting to improve Jordan. Numerically speaking Jordan is a small country with a limited population and can ill afford to lose numbers when it is pushing for change.

Twitter is evolving and expanding in Jordan. The number of users is growing which is leading to more people being a part of a national discourse. Since Twitter is still in its start up phase in this country and not viewed as a tool but more of a new commodity, there will be a delay in activities correlating into results. The tracks are being laid for Twitter to be used in tandem with the drive for change, but as of now Twitter's usefulness seems to be stalling.

There has been little qualitative research conducted on the subject of Twitter. In addition, there has not been any research completed that explored Jordanian usage of the site. However, my study was mainly exploratory so the focus was width not depth. I do extend the hypothesis that Jordanians are utilizing the Two Step theory of communication, which was first presented in 1944 in *The People's Choice*, as an integral part of discourse and organization.

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<sup>10</sup> Nicole Neroulis, "Facebook shuts down fan page for 'inciting violence against the Jews.'" *USA Today*, March 30, 2011. <http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2011-03-30-facebook-Jewish-Israel-30-ST-N.htm>.

## Literature Review

Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet in *The People's Choice*, a 1944 study focused on the process of decision-making during a Presidential election campaign, presented the two-step flow of communication hypothesis. They originally hypothesized that there would be strong evidence of the media's influence on voting decisions. However, they discovered that informal, personal contacts were able to exude more influence than exposure to radio or newspapers themselves. With this data, Lazarsfeld and Elihu Katz produced the two-step flow of mass communication.

This theory avows that information from the media moves in two distinct phases. First, opinion leaders, individuals who pay close attention to mass media and its messages receive the information. Opinion leaders pass on their own interpretations in addition to the actual media content. These opinion leaders are able to qualify and spread not only the actual media content but also their own judgments and qualifications. Opinion leaders are quite adept and capable in changing their followers' opinions to be similar to their own. The term "personal influence" was coined to refer to the process of intervening between the media's direct message and the audience's ultimate reaction.<sup>11</sup> This created the hypothesis; "ideas often flow *from* radio and print *to* the opinion leaders and *from* them to the less active sections of the population."<sup>12</sup>

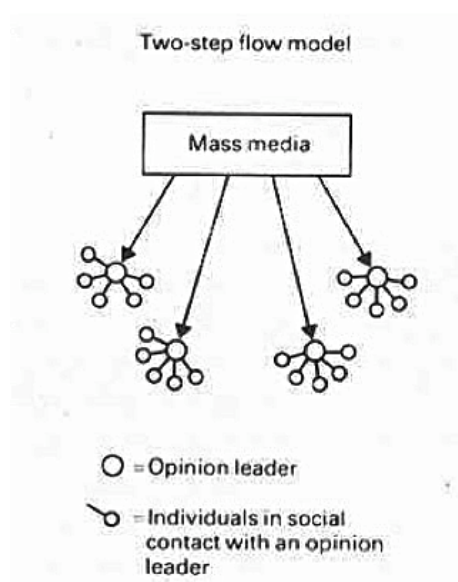
In the 2011 paper, "Who says What to Whom on Twitter", there is ample support for the Two-Step theory of mass communication, "almost half the information that originates from the media passes to the masses indirectly via a diffuse intermediate layer of opinion leaders, who

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<sup>11</sup> P.F. Lazarsfeld, B. Berelson, & H. Gaudet, *The people's choice: How the voter makes up his mind in a presidential campaign*. (Columbia University Press. New York: 1944), 65

<sup>12</sup> P.F. Lazarsfeld, B. Berelson, & H. Gaudet, 151.

although classified as ordinary users, are more connected and more exposed to the media than their followers”.<sup>13</sup> Fifty percent of the current material on Twitter, the tweets, comes from 0.05% of all users.<sup>14</sup> This statistic demonstrates that the content existing on Twitter is actually a repetition of a handful of “elite users”.<sup>15</sup> On Twitter, there is not specific designation for an “elite user”. I will be using the definition of an “elite user” as brought up in the 2011 Twitter study. An elite user, fits into one of four categories celebrity, media, organization, or blogger. Within this breakdown of elite users, they all share commonalities; increased activity and many followers. This breakdown is visually presented down (on a small scale) in this conceptual model:<sup>16</sup>



This model shows how news gets diffused to the greater population. On Twitter, however, there is not a cap on the number of followers one can have. For instance, Wael Al-Abbas one of the more prolific Tweepers in Egypt has upwards of 10,000 followers. Granted not

<sup>13</sup> Hofman, Jake M., Mason, Winter A., Watts, Duncan J., Wu, Shaomei. *Who Says What to Whom on Twitter*. 2011, 1.

