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*Institutt for sammenliknende politikk*

# Online Service Providers and the Arab Spring

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## **ABSTRACT**

The role played by internet and mobile phone services – access providers, social media etc – in the Arab Spring has been much discussed, including in academia. Whether these services were instrumental in the wave of revolutions that took over the Middle East and North Africa in 2011 has been widely studied. However, the question of how the firms behind these services reacted to the events, and why, has not been discussed. What factors explain that Online Service Providers adopted different attitudes to the Arab Spring? Drawing from political risk theory and research on business and peace, I propose a framework to analyse online service providers' attitude, and factors that might offer an explanation. The study proposes a comparison between four firms' attitude to the Arab Spring in Egypt, based on the qualitative analysis of their corporate communication. Two firms that did not communicate on the events are also included in the study, to better contrast results. I find that a combination of three factors explains their attitude: well-established corporate social responsibility policies and ethical principles (creed), prior experience of similar conflict abroad and in Egypt, and the combination of little to no assets in Egypt with the support of firms' home country. The study highlights limits of political risk theory and theory of business and peace, which both rely on the premises that firms are present in country.

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## 1 Introduction: the Arab Spring and online tools

The Arab Spring, the wave of protests that hit the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) following the immolation of a street vendor in Tunisia in December 2010 and continued throughout 2011, was at the time hailed as a series of “Facebook Revolutions” or “Digital Revolutions” (Beaumont 2011). This was due to the perception that online tools (such as social media, email, etc...) played an important role during the protests, facilitating the mobilization of many protesters and the cascading of protests from Tunisia to Egypt, Libya and many other countries in the MENA region.

Researchers have begun studying the role online tools can play in authoritarian regimes before these events, calling them “Liberation Technologies” (Diamond 2010). This stream of research into the uses and impacts of internet-enabled services continues, looking into how activists use such tools to organise (Howard and Hussain 2011; Manuel. Castells 2015), how they change the balance of power between authoritarian regimes and citizens (Meier 2012), or how they are used to diffuse information beyond the region (Aday et al. 2012). Another stream of research shows how online tools are also used as surveillance and propaganda tools by authoritarian regimes (Cattle 2015; Morozov 2012). Based on this research on the use of online tools during the Arab Spring, it appears that these tools were not used by a majority of protesters, but that they were mostly used to communicate about events to the outside world. Both Cattle and Morozov raise questions regarding the fact that online services used in the context of protests, and the Arab Spring, are in fact owned and administered by private companies.

These firms, Online Service Providers (OSP), can be defined as “any company, organisation or group that provides an online service. These types of services may include Web sites, discussion forums, chat rooms, or Web mail. OSPs may also refer to a company that provides access to the Internet” (Wentrup and Ström 2017, 158). As presented above, little has been written on the role played by these companies during the Arab Spring: research has focused on the role played by the services firms provide. However, these services cannot be disconnected from the organizations that provide them: private firms, whose interest is to make profits. The academic fields focusing on corporate social responsibility (CSR) and business and human rights have just begun studying the role and impact of Online Service Providers with regards to democracy and human rights.

Research on business and peace focuses on how business can avoid fostering conflict and participate in building peace and supporting human rights. However, this field of research has focused mostly on specific industrial sectors, in particular extractive industries, which are asset-heavy (Ford 2015). Moreover, earlier studies of firms' attitude to conflict have either focused on the behaviour of firms, not on factors that might explain it (Kolk and Lenfant 2012), or on the factors influencing the *possibility* of such behaviour, not on their actual behaviour (Oetzel and Getz 2012).

The question of how firms react to political events is certainly not a new one, as literature on political risk provides several ways to understand the issues firms face in foreign countries. The literature mostly concerns itself with the threats posed by changes in regulation, not violent conflict, and is interested in the moment of the decision to invest in a foreign country, not in how firms with ongoing operations react. However, OSPs are not necessarily asset-heavy: sometimes they did not have any physical presence in the region yet decided to engage with the events of the Arab Spring.

Based on the short presentation above, there is clearly a gap in the academic literature with regards to the role of online service providers in conflict in general, and in the events of the Arab Spring in particular. This gap is especially important to fill, as the role of internet in the Arab Spring has been studied extensively: 247 peer-reviewed articles were published between 2011 and 2016 (Smidi and Shahin 2017), confirming the interest of academia on the topic.

## 1.1 Research question

Thus, I propose the following research question: *What factors explain that Online Service Providers adopted different attitudes towards the Arab Spring?*

This research question implies that Online Service Providers adopted different attitudes to the Arab Spring. It is necessary to first investigate these attitudes before looking at factors that can explain them.

Studying the phenomenon of the Arab Spring across the Middle East and North Africa is too large a task for a master's thesis. A third of the studies of the Arab Spring focus on Egypt (Smidi and Shahin 2017, 201), which leads me to look deeper into the role played by OSPs in the events in that country specifically.

Other justifications for focusing on Egypt in order to study OSPs' role in the events are that no foreign intervention facilitated the departure of President Mubarak and the success of the revolution (Howard and Hussain 2013), and the fact that Egypt was the country with most internet users in the Arab world (Abdulla 2007; Howard and Hussain 2011), and with a comparatively large political blogosphere (Etling et al. 2010).

In order to understand what factors explain OSPs' attitudes towards the Arab Spring in Egypt, I, of course, have to study what attitude OSPs adopted during the events. The period under consideration in the following paper will be defined as 14 January 2011 until 21 March 2011. 14 January marks the flight from his country of the former Tunisian President Ben Ali, who had resigned the day before. This date marks the start of the period under consideration, as Tunisia was a strong inspiration for Egyptians, especially after they heard of Ben Ali's departure from his country (Ghonim 2012, 131–32). His departure marked the start of the organization of the first wave of protests in Egypt. Other researchers studying internet and the Arab Spring have also used that date as a starting point (Aday et al. 2013).

I chose 21 March 2011 as the end of the period I will investigate, as on that date Egyptians voted in a referendum on constitutional changes, the first vote since the resignation of President Mubarak on 14 February (Chulov 2011). I could have chosen 14 February as an end-date, however, the Egyptian military announced its intention to maintain military rule, even after Mubarak's departure (McGreal 2011). 21 March is also a good delimitation of the first wave of the Arab Spring in Egypt (there were other waves at the end of the summer 2011, when military delayed the elections, and during the electoral campaign period until November 2011 (Blight, Pulham, and Torpey 2011).

## **1.2 Thesis organization**

The thesis is built around six sections. Following this first section, the second section presents relevant literature, drawing from scholarship on corporate social responsibility, political risk and business and peace. The third section presents the methodology used to carry out the study of online service providers: comparative case study. It also introduces the selected cases and details how material was gathered. The fourth section offers a deeper dive into the material, analysing the attitude adopted by the firms during the Arab Spring in Egypt, as well as these firms' characteristics. The fifth section discusses the results, offers some theoretical considerations, and reflects on the limits of the study. The last section concludes this paper.

## 2 Theoretical framework

Earlier research in the fields of corporate social responsibility, of political risk, and of business and peace provides a useful background to investigate OSPs' reaction to the Arab Spring. The first section proposes a definition of Online Service Providers and briefly outlines their responsibilities with regards to human rights. In the second section, I discuss scholarship on political risk, in order to shed light on how OSPs might analyse and manage the risks presented by violent conflict. Then I present research on business and peace, and finally, in the fourth section, I propose a framework to analyse OSPs attitude to the Arab Spring in Egypt, along with potential factors that might have influenced them.

### 2.1 Online Service Providers: a specific type of company with specific responsibilities

This section proposes a definition of Online Service Providers, before showing that these firms have specific responsibilities with regards to human rights.

#### 2.1.1 Characteristics of Online Service Providers

Online Service Providers (OSPs), also sometimes called intermediaries (La Rue 2011, 11), are rarely defined by researchers. Current definitions of OSPs often remain vague, based on examples (MacKinnon et al. 2014; Taddeo and Floridi 2015). Wentrup and Ström (2017, 158) base their definition of OSP on Webopedia (2015) and define them as “any company, organisation or group that provides an online service. These types of services may include Web sites, discussion forums, chat rooms, or Web mail. OSPs may also refer to a company that provides access to the Internet”. They also identify a few characteristics of OSPs: they have a geographically wide user base while their operations often remain highly concentrated to a few locations in the West, and they are totally dependent on internet access. They are not dependent on being physically present in an area to have users there.

Hence, Online Service Providers are most often removed from conflict areas, in that they do not have physical assets or operations in conflict areas – or at least do not need to have a physical presence to continue operating in these areas. OSPs operate throughout the world, with few exceptions, meaning that users can be based anywhere in the world, and not

only in areas affected by conflict. In this, OSPs differ greatly from extractive industries, which are most often mentioned and studied under the concept of Business and Peace<sup>1</sup>.

The business model of OSPs is often very different from other industries: there is no financial transaction between most OSPs and their users. The service is provided for free in exchange for the users' data, which are then sold to marketing companies or used to sell advertising space to other businesses (Cattle 2015; Wentrup and Ström 2017) and raises human rights questions, especially with regards to private data these companies can be asked to transfer over by governments (Laidlaw 2017, 146–47).

Finally, Online Service Providers do enable and even administer “citizenship rights”, as demonstrated by Bauer (2014, 267–73). Citizens use online services to inform themselves and share information, to organise and protest, in sum to exercise their civil and political rights. OSPs are then in effect administering the way citizens exercise these rights, which can create problems, for example, when Facebook's terms of use require users to use their real identity instead of a pseudonym. Activists in authoritarian regimes then have to circumvent the OSP's policy in order to ensure their security – thus risking exclusion from the service (Cattle 2015, 446).

### 2.1.2 Business and Human Rights

Among the characteristics of OSPs identified above, the fact that they administer human rights calls for further discussion. Indeed, Broeders and Taylor (2017) demonstrate how OSPs enjoy great powers: they have more users than some states have citizens, they provide most of the communication infrastructure, and they also organise speech across states' borders: the power of OSPs has “political and foreign dimensions” (Broeders and Taylor 2017, 316). The authors also highlight how OSPs shape the information society – sometimes in agreement with governments and sometimes in opposition to them – and how they shape what information citizens and governments receive and how they receive it, meaning that OSPs have great political power, and great social responsibilities (Broeders and Taylor 2017, 319).

This, as well as the Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression (La Rue 2011, secs. 47 & 76), confirm that

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<sup>1</sup> Business and Peace is developed in section 1.3 of this document.

the framework Protect – Respect – Remedy (Ruggie 2008) should inform research on how Online Service Providers reacted to the Arab Spring. Freedom to access to internet is a human right (La Rue 2011). The Report of the Special Rapporteur was published in May 2011, just after the events of the Arab Spring in Egypt. To write this report, the rapporteur visited Cairo, Egypt, on 11-13 January 2011, in order to consult regional experts. Thus, the report was not available to OSPs at the time of the events in Egypt, but it does reflect ongoing thinking on issues of internet and freedom of expression.

The Protect-Respect-Remedy framework describes how states have the responsibility to protect human rights, but firms have the responsibility to respect human rights, and should not make themselves complicit of human rights abuses (Ruggie 2008). Following Ruggie's framework, states have the primary responsibility to remedy human rights abuses, but business should also provide access to grievance mechanisms. Ruggie also note the existence of initiatives promoting standards of practice, such as the UN Global Compact.

The UN Global Compact was launched in 2000 (Annan 2000). Signatory companies pledge that they will respect ten principles of sustainability, including human rights, and that they will promote the Sustainable Development Goals (Our Mission n.d.). Since then the Global Compact has released a series of guidelines for companies, including with regards to violent conflict (UN Global Compact 2010).

Other relevant guidelines are the 2000 *OECD Principles for Multinational Enterprises* (OECD 2008), which were relevant at the time of the Arab Spring. the updated *OECD Principles* (2011) and the *Guiding Principles for Business and Human Rights* (United Nations 2011) were published as the Arab Spring unfolded in the region, but after the period under analysis (they were adopted in May and June 2011, respectively) – hence an analysis of OSPs' reaction to the events cannot be based entirely on these.

Both the 2000 *OECD Principles* and the Protect-Respect-Remedy framework emphasize that corporations have to respect the human rights guaranteed in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Both the *OECD Principles* and the Protect – Respect - Remedy framework are soft law: they do not bind corporations legally, although their application is encouraged.

Work presented here shows how OSPs have responsibilities, which are intimately tied to their specificity, and, in particular, to the fact that they do administrate citizenship rights. I

find here justification to investigate how OSPs reacted to the Arab Spring. The OECD *Principles* and the Protect – Respect – Remedy framework should inform such an investigation, and mention of these principles by firms as well as their participation to initiatives such as the *Global Compact* might give an indication on their attitude towards the Arab Spring.

## 2.2 Political risk

“The social responsibility of business is to increase its profits”, according to Friedman (1970). Since then, the literature on international business has studied how corporations have adopted political behaviours, sometimes becoming political actors (Scherer, Palazzo, and Matten 2014), providing public goods, including ones that are normally only provided by sovereign states, such as security (Wolf, Deitelhoff, and Engert 2007), and engaging in philanthropic activities. But what are the motivations behind such engagement, which goes so far beyond Friedman’s assertion? An answer is offered by the literature on political risk: political behaviours, including philanthropy and social responsibility initiatives, are among the strategies used by firms to manage political risk (Boddewyn and Brewer 1994).

Following a section defining political risk, I draw upon literature analysing political risk and how firms manage such risk. A final section highlights the specificities of domestic firms facing political risk.

### 2.2.1 Defining political risk

The literature on political risk provides theories to understand multinational enterprises’ (MNE) attitude to political events. Political events can impact MNEs in three aspects: they can affect their capacity to transfer capital, technology, or people; their ability to operate; and their ability to own and manage their assets in the host country (Kobrin 1979, 68). Political risk is industry- and firm-specific, as not all industries are affected in the same way by political events, and as not all firms are similarly vulnerable to political events.

Political risk can be understood in a broad way as any political event that affects a firm, from changes in regulations to violent conflict (Boddewyn and Brewer 1994; Kobrin 1979). Miller (1992) uses a narrower definition that separates political risk (changes in government, ranging from revolutions to democratic election) from policy risk (changes in policy) and

social risk (for examples riots – this describes events related to a population disagreeing with the government). For this paper, a broader understanding of political risk will be assumed, as in the case of the Arab Spring in Egypt, social risk (the opposition of the population to its government) led to a revolution, which ultimately resulted in a change in government.

Based on this definition of political risk, political events such as the Arab Spring can affect business' ability to operate, transfer and own assets in the affected country. This definition seems to limit itself to firms that have assets and operate in the affected country, the host country. What about industries that do not rely on heavy in-country assets?

### 2.2.2 Analysing political risk

Research on political risk has mostly focused on the investment stage – when multinationals consider whether to go ahead with foreign direct investments (FDI) in a host country (Hood and Nawaz 2004; John and Lawton 2017; Oetzel, Getz, and Ladek 2007), or on later stages, when firms decide to exit (Dai, Eden, and Beamish 2017).

Theory based on bargaining power considers that firms and governments each have something the other is interested in. For a firm, bargaining power is at its highest before entry in the host country, and this is thus when political risk is at its lowest (Stevens, Xie, and Peng 2016). Oetzel, Getz and Ladek (2007) highlight how bargaining power theory does also allow for analysing a firm's exposure to political risk beyond the investment stage, after a firm has made its first investments. They insist on the fact that most investments are at least of a medium to long-term nature, especially in manufacturing, infrastructure and extractive industries. Beyond negotiations with the host government regarding business operations, bargaining-power theory also explains firms' political behaviour, including during political events such as revolution and conflict (Boddewyn and Brewer 1994).

Stevens, Xie and Peng (2016), however, identify limits to the bargaining-power theory. Research on political risk has long focused on asset-heavy sectors such as extractive industries and manufacturing, but do not account for the specificities of the service industry, which comparatively has little assets in a host country. Because the service industry involves little in-country assets, a lot less interests are engaged in the host country, and hence the service industry should be a lot less exposed to political risk, according to bargaining-power

theory. They introduce legitimacy as another paradigm for firms to understand and manage political risk.

The legitimacy-based approach fills the gap left by separating the notions of home country and host country: firms face numerous demands from stakeholders both at home, in the host country, and even globally (Windsor 2007). If a firm's actions and attributes are seen as "desirable, proper or appropriate" (Suchman 1995, 574) it will gain legitimacy to operate in the eyes of society and government. Three types of organizational legitimacy are generally identified: cognitive (when an organization is taken for granted), pragmatic (when an organization benefits the evaluator) and moral (when an organization's norms are seen as positive) (Bitektine 2011; Suchman 1995). Both pragmatic and moral legitimacy are fluid concepts: they are constantly being evaluated by stakeholders.

A firm's legitimacy is not universal: a firm can be seen as legitimate at home, and not in the host country, or vice versa. A firm can also have legitimacy in the eyes of a government but not in the eyes of society at large, if the government itself is not seen as legitimate. If a firm derives its local legitimacy solely from the government, and that government is perceived as illegitimate, the firm's legitimacy in the eyes of society at large will be very weak (Darendeli and Hill 2015).

According to Stevens, Xie and Peng, the question of the legitimacy of firms and governments in the eyes of society help understand why a government might intervene in a firm's operations (and thus how a firm might be exposed to political risk). The authors demonstrate that in order to analyse a firm's exposure to political risk, one needs to look into the firm's legitimacy in the eyes of the host society, and in those of its home society, as well as into its legitimacy in the eyes of both home and host governments. One also needs to take into account the legitimacy of home and host governments. The legitimacy-based approach to political risk allows for understanding that the service industry, including search engines and telecom, also face political risk (Stevens, Xie, and Peng 2016), which they have to manage both at home and in the host country.

