# Weighing the Limitations Against the Added–Value of Social Media as a Tool for Political Change

BY MAYESHA ALAM

Social media is helping to revolutionize revolution. Innovation has always been a salient ingredient in any people-driven movement for political change. In this day of Internet domination however, technological developments are reframing the way people think about their public personas and their responsibility to their community as well as to the world. The difference between the existence and absence of social media and new technologies however is not equivalent to the lack of motivation for change or the lack of consciousness that the system in place is inadequate or somehow producing injustice. Rather, the existence of social media and its wide accessibility can result in a faster rate of public demands met or at the very least a greater awareness by a wider range of people. And

yet, the use of social media for political mobilization is by no means a foolproof tactic, nor is technology a guarantor of change. As this paper will argue, new technologies, particularly social media, are both a catalyst for democratic reform as well as an instrument to aid more traditional methods of protest and civil resistance.

*Using Ever-Changing Tools to Spread Constant Principles*

The history of new media being used as a tool for political change, public mobilization, and revolution long precedes the current age of Twitter and Facebook. Indeed, media and technology has long shaped the approach, implementation, and impact of various movements for political change. The forums and tools that exist today are merely

# Between the Stirrup and the Ground: Relocating Digital Activism

BY NISHANT SHAH *and* FIEKE JANSEN

*Introduction*

The first decade of the 21st century has witnessed the simultaneous growth of the Internet and digital technologies on the one hand and political protests and mobilization on the other. As a result, some stakeholders attribute magical powers of social change and political transformation to these technologies.

In the post-Wikileaks world, governments try to censor the use of and access to information technologies in order to maintain the status quo (Domscheit-Berg 2011). With the expansion of markets, technology multinationals and service providers are trying to strike a delicate

balance between ethics and profits. Civil society organizations for their part, are seeking to counterbalance censorship and exploitation of the citizens' rights. Within discourse and practice, there remains a dialectic between hope and despair: Hope that these technologies will change the world, and despair that we do not have any sustainable replicable models of technology-driven transformation despite four decades of intervention in the field of information and communication technology (ICT).

This paper suggests that this dialectic is fruitless and results from too strong of a concentration on the functional role of technology. The

# Social Media and the Reconfiguration of Political Action in Revolutionary Tunisia

By Mohamed Zayani

New media, in general, and social media, in particular, played an important role in the historic events in Tunisia that forced president Zine El Abedine Ben Ali to flee the country and sent shock waves throughout the entire region. However, the relationship between media activism and the revolutionary momentum is far from being causal or uni-dimensional. In fact, a media-centric approach to the momentous events that Tunisia witnessed provides a limited understanding of how otherwise acquiescent citizens become politically involved. What is interesting about the recent events in Tunisia is not whether new media is the driving force behind the revolution but how social media is part of evolving dynamics which reinvented political engagement among a seemingly depoliticized young generation. What is worth exploring is not the causal, political, or revolutionary effect of media, but the ways in which the sphere and terms of political action as such are reconfigured in the age of social media.

For 23 years, Tunisia was ruled by the authoritarian regime of Ben Ali, which not only lacked political legitimacy—having seized power in a coup in 1987—but also stood for no cause and had no ideological underpinning. Initially, the proclaimed agenda for change brought about political opening and inclinations toward reform, but gradually the Tunisian spring gave way to a more restrictive environment. The perceived Islamist challenge in the 1990s was used to institutionalize repression and to consolidate an autocratic rule, which legalized the opposition but gave it a narrow opening and kept it both anemic and loyal. Democratizing progress took the form of a tailor-made electoral democracy which was mired in a "proceduralism" intended to pay lip service to democratic reform while perpetuating the regime's hold on power.[1] Beneath the façade of democracy lied a police state characterized by single party rule, intolerance for political dissent, lack of transparency, and personalization of power.

Cognizant that democratic pretension without economic achievements would make his system hollow and his regime untenable, Ben Ali accelerated the implementation of structural adjustments as evident in the increased privatization of economic sectors and the orientation towards export-based growth. At the same time, the regime continued to rely on tourism and remittances for foreign currency. The macroeconomic management the government pursued, along with the degree of stability the country witnessed under the regime's authoritarian hold, helped strengthen the economy. Judging from its performance indicators, Tunisia was on the right track. Since the mid-1990s, growth rates have been consistently above 5%, inflation held at around 4%, budget deficit kept at manageable levels, exports increased, per capita income improved, poverty rates reduced, and population growth slowed. By IMF standards, Tunisia was "a rare model that works in the developing world."[2] French President Jacques Chirac even called it an economic miracle.

However, the country's performance indicators disguise structural difficulties made all the more complex by the interpenetration of the world economy and the changing socio-demographic structure of the country. While the structure of the economy was not amenable to producing high-skilled jobs that could attract the increasing waves of college graduates, the development strategy the government pursued privileged the cosmopolitan centers and the coastal cities over the inner regions. Similarly, the relationship of patronage-clientelism the government instituted privileged economic players who were close to the regime while increasing the disparity between classes. Notwithstanding the politically motivated social programs the government implanted to benefit the unprivileged areas and the lower classes, the country's integration in the liberal global economy affected the economic well being of the layman, shrinking the middle class and reducing people's purchasing power. The problem was compounded with economic "clanism" and rampant corruption. Over the years, the regime developed "a culture of crony capitalism", which fostered an aggressive extractive mentality.[3] Inevitably, the institutionalization of corruption and the unrealized potential of the economy engendered socio-economic deprivation, class disparity, and regional equalities.

Expectedly, the more compounded these problems became, the more sanitized the national media sphere grew. In an environment where media was state controlled and where journalists were either subjected to heavy restrictions or paralyzed by self-censorship, such devolution went uncontested. The absence of credible political parties and of a viable civil society sector meant the persistence of a monolithic discourse which glorified Ben Ali's rule. Coalitional investment in organized labor and the business sector meant not only that the regime faced little resistance from what would have been advocates of social change, but also that these became "defenders of authoritarian perpetuity."[4]

Key to Ben Ali's power politics was the institutionalization of repression. With the West either turning a blind eye to human rights abuses in Tunisia and to Ben Ali's lack of commitment to real political reform or conveniently supporting him for his proclaimed moderate and secularist orientation in a region marked by Islamic revival, the cost of repression was relatively low. The aversion of the political establishment to dissent fostered a culture of repression, which fed on an uncompromising and obtrusive state security apparatus. As

Tunisia developed into a perfect police state, many Tunisians internalized the culture of fear, resigning to the idea that the political reality of the Arab world was immutable, while others, who were more mindful of the civil war that ripped apart neighboring Algeria in the 1990s, acquiesced to the tradeoff between security and freedom, eventually tolerating restrictions on individual liberties and infringements of civil rights. Soon enough though, a suffocating atmosphere started to weigh on people.

Significantly, Ben Ali adopted a fused system of political oppression and social liberalization.[5] The survival of the regime impelled a modernization of authoritarianism through the adoption of policy choices including the promotion of women's freedom, the investment in education, the adoption of information and communication technologies, the setting up of an Internet infrastructure, and the promotion of the youth. Going hand in hand with these policy choices was a *de facto* secularization of society that declared those who had an Islamist affiliation or affinity to be enemies of the state and pursued systematic depoliticization of the young generation through the policing of the universities, the infiltration of organizations, the promotion of entertainment media, and the popularization of sports.

Ironically, the modernization of authoritarianism that the Ben Ali regime pursued introduced variables and engendered counter dynamics, which would prove to be consequential. Demographic changes, a young population, advanced levels of education, liberal orientations, and consumerist inclinations brought higher expectations for many Tunisians, which were often dashed in the face of a prescriptive culture, high unemployment among college degree holders, social marginalization, economic retraction, bleak future perspectives, and thwarted aspirations. These disjunctions highlighted the bankruptcy of the system but also accentuated the extent to which the state, as the locus and enabler of meaningful and engaged citizenry, was eviscerated. If the omnipotence of the police state meant the confiscation of freedom, the marginalization of a large segment of society signaled the suspension of dignity—notwithstanding the official discourse on the centrality of the human rights dimension to Ben Ali's Tunisia.

It is from this perspective that one can understand the desperate act of the street vendor, a young Tunisian from the deprived town of Sidi Bouzid, who set himself on fire in protest of the confiscation of his fruit stand. Mohamed Bouaziz's public self-immolation was a symbolic act that awakened the national popular consciousness, accentuated the layman's plight, externalized a deep sense of resentment, developed a revolutionary environment, and sparked a historical revolution long in the making. The fact that the social demands of the protesters were intertwined with political demands should come as no surprise. In recent years, Tunisia exhibited signs of simmering discontent and sporadic social unrest. Most notable are the riots which took place in the mining region of Gafsa in 2008 and which were ruthlessly but discretely quelled. The symbolic effect of the protests

though was long lasting—the red line that was crossed would call into question fundamental aspects of the relationship between the ruler and the ruled. With the outbreak of the Sidi Bouzid events, these unsettling dynamics were played out more intensely and more publicly. Here social media was no small player.

In an environment where freedom was more a slogan than a practice, the Internet and new media had a special appeal for Tunisia's young and educated population. The Internet shook off the sense of isolation and enabled many to be part of the information revolution and to ride the wave of globalization. It was an alternative space for engagement and relative freedom in a suffocating environment marked by tight control and heavy censorship. The spread of the Internet meant the development of a parallel space of engagement, which is distinct from the country's restrictive reality and partially disconnected from it. Naturally, the high levels of Internet access in Tunisia prompted the government to monitor Internet use. Political content that was deemed harmful was systematically blocked, sensitive material and human rights reports made inaccessible, Internet activists arrested, and popular sharing sites banned. Expectedly, such a constraining atmosphere favored entertainment over politics, and content sharing over content creation. The regime's aversion to political activism informally delineated the confines of acceptable Internet freedom within the social sphere. By and large, Internet use among young people was more of a lifestyle than a form of activism. Although there were active bloggers, they were routinely monitored by Internet police and their blogs were often targeted. Because of the government crackdown on the Internet, many users migrated to Facebook to facilitate navigation and remain active. More than a means of communication, Facebook offered a space of interaction.

