Structural Inertia, Social Media and Organizational Change

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Abstract

The paper addresses structural inertia and radical change in countries which have suffered from stagnant inertial forces. In light of the punctuated equilibrium model, the paper introduces two propositions which suggest that such forces have established the necessary conditions for radical change. Also, social media networks have been a factor in creating such change by galvanizing protestors and by allowing them to share information, to organize, and to build support and momentum for the change process.

Keywords: Structural inertia, Social media, Organizational change

1. Introduction

Organizational change involves a difference in "how an organization functions, who its members and leaders are, what form it takes or how it allocates its resources" (Huber & Glick, 1993, p. 216) and it also involves "a transformation of an organization between two points in time" (Barnett & Carroll, 1995, p. 219). Organizational theorists have two different views on organizational change (Schwarz & Shulman, 2007). The first view considers organizations as environment-adaptive entities which need to cope with the changing demands of the environment to remain viable (Fay & Luhrmann, 2004). According to this view, organizations operate in a dynamic environment which is characterized by social, legal, technological, and economic changes (Crossan, Vera & Nanjod, 2008). The second view considers organizations as inert entities characterized by static structures and inertial forces which favor slow or little change particularly in core organizational features (Hannan & Freeman, 1984). Structural inertia is considered a barrier which resists the change process within an organization (Majid, Abdullah, Yasir, & Tabassum, 2011). Inertia results from internal and external factors (Hannan & Freeman, 1977) such as organizational norms and market exit and entry barriers.

This paper takes the position that organizations should change their structures and strategies to gain a competitive advantage and to improve performance and that structural inertia can have a negative impact on organizations if it resists necessary change (Brown, 2002). Lewin (1951) contends that if management is unable to overcome negative inertia, conflict and strife will arise. The above arguments (Brown, 2002; Lewin, 1951) are vital to organizations where inertial forces result in a competitive disadvantage due to resisting timely organizational response to environmental changes. Majid *et al*. (2011) contend that inertial forces have prevented developing countries' economies from adapting to environmental changes. As a result, such forces are considered to be a threat to the development of the economies of developing countries because the economies of developed countries can adapt more quickly to environmental demands and outcompete them.

According to the punctuated equilibrium theory (Tushman & Romanelli, 1985), inertial forces can result in resistance to change and such resistance "establishes the key condition that supports revolutionary transformation" (Romanelli & Tushman, 1994, p.1144) and technological advances create radical change by interrupting the equilibrium once inertia has established the necessary change conditions. The theory also suggests that radical change periods are normally short, whereas stability or equilibrium periods during which organizations evolve are long.

Other scholars have had similar findings. For example, Greenwood and Hinings (1996) argue that radical change is more likely to occur within an organization if the degree of its institutional normative embeddedness is increased. In addition, the influence of organizational norms varies at times depending on institutional pressures such as the environment (Dacin, 1997). Hence, inertial forces that are strong and resisting change at some point in time may become weak at another lacking the ability to resist the change process and allowing for better change conditions. Moreover, Brown (2002) argues that organizations have different stakeholders to satisfy. Stakeholders and their demands change over time and organizations

need to respond to such changing demands (Brown, 2002). Organizations which do not break the grip of inertial forces to change will face greater risk of failure than those which change their structures and strategies in response to stakeholders demands (Brown, 2002).

Technological advances have been shown to cause changes at the organizational level (Markus & Robey, 1988). The Internet, in general, and social media networks in particular, have changed people's communication patterns as more individuals are now able to share thoughts, ideas, and information with each other in different parts of the world easily and quickly (Falkow, 2010). The ease and speed of information sharing have facilitated different kinds of organizational change (Jue, Marr, & Kassotakis, 2010; Lucio, 2011). Technological advances are capable of driving incremental or less radical organizational change such as changing the way online marketing is done (Falkow, 2010), as well as radical organizational change by interrupting the existing organizational structure (Tushman & Anderson, 1986).