However, Stevens et al (2016) consider that governments who see firms as legitimate will not intervene in their operations. They also consider that even if a government sees a firm as illegitimate, it won't intervene in its activities if the firm is seen as legitimate by society. The example of Online Service Providers in Egypt seems to challenge this, as the Egyptian

authorities disrupted activities of firms that operated in joint venture with a state-owned firm, and also intervened in activities of firms that were seen as legitimate by society.

The case of OSPs' attitude to the Arab Spring in Egypt calls for pushing further this understanding of political risk based on legitimacy: firms are exposed to political risk existing both in the host country and in the home country. This implies that firms are exposed to political risk in a host country where they have assets. However, some OSPs did not have any assets in Egypt at the time. Yet, they still engaged with the conflict in Egypt. Thus, it seems that OSPs need to manage political risk also in areas where they are not physically present, which a legitimacy-based approach might explain: in Egypt, some OSPs might have acted in order to maintain their legitimacy in the eyes of their "home" society and home government, in which case such factors as headquarter location might have influenced their attitude. However, the relationship between firm legitimacy in the eyes of government, firm legitimacy in the eyes of society and political risk needs to be further explored, as the example of OSPs in Egypt appears to contradict Stevens, Xie and Peng's argument (2016).

### **2.2.3 Managing political risk**

To limit the impact of political events on their activities, firms need to take mitigating measures. Literature regarding how firms do manage the political risks they are exposed to is less abundant. Theoretical approaches can be found among studies of business-government relations. Boddewyn and Bower (1994) suggest a framework to describe the behaviours firms adopt towards their host government. Firms can be non-bargaining or bargaining, meaning firms can choose avoidance (and exit the host country), compliance or circumvention (sometimes illegally) of government's regulations, and thus not engage with their host government. They can also decide to adopt a bargaining strategy and engage with the government, either partnering or entering into conflict with it. This theory is based on bargaining-power and assumes that firms which have power in the eyes of the host government will decide to engage with it and adopt a bargaining behaviour, whereas firms enjoying less power will refrain from bargaining.

However, this typology of possible strategies of business-government relations does not completely explain how firms manage political risk: it focuses on relations with the host government, neglecting other stakeholders (such as the civil society or rebel groups). It does not offer an understanding of what course of action firms decide to adopt to mitigate for

different types of political risk, and it does not help with understanding which factors impact a firm's decision to engage with political events, or not. The fact that Online Service Providers that had little to no assets in Egypt decided to engage in favour of peace and human rights contradicts the premise that firms engage with a *host* country. It also questions the assumption that these firms did not face political risk in Egypt, since they decided to engage with the conflict. It seems that contrary to what Boddewyn and Brewer argue (1994), firms adopt political behaviours also in country where they have little to no assets. This challenges the theory that firms that have power in the eyes of a government will engage in bargaining behaviour with that government.

Others have studied the political behaviours firms adopt to manage different types of political risk, but these studies mostly take into account a single risk factor: government regulations (Keillor, Wilkinson, and Owens 2005). They focus on firms' capacity to transfer and own assets, and on how host governments can decide to limit this capacity.

Few do focus on risks that go beyond changes in regulations, such as protests, revolution or violent conflict. Some have focused on MNE's decision to exit (or stay in) the host country when it faces war (Dai, Eden, and Beamish 2017), showing that MNEs with prior experience of risky situations and more resources exposed to war are less likely to exit the host country than similarly exposed MNEs with less experience. However, firms with less assets in-country tend to exit, regardless of prior experience. This study does not account for the attitude MNEs adopt once they decide to remain in the country. Does prior experience of conflict affect the attitude firms adopt through a new conflict?

Oetzel and Getz (2012) investigate how firms might react to violent conflict, and the factors that would affect their behaviour. They find that firms (local and multinationals) would react directly to violent conflict under the pressure of local stakeholders, while international stakeholders' pressure would push firms to act more indirectly. Interestingly, they find out that firms in the utilities industry (including transportation, utilities and communication) are less likely than other firms to respond directly to violent conflict, as well as indirectly and unilaterally. The response strategies under consideration are direct and collaborative, direct and unilateral, indirect and collaborative and indirect and unilateral (Oetzel, Getz, and Ladek 2007). A direct approach is when a firm tries to influence parties to the conflict, for example by lobbying with the government, by speaking out publicly, or by facilitating negotiations. An indirect approach is understood as actions aiming at alleviating

populations' sufferings and/or addressing root causes to the conflict. Firms can decide to act alone or collaborate with other organizations (firms or NGOs for example).

However, the study is based on a survey among companies who have signed the UN Global Compact, and on the hypothetical way they might respond to a violent conflict, not on firms' responses to actual conflict. Moreover, the study focuses on the role of stakeholder pressure on the strategies firms might adopt. Other factors might come into play, such as prior experience of violent conflict, localisation of headquarters, etc... If their study demonstrates that firms participating in the UN Global Compact are willing to respond to conflict and to foster peace, the fact that it is based on how firms *might* react to violent conflict does limit the generalizability of its results. In Egypt, Online Service Providers who were involved in the UN Global Compact did not adopt behaviours aiming at fostering peace, which challenges Oetzel and Getz's findings (2012).

Darendeli and Hill (2015) look into how Turkish construction firms engaged in Libya survived to the events of the Arab Spring, and the fall of Qadhafi's regime. They show how the firms that survived the conflict, and the change in government, were pursuing pragmatic and moral legitimacy in the eyes of stakeholders beyond the host government prior to the events. Firms that had developed connections to local tribes prior to the events (ensuring a form of moral legitimacy in the eyes of stakeholders) and firms that were working on projects of public interest (such as infrastructure, construction of public universities and hospitals) and thus enjoying a form of pragmatic legitimacy survived the turmoil better than others. Thus, the legitimacy-based approach helps understand the political risk faced by firms during the Arab Spring in Libya, and likely in Egypt, too.

#### **2.2.4 A note on domestic firms and political risk**

Most of the literature on political risk focuses on multinational enterprises and how they relate to political events and engage with governments and stakeholders, thus neglecting to consider how domestic firms face uncertainty and are impacted by political events. Because domestic firms do not have the competence and experience MNEs have acquired, nor the same resources (Luo and Tan 1998), they do not perceive and tackle political risk in the same way (Eden and Miller 2004; Luo and Tan 1998; Zaheer 1995). But where MNEs suffer from a liability of foreignness, meaning that they face challenges linked to their lack of knowledge of the host country, absence of a local network and political influence, and the natural preference

for domestic firms (Wöcke and Moodley 2015; Zaheer 1995), domestic firms benefit from a better understanding of their environment and better networks (Eden and Miller 2004).

However, some research seems to show that domestic firms and MNEs do not differ as greatly as expected in the way they handle political risk in the form of regulatory uncertainty (Wöcke and Moodley 2015). Domestic firms are more likely than MNE to adopt an avoidance strategy in the face of regulatory adversity – but it is about the only difference identified by the authors. The authors however highlight that they study the health sector in South Africa – an industry in which MNEs have actually been present in the country for much longer than domestic firms.

In sum, theory of firms' political behaviour based on a bargaining-power approach of political risk appears to be challenged by the example of Online Service Providers in Egypt. Boddewyn and Brewer's argument that firms that have power in the eyes of a government will engage in bargaining behaviour with that government (1994) seems challenged by the fact that some OSPs engaged with the conflict in Egypt despite being absent from the country. If the legitimacy-based approach to political risk proposes a broader understanding of political risk – both in host and home country (Stevens, Xie, and Peng 2016), it is still limited by the fact that firms' in-country presence is assumed. Moreover, Stevens, Xie and Peng's argument that a government will not disrupt operations of firms that are seen as legitimate by society seems to be challenged by the example of OSPs in Egypt. Literature on political risk has also mostly failed to analyse how firms operate while facing a conflict situation. Oetzel and Getz's findings in their study of how firms might react to conflict indicate that the firms surveyed – all part of the UN Global Compact – are willing to react strategically to conflict. However, some OSPs, members of the UN Global Compact, did not adopt such strategy. Thus, it makes sense to turn to literature on business and peace, in order to get a better understanding of how firms operate under conflict situations, and what factors might explain the way they engage with such events.

### **2.3 Business and conflict, business and peace**

Research on business and peace provides indications regarding how to understand OSPs' attitude towards the Arab Spring. In order to shed light on this, I first present a definition of

peace. Then I introduce the different ways business can influence peace, as identified by earlier research. Finally, I look into how firms' attitude towards conflict can be studied.

### 2.3.1 Defining peace

Beyond respecting human rights, business can influence peace. Peace in my research is understood in a maximalist definition as the absence of violence, combined with human rights and participatory government (Oetzel et al. 2009, 355).

Although research on business and peace tends to define peace as the absence of violence, the broader definition adopted here allows for consideration of events during the Arab Spring regardless of the level of bloodshed, especially as Arab Spring-related events are considered as conflict (Conflict Barometer 2011). Using the broader definition of peace does not break with the tradition, as many researchers advocate for such a broad understanding of peace (Galtung 1969; Gleditsch, Nordkvelle, and Strand 2014, 155; Oetzel and Miklian 2017). Based on this definition, pro-peace activities include the defence of human rights.

By considering the Arab Spring in this way, I can then turn to research on business and peace, which will allow me to further study how OSPs reacted to the Arab Spring.

### 2.3.2 Why business and peace?

Going back to Friedman's argument that "The social responsibility of business is to increase its profits" (1970), why are firms interested in fostering peace? Under which circumstances are they "expected, willing and motivated to contribute to a specific public governance function, namely, peace and security"? (Jamali and Mirshak 2010, 444). This question is particularly relevant as firms, when facing conflict, are mostly concerned about being able to continue operating through the conflict, and being seen as neutral (Jamali and Mirshak 2010).

The motivations of firms that decide to foster peace might be explained by "need, creed, and greed" (Rettberg 2016). Firms need peaceful conditions to maintain and develop their activities; this is what Rettberg defines as "need". A business's "creed" is its ideology, or ethical belief. Businesses with a portfolio of CSR activities, or with strong ethics are more likely to act for peace. With "greed", Rettberg means that by fostering peace, a firm will gain competitive advantage to increase its profits. However, the notions of "need" and "greed" can also explain that some firms do not engage in peacebuilding activities. Some firms do benefit from conflict.

In the vein of what Rettberg identifies as “need”, the previous section on firms and political risk has shown how firms facing political risk, including violent conflict, adopt strategies to mitigate events’ impact on their operations. Unless firms decide to withdraw from a conflict situation, risk management strategies may include engaging with conflict’s actors, root causes for the conflict or populations affected by the conflict, and thus possibly fostering peace, so that activities can be maintained (and developed). Thus peacebuilding activities are among the strategies firms adopt to manage political risk (Oetzel and Miklian 2017). Businesses adopting peacebuilding strategies in that case consider peace as an “instrumental benefit” (Fort 2015, 120).

Under “creed”, Rettberg takes into account both firms with a pro-peace ideology, similarly to Fort’s “peace entrepreneurs” (Fort 2014, 110, 2015, 100), and firms that carry out CSR activities. The question of CSR activities is however not necessarily part of what Fort calls “peace entrepreneurship”. CSR activities, following Fort, should be rather considered part of ethics businesses apply because they are now a norm. Fort thus describes a third type of peacebuilding firms; firms building peace without realizing it, because they follow well-established norms while continuing business as usual (Fort 2014, 111). Analysing Online Service Providers’ attitude might confirm that CSR policies have become a norm, and thus are not a determinant of a pro-peace attitude.

As highlighted in section 2.1, responsibilities are assigned to business with regards to human rights. Because firms have a responsibility to protect human rights, and because these human rights are a part of peace, firms have a responsibility to “do no harm”, if not foster peace. Because OSPs have great power over citizenship rights, they should make sure that they do not fuel conflict, and that they foster peace. However, other researchers warn of the important criticism that business is not a democratic actor, and thus that for a firm to engage in activities going beyond conflict-sensitive practices might be taking too much responsibility (Ford 2015). Ford insists on the fact that the role of the state matters, and that firms filling governance gap take on too big a role.

It is important to note that most firms seem to be very worried about being associated with peacebuilding (Jamali and Mirshak 2010). Most are focussed on continuing their operations through conflict, not on fostering peace, which the study of OSPs in Egypt might confirm. The study could also confirm Rettberg’s theory (2016) that a combination of need, greed and creed motivates firms to engage in favour of peace. Such a combination might explain that some OSPs adopted a pro-peace attitude, while others did not.

### 2.3.3 How can business foster peace?

A lot of research has focused on how business can foster peace, both from an academic and from a practitioner's perspective. Research has identified four to five general ways in which firms can influence peace.

First, firms foster economic growth, which itself fosters peace (Forrer, Fort, and Gilpin 2012, 4–5; Miklian 2016, 11; Oetzel et al. 2009, 362). Simply by being there and carrying out their activities, firms foster peace.

Second, they can foster peace through developing local economies and local capabilities, either because they use local contractors or via development projects they implement in the context of corporate social responsibility (CSR). This fosters peace as it creates a sense of community (Forrer, Fort, and Gilpin 2012, 5; Oetzel et al. 2009, 365), but is also criticized as CSR policies are often seen as opportunistic and sometimes lead to conflict between communities (Miklian 2016, 12).

Third, firms influence peace by implementing international norms and adopting external evaluation tools (Fort 2015; Miklian 2016, 15; Oetzel et al. 2009, 364). For example, firms that respect human rights and implement transparency standards, and report on these, demonstrate the benefits of peaceful and democratic behaviour, and hence foster peace.

Business also foster peace through conflict-sensitive practices, such as avoiding to finance a party to the conflict, or by addressing the root causes of the conflict (Forrer, Fort, and Gilpin 2012; Miklian 2016, 18; Oetzel et al. 2009, 367).

Finally, firms can influence peace through track-two diplomacy, meaning by participating in or facilitating multi-stakeholders negotiations (Forrer, Fort, and Gilpin 2012; Miklian 2016, 20; Oetzel et al. 2009, 366).

These five ways of influence of business on peace do provide a framework to analyse Online Service Providers' activities during the Arab Spring in Egypt, especially the last two ones, as they imply that firms can go beyond their usual way of operating when facing a conflict. Oetzel et al (2009, 369) also suggest that further research should focus on understanding which firms' characteristics make them more likely to engage in peace-fostering practices. Thus, analysing OSPs' reactions during the Arab Spring in Egypt makes sense in an exploratory perspective.

## 2.4 Analysing firms' attitude towards conflict and peace

This section draws on literature discussed above to offer a framework to analyse firms' attitude first, and then characteristics which might explain the attitude firms adopted.

### 2.4.1 Frameworks to describe firms' attitude

Wolf et al (2007) propose a framework identifying four forms for a firm to engage with conflict: take advantage, business as usual, withdrawal, and "proactive engagement". A firm takes advantage of a conflict, and engages in profiteering, when it benefits from the conflict, and supports the continuation of the conflict. By withdrawing, a firm avoids possibly fuelling conflict, and removes itself from a difficult situation, avoiding further consequences on its personnel and operations, as seen in section 1.2 on political risk. Business as usual and "proactive engagement" should be understood as either in "words" - i.e. public commitments - or "deeds" - actions in a conflict - (Wolf, Deitelhoff, and Engert 2007). Firms can maintain business as usual, or engage proactively in favour of peace, by communicating their commitments. Alternatively, firms engage proactively or maintain business as usual in their actions.

Jamali and Mirshak (2010) offer an overview of how firms engage with conflict based on prior research in the academic fields of international business political behaviour and of business & society, and on practitioners' literature. Their proposed framework is reproduced on the next page (figure 1). The framework places firms' strategies with regards to conflict on a continuum, from a coping strategy to a conflict-resolution strategy. It shows the parallels between the different streams of research they take into account. Rows 1 and 2 come from the literature on political behaviour, whereas row 3 comes from practitioners' perspective and row 4 is the framework identified by Wolf et al (2007). However, as Jamali and Mirshak (2010) themselves note, the different classifications suggested do not strictly overlap.

In fact, strategies presented in row 1 & 4 (avoidance, withdrawal and profiteering) do not overlap with row 2 & 3 (passive reaction and compliance). Compliance and passive reaction could rather be considered as "business as usual" in the words of Wolf et al (2007). Moreover, the proposed framework remains general, describing strategies but not really including firm's activities that foster peace (presented in section 1.3). It does not take into

account the distinctions between words and deeds (Wolf, Deitelhoff, and Engert 2007), between indirect and direct actions (Oetzel and Getz 2012; Oetzel, Getz, and Ladek 2007).