Under intense socio-political conditions, this *de facto* aggregation would prove significant. In fact, the popular culture spaces around which Facebook use among the youth developed spawned counter-cultural tendencies. Though a great deal of the activities on Facebook related to sharing either personal communication and pictures or popular entertainment videos relating to music, sports, and drama, this increasingly popular space of engagement was not necessarily depoliticized. For example, the rise and popularity of underground contentious music genres like local rap songs, which were circulated on social media, points to the gradual consolidation of a digital political consciousness. Young rappers like Psycho-M and El General produced viral rap videos, which, though avowedly social in orientation, were notably contentious. No less important than the actual mediatized nature of the circulated popular culture expressions was probably their political thrust. Although not necessarily ideological, Tunisian youth developed a political consciousness, which manifested itself differently from that of classical political players.

When the Sidi Bouzid events broke out and the word started to get out about police brutality in the face of mount-

ing protests, people actively sought information. Collective interest, a deep-seated feeling of frustration, and seething resentment, along with a rekindled political inclination, fostered an intense form of online participant citizenry among an estimated 1.8 million active Tunisian Facebook account holders in a country of 11 million people. The fact that the images and information were operating within the confines of the cyber world—i.e., on the fringe of the real world—gave people a relative sense of security. In fact, there was a perception that Facebook was a safe place of engagement. The ensuing wave of killings, arrests, and suicides helped collapse the line of demarcation that distinguished the cyber world from the real world, and in doing so went a long way toward shaking off the culture of fear. Protesters actively and fervently witnessed the turmoil registering events, protests, and riot scenes through mobile phones, smartphones, and personal cameras and uploading them on social network sites. A constant stream of personal newsfeeds, images, and videos, which tracked the situation, animated Facebook pages such that incidents developing in a local context took on a national dimension. Social media like Facebook became crucial in connecting people not only to information, but also to other people. As the news spread, social connections intensified communication between individuals and among communities. While giving Tunisians a glimpse of the extent of the unrest and the depth of anger, the extensive use of connective technologies and social media fostered solidarity—both digital and real—channeling loosely coordinated publics and enhancing activism. Young Internet users, Facebook account holders, and cyber activists in the country and abroad helped expose the practices of the Ben Ali regime inside and outside the blogosphere and mobilize support. As the protests spread and the word got out, the nature of involvement evolved from passive Internet curiosity to avid information seeking to active sharing to citizen journalism to cyber activism to civil activism, culminating in street demonstrations and defiant confrontations, which found their way back to Facebook.

No less important than the revolutionary mindset that was fostered by new media was the role that traditional media played. While state media imposed a total blackout on the unrest, news channels like France 24 and Al Jazeera picked up the news feeds and aired Facebook videos that lit up the social web. Barred from reporting in Tunisia during Ben Ali's rule, Al Jazeera cautiously resorted to citizen journalism, even instituting a service for uploading pictures and information and turning its newsroom to a center for collecting feeds. What satellite television did is amplify the voices of the people, publicize their cause, and extend their reach to millions of Tunisians and Arabs. But even when the protests in Tunisia and the ensuing police brutality became the top agenda item on satellite TV news, social media like Facebook and Twitter remained central to the flow of information, covering the events in the inner towns faster than satellite television could report. Interestingly, what social media did was not simply enable young people to circum-

vent the government censors but also to operate outside the structures of traditional media—even altering the latter's operational frame while giving it a new momentum. Airing low resolution images from the camera phones of protesters collected through citizen journalism became a signature of authenticity for pan Arab satellite channels like Al Jazeera, so much so that if it was not from Facebook, it was not real. The material that made its way to television was recaptured and re-circulated on Facebook in a self-perpetuating manner. The government's inability to control the information, and by extension the space of interaction social media afforded, was the beginning of the end.

It remains to be said that while new and old media were a potent enabler of the revolutionary dynamics, the popular forces that brought down Ben Ali's authoritarian regime cannot be reduced to a media effect. What happened in Tunisia was not a media revolution, but arguably a revolution in the age of media, which is tantamount to saying that media can only be part of a more complex conjuncture where the cultural, social, economic, political and historical intersect in complex ways. Understanding these dynamics in their full complexity requires a social science perspective that is capable of delving into the thick of the lived sociality in contemporary Tunisia as much as it necessitates a political science perspective, which can theorize how revolutions take place in a distinctly authoritarian Arab context.

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# Digital Protectionism: Preparing for the Coming Internet Embargo

By Rami Khater

For years developed countries in the West have spoken of the threat of the "end of oil" or another embargo that would debilitate and destabilize their fossil fuel hungry economies and lifestyles. In a reversal of roles, the Middle East is now as dependant on Western Internet services as the West is upon its oil. While the United States is working hard to free itself from its oil dependence, Middle Eastern countries will begin their Internet independence campaigns as well, before the first embargo hits. Middle Eastern countries that do not prepare suitable alternatives to the most popular Internet services, such as email, blogs, search, and cloud computing,[1] run the risk of being dealt a serious blow to both their economies and societies. Further, and of equal importance, the amount of data collected by different websites and companies through the Internet services they provide is capable of giving them unique, in depth, and real-time insight about countries around the globe; this knowledge in the hands of a foreign entity, be it private or government owned, is a challenge to the sovereignty of other nation-states.

## Virtual Infrastructure

The Internet is a distributed architecture by design, with many nodes connected in an infinite mesh. However, Internet services that users around the globe depend on (Google, Yahoo, Amazon) are in a very concentrated, centralized, and non-durable service network that does not adhere to the distributed and decentralized architecture of the Internet itself. The most used Internet services have become essential virtual infrastructure upon which many other services and infrastructures operate. We take these services for granted and do not conceive of the potential interruption if only one of them were to be inaccessible for any serious length of time.

Thus far, the Internet has been a largely uncontrolled domain where the traditional rules and priorities of the nation-state have been largely ignored. The unprecedented growth and innovation the world has witnessed has left many countries unwilling to control the activities of their citizens in belief that it would undermine potential gains. However, a small number of countries control the vast majority of popular services[2] and this has given them a great deal of power over all other nations.

An Internet embargo would disrupt communications between individuals, business, and governments as well as cause traditional economic problems. Many Middle Eastern countries rely on Google/Yahoo for search, Microsoft for chat, Wordpress for blogs, and many other American or European companies for the hosting of websites. In the event of political fallout between an Arab country and the United States, the Internet could be used as a sanction weapon. Such a scenario does not imply a complete cessation of Internet activity in that Arab country, rather services and websites from "American" companies would be inaccessible. Imagine a Middle Eastern netizen unable to access a piece of or the entire foreign virtual infrastructure. Major Arab corporations' websites could fall as well, as they are commonly hosted by American or European website hosting services. The speed and ease with which this partial or total embargo can be accomplished will astonish those who are not prepared for the coming use of Internet services as political leverage.

A number of recent events have brought the potential of an Internet embargo to the forefront. On January 21, 2010, Secretary of State Hilary Clinton gave a speech[3] on America's Internet doctrine and stated that the Internet is a tool for democracy and that "American" companies will not bow to the desires of nations with unethical practices or laws. Secretary Clinton made it readily apparent: American Internet companies will tow the national line in full, and are no longer exempt of their American ideals and laws, they must act ethically, even when it is in contradiction of another entity. This is in direct contrast to the activities of American Internet services in the past when dealing with countries like China.

Days after the Clinton speech, the massively popular website sourceforge.net, which is a repository for open source projects and collaboration, blocked access to any visitors from Iran, North Korea, Syria, Sudan, Cuba, and other nations[4]. Only after an uproar from the open source community, that the blocking violated the very nature (and laws) of the open source movement, was the policy adjusted. Individual open-source projects on sourceforge.net may now decide if they want to block access from this pre-defined list of countries to their project group or not.

SourceForge released a statement explaining why it had restricted access.

> "…restrictions on the free flow of information rub us the wrong way. However, in addition to participating in the open source community, we also live in the real world, and are governed by the laws of the country in which we are located. Our need to follow those laws supersedes any wishes we might have to make our community as inclusive as possible."

The message was clear to nations dependant upon this virtual infrastructure: "We control access to knowledge and critical services on the Internet". This was a small example, perhaps even a warning.

Iran has made the first step in the Middle East towards Digital Protectionism. Taking a hint from the Clinton speech and the sourceforge.net debacle, Iran's government struck first by blocking all access to Gmail[5] from their national

IP address range[6]. This is not an act against the interests of Google; rather it is against the United States. Iran views the virtual infrastructure as a proxy for American interests, and since Iran cannot control or monitor the Gmail service, it simply decided to block it. Iran plans to launch a state-run email service for its citizens so that they may not only communicate effectively but also reduce the likelihood that a disruption in services (prompted by a foreign entity) would affect their national economy and stability. The Iranian government did not choose to block Yahoo or Hotmail e-mail services, which leads many to characterize its action as a symbolic. Iran's government has taken the first step to reduce its dependence on Western Internet services for its own stability and future. Whether this action was taken to protect the government from activists or protect netizens of Iran at large is to be seen.

Iran chose to use a state-run email service, however it could have used a privately run system through an Iranian corporation. The important part is that the organization in charge of these critical services, private or public, is loyal to Iran or its regional allies and willing to cooperate when needed. In essence, Iran wants to be in a similar position as the United States, with uninhibited access to data and control over virtual infrastructure.

Digital Protectionism in the Middle East need not be on a country-by-country basis. For larger endeavors, such as creating search engines, the Gulf Corporation Council (GCC) may decide to have a regional system or Syria, Lebanon, and the Palestinian Authority could work together as well. This infrastructure would take years to reach the level of sophistication offered by world-class providers, however, it is an investment in sovereignty and economics. The best way to protect against a virtual infrastructure blockade is to create an alternative.

## Issues of Sovereignty

The same companies that run the most popular global virtual infrastructure have benefitted immensely from the amount of data they are constantly collecting. At times Google knows more of what is going on inside the United States than the government itself. While an ominous prospect, Google has used this knowledge to assist the government. For example, Google provided Swine Flu trends to the government up to two weeks before the government report itself was finished, with over 95% accuracy when compared to the final official document.

The U.S. government benefits immensely from access to this kind of data in times of need. In fact, access to the data help the government *govern* more effectively. However, providers also have similar data and knowledge about other nations as well; this data gives these private entities an enormous amount of power. Search engines may know more about the current economic issues in Greece than the country itself or the entire EU. Twitter may have statistics showing that the search terms "coup" and "revolution" have

increased two hundred times in a country since a disputed election.

*Foreign Policy's* Marc Lynch offered a quick and simple example of the knowledge that is waiting to be unearthed in these massive datasets. Lynch searched Google for "third intifada" in Arabic and tweeted that he found "123,000 hits from February to March 2010 versus 178,000 in all of 2009"[7]. Such a massive increase in a phrase with direct ties to Palestine/Israel could be an indicator of the negative outlook the Arab world has on the current state of affairs.