<sup>14</sup> Hofman, Jake M., Mason, Winter A., Watts, Duncan J., Wu, Shaomei, 3

<sup>15</sup> Hofman, Jake M., Mason, Winter A., Watts, Duncan J., Wu, Shaomei, 3

<sup>16</sup> E. Katz, & P. F. Lazarsfeld, *Personal Influence*, (New York: The Free Press. 1955), 65.

all of the people following him are Egyptians, fellow-revolutionaries, but his voice is carried to over 10,000 people in the first wave, then there is no telling to how many times he will be retweeted and the population exposed to his message goes up exponentially. This wide diffusion of his message occurred even as the Egyptian authorities were cutting off Internet access and shutting down satellite televisions. However, it is nearly impossible to stop a Tweet. Tweets are able to go out over two networks, the Internet and SMS, the network cell phones use for text messaging.<sup>17</sup> This makes it nearly impossible for a government to be able to block them. Tweets can also be received and read on practically anything with a screen and a network connection. This allows Twitter to be highly mobile and fast. While other networking sites like Facebook are being used they do not have the capacity to broadcast information in the same manner as Twitter. Andrew Sullivan, a blogger for The Atlantic, comments on the adaptability of Twitter:

That a new information technology could be improvised for this purpose so swiftly is a sign of the times. It reveals in Iran what the Obama campaign revealed in the United States. You cannot stop people any longer. You cannot control them any longer. They can bypass your established media; they can broadcast to one another; they can organize as never before.<sup>18</sup>

Typically how a government censors Web content is to ban specific URLs or particular IP addresses. This enables them to ban the Facebook IP, Twitter IP or a Blog IP. Twitter is interesting because most people who use the service do not actually use the website.<sup>19</sup> Most

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<sup>17</sup> Lev Grossman, "Iran Protests: Twitter, the Medium of the Movement," *Time Magazine*, June 17, 2009, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1905125,00.html>.

<sup>18</sup> Andrew Sullivan, "The Revolution will be Twittered" *The Atlantic*, June 19<sup>th</sup> 2010, <http://andrewsullivan.theatlantic.com/the-daily-dish/2009/06/the-revolution-will-be-tweeted-1.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Gaurav Mishra, "Iran's 'Twitter Revolution'—myth or reality?," *World Focus* (blog), June 18, 2009, <http://worldfocus.org/blog/2009/06/18/irans-twitter-revolution-myth-or-reality/5869/>.

people who want to tweet use a Twitter application like Tweetdeck, Digsby, Twitterfeed or Twitterholic. These are only the four most popular Twitter applications out of thousands of possible choices.<sup>20</sup> In addition to the ability to use an application, Twitterers can text message their tweets onto the Twitterverse.<sup>21</sup> Even though a government has the potential to block twitter.com, it is almost impossible to block every avenue in which a tweet can be broadcast.

## **Methodology**

Twitter is an organic website that changes not just daily but arguably, by the minute. My hopes were that interviews and focus groups would provide a holistic sense of the Jordanian twitterverse. Trying to grasp a current picture I interviewed three elite users in Jordan. I chose a blogger, a media service and an organization founder. These three individuals represent the very active segment of Jordanian users, who are trying to enact change with help from tweeting.

I was somewhat surprised at the ease of finding people to interview. Using my Twitter account I was able to observe the current Jordanian Twitter conversation. After reading and following the discourse I picked out a few names of people who dominated the conversation. Then it was a simple matter of becoming a follower and them following me. After mutual following, I asked for an interview via private messaging. People want to talk about how they are using Twitter to try and change society. It was fortunate that I was able to get the attention of someone with a lot of connections to help me through the process.

All of my interviews were conducted in English and for the most part went smoothly. Instead of using the same identical survey for every person, I used the same starting questions

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<sup>20</sup> Leena Rao, "The Top 21 Twitter Application (According to Compete)," *Tech Crunch*, February 19, 2009, <http://techcrunch.com/2009/02/19/the-top-20-twitter-applications/>.

