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**Bernard Hibbitts, Publisher & Editor-in-Chief**    
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## The Twitter Revolutions: Social Media in the Arab Spring

JURIST Guest Columnist **Kevin Govern** of Ave Maria School of Law says that social media and networking have proven pivotal in the success of the Arab Spring protest movements in a manner that was previously unforeseen by commentators and scholars...



The ongoing protests in the **Arab Spring** are unprecedented in scope and duration since the end of European domination. These protests have resulted in the **overthrow** and **death** of Muammar Gaddafi, along with the rulers of **Tunisia** and **Egypt** being ousted, and those of **Bahrain**, Jordan, Oman, **Yemen** and Iran being seriously challenged.

Since January, these protests have challenged the legitimacy of leaders in the Middle East and North Africa. US allies and adversaries have experienced intense public unrest challenging their rule and legal systems. That has taken place due to a twenty-first century manifesto of small changes, enabled by technology, to mobilize those nations' youth against dictatorial regimes. This was not entirely anticipated. Malcolm Gladwell cast doubt on the potential contribution of social networking to social movements and social change. Gladwell concluded in his October 4, 2010 article, **Small Change: Why the Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted**, in *The New Yorker* that social networking websites with weak ties and unstructured equality among participants are the opposite of the US civil rights movement's strong ties and hierarchical organizations.

Jeremy Brecher and Brendan Smith countered Gladwell with the

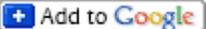
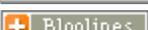
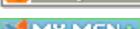
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October 8, 2011 piece **Is Social Networking Useless for Social Change?** in The Huffington Post. The authors considered Gladwell out of touch with true changes in political organizing and communication. Brecher and Smith cited to a "once-influential study published in 1847 [that] observed that workers were beginning to form 'combinations'" via the use of electronic (telegraph) and print (newspaper) means of communication. In a profound understatement, the authors commented that "[m]aybe the role of telegraph and newspapers a century and two-thirds ago is irrelevant to the role of social networking media today. But maybe not."

That study was in fact the 1848 **Manifesto of the Communist Party** by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Marx and Engels observed that workers were beginning to form "combinations" and that this "union [was] helped on by the improved means of communication that are created by Modern Industry, and that place the workers of different localities in contact with one another. It was just this contact that was needed to centralize the numerous local struggles, all of the same character, into one national struggle between classes."

Current events raise some provocative questions on the utility of social networking to revolution. Namely: are "improved means of communications" now creating a "contact ... needed to centralize the numerous local struggles ... into one national struggle" between governments and their people? Are corrupt party politics and bankrupt slogans being put into perspective of real-world experiences shared in real-time? Put as a positive assertion, modern-day Internet revolutionaries may be unconsciously — or consciously — following those tenets set forth in the Manifesto, even without embracing Marxism.

What may prove to be one of America's most infamous security breaches may also be looked upon as the impetus for some recently emergent Internet-based movements for freedom of speech and civil liberties. Specifically, WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange told reporters recently that leaked US diplomatic cables in December 2010 showed former Tunisian president Ben Ali to be corrupt and would not have US support if revolution came to his nation. That news became known to thousands of technologically savvy young Tunisians who were weary of the persistent political illegitimacy of the Ben Ali government. This knowledge mobilized them to act to bring his government down. Weeks later, the world witnessed this again in Egypt, with president Hosni Mubarak stepping down after 30 years in power and now facing **public trial**. Muammar Gaddafi, the "Brother Leader and Guide of the Revolution" in Libya, has been chased from his palaces in Tripoli and met his demise at the hands of his own people as facilitated by NATO air support. Social networking-enabled challenges to authority have also spurred on a **resurgence of resistance** to the theocratic regime in Iran.



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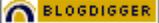
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This paradigm of progress challenges the antiquated agents of change, those nineteenth and twentieth century notions in which peoples and nations might reestablish political legitimacy around the globe. Nineteenth century German political scientist Heinrich Rudolf Hermann Friedrich von Gneist considered the "free legal profession" as an "Archimedean lever for accomplishing the liberal project of personal rights and the rule of law." That profession is still significant, to be sure, but interpersonal communications have become an increasingly important lever to move ideas and regimes.

*Kevin Govern is an associate professor of law at Ave Maria School of Law. He began his legal career as a US Army Judge Advocate. He has also served as an assistant professor of law at the United States Military Academy and has taught at California University of Pennsylvania. Unless otherwise attributed, the conclusions and opinions expressed are solely those of the author and do not reflect the official position of the US government, Department of Defense or Ave Maria School of Law.*

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This article was prepared for publication by [Jonathan Cohen](#), the head of JURIST's academic commentary service. Please direct any questions or comments to him at [academiccommentary@jurist.org](mailto:academiccommentary@jurist.org)

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