What makes this data ever more interesting is the collective and peer produced nature of it. There was no concerted effort from millions of Arabic language Internet users to use the phrase "third intifada" in the past month, this statistic is the collective truth gathered from separate actions. Therefore, the data being collected in micro-increments is honest data, somewhat of a collective conscious. Lynch found a trend in the ocean of publicly available data. What could he find out if he had access to the private and public datasets?

These private corporations will soon know more about foreign sovereign nation-states than those states know about themselves. As the use of foreign virtual infrastructure increases they are capable of more data mining for past trends and statistically accurate predictions of the future. The sovereignty of nation-states is directly challenged when a foreign entity beholden to the laws and desires of a foreign nation can effectively predict its economic, political, and social future. Therefore the need for virtual infrastructure is also an investment in the future of regional stability and sovereignty of each individual nation-state in the Arab world.

## Issues of Control

Implicit in the term sovereignty is control. And as the case of Blackberry demonstrates, reliance on foreign service providers undercuts the control that states generally exercise. Research In Motion (RIM), the creator of the massively popular Blackberry device is based in Canada, and the architecture of their service is extremely centrally controlled. Other than traditional mobile phone services such as SMS and phone calls, all other data and services run through RIM's servers in Canada. The most notable of these centrally controlled services are traditional web browsing and Blackberry Messenger. The issue is that governments cannot view conversations or censor web browsing over these centrally controlled services. Both of the services encrypt data, which is then sent back to Canada, where it is routed, stored, and when needed encrypted and sent back to the user. Blackberry data from around the world is centrally stored in Canada, currently accessible by few nations, including the United States and Canada.

Many Middle Eastern countries, especially in the Gulf, view this as completely unacceptable. Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia have all promised to shut down Blackberry services if RIM does not give them access to all data and the ability to censor specific websites. The

Blackberry devices have always had this centrally controlled mechanism, but it is only recently that there have been claims that the devices are used for nefarious means and are security risks. Granted, it is understood that many nations simply want to eavesdrop on all their citizens' conversations and the inability to do so opens a cornucopia of potential criminal uses for the device, whether real or imagined. However they desire the same control as others.

Backlash in the United States has been harsh but the smell of hypocrisy is abundant. The Center for Democracy and Technology believes that this is an attack on Internet Freedom — but it is not. Rather, sovereign Middle Eastern states want the same rights as Canada and the United States in monitoring their citizens' actions. To call one state's access to information legitimate and the others an attack on rights is indeed questionable at best.

RIM is reported to have come to agreements with all Middle Eastern countries that have expressed concern thus far. They will censor websites for Kuwait, have come to terms with the UAE, and will give Saudi Arabia access to their users' data via a control system within Saudi borders. Internet forums and blogs have been abuzz with claims that "the flood gates have opened". Indeed, the Middle East, with its heavy usage of the latest technology but little virtual infrastructure or devices of its own, is firing the first salvos over control of the new "great game" — control of and access to data.

## Conclusion

It is not a matter of *if*, rather *when*, the Internet will be used as an economic and social weapon similar to any other throughout history when there is a dependency relationship. The world has been misled to believe that the Internet is a boundary-less place that cannot be controlled. Countries around the world will find their dependence on the Internet and related services undermined if they are unwilling to create their own services and virtual infrastructure to offset some of that need.

The warning shots have been fired and the lines drawn in virtual space. The Middle East has been in a precarious position over the last 100 years being semi-dependant on foreign countries for various services. There are no Middle Eastern search engines, email, chat, cloud, or online retailers that are worth discussing in earnest. The entire region and its users may be removed from accessing the Web, with no viable options to turn to. Protectionist policies exist in every nation, for a variety of reasons; Digital Protectionism is the next logical step.

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7

# Improving Governance Through Symbiotic Media Structures

By Edward Gaier *and* Jason Smith

The role of social media in the political reform of governments is a hot topic across a variety of academic disciplines, as well as occupying a significant space in headline news as of late. To think of social media and the impacts it has on governance provides many unique opportunities and challenges to existing theories of rule and citizenship. Yet, to fully think of social media as an object that is independent of any other structure is an oversight that many technophiles and other technological determinists routinely make in their assessments of how media networks affect a people's relationship to their government. Recently, social media has been able to assist in the deconstruction of authoritarian regimes and present opportunities for democratization, but little evidence supports that social media acts in a productive capacity. It can deconstruct illegitimate regimes through mobilizing the population against a common foe, but it has not been equally effective in constructing a new democratic regime through the politicking between leaders representative of the population, through the conventional and formal space of government.

One example of how social media and the proliferation of information contributed to mobilizing people against an authoritarian ruler, aiding its eventual downfall, comes from the Philippines.[1] In 2001, popular demonstrations organized with the use of short message services (SMS) — text based communications that are part of phone and other mobile devices — led to the end of the corrupt rule of Joseph Estrada. However, the presence and utilization of SMS acts less as a causal factor for deconstructing authoritarianism, but rather as a medium or catalyst for mobilization and political action. The people of the Philippines had already proven their ability to mobilize against the dictatorial regime of President Ferdinand Marcos in 1986, far before the spread of social media such as SMS. Despite the restoration of power to a more democratic government the Philippines continues to suffer from widespread civil corruption. This case demonstrates that social media is a preferable medium for political action, but it is unable to foster the political reform and progress necessary to prevent the return of corruption and abuse of government offices for personal gain.

Despite this, social media remains an empowering element for democratic forces within a society. The social nature of this revolutionary media structure implies an inclusive and accessible platform for the exchange and consumption of information, which requires an active and engaged individual partaking in actions with others of the same disposition. However, the dependence on advanced technology puts social media into a dialogue with existing media systems and the infrastructures that sustain them. We describe the existing media system as corporate media: more conventional media sources that are centralized and run as private businesses for the purpose of making a profit. While corporate media has in the past demonstrated its ability to counter authoritarian forces, corruption, and bad governance, it remains problematic with its centralized and exclusive structure concentrated on promoting private interests. Given that social media has yet to prove its ability to significantly enhance governance or construct democratic change and corporate media has been known to be more exclusive and elitist, how can these two media structures work to improve governance? Or, how can they construct progressive change that will not only remove authoritarians, but also contribute to institutional change promoting accountability, transparency, and access to the decision-making processes of governing?

Social media and corporate media structures are unlikely to significantly contribute to democratization and enhanced governance independent of one another. For media to contribute to the construction and maintenance of democratic government representative of the entire population, social media and corporate media must form a symbiotic and interdependent relationship utilizing their respective decentralized and centralized structures.

## *Juggling Between Media Systems*

Social media acts as a medium allowing individuals to connect and network around common interests. Politically, the increasing connectivity of individuals sharing political preferences and sentiments allows for an increase in political activity and engagement.[2] While social media platforms act as a center for convergence, individuals are free to consume, produce, and associate with content and other users at their own discretion. Participating in social media is not completely inclusive given that a certain degree of infrastructure and capital is required to search the Internet or send a text message,[3] but its inclusiveness far exceeds that of corporate media.

With regard to authoritarian regimes and less developed countries, social media is likely to have the most visible impact due to the relatively young media systems there, as opposed to media systems in developed countries in which it would be harder to break up the monopolies of news organizations that have created their own media markets and specialized reporting practices. Although advanced media systems have seen a decline in other sectors of the world,[4] their positions in developed nations allot them more capital and importance over developing media systems in the rest of the world. The structure of advanced media is one that operates under policies that promote an open and competitive media — yet deregulation practices over the past 30 years have given rise to corporate interests and a

decrease in transparency and public participation.[5] Although corporate media has provided a common public forum for civil discourse to take shape, through its ability to help mold the "political reality" in which citizens participate, it has also been plagued by a tendency to mute diverse voices rather than address them.

Social media has two immediate factors that prevent it from being more influential in governance and fomenting democratic change. First is the issue of homophily, the tendency for individuals to independently affiliate themselves more with like-minded rather than different counterparts.[6] When entering into political discussions between actors and voices in close alignment, individuals will connect more with others sharing similar paradigms and limit exposure to diverse interests and opinions. Despite being associated with increased political action,[7] homphilia decreases exposure and tolerance for differing perspectives and political interests.[8] This lack of exposure prevents the inclusive and open dialogue between diverse groups that is necessary in a legitimately representative political system. In order for social media to act as a space where competing interests and differing sentiments converge, self-segregating practices associated with homophilia must be addressed.

Secondly, the amount of social media content is simply too dense for any individual to consume. Social media platforms allow multiple agents and actors to arise espousing to be the authority of a shared interest or movement and create unique "self-produced media."[9] This precondition establishes content on social media platforms that are both diverse and nearly limitless. While self-produced media thrives in social media platforms, sharing content produced by corporate media is also popular. Articles, videos, and podcasts produced by corporate media giants such as major television networks and internationally recognized periodicals are proliferated by independent individual users. In order to contribute to a democratic form of governance where social media is able to act as a conduit of public interests and political sentiments, the enormous amount of diverse information on social media platforms needs to be organized by movements and leaders in order to bring the sentiments and interests of the people into the decision-making process.[10]

## Symbiotic Relationship

While corporate media is too exclusive to become truly reflective of an entire society, social media is too vast for one user to gain full exposure to the diverse perspectives of that society. However, both have the ability to contribute when utilizing their unique qualities. The high profile nature of corporate media creates the possibility of establishing a standard of political and social discourse that incorporates the major and most significant factors, movements, and leaders of the time. In order to construct a more orderly, convenient, and predictable media product for consumption on a massive scale, corporate media must survey a massive amount of information and condense it into essential elements. This process creates a functional role for corporate media, acting as crucible or filter working to establish a standardized national narrative for discourse to revolve around. Corporate media is also able to counter the anti-pluralist effects of homophilia by exposing consumers to the divergent perspectives and voices that they would selectively remove from their own information diets.[11] Familiarity and tolerance for a wide spectrum of sentiments and interests is required for political discourse, and to promote collaboration in diverse populations.

A recent example of how corporate media centralizes major social and political movements comes from Egypt. The uniting of constituents disgruntled with the regime of Hosni Mubarak relied upon the massive coordination of Egyptians sharing common sentiments over social media platforms. Individuals such as Wael Ghonim organized protests and demonstrations using social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, encouraging the mobilization, which occurred in early 2011. While in the larger picture of the events occurring in Egypt, Ghonim's use of social media can be viewed as relatively small, or as a bottom-up approach, it nonetheless brought him attention outside of Mubarak's security forces. Corporate media entities brought him to the foreground and put him in a position to consolidate, centralize, and speak for the people's frustrations. Even though he turned down the opportunity to become a popular leader, the amount of attention he received demonstrates the ability of corporate media to give rise to elites and leaders to centralize and embody the sentiments and attitudes of a decentralized yet powerful movement.

