Facebook Officials Keep Quiet on Its Role in Revolts

By JENNIFER PRESTON

With Facebook playing a starring role in the revolts that toppled governments in Tunisia and Egypt, you might think the company’s top executives would use this historic moment to highlight its role as the platform for democratic change. Instead, they really do not want to talk about it.

The social media giant finds itself under countervailing pressures after the uprisings in the Middle East. While it has become one of the primary tools for activists to mobilize protests and share information, Facebook does not want to be seen as picking sides for fear that some countries — like Syria, where it just gained a foothold — would impose restrictions on its use or more closely monitor users, according to some company executives who spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were discussing internal business.

And Facebook does not want to alter its firm policy requiring users to sign up with their real identities. The company says this requirement protects its users from fraud. However, human rights advocates like Susannah Vila, the director of content and outreach for Movements.org, which provides resources for digital activists, say it could put some people at risk from governments looking to ferret out dissent.

“People are going to be using this platform for political mobilization, which only underscores the importance of ensuring their safety,” she said.

Under those rules, Facebook shut down one of the most popular Egyptian Facebook protest pages in November because Wael Ghonim, a Google executive who emerged as a symbol of the revolt, had used a pseudonym to create a profile as one of the administrators of the page, a violation of Facebook’s terms of service.

With Egypt’s emergency law in place limiting freedom of speech, Mr. Ghonim might have put himself and the other organizers at risk if they were discovered at that time. Activists scrambled to find another administrator to get the page back up and running. And when Egyptian government authorities did figure out Mr. Ghonim’s role with the Facebook page that helped promote the Jan. 25 protest in Tahrir Square, he was imprisoned for 12 days.

Last week, Senator Richard J. Durbin, Democrat of Illinois, urged Facebook to take “immediate
and tangible steps” to help protect democracy and human rights activists who use its services, including addressing concerns about not being able to use pseudonyms.

In a letter to Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook’s chief executive, Mr. Durbin said the recent events in Egypt and Tunisia had highlighted the costs and benefits of social tools to democracy and human rights advocates. “I am concerned that the company does not have adequate safeguards in place to protect human rights and avoid being exploited by repressive governments,” he wrote.

Elliot Schrage, the vice president for global communications, public policy and marketing at Facebook, declined to discuss Facebook’s role in the recent tumult and what it might mean for the company’s services.

In a short statement, he said: “We’ve witnessed brave people of all ages coming together to effect a profound change in their country. Certainly, technology was a vital tool in their efforts but we believe their bravery and determination mattered most.”

Other social media tools, like YouTube and Twitter, also played major roles in Tunisia and Egypt, especially when the protests broke out. But Facebook was the primary tool used in Egypt, first to share reports about police abuse and then to build an online community that was mobilized to join the Jan. 25 protests.

In recent weeks, Facebook pages and groups trying to mobilize protesters have sprung up in Algeria, Bahrain, Morocco and Syria. Hashtags on Twitter have also helped spread the protests, which extended to Algeria over the weekend and to Bahrain, Iran and Yemen on Monday.

“This is an incredible challenge and an incredible opportunity for Facebook, Twitter and Google,” said Ethan Zuckerman, a senior researcher at the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard, where he works on projects about the use of technology and media in the developing world. “It might be tougher for Facebook than anyone else. Facebook has been ambivalent about the use of their platform by activists.”

Unlike Vodafone and other telecommunications carriers, which often need contracts and licenses to operate within countries, Facebook and other social networks are widely available around the world (except in countries like China, and Iran, which have restricted access) and encourage the free flow of information for anyone with access to the Internet.

In a speech that Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton is scheduled to deliver Tuesday, she will once again emphasize that Internet freedom is an inalienable right. In recent weeks, the State Department has been sending out Twitter updates in Arabic and began sending updates in Persian over the weekend.

Twitter and YouTube, which is owned by Google, have been more willing to embrace their roles in
activism and unrest, Mr. Zuckerman said.

After the Internet was shut down in Egypt, Twitter and Google actively helped protesters by producing a new service, speak2tweet, that allowed people to leave voice mail messages that would be filed as updates on Twitter. Biz Stone, one of Twitter’s founders, used it as an opportunity to emphasize the positive global impact that comes with the open exchange of information.

When the Internet was back up, YouTube, working with Storyful, a social media news curation service, took the thousands of videos pouring in from the protests in Tahrir Square to help people retrieve and share the information as quickly as possible on CitizenTube, its news and politics channel.

Facebook has taken steps to help protesters in Tunisia after government officials used a virus to obtain local Facebook passwords this year. The company rerouted Facebook’s traffic from Tunisia and used the breach to upgrade security last month for all of its more than 550 million users worldwide; at the same time, it was careful to cast the response as a technical solution to a security problem. There are about two million Facebook users in Tunisia and five million in Egypt.

Debbie Frost, a spokeswoman for Facebook, said the company was not considering changing its policy requiring users to use their real identities, which she says leads to greater accountability and a safer environment.

“The trust people place in us is the most important part of what makes Facebook work,” she said, adding that the company welcomed a discussion with Mr. Durbin and others who have an interest in this matter. “As demonstrated by our response to threats in Tunisia, we take this trust seriously and work aggressively every single day to protect people.”

Mr. Durbin has urged Facebook to join the Global Network Initiative, a voluntary code of conduct for technology companies, created in 2008, that requires participating businesses to take reasonable steps to protect human rights.

Andrew Rasiej, founder of the Personal Democracy Forum, said that the people and companies behind the technology needed to be more transparent about what information they collect, and that they needed to develop consistent policies to allow people to opt in or out of their data collection systems. “We must have a right to protect the privacy of information stored in the cloud as rigorously as if it were in our own home,” he said.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

**Correction: February 25, 2011**

An article on Feb. 15 about the role of Facebook in the revolts that have toppled governments in Tunisia and Egypt, referred imprecisely to the policy of Saudi Arabia regarding domestic access to
Facebook. While Saudi Arabia has temporarily limited such access in the past, it is not currently doing so.