In their discussion of structural inertia and organizational change concepts, Majid *et al*. (2011) applied such concepts to developing countries and suggested that inertial forces are

characteristic of many developing countries and they negatively impact their development because such forces prevent timely response to environmental changes. This paper follows the same approach, but applies the concepts using the punctuated equilibrium model to one important part of these countries which is the Middle East region, particularly Arab countries including Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, and Libya. These countries have witnessed radical changes after suffering from negative inertial forces for decades and resisted any radical change. The current radical changes have a lot of implications for the West because the Middle East has plenty of natural resources such as oil and natural gas which are critical to the global economy (Shah, 2011) and many oil-rich Middle Eastern countries have made huge financial investments in different Western countries which helped increase their global economic influence (Abdelal, Khan, & Khanna, 2008).

In light of the punctuated equilibrium theory, this paper extends the current literature by considering the role of social media networks such as Facebook and Twitter in building momentum for members of organizations to create radical change and in increasing its likelihood in the Middle East, after inertial forces establish the necessary conditions for radical organizational change.

In this paper, I begin by discussing the two perspectives of organizational change. In the next section, I expand on structural inertia and how it establishes change conditions. Then, I discuss social media networks' role in building momentum for organizations members to cause radical change in Middle Eastern countries. I discuss the punctuated equilibrium theory in more depth and then I discuss the importance of the Middle East region. The next section applies the punctuated equilibrium theory to the current changes in the Middle East. I introduce two propositions which suggest that inertial forces in the Middle East establish the key conditions for radical change and that social media networks have been a major factor in creating radical change in the region. I close with the implications of this topic, the limitations of the paper and future research directions and a conclusion.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Organizational Change

Organizational change can refer to a difference in form, quality and condition of an organization over time (Poole & Van de Ven, 2004). The organization is evaluated based on a number of dimensions such as performance at some point in time and it is evaluated again later on at another point in time using the same dimensions. If the difference is greater than zero, then one can argue that change took place (Poole & Van de Ven, 2004). Organizational change can be planned or unplanned, incremental or radical depending on the organization's goals and conditions (Poole & Van de Ven, 2004). Some organizational scholars argue for the need for organizational change (e.g., Clarke, 1994; Fay & Luhrmann, 2004; & Majid et al., 2011).

According to this group of scholars, organizations operate in a dynamic environment which is characterized by social, legal, economic and technological changes. Organizations that can adapt to environmental changes gain a competitive advantage over rivals (Majid et al., 2011)

and remain viable (Fay & Luhrmann, 2004). Organizational change is expected if an organization is performing poorly relative to its rivals (Colombo & Delmastro, 2002) and when a new breakthrough technology is introduced (Colombo & Delmastro, 2002; Tushman & Anderson, 1986). Organizations need to change their structures and strategies to enhance their performance to satisfy their stakeholders (Brown, 2002). At the same time, when a new technological innovation appears, organizations normally need to change their structures and strategies to exploit the new technology and to reap its benefits (Colombo & Delmastro, 2002).

On the other hand, organizations are viewed as inert entities by another group of organizational scholars. This group considers organizations as entities that are subject to strong inertial forces and such forces resist or slow down the process of change (Hannan & Freeman, 1984). If organizations change, they face great risks (Barnett & Carroll, 1995). Hence, "a resistance to change rooted in the size, complexity, and interdependence in the organization structures" may occur (Tushmann & O'Reilly, 1966, p. 18). Hannan and Freeman (1984) argue that the environment selects out organizations whose structures are static or inert. They also argue that organizations that are reliable in producing the same quality of products repeatedly and accountable for their activities and actions are selected by the environment. As organizations try to be reliable and accountable and reproduce routines, they become more inertial and as a result structural inertia builds up.