## Conclusion

While social media platforms establish a more inclusive and decentralized media structure than the conventional, centralized, and exclusive corporate media, it has yet to prove its independent ability to serve the proactive and constructive purpose of improving governance. Social media has made inroads in the ability for disenfranchised peoples to organize and coordinate political action around excluded interests; however, it is yet to replace corporate media in aggregating significant movements and common interests into a workable national discourse. By recognizing the limitations of social media's structure in creating the institutions that allow democratic standards to emerge, and by recognizing that social and corporate media are not competing, interchangeable, or independent, a clearer understanding of social media's current and potential influence on governance and democracy emerges.

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1    Information regarding the popular mobilizations in the Philippines was gathered from Democracy Web, Available at: http://www.democracyweb.org/accountability/philippines.php.

2    Knight Commission 2009. *Informing Communities: Sustaining Democracy in the Digital Age.* Washington, DC: Aspen Institute.

3    Mansell, Robin. 2004. "Political Economy, Power and New Media." *New Media & Society* 6, (1); p. 96-105.

4    Tunstall, Jeremy. 2008. *The Media Were American.* Oxford: Oxford University Press..

5    Leys, Colin. 2001. *Market-Driven Politics.* London, UK: Verso; McChesney, Robert. 2004. *The Problem of the Media.* New York,: Monthly Review Press; Freedman, Des. 2008. *The Politics of Media Policy.* Cambridge: Polity.

6    McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Cook. 2001. "Birds of a Feather: Homophily in Social Networks." *Annual Review of Sociology* 27; p. 415-444.

7    Veenstra, Aaron, Ben Sayre and Kjerstin Thorson. 2008. Sticking Together Online: Political Participation and Ideologically Homogenous Blog Consumption. Presented at the 63rd Conference of the American Association for Public Opinion Research on May 16, 2008.

8    Boyd, Danah. 2005. "Sociable Technology and Democracy." Pp.183-193 in *Extreme Democracy* (eds. Jon Lebkowsky and Mitch Ratcliffe), Lulu.com..

9    Croteau, David. 2006. "The Growth of Self-Produced Media Content and the Challenge to Media Studies." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 23, (4); 340-344.

10   Ottaway, Marina. 2011. "From Tunisia to Egypt: Protests in the Arab World". Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Available at: http://www.carnegieendowment.org/events/?fa=eventDetail&id=3148. Ottaway argues that leaders and elites are required in opposition groups in order to lobby and negotiate with the government and other political entities.

11   Veenstra, Aaron, Ben Sayre and Kjerstin Thorson. 2008. Sticking Together Online: Political Participation and Ideologically Homogenous Blog Consumption. Presented at the 63rd Conference of the American Association for Public Opinion Research on May 16, 2008.

Deibert, Ronald J., John G. Palfrey, Rafal Rohozinski, Jonathan Zittrain, and Miklos Haraszti. 2010. *Access Controlled: The Shaping of Power, Rights, and Rule in Cyberspace.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

*Ibid.*

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1    Applications and data reside centrally online instead of at users end (e.g. Gmail, Dropbox)

2    Alexa rankings as of March 2010 - http://www.alexa.com/topsites/global

3    Link to speech - http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2010/01/135519.htm

4    Denied Persons List and the Entity List, and other lists

5    Google's email service, http://www.gmail.com

6    Any traffic that appears to originate from inside Iran

7    http://bit.ly/9vxr0U

# Internet and Political Transformation in Turkey

BY IMREN BORSUK AND ENSARI EROĞLU

## Introduction

The rising production and usage of information and communication technologies (ICTs) marked the beginning of the 21st century as the "communication age." These technologies did not only change private life, but they also altered the public realm with the increasing rise of virtual communities and social networks. Citizens have now been dubbed "netizens" because they take part in new discursive spaces through ICT facilities. This transformation is especially influential in the political realm of developing countries in which the voice of civil society remains weak because of an elite-dominated decision-making process. Turkey presents an important case study to observe the effects of ICTs on political space. In Turkey, initial efforts were made in the late 1980s but the Internet was first introduced in 1993 (Çağıltay and Wolcott 2001) and it has been expanding with an increasing speed since 2000 (Acar and Kumas 2008). The Internet has contributed to the enlargement of the public sphere in Turkey, especially with regard to sensitive political issues such as the Kurdish problem, the Armenian question, and the military's role in politics.

This paper will examine the innovation of political space in Turkey by presenting three major events related to these sensitive issues: an online petition campaign in support of Kurdish children who were sentenced for throwing stones at security forces, an online public appeal concerning the Armenian massacres named "We Apologize," and the 2007 intervention by Turkish military forces in presidential elections via online an memorandum. In the first section, we will consider three arguments concerning the influence of ICTs on public space. In the second section, we will present these three events in light of the contribution of the Internet to political space. In the last section, we will discuss the case studies and draw conclusions. We will argue that the Internet does not bring about such "decentralizing, globalizing, harmonizing, and empowering" effects on political space (Negroponte 1995). However, it does act as a catalyst for more pluralistic political space.

## The Influence of ICTs on Political Space

There are three central arguments concerning the relationship between ICTs and political space. According to optimists, ICTs bring about decentralization and dissemination of information between privileged and disenfranchised groups. Although a handful of political parties still control politics

for the most part, ICTs broaden political participation with the ease of online citizen networks. Therefore, ICTs have reduced the gap between the center and the periphery with low costs due to the widespread use of telecommunication networks. Various observers describe this phenomenon differently. For example, Grossman (1995) characterizes it as an "electronic republic"; Negroponte (1995) rings alarm bells as he warns of the evaporation of the nation-state under the pressure of new technologies; Rheingold (1991) qualifies it as "great equalizer" because it can "equalize the balance of power between citizens and power brokers" (*ibid.*, 97).

Conversely, pessimists doubt the sustainability of these arguments. First, they point to the growing digital divide between "haves" and "have-nots" since only a small percentage of the population is able to utilize ICTs in developing countries. They argue that cultural and educational development influences a society's economic and technological development, which, in turn, conditions social development, which once again stimulates cultural and educational development (Castells 1999). Thus, this digital divide broadens "virtuous circle of development or a downward spiral of underdevelopment" (*ibid.*). Second, the Internet is not only utilized to achieve progressive goals. The Internet has turned into a shopping mall in the hands of big corporations through marketing, selling, and shopping (Weis 1992; Schiller 1993). Entertainment and diverting goals of big media corporations prevail over the progressive uses of the Internet. Moreover, ICT usage is not as free as many assume it is; authoritarian regimes apply wide-ranging restrictions on access. As recent uprisings in the Middle East demonstrate, states are capable of censoring and monitoring ICT usage, for example, by blocking the transmission of text messages on mobile phones, limiting what can be said on the to the Internet, or by restricting access to the Internet altogether. In fact, the Internet can provide authoritarian regimes with tools to keep tabs on and control their opponents. Calingaert (2010) gives the example of authoritarian regimes hacking into Facebook in order to access an entire network of activists.

The third argument insists that collective action in real space is more desirable than collective action in virtual space because of the great importance of face-to face contact in constructing a sense of sympathy and responsibility between participants (Mansbridge 1980). Participants in virtual spaces can easily evade the responsibility of collective action and thus face difficulty in developing mutual empathy for reconciliation that face-to-face contact can generate. Bimber considers ICTs not as revolutionary agents but as a medium of "accelerated pluralism", which stimulates "more fluid, issue-based group politics with less institutional coherence" (Bimber 1998, 133).

### Internet and Political Space in Turkey

Internet access in Turkey is widespread for a developing country, with 41.6% penetration in households (TurkStat, 2010a) and 90.9% for companies (TurkStat, 2010b). This vast and increasing usage of the Internet facilitates dialogue on difficult issues such as Turkey's Kurdish problem, the Armenian question, or the military's influence on politics. The following section will present three major Internet-related events on these issues: the online petition campaign of Justice for Children Initiative (JCI), the online "We Apologize" appeal concerning the Armenian massacres, and the 2007 intervention of Turkish military forces in presidential elections via an online memorandum.

### Justice for Children Initiative (JCI)

The Kurdish problem is one of the most important and sensitive questions in contemporary Turkey. The Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) carries an armed struggle against Turkish state in South-Eastern Turkey and the Northern Iraq, while Kurdish children have been participating in demonstrations and protests increasingly since 2006. According to Turkey's Anti-terror Law, more than 500 children between the ages of 12 and 18 have been sentenced to excessive penalties such as imprisonment ranging from 10 months to 161 years by Heavy Penal Courts for the crime of being a member of the terrorist organization, i.e. the PKK. In December 2007 more than 40 human rights activists and civil organizations together founded the Justice for Children Initiative (JCI) to defend the rights of these children to a fair trial according to the specific articles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice. JCI launched an online petition campaign to gain public support. But JCI's activities did not remain limited to this petition campaign. The organization also collaborated widely with celebrities, journalists, and organized demonstrations for its cause. Under pressure, the government submitted a bill to re-try these children, which was approved in July 2010. However, the bill was insufficient and only released close to 100 children in jails and generally speaking, Heavy Penal Courts still judge children. Now the courts accuse them not of being members of the PKK, but of performing hazardous acts during demonstrations. In this case, the online petition campaign did not bring about a breakdown in the status quo, i.e. a new policy of retrying of all children according to United Nations standards, but it ensured the public access to and support for the campaign as an element of pressure on the government.

### "We apologize" Campaign

The Armenian massacres of 1915 remained taboo in the Turkish Republic, closed to discussion until very recently. The traditional stance of the state is grounded in the denial of these massacres and it does not, under any conditions, accept calling the event a "genocide". In December 2008, in Turkey, after the murder of Hrant Dink, a Turkish-Armenian journalist, several renowned Turkish intellectuals and academics initiated the "We apologize" campaign" through a

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# Unlocking the Civic Potential in the Local, Online, Networked Public Realm

By Paul Hepburn

## Introduction

This paper will summarise a new research approach to exploring the prospects for local government unlocking the civic potential in the local, online, networked public realm. In presenting this approach this study argues that it is now timely for government to exploit the civic potential in the Web enabled public realm through analysing and understanding it as a social network. It contends that, notwithstanding the digital divide, there now exists, particularly in developed countries, a critical mass of online networked civic and political activity within which a new public realm can prosper. Moreover, it is at the level of localities—be that at county, city, or town—that this new civic space can be most effectively harnessed to contemporary modes of local governance.

