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## Facebook and Twitter key to Arab Spring uprisings: report

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DUBAI // The most popular Twitter hashtags in the Arab region in the first three months of this year were “Egypt”, “Jan25”, “Libya”, “Bahrain” and “protest”.

Nearly 9 in 10 Egyptians and Tunisians surveyed in March said they were using Facebook to organise protests or spread awareness about them.

All but one of the protests called for on Facebook ended up coming to life on the streets.

These and other findings from the newly released second edition of the Arab Social Media Report by the Dubai School of Government give empirical heft to the conventional wisdom that Facebook and Twitter abetted if not enabled the historic region-wide uprisings of early 2011.

In part by using the social networking sites, activists organised and publicised the unprecedented protests that gave rise to the so-called Arab Spring, which has so far seen longtime governments in Egypt and Tunisia fall, regimes in Syria, Libya, Yemen and Bahrain clash with the opposition, and leaders in Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the UAE offer more benefits to their populace.

Social media – its rise and its new activist uses – have “played a critical role in mobilisation, empowerment, shaping opinions and influencing change,” the report said.

Just how integral its role was has been debated, it said, “with some camps labelling them the main instigators and others relegating them to mere tools.”

“Regardless, it can be stated that many of the calls to protest in the Arab region were initially made on Facebook,” it said. “As the initial platform for these calls, it cannot be denied that they were factor in mobilising movements.”

Facebook usage swelled in the Arab region between January and April and sometimes more than doubled, the report found.

Overall, the number of users jumped by 30 per cent to 27.7m, compared with 18 per cent growth during the same period in 2010. In the past year, the number of users has nearly doubled from 14.8m.

Usage in Bahrain grew 15 per cent in the first three months of the year, compared with 6 per cent over the same period last year.

Egypt saw 29 per cent growth compared to 12 per cent last year.

Tunisia had 17 per cent growth compared to 10 per cent last year.

The exception was Libya, where usage fell by 76 per cent. One possible reason is that many there have fled amidst fierce fighting between the regime and rebels.

During the protests in Egypt and Tunisia, the vast majority of 200-plus people surveyed over three weeks in March said they were getting their information from social media sites (88 per cent in Egypt and 94 per cent in Tunisia).

This outnumbered those who turned to non-government local media (63 per cent in Egypt and 86 per cent in Tunisia) and to foreign media (57 per cent in Egypt and 48 per cent in Tunisia).

On Twitter, the hashtag “Egypt” had 1.4 million mentions in the three months of the year. Other hashtags – which are essentially search terms – “Jan25” had 1.2m mentions; “Libya” had 990,000; “Bahrain” had 640,000; and “protest” had 620,000.

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The flurry of tweets spiralled during the turning points of the uprisings.

In Tunisia they peaked around the January 14 protest start date. In Egypt they spiked around February 11 when longtime President Hosni Mubarak stepped down. And in Bahrain they jumped in the days after the demonstrations began on February 14.

Government attempts to ban such sites ended up backfiring, the survey of Egyptians and Tunisians found.

Just over a quarter of those polled (28 per cent in Egypt and 29 per cent in Tunisia) said the blocking of Facebook disrupted their efforts to organise and communicate.

But more than half (56 per cent in Egypt and 59 per cent in Tunisia) said it had a positive effect, motivating them to press on and mobilising newcomers.

The authorities' efforts to block out information, the report said, ended up "spurring people to be more active, decisive and to find ways to be more creative about communicating and organising".

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