2.2 Structural Inertia

Structural inertia is defined as a barrier that slows down or resists the process of organizational change (Majid *et al*., 2011). Hannan and Freeman (1984) argue that inertial forces make the change process very slow compared to the rate of environmental change. This is specifically true for core organizational features which are difficult to change. These features include; the organization stated goals, forms of authority, and strategy. Changing core features could be risky and costly (Hannan & Freeman, 1984). As a result, the organization may fail to exploit the environmental opportunities or to avoid threats in a timely fashion (Majid *et al*., 2011). The slow response to environmental opportunities and threats has enabled developed countries to outcompete developing countries economically (Majid *et al*., 2011).

Structural inertial forces result from internal organizational factors as well as external environmental factors (Hannan & Freeman, 1977). The internal factors include; sunk costs associated with plant, equipment, and personnel that cannot be transferred from one place in the organization to another in a timely manner, lack of availability of information which decision makers need to make strategic decisions, internal political constraints regarding the redistribution of resources among organizational subunits, and norms or procedures that the organization has established over time (Hannan & Freeman, 1977).

The external factors include; legal and fiscal barriers to entry and exit from markets, high costs of acquiring information on the environment especially if it is turbulent, loss of legitimacy, and costs associated with it if the organization changes its structures and strategies, and the collective rationality problem. This problem results from the fact that no

one can assume that a strategy chosen by an organization to cope with an environmental challenge will be effective for other organizations (Hannan & Freeman, 1977).

Several scholars have argued that inertial forces establish key conditions for radical change and that the strength of inertial forces can vary from time to time depending on organizational and environmental conditions and this makes organizational change more likely under certain conditions. For instance, Greenwood and Hinings (1996) argue that radical change is more likely to occur within an organization if the degree of its institutional normative embeddedness is increased. They also suggest that individuals' commitments to organizational norms and values may decrease when "performance problems and crises act to trigger political dissensus over existing arrangements and permit groups less committed to prevailing practices to more legitimately raise and promote alternative perspectives" (Greenwood & Hinings, 1996, p. 1043).

This erosion of commitment to established norms and values may also result from the emergence of new ideas and views (Greenwood & Hinings, 1996). Further, Greenwood and Hinings (1996) contend that change can be prevented by elite domination or use of power to impose certain norms and rules on the non-elite. However, when there is a high tendency for change, structural change takes place regardless of elite domination or power (Gersick, 1991). contends that a system's deep structures generate inertia or resistance to change and such resistance creates key conditions for change.

Deep structures refer to interdependence of a system's parts and the way they receive environmental resources. Such deep structures make the system vulnerable to two types of disruption which cause the parts of the system and its activities to be out of alignment with each other and with the environment.

The second type of disruption results from environmental changes which pose a threat to the system as they can influence its ability to acquire resources. So, organizations change to cope with this situation. Dacin (1997) argues that organizations react to several external and internal sources which require them to conform to specific norms. These sources include the broader normative environment, the state, dominant organizations, professional norms or standards, and uncertainty resulting from some task requirements. Institutional forces vary in significance and strength over time and some forces have little or no impact on organizations (Dacin, 1997). Furthermore, some institutional forces affect organizations consistently while others increase or decrease in intensity overtime and at the same time some forces are replaced by new ones (Dacin, 1997).

2.3 Social Media Networks and Organizational Change

According to Markus and Robery (1988), technology can determine and constrain the behavior of humans and organizations and it can also cause change in an organization. Furthermore, technology has the ability to cause dramatic change in the shape of the organization and in the nature of managerial careers (Leavitt & Whisler, 1958). Burkhardt and Brass (1990) suggest that major organizational restructuring occurs when an organization faces an external shock such as the implementation of a new technological innovation. This

shock is associated with an increased level of uncertainty (Tushman & Anderson, 1986). To reduce the level of uncertainty, organizations tend to give individuals who can reduce uncertainty, more power (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1977). Thus, technology can bring about changes in organizational structure or power or both (Burkhardt & Brass, 1990).

One of the greatest technological innovations that humans have witnessed is the Internet which has created significant changes in many organizations. For example, the Internet has reshaped the way humans interact with each other and increased the speed of receiving information. Many organizations are using the Internet to send and to receive emails instead of using a fax machine or writing and mailing a letter to their stakeholders which saves them time and effort (Gorsline, 2010).