This research applies a distinctive mixed method approach to explore this local online public realm in the context of a local referendum in a UK city region. Relational Hyperlink Analysis is used to analyse the structural significance of the local online hyperlinked network. This analysis uses Social Network Analysis (SNA) and an associated statistical technique, Exponential Random Graph Modelling (ERGM) to render the network visible and understandable. To further illuminate how local civic and institutional actors involved in this space used the network, the research draws upon a Network Ethnography approach that uses SNA to identify subjects for qualitative investigation.

## The public realm

A politically and culturally vibrant public realm, or public sphere, is often seen as necessary for the general health and well-being of civic society within liberal democracy (Calhoun 1996). Historically (Habermas 1989), this realm was where individuals gathered to freely and critically discuss public issues and in doing so acquired an inclusive civic culture and the capacity to act as citizens. The development of this public realm was very much dependent upon the technological capacity of the day to print and publicise a range of critical opinions. Arguably, the traditional media, libraries and religious institutions have continued to play a role in maintaining this public realm (Garnham 2004). However, as contemporary liberal democracies have been characterised by concerns over levels of civic and political disengagement (Stoker, 2006), so the vibrancy and effectiveness of the existing public realm has been questioned (Coleman and Blumler 2009).

It has been argued (Castells 2009) that the Internet has introduced a new communicative power that may provide a rich enough media landscape to feed a new online public realm. This enquiry shares this sentiment but emphasises three points: one, the online environment is now probably most favourable for this endeavour; two, that it is at the level of local governance—be that city, town, or county—that the networked capacity of the Web can be best exploited to help create a new vibrant and effective local civic space; and lastly, for local government to develop and implement appropriate strategies for engaging in and developing this space, it must first see and understand the network as a social network.

## A new online environment

Whilst acknowledging the problem of the residual 'digital divide' this research argues that the online environment has a new civic potential. It is now characterised by a critical mass of individuals turning to the Internet for information on a range of issues including government policy (Dutton 2009). Government, at all geographical and administrative levels, is using the Internet to communicate with citizens and in some instances involve them in decision-making processes (Mossberger et al 2008). Meanwhile communities of interest continue to use the medium to collectively maintain their identity or improve their locality (Brinkernhoff 2009). The recent proliferation of hyper-local websites (e-government bulletin, 2010) is one example of this latter endeavour. Indeed, it is the local enactment of such a global technology that has particularly interested local government policy-makers alert to the potential democratic and fiscal benefits of moving government online (Polatt and Pratchett 2009). However, whilst local e-government and e-democracy initiatives have been implemented to varying degrees of success, none of these has taken full advantage of the unique networking capabilities of the Web. Given this unprecedented level of online activity it is timely to demonstrate the Web's capacity to link the institutional 'top down' networks with those of individuals and communities to realise the civic potential of a local, online, and networked public realm.

## A local networked public realm

Underpinning this research is an argument that local government has a specific interest and role in developing and engaging in this new local public realm. Localities in the 21st century are facing particular challenges not least of which is to avoid political, economic, and cultural marginalisation by an increasingly globalised networked society (Castells 1996). This phenomenon has re-shaped the geographical contours of political and economic authority exposing localities to a globalised marketplace and a remote polity (Hirst and

Thompson 1995). Territorially bound national government and media have been recast as one tier of influence between the local and the global. This new political reality brings a range of problems and opportunities for localities and local governance, but fundamentally the challenge is to sustain a relevant political, economic, and cultural identity (Beck 2000).

Effectively cultivating and exploiting a local public realm to develop a more robust civic culture will be an important factor in localities acquiring the resilience to face these new challenges. Whilst existing religious and traditional media organisations have historically enabled the public realm at a local level it is the Internet and in particular the Web, in being both local and global, that maps onto the new political realties and may better nourish a new local public realm. Moreover, as Benkler (2006) has demonstrated, the particular hyperlink networked structure of the Web enables a more effective public realm than that provided by the traditional media.

Local government will be a feature of this online, local public realm for a number of reasons. Unlike at a national level, the distinction between the public realm and local government can be blurred as Alexis de Tocqueville (1835) observed in commenting on American local politics: those doing the governing and those being governed overlap. In a modern idiom this is local networked governance. Furthermore, whilst this local online space exists and caters for civic activity, it is likely to require policy intervention by local government to ensure an effective public realm (Hindman 2009). This is one that links to the local decision making process and provides access to divergent views (Sparks 2002).

## Research approach

This research is presented as a case study of a local referendum on a traffic congestion charging system put to a UK city region conurbation of 2.5 million people covering 10 municipal authorities.

The local online network of interest was captured by using the VOSON (Virtual Observatory for the Study of Online Networks) software (Ackland 2008) to 'crawl' the Web. In doing so it develops a database of web pages and sites linked by inward and outward bound hyperlinks to a designated 'seedset' of websites selected as relevant by the researcher. VOSON then enables a number of analytical operations on the collected database: the pages can be mined for text, the data can be visualised through a number of different mapping concepts and a series of basic Social Network Analysis (SNA) measures can be derived. This comprised the first stage of analysis, the output from which was a series of network maps indicating the extent, composition, and prominence of sites in the network according to SNA measures.

The second level of analysis applied the innovative technique of Relational Hyperlink Analysis (Lusher and Ackland 2009) to render the online local networked public realm more understandable. Unlike other types of hyperlink network analysis this technique views hyperlinks as social connections and not just as indicators of visibility or popularity. This view enables a statistical technique associated with SNA, Exponential Random Graph Models, to be performed on the captured online network. Modelling the captured network in this way uniquely provides an understanding of what is likely to be driving the hyperlinking behaviour in the network. For example, is a site being linked to because of its random position in the network or is it likely to be because of the site's content or function. This insight provides a greater understanding of why particular sites might be prominent at any one time in the given network. The third stage of analysis drew upon Howard's (2002) network ethnography approach. This employs SNA measures of centrality and prominence to identify social actors in the network for further, more qualitative inquiry.

## Conclusion

This study offers evidence of the Web providing 'just enough' links in this local context to suggest the structural existence of a networked public sphere. However, further evidence from the narratives and the statistical model paint an alternative picture. This suggests that, in the main, hyperlinking behaviour and use made of the network corresponds to a 'politics as usual' scenario where cliques are more likely to proliferate and powerful economic and media interests dominate online as they do offline. If the civic potential is to be unlocked here then policy interventions must establish a trusted local networked public sphere or online civic space, independent of vested interests but linked to the local governance decision-making process. In addition to this, there is a requirement for greater education, particularly aimed at senior local governance policy makers, in the potential of online political networks and the culture of online engagement.

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website (www.ozurdiliyoruz.com). The campaign aimed to collect online petitions from subscribers under this apology:

> "My conscience does not accept the insensitivity showed to and the denial of the Great Catastrophe that the Ottoman Armenians were subjected to in 1915. I reject this injustice and for my share, I empathize with the feelings and pain of my Armenian brothers and sisters. I apologize to them."

The campaign attracted a significant response, much of it indignant. The office of the Director of Public Prosecution initiated an investigation of the campaign for "insulting 'Turkishness' and the Turkish nation". The government declared the online campaign as detrimental to the normalization of relations with Armenia. Opponents of the website in turn launched their own websites countering the campaign

under the slogan, "We do not apologize". The major contribution of this platform has been to open the question of Armenian massacres to discussion and to create a growing sensitivity toward this question with the help of renowned Turkish intellectuals and celebrities. This campaign has attained an impressive 30,000 signatures, far exceeding the expectations of its founders.

### E-memorandum

The Turkish military has a history of intervening in politics with a number of coup d'états such as in 1960, 1971, and 1980. The military continues to exert its influence in politics, as is evident by the special declarations of the Turkish General Staff and National Security Council. During the process of electing the President of Republic in 2007, the Turkish General Staff announced this declaration on its website on April 27, 2007:

> "The problem that emerged in the presidential election process is focused on arguments over secularism. Turkish Armed Forces are concerned about the recent situation. It should not be forgotten that the Turkish Armed Forces are a party in those arguments, and an absolute defender of secularism. Also, the Turkish Armed Forces is definitely opposed to those arguments and negative comments. It will display its attitude and action openly and clearly whenever it is necessary."

This declaration was a reaction to the conservative candidate of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), a conservative Islamist party, which holds the majority in government. This declaration was published online, but it was not addressed to the media and nor was it declared before the Turkish public, as was the case in previous coup d'états. Some describe this as a cyber memorandum, an Internet memorandum, or web memorandum. The interference of the Turkish General Staff provoked the opposite of its intended purpose. Turkish support for the AKP increased, securing its position of power with 46% of total votes in July 2007. This case illustrates that in Turkey the Internet is not only in the hands of progressive forces in pursuit of increased democracy, but it is also an instrument of hegemonic forces to sustain their pressure over political space.

### Discussion and Conclusion

The Turkish case provides important insights on the importance and potential effect of the Internet on political space. First, as JCI and the "We apologize" campaign demonstrate, the Internet provides an alternative political forum for civil society actors to discuss sensitive issues. Even though the Internet does not generate a breakdown of traditional political players such as political parties, civil society organizations, syndicates, and trade unions, civil society is no longer as dependent on the regulations, controls, and interventions of representative-bureaucratic political institutions.

Castells (2010) notes that "it is in the realm of symbolic politics, and in the development of issue-oriented mobiliza-

tions by groups and individuals outside the mainstream political system that new electronic communication may have the most dramatic effects" (417). Nonetheless, the Internet is not only a symbolic struggle in cyberspace; it also conditions power and transforms the mainstream political system as the e-memorandum illustrates. Yet whether the Internet can engender shared beliefs and solidarity among participants remains doubtful since the involvement in virtual networks does not necessarily bring about the use of protest based on collective action. The "We apologize" campaign, which is devoid of a civil society organization, did not turn into a protest movement based on collective action. Instead it contributed to raising public consciousness on the very taboo issue of the Armenian question. Altogether, these events contributed deeply to creating a freer public space to debate sensitive issues of Turkey.

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lack of vocabulary to map and articulate the transitions that digital technologies bring to our earlier understanding of the state-market-citizen relationship, as well as our failure to understand technology as a paradigm that defines the domains of life, labour, and language, amplify this knowledge gap.