<sup>21</sup> Andy Carvin, "Welcome to the Twitterverse," *NPR*, February 28, 2009, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=101265831>.

and built off that common base. In order to get the best possible data I reformulated and rewrote my interview questions to cater to each person I was interviewing. Each person I interviewed had a slight different area of expertise. Although this method ensured that I would sometimes cover different ideas in each interview, I made sure to ground each question with the intent of discovering how Jordanians use Twitter and if there were users whose opinion carried more weight. I was fortunate to be able to interview the high caliber of people as I did, however, the one true “elite user” in Jordan was out of my reach to interview.

The one person on Twitter who is followed by universally every Jordanian user is Queen Rania. Some of the people I talked to only joined the site to be able to follow the Queen’s tweets. While interviewing her would have been an amazing experience, it would have only satisfied half of my research goal. Hearing the Queen’s view of the application’s of Twitter would have helped my data collection, however, it is highly unlikely that she would openly voice any proposed changes to the current government structure.

To bolster my results, I also wanted to try and get a sense of the direction Jordanian Twitter was heading. Even though it is nearly impossible to accurately predict a social movement’s future development, I felt comfortable enough assuming that the future of the movement will be in the youth’s hands, as is often the case with technological mediums like Twitter. Social movements tend to rely heavily on the activism of the younger age demographics mainly college-aged cohorts. In order to create a focused subject group who are most readily available, the research was conducted with the participation of Jordanian college students ranging from 19 to 23 years of age who were currently enrolled in the University of Jordan. In total 15 people took part in my focus groups, the members of my group were engaged by my project advisor and academic support staff at the School for International Training. While these



fifteen voices do not represent the entirety of the population that I was interested in and I run there is the risk of generalization, the opinions voiced were of great variance and value.

I ran into some problems with my focus groups. In the first focus group, I only had one student who had a Twitter account and another member did not know what Twitter was. However, even the lack of information about my subject was valuable information in and of itself. This focus group confirmed my beliefs that the majority of college-aged students were not active on Twitter. The second focus group was held during an American Literature class at the University of Jordan. This was a bigger sample and therefore increased the probability that some of the students would have Twitter accounts. More students did end up having Twitter accounts but I was still faced with a member or two of the group who was unsure of what Twitter application.

I was surprised at how many people I encountered whom did not know about Twitter. I had assumed that with the current magnitude of media attention focusing on the site that everyone would be familiar with its application. However, this was a gross overestimation taken on my part. Everyone had heard of the phrase “tweet” but were not exactly sure of what that constituted. This proved to be confusing initially because my focus group participants were able to incorporate correct terminology into our discussions, but when pressed did not conceptually understand definitions. Jordanians felt and expressed that they did not know how to use the site. Since, Twitter does not offer a user’s guide and encourages users to discover their own personal style with dealing in the twitterverse. This ambiguity is frustrating to a lot of new users and functions as a deterrent to some from joining.

I tried to cover different Jordanians' views from varied demographics. However, a gap in my research was that I mainly talked to upper-middle to upper-class people. At the University and online I was unable to find many people from a lower socio-economic class. This might be due to my lack of searching a wider area, but I also took into consideration that Internet access is not a necessary good but rather a luxury item.

Looking at the gender of my sample, I would evaluate my efforts to conduct research evenly fairly favorably. I interviewed two men and one woman and in my focus groups while one was predominantly female the other was almost entirely male. It is interesting that there have been studies about the gender breakdown of other social sites such as Facebook, but as to date there has not been a scientific breakdown of the ratio on Twitter. This stunted any further examination into the role that gender might play in tweets.

While examining the content on Twitter I ran into some initial problems with the language barrier. I am not sure of the exact breakdown of Arabic and English tweets, but there was enough Arabic tweets to make holes in my complete understanding of the conversation. I relied heavily on different online translation sites and whenever the message was still unclear I enlisted the help of a translator. While I am confident that I had a rudimentary understanding of what was being said, the language obstacle prevented me from a complete content analysis, as I had previously planned to conduct. Instead I decided to focus more on what the users and non-users in Jordan were saying about the site. If this project could have been expanded a more detailed analysis of the actual content of the tweets would be interesting.

Time also proved to be a constraining element. A proper comparison of Jordanian tweets and those of neighboring countries such as Egypt, Syria or Iraq would have been worthy of note.

Especially a comparison between the rhetoric used in Jordan tweets with that used in Egyptian tweets before protests and the eventual Egyptian revolution. However, due to time and language constraints I was unable to include this in my research.