Coupled with the use of the Internet was the emergence of social media networks such as Facebook and Twitter which caused major changes in people's lives and within organizations. These networks have enabled millions of people around the globe to share ideas and information in relatively short periods of time and with minimal effort (Falkow, 2010).

More and more individuals and organizations are using Facebook and Twitter to communicate with family members, friends, and co-workers. According to Facebook, it has more than 500 million active users, 50 percent of them log on to their Facebook account on a daily basis and almost 250 million users access their Facebook account through mobile devices. Each user has 130 friends on average.

Facebook users interact with 900 million objects such as pages, groups, events and community pages and more than 30 billion pieces of information (e.g., web links, news, stories, blog posts, notes, photo albums, etc.) are shared every month.

Facebook has also been able to reach more countries because of its 70 translations that are available on its website which are done by more than 300,000 users who help translate the website. In addition, an average of 10,000 websites integrates with Facebook every day (Facebook, 2011).

Twitter has more than 200 million registered users (Barnett, 2011). They send almost a billion tweets every week. Almost 460,000 new accounts were added recently, and the number of users accessing their Twitter account through mobile devices has increased by 182 percent over the last year (Barnettt, 2011). The above information indicates how powerful these social media networks can be in disseminating knowledge and information across the globe and in creating momentum for change at the individual as well as the organizational level.

2.4 The Punctuated Equilibrium Theory

The theory suggests that organizations develop a typical pattern of activity based on environmental conditions and management decisions which create inertial forces. Because of the resultant inertial forces, the organization keeps supporting the established pattern. Therefore, to break the grip of such inertial forces, a radical change in the activity pattern is required (Romanelli & Tushman, 1994).

According to Romanelli and Tushman (1994), organizations consist of interdependent

subunits which tend to resist change because the heads of such subunits try to keep a strong network of commitments and relationships. Such resistance to change is important to punctuated equilibrium theorists because it is the "key condition" that supports radical transformation.

The punctuations of the equilibrium can result from political events such as elections (Oetzel, Bettis, & Zenner, 2001) or industry events such as introducing a technological breakthrough (Tushman & Anderson, 1986). The theory also suggests that deep structures generate inertia (Gersick, 1991). Deep structures refer to the major choices a system has made for its parts, the way they are organized, and the main activities which help maintain its existence. During equilibrium periods, the deep structures are maintained and incremental or little change takes place to adjust to some environmental changes. Revolutionary periods are characterized by destroying the deep structures and by creating a new structure or a radical change in response to major environmental changes (Gersick, 1991).

2.5 The Middle East Region and its Importance

Some Middle Eastern countries have been suffering from stagnant inertial pressures for a few decades. Such inertial pressures have prevented radical change from taking place until recently when people started protesting and taking to the streets to break the grip of inertial forces.

Typically these forces result from monopolizing of power by a small group of officials which is normally supported by the military, large business corporations, widespread corruption and a "culture of repression that is vigorous and deeply ingrained" (Beaumont, 2011). For example, the former Egyptian President ruled the country for almost thirty years (Shatz, 2010). During his reign, no real opposition parties were allowed to form or to supervise elections and even if elections were held, they were fraudulent (Kelly, 2005). Emergency laws were used to prevent any mass gatherings or demonstrations, and human rights and freedoms were disrespected or ignored (Shatz, 2010).

Other examples include the Yemeni President who ruled his country for decades (Trisman, 2011), the former Tunisian President who ruled the country for nearly twenty three years (Davies, 2011) and the Libyan President who was in power for almost forty one years (Frayer, 2011).

The Middle East has been a central global region for many decades because of its oil and natural gas reserves. Moreover, the region includes Iran and Israel which are two important countries whose policies and actions impact the West's foreign policy (Dyer, 2010). This is true because of the Israeli occupation of Palestine and the constant conflict between the two nations and Iran's nuclear weapon program (Dyer, 2010). The current changes in the region (e.g., radical changes in countries' leadership and structure) make the region even more significant to the world.