This paper draws on a research project that focuses on understanding new technology, mediated identities, and their relationship with processes of change in their immediate and extended environments in emerging information societies in the global south (Shah 2009). We suggest that endemic to understanding digital activism is the need to look at the recalibrated relationships between the state and the citizens through the prism of technology and agency.

*Context*

It is appropriate, perhaps, to begin a paper on digital activism, with a discussion of analogue activism[1] (Morozov 2010). In the recent revolutions and protests from Tunisia to Egypt and Iran to Kryzygystan, much attention has been given to the role of new media in organizing, orchestrating, performing, and shaping the larger public psyche and the new horizons of progressive governments. Global media has dubbed several of them as 'Twitter Revolutions" and "Facebook Protests" because these technologies played an important role in the production of flash-mobs, which, because of their visibility and numbers, became the face of the political protests in different countries. Political scientists as well as technology experts have been trying to figure out what the role of Twitter and Facebook was in these processes of social transformation. Activists are trying to determine whether it is possible to produce replicable upscalable models that can be transplanted to other geo-political contexts to achieve similar results,[2] as well as how the realm of political action now needs to accommodate these developments.

Cyber-utopians have heralded this particular phenomenon of digital activists mobilizing in almost unprecedented numbers as a hopeful sign that resonates the early 20th century rhetoric of a Socialist Revolution (West and Raman 2009). They see this as a symptom of the power that ordinary citizens wield and the ways in which their voices can be amplified, augmented, and consolidated using the pervasive computing environments in which we now live.

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In a celebratory tone, without examining either the complex assemblages of media and government practices and policies that are implicated in these processes, they naively attribute these protests to digital technologies.

Cyber-cynics, conversely, insist that these technologies are just means and tools that give voice to the seething anger, hurt, and grief that these communities have harboured for many years under tyrannical governments and authoritarian regimes. They insist that digital technologies played no role in these events — they would have occurred anyway, given the right catalysts — and that this overemphasis on technology detracts from greater historical legacies, movements, and the courage and efforts of the people involved.

While these debates continue to ensue between zealots on conflicting sides, there are some things that remain constant in both positions: presumptions of what it means to be political, a narrow imagination of human-technology relationships, and a historically deterministic view of socio-political movements. While the objects and processes under scrutiny are new and unprecedented, the vocabulary, conceptual tools, knowledge frameworks, and critical perspectives remain unaltered. They attempt to articulate a rapidly changing world in a manner that accommodates these changes. Traditional approaches that produce a simplified triangulation of the state, market and civil society, with historically specified roles, inform these discourses, "where the state is the rule-maker, civil society the do-gooder and watchdog, and the private sector the enemy or hero depending on one's ideological stand" (Knorringa 2008, 8).

Within the more diffuse world realities, where the roles for each sector are not only blurred but also often shared, things work differently. Especially when we introduce technology, we realize that the centralized structural entities operate in and are better understood through a distributed, multiple avatar model. For example, within public-private partnerships, which are new units of governance in emerging post-capitalist societies, the market often takes up proto-statist qualities, while the state works as the beneficiary rather than the arbitrator of public delivery systems. In technology-state conflicts, like the well-known case of Google's conflict with China (Drummond 2010), technology service providers and companies have actually emerged as the vanguards of citizens' rights against states that seek to curb them.

Similarly, civil society and citizens are divided around the question of access to technology. The techno-publics are often exclusive and make certain analogue forms of citizenships obsolete. While there is a euphoria about the emergence of a multitude of voices online from otherwise closed societies, it is important to remember that these voices are mediated by the market and the state, and often have to negotiate with strong capillaries of power in order to gain the visibility and legitimacy for themselves. Additionally, the recalibration in the state-market-citizen triad means that there is certain disconnect from history which makes interventions and systemic social change that much more difficult.

*Snapshots*

We draw from our observations in the "Digital Natives with a Cause?"[3] research program, which brought together over 65 young people working with digital technologies towards social change, and around 40 multi-sector stakeholders in the field to decode practices in order to gain a more nuanced understanding of the relationships between technology and politics.

The first case study is from Taiwan, where the traditionally accepted uni-linear idea of senders-intermediaries-passive receivers is challenged by adopting a digital information architecture model for a physical campaign.[4] The story not only provides insight into these blurred boundaries and roles, but also offers an understanding of the new realm of political intervention and processes of social transformation. As YiPing Tsou (2010) from the Soft Revolt project in Taipei explains, "I have realised how the Web has not only virtually reprogrammed the way we think, talk, act and interact with the work but also reformatted our understanding of everyday life surrounded by all sorts of digital technologies."

Tsou's own work stemmed from her critical doubt of the dominant institutions and structures in her immediate surroundings. Fighting the hyper-territorial rhetoric of the Internet, she deployed digital technologies to engage with her geo-political contexts. Along with two team members, she started the project to question and critique the rampant consumerism, which has emerged as the state and market in Taiwan collude to build more pervasive marketing infrastructure instead of investing in better public delivery systems. The project adopted a gaming aesthetic where the team produced barcodes, which when applied to existing products in malls and super markets, produced random pieces of poetry at the check-out counters instead of the price details that are expected. The project challenged the universal language of barcodes and mobilized large groups of people to spread these barcodes and create spaces of confusion, transient data doubles, and alternative ways of reading within globalized capitalist consumption spaces. The project also demonstrates how access to new forms of technology also leads to new information roles, creating novel forms of participation leading to interventions towards social transformation.

Nonkululeko Godana (2010) from South Africa does not think of herself as an activist in any traditional form. She calls herself a storyteller and talks of how technologies can amplify and shape the ability to tell stories. Drawing from her own context, she narrates the story of a horrific rape that happened to a young victim in a school campus and how the local and national population mobilized itself to seek justice for her. For Godana, the most spectacular thing that digital technologies of information and communication offer is the ability for these stories to travel in unexpected ways. Indeed, these stories grow as they are told. They morph, distort, transmute, and take new avatars, changing with each telling, but managing to help the mes-

sage leap across borders, boundaries, and life-styles. She looks at storytelling as something that is innate to human beings who are creatures of information, and suggests that what causes revolution, what brings people together, what allows people to unify in the face of strife and struggle is the need to tell a story, the enchantment of hearing one, and the passion to spread it further so that even when the technologies die, the signal still lives, the message keeps on passing. As Clay Shirky, in his analysis of the first recorded political flash-mob in Phillipines in 2001, suggests, "social media's real potential lies in supporting civil society and the public sphere — which will produce change over years and decades, not weeks or months."

## Propositions

These two stories are just a taste of many such narratives that abound the field of technology based social transformation and activism. In most cases, traditional lenses will not recognize these processes, which are transient and short-lived as having political consequence. When transformative value is ascribed to them, they are brought to bear the immense pressure of sustainability and scalability which might not be in the nature of the intervention. Moreover, as we have seen in these two cases, as well as in numerous others, the younger generation — these new groups of people using social media for political change, often called digital natives, slacktivists, or digital activists — renounce the earlier legacy of political action. They prefer to stay in this emergent undefined zone where they would not want an identity as a political person but would still make interventions and engage with questions of justice, equity, democracy, and access, using the new tools at their disposal to negotiate with their immediate socio-cultural and geo-political contexts.

In their everyday lives, Digital Natives are in different sectors of employment and sections of society. They can be students, activists, government officials, professionals, artists, or regular citizens who spend their time online often in circuits of leisure, entertainment and self-gratification. However, it is their intimate relationship with these processes, which is often deemed as 'frivolous' that enables them, in times of crises, to mobilize huge human and infrastructural resources to make immediate interventions.

It is our proposition that it is time to start thinking about digital activism as a tenuous process, which might often hide itself in capillaries of non-cause related actions but can be materialized through the use of digital networks and platforms when it is needed. Similarly, a digital activist does not necessarily have to be a full-time ideology spouting zealot, but can be a person who, because of intimate relationships with technologized forms of communication, interaction, networking, and mobilization, is able to transform him/herself as an agent of change and attain a central position (which is also transitory and not eternal) in processes of social movement. Such a lens allows us to revisit our existing ideas of what it means to be political, what the new land-scapes of political action are, how we account for processes of social change, and who the people are that emerge as agents of change in our rapidly digitizing world.

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## Endnotes

1 Morozov looks at how 'Digital Activism' often feeds the very structures against we protest, with information that can prove to be counter productive to the efforts. The digital is still not 'public' in its ownership and a complex assemblage of service providers, media houses and governments often lead to a betrayal of sensitive information which was earlier protected in the use of analogue technologies of resistance.

2 Following the revolutions in Egypt, China, worried that the model might be appropriated by its own citizens against China's authoritarian regimes, decided to block "Jan25" and mentions of Egypt from Twitter like websites. More can be read here: http://yro.slashdot.org/story/11/01/29/2110227/China-Blocks-Egypt-On-Twitter-Like-Site

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3    More information about the programme can be found at http://www.hivos.net/Hivos-Knowledge-Programme/Themes/ Digital-Natives-with-a-Cause

4    Models of digital communication and networking have always imagined that the models would be valid only for the digital environments. Hence, the physical world still engages only with the one-to-many broadcast model, where the central authorities produce knowledge which is disseminated to the passive receivers who operate only as receptacles of information rather than bearers of knowledge. To challenge this requires a re-orientation of existing models and developing ways of translating the peer-to-peer structure in the physical world.

a phase in a deep history of similar efforts. "New" media is a relative concept. What is new today is old tomorrow thanks to rapid invention, globalization, and mass consumption of anything deemed even remotely entertaining by youth. During the civil rights movement a few decades ago, video footage of abuses against black students at universities or black citizens in restaurants and other public spaces sparked outrage that soon transformed into mobilization against the status quo. (BBC Motion Gallery 2009) Video footage then had similar effects to tweets and pictures snapped on cellular phones today. But just like during the civil rights movement, people were impassioned, engaged, and involved even without technology.

Text-messaging, which may now seem like an old cousin of newer forms of mobile innovation such as Twitter, contributed largely to the ultimate downfall of former Phillippine president, Joseph Estrada in 2001. During his impeachment trial, protests were organized by crowds using SMS and data gathered by researchers revealed that as many as 7 million text messages were sent in that one week related to the trial and protests (Shirky 2011). While Clay Shirky suggests that "increased freedoms" related to information technology "can help loosely coordinate" calls for democratization and political change by ordinary people, as this paper argues, the impact can be potentially far more profound (*ibid.,* 28). Global trends such as this, world wide attention, and engagement of people on the basis of their human identity rather than citizenship or other affiliations point towards Marshall McLuhan's hypothesis that "members of every nation are connected by communication technology" and the world is becoming a "global village" (McLuhan 1996, 12-30). In pursuit of democratic reform, protection of personal freedoms, and greater equality, people are coming together via collective efforts organized using social networking to reinforce individual rights.