Another problem that arose that was unforeseeable was the swing of public sentiment after the March 24<sup>th</sup> demonstrations in Amman Jordan. Before that demonstration, people were more open and willing to discuss political changes. However, the aftermath of the violent demonstration effectively gagged a lot of people's opinions. The overriding sentiment after the casualty was to loudly proclaim Jordan's unity and stability. While talks about change and political modifications did not cease, they became much more reserved.

With the media hype and exaltation of Twitter, the breaker of tyrants, it was also difficult to remain objective. I struggled in not glorifying the data that supported this claim. It is hard to separate the sensationalized name of Twitter with its actual reality. It would have been enjoyable to write a paper that completely flaunted some of the more exaggerated claims of a tweet's power. I constantly tried to check myself and read a variety of reviews, but that might be a slight bias in my work. The fact that I am an avid twitterer and enjoy the site might have colored my perception. As someone who has embraced this technology into my life I am inclined to view it favorably and as an affective medium through which to dialogue social reform.

## **Findings**

In person Mohammed Omar is soft-spoken and speaks with deliberation. However, in the online community Mohammed Omar has a loud passionate voice. His blog attracts upwards of 3,000 viewers on a daily basis. He was the first Arab blogger to use his own name on his blog

and now acts as a media watchdog in Jordan and is respected the world over.<sup>22</sup> Even though he is self-described as a man who stirs up controversial subjects and no one likes him, he has over 800 followers on Twitter.<sup>23</sup> Zeid abu-Odeh is the founder of Jordandays.tv, a live streaming media website, whose goal is to promote democratic awareness.<sup>24</sup> His website broadcasts political events, demonstrations, lectures, press conferences, etc. His experience in bringing current events to the public gives him insight into the current pulse and flow of the Jordanian reform movement. These two members of the twitterverse come from distinct sectors in Jordan and have considerable importance in the current dialogue.

Breaking down the Twitter scene in Jordan is important to establish how different factions are influencing the reform dialogue. There are four main categories of Twitter users, and one sub-category. The biggest and newest group of users is largely non-political and has probably decided to join Twitter to be a part of the popular trend. Their contributions to reform efforts are limited but they are important because they are at least privy to the ongoing talks. Then there is a growing group of “pro-government” or government agency twitterers. This division will be discussed in detail later, but in general, they tweet against any opposite opinion. The next group is comprised of the youth movement, like the March 24<sup>th</sup> protestors. They are the most active in political discussions.<sup>25</sup> The youth group is also split into two factions, those who live in Jordan and those who live abroad. Finally is what I have deemed the elite group. It provides a stable overarching view of the current state of Jordan and has defined ideas for the future direction of Jordan.

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<sup>22</sup> “Mohammed Omar: the first Arab blogger to use his own name,” *The Arab Press Network*, October 20 2009, <http://www.arabpressnetwork.org/articlesv2.php?id=3410>.

<sup>23</sup> Mohammed Omar, interview with the author, Amman, May 10, 2011.

<sup>24</sup> “About Us”, Jordan Days. Accessed April 20 2011, <http://www.jordandays.tv/>.

<sup>25</sup> Mohammed Omar, interview with the author, Amman, May 13, 2011.

Zeid abu-Odeh was one of the earlier Jordanians who activated a Twitter account. About two years ago, the Jordanian Twitter scene was just starting to form. Initially the members were from the more affluent sectors of society. This created a highly homogeneous ensemble that shared many common goals and background. Zeid now has been noticing the gradual shift, “We were like a small group, but now it is becoming crazy. [...] I don’t know if this is good for us, it stopped being as this group of people discussing issues. It has exploded to the masses”.<sup>26</sup> This budding group of new users is a somewhat polarized group, some do prove to have interesting new ideas but others indeed do just want to become a part of what is now popular. However, even those that do not initially join Twitter with the intent of promoting a cause are not in of themselves a lost cause. “It is important to try to influence those who may have just joined Twitter as a fad by tweeting at them what is going on. It is important to educate them, to enlighten them. To include everyone in the conversation.”<sup>27</sup> Even if sometimes it can become a “headache”.<sup>28</sup>

A few months ago, Jordanian intelligence and police agencies had no idea of Twitter, who was a tweep, or what a tweet was. However, two months ago the Chief of Police invited Mohammed Omar and thirty other Twitter users to a meeting. This was a government sponsored fact-finding session to help the intelligence agencies understand social media. Now, they have qualified people keeping up to date with the currents of Twitter and other social media sites. There is also been a formation of a committee devoted to *astroturfing*.