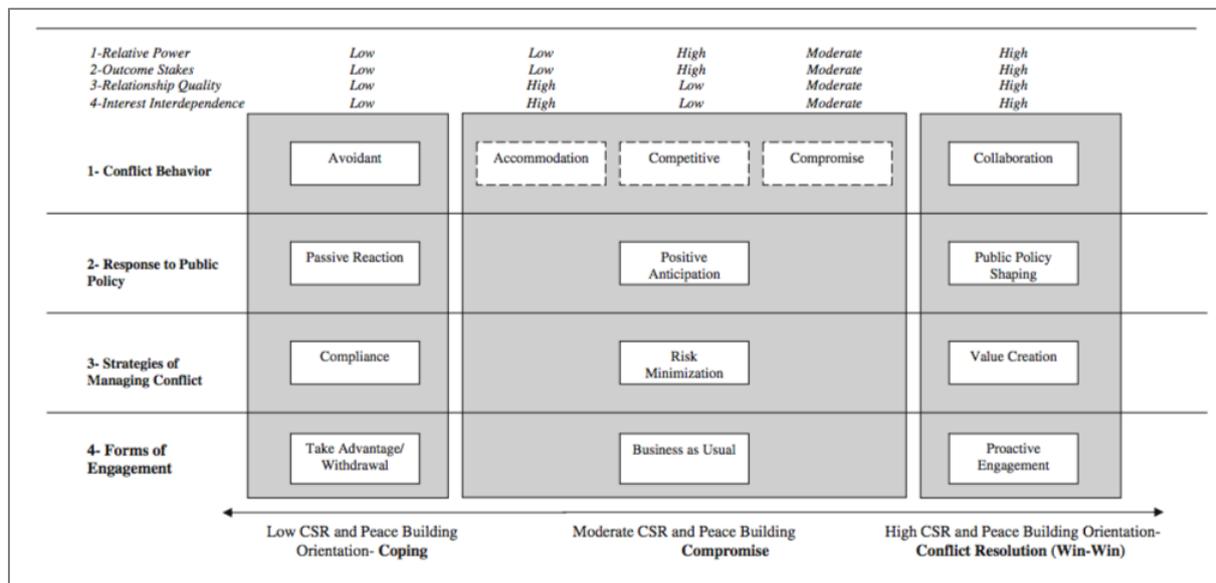


Figure 1 Business-conflict linkages: MNC strategies, CSR and conflict (Jamali and Mirshak 2010)

Attempts at investigating how firms react to conflict using the frameworks presented above have been made. In particular, Kolk and Lenfant (2012) have used a framework inspired from these suggestions. They evaluate how companies react to conflict: are they avoidant, do they use a “business as usual” strategy or do they adopt strategies to facilitate conflict resolution? Kolk and Lenfant developed this framework to study multinational companies’ standing to the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), in the context of a wider study looking into how multinational companies collaborate with non-governmental organisations in DRC. For this study, the scholars consider firms to be “avoidant” if they do not provide any information on the conflict on their website or in reports, and if they have not answered the study questionnaire. “Business as usual firms” are firms that, despite disclosing some information (in their own reporting or in the questionnaire), are not specific about the conflict in DRC. “Conflict resolution” firms are those who are more specific with regards to the conflict and their possible role in the conflict, either in their reporting or in their answers to the questionnaire. This shows the difficulties of studying firms’ attitude to a conflict, as Kolk and Lenfant take into account what firms say, but not necessarily their activities. As they note themselves, these categories are rigid,

whereas placing firms' attitudes to the conflict on a continuum would provide a more precise understanding of the situation.

Analysing each firm's attitude based on the typology of activities presented in section 2.3.3 will allow for more granularity. Taking into account firms' engagement in words and deeds (Wolf, Deitelhoff, and Engert 2007) and directedness or indirectedness of their engagement (Oetzel and Getz 2012) will draw a more comprehensive picture of their attitude. Thus, I propose a continuum from taking advantage through to proactive engagement based on the work of Wolf et al (2007) and Jamali and Mirshak (2010). In order to place firms on this continuum, their activities during a conflict should be considered according to the typology of peace-fostering behaviours, taking into account whether each firm used words or actions.

#### **2.4.2 Factors influencing firms**

Based on scholarship presented earlier in this chapter, a series of factors should be included while studying firms' attitude towards conflict and peace. Based on bargaining-power theory, one should include firm size, firm ownership form, the level of a firm's presence in the conflict zone, the location of firm's headquarters, and the type of product or service offered. Legitimacy-based approach to political risk suggests that further factors influence firms' attitude to conflict: product/service visibility, and existing CSR practices and ethical engagement. Furthermore, firm prior experience in the country and of conflict should be considered.

Some consider that smaller firms might be more likely to foster peace in their day-to-day operations, as they contribute directly to the local economy, whereas multinationals, due to their size and resources, have likely more influence on local government and communities (Forrer, Fort, and Gilpin 2012; Nelson 2000). Others suggest that small and medium-sized firms have fewer incentives to adopt a peace-fostering attitude because they face little reputational cost: they are less visible. Big multinationals are thus more likely to engage in conflict-resolution activities (Wolf, Deitelhoff, and Engert 2007). Moreover, bargaining-power theory highlights that bigger firms have more power over governments than smaller firms, and are thus more likely to engage with a government (Boddewyn and Brewer 1994). In particular, firms with more than hundred employees are more likely to adopt a strategic response when facing violent conflict (Oetzel and Getz 2012). Following both bargaining-

power theory and business and peace theories, multinationals have the means and opportunity to engage with both government and local stakeholders in order to support peace.

State-owned firms are likely to be used as a tool for foreign diplomacy by their owner (Forrer, Fort, and Gilpin 2012). Family-owned companies, because they can be related to identified persons, are more likely to try and foster peace than publicly-traded firms (Wolf, Deitelhoff, and Engert 2007). Oetzel and Getz (2012) do not identify any significant difference between publicly-held firms and privately-held firms.

Other factors identified as relevant involve the presence of assets and offices in the conflict zone (Wolf, Deitelhoff, and Engert 2007). Local presence is an incentive for firms to engage with the situation, as firms find themselves impacted (Dai, Eden, and Beamish 2017; Oetzel and Getz 2012). Firms heavily involved in a conflict zone enjoy more bargaining power (Boddeyn and Brewer 1994) and a higher level of legitimacy (Oetzel, Getz, and Ladek 2007) which make them more likely to respond strategically to conflict and adopt peacebuilding strategies.

Location of headquarters is another factor identified as important, as pressure from the home country would push firms to engage in peacebuilding behaviours (Oetzel and Getz 2012; Wolf, Deitelhoff, and Engert 2007); a firm's home country also impacts a firm's legitimacy (Stevens, Xie, and Peng 2016).

The type of product or service offered by a firm can also influence the risk it faces during a conflict, and thus its attitude towards the conflict. Firms offering public services and infrastructure enjoy a higher level of legitimacy in the eyes of a conflict-torn society (Darendeli and Hill 2015), and more bargaining power. If the product or service is visible, locally and internationally, a firm will be pressed to engage in peacebuilding in order to maintain its legitimacy (Oetzel and Getz 2012; Oetzel, Getz, and Ladek 2007; Wolf, Deitelhoff, and Engert 2007).

As highlighted by Rettberg (2016), firms' "creed" also influence their attitude towards peace, and manifest itself through a strongly defined ethic line, public ethical engagement and Corporate Social Responsibility programmes. Firms displaying these characteristics are more likely to engage in peacebuilding (Oetzel, Getz, and Ladek 2007; Wolf, Deitelhoff, and Engert 2007).

Literature on political risk also invites the consideration of two other factors: firms' prior experience of violent conflict, and firms' prior experience in the host country (Dai,

Eden, and Beamish 2017; Oh and Oetzel 2017). Dai et al (2017) show that firms with prior conflict experience tend to exit conflict zones, unless they have important assets in the area. Oh and Oetzel (2017) show that firms with prior conflict experience will not expand in a conflict zone, unless they have prior experience of conflict in the country. Conflict experience and country experience might be relevant when studying OSPs' attitude towards the Arab Spring in Egypt, as not all OSPs who engaged with the events had a physical presence Egypt.

Other factors influencing firms' attitude to conflict and peace include the type of conflict (Forrer, Fort, and Gilpin 2012; Wolf, Deitelhoff, and Engert 2007), but in the case of a study of firms reaction to a single conflict – the Arab Spring in Egypt – this is not relevant. Similarly, although the type of industry is considered as an important factor by some (Forrer, Fort, and Gilpin 2012; Nelson 2000), because this paper focuses on a single sector – that of online services – this factor will not be taken into account beyond the different types of services offered by firms in this sector.

### 3 Methodology

This section presents the methodology used to carry out the study, focusing first on the design, then on the conceptualization and operationalization of the variables. The process of case selection is then discussed. The next section introduces how material was gathered and analysed. I finally offer reflections on the validity and reliability of the study.

#### 3.1 Design: comparative case study

Understanding what factors explain that OSPs adopted different attitudes to the Arab Spring in Egypt required I gain deeper knowledge of OSPs' attitude during the Arab Spring in Egypt, and of each OSP's characteristics. This put my research in the realm of case studies (Ringdal 2013, 170–71). Even though my research question “What factors explain that Online Service Providers adopted different attitudes towards the Arab Spring in Egypt” is not a “how or why question” (Yin 2013, 10), it remains explanatory in nature, aiming to identify characteristics that might explain OSPs' attitude to the events. Furthermore, it is a more detailed version of the wider “How did OSP react to the Arab Spring, and why?”. Thus, case study is a relevant method.

As OSPs are very diverse companies, covering very different types of services such as internet access, social media or search engines (Wentrup and Ström 2017), I needed to study more than a single company. Comparing multiple cases allows for considering firms with different characteristics, especially as literature presented in section 2.4.2 identifies a series of firm's characteristics that can explain its attitude to conflict. Using a comparative design makes it possible to highlight commonalities and differences between the different cases, and to build upon existing theory.

#### 3.2 Conceptualization & Operationalization

In order to answer to the question “What factors explain that Online Service Providers adopted different attitudes towards the Arab Spring?” I proceeded in two steps. The first step consisted in identifying which attitude each OSP adopted towards the events of the Arab Spring in Egypt. The second step consisted in identifying which characteristics differentiate

each OSP, and might thus explain their different attitude, based on the literature presented in section 2.

### 3.2.1 Dependent variable: OSPs' attitude the Arab Spring in Egypt

In order to analyse OSPs' attitude to the Arab Spring, I have used a framework based in the theory exposed in section 2.4.1. Following Wolf et al (2007), Jamali and Mirshak (2010) and Kolk and Lenfant (2012), I have differentiated between firms that were avoidant, firms that carried out business as usual and firms that adopted a form of engagement.

To gain more granularity in my understanding of OSPs' attitude, I have distinguished between firms that engaged with the events in words - by communicating - or deeds - by taking action - in favour of peace. Peace is here understood as positive peace, i.e. the absence of violence combined with human rights, as presented in section 2.3.1. For further granularity, I have looked into whether firms acted indirectly or directly, and whether they acted collaboratively or unilaterally (Oetzel and Getz 2012; Oetzel, Getz, and Ladek 2007). This framework of analysis is presented in figure 2 below.

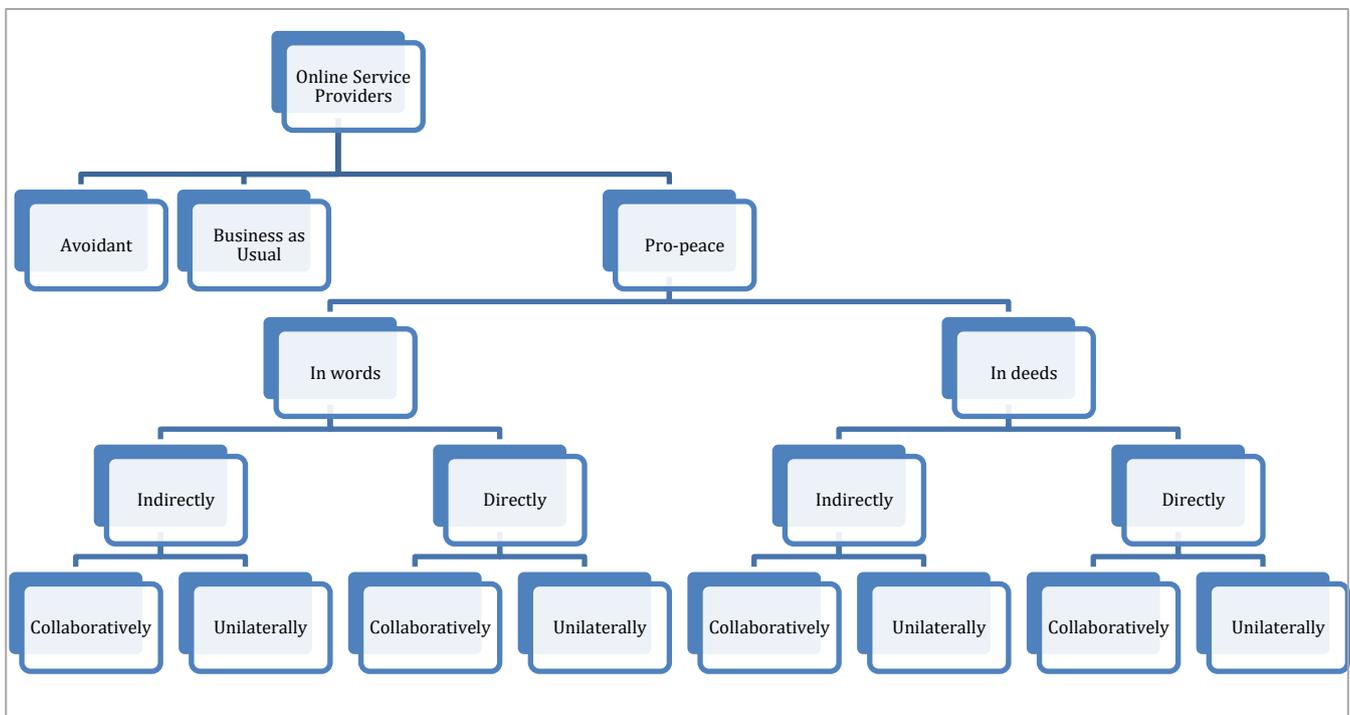


Figure 2 Online Service Providers attitude to the Arab Spring: Framework

Following the framework used by Kolk and Lenfant (2012), firms that do not mention the events of the Arab Spring in Egypt, either in their own communication (reports, press releases, institutional blogs) or via interviews are considered as *avoidant*. Firms that mention the events of the Arab Spring in their communication, but that do not take position in favour of peace are considered as adopting the attitude of *business as usual*. Firms that mention a position in favour of peace are considered as *engaging for peace*.

That engagement was then evaluated, to see whether it was in *words*, or *deeds* (if the firm takes specific measures, beyond communicating its support for peace) (Wolf, Deitelhoff, and Engert 2007).

The forms of engagement were further analysed, to understand whether the firm engaged in a direct or indirect manner, and in a collaborative or unilateral way (Oetzel and Getz 2012; Oetzel, Getz, and Ladek 2007). Firms take a direct approach if they engage directly with the parties to the conflict in order to stop it, by facilitating negotiations, or by publicly supporting peace for example. They can also approach the conflict indirectly, by limiting the consequences of the conflict on people, or by tackling the root causes of the conflict. Firms act collaboratively if they partner with other firms or organizations. If they engage by themselves, they adopt a unilateral strategy.

### 3.2.2 Independent variables: firms' characteristics

Factors to take into consideration when analysing Online Service Providers are the characteristics exposed in section 2.4.2 of this paper, which literature identifies as possible factors explaining firms' attitude towards conflict. I have focused on these potential factors to compare between the different cases, including firm size, ownership structure, level of presence in Egypt, location of headquarters, type of service offered, existing CSR policy and ethical principles, engagement in wider CSR initiatives, prior experience of conflict and prior experience in the country.

To determine firm size, some use firm annual turnover (Kolk and Lenfant 2012) while others use the number of employees (Darendeli and Hill 2015; Oetzel and Getz 2012). For this paper, firm size is understood in terms of number of employees, as this allows to build further upon Oetzel and Getz's study of how firms might respond to conflict.

Regarding ownership structure, I have looked into whether firms are state owned, publicly traded or privately owned, as these are the categories identified by literature presented earlier.

To evaluate the level of a firm's presence in Egypt, I have looked into whether each firm had local offices at the time, and whether their activities were asset-heavy: did the firm have offices in Egypt at the time? Did the firm own or manage infrastructure beyond offices? (internet and mobile phone providers for example do have infrastructure in the countries where they operate).

Location of headquarters and type of service offered are two factors that speak for themselves.

In order to evaluate OSPs' creed, understood as a strongly defined ethic line, public ethical engagement and Corporate Social Responsibility programmes, I have studied corporate sustainability reports issued for the period or just before. I have also searched whether each firm participated in voluntary initiatives such as the ones identified in section 2.1.2. These include the UN Global Compact, the Voluntary Principles on Business and Human Rights, and the industry-specific Global Network Initiatives (GNI). References to other similar initiatives have also been taken under consideration, as well as mentions of strong ethical values.

Finally, prior experience of conflict and prior experience of conflict in Egypt have been evaluated based on academic literature covering such experience, on each firm's own reporting of such experience in their institutional communication, and on media reports. A firm is considered as having prior experience of conflict if it mentions such experience in its own communication, but I also look into whether firms operated in conflict areas, prior to the Arab Spring in Egypt, without mentioning those. Earlier research suggest that firms are considered as having prior experience of conflict if one of their wholly owned subsidiaries has operated in a conflict area (Oh and Oetzel 2017, 717). However, this definition cannot be adopted here, as some OSPs had no presence in Egypt during the Arab Spring, and as others did not wholly own their Egyptian subsidiary.

### 3.3 Case selection

The object of this study is Online Service Providers, and in particular businesses, meaning for-profit organisations. This remains a very large universe to select cases from and needs narrowing down. As a starting point, I have considered firms and services mentioned in the academic literature on the internet in Egypt prior to and during the Arab Spring. This ensures that the services provided by these firms were used in Egypt during the Arab Spring, and thus that the cases are relevant.

Work by Howard and Hussain (2013) and Etling et al (2010) map the digital landscape in Egypt before the Arab Spring. By mapping how the websites of Egyptian political parties link to other websites in November 2010, just before the events of the Arab Spring in Egypt, Howard and Hussain highlight the centrality of some OSPs (2013 Figure 3.3 Pre-Uprising Structure and Content of Egypt's Online Political Sphere, November 2010.). As Egyptian political parties heavily link to these, they are used intensively in Egypt, and should thus come under consideration. In their study of the Arabic political blogosphere, Etling et al (2010, 1232) show that Egyptian blogs represent a third of the Arabic political blogosphere<sup>2</sup>. Their analysis of how these blogs link to other websites reveals a list of the ten websites that are most linked to. Among those, three fall under the category of for-profit online service providers, and should thus be included in a list of possible cases.