*Indicators of political change*

As new technologies emerge, their use for political change becomes increasingly diversified and difficult to control. Consequently, tracking the use of social media for civil resistance and public activism is complicated, as is measuring the impact

and success. The field has not been studied extensively, but Jacob Groshek and Philip Howard have tried to determine whether a causal relationship exists between social media tools and democratization. Their papers suggest a correlation does exist between communications technology, especially the kind capitalized by the masses and revolution. (Groshek 2009) When trying to evaluate how useful social media is as a tool for revolution, it is important to first determine what the intended impact is and how those who are using technology envisage success. This principle is similar to that of "do no harm" as proposed by Mary Anderson in her book of the same title for development practitioners. (Anderson 1999)

One marker of how impactful social media and new technologies can be in citizen journalism and civil resistance is how quickly a government forces the shutdown of Internet. This is often a reflection of how severely threatened governments feel by bloggers, online journalists, and political organizers. Such a move, however, can backfire because it often courts international condemnation and pressure. The wave of revolutions sparked in early 2011 in the Middle East and North Africa have seen multiple authoritarian governments severely limit or even shut down the Internet as a desperate strategy for maintaining control. What such officials fail to recognize however, is that while the Internet can certainly aid the cause of the people, it is by no means the "make-or-break" factor in the struggle. This is especially true when people have been starved of political participation and silenced for as long as four decades by the same regime as is the case in Libya.

While not directly linked to the pursuit of democratic political change, the work of platforms such as *Ushahidi* or FrontlineSMS raises an important point on the intersection between technology and development or social progress. Crowd-sourcing using mobile phones for citizen reporting during conflict, natural disasters, election monitoring, and other volatile situations has gained considerable momentum in the last decade. In the aftermath of the 2010 Haiti earthquake, humanitarian assistance organizations relied on data and information collected by crowd-sourcing and crowd-mapping to coordinate relief efforts and deliver services (Biewald 2010). Information gathered, however, is not always reliable and can be manipulated by parties for ulterior motives, especially in politically charged environments. While access to such technologies is purposeful for communication, connection, and inclusion in larger economic or political processes, the added value cannot be guaranteed and rather must be harnessed.

Integral to political change is a quest for truth. Social media has the potential to serve as a vehicle towards unveiling the truth about those in power and the forces at play that sustain a political establishment. During the Cold War, for example, access to photocopying machines was crucial not only for the underground press but also for citizens to produce pamphlets and spread information. (Shirky 2011) The digital leap to Internet platforms such as Facebook means that the spread of information has become physically

lighter, but it is still susceptible to intrusion by those who wish to deny people their personal freedoms including free speech and right to assembly.

Social media is important not only because it is a medium through which information spreads, but also because it provides an opportunity, responsibility, and choice for the receptor as to what an individual will do with the information. It is in this capacity that people maintain agency and categorize themselves as passive bystanders or active participants — even in a world where information is abundant, including when we may not want its influx.

## Limits of Technological Tools, Potential for Big Change

In a controversy-courting article published by *The New Yorker,* Malcom Gladwell heavily criticized what he observes as the hyper-inflated optimism on the power of social media for social activism. Gladwell correctly writes that thanks to social media, "the traditional relationship between political authority and popular will has been upended, making it easier for the powerless to collaborate, coordinate, and give voice to their concerns." (Gladwell 2010, 1) But he continues his critique so far as to suggest that "the platforms of social media are built around weak ties" (*ibid.*, 2). His basis for this argument rests on the lessened face-to-face contact between those engaged in civil resistance as a result of social media. What Gladwell fails to acknowledge however, is that the redefinition of activism does not necessarily translate to the lessening of its impact or value.

While the individual contributions of people scattered across the world, whether via a tweet, a blog post, or a Facebook group may seem like "small change" as Gladwell sees it, it is the collective effort that counts. The combination of all the different forms of civil resistance by protestors and sympathizers, including but certainly not limited to the social media sphere, pushes a movement forward. There is a strategy to the use of social media, as explored by Jennifer Aiker and Andy Smith in their book *The Dragonfly Effect* (2010). This begins with identifying a goal and birthing an idea, then gaining attention amidst a social media sphere saturated with useless information, followed by gaining international solidarity and cultivating a movement. Margaret Mead famously said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed it is the only thing that ever has" (Early 1997, viii). In the modern age, social media is helping to expand that group.

Also noteworthy is the fact that oppressive regimes are not alone in feeling threatened by the rise of social media. Non-state actors such as local or international organizations, whether criminal or terrorist, may also feel threatened by cross-continental associations formed via the Internet or the spread of the documentation of human rights violations, abusive conditions, or any other circumstances that could also be a source of humiliation. At the same time, the opposite can be true when non-state actors are not threatened by social media and on the contrary, use social networking

technologies with violent motives. Consider for a moment the plight of disenfranchised youth in Jammu-Kashmir, a long disputed territory on the cusp of India and Pakistan.

Many young Kashmiris are choosing to embrace non-violence thanks to new technologies. There is a generational shift that should not be ignored between the adolescents of this age and their parents who were more willing to take up arms. (Alam 2010) Prolific scholar on non-violence, Gene Sharpe, proposed in his work *There are Realistic Alternatives* the idea that resisting violence is more than just "turning the other cheek," and rather about "the ability to be stubborn and to resist powerful opponents powerfully." (Sharpe 2003, 4). In Kashmir and beyond, technology is serving as a medium for protesters to do exactly that. However, not all those who embrace non-violence remain non-violent. There are some who feel so frustrated by lack of change that not only do they return to violent means, but instead of hurling sticks and stones, they may hurl grenades and rockets. In such cases, new media may not directly cause the use of violence *per se* but the availability of certain visual materials, audio footage, or literature transmitted via satellite technology can leave people more susceptible to resorting to desperate measures.

Another danger in the social media revolution is that because practically anyone has access to emotionally charged videos and images, one must ask, how will they be received and what will people do with them? Just as the Internet can be used to rally people together in the cause of peace, images of young men and women abused by a government meant to protect them can be leveraged by some in an attempt to spark more violence. The possibilities for positive repercussions are endless, but so are the possibilities for negative ones. It is therefore imperative to always keep in perspective not only how these tools can be used, but also whether and how they help people do good in the world.

## Conclusion

People are learning quickly that a small device such as a cellular phone can be just as powerful, if not more so, for resolving conflict than any conventional weapon. If they are harnessed strategically and conscientiously, the vast array of social media instruments available today should help facilitate dialogue, raise awareness, and push boundaries for human progress and social change.

Social media, however, is by no means a substitute for direct political action — it is only a supplement. While the use of social media as a tool for revolution is generally received with optimism and enthusiasm, it is best to also temper these reactions with caution and a dose of reality. After all, just because an oppressive regime is undone, this does not mean that a more just system will arise or institutions for the protection of citizens will follow. Political change has always been a long, arduous process of trial and error, of birth and rebirth, of frustration and tumult. Even when the masses are satisfied, democracy is a work in progress.

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# Reality Bytes:

## While aptly documenting "the dark side" of Internet freedom, *The Net Delusion* is generous with criticisms, but stingy with solutions.

### By Jennifer Mickel

Despite its hyperbolic title, *The Net Delusion* by Evgeny Morozov posits a rather modest thesis: the Internet is sometimes a double-edged sword in the fight for a free and democratic world, yet the discourse surrounding Internet-freedom has been dominated by cheerleaders who seem to overlook this. The treatise is an attempt to nudge—or, as Morozov's absolutist style could more aptly be described, "to yank"—the locus of Internet commentary toward something more realistic. Of course, as one might expect from an aggressive course-correction, Morozov over-argues his point, exposing himself to criticisms in the process.

First, Morozov states his problem: accusing "the State Department" and "Western governments" (among others) of excessive "cyber-utopianism," Morozov conveys the pro-Internet rhetoric that has dominated official and unofficial statements from government officials and influential commentators. He implies that this excitement stems from naïve optimism by showing how similar the hype is to that which surrounded other game-changing technologies, from the telegraph to the radio to the airplane. Indeed Edward Thornton's 1868 description of the telegraph as "the nerve of international life, transmitting knowledge of events, removing causes of misunderstanding, and promoting peace and harmony throughout the world" does seem a bit over the top—and acutely parallel to expectations set by pundits for the world wide web.

Morozov's book usefully catalogs ways the Internet can be used by authoritarian regimes to track, suppress, and silence dissidents and to serve as a platform for propaganda. In so doing, he challenges the idea that there exists a direct relationship between the breadth of the unfettered Internet and the amount of freedom and democracy in the world. *The Net Delusion* touches on a number of different aspects, from the pernicious effects of Soviet-era metaphors on the current understanding of Internet freedom to the potentially dangerous (and unintended) uses of evolving technologies. For example, recommendation generators on Amazon and Netflix, if applied to web history rather than media-buying history, could be used for "predictive censorship," thereby making Internet filters "smarter" as they deny dissidents access to controversial content.

Similarly, Morozov notes that face-recognition technology, which automatically identifies individuals pictured in photographs and is rapidly being folded into social media could also "allow Iranian authorities to quickly learn the identity of the people photographed through the street protests in Tehran." Neither application of online space seems promising for furthering political freedom.

Morozov is also helpful in highlighting a glaring oversight: in the face of technology that utterly rearranges entire paradigms of information sharing, privacy, and group behavior, no corresponding evolution of popular ethics has occurred. Indeed, very little legal or regulatory attention has been devoted to uses of new technology, leaving no reference point for right and wrong. Morozov is perhaps correct in asserting that "this is an area where Western policymakers could accomplish the most simply by means of legislation." He maintains "Western governments and foundations… need to identify, publicly debate, and, if necessary, legislate against each of those numerous [business and social] forces" affecting the future of Internet control. However, Morozov also points out that those who seek to regulate the Internet will find themselves on a collision course with proselytizers of the gospel of innovation, such as Google—and he offers no prescriptions for how to deal with that.

