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Democracy Promotion in the Age of Social Media: Risks and Opportunities

Summary

The potential that Social Digital Media (SDM) have to support and promote democracy is attracting growing interest from researchers and policy-makers. However, the debate on this issue is controversial. The prominent role played by SDM in the popular uprisings across North Africa and the Middle East has led to the coining of the catchphrase "Social Media Revolution". Yet critics argue that some Western policy-makers may be hamstrung by a cyber-utopian view that regards the Internet as inherently pro-democratic. The undifferentiated call for "Internet freedom" that results from such cyber-utopism is a dangerous one. Rather than that, policy makers should start out by asking how SDM can be used to sideline existing policies on democracy assistance in a given country and let the answer to that question shape their strategic choices. Any serious debate on the promise of SDM to aid democracy promotion must consider that different types of SDM vary in their specific characteristics and that such variation translates into different opportunities and risks depending on the political context in which they are employed.

- In closed societies, where the dissemination of suppressed information is critical for the creation of a rhetorical space beyond the control of the state, efforts should concentrate on circumventing censorship and facilitating access to types of SDM capable of generating high-quality content, especially *blogs* and *collaborative projects*.
- Where the mobilisation of civil society is needed to challenge irresponsive and reform-adverse governments, social *networks* and *content communities* should be the focus of attention.

However, digital activists would have to be trained in the safe use of such platforms to evade government surveillance and persecution.

Experience shows that social media assistance stands a better chance of succeeding if it adopts a country- and issue-oriented approach. Non-state donors with close ties to local actors, such as political foundations, church organizations and domestic non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in developing countries, are more likely than state-owned donor agencies to develop programmes that relate to existing networking structures and to enjoy credibility and legitimacy in the communities of the recipient countries.

Direct government action to promote Internet freedom should concentrate on domestic tasks. Many of the tools used by authoritarian governments to monitor and silence digital dissent are engineered and distributed by US and European companies. Hence, export restrictions on censoring and filtering software should not be viewed as avoidable obstacles, but rather as a fundamental investment in democracy promotion.

Furthermore, the development of proper policy incentives will be essential if companies are to be convinced to consider user protection as a central part of their business mission. It is not a given that SDM service providers should expand business at the cost of their users' privacy.

International Development and Internet Freedom

Ever since the Internet became available to the general public in the early 1990s, the international donor community has sought to employ it in pursuit of strategic development goals. Early efforts were concentrated on investment in technologies to increase penetration rates and improve access for marginalised communities. From the mid-2000s, the advent of Web 2.0 technologies enabled users to collaborate with each other in the creation of web content. Addressees of development policies were now no longer seen as passive Internet consumers. Instead, the discussion increasingly turned to their potential to produce innovation. Based on the conviction that the more freely information flows on the Internet, the stronger societies will grow, the promotion of Internet freedom became a major guideline in development cooperation. The benefits and risks of this approach will be discussed in the following sections.

Essential Characteristics of Social Digital Media (SDM)

SDM are defined as the group of Internet-based applications that enable user-generated content to be created and exchanged. Much of the hope pinned on SDM stems from their potential use for political purposes: SDM allow citizens to discuss public affairs, to join forces in monitoring the behaviour of officials and to mobilise protests against their governments at relatively low transaction costs. However, the various types within the broad SDM category cater to different target groups and have different communication features. Media theory proposes two essential criteria for distinguishing SDM types: media richness and self-disclosure.

- Media richness refers to the amount of information a medium can transmit within a given time. The richer a medium is, the more effective it will be in conveying information between communication partners. For example, media based on the exchange of text (e.g. e-mails) will be less effective in transmitting information than those that also allow the exchange of pictures and videos.
- Self–disclosure is critical in the establishment of interpersonal trust. The concept refers to the desire of people to present a certain image of themselves to others, which is achieved through the disclosure of specific personal information. SDM vary greatly in the degrees of self-disclosure they require.

The following section introduces basic SDM subtypes and discusses their potential assets and drawbacks for democracy promotion on the basis of the two above mentioned criteria.

SDM Types and their Potential for Democracy Promotion

Social networks

Social networks (SNs) such as Facebook score high in *media richness* and *self-disclosure*. They enable users to learn about their virtual friends' inclinations, to share media content and to participate in discussion forums, thus allowing them to simulate real-life interaction. The amount of personal information disclosed in this process leads to a high degree of interpersonal trust, which correlates with political participation. Yet scholars are sceptical about the impact of SNs on participation. Some argue that increasing political activism via SNs may lead to an organisational loss for traditional activist entities, as people turn away from conventional forms of protest (demonstrations, sit-ins, etc.) to embrace the more comfortable and secure forms of digital activism. But SNs have been successfully used to promote political causes in countries with varying degrees of democratic consolidation. Recent prominent examples include an initiative to combat electoral corruption in Brazil and a campaign to avert the introduction of the death penalty for homosexuals in Uganda.