Of course, firms mentioned directly in connection with the study of the Arab Spring in Egypt should also come under consideration, as proposed above. In her work on human rights and the internet during the Egyptian Arab Spring, Cattle (2015) identifies a number of OSPs who faced the events in Egypt. Similarly, in their study of social media as tools for activism during the Arab Spring, Youmans and York (2012) identify some of the online services used by activists. Both Cattle and Youmans and York focus on the challenges for activists of using privately run services, from a human rights perspective. Thus, the OSPs they identify are relevant when studying their attitude to the Arab Spring in Egypt. Table 2, next page, offers an overview of OSPs identified as relevant for the current study, *before specific cases have been selected*.

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<sup>2</sup> The Arabic blogosphere is defined as blogs, written in Arabic, English or French whose authors have ties to the Middle East & North Africa, either geographic, ethnic or through family. (Etling et al. 2010)

<b>Online Service Provider</b>	<b>Source</b>
Google	Youmans and York 2012 Howard and Hussain 2013 Cattle 2015
Twitter	Youmans and York 2012 Howard and Hussain 2013 Cattle 2015
Facebook	Youmans and York 2012 Howard and Hussain 2013 Cattle 2015
YouTube	Etling 2010 Youmans and York 2012 Howard and Hussain 2013
Flickr	Etling 2010 Youmans and York 2012 Howard and Hussain 2013
Yahoo	Etling 2010 Youmans and York 2012 Howard and Hussain 2013
Blogger	Etling 2010 Howard and Hussain 2013
Wordpress	Etling 2010 Howard and Hussain 2013
Vodafone Group	Cattle 2015
France Telecom – Orange	Cattle 2015
Etisalat	Cattle 2015

*Table 1 Online Service Providers identified by academia in the Egyptian context*

The eleven cases identified above are too many for the timeframe available to carry out this research, especially as a researcher needs to gain a deep knowledge of each case (Ragin 2014, 50). Moreover, in order to be able to qualitatively analyse these OSPs' attitude to the Arab Spring, I needed to be able to access to sufficient data on each company.

Thus, in order to further narrow down the cases under analysis, I undertook a first round of data collection by visiting each firm's corporate websites or blogs and searching these for mentions of each firm in connection with the Arab Spring in Egypt. The goal here was to retrieve corporate reports mentioning the events in Egypt, as well as press releases on the events or other forms of corporate communication (blog, social media posts etc). I also identified whether firms participated in CSR initiatives such as the UN Global Compact or the Global Network Initiative<sup>3</sup> (GNI). Search engines Google and Duckduckgo were used to

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<sup>3</sup> The Global Network Initiative is a platform created in 2008 and bringing together ICT companies, human rights organizations and academia in order to address the questions of human rights and freedom of expression (About GNI n.d.)

identify whether these firms communicated in the media on the issue. This preliminary investigation allowed me to estimate data availability for each of these firms, and to get a first idea of their attitude during the Arab Spring and of general characteristics, based on theory exposed in section 2. The result of this first round of research is presented in the table below.

<b>OSP</b>	<b>Type of data available</b>	<b>Service type</b>	<b>Assets in Egypt</b>	<b>Attitude</b>	<b>CSR initiative</b>	<b>Comment</b>
Google	Corporate blog post;	Search engine & social media	Yes: office	Developed tool to support activists	GNI	Owens YouTube
Twitter	Corporate blog posts	Social media	No	Cooperation with Google	No	
Facebook	Activists testimonies	Social media	No	No specific action identified	No	
YouTube	Several corporate blog posts; participation in roundtable after the events	Social Media	Yes (with Google)	Worked around terms of use to support activists	GNI (via Google)	Owned by Google
Flickr	Material on Flickr available from owner Yahoo	Social media	Yes (with Yahoo)	No specific action identified	GNI (via Yahoo)	Owned by Yahoo
Yahoo	Blog post; participation in roundtable after events	Social media & web portal	Yes	No specific action identified	GNI	Owens Flickr
Blogger	None	Blogging platform	No	Unknown	No	
Wordpress	None	Blogging platform	No	Unknown	No	
Vodafone Group	Press releases; Sustainability report	Internet & Mobile phone	Yes (office & infrastructure)	No specific action identified	No	
France Telecom – Orange	Press releases; Sustainability report	Mobile phone (including mobile internet)	Yes (office & infrastructure)	Informed users	Global Compact	
Etisalat	Corporate annual report	Internet & mobile phone	Yes (office & infrastructure)	No specific action identified	No	

*Table 2 Online Service Providers: preliminary data*

Based on the table above, some OSPs seem more difficult to analyse than others, as little to no data is available on the attitude they adopted during the Arab Spring in Egypt.

Beyond the question of data availability, case selection should be informed by theory, and should aim for replicability (Yin 2013, 57). In the list of possible cases established above, two types of firms can be identified: social media on one side, and mobile and internet service providers on the other side. Section 2.2 of the present paper highlights a possible limitation of bargaining-power – based theory of political risk, which seems unable to explain how firms that are not asset-heavy handle political risk. It thus seems necessary to select at least one case for each category of firm (social media, and infrastructure).

Yin underlines that when selecting multiple cases, the research should follow a replication logic. Selecting two different social media and two different internet and mobile service providers would follow such logic.

Data availability should not be a criteria to select cases, as this might bias the case selection (George and Bennett 2005, 83). However, data availability remains an important constraint, and can justify case selection (Yin 2013, 28). Thus, I selected Vodafone Group and France Telecom-Orange as two internet and mobile service providers.

Regarding social media, based on the richness of available data, I chose Twitter on one hand, and YouTube on another. However, as YouTube is owned by Google, I decided to study the case of Google, while including YouTube's attitude. Even if YouTube communicated separately on the Arab Spring in Egypt, it proved too difficult to study YouTube as a separate entity. YouTube does not report separately from Google, as far as annual reporting goes, and even though the two companies have head offices located in two different areas, further research into office locations, and the functioning of their sales teams have shown it is best to study Google, and not YouTube as a separate entity<sup>4</sup>.

One limit of selecting cases based on available data, is that negative cases risk being excluded. Because negative cases avoided engaging with the Arab Spring in Egypt, there is no data available to study their attitude and the factors that might have influenced it. Excluding negative cases might skew the study, and exclude the consideration of relevant factors (Mahoney and Goertz 2004). Not including the case of Facebook in particular might be

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<sup>4</sup> Google 2011 Annual report mentions repeatedly YouTube as a "product" and confirms that a single team is in charge of sales throughout all products (Google 2012, 6–7).

problematic: no data is available from the company, only the testimonials of activists who recount how the company reacted to their questions. However, the case of Facebook is highly symbolic, as the Arab Spring was named a “Facebook revolution”. The refusal of the firm to communicate on the issue is in itself an indication of its attitude. In order to limit bias related to excluding a negative case for which some data is available, the case of Facebook has been reintegrated in my study for comparison at the discussion stage, where it helps bring more light on my research (George and Bennett 2005, 23–24). Another case I have brought into the discussion is that of Etisalat, as it is the only non-western firm identified as a potential case, and the third mobile operator in the country, after France Telecom-Orange and Vodafone Group (Abdulla 2007, 19)

In sum, the selected cases are: Twitter, Google, Vodafone Group and France Telecom-Orange. Two cases have been integrated into the discussion, despite the little data that is available for each, in order to bring more light to the results. These are Facebook and Etisalat.

### 3.4 Document analysis

I have based the study of each case on a variety of documents, including corporate reports (both financial and sustainability reports as available), press releases, as well as other company communications, including blog posts on their websites and statements made on social networks by firms. Other documents included in my research are firms’ presentations at conferences and roundtables, interviews and statements released by firms’ executives to the press and press releases. If those press releases are not available on firms’ websites, I have used quotes of these in the press<sup>5</sup>.

The project is limited to the analysis of corporate communication on the events of the Arab Spring in Egypt, and testimonies of activists as published in book form or in the press. The use of public corporate communication as a source presents a set of limits. These

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<sup>5</sup> I would have liked to interview resource persons within each company, as this would have allowed me to ask targeted questions, and to understand how executives at these companies experienced the events of the Arab Spring, and what process was used to decide on the attitude they adopted. Interviews are indeed ideal to get targeted data insights (Yin 2013, 110). However, it has proved impossible to complete such interviews within the timeframe of the project. Potential resource persons have been identified for some of the cases under consideration, but I have not been able to establish contact.

documents cannot be taken for objective, and the facts they present can include errors (Bryman 2012, 451).

The next section presents in more details how material was collected. It is followed by a section detailing how the collected material was coded and analysed.

### 3.4.1 Collecting material

Different methods to collect material were used depending on the type of material. I will present first how material related to corporate communication was collected, before presenting how media articles quoting each firm were gathered.

For corporate communication, corporate websites were visited to retrieve the necessary material. Because time has passed between the events of the Arab Spring, in 2011, and the time of the research (2018), I have faced the issue that a lot of press releases and corporate reports that were available on firms' websites during and just after the Arab Spring have now been removed from the visible websites.

To circumvent the issue, I have used two different strategies. The first one relies on using specific queries in search engines, in order to find relevant documents. To avoid bias because of the search engine used, two different search engines have been used throughout this research: Google, as it is the most popular, and DuckDuckGo. DuckDuckGo is a competitor of Google and is interesting in the context of research, as it does not track the user. I thus avoid the "filter bubble", a phenomenon by which search engines present results tailored to the user, based on the user's location and other data embedded in the user's browser (Who Decides What Websites You Visit? 2017).

The second strategy used to access data as it was available in earlier version of firms' websites is the use of the Internet Archive's *Wayback Machine*. The Internet Archive has been archiving websites since 1996 (Internet Archive: About IA n.d.). By typing a websites' url in the *Wayback Machine*, on the Internet Archive's website, one can access the website as it was at specified dates. This makes it possible for a researcher to consult a website as it was before pages were deleted for example. Note that not all websites are archived, and that some websites specifically refuse to be archived.

Regarding the collection of firms' quotes in the media, I queried the database Factiva. Factiva offers an archive of media articles, which can be queried for a specific company, over

a specific period, in connection to a specific topic. In the case of this paper, Factiva was queried for items in English, published between 2011-01-14 and 2011-03-21, mentioning Egypt, for each of the four companies under study. A second query was made, over the same time period, for press releases mentioning each company.

### 3.4.2 Coding documents

Once material was assembled, it was coded in order to see if themes emerged that relate to the frameworks of analysis presented in section 3.2. To carry out this task, I used computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), which allowed me to import all the collected material and code it directly into the software. CAQDAS here was used to manually code each document. Although there is the possibility, I did not use automate coding. The software is a tool that made it easier to code and review my data, but I did not let it guide the process, in order to avoid losing sight of the context of each document (Bryman 2012, 592; Yin 2013, 134). The software used is NVivo 11.4.3, chosen because a licence is available through the University of Bergen. Using the software also allowed for greater reliability of the study, as material, the code used, and memos are all stored in one place.

Material collected was then organized based on which case it was relevant for, and material type – corporate report, communication on corporate blogs and social media, press releases as quoted in the media, and quote of company representatives. I then read through the material, and coded it, identifying signs of the type of attitude adopted by firms, and firms' characteristics. The code is based on the frameworks defined in section 3.2.1 and figure 2 – for firms' attitude – and section 3.2.2 – regarding firms' characteristics. These frameworks are guiding my analysis of OSPs' attitude to the events in Egypt (Lewins and Silver 2007, 96). While coding material, I observed other themes emerging. This prompted me to add to the code. I added code for signs of collaboration between firms maintaining business as usual, which the literature review had not suggested. I also coded for firms' concern with the security of their employees and assets, which was a recurring pattern in the material.

### 3.4.3 Further analysis

After coding material for the type of attitude each firm adopted and for firms' characteristics, it appeared that firms' attitude evolved over time, and that firms adopted a set of strategies, and not just one. To dive deeper in the analysis, I built a timeline of each firms' reaction,

based on the dates they communicated on. This timeline is based on the dates on which they published blog posts, press releases and other statements and dates at which their representatives were quoted. I then confronted this timeline to a timeline of events of the Arab Spring in Egypt. By confronting firms' reaction to the timeline of events in Egypt, I was able to identify which attitude firms adopted – avoidant, business as usual, or pro-peace. I also identified the set of pro-peace strategies firms chose – words or deeds, direct or indirect, collaborative or unilateral. I then summarized the results of this analysis in a table – Table 13, page 66. The table offers a comparison of firms' characteristics, and of their attitude. It made it possible to compare between cases and discuss which characteristics seem to best explain Online Service Providers' attitude to the Arab Spring.

### 3.5 Validity & reliability

To ensure the quality of a case study, Yin (2013) identifies four criteria: construct validity, internal validity, external validity and reliability.

Regarding the construct validity of the research presented above, to ensure I have managed to analyse the reaction of OSPs to the Arab Spring (the dependent variable) and to identify relevant independent variables (here the characteristics of OSPs), I have anchored the study in the theoretical frameworks presented in section 2.4. Each step - determining how to measure the reaction, selecting the OSPs to include in the study, selecting the characteristics of OSPs which might explain OSPs' reaction - is grounded in theory (Yin 2013, 46). The selection of cases and variables has been documented, and I have maintained a chain of evidence, as recommended by Yin.

To ensure the internal validity of the study, I have selected cases with a different attitude to the Arab Spring in Egypt: OSPs who took actions to protect their users' human rights and favour peace and OSPs who continued business as usual. I have also reintegrated two cases who avoided adopting a specific attitude in my analysis, despite the difficulty of obtaining data. This will limit bias linked to selecting on the dependent variable (George and Bennett 2005, 83). I have also tried to address rival explanations, and to take into account outlier cases (Yin 2013, 47).

External validity - that the results can be generalised to other OSPs than the one included in the study - has been maintained by selecting diverse cases pairing them in order to

try and replicate findings, which will ensure findings can be generalized to other cases (Yin 2013, 48). Moreover, the case study is informed by theory.

Regarding reliability, I have documented the case selection process, as well as how data was collected. Material on each case is kept in a database, as well as the code and memos written at the analysis stage (Yin 2013, 49). Transparency ensures reliability.

## 4 Results & analysis

In the first section, I focus on the attitude adopted by the four Online Service Providers under study. Then, I analyse the characteristics of these OSPs. Finally, I bring the two negative cases back into the analysis, so that they can be used to contrast findings at the discussion stage.

### 4.1 The attitude adopted by OSPs

In the following section I study how the four Online Service Providers reacted to the events as they developed. In Egypt, activists had organized protests against Mubarak's regime well before the events of the Arab Spring, but following the success of protesters in Tunisia, marked by Ben Ali's departure, activists started to coordinate and to organize the first protests on 25 January. Selected events are presented in the table below, to facilitate the analysis of OSPs' attitude during the period (Blight, Pulham, and Torpey 2011; Ghonim 2012; Howard and Hussain 2013; Miyakawa 2011).

<b>Date</b>	<b>Events in Egypt</b>
14/01/2011	Following Ben Ali's departure in Tunisia; Egyptian activists plan coordinated protests.
24/01/2011	First reports that Twitter is inaccessible.
25/01/2011	First coordinated protests.
26/01/2011	Twitter & Facebook inaccessible.
27/01/2011	Twitter, Facebook, YouTube inaccessible.
28/01/2011	Internet & mobile network shutdown; Day of rage: second mass protest.
29/01/2011	Mobile phone call service restored.
02/02/2011	Camel Charge Battle: crack down on protesters in Tahrir Square, Cairo; Return of internet service.
04/02/2011	Day of Departure protests.
05/02/2011	SMS service restored.
10/02/2011	Mubarak address - transfers power but does not resign.
11/02/2011	Mubarak resigns.
04/03/2011	Appointment of caretaker Prime Minister Essam Sharaf
21/03/2011	Referendum on constitution amendments

*Table 3 The Arab Spring in Egypt: timeline*

First, I investigate the attitude adopted by OSPs at the beginning of the Arab Spring. Then, I show how firms changed their attitude following the order issued by Egyptian authorities to shut down internet and mobile networks. Finally, I look into how firms acted beyond the government-ordered shutdown.

#### 4.1.1 At the beginning of the events

Out of the four companies under analysis, three of them reacted following the first coordinated protests organized in Egypt – and the first disruptions. The fourth, France Telecom-Orange, did not communicate on the protests, remaining conflict avoidant.

The first protests were organized on 25 January. As protests began, media already reported that some online services, and in particular Twitter, were sporadically blocked in Egypt, starting on 24 or 25 January (Miyakawa 2011; Twitter site blocked in Egypt - Harvard's Herdict 2011). This prompted Vodafone Group's Egyptian subsidiary, Vodafone Egypt, to react about the issue on Twitter on 25 January, stating "We didn't block twitter - it's a problem all over Egypt and we are waiting for a solution." (Vodafone Egypt 2011b). The Twitter account was usually used by Vodafone Egypt to provide support to customers in the country, and to promote its services. Beyond the fact that the firm used the very service that is only sporadically accessible to explain that it had nothing to do with it, the firm very early on in the events tried to be transparent. At this stage, it does however remain avoidant, not connecting the fact that Twitter was not accessible to the ongoing protests.

Access to Twitter remained blocked for users in Egypt until 27 or 28 January, when internet and mobile networks were shut down by the authorities. However, some users managed to access Twitter using SMS (Twitter site blocked in Egypt - Harvard's Herdict 2011). On 26 January, the official Twitter account for the firm posted about the events in Egypt, sharing a list of Twitter accounts established by journalists to follow the events in Egypt: ".@MotherJones suggests some smart accounts to follow for news on #Egypt including @arabist and @shadihamid. Read on: <http://bit.ly/ghxhL2>" (Twitter 2011b). Highlighting how to use the service to follow on current events was already a common practice for Twitter, who highlighted how to follow on New York Fashion Week for example (Twitter 2010). Twitter also confirmed to journalists that the Egyptian authorities were attempting to block access to the service (Arthur 2011). A way to post on Twitter via SMS, thus by-passing the block, already existed before the events (How To Find Your Twitter Short

Code 2010). Thus, at the beginning of the events in Egypt, Twitter adopted an attitude of business as usual, mentioning the events, but not promoting peace.