Astroturfing is a campaign of comments; it’s a tool to form the public opinion. So we now say that the government has virtual

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<sup>26</sup> Zeid abu-Odeh, interview with the author, Amman, May 13, 2011.

<sup>27</sup> Zeid abu-Odeh, interview with the author, Amman, May 13, 2011.

<sup>28</sup> Zeid abu-Odeh, interview with the author, Amman, May 13, 2011.

thugs. So they have their men on twitter, Facebook, on comments. It means that the government and the intelligence, the police are trying to, are learning from Egypt or Tunisia and are trying to fight us to stand against us on the internet before the people go after them<sup>29</sup>

This practice of “fake comments” causes some ideas to be buried under an avalanche of state approved information. In addition, the mukhabarat (secret police) is also monitoring material on social media sites more intently. Some subjects such as the Jordanian-Jordanian and Palestinian-Jordanian topic are taboo to talk about in an official sense and now are taboo to talk about in any social media sense.<sup>30</sup>

There are about thirty-to-forty users that are representing the March 24<sup>th</sup> movement now on Twitter. They are a somewhat new organization and are using Twitter to add their voice to the dialogue as a collective front. Also, the inner dialogue between the different members of the group provides for an unobtrusive look into the inner workings and philosophies of the members themselves and the group as a whole. This might be the most active segment of the Jordanian Twitterverse, they contribute around “twenty to thirty tweets an hour”.<sup>31</sup> The group also has an interesting dichotomy, because included in this segment is diasporas. There are people inside of Jordan and then there are people outside of Jordan tweeting as a collective unit. Those outside of Jordan have greater freedom voicing more extreme and controversial opinions. While there are no written codes about censorship inside Jordan, there is abundant self-censorship.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Mohammed Omar, interview with the author, Amman, May 13, 2011.

<sup>30</sup> Zeid abu-Odeh, interview with the author, Amman, May 13, 2011.

<sup>31</sup> Mohammed Omar, interview with the author, Amman, May 10, 2011.

<sup>32</sup> Mohammed Omar, interview with the author, Amman, May 10, 2011.

Mohammed Omar in addition to being a journalist and blogger, serves as an Internet critic. According to his statistics, last year only 300 articles had to be deleted from websites-mostly due to security reasons. However, there is “ample self-censorship” that helps keep everything in a realm that is deemed appropriate in Jordanian society. “The people censor themselves. Jordanian journalists will not tell you we are censored, because it is through our own doing”.<sup>33</sup> On Twitter, with the increased number of people online, a growing need for self-censorship has arisen. “I have noticed the impact of my tweets. I can create discussion”.<sup>34</sup> This feeling brings up two interesting aspects of Twitter. Firstly, that tweets can carry impact and the way that they convey a message is important. With such limited space for a message, every word counts and the right rhetoric must be used to have the biggest impact. In addition, this sentiment of being able to “create discussion” is a key factor in the development of Twitter as a successful tool of reform.

This “creating discussion” aspect of Twitter is still being developed in Jordan. Discussions are being had and led by elite members of the Twitterverse, however, they are not able to reach a large enough audience. The Two-Step theory hinges on being able to influence a wide audience. <sup>35</sup> Internet has only penetrated 27% of the Jordanian population.<sup>36</sup> At this current point in time, there is simply not enough access and Twitter accounts to truly test the capacity for the medium to display definitive characteristics of the Two-Step theory of mass communication. The framework is being formed however, and

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<sup>33</sup> Mohammed Omar, interview with the author, Amman, May 10, 2011.

<sup>34</sup> Zeid abu-Odeh, interview with the author, Amman, May 13, 2011.

<sup>35</sup> Stanley J. Baran, *Theories of Mass Communication*  
[http://highereducation.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/0767421906/student\\_view0/chapter12/glossary.html](http://highereducation.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/0767421906/student_view0/chapter12/glossary.html).