However, the role of SNs in the uprisings of the Arab Spring also sparked a controversy over their ability to promote democracy in an authoritarian context. SNs undoubtedly have the potential to lower the mobilisation costs of civil movements. The snowball effect and the interpersonal trust generated by SNs can accelerate the dissemination of dissident information and increase citizens' proclivity for political risk-taking: knowing that 50 of your friends will join a demonstration may persuade you to join it yourself. But the very features that help civil movements to get the crowd into the streets also help intelligence agencies to identify individuals within that crowd. While enormous resources once had to be invested in learning about dissident networks, a glance at an activist's SN profile may now compromise the security of everybody that person knows. Evidence of the abuse of user data for intelligence purposes abounds. In the aftermath of Iran's post-election uprising in 2009, numerous such incidents were reported.

Nonetheless, civil society activists would be ill-advised to avoid SN altogether. They need to demonstrate their presence on these networks to muster support for their causes. They may opt to use a pseudonym, but only at the cost of reducing the trust that others have in them and, with it, the effectiveness of their efforts. Furthermore, most operators of SN pursue commercial interests rather than democracy promotion. They have a strong economic incentive to ensure their databases are of a high quality, which leads them to oppose the use of pseudonyms.

Blogs

A *blog* is a website run by an individual who regularly posts news and comments on a particular subject. Blogs differ from static websites in that readers can comment on content in an interactive format. *Microblogs* (as found on Twitter) are a blog subtype consisting of very short posts. Both types are mainly text-based and therefore score low in media richness. At the same time, they score high in self-disclosure because they give high visibility to the person creating the content, which, in turn, generates high levels of interpersonal trust. Studies conducted in consolidated

democracies confirm this relation. According to the Pew Center, US citizens' trust in news broadcast by traditional media sources has been steadily declining over the past two decades, with those professing least trust constituting the largest group of consumers of user-generated news content.

The capacity of blogs to spread censored information poses a vital threat to authoritarian regimes. In Egypt, for instance, reports published by bloggers on human rights abuses by police were central to generating the public climate that facilitated the mass protests at Tahrir Square. The potential that blogs have for generating interpersonal trust hence suggests that they can be used as viable tools in the promotion of democracy. But this very feature makes the blog a two-edged sword. To equate all bloggers with dissidents would be naïve. Authoritarian governments have become adept at using the Internet's appeal to young people to advance their own agendas. As the rise of sophisticated online propaganda apparatuses in China and Russia shows, the blogosphere's competitive edge over mainstream media facilitates the use of the Internet as a channel for concealed pro-government propaganda. In addition, the disclosure of personal information makes bloggers an easy target for surveillance by non-democratic actors.

Anonymous blogging is one way to avert the risks that self-disclosure entails. A successful example is the Mexican *Blog del Narco*. Following the assassination of some of their collaborators at the hands of the drug cartels, several newspapers restricted their coverage of the drug war. In 2010, reacting to this severe blow to the democratic control function of the press, an anonymous informatics student set up a blog which offers an uncensored view of the drugs war. By 2011, it had become one of the most visited websites in Mexico.

Collaborative projects

Collaborative projects are based on the principle of "crowdsourcing", i.e. the idea that the outcome of joint efforts by many actors is superior to that of individual efforts. They involve low levels of media richness and self-disclosure, since they are mainly text-based and place greater emphasis on collective action than self-presentation. Their multisource nature and the constant supervision of content by contributors from various backgrounds ensure the objectivity and quality of the information in these forums. Such collaborative projects as Wikipedia facilitate labour-intensive tasks that require the collection and analysis of large quantities of data. This characteristic makes them a useful means of supporting transparency and accountability. A good example of such implementation in a democratic context is provided by the website guttenPlag Wiki. In spring 2011, volunteer reviewers joined forces to substantiate the accusations of plagiarism levelled at the then German Defence Minister, zu Guttenberg. Within four days, the reviewers were able to confirm that passages on 270 of the 407 pages of his PhD thesis had been incorrectly attributed.

Collaborative projects have also been successfully implemented in violent settings. The Ushahidi.com project, for example, was set up in reaction to post-election violence in Kenya in 2008. It enables citizens to report instances of violence by mobile phone or PC. The reports are then categorised by type of violence (riots, rape, looting, etc.) and displayed on interactive maps. The site has been employed in various violent contexts, such as tracking xenophobic assaults in South Africa and reporting on conflicts in Eastern Congo. However, the anonymity assured by crowdsourcing may also be misused for non-democratic ends: following the post-election protests in Iran in 2009, the pro-Ahmadinejad site RajaNews published pictures of protestors' faces and asked the public to identify them. According to the Iranian police, anonymous tip-offs led to the arrest 40 people.