This last argument demonstrates one of Morozov's weaknesses: he repeatedly speaks of behemoths like "the West," as if it were a given that these entities act in unison. Having met with Washington officials and experts on numerous occasions, he should know better than anyone that "Western policymakers" are not acting as a monolith; that to criticize a statement from the State Department for being inconsistent with that of a member of Congress is not a commentary on Internet freedom policy, but rather on a failure in government coordination—which is neither specific to this issue nor new.

Morozov also paints with too broad a brush when describing the positions he wishes to refute, allowing them none of the nuance and rationality that he allows himself. As Morozov puts it, no one is merely "pro-Internet" or "optimistic;" rather, they are misguided adherents of "Internet-centrism" and delusional "cyber-utopianists." Historians do not merely consider *samizdat* a factor in the Soviet Union's downfall; "many want to establish" a "monocausal relationship" between the two. "Denying that greater information flows… can result in the overall strengthening of authoritarian regimes is a dangerous path to take," he asserts, yet he offers no example of anyone who "denies" this. What he shows, rather, is that considering the Internet in this light is not the dominant theme of the conversation. Adding an important qualifying phrase, he opines: "it is hard to imagine how it [the Internet] could, *all by itself*, help cultivate a deep commitment to serious causes" (emphasis mine). Such qualified and extreme straw-men are easy targets in which to poke holes. It would be difficult to find a commentator who would seriously defend any of them without a more complex and conditional explanation.

Still, there is no question that a book of this nature needed to be written to redirect attention to the ways the Internet can be used to further "anti-democratic" ends—and Morozov is a keen observer of these malevolent uses of the Internet.

Using the example of Russia's hugely popular state-generated online entertainment and its ability to simply distract the public from political issues, he observes, "The Russian authorities may be onto something here: the most effective system of Internet control is not the one that has the most sophisticated and draconian system of censorship, but the one that has no need for censorship whatsoever."

We should not allow the considerable merits of the book to be drowned in a wave of easy criticism given recent success stories in the Arab region and Morozov's self-satisfied notion that he is disabusing everyone of their "delusions." For Morozov›s discussion of ways that potent cyber tools—like other potent tools—can be wielded to serve nefarious ends injects a necessary stream of pragmatism into a field that has been too obsessed with the novelty and glamour of its heyday to give more than a token public nod toward potential drawbacks.

In the end, *The Net Delusion* succeeds in a difficult endeavor: persuasively countering the tone of the discourse on a ubiquitous topic. It serves a purpose by highlighting the dominant tendency to declare Internet freedom a "net positive" without scrutinizing this claim, cautioning against ignoring potentially harmful applications as policymakers assess the role of the Internet in combating (and perhaps aiding) authoritarianism. When the euphoria surrounding technology's role in the Arab uprisings ebbs, critics will recognize *The Net Delusion* for its useful refusal to be swept up in the hype. The Internet is not going away. Nor, then, are its possible anti-democratic uses, which Morozov lays out so clearly for our benefit.

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At the end of the day, the question is not "what can Twitter do for Tunisians?", but rather "what can Tunisians do with Twitter?" While the potential for social media as a tool for revolution is by now undeniable, it is important to remember that outlets such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Flickr are only modes of communication assisting a people's movement. The agents of change have always been and will continue to remain the people, driven by a thirst for freedom. The envisioned success is beheld in the eyes of ordinary men and women in pursuit of an extraordinary vision, not in a camera's lens or a website.

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# iCare: Emergent Forms of Technology-Mediated Activism

## By Samuel Tettner

As a greater percentage of the world grows up with a computer in their living room and a smartphone in its pocket, changes in the organization of our societies have been discussed at great length (Castells 1996). The emergence of technologically-savvy and digitally inclined youth in developing societies present interesting questions of social engagement, political participation, and what the future of civic society will be in the twenty-first century. This group—deemed the 'Millennials' or 'Digital Natives'—is currently the subject of a lot of discussion in academic circles. The transformative potential of a generation that is being brought up with unprecedented access to information and technology, and is connected to each other via social networks, is huge.

Yet the role young people play in processes of social change around the world is still poorly understood. Many knowledge gaps plague the current discourse on Digital Natives (Nishant and Abraham 2009). Some of these are a systemic bias towards a western, English-speaking, middle class conception of what it means to be 'digital'—eschewing representations of the scale and impact of many initiatives, and lacking an understanding of how new platforms lend themselves to new practices of activism.

Emerging from this desire to provide insight into these gaps, the "Digital Natives with a Cause?" project was initiated. As an international research project, three workshops were held in emerging information societies across the global south in Taipei, Taiwan, Johannesburg, South Africa, and Santiago, Chile. The workshops aimed to answer the following questions: what are the new ways young people in developing countries are utilizing digital technologies for social change? How are these new practices creating technology-mediated identities? And, what is the potential that these new identities have for further social transformations?

The three workshops attracted young people who used technology within particular regions in a variety of ways. These sessions served as open spaces where youth could engage in reflective exercises about their identity and their work, and write down their thoughts. Based on the writings of several workshop participants, here are our findings.

### New forms of activism

More and more, popular discourse seems to characterize the youth as apolitical or disconnected from their surrounding social realities. This has been said particularly of young people who inhabit the growing digital sphere, as these new practices are believed to isolate, foment selfishness, and cre-ate apathy. Much of these sentiments are caused by a lack of understanding of how young people relate to the world.

Prabhas Pokarel is Nepali expatriate living in Kosovo. Prabhas spends considerable time on social media as an effort to connect with his Nepali identity and so he thinks there is a new type of activism taking place (Pokarel 2010) . This new practice does not conform to the traditional offline definitions of activism. 'Discursive activism', as he calls it, is the act of using digital media to foster meaningful discussions around issues of particular importance. He cites the example of a Facebook page where a friend of his uses her page as a forum for discussion about contemporary socio-political issues of Nepal. Discursive activism is not necessarily activism as we know it, that we traditionally define around a particular campaign or cause, nor is it Slacktivism ( a portmanteau of the words slack and activism, it refers to those young people who join online campaigns or 'like' causes on Facebook but refuse to do anything else of substance about it). According to Prabhas, removing the presence of traditional elements from the definition of activism such as a specific campaign and a community to manage or organize, changes how we both perceive and judge the new action.

The value of this new type of social engagement is in its power to create conversations and dialogue around social issues, or a discourse. Ongoing social discourses are healthy components of the democratic process. In fact, the concept is central to the idea of a deliberative democracy (Dryzek 2000). Since a discourse is an on-going process, conceptualizing activism this way also removes the pressure to produce quantifiable and measurable impacts for one's engagement with social change. This is important because within the political sphere the little scholarly description that does exist of young people in developing countries places unrealistic expectations on them, as they are portrayed as leading revolutions using tools like Twitter that will eventually save the world .

### Constraints of a new medium

Besides giving space for new and fresh practices, digital activism sparks interesting questions about the nature of activism itself. Brendon O'Brien, a Trinidadian young man passionate about confronting gender discrimination and advocating for LGBT rights in Trinidad and Tobago expressed one of them: traditional activism involves communicating and entering in dialogues with a variety of stakeholders. Social change happens as a push-and-pull between actors with differing and often contradicting agendas, and thus the role of activists change with context. Brendon calls this type of activism 'dynamic activism', because of its capacity to adapt its strategy, message, and tools according to the situation (O'Brien 2011). But what happens with digital activism? Do digital activists possess such a skill?

New technologies offer great new reach for mobilization and awareness, allowing campaigns to span a bigger scope in terms of their audience than physical activism. However,

the specific message of the campaign gets entrenched simply as a consequence of the current technological design of the Internet. The openness, accessibility, and anonymity of the Internet are highly regarded features of its design. Thus, it's hard to distinguish which website will be viewed by which particular audience at which time. At great length, Jaron Lanier discusses ways that new technologies constrain social relations (Lanier 2010). These technological aspects might be a hindrance to mobilization. For example, it is important to make messages very specific to the target audience and their context. In other words, designing a campaign that targets "everyone in society" is rarely effective.

This consideration is particularly important in terms of language. Specific terminology and symbols play an important role in group identification and identity politics (Castells 1997). For example, gender equality activists may advocate the adoption of gender-neutral language. But the dynamics between language and social cohesion are fluid and not easily predictable. In Brendon's example, within the LGBT community terms like 'fags', 'bullers', 'battimen' and 'anti-men' are used indiscriminately. However, within greater Trinidadian society they are still considered derogatory. A similar situation happens in the United States with the word 'nigger'. These varying socially acceptable behaviours and uses of language have complex social underpinnings, often times based on physical and material considerations. How these complexities match up with their online representations is not well known yet. The online world generally represents a unified social experience: there is *one* cyber space, not a multitude of cyber silos with each one catering to the unique social environments of its users.

## Questions for the future

These insights lead to several questions that remain unanswered. What other new social practices are emerging throughout the world, facilitated by Facebook and Twitter? How are young people using cellphones and other mobile gadgets to communicate with their social contexts? And how does their engagement make us reflect on pre-existing social concepts within our societies? Questions of digital activism also make us reflect on conditions which we might have thought to be constituent of activism itself, like the dynamic character described by Brendon and which might be missing in its online counterpart. How do digital activists cope with these features of the online experience to achieve their objectives? How do they utilize the new medium for its advantages while minimizing its shortcomings? Are digital activists ever aware of these limitations?

It could be the case that processes of social change in their digital forms might end up having an entirely different syntax than their offline predecessors, simply as a result of temporary technological constraints. One issue which features in both the examples described is that of language: dynamic activism is dynamic partly because language and its context are constantly changing. Discursive activism is an activity framed under discourse politics, and discursive politics concerns itself with the construction of meaning: it seeks to reinterpret, reformulate, and rewrite the norms and practices of society and the state. Its vehicle is both in speech and print—conversations, debate, conferences, essays, stories, newsletters, and books (Katzenstein 1995).

Digital platforms are increasingly becoming another forum for discursive politics to unfold. As a result, we must focus our attention towards online spaces to better understand the relationship between young people and the ontology of the modern democratic citizen identity: its symbols, terms, and relations. For example, one of the findings of our research so far is that young people in developing countries are not claiming the idea of 'being political' as something they are or even do, even though their practices would be best qualified under the off-line definitions of what it means to be political. What do we do with the 'political' label then? This fact alone might help us account for the current lack of understanding of technology-mediated social change described above. New platforms for social communication are creating new types of processes for social change, as well as re-defining their specific components. Prabhas' example of discursive activism shows us that it is important to pay close attention to these newly technologized-social spaces and look for emerging social practices that might go un-noticed, or misdiagnosed.

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