The region also includes Egypt which is the largest Arab country with a population of more than eighty million people and the one with the strongest military in the region (Mitropolitski, 2004). Egypt was the first Arab state to sign a peace treaty with Israel and this strengthened

its relationships with the West (Mitropolitski, 2004). Egypt has also played a moderator role in the peace process between Israel and its neighboring Arab states (Khan, 2003).

2.6 Linking Inertia and Social Media to the Current Changes in the Middle East

As mentioned above and according to the punctuated equilibrium model, inertial forces establish the key conditions for radical change and introducing a new technological breakthrough helps create such change (Romanelli & Tushman, 1994). This model applies very well to the Middle East, particularly Egypt. The country has witnessed a major transformational change which resulted in replacing top leaders of the country including the president who ruled for more than 30 years.

A major driving force for such radical change was Facebook and other social media networks which galvanized the protests and helped them organize their actions and share information. Social media networks have contributed significantly to the current changes in Middle Eastern countries. The Tunisians used Facebook and Twitter to communicate to each other to arrange for anti-government demonstrations which caused major change in Tunisia and ended with overthrowing the president (Laudermilk, 2011).

The role of Facebook was even more impressive in Egypt. After two Egyptian police officers murdered a 28-year old Egyptian, who had evidence of police corruption, a human rights activist created a Facebook page to show police brutality (Preston, 2011). Within few months, 130,000 people joined the page. The number grew to 473,000 people who were able to create momentum and to recruit people to gather in Tahrir Square in Cairo.

Overall, social media networks have helped create and accelerate the process of radical change in part of the Middle East region by allowing people to share information, to organize, and to galvanize global support. This change took place after some inertial forces created the necessary conditions for radical change.

Based on the above discussion, I propose that:

Proposition 1: Inertial forces in some Middle Eastern countries have created the necessary conditions for radical change.

Proposition 2: Given the inertial forces in the Middle East, social media networks have been a major factor in creating radical change in Middle Eastern countries.

3. Practical Implications

This paper has implications for countries and individuals. Countries should change their ruling structures and strategies to adapt to environmental changes to satisfy citizens' needs. This adaptation and response enable rulers to remain in power until their term in office ends without the need to use force. This age of information has enabled individuals from different parts of the World to access and to share information in an unprecedented way. Hiding facts from the public is no longer possible and suppression of citizens and denying them their basic human rights will not help rulers cling to power.

Structures inertial forces in some Middle Eastern countries have resisted organizational

change for decades, but such forces have also established the necessary conditions for radical change. Rulers of countries who use negative inertial forces should eliminate such forces and replace them with more positive ones. In addition, social media networks are capable of building momentum for radical change, when negative inertial forces are present. The citizens of countries whose rulers use negative inertial forces to remain in power, can use social media networks such as Facebook to organize demonstrations and to create change.

4. Limitations and Future Research

The findings of the paper are limited to the Middle East countries which had suffered from stagnant inertial forces. More specifically, they pertain to countries where the change process has been slow or almost non-existing and where people had access to social media networks.

Future research should focus on comparing the influence of structural inertia forces on organizational change to find out which forces are the most influential, during what time periods, and why. The findings can help countries eliminate those forces which have the most negative influence first, and then eliminate the less serious ones. In addition, future research should examine the success rate of radical change after it takes place and the reasons of success or failure. In other words, did change yield positive and desirable outcomes which individuals wished for or did it result in negative and undesirable outcomes which individuals never anticipated and why.

5. Conclusion

The paper has addressed the issue of structural inertia and radical change in some Middle Eastern countries which have had inertial forces. Following the punctuated equilibrium model, the paper suggests that such forces have established the necessary conditions for some radical change in part of the Middle East region. Also, social media networks have been a factor in creating such change by galvanizing protestors and by allowing them to share information, to organize, and to build support and momentum for the change process.

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