Content communities

Content communities score high in media richness, since they enable the exchange of pictures, videos and other forms of media. Self-disclosure and social interaction rank low in these communities, the focus being on content rather than identity. The most popular communities coalesce around the sharing of photographs (e.g. Flickr) and videos (e.g. YouTube). As they are mainly entertainment-oriented, they might be expected to have a marginal impact on political mobilisation. However, the low level of self-disclosure required in content communities favours activists wishing to circulate suppressed information. While users have to set up a basic profile to upload content, the viewing and sharing of content does usually not require a personal account. As visual cues have a greater impact than textual ones, such platforms as YouTube increase the speed of content dissemination, allowing dissidents to spread information widely before censorship authorities can crack down on them. The Egyptian case illustrates the impact which videos that "go viral" have on political mobilisation: on 6 June 2011, blogger Khaled Said was beaten to death by police officers after reporting on police corruption on his blog. Five days later, a video showing his mutilated corpse was uploaded to YouTube. Within a day, the video received over 86,000 views. A fortnight later nearly 11,000 people responded to the call for silent street protests to mourn Said. The video was later embedded on the Facebook site "We are all Khaled Said", which was a major catalyst of the 2011 uprising that ousted the Mubarak regime. On the downside, anonymity makes it hard to verify the origin of content and facilitates the circulation of concealed government propaganda. Following the 2009 post-election unrest in Iran, public outrage was sparked by a YouTube video showing protestors burning the picture of Ayatollah Khomeini. The video later turned out to be a fabrication of the state broadcasting agency IRIB aimed at discrediting the protest movement.

Conclusions and recommendations

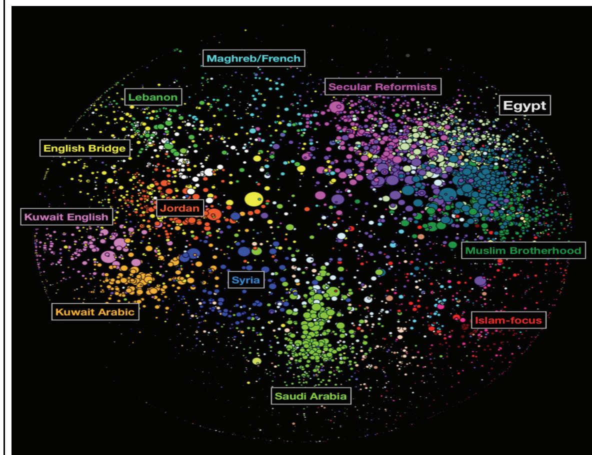
The argument for Internet freedom and the use of SDM to promote democracy requires some fine-tuning. To deny that the greater availability of personal data on the Internet can backfire and so strengthen authoritarian regimes, would be shortsighted.

As shown above, the relationship between various types of SDM and digital activism is complex and strongly dependent on political and national context. Their successful implementation for the promotion of democracy hence requires a constant adjustment of strategies to these context specific requirements To date, the most successful digital campaigns have been those which combined decentralised and grassroots-oriented dynamics with creative, issue-oriented approaches. This indicates that social media assistance is a task best addressed through small, flexible programmes developed by non-state donors such as political foundations and domestic NGOs that maintain close ties with local actors.

In contrast, the presence of government agencies such as USAID as major actors in the field of Internet freedom is critical. Where digital campaigns are co-opted into the geopolitical agendas of large donor nations, activists who accept their funding run the twofold risk of losing credibility and legitimacy in the eyes of their local communities and of exposing themselves to persecution by governments who equate cooperation with Western interests with espionage and treason. Governments who wish to promote Internet freedom should concentrate on domestic tasks. They might begin by imposing restrictions on the export of censoring and filtering software. It is no secret that most of the tools used by authoritarian governments to monitor and silence digital dissent are engineered and distributed by US and European companies. The best known cases are *Cisco Systems* and *Yahoo!*, both of which have been accused of providing the Chinese government with equipment customized to track dissenters online.

Furthermore, it is not a given that SDM providers should expand their business at the expense of their users' privacy. Where governments shy away from regulatory intervention, driven by a logic that puts corporate interests before privacy protection, basic democratic rights may be at jeopardize.

Figure: Mapping the Arab Blogosphere: Politics, Culture and Dissent



In 2010, the Berkman Center of Internet and Society conducted a study on the structure of the Arabic language blogosphere and its most debated issues. The social network map that resulted from this study demonstrates that the Arabic blogosphere is organized primarily around countries with distinct issue specific sub-clusters (e.g. religion or secular reformism). Most bloggers write personal, diary-style observations. Popular topics include human rights and personal religious thoughts. When writing about politics, bloggers focus on domestic topics and are mostly critical of domestic political leaders. International news receive far less attention, but where foreign political leaders – especially the US government – are discussed, it is mainly in negative terms. This supports the notion that social media assistance programmes should be country and issue oriented and be carried out by non-state donors.

Source: Etling, Bruce et al. (2009)

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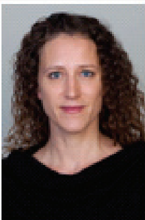

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