<sup>36</sup> “Wide World Internet Statistics” Miniwatts Marketing Group. 5 April 2011.  
<http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats5.htm>.

elite users are able to create discourse. However, they are mostly communicating with other elite users on Twitter. There needs to be growth of the “common user” to establish a sense of community on the Twittersverse. This could become a reality in the near future however, “Twitter for Jordanians is growing, increasing everyday, actually we have more than 2,000 tweets a day in Jordan”.<sup>37</sup>

### **Additional Findings**

In the course of my research, I came across some very interesting sub-findings. They did not directly relate however, to my main research question but they raise an interesting point that I had not previously considered. Through researching how breaking news and opinions were disseminated I became acutely aware of the current news gathering cycle. Fundamentally the news gathering process is changing. Twitter now can serve as a lightning rod alert system of current events.

Twitter and other social networking sites have the potential to revitalize the political sphere and create modes of communication that cannot be shaped exclusively by the nation state. Twitter has transformed the landscape of media production by changing how the world is alerted to breaking news. Anyone with a cell phone or Internet access can be the first to cover a groundbreaking story. The screen culture has inspired a revival of political activism.<sup>38</sup> According to Baroness Susan Greenfield, professor of pharmacology at Oxford and expert on the physiology of the brain, screen culture is, “a world of constant flux, of endless sound bites, quick

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<sup>37</sup> Mohammed Omar, interview with the author, Amman, May 10, 2011.

<sup>38</sup> Henry A. Giroux, “The Iranian Uprisings and the Challenge of the New Media: Rethinking the Politics of Representation,” *Fast Capitalism*, 5, no. 2, (2009), [http://www.uta.edu/huma/agger/fastcapitalism/5\\_2/Giroux5\\_2.html](http://www.uta.edu/huma/agger/fastcapitalism/5_2/Giroux5_2.html).



cuts and half-baked ideas. Nations don't stand alone but are massively interlinked to everything else; truth is not delivered by authors and authorities but is assembled by the audience".<sup>39</sup> The uprisings in 2011, exemplified how new electronic advances have challenged the state's ability to define borders and boundaries of what constitutes the very nature of political engagement.

Twitter is able to provide a feel for things on the ground. Users are able to upload pictures and videos to be transmitted online. Victor Herrero of USA Today wrote, "social networking tools such as Twitter, Facebook and some Google applications have been at the forefront of transmitting highly localized information such as finding family and friends, food and water, ways to get transportation..."<sup>40</sup> Twitter allowed for the creation of a mosaic of the human drama on the ground. Never before has a free application empowered such a diverse cross-section of people broadcasting their opinion of current events.

"I don't know how to use Twitter. If I knew what it was I might use it more".<sup>41</sup>

Overwhelmingly the response of college kids in Jordan is that they do not understand how to use Twitter and therefore do not use Twitter. While everyone in my focus group could rattle off facts about how Egypt and Tunisia used Twitter to help further their revolutionary cause, no Jordanian even felt comfortable using the site. There is not an official way to use Twitter and in one sense this is what makes the site innovative, it can be adapted to personal causes. However, this indistinctness seems to deter many young Jordanians from using the site themselves.

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<sup>39</sup> Jackie Ashley, "New Technology May be Changing the Human Brain," *Guardian*, April 24 2006, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2006/apr/24/comment.television>.

<sup>40</sup> Jared Keller, "Evaluating Iran's Twitter Revolution," *The Atlantic*, June 18, 2010, <http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2010/06/evaluating-irans-twitter-revolution/58337/>.

<sup>41</sup> Focus Group 2, Male and Females Subject, 20 April 2011.

One thing that I found unsettling was the common recognition that Twitter could be an important tool in enacting social change but there was no motivation to use it now. There was an attitude of waiting and having things unfold themselves without any effort required by the people. One student said:

I think people will start using Twitter more. They started with Hi5 [social networking site], then the Facebook, everything comes in time. Facebook was before only in 2005 it came. The thing with Twitter is that you don't have to have photos, videos, it is about short things. People read them. It's not for messing around.<sup>42</sup>

No one necessarily showed interest in helping the popularity of Twitter grow, many said they simply did not have the time to devote to it and use it seriously.<sup>43</sup> While this nonchalant attitude might be frustrating to those that are actively using Twitter to further the reformation process in Jordan, a social movement cannot be rushed.

