

Is Social Media a Trustworthy News Outlet?

By Adria Winfield

Resources

NPR sources – audio clips

[Social Media Gets Credit for Tunisian Overthrow](#)

[The Revolution Will Be Tweeted](#)

[Backstory of a Revolution](#)

[New Media in Egypt](#)

Context

These activities relate to the social and political uprisings in the Middle East (2011)

Critical issue

During this time of upheaval in the Middle East, labeled by the media “Arab Spring”, has social media – e.g. Facebook and Twitter – offered reliable sources of information? Which sources do the public trust more – social media sites or the state-run media?

Preview activity/Introductory questions

Ask students for their thoughts on the following questions:

1. How do you find information about what is going on in the world?
2. How has the spread of information changed in the past 100 years?
3. What types of social media (Facebook, Twitter, You Tube, blogs) do you use in your daily life?
What information do you share about yourself?
What do you look for on social media sites?
4. Do you trust these social media sites to provide accurate information?

Focus questions

Choose **one or two** of the audio clips from the list above to stream in your classroom. Ask students to listen with the following questions in mind, before they respond.

- How has social media been used in each of the situations covered in the clip?
- Are there differences in how social media has been used to spread information?
- How successful has social media been in helping the Arab Spring participants? How can you measure success?
- What are some of the dangers that users of social media face in the Middle East?

Post viewing

In fall 2010, writer Malcolm Gladwell published an article in the *New Yorker*, entitled “The Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted”. Gladwell argued that social revolution is not a product of social media, but rather of grass roots organization through traditional channels of communication, i.e. word-of-mouth, telephones and meetings. Gladwell suggests that in-person communication is more trustworthy than on-line communication.

He writes about the US Civil Rights Movement (1950s and 1960s), during which time organizers used the black church as their center; people knew each other by sight and trusted each other. He believes that the US Civil Rights Movement was successful for these reasons and that even if Facebook had been available back then, it would not have made a difference. Organizers would have still wanted to know the people who were involved, and would not have wanted to work with “unknown” people on the Internet.

Source: [Gladwell New Yorker](#)

- Suggest that students form small groups (3-4 people) and discuss Gladwell’s ideas and their responses to the radio clips. Does Gladwell make a valid point? During a time of social unrest and change, is in-person communication more trustworthy than on-line communication?

Research contact assignment

If feasible, suggest students take a field trip to the *San Francisco Chronicle*, where they can learn about how social media has changed the way news is reported, and the reliability of this news.

Another option could be to organize interviews with students, faculty members, and members of the students’ community and question interviewees about how they use social media and whether they trust these sources of information. Do they believe news they receive on Twitter or Facebook, or do they trust more traditional news sources, e.g. newspaper and television news?

Since both Facebook and Twitter are Bay-Area based companies, check to see if a visit to either company is possible. Students can learn more about these social networking sites and report on their findings.

Reflection

In this lesson students have explored:

- The role of social media in the flow of information across the Middle East during a time of social upheaval.
- How young people in particular have been dependant on social media outlets for vital information.
- The importance of information exchange during war time here in the United States.
- Malcolm Gladwell's opinion of social media and his belief that true, honest information stems from in-person, face-to-face communication.

Ask students to write a journal entry reflecting on what they have learned about social media as a reliable source of information? (They should not worry about grammar, spelling, or punctuation)

What makes people trust social media?

Has this assignment changed their opinion of social media?

Further resources

PBS Video: Frontline [Egypt's Facebook Faceoff](#)

PBS Video: PBS Newshour [Saudi Women Take the Wheel](#)

KQED Radio [Iran's Election Aftermath and Social Media](#)

PBS Video MediaShift [Athlete's On Social Media](#)

PBS Video MediaShift [Social Media Marketing](#)