

FOCUS

This section usually highlights current issues on the political agenda of the European Union or in the field of citizenship education in Europe. But on the occasion of the events in the Arab world, this time this section focuses on these developments and their relevance for citizenship education.

Social Media, “Facebook revolutions” in the Arab World and some implications for citizenship education

From 7 to 9 April 2011, the NECE workshop “Perspectives of Web 2.0 for Citizenship Education in Europe” took place in Brno, Czech Republic. Amongst 40 participants from 15 different European countries, one was **Maartje Nevejan**, an independent filmmaker based in Amsterdam, with a background in theatre and multi media. Maartje participated in the sixth annual Al Jazeera Forum in Qatar (from 12 to 14 March 2011). During the workshop and informal get-togethers she told us about her recent experiences regarding social media and its influence on the latest developments in the Arab world.

NECE: Maartje, you participated in the Al Jazeera Forum, and now you are visiting this workshop. How does it come?

Maartje: I returned quite inspired from Qatar. During the Al Jazeera Forum I learnt much about the importance social media may have when it comes to political changes. In this sense, this workshop is actually in direct relationship to this journey. Web 2.0, active citizenship and civic participation - that's what it is all about in the Arab world at the moment. While some of the participants here are discussing these issues quite theoretically, young people in the Arab world are really practicing it.

NECE: So, Maartje, you really have the opinion that the latest developments in the Arab world are connected with modern ways of communication and civic participation?

Maartje: Yes, absolutely. The modern Arab revolution would not have been possible without such young, civically engaged people and social media.

NECE: We heard that some of the autocratic leaders in the ‘Middle East’ stated that it was Al Jazeera which organised the uprisings. How are we to understand such accusations? We remember some quite outspoken journalists on the Tahir-square in Cairo, but such a way of reporting about political developments in itself does not bring dictatorial structures down.

Maartje: It is not that easy. You have to consider the influence of Al Jazeera in a broader context and in a larger time-line. Until the founding of Al Jazeera in 1996, dictators in the Middle East had the

monopoly on information distribution. All started with a satellite TV station funded by the enlightened Emir of Qatar. In the meantime, Al Jazeera has 65 offices all over the world. 3.000 people are employed in 60 countries, and 220 million families are following the Al Jazeera programmes in more than 100 countries every day. There also exist ‘Al Jazeera English’, ‘Al Jazeera Sports’, ‘Al Jazeera Documentary’, ‘Al Jazeera Mobile’, ‘Al Jazeera Study Center and Media-Training’ and the website ‘Al Jazeera.net.’

NECE: But all this does not have much to do with social media yet...

Maartje: Wait a minute. The crucial site - which I have not mentioned yet - was ‘Al Jazeera Talk’. The website has been established since people from Al Jazeera realised at quite an early stage the importance of social media for the Middle East. ‘Al Jazeera Talk’ with 150.000 visitors a day is the most important website in the Arab world. Young people are putting their own news or some movies on this site. The young bloggers developed into a sort of soldiers in the first lines of the war about information. Very often they were the only source of information for Al Jazeera journalists themselves. For example, Mubarak banned Al Jazeera, but everyone became a reporter him- or herself. How could you stop 80 million reporters?

NECE: So, the current situation is not happening ‘out of the blue’?

Maartje: No, absolutely not. In the past years, these young people have developed their own communication infrastructure. They developed their own ways of avoiding the censorship of the ruling dictators. They developed a way of ‘citizen journalism’, if we want to call it like that. And now finally it is their time. It is dangerous, but they are making history.

NECE: How did all this get started?

Maartje: It started approximately 10 years ago. A group of computer technicians were dealing with the Arabisation of computer software. After a while, the technicians came into contact with political activists working on issues like democracy, freedom of the press and human rights. In the beginning, all these contacts were actually only happening online. But five years ago they started to meet in reality – so called ‘offline’. For example, they met people from other Arabian countries in Lebanon, but also people living in asylum in Paris or London. They discussed the possibilities for change, talked about strategies and techniques to reach their aims - and they discussed not only virtually, but also in the streets and on the squares.

NECE: And what did the actions of these young people actually look like?