However, the current use of Facebook will definitely be able to translate into Twitter usage. In both focus groups, we discussed how Facebook was a way to share not only social aspects of life but political news and thoughts additionally.<sup>44</sup> Users are using the "status" updating feature to post hyperlinks to news articles. When I asked the groups their usual routine on Facebook, universally all the students expressed that when they log onto Facebook and they check up on their close or better friends in detail. On a daily basis they did not expand their perusing to their entire assortment of friends.<sup>45</sup> Essentially they were practicing a rudimentary form of Two-Step theory of communication. They would likely comment or "like" something that a select group of friends posted but would rarely extend

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<sup>42</sup> Focus Group 2, Male and Females Subject, 20 April 2011.

<sup>43</sup> Focus Group 2, Male and Females Subject, 20 April 2011.

<sup>44</sup> Focus Group 1, Males and Female Subjects, 19 April 2011.

<sup>45</sup> Focus Group 2, Male and Females Subject, 20 April 2011.

their Facebook activity scope to include the entire population of friends.<sup>46</sup> This selectivity of focus is a strong foundation for creating a twitterverse that fully adapts a relationship of following and retweeting. While the current Facebook usage does not necessarily mean that there will be a direct correlation on Twitter, it is providing at least a precedent reminiscent of Two-Step theory.

Additionally, there are many of discussions about how Jordan should change and what next step should be taken. In the course of my research, I was able to discuss what Jordanians want to have happen and read their opinions tweeted. I was surprised at the different things that people wanted and the range of social issues addressed. Politically there have been cries for a return to the 1952 Constitution with the change in the voting laws to allow for more than one vote per person. In the extreme of the political spectrum there have been hushed wishes for a constitutional monarchy and even quieter for a republic. Economically speaking, there is a grave concern over corruption in the allocation of funds to poorly founded projects. Also, with the growing population of youths who will be seeking employment in the coming years there is a shortage of available jobs. However, the greatest variety of changes voiced by Jordanians dealt with social issues.

On a social level the wide range of topics covered is inspiring. While there is contention over the Jordanian and Palestinian heritage issue, there have been some positive talks about future relationship improvements. In addition, the environmental consciousness is being raised and “going green” is gaining popularity.<sup>47</sup> There is even a plea for a greater equality between men and women. These issues are only the tip of the iceberg

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<sup>46</sup> Focus Group 2, Male and Females Subject, 20 April 2011.

<sup>47</sup> Focus Group 2, Male and Females Subject, 20 April 2011.

of things that Jordanians wish to improve upon. The overall attitude of possibilities that are attainable in Jordan is such a strength of society. Stagnation is always a threat looming to stall a nation, constantly striving to become more ideal is the only way to prevent stagnation.

## **Conclusion**

We are living in a time of great social change. Countries are experiencing revolutions and old ways of doing things are no longer justified by tradition. While the catalysts for these changes vary, one commonality is shared between them all. Every protest, revolution and uprising has benefitted from the use of social media. Twitter especially has gained popularity and headlines.

In Jordan, the Internet is still a new commodity. While it is growing and the government is supporting its growth, it is not a nationwide phenomenon like satellite television. I believe it has the potential to become similarly popular and widespread, it simply needs more time. Soon not only will every roof have a satellite dish set up but they will also have a wireless router in the window.

At this current time, there is simply not enough data and a big enough pool of users to support a sustainable Two-Step theory of mass communication. Everything is on track for a transition between the current usages of Facebook to the more apt platform Twitter. Once there is more popular support there is a pool of users who stand at the ready to helm reform discussions and movements.

Twitter is still a young developing entity into the Jordanian political and social consciousness. People recognize it and socially obtain an account so that they can feel inclusion within the popular current. There is an apparent juxtaposition between users embracing this as a

tool for social reform and those who are embracing social media hype. This division is causing a faulty foundation for the Jordanian social reform platform. There needs to be a bridging of the two factions to consolidate and solidify the efforts for reform.

Currently there is a lot of pressure in Jordan, on police and intelligence agencies, to monitor and control the twitterverse. In a few short months, the capacity of this segment to be able to understand and exert influence has grown tremendously. While state censorship does exist, it is not the prevalent mean of maintaining a polite discourse. Astroturfing is applied to certain themes that do not fit within an acceptable discussion. However, simply burying the offending ideas under criticism and threats will not make the problem disappear. The most effective means for controlling the conversation lies outside the jurisdiction of the executive branch and resides within each citizen of Jordan. The degree to which Jordanians exert self-imposed censorship permeates into Twitter and severely restricts social movements.