Google adopted a similar attitude, communicating on the events in Egypt by relaying footage of the protests uploaded by users on its service, YouTube. This was done in two ways, via YouTube's Twitter handle (@YouTube) and via the official blog *YouTube Trends*. On Twitter, @YouTube shared links to two videos, accompanied with the comment "View raw footage of the protests in Egypt" (YouTube 2011d) on 26 January. On the same day, a post on the blog *YouTube Trends* shared a playlist of videos from the protests. The playlist was made of "some of the most popular clips as well as those curated by New York Times' Lede and Storyful" (Protests in Egypt Captured in Dramatic, On-the-Scene Videos 2011). In both these communications, YouTube showed off how its service is used to share information. It acted to relay information, and publicize its service, but did not take action. This behaviour can be considered as "business as usual", as YouTube routinely highlighted popular videos via Twitter and its blog *YouTube Trends* on varied topics such as music, or comic home videos. YouTube did not take position in favour of human rights and positive peace in these messages: text accompanying links to videos of the protests is descriptive, quoting media outlet and adopting a similar tone rather than announcing an engagement for peace and human rights.

Note that both Twitter and Google adopted a similar strategy of showcasing how to use their services to follow events, regardless of their type. Another interesting aspect is that both actually linked to lists of accounts or videos to follow established by journalists; they did not curate these themselves.

#### **4.1.2 Internet and mobile network shutdown**

On Friday, 28 January 2011, internet and mobile phone services were shut down, following an order from the authorities. Service was shut down in the morning just before a second mass protest took place. Today, some consider that the blackout order was the "tipping point", sending the country into revolution (Cattle 2015, 419).

#### 4.1.2.1 *Maintaining transparency*

To completely shut down internet and mobile services, the authorities ordered operators, including Vodafone Group, France Telecom-Orange and Etisalat, to stop providing the service to their customers. The blackout was not done by state services: the firms providing access to the service were the ones who acted.

Following the order, Vodafone Group published a press release on its website on 28 January. This press release, published on the group's website, was presented as signed by Vodafone Egypt (Mobile operators in Egypt given suspension orders - Vodafone 2011). It stated, "All mobile operators in Egypt have been instructed to suspend services in selected areas. Under Egyptian legislation the authorities have the right to issue such an order and we are obliged to comply with it. The Egyptian authorities will be clarifying the situation in due course." On the same day, the group's CEO, Vittorio Colao, spoke on the issue at the World Economic Forum in Davos, along the lines of the press release issued on the group's website, and expressing hope that the government would reverse the decision (Rhoads and Fowler 2011). Like its competitor Vodafone Group, France Telecom-Orange shut down internet and mobile phone services, and released a statement confirming "measures to block mobile phone service" had been taken by the Egyptian authorities (El Gazzar, Vitorovich, and Bender 2011; Rhoads and Fowler 2011).

So, on this first day of service disruption, both Vodafone Group and France Telecom-Orange explained the orders they were given via press release and complied with those. They did not elaborate on why they chose to comply with government demands. Communication was made via each multinational, not through their local subsidiaries.

After the week end, on 31 January, Vodafone Group announced via press release that cell phone service had been restored on 29 January, and that the group did not have any option but to comply with the authorities' orders, both from a legal and technical perspective (Kirk 2011; Vitorovich and Bender 2011). The government could have shut down the network without the group's help, but this would have damaged infrastructure and made it difficult for the firm to restore service. The group also highlighted that its priority was the safety of employees. Only voice capabilities were restored: mobile internet and SMS were still shut down (Parker 2011). A France Telecom-Orange spokesperson was quoted, on the same day, as saying that "all mobile services are functioning again" (Vitorovich and Bender 2011), and

that 20 expatriate employees and their families were repatriated from Egypt the day before (France Telecom Repatriates Its Egypt-Based Expatriates 2011; Kirk 2011).

Both firms explained their decision to comply with orders given by the authorities by their concern for the security of their employees (France Telecom - Orange 2012b, 57–58; Kirk 2011). Vodafone Group also highlighted the fact that Egyptian authorities could have disregarded a decision to not shut down service by damaging the firm's infrastructure, with long term consequences for its future operations. Both firms spoke from a perspective of risk management: they did not seem to consider peace or human rights aspects in their decisions, rather focusing on the immediate concern of the security of their employees and assets.

A few days later, on 3 February, Vodafone Group explained that SMS service was still shut down, and that the Egyptian government had requested it sent regime-scripted SMS to all their customers. The statement explained: "Vodafone Group has protested to the authorities that the current situation regarding these messages is unacceptable. We have made clear that all messages should be transparent and clearly attributable to the originator." (Egypt forced firms to send pro-regime SMS 2011; Parker 2011; Sonne and Colchester 2011). The group's CEO Vittorio Colao was again quoted in the media, stating that mobile internet services had been restored a day earlier (Holton and Fayed 2011), and confirming that the group is "in a continuous dialogue with government" (Parker 2011). Some sources also reported that the UK government complained to the Egyptian ambassador in London on the same issue, on the same day, "after a request by Vodafone" (Parker and Thompson 2011). Two Vodafone Group managers were injured during protests in Egypt on the same day, and one of them was missing (Parker 2011). 3rd February marks the last time statements were issued by the group during the period under study.

In releasing statements complaining about actions the firm had to take following orders by the Egyptian authorities, Vodafone Group continues to adopt a business as usual strategy. It communicates on the events in Egypt, but still does not express itself in favour of peace, nor does it take action to address the conflict.

In a similar move, and on the same day, France Telecom-Orange issued a statement criticizing the fact that it had been required by the authorities to send pro-government SMS to customers. In this statement, the firm mentioned that it "strongly disapproves of any message of a political nature that runs against the neutrality principle which defines our role as a network operator" and that the only SMS subsidiary Mobinil sent to customers were related to

“national security and general safety” (Sonne and Colchester 2011). France Telecom-Orange’s CEO also expressed himself on the firm’s concern for its employees’ safety, saying that “when armed police arrive at your offices there is not much one can do” (Sonne and Colchester 2011). On 5 February, Mobinil’s CEO Hassan Kabbani announced that SMS services had been restored (El Gazzar 2011).

Both Vodafone Group and France Telecom – Orange used press releases and press conferences to explain the situation in Egypt, and to justify why they chose to follow the government’s order to shut down services. They expressed themselves in terms that highlighted the risks taken by their employees, and the risks to infrastructure they managed, but did not mention concerns over peace and human rights issues. Thus, both firms adopted a strategy of business as usual, acknowledging the events and explaining their decision, but not defending human rights or trying to support peace.

Both firms communicated on the same days, on the same issues, and giving similar explanations. This can be explained by the fact that each of them reacted to the same events, but could also indicate a form of cooperation between the two, or maybe one firm followed closely on the other? To answer this question, I would need to supplement material already gathered with interviews of decision-makers within each firm, something I was not able to do.

<b>Firm</b>	<b>Attitude</b>
Vodafone Group	Business as usual
France Telecom-Orange	Business as usual

*Table 4 Vodafone Group and France Telcom-Orange's attitude to the events*

#### *4.1.2.2 Expressing support for human rights*

Other firms reacted to the internet and mobile network shutdown by criticizing the Egyptian authorities’ decision, and by expressing their attachment to human rights.

On 28 January, just as internet and mobile network were shut down, one of Twitter’s cofounders and the firm’s general counsel published a blog post titled “The Tweets must flow”, describing the firm’s engagement for freedom of expression, and how the firm protects its users’ private information (Stone and MacGillivray 2011). Even if the situation in Egypt

was not mentioned clearly, references made in the text do point to these events: the text mentions tweets that “may facilitate positive change in a repressed country”, and affirms that, “our position on freedom of expression carries with it a mandate to protect our users' right to speak freely and preserve their ability to contest having their private information revealed”. Given the context in which the blog post is published, it seems that the blog post can be read as referring to the events in Egypt, among others. One of the authors of the post, Biz Stone, was interviewed a couple of weeks later, as events in Egypt were still on-going, about Twitter’s reaction to the shutdown. He explained how shocking it was, for the firm, to see that the authorities went beyond blocking its service, and how what was important for them was to enable users to communicate, regardless of opinion expressed (Gross 2011).

Thus, the blog post published just after the internet shutdown is a form of engagement for peace, in the context of the Arab Spring in Egypt. The firm here engages for peace, in words, indirectly and unilaterally, as it neither engages with the parties to the conflict, nor specifically mentions Egypt.

<b>Firm</b>	<b>Attitude</b>
Vodafone Group	Business as usual
France Telecom-Orange	Business as usual
Twitter	Pro-peace, in words, indirectly & unilaterally

*Table 5 Vodafone Group, France Telecom-Orange and Twitter's attitude*

#### *4.1.2.3 Taking action to support people in Egypt*

On 31 January, a post on Google’s official blog announced that the firm, together with Twitter, took specific action to “help people in Egypt stay connected at this very difficult time” (Singh and Mardini 2011). The post was also shared on Twitter (Google 2011b).

Some Google engineers worked together with engineers at Twitter and SayNow to create a service for users to call a phone number, where they can tell their message, which is then posted on Twitter with the hashtag #egypt. The service, named Speak-to-Tweet, allowed users to share information on Twitter despite the shutdown of internet. Users could also listen to previously posted tweets by calling the same phone number. The service was created by a

Google engineer, AbdelKarim Mardini, and by Ujjwal Singh, the co-founder of SayNow, in collaboration with Twitter. SayNow had been bought by Google a week earlier. Twitter also announced the creation of the Speak-to-Tweet service in collaboration with Google via a tweet (Nonprofits 2011; Twitter 2011a). It was already possible for users to publish messages on the service using SMS, but the collaboration with Google made it possible for them to bypass the shutdown of mobile networks, as users could call a dedicated service from a landline to post messages.

By creating this service, Google & Twitter collaborated to provide people in Egypt with a solution to by-pass the government's shutdown of internet and mobile network. It is a form of indirect engagement for peace, as the firms did not address parties to the conflict, but rather limited the consequences of the conflict on affected populations. Creating this service was also an occasion for Google to communicate on its new acquisition and to demonstrate its capabilities.

Google took other actions in favour of peace, but independently. The firm updated its Transparency reporting: "Given the recent interest in the availability of our services, we've reduced the time delay in the Traffic tool on our Transparency Report to less than four hours" (Google updates service tracker amid Egypt shutdown 2011). The Traffic tool allows users to visualize traffic to Google's services by country of origins, over a period of time, and thus shows service disruption during the blackout in Egypt. Prior to the update announced by Google on 29 January, there was a delay of 30 hour. In this announcement, the firm also stated: "We believe that access is a fundamental right, and it's very sad if it's denied to citizens of Egypt or any country". The firm publicly criticized the Egyptian authorities' decision to limit its citizens' human rights, and thus engaged directly in favour of peace. This is a form of engagement in words, because the action taken – updating its transparency report - does not affect people in Egypt.

Google's video-sharing service, YouTube, also took steps with regards to the events in Egypt (Ma 2011). In a blog post, YouTube announced three different ways the service helped "people access and share" videos of the events: YouTube's CitizenTube channel highlighted the latest footage, banners on the site pointed users towards videos of the protests, and YouTube streamed Al Jazeera live broadcast of the events, both in Arabic and English. The blog post also mentioned the Speak-to-Tweet service put together by Google. Here, YouTube collaborated with another organization, Al Jazeera, in order to be able to share more videos of the events. It also continued curating videos, like it did since the start of the protests in Egypt.

The fact that YouTube pushed the new service developed by parent company Google confirms that the two cannot be considered separately from one another in the context of this paper.

Finally, Google also set up a page on its *Crisis Response* website, putting together resources on the events in Egypt, linking to relevant YouTube channels, its Speak-to-Tweet tool, and other services not provided by Google, such as a way to connect to the internet from a landline or to access blocked websites. That page also provided emergency phone numbers in Egypt, and the contacts of embassies and NGOs (Egyptian Resources 2011a). Google updated the page over time, as a comparison with a later version of the page demonstrates (Egyptian Resources 2011b)<sup>6</sup>.

Thus, Google took further action by developing new ways to share information, follow on the events and support people affected through its Transparency report, its video-sharing service YouTube and its crisis response page. All of these demonstrate the firm's engagement for peace, in words, directly and in deeds, indirectly and collaboratively.

<b>Firm</b>	<b>Attitude</b>
Vodafone Group	Business as usual
France Telecom-Orange	Business as usual
Google	Pro-peace, in deeds, indirectly, collaboratively; Pro-peace, in words, directly, unilaterally
Twitter	Pro-peace, in words, indirectly, unilaterally; Pro-peace, in deeds, indirectly, collaboratively

*Table 6 Vodafone Group, France Telecom-Orange, Google and Twitter's attitude*

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<sup>6</sup> Versions of the pages as available on 1 February 2011 and 21 March 2011 can be found through Internet Archive's Wayback Machine.

### 4.1.3 Beyond the service shutdown

Mobile and internet networks were restored over several days: phone calls service was restored on 29 January, internet on 2 February and SMS on 5 February. Protests did however continue, and firms continued to react to the events, not just to the network shutdown.

Google's YouTube continued to regularly use its Twitter account and YouTube Trends blog to serve as megaphone for videos of the events in Egypt (YouTube 2011c). Beyond sharing links to relevant live broadcast and popular videos, YouTube published two blog posts analysing how its service was used in the context of the events in Egypt. One compared searches on its service during the events in Egypt to searches at the time of the 2009 protests in Iran (YouTube 2011a), and the other analysed the keywords used across countries that experienced an Arab Spring (YouTube 2011b). Thus, Google continued to show how its service can be used not only to follow with political events but also to analyse them. These posts point towards the fact that the events in Egypt were also an opportunity for Google to showcase the advantages of its product.

Twitter maintained its commitment to freedom of expression. On 11 February, the firm announced the expansion of its pre-existing initiative awarding free promoting space to a non-profit each month. The programme was expanded by offering such space to "non-profit organizations that are particularly relevant during a crisis" (Diaz-Ortiz 2011), and the selected organization on 11 February was the Committee to Protect Journalists, because Twitter "believes that the freedom of expression is an essential human right". Twitter continued to have the same attitude towards the conflict: the firm still engaged in favour of peace and human rights. It did not take action, instead using words and supporting relevant non-profit organizations.

Mobile and internet service providers Vodafone Egypt and Mobinil, the Egyptian subsidiaries of Vodafone Group and France Telecom-Orange, announced compensations for their customers, once service was restored. The compensation plan was agreed upon between the three mobile operators, Vodafone Egypt, Mobinil and Etisalat (Orange Egypt 2011a; Vodafone Egypt 2011a). France Telecom-Orange's subsidiary Mobinil also announced extraordinary measures on Twitter. In order to ensure all customers could communicate in case of emergency, the firm started offering free calling time and delay in bill payment on 6 February (Orange Egypt 2011c, 2011b, 2011d). These measures are commercial compensations to customers who could not use the services they paid for during the service

shutdown, not measures implemented to protect their human rights, as neither Vodafone Egypt or Mobinil mention them in their announcement. The fact that they collaborated on compensations does raise the question of possible cooperation between Vodafone Group and France Telecom-Orange to maintain business as usual during the conflict.

Both Vodafone Group and France Telecom-Orange mention the events of the Arab Spring in their sustainability reports, as well as the steps taken. Vodafone Group's Sustainability Report covers the year ending on 31 March 2011 and was written soon after the period under study. In the report, the group's CEO explains that he believes the firm adopted the right approach towards the events (Vodafone Group 2011, 2). The report highlights that the group faced questions regarding its role in protecting human rights and freedom of expression (Vodafone Group 2011, 9). The report mentions that Vodafone Group engaged with NGOs and industry initiatives such as The Global Network Initiative in order to "explain (their) decisions". France Telecom-Orange too refers to the events in Egypt in its sustainability report (France Telecom - Orange 2012b, 57–58). It mentions the United Nations directing principles for business and human rights<sup>7</sup>, and that France Telecom-Orange participated in an "industry dialogue" during the Summer 2011. Thus, both firms mention an on-going reflection on their attitude in Egypt in January-March 2011, while still commenting they believe they adopted the right one.

#### 4.1.4 Summary

Analysing Online Service Providers' communication during and immediately after the events of the Arab Spring in Egypt offers an overview of the attitude each of them adopted. Based on this material, I observe that firms' attitude evolved as the events progressed, as well as their modalities. The order to shut down internet and mobile phone services issued by the Egyptian authorities on 28 January seems to mark a shift in the attitude adopted by three of the four firms. Vodafone Group, almost since the beginning of the period under study, maintained business as usual, explaining what happened in Egypt and what the firm did. France Telecom-Orange adopted a position similar to that of Vodafone Group following the blackout.

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<sup>7</sup> The UN principles were approved in June 2011.

Twitter and Google both maintained business as usual before the internet and mobile service shutdown, communicating on how to use their services to follow with the events in Egypt. After networks were shut down, each firm engaged in favour of peace in several ways. Twitter engaged in favour of peace in words, but in a non-specific manner, and later collaborated with Google in implementing a system to help Egyptians by-pass the blockade. Google also engaged in favour of peace directly, criticizing the decisions of the Egyptian authorities.