Maartje: There is, for example, an organisation called ‘Tactical Technology Collective’. They publish books, DVD's, and folders where citizens who want to come into action may learn how to transform information into action. They answer questions such as how to build secured websites?, How to create a blog?, How to prevent the authorities from tracking down you or your friends? and How to erase sensible information from your computer?

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All in all, we may say that the social media had an extreme influence on the political consciousness of citizens in the Arab world. If, for example, a tool like Facebook created something, then these people from the whole Arab world began to come into contact with each other and to exchange views. Later they went out into the streets together. You might put it as a young Arab told me: the 'curtain of fear' among the people in the Arab world was lifted by Facebook. In this sense, there are no leaders. Everyone is part of a nameless sort of Wikipedia, where everyone may add something, and all this stuff together creates a network.

NECE: And what is it these promising young people you met during the Al Jazeera forum are dreaming about? What are their aims?

Maartje: Some are dreaming that the Arab world should build up a strong coalition of states such as the EU, especially in the economic sense. Libya has the oil, Egypt the strategic potential, Tunis its intellectuals. If they will cooperate, in the future they might compete with growing economies like Brazil and India. Since they have been experiencing a virtual Arab Space via the Internet, their dream of an Arab space in the real world is coming closer. Some call it Pan Arab Humanism. It might take another 10 years, but I believe they will replace the old Arab images by new Arab images for the next generation. The new images will talk about human values and dignity such as freedom, democracy, constitutional reforms, more equality in society and the emancipation of women.

NECE: Maartje, now finally, do you have any messages for the workshop organisers or the readers of our newsletter?

Maartje: I am very happy that I could participate here in the NECE workshop. I would suggest to the organisers to have a close look into the role of social media in the Arab revolutions. There might be interesting examples regarding active citizenship and civic participation, which might as well have some influence on the political landscape in European countries tomorrow ...

Maartje Nevejan worked for Dutch, Belgian, Finnish Broadcast, and Al Jazeera. She is mostly known for her films and websites about angry teenagers around the world, not taking the standard power structures anymore. In her projects she likes to research the (raw) poetic quality of reality. Maartje Nevejan has won several awards, amongst others the Golden Calf, Silver Zebra, and was nominated for the Rose d'Or and the Emmy Award.

More information about Maartje Nevejan and her work at: www.couscousglobal.com or www.nevejan.nl

Social Media and the New Arab Spring

by Dr Andy Williamson,
Director of Digital Democracy at the Hansard Society in London

Across North Africa and the Middle East we are witnessing a rising tide of citizen-led protest against autocratic and corrupt regimes. In echoes of the Czech Spring of 1968 and the tumultuous wave of change that swept across Eastern Europe during the 1990s, there is a real feeling that change is real, can happen and can be sustained. There is a new and emergent spirit of pan-Arabism, with activists in one country following and gaining confidence (and support) from those in others. There is nothing new in this; we have seen such movements before during the 1960s. Some of the countries that are today rising up for change were the same ones who were brutally repressed 50 years ago. The difference between then and now is the rise of digital media.

Key tools for the modern revolution are digital because they achieve significant things; first, they bring together otherwise remote and disparate groups. Second, they create channels to bypass traditional state control of the media so the outside world can see what is going on. Alongside traditional activism and action, the tools of the trade today are the internet (for information dissemination and news), social media (to connect and coordinate), mobile phones (to capture what happens) and digital, particularly satellite, television to report it.

The underlying complexity of the network is an important factor too. Whilst many regimes would like to simply turn off the internet, this is very difficult to do completely. Activists on the ground and net-savvy supporters around the world are able to implement proxy techniques to evade detection and bypass the controls of states. Flows of information can be slowed but not stopped; the world is now simply too porous.

Social media is important because it is an ideal tool for connecting loose networks of association, bringing together otherwise disparate groups and individuals to support a common cause. It is no respecter of borders. What happens in Morocco and Egypt motivates and empowers protesters in Libya, Syria and Yemen.

We saw digital activists from Morocco support Egyptians, teaching them how to exploit these new tools. One must be careful not to overstate the role of social media; it is only a tool. The previous example was largely done face-to-face, not online, and what social media can achieve is down to alignment with social behaviour and its effective social appropriation. That said, social media does play an important part in contemporary revolutionary movements; we are seeing around 40-45 tweets per minute from Egypt and 30-35 per minute from Syria and Libya.