Jordan is simply not a large country. While it plays a key role in geo-political relationships, it does not have a directly proportional population. To be effective there needs to be a united Jordanian population, however, there currently exists a diversion of human resources. Jordanians are split into either Jordanian-Jordanians or Palestinian-Jordanians. Right now, these two camps are both in Jordan but are pushing for two different causes, one within the borders and one outside.

The Twitter population in Jordan is severely fragmented and lacks size. The social users, Palestinian users, and inactive users are distracting background noise to the current political reformation discussion on Twitter. For social reform activists to be able to direct and help usher in positive changes, they need followers. The mechanism for dissipating information and ideas to a vast audience is in place. Facebook usage in Jordan echoes the Two-Step Theory of Mass

Communication and can be easily fitted to a new social media site. However, the technology has just not caught enough popular support to power reforms.

### **Limitation of Study**

Time, played a crucial role in the extent I was able to pursue my research. There were not enough hours in the day to be kept up to date on what was being tweet and to track down people to interview. A balance had to be established between following the online dialogue and initiating offline discourse. A compromise had to be made between the two areas; I did not have enough time to “catch up” on the past dialogue. This sometimes led to gaps in my understanding, as I had missed the references to things that happened a year ago.

The newness of Twitter in Jordan was also a limitation of my study. I would have liked to delve deeper in the potential of the medium to instigate positive political movements. However, this was a gross oversight on my part. There is not enough popular support to make Twitter a viable medium, however, there is potential for growth.

### **Recommendations for Future Studies**

Taking into consideration some of the limitations of this research project, I would suggest that further studies be conducted regarding Twitter’s continuing evolution of becoming a useful tool. One topic that my study touched upon was the news alert cycle and how news is reported and gathered. Possible future qualitative research endeavors could look at how Jordan Times and Al-Jazeera are now using Twitter to supplement their newspaper subscription and instantly broadcast current events. This new adaptation allows for a much more mobile news reporting process.

Or a study could be conducted to examine the Jordanian public's reaction to certain tweets. It would be informative to try and measure and discern the effect of a tweet. There have been similar studies conducted about the impact of different advertisements, propagandas and printings. A logical next step would be to examine what 140 characters could accomplish and invoke.

In the course of my research I encountered both Arabic and English tweets. In addition, I observed a lot of transliterated Arabic as well. I wondered what the implications of using one language over the other would be? Is Arabic more well received by certain members of society, or is English? Since the limit on a tweet is 140 characters, there is a lot of deliberate thought that occurs, how much thought is given to language? Twitter offers a fascinating opportunity to look into the implications of language and cultural acceptance.

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## Appendix

### **#reformjo: Jordanian Tweets for Social Reform**

Megan Daily, Washington and Lee University, Lexington, Virginia, United States

School for International Training—Jordan: Modernization and Social Change

#### **Instructions:**

*Please read the following statements carefully and mark your preferences where indicated. Signing below indicates your agreement with all statements and your voluntary participation in the study. Signing below while failing to mark a preference where indicated will be interpreted as an affirmative preference. Please ask the researcher if you have any questions regarding this consent form.*

I am aware that this interview is conducted by an independent undergraduate researcher with the goal of producing a descriptive case study of the current dialogue and usage of Twitter by Jordanians.

I am aware that the information I provide is for research purposes only. I understand that my responses will be confidential and that my name will not be associated with any results of this study.

I am aware that I have the right to full anonymity upon request, and that upon request the researcher will omit all identifying information from both notes and drafts.

I am aware that I have the right to refuse to answer any question and to terminate my participation at any time, and that the researcher will answer any questions I have about the study.

I am aware of and take full responsibility for any risk, physical, psychological, legal, or social, associated with participation in this study.

I am aware that I will not receive monetary compensation for participation in this study, but a copy of the final study will be made available to me upon request.

I [ do / do not ] give the researcher permission to use my name and position in the final study.

I [ do / do not ] give the researcher permission to use my organizational affiliation in the final study.

I [ do / do not ] give the researcher permission to use data collected in this interview in a later study.

**Date:**

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**Participant's Signature:**

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**Participant's Printed Name:**

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**Researcher's Signature:**

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***Thank you for participating!***

*Questions, comments, complaints, and requests for the final written study can be directed to:*

Dr. Raed Al-Tabini, SIT Jordan Academic Director

Telephone (962) 077 7176318

Email: [raed.altabini@sit.edu](mailto:raed.altabini@sit.edu)