<b>Firm</b>	<b>Attitude</b>
Vodafone Group	Business as usual
France Telecom-Orange	Business as usual
Google	Pro-peace, in deeds, indirectly, collaboratively; Pro-peace, in words, directly, unilaterally
Twitter	Pro-peace, in words, indirectly, unilaterally; Pro-peace, in deeds, indirectly, collaboratively

*Table 7 OSPs' attitude to the Arab Spring in Egypt*

## 4.2 Characteristics of OSPs

In order to study the independent variables identified earlier - characteristics that could help explain OSPs' attitude – I first look into firm size, ownership structure and type of service offered. I then focus on whether each firm had employees or assets in Egypt, the location of their headquarters, whether they had previous experience of conflict, and whether they had prior ethical principle and corporate social responsibility policies.

### 4.2.1 Size, ownership structure and type of service offered

The four firms differ greatly in terms of number of employees. Vodafone Group had 83,900 employees worldwide at the time of the Arab Spring in Egypt (Vodafone Annual Report 2011, sec. People). France Telecom-Orange had 172,000 employees in 2011 (France Telecom - Orange 2012a, 4). As of September 2010 Twitter had 300 employees (About Twitter 2011). The firm at the time was experiencing an important expansion, as the firm had 150 employees

in February 2010 and 30 employees in the Summer of 2009 (MacGillivray 2010). Google had 32,467 employees as of 2011 (Google 2012).

Three of the four firms were publicly traded: Vodafone Group, France Telecom – Orange and Google, whilst Twitter was privately owned. It explains why Twitter does not have an Annual Report available for the year 2011. The French state, at the time, owned twenty-seven percent of France Telecom-Orange’s capital (France Telecom - Orange 2012a, 107). Both France Telecom-Orange and Vodafone Group operated joint ventures in Egypt: Vodafone Group owns about fifty-five percent of Vodafone Egypt (Vodafone Egypt Sustainability Report 2010 - 2013 2013), the rest was owned by Telecom Egypt, itself owned in majority by the Egyptian government (Abdulla 2007, 18); France Telecom-Orange owned and operated Egyptian subsidiary Mobinil as a joint venture with Egyptian firm Orascom (Mobinil 2012).

Two firms provide mobile phone service and internet access, Vodafone Group and France Telecom-Orange. Google defines itself as “a global technology leader” whose mission is “to organize the world’s information and make it universally accessible and useful” (Google 2012). Google’s products include a search engine, video-sharing site YouTube and a series of other online applications (such as email). The firm’s primary revenue source is advertising. As for Twitter, it describes itself as “real-time information network that connects you to the latest information about what you find interesting” (About Twitter 2011).

<b>Firm</b>	<b>Size (employees)</b>	<b>Ownership structure</b>	<b>Type of service</b>
Vodafone Group	83,900	Publicly-traded	Mobile & internet access
France Telecom-Orange	172,000	Publicly-traded, French state owns 27%	Mobile & internet access
Google	32,467	Publicly-traded	Social media & internet services
Twitter	300	Privately-held	Social media

*Table 8 OSPs' size, ownership structure and type of service offered*

#### 4.2.2 In-country presence

Three of the four firms under study were present in Egypt during the Arab Spring: they had offices, and two of them also had communication infrastructure in the country. Based on Vodafone Egypt's reporting, there were 4,199 employees in Egypt in March 2010 (Vodafone Egypt Sustainability Report 2010 - 2013 2013). France Telecom-Orange's Mobinil had 4,689 employees in Egypt in 2011 (Mobinil 2012, 27). Google, according to employee testimonies, had offices in Cairo at the time (Ghonim 2012). Little data is available regarding the location of Twitter's offices at the time, but the firm announced the opening of its first offices in the Middle East and North Africa in 2015, confirming it did not have offices in Egypt in 2011 (MENA 2015).

<b>Firm</b>	<b>Presence in Egypt</b>
Vodafone Group	Yes: offices & infrastructure
France Telecom-Orange	Yes: offices & infrastructure
Google	Yes: offices
Twitter	No

*Table 9 OSPs' in-country presence*

##### 4.2.2.1 Employee security

The fact that Vodafone Group, France Telecom-Orange and Google had assets in Egypt means that the events in the country could have an impact on the security of their employees and infrastructure. Both Vodafone Group and France Telecom-Orange regularly mentioned their concern over security in their communication during the events and in their annual and sustainability reporting. Google did not mention such concerns.

Concerns over the safety of employees and infrastructure was among the explanations Vodafone Group gave for its decision to comply with the Egyptian authorities' order to shut down service, and to send scripted messages to customers (Kirk 2011; Parker 2011). It was also reported that two Vodafone managers were injured during protests in Egypt on 3 February, and that one of them was missing, confirming the firm's concern (Parker 2011). However, these managers were injured as they carried out political activities, not as they were

working. The firm's CSR report explains how the group reacted to the events, focussing on the safety of employees in the country, and on keeping their ability to control their infrastructure. (Vodafone Group 2011, 9). In its Annual Report too, the firm mentions the events in Egypt, stating that their "employees risked their personal safety in a very volatile environment to keep the network up and running at a time when mobile communication was more important than ever, keeping the voice network outage to less than 24 hours" (Vodafone Annual Report 2011, sec. Chairman's statement).

Concern over employee safety seems to have influenced France Telecom-Orange's attitude. The firm repatriated twenty expatriate employees and their families from Egypt on 30 January 2011 (France Telecom Repatriates Its Egypt-Based Expatriates 2011; Kirk 2011). France Telecom-Orange's CEO also expressed himself during a press conference saying that "when armed police arrive at your offices there is not much one can do" (Sonne and Colchester 2011). That concern was confirmed later in the firm's sustainability report, which highlights employee safety and the need to ensure business continuity to explain their decisions (France Telecom - Orange 2012b, 24).

#### *4.2.2.2 When company executives demonstrate*

Firms present in Egypt also faced the fact that some of their employees, executives and board members chose to protest, as was the case for the two Vodafone Group managers who were injured (Parker 2011).

Khaled Bichara, the CEO of Orascom, France Telecom-Orange's partner in Egyptian joint venture Mobinil, was filmed demonstrating against the regime in Cairo. He was also quoted as saying that he was "there on a personal capacity". Mobinil board member and founder of Orascom, Naguib Sawiris, engaged in politics too, calling for the formations of a unity government (Holton 2011). Mobinil board member Naguib Sawiris said he negotiated with the government for the release of Google employee Wael Ghonim (Google executive released in Egypt & joins protest 2011). Even though these were not directly linked to France Telecom-Orange, the fact that close partners engaged themselves in the conflict was likely worrying for the group.

Google learnt of the disappearance of their Head of Marketing for MENA on 30 January 2011. Based on Wael Ghonim's testimony, which he published in the form of a book in 2012, he was one of the organizers of the protests. He travelled to Egypt from Dubai, where

he worked, on a holiday to participate. Google, without knowing of his involvement in the protest, attempted to locate him (Ghonim 2012, 237). The timeline is not precise, but the firm decided to follow a dual strategy: display ads on their services, targeted at users in Egypt, asking for anyone with information to call a dedicated phone number and hiring security firms in Cairo to look for him at police station and hospitals. Calls for information on Ghonim's location were also released through the media (Google says Middle Eastern marketing manager has been missing since last being seen in Egypt 2011). It is unclear whether Google attempted to dialogue with the Egyptian authorities to facilitate the release of its employee. Ghonim himself says his release was negotiated by his activist friends during meetings with the authorities (Ghonim 2012, 241).

Google did not mention the disappearance of Wael Ghonim on its official blog or Twitter handle until after his release on 6 February (Google 2011a). The firm later stated "We're incredibly proud of you, @Ghonim, & of course will welcome you back when you're ready" (Google 2011c). Google highlights that he does not work for the firm at the moment, and that Ghonim's opinions are not Google's. The company's CEO reaffirmed the same position on 15 February (Svensson 2011).

In his testimony, Ghonim mentions the role of an Egyptian colleague who updated his friends in Egypt on a daily basis. That colleague is AbdelKarim Mardini, one of the two authors of Google's blog post announcing the Speak-to-Tweet service on 31 January 2011, a day after Google learns of his disappearance (Ghonim 2012, 237). It is difficult to tell whether the steps taken by Google in favour of peace after learning of their employee's disappearance are directly linked. However, the fact that the same employee worked on the Speak-to-Tweet service and kept friends of Ghonim in Egypt informed seems to indicate that the fact that Google had Egyptian employees in Egypt and elsewhere played a role in the firm's engagement for peace during the conflict.

In sum, firms that had infrastructure in the country were exposed to pressures from the Egyptian government, which was not the case of Google, who had only offices in the country. The three firms faced challenges related to their employees' engagement in the conflict, while attempting to maintain a neutral position themselves. The case of Google also seems to indicate that the engagement of Egyptian managers in favour of peace at least contributed to the firm's taking action to support people on the ground, in particular in the case of the Speak-to-Tweet service.

### 4.2.3 Location of headquarters

Two of the four firms are headquartered in Europe and are part of joint ventures in Egypt. Vodafone Group is headquartered in the United Kingdom (Vodafone Annual Report 2011). France Telecom-Orange (now called Orange) is headquartered in France (France Telecom - Orange 2012b). It owns and operates Egyptian subsidiary Mobinil as a joint venture with Egyptian firm Orascom, which offers mobile and internet services in Egypt (Mobinil 2012). The two other firms, Google and Twitter, are headquartered in California, USA (About Twitter 2011; Google 2012).

From the gathered data, it is difficult to assess whether the location of firms' headquarters played a role in their attitude to the events. The role played by the firms' home government appears somewhat clearer when looking into some of the firms' past experience of conflict, both in Egypt and in other countries, in particular with regards to the role of the American government. Both Twitter and Google experienced pressure from their home government to act in favour of peace before the events of the Arab Spring, as I will show in section 5.2.4. It is likely that if they did not experience pressure from their government concerning the events in Egypt, past experience of pressure during similar events played a role in the attitude they adopted in Egypt.

A single source mentions that Vodafone Group asked for the British government to talk with the Egyptian authorities about the service disruption and scripted messages orders (Parker and Thompson 2011). It is difficult to base conclusions from a single mention in the media, but it would be an interesting question to raise in an interview with managers at Vodafone Group.

The four firms are headquartered in western, democratic countries, where they also have users and clients. The events in Egypt were very much covered in western media, as shown by the number of articles I have looked into while gathering material for this study. It thus seems reasonable to consider that all these firms faced at least some pressure from citizens in their home country.

<b>Firm</b>	<b>Headquarters location</b>
Vodafone Group	United Kingdom
France Telecom-Orange	France
Google	USA
Twitter	USA

*Table 10 Location of OSPs' headquarters*

#### 4.2.4 The question of prior experience

In order to understand whether each firm had prior experience of operating during conflict, I look into whether each firm mentions operating during conflict prior to the Arab Spring. In particular, I look into whether they refer to prior experience of conflict, and of conflict in Egypt, both when discussing the conflict under study and in earlier communication.

##### 4.2.4.1 Of conflict

Earlier reports released by Vodafone Group do not mention prior experience of conflict, nor do reports covering the period under study. However, Vodafone Group owns Safaricom, an internet and mobile network service provider in Kenya, as a joint venture (Vodafone Annual Report 2011, sec. At a glance). Safaricom experienced issues related to the use of its service during post-electoral violence following the 2007 presidential elections in Kenya, when mass SMS were used to share hatred and call for violence between tribes. Safaricom was already a joint venture of Vodafone at the time. During the conflict in Kenya, the CEO of Safaricom was approached by the government about shutting down SMS service, but instead suggested that service providers send mass SMS to their customers promoting peace – which Safaricom did (Goldstein and Rotich 2008, 5). Safaricom's initiatives in Kenya are covered by Vodafone Group's Sustainability Report, but the 2007-2008 crisis is not mentioned in that year's report. In fact, there is no company communication on prior experience of conflict. This seems to show that the Vodafone Group had not internalized that experience.

France Telecom-Orange does refer to prior experience of conflict in the CSR report, in a box focusing on “ensuring employees safety in countries in crisis” (France Telecom - Orange 2012b, 72), where the firm explains that measures taken in Egypt are similar to those

taken in Madagascar in 2009, but does not detail further. However, France Telecom's reports for 2009 do not mention the Madagascar crisis or any steps taken in that crisis. The Madagascar crisis involved demonstrations leading to a coup d'état, but online service providers were not involved in a way similar to the Arab Spring (International Crisis Group 2010).

Other conflicts which France Telecom-Orange might have had experience with include the April 2009 revolution in Moldova and the post-election crisis in Kenya in 2007-2008. During parliamentary elections in Moldova in April 2009, opposition activists used SMS and social media to first campaign and then protest the election of a communist majority in parliament. Following the publication of election results, on 7 April, protesters gathered in the capital's city centre, where protests turned violent. During the revolution, the government shutdown internet in the country, and cut mobile networks in the capital's city centre. However, these service cuts were managed by the authorities themselves, who shut down the only internet access point in the country (of which all service providers are dependent), and organized the mobile phone network shutdown in a limited area, the capital's city centre (Lysenko and Desouza 2012). Thus, service providers like France Telecom-Orange were not involved in the protests, nor were they questioned in media coverage. France Telecom-Orange only entered the Kenyan market by buying national firm Telkom in December 2007, and mobile services were first launched in October 2008, after the crisis (France Telecom 2009).

France Telecom-Orange experienced conflict before, in Madagascar, and capitalized on that experience, according to its report. The conflict in Madagascar is different from the one in Egypt, as there was no service shutdown in Madagascar. France Telecom-Orange does not refer to other conflicts it experienced that were similar to the Arab Spring in Egypt (where firms were involved in the events by the authorities).

Twitter had also gathered experience of facing conflict prior to the Arab Spring, even as it had no in-country presence there. In Iran in 2009, protesters used the service to demonstrate against the elections' results. At the time, Twitter decided to delay an update to its service so that any potential downtime would occur during night-time in Iran (Gross 2011; Stone 2009a, 2009b). Twitter, at the time, was asked by the US State Department to delay their update (Morozov 2012, 9–14), which Twitter co-founder himself admits. He quickly adds that others had made the same request, and that the firm made its decision independently (Gross 2011; Morozov 2012, 9–14). Thus, when the protests turned into a revolution, Twitter

had already experienced its service being used by activists during similar events, and pressure from the US government in that context.

Google had also acquired some experience during the 2009 protests in Iran. The blog post published on the *YouTube Trends* blog shows that the firm is aware of this, as it compares searches on YouTube at the time of the protests in Iran and during the events in Egypt (Comparing Searches for “Iran” in 2009 with “Egypt” in 2011 2011). In this post, YouTube shows how there were more searches for Iran at the time than there are for Egypt in 2011 on its platform, but that when looking at searches on the search engine Google, it is the opposite. This shows that YouTube and Google’s attitude to the events in Egypt is informed by previous experience of the Iranian conflict. In fact, YouTube’s post on its official blog describing what the service is doing for the protest in Egypt mentions that they have “used similar tools and live streaming technologies in the past to give our users access to information on major world news events, such as the Haiti earthquake and the protests in Iran” (Ma 2011).

Three of the four online service providers under study mention prior experience with operating in the context of a conflict: France Telecom-Orange in Madagascar, and Google and Twitter in Iran. Neither Twitter nor Google were present locally in Iran during the conflict. Two of the three firms, Google and Twitter, had adopted a pro-peace attitude in an earlier conflict – in Iran in 2009.

#### 4.2.4.2 *In Egypt*

Vodafone Group had experience from operating in Egypt at the time of the Arab Spring, and it was also tightly connected to the Egyptian authorities through its partner Telecom Egypt. Vodafone Group’s activities in Egypt started in 1998. Telecom Egypt is controlled by the state (Sonne and Colchester 2011). Similarly, France Telecom-Orange has been present in Egypt since the creation of Mobinil in 1998, so the firm had experience of operating in the country. However, neither firm mention prior experience of facing conflict or human rights issues in Egypt. They seem to not have had prior experience of conflict in Egypt.

Google had prior experience of facing issues regarding how Egyptian activists and bloggers used their services, and with how its home government, the USA, considers the firm’s role in that context. The State Department contacted Google in 2007 and again in 2008 to ask for the restoration of videos posted on YouTube by an Egyptian blogger. The videos

exposed police violence, and were taken down by YouTube (Requesting Department Assistance to Restore Egyptian Blogger's Youtube Access 2008; Tsotsis 2011).

Twitter had also experienced being used in political demonstrations in Egypt, as recounted by cofounder Biz Stone on several occasions. Twitter was aware of its service being used by activists in Egypt, as shown by the blog post the firm published at the time (Stone 2008b). An American student in Cairo, Egypt, was arrested by the authorities in 2008 during a protest and was freed after having posted about his arrest on Twitter. The American student had started using Twitter after Egyptian activists had shown him the service (Gross 2011; Stone 2008a, 2009a).

Thus, it seems that three of the four firms had experienced conflict before, as they themselves mention such events in their reporting and public communication. Two firms had experienced conflict, or at least human rights-related challenges, in Egypt prior to 2011.

<b>Firm</b>	<b>Prior experience of conflict</b>	<b>Prior experience of conflict in Egypt</b>
Vodafone Group	No	No
France Telecom-Orange	Yes	No
Google	Yes	Yes
Twitter	Yes	Yes

*Table 11 OSPs' prior experience of conflict*

#### **4.2.5 Creed: corporate social responsibility and ethics**

To evaluate whether each firm had creed before the events, I study the firms' corporate social responsibility policies, whether they were part of industry initiatives and whether they had established ethical principles.

Vodafone Group had an established practice of publishing a Sustainability Report yearly but was not a member of industry initiatives such as the Global Compact or the Global Network Initiative (GNI). However, the firm mentioned engaging with the Global Network Initiative while developing a policy concerning its customers' freedom of expression and right to privacy (Vodafone Group 2010). Similarly, the firm engaged with the GNI regarding its

attitude during the events in Egypt. The report does acknowledge the firm's responsibility to respect customers' human rights (Vodafone Group 2011, 9–10), and that new policies have been put in place in that regards.

