

Inside the Egyptian Revolution

By Wael Ghonim

The power of the internet is held captive by the less noble aspects of human behaviour

The videos “Inside the Egyptian Revolution” and “Let’s design social media that drives change” narrate both the story of how the Arab Spring used the power of social media and how social media failed them afterwards. The killing of a 30 year old Saed served as a trigger event when the speaker created a facebook page that voiced out the concerns of the Egyptian citizens and the facebook page started a revolution. While the Egyptian citizens were unhappy for decades with the state of their government, there was no uprising of this scale. So what was different this time ? - social media helped the common man cross the psychological barrier of fear collectively and empowered the people to question the propaganda that was thrust upon them. The regime was overthrown and a democratically elected government was put in place. However, things started going downhill very soon - the army overthrew the government and the society was polarised beyond repair between the two factions.

The difference was that now the governments and the people in power started understanding how social media worked and used to exploit it the hidden biases we have in all of us. Firstly, there was a lack of consensus about what was the next step. This lack of consensus was soon turned into intense polarisation driven by human behaviour. While polarisation of opinions has always been a problem, the difference this time was that this polarisation was magnified and amplified by social media in the form of echo chambers, fake news and hate speeches.

Social media has given everyone of us a voice but it comes with the lack of accountability for what we say and what we do online. It has made it easier for us to hurl abuses at people who don’t agree with us - it is easy for a troll to issue a rape threat to a female journalist and get away with it. This happens to most female journalists in India. The corporates who run these social media platforms in the pursuit of platforms are partly to blame. Broadcasting is favoured over engagement ; posts over discussions and shallow comments over deep conversations.

We need to build social media platforms that serve people and not advertisers and solving these challenges will be a very important in reaching that goal -

1. How do you deal with rumours ?
2. How to get rid of the echo chamber/filter bubble effect ? How do we discover opinions that don’t align with ours ?
3. How do we ensure that online discussions don’t turn into fights ?

The biggest step in this direction , in my opinion , is to ensure that accountability is built into these social media platforms - one should not be able to get away with what he/she says online and whatever is being said should be fact checked and verified. The next step is to take back the control from

corporations and built platforms that are transparent and audited - the algorithms that recommend articles and govern our news feed should be transparent and widely analyzed.