France Telecom-Orange also has an established practice of publishing a sustainability report yearly, and has been a member of the UN Global Compact since 2000 (France Telecom-Orange 2011, 9). Its 2010 CSR report, covering the year just before the Arab Spring, also refers to the OECD principles for multinational corporations, and to a code of ethics. However, no direct reference is made to freedom of expression, or to the right to privacy of its customers in that report, even as references are made to other human rights such as the freedom of assembly (France Telecom-Orange 2011, 45). The report for the year 2011, which explains the steps taken after the events in Egypt (France Telecom - Orange 2012b, 6, 57–58) shows more awareness towards these questions. It mentions the new UN Principles for Business and Human Rights, adopted in June 2011, and explains the firm is engaged with stakeholders in a dialogue to define how these should be implemented.

Google has had a strong motto since it became public, “Don't be evil” (Page and Brin 2004). The firm also participated in the creation of the Global Network Initiative (Global Network Initiative n.d.), and was the first to publish and regularly update a Transparency Report in 2010 (Transparency Reporting Index 2016).

Twitter affirmed its belief in the “open exchange of information” on its website before the events (About Twitter 2011) as well as its commitment to internet freedom and freedom of speech (MacGillivray 2010). One of the firm's cofounders authored a tribune describing how activists use Twitter and endorsing the values of peace and human rights (Stone 2010). The firm had put together a website dedicated to promoting uses of Twitter for good, Hope140.org. However, Twitter was not a participant in industry-wide initiatives such as the Global Network Initiative (Morozov 2012, 22–23), finding it not adapted to its size and means (MacGillivray 2010).

Comparing creed, in the form of ethical principles, corporate social responsibility initiatives and reporting shows that firms approached these questions differently. For Vodafone Group, this takes the form of reporting on corporate social responsibility and engaging with the Global Network Initiative, but without becoming a member in any industry initiatives. France Telecom – Orange also routinely reports on CSR, and is a member of the UN Global Compact and other initiatives, but does not mention issues of freedom of

expression until after the Arab Spring. Compared to Google and Twitter, two firms that have strong, public engagement in favour of human rights, neither Vodafone Group nor France Telecom-Orange display strong creed. But they did have a level of engagement with issues related to human rights.

<b>Firm</b>	<b>Creed</b>
Vodafone Group	Some
France Telecom-Orange	Some
Google	Yes
Twitter	Yes

*Table 12 OSPs' creed*

### 4.3 Summary: bringing back the negative cases

The four cases, Vodafone Group, France Telecom-Orange, Twitter and Google all acknowledged the events in Egypt as they were happening. If all of them did not embrace a pro-peace attitude, they, at a minimum, maintained business as usual. To be able to understand which factors influenced their attitude, it seems important to take firms that remained avoidant under consideration. As explained in section 3.3, these cases are Etisalat and Facebook.

Etisalat is an internet and mobile phone service provider operating in Egypt through its subsidiary Etisalat Misr. As such, it had to follow the same requirements as others and shut down service for a few days, before sending government messages to its users. The firm's annual report does not mention the events in Egypt, even in the section on operations and corporate social responsibility in Egypt (Etisalat 2012, 28–29). The firm only mentions the events in its report covering the first quarter 2011, in a box explaining that “political unrest has resulted in network suspensions” (Etisalat 2011, 20). Despite Etisalat being among the main foreign firms in Egypt identified on the occasion of the Arab Spring by media (Factbox 2011), the firm did not release any statement and refused to comment (Etisalat - Investor Relations - Investor Relations n.d.; Gazzar, Vitorovich, and Bender 2011). Because so little is

available on the firm's attitude to the events in Egypt, it is difficult to analyse its behaviour in light of theory. Thus, its attitude seems best described as "avoidant".

Etisalat is headquartered in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and the UAE government owns sixty percent of the firm, while the remaining forty percent are publicly-traded (Etisalat 2012, 8). The UAE did experience – and repress – pro-democracy activity in 2011, following the events in Egypt (Howard and Hussain 2013, fig. 1.2). Etisalat has operated in Egypt since 2006 (Abdulla 2007, 19). The firm joined the UN Global Compact in 2012 and published a corporate social responsibility report on that occasion (Emirates Telecommunications Corporation - Etisalat | UN Global Compact n.d.). Etisalat had 53,000 employees in 2011 (Etisalat 2012, 8). The firm never refers to experiencing conflict in its reporting.

Facebook's attitude towards the Arab Spring in Egypt is difficult to gauge, as the firm has not communicated much on the events, either at the time or since, despite being frequently mentioned in the media in connection with the events. Facebook was quoted on 28 and 29 January 2011 as confirming a drop in traffic to its service from Egypt in an email statement and through a spokesman (El Gazzar, Vitorovich, and Bender 2011; Rhoads and Fowler 2011). But Facebook always refused to acknowledge any role played by its service, or to communicate further on the events in Egypt (Preston 2011). The only sources available are testimonials of activists themselves. Wael Ghonim, the creator and principal administrator of the Facebook Page that organized protests that led to the fall of the regime recounts how his page was suspended in November 2011 (Ghonim 2012, 117). He and other activists explain how difficult it was to get in touch with Facebook and find a way so that the administrator could maintain anonymity (for his own security) without violating Facebook's terms of use that require all users to use their real names (Ghonim 2012, 113; Giglio 2011). These activist testimonials show that Facebook did not seem to have a process regarding political crises of the type. Media mentions a director of policy for Europe, Richard Allan, who however refuses to react to the issue (Shapira 2011). Even though events in Egypt were quickly named "Facebook Revolution" in the media, the firm always refused to react publicly.

Since 2011, Facebook has mentioned the events of the Arab Spring only once, in January 2018, in a blog post published in its newsroom reflecting on the effects of social media on democracy (Chakrabarti 2018). The post does not refer to Egypt, or to the company's specific actions. Moreover, reflection on Facebook's impact on democracy comes at a time when the firm is facing criticism and investigation at home, in the USA, with regards

to how it was used to influence the 2016 general elections. Thus, the firm does not seem to have had values related to peace & human rights, at the time of the events in Egypt.

At the time of the Arab Spring, Facebook was privately held. The firm's initial public offering was completed in May 2012 (Facebook 2013, 14). It did not have offices either in Egypt or in the Middle East and North Africa, as its MENA office opened in 2012 in Dubai (Halligan 2017). Facebook does not seem to have faced similar events prior to the Arab Spring, and so did not have experience to build upon. The firm did not report on corporate social responsibility, did not publish a transparency report, nor was it part of industry-specific initiatives for human rights such as the Global Network Initiative.

Bringing these two negative cases into the analysis allows me to build the following table, summarizing the results of my study of Online Service Providers' attitude to the Arab Spring in Egypt. This table is discussed in the next section.

<b>Firm</b>	<b>Size (employees)</b>	<b>Ownership</b>	<b>Type of service</b>	<b>Presence in Egypt</b>	<b>Headquarters location</b>	<b>Prior experience conflict</b>	<b>Prior experience conflict in Egypt</b>	<b>Creed</b>	<b>Attitude</b>
Vodafone Group	83,900	Publicly-traded	Mobile & internet access	Yes: office & infrastructure	United Kingdom	No	No	Some	Business as usual
France Telecom-Orange	172,000	Publicly-traded, French state owns 27%	Mobile & internet access	Yes: office & infrastructure	France	Yes	No	Some	Business as usual
Google	32,467	Publicly-traded	Social media & internet services	Yes: office	USA	Yes	Yes	Yes	Pro-peace, in deeds, indirectly, collaboratively; Pro-peace, in words, directly, unilaterally
Twitter	300	Privately-held	Social media	No	USA	Yes	Yes	Yes	Pro-peace, in words, indirectly, unilaterally; Pro-peace, in deeds, indirectly, collaboratively
Facebook	1,600	Privately-held	Social media	No	USA	No	No	No	Avoidant
Etisalat	53,000	UAE state owns 60%, 40% publicly-traded	Mobile & internet access	Yes: office & infrastructure	UAE	No	No	No	Avoidant

*Table 13 OSPs' characteristics & their attitude to the Arab Spring*

## 5 Discussion

The first section presents findings based on the results summarized above. The second section draws on the study's findings to shed new light on theory. The third section discusses limits of this study and suggests how it could be taken further.

### 5.1 Three characteristics explain OSPs' attitude to the Arab Spring in Egypt

Drawing on the table presenting the results, page 66, the first section shows that firms with well-established CSR policies and ethical principles are more likely to engage for peace. The second section shows how firms with prior experience of conflict engage more in favour of peace. The third section then discusses host country presence and headquarters' location. Finally, the last sub-section summarizes these findings, and highlights which characteristics do not seem to explain firms' attitude.

#### 5.1.1 Well established CSR policies and ethical principles are linked to more engagement for peace

Based on the thorough analysis of Online Service Providers' attitude to the Arab Spring, I observe that firms with strong ethical principles established prior to the events adopted a pro-peace attitude. Indeed, the main difference between firms that remained avoidant and firms that displayed some form of engagement for peace – by adopting a pro-peace attitude or business as usual – is that the latter had at least an established practice of engaging on corporate social activities and reporting.

Forms of CSR practice and reporting, and forms of expression of ethical principles differ from firm to firm. Two firms reported on CSR by releasing an annual sustainability report, Vodafone Group and France Telecom-Orange. Three firms engaged with industry-wide initiatives, either by becoming members or by engaging with such initiatives on a more informal basis. France Telecom-Orange and Google were members of respectively the UN Global Compact and the Global Network Initiative (GNI). Vodafone Group discussed informally with the Global Network Initiative on issues related to freedom of expression and right to privacy before the events, but without becoming a member.

Firms routinely reporting on CSR, Vodafone & France Telecom-Orange, adopted business as usual, being transparent about the requests they received from the Egyptian authorities, and the challenge they faced, but not expressing any clear position in favour of peace. This seems to confirm the point raised by Fort (Fort 2014, 111) that CSR is now an accepted norm rather than a sign of strong engagement for peace.

The firms with the highest level of creed, Google and Twitter, did not report on CSR in the traditional manner – via annual CSR reporting. Whilst Google regularly updated its Transparency pages, Twitter had established a dedicated website for non-profit organisations. More significantly, both Twitter and Google had well-established ethical principles, widely and publicly defended by their founders before the conflict in Egypt. This is what seems to differentiate between firms that adopted a business as usual attitude and firms that engaged for peace. Pro-peace firms engaged for peace based on their ethical principles, as shown in their statements: “The tweets must flow” (Stone and MacGillivray 2011) and “We believe that access is a fundamental right, and it's very sad if it's denied to citizens of Egypt or any country.” (Google updates service tracker amid Egypt shutdown 2011).

Twitter and Google did not adopt exactly the same attitude: Twitter engaged indirectly for peace, either through its collaboration with Google or its statements, which remained non-specific to Egypt. Google did engage directly for peace by criticizing the Egyptian authorities' decisions to shut down communication networks. Google had also shown more signs of creed than Twitter, as it was a member of the GNI, in addition to its other commitments to CSR.

The two negative cases – who adopted an avoidant attitude – do confirm that the level of a firm's creed is linked to its engagement for peace. Neither Etisalat nor Facebook had clearly stated CSR policies or ethical principles, and both firms adopted avoidant attitudes, barely mentioning the events in Egypt, even long after they occurred. Thus, I draw the conclusion that firms which have adopted CSR norms engaged more for peace, at a minimum adopting an attitude of business as usual: they explained the challenges they faced, and their decisions.

### **5.1.2 Positive, prior experience of similar conflict matters**

Of the four positive cases, three referred to prior experience of conflict while reflecting on their approach to the conflict in Egypt. France Telecom-Orange, Google and Twitter all

mention prior conflict experience in their own communication on the Arab Spring in Egypt. Neither of the negative cases seem to have experienced conflict prior to the Arab Spring, based on the limited material available.

Beyond this, evaluating whether OSPs had experienced conflict prior to the Arab Spring in Egypt has proven difficult. Indeed, cross-referencing academic research on conflict with the operations of each of the four cases confirms that all of them had experienced conflict before. Twitter and Google both faced challenges during the 2009 conflict in Iran, despite not operating in the country. Vodafone Group's Safaricom faced post-electoral violence in Kenya in 2007. France Telecom-Orange also faced post-electoral conflict in Moldova in 2009, during which internet and mobile services were shut down. However, neither Vodafone Group nor France Telecom-Orange refer to these conflicts, which share some similarities with the Arab Spring in Egypt. When France Telecom-Orange mentions previous conflict experience (in Madagascar), the firm does not detail how that experience informed its attitude in Egypt.

In fact, it seems that prior experience of a similar conflict, combined with prior experience of human rights issues in Egypt, can have influenced the attitude firms adopted in Egypt. The two firms that adopted a pro-peace attitude each had experienced similar events earlier, during the post-election conflict in Iran in 2009. Each of these firms had also been confronted to human rights-related challenges in Egypt. Activists had been using their services to demonstrate against the Egyptian government prior to 2011, and each firm was aware of this, as shown in section 4.2.4.2. This confirms Oh and Oetzel's finding (2017) that prior experience of conflict alone is not enough for a firm to adopt a strategic attitude in another conflict. Prior experience of similar issues in the same country combined with prior experience of conflict is what differentiates between pro-peace firms and business-as-usual firms.

It is unclear whether these firms' prior conflict experience can be distinguished from the role played by their home government. Indeed, based on available material presented earlier (section 4.2.4), it seems that the American government asked these firms to adopt a pro-peace attitude before, when Twitter delayed a service update during the conflict in Iran, or when Google's YouTube was asked to reinstate videos showing torture exercised by the Egyptian police.

The analysis of OSPs' prior experience with conflict shows that the type of conflict experienced by OSPs matters. Firms that had experienced conflict in which they were involved by parties to the conflict, who experienced positive recognition of their attitude in their home country, and who had already faced human rights-related issues in Egypt, adopted a similar attitude in response to a similar conflict in a familiar conflict – in this case, a pro-peace attitude during the Arab Spring in Egypt.

### **5.1.3 Host and home country: awareness of home country support and engagement for peace**

Among the four cases I have focused on, three were present in Egypt, and one – Twitter - had no presence in the country. Two of the firms, France Telecom-Orange and Vodafone Group had offices and other assets in the country – such as cell phone towers - whereas Google only had an office in the country. The fact that Vodafone Group and France Telecom-Orange had control of infrastructure in Egypt seemingly did not give them power to negotiate with the authorities. To the contrary, they repeatedly mentioned that they feared for the security of their employees and for the integrity of their assets, should they refuse to proceed according to the demands of Egyptian authorities. This, combined with their pre-existing CSR policies, explains why they adopted a business as usual strategy: openly supporting peace might have threatened their employees and assets.

The case of Google can seem to question the above finding. Indeed, the firm had in-country employees, and one of its Dubai-based employees was arrested by the Egyptian services. Despite that, Google adopted a pro-peace attitude. One possible explanation might be that Google did not have costly investments in Egypt beyond offices, and that its activities do not depend on government-issued licences - as opposed to internet and mobile network providers.

The fact that Google had employees in Egypt, and Egyptian employees in other locations, might also explain why it engaged directly for peace, and not Twitter. Based on Google's communication, Egyptian employees were involved in the firm's pro-peace initiatives – in particular the creation of Speak-To-Tweet. Google might have been more aware of the challenges faced by Egyptians because it had Egyptian employees.

The question of the home country also allows for rich analysis. Of the four cases, two – Google and Twitter – were aware of their home country’s support of a pro-peace attitude, based on their earlier experiences with their home country government’s support of their pro-peace activities during the events in Iran, but also while facing human rights challenges in Egypt. The case of Etisalat supports the idea that firms’ home country played a role in their attitude. The UAE-headquartered firm, owned in majority by the UAE state, remained avoidant. It is very unlikely the UAE would have supported any acknowledgement of the events in Egypt, as it itself repressed pro-democracy activism at the same period. Rather, Etisalat likely remained avoidant, because of its home country.

It is less clear how the home country of Vodafone Group and France Telecom-Orange might have influenced their attitude to the Arab Spring, as material does not point to it directly. However, both firms’ home countries share democratic values, even if I have not found any sign of them supporting these firms’ attitude.

Thus, firms aware of their home-government supporting their pro-peace attitude during prior conflict adopted a more pro-peace attitude. The firm whose government faced similar protests to the Arab Spring in Egypt remained avoidant. The effect of home country support is mitigated by the risks faced by firms with heavier interests in Egypt, who maintained business as usual: they were not avoidant but did not fully engage for peace because of risks faced by their operations in the country.

#### **5.1.4 A note on firms collaborating to face conflict**

While analysing the attitude OSPs adopted during the Arab Spring in Egypt, I have found signs indicating that most of them collaborated with other firms in order to face the events. Twitter and Google collaborated when taking action to support peace with the creation of the Tweet-To-Speak tool. Vodafone Group and France Telecom-Orange each adopted business as usual, communicating about the challenges they faced and the rationale behind their decisions. Studying their attitude did not show many differences between the two firms, and their press releases and interviews seemed to be almost simultaneous.

This could point towards both firms discussing about their strategy together, but it could also be an effect stemming from the fact that material used in this research comes from press releases and quotes *as reproduced in the media*. This can create an impression of

coordination that was not necessarily there. I note however that Vodafone Group and France Telecom-Orange collaborated together with Etisalat on compensations they offered their customers after service was restored. This question would need to be further investigated, especially through interviews with representatives of each firm.

### 5.1.5 Summary

The main characteristic that differentiates between the four cases analysed in depth and the two negative cases is creed. Firms with well-established CSR policies adopted business as usual, at a minimum. Another characteristic that can explain OSPs' attitude is whether they had experienced a similar conflict, during which their engagement was positively perceived in their home country. Finally, the dialectic between home and host country also influenced firms' attitude. The case of Etisalat confirms that the home country does play a role, as its home country faced and repressed pro-democracy activism during the events of the Arab Spring, while Etisalat remained avoidant. Firms whose operations in Egypt depended on government-issued licenses and heavier assets did not engage for peace, while firms with little footprint in Egypt and support from their home government engaged for peace.

Looking into firms' attitude in more details shows that the two pro-peace firms, Google and Twitter, did not adopt the same combination of pro-peace strategies. The firm with the strongest creed and locally present in Egypt – Google - combined pro-peace, indirect action with direct engagement in words. Twitter, who was not locally present and who had a slightly lower level of creed adopted indirect strategies to support peace.

Other characteristics do not seem to explain these firms' attitude. No conclusion can be drawn from these firms' ownership forms, beyond the fact that the firm mostly held by the country where it is headquartered adopted an attitude in accordance to its home country. No conclusion can be drawn from the firms' size. Number of employees differ greatly from firm to firm, apart the fact that they all have more than 100 employees, the threshold beyond which Oetzel and Getz established that number of employees does not significantly explain firms' attitude towards peace (Oetzel and Getz 2012, 179). No conclusions could be drawn based on the type of service offered either.

## 5.2 Implications for theory

In this section, I confront the findings discussed above to theory presented in the literature review. I first focus on bargaining-power and political risk, confirming that it is not enough to explain OSPs' attitude to the conflict. I then turn to the legitimacy-based theory of political risk, showing that it does explain most firms' attitude. Finally, I draw from literature on business and peace.

### 5.2.1 Bargaining power and political risk

Bargaining-power based theory of political risks offers a perspective on political risk based on the premises that firms facing political risk in a host country have investments in that country, or are in the process of investing in the country (Boddeyn and Brewer 1994; Oetzel and Getz 2012; Oetzel, Getz, and Ladek 2007; Stevens, Xie, and Peng 2016). Based on the analysis of the attitude of the four firms, those that engaged most for peace, the ones that adopted a pro-peace attitude, had little to no investments in the country: Twitter had no presence, and Google had an office, but nothing more. Thus, a bargaining-power based approach is not enough to explain OSPs' attitude during the Arab Spring in Egypt, as it does not allow for taking these two cases under consideration. It does not help understand why two firms with little to no investments in Egypt decided to adopt a pro-peace attitude. Indeed, the fact that both Twitter and Google engaged for peace contradicts Boddeyn and Brewer's argument that firms that have power in the eyes of the host government will engage with that government (1994).

None of the firms that had heavier assets engaged clearly in favour of peace. Vodafone Group and France Telecom-Orange both adopted business as usual strategies. This might be related to the fact that both firms had been operating in Egypt for some time, having entered the country in 1998, when bargaining power is considered as being at its highest just as firms enter a country (Stevens, Xie, and Peng 2016). Indeed, both Vodafone Group and France Telecom-Orange communicated on their concern over being able to ensure their employees' security and being able to stay in control of their infrastructure. Both firms explained they were worried Egyptian authorities would threaten their employees, damage their infrastructure or revoke their operating licenses. In the case of Vodafone Group and France Telecom-Orange, bargaining-power based theory does explain why both firms complied with the authorities' demands (Boddeyn and Brewer 1994). It does not however explain why they did not choose to remain avoidant.

### 5.2.2 Legitimacy and political risk

The legitimacy-based approach to political risk allows for taking into account political risk faced by firms in the host country and in their home country with more granularity. Whereas bargaining-power based theory focuses on the relations between firms and host government, the legitimacy-based approach also takes into account relations between firms and other stakeholders, in the host country and the home country (Stevens, Xie, and Peng 2016).

In Egypt, Vodafone Group and France Telecom-Orange faced a challenging situation. Protesters were challenging the host government that had granted them operating licences, and demonstrations escalated to become a conflict. Before the events, internet and mobile phone service providers enjoyed pragmatic legitimacy in the eyes of both Egyptian government and society, as the service they offered was useful to both government and society (Bitektine 2011; Suchman 1995). They probably also enjoyed cognitive legitimacy, because they had been operating in the country for a few years. But the events of the Arab Spring show that the Egyptian government itself had lost legitimacy in its society's eyes, weakening firms' legitimacy in the eyes of Egyptians (Darendeli and Hill 2015). By shutting down networks on government orders and sending regime-scripted text messages, Vodafone Group and France Telecom-Orange stopped benefitting local people - who could not use the service. They likely also lost any moral legitimacy they might have enjoyed before. Being as transparent as possible on their actions was likely an attempt to spare as much legitimacy as possible, on both government and protesters sides.

It appears more difficult to discuss host country legitimacy for a firm like Google, which only had offices in Egypt, or like Twitter, which had no interests in the country. The legitimacy-based approach as presented by Stevens et al (2016) still relies on the consideration of a "host country", for which no definition is given. The notion of host country should be understood as a country where a firm's services are used, without the firm necessarily maintaining a presence in that host country.

As the Egyptian authorities very early on blocked access to Twitter and Google's services, it seems that none of them enjoyed legitimacy in the eyes of the Egyptian authorities. However, the fact that activists used their services shows that these OSPs enjoyed high moral

legitimacy in their eyes, and by extension in the eyes of Egyptian society<sup>8</sup>. This can explain that they decided to foster that legitimacy by defending peace and freedom of expression.

However, Stevens, Xie and Peng's argument (2016) that a government will not intervene in the operations of a firm it perceives as legitimate is contradicted by the experience of Vodafone Group. The firm operated Vodafone as a joint venture with government-owned Telecom Egypt. Regardless, the authorities disrupted the firms' operations. Similarly, Stevens, Xie and Peng (2016) argue that a government will not intervene in the operations of a firm its society perceives as legitimate. This is contradicted by the cases of Google, Twitter and Facebook, whose services were disrupted by the government *because* they were seen as legitimate by society. This is likely due to the nature of the events in Egypt, as the government was not only perceived as illegitimate by society, but also threatened by society, as protesters demanded the end of the regime.

The legitimacy-based approach calls for taking under consideration the question of home country legitimacy at the same time as that of host country legitimacy (Stevens, Xie, and Peng 2016). The question of home country legitimacy proved difficult to study based on the type of material gathered – firms' communication as they published it or as transcribed in the media. None of the four firms mention pressure felt at home. However, the sheer number of media articles covering these firms in the context of the Arab Spring in Egypt shows that there was a lot of interest, at least in English-language media. It confirms that these firms faced pressure from stakeholders, and not just from their governments.

Three of the four firms were supported by their home governments. Vodafone Group enjoyed the support the British Ambassador, who officially complained to the Egyptian authorities with regards to the regime-scripted messages the firm had to send to its customers (page 45 of this paper). Google and Twitter knew that their government would support their pro-peace attitude, as it had done so before, in the context of another conflict, as well as in the context of human rights abuses in Egypt. I could not evaluate the four firms' home country legitimacy further, based on the material gathered. However, the four positive cases all are headquartered in countries that share democratic values.

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<sup>8</sup> Even though not all Egyptians used these services, I consider that because of the scale reached by the demonstrations organized by users, these service providers' legitimacy was high among demonstrators at the time.

The negative case of Etisalat seems to confirm that legitimacy-based theory helps understanding OSPs' attitude in Egypt. The firm faced the same challenges to its legitimacy in Egypt as Vodafone Group and France Telecom. However, its home country – whose state owns sixty percent of its shares – faced and repressed prodemocracy activism over the same period. To maintain some of its legitimacy at home and in Egypt, it had to remain conflict-avoidant.

The case of Facebook shows that the legitimacy-based approach is not enough. Based on the little material available, the firm enjoyed at least the same legitimacy as Twitter and Google in the eyes of the Egyptian society, as its service was used by protesters to organize. Facebook was also blocked by the Egyptian authorities from the start of the events. Moreover, like Google and Twitter, Facebook is headquartered in the United States.

In fact, legitimacy-based theory of political risk helps understand most of the risks faced by a firm, with the caveat that, contrary to Stevens, Xie and Peng's argument (2016), a government can disrupt the activities of a firm perceived as legitimate by society or by itself, if the government is under threat. It does not fully explain which strategy a firm decides to adopt in order to manage that risk.

### **5.2.3 Business and peace**

Research on business and peace suggests that engagement for peace is one of the strategies firms use to manage political risk (Oetzel and Miklian 2017). As shown above, the legitimacy-based approach to political risk helps understand the challenges faced by Online Service Providers. The four positive cases and the two negative cases all faced challenges to their legitimacy in Egypt. I also found that most firms – apart from Facebook – could find support for the attitude they adopted in their home country. Twitter and Google had experienced such support on previous occasions, in other countries as well as in Egypt. Vodafone Group and France Telecom-Orange are both headquartered in democratic countries. Etisalat is headquartered in and mostly owned by the UAE, who faced challenges similar to the ones Egypt faced.

Indeed, it seems that the attitude adopted by these firms proceeds at least in part from their need to manage political risk faced at home and abroad. This echoes Rettberg's theory that business engages for peace based on a combination of need, creed and greed (2016).

Factors that differentiate between the four cases' perception of their need include whether they had heavy assets in Egypt, and whether they had prior experience of similar events. Another aspect is the question of creed, especially once negative cases are used to contrast findings. Creed – pre-existing CSR policies and ethical principles – is what differentiates Twitter and Google from Facebook. The latter remained avoidant, and had no pre-established strong creed, whilst the Twitter and Google each had strong creed, and each adopted pro-peace attitude.

Comparing Vodafone Group and France Telecom-Orange on one hand with Twitter and Google on the other also seems to confirm Fort's argument that some CSR practices have become a norm (2014, 111). Indeed, both Vodafone Group and France Telecom-Orange had well-established CSR policies, but neither adopted a pro-peace attitude: they maintained business as usual. However, they showed more awareness of the issues in Egypt than firms who had no CSR policies at all and remained avoidant. Despite CSR policies becoming more generalized, some firms still do not adopt them.

Although my research has not focused on the effects of the Arab Spring in Egypt on Online Service Providers' profits, analysing their attitude to the events does offer a clue with regards to greed. The two firms that chose to adopt a pro-peace attitude, Google and Twitter, also took the opportunity to highlight how their services could be used in the context of a conflict. It seems they used the opportunity to promote their services. In the case of Google, the firm also communicated on the acquisition of a company, SayNow, and showed its capabilities. This confirms Rettberg's theory (2016) that it is indeed a combination of need, creed and greed that explains the attitude adopted by OSPs in Egypt.

Findings do dispel some expectations based in earlier scholarship on business and peace. Multinationals with more assets in Egypt did not seem to have influence over the authorities. (Forrer, Fort & Gilpin 2012, Nelson 2000). They were not more likely to engage for peace (Wolf et al 2007). This could confirm that focusing on extractive and other asset-heavy industries has limited the capacity of business and peace theory to describe how firms in other industries engage with conflict and for peace. Alternatively, this could be related to the specificities of the conflict under analysis: the Egyptian authorities involved firms that managed internet and mobile phone infrastructure in the conflict by demanding they shut down their services. This in turn made it difficult for them to engage for peace without exposing themselves to more political risk.

In fact, many OSPs repeatedly maintained that they were neutral actors, confirming Jamali and Mirshak's findings that firms are mostly focussed on maintaining their activity through conflict, and try to avoid at all cost being associated with peacebuilding (2010). Of the firms that adopted a pro-peace attitude, only Google engaged directly with the conflict, when it criticized the Egyptian authorities' decision to shut down internet and mobile phone services.

#### **5.2.4 Summary**

Analysing how and why firms engage for peace cannot be dissociated from the issue of political risk. In order to best understand firms' decisions, it is necessary to understand what political risk they face, and how they perceive such risk. Studying Online Service Providers' attitude in Egypt during the Arab Spring shows that political risk faced by firms cannot be understood only from a bargaining-power based approach. Firms face political risk globally, in areas where they are not physically present as well as at home and can sometimes engage for peace in areas where they do not have physical assets. The analysis of the factors that can explain why different Online Service Providers adopted different attitudes during the Arab Spring in Egypt shows that it is necessary to combine legitimacy-based approaches to political risk with business and peace theory in order to understand how OSPs manage conflict.

### **5.3 Limits of this study & potential for future research**

I believe I have managed to identify factors explaining why different Online Service Providers adopted different attitudes towards the Arab Spring. The study does not however allow me to weight the importance of each factor in OSPs' decision to adopt a specific attitude, as I analysed a small number of firms.

This study fills a gap in research on political risk and on business and peace in several ways. First, it investigates a type of firms frequently neglected in research on business and peace that focuses mostly on extractive industries. The study also offers to look into the attitude adopted by firms during conflict, which is largely missing from research on political risk. It also challenges political risk theories, which rely on the concept of a host country where firms are exposed to political risk.

However analysing material produced by each firm point towards issues that would benefit from clarifications. The main limit of my research is that I was not able to interview representatives of each firm. By carrying out interviews, I would have been able to verify my findings, and to shed more lights on how each firm perceived the events of the Arab Spring in Egypt.

Because the study's scope is limited to the events of the Arab Spring in Egypt, it might be difficult to generalize from my findings. Indeed, comparing the attitude of firms during Arab Spring in Egypt to firms' attitude during the Arab Spring in other countries would allow for richer findings, especially with regards to the role of host and home country: did OSPs adopt the same attitude across all countries experiencing the Arab Spring? What role did their connection to the host country play in their decisions? Did their home country influence firms' attitude in the same way across the region?

Beyond the question of firms' attitude during the Arab Spring, investigating how online service providers react to service disruptions in other contexts would enrich scholarship on their responsibilities with regards to human rights. This became more relevant after the release of the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights in July 2011. Understanding how Online Service Providers perceive their role administrating human rights is relevant beyond the question of service disruption, as shown by the on-going debate around how their services can be used to influence election results (Etter, Silver, and Frier 2017).

My investigation of Online Service Providers' attitude towards the Arab Spring in Egypt shows that greed – the perspective of developing activity – played a role in OSPs' decision to engage for peace. Looking into how the events in Egypt impacted these firms would offer an interesting counterpoint. Was the strategy adopted by each firm successful? Several years later, are they still present in the country? For those who were not in-country, have they opened offices in the country? Have they expanded their activities to the wider MENA region? Have they changed their ethical principles and CSR policies? Indeed, scholarship on political risk, and scholarship on business and peace rarely discuss the success and failure of political risk management and peacebuilding strategies from a business perspective.

## 6 Conclusion

The goal of this study was to understand how Online Service Providers reacted to the Arab Spring, and why. I chose to study the research question “what factors explain that Online Services Providers adopted different attitudes towards the Arab Spring?” In order to answer this research question, I studied the Arab Spring in Egypt, which made it possible to focus on firms’ characteristics that explain their attitude, and not account for differences from country to country.

Drawing from literature on political risk and business and peace, I proceeded to create a framework of analysis of firms’ attitude to the Arab Spring in Egypt. Firms can be avoidant, maintain business as usual or adopt a pro-peace attitude. Firms’ engagement for peace was analysed in greater details, to understand the modalities of their pro-peace engagement. I also identified firms’ characteristics that might explain their attitude: size, ownership form, type of service offered, location of headquarters, in-country presence, prior experience of conflict abroad and in Egypt, and well-established CSR policies and ethical principles. I then identified four cases to analyse, two mobile phone and internet access providers – Vodafone Group and France Telecom-Orange - and two firms offering online services and social media – Google and Twitter.

Following an analysis of each of these firms’ public communication - in interviews, press releases, on their websites and in their reports – I was able to identify which attitude each of them adopted, and to draw a table comparing their characteristics with the attitude they adopted. Two negative cases – two firms that refused to communicate on the events, and thus are considered as having an avoidant attitude – were integrated into that table, in order to better contrast the results. These cases are Facebook, a social media, and Etisalat, who provides mobile phone and internet access.

Based on this analysis, I find that the combination of three characteristics can explain online service providers’ attitude to the Arab Spring in Egypt: whether they had well-established CSR policies and ethical principles, whether they had prior experience of similar conflict abroad and in Egypt, and whether they had infrastructure in the country combined with the support of their home country. Firms with well-established CSR principles adopted an attitude of business as usual. Firms that also had strong ethical principles adopted a pro-peace attitude. Firms that had prior experience of a similar conflict abroad, and prior experience of human rights challenges in Egypt engaged for peace. Finally, firms that

engaged for peace had little to no assets in Egypt, and their home-country government supported their attitude. Other characteristics do not seem to explain these firms' attitude. I cannot however draw conclusions on how much of firms' attitude each of these characteristics explains. Indeed, my study is qualitative in nature, and only takes into consideration six cases, including two negative cases for which little information is available.

As this case study focuses on a small number of companies, in a single country, during a specific conflict, findings should not be generalized beyond this specific set of conditions. However, they highlight limitations of political risk and business and peace theories. Each tend to anchor in firms' presence in country, whereas my study shows that firms that had little to no in-country presence adopted a pro-peace attitude. Legitimacy-based theory of political risk offers an alternative, as it considers political risk faced by firms globally, at home and abroad. Business and peace theory, which studies the role of firms in peacebuilding, complements legitimacy-based theory of political risk by adding the aspect of firms' creed and greed. If legitimacy-based theory of political risk explains that different firms face different political risks, business and peace proposes an explanation of firms managed being exposed to conflict based on the combination of their need, creed and greed.

Beyond these findings, the study of online service providers' attitude to the Arab Spring in Egypt raises broader questions. What were the consequences of these firms' attitude on their operations, once the conflict was over? Beyond the case of Egypt, did these firms react in the same way to similar events in other countries? How do they perceive their role as administrators of citizenship rights, especially as their role in elections is being more and more questioned?

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