The Role of Social Media in Promoting Political Change

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What is the role of the Internet in empowering social movements?

Introduction

During the past decade, social media platforms have dramatically expanded as widely used tools of sharing political content on the Internet. The number of global citizens involved in some kind of social network on the Internet is currently in the low billions. Websites such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube provide relatively accessible platforms for sharing political opinions and values online, since any citizen can become a potential content provider for social networks regardless of age, gender or nationality. As a consequence, networked citizens of today can experience a sense of empowerment like never before.

Social media facilitates two-way communicative links between citizens and power-holders of society, thus creating a shift from traditional models of political communication. The possibility of establishing direct communicative links among policymakers, political activists and citizens completely reshapes the media landscape, making it more difficult to identify the dispositions, strategies and actors of particular channels of media. Social networking sites reform how people get involved in politics and allow users to connect through collaborative ways, presenting new forms of political activism. As a result, many regard social media platforms as the ideal promoters of progressive political change and global democracy.

Most importantly, the rapid expansion of social media tools comes in a time of general disenchantment toward policy makers and institutions. Confidence in formal politics is decreasing and citizens are not convinced about the consequences of their values and
opinion reflected in governance. (Coleman – Blumer [2010] pp.1) In such a politically pessimistic environment, generating and sharing content creates a corresponding structure of society, allowing citizens the prospect of sharing their views with a wide audience, or even attempt to influence institutional policymaking.

By bringing groups together, online mass communication becomes an accelerator of collective discussion among citizens. According to John Stuart Mill’s 1861 publication titled *Considerations on Representative Government*, political discussion is the most effective way of becoming a conscious member of a community (Mill [1861] quoted by Coleman – Blumer [2010] pp.38). To follow Mill’s assertion, social media sites are exemplary platforms of creating communities according to local interests or political orientation and generating public discussion, thus enabling the formation of citizens’ considered political opinions, potentially leading to an increased political consciousness.

Probably the most ubiquitous feature of social media is that it allows movements to organize and mobilize online. Therefore, a number of global events, such as the 2011 protests on Cairo’s Tahrir Square are closely related to the phenomenon of social media. Because this occurrence correlates with the right to the freedom of expression, social media is strongly supported by Western democracies, whereas authoritarian regimes see it as a threat to their domestic stability. Information spreads quickly online and increased transparency encourages the progress towards a well-functioning civil society even in nondemocratic states in the long term.

For these reasons, the topic of online participation through social media outlets is a particularly contemporary issue that evokes a variety of questions concerning civil society, the freedom of expression and diverse governmental attitudes towards media censorship. The following thesis is aiming to examine and evaluate the ways in which social media tools reshaped political communication by facilitating public participation worldwide. In order to gain a representative picture of their political power, it is pivotal to address the criticism towards the effectiveness of networking tools and analyze Evgeny Morozov and Malcolm Gladwell’s arguments against the importance of social media tools in civil emancipation. In some cases of public participation (such as the
2009 ‘Twitter Revolution’ in Moldova) the factual role of social media is disputed compared to the acclaim it achieved in numerous reports. As a consequence, it is essential to measure the circumstances in which these vehicles can be useful towards establishing a well-functioning civil society.

Even though the Internet has not altered the ideological landscape of politics in its own, it creates new and transformed ways for movements to form and mobilize. While social media sites are merely tools of distinct individual implementations, they facilitate public awareness and participation, moreover, the formation of an elaborate, decentralized network of supporters in the case of international political movements (Chadwick [2006] pp.126).

Since the subject of this thesis is a particularly current and highly debated issue, it is important to conduct extensive research in regards to its evolution by outlining relevant reports and articles published in the quality press, besides assessing scientific studies pertaining to the analyzed subject. I begin my thesis by introducing the concept of social media. Following that, I am going to examine the advanced strategies of contemporary political communication and the aspects of social media as triggers of participation. Then, beyond analyzing the responses of power-holders both within democratic and authoritarian societies, I am aiming to investigate the political power of social media in cross-cultural comparisons, concentrating on its role in promoting social change by increasing public awareness.

1. What is Social Media? Definitions of Social Media and User-Generated Content

In order to explore the possibilities provided by social media platforms, it is necessary to clarify what distinguishes them from other forms of web-based media. According to Eric and Boyd, “Social network sites are web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.” ([2007], pp. 2) This definition outlines social network sites (sometimes referred to as SNSs) adequately. It is precisely due to this feature, namely that social media profiles exist in a bounded
system, that they are considerably more powerful and effective than traditional websites. In this essay, when describing the effects of social media on political empowerment, I am using the terms social media and social network sites interchangeably, as the definition coined by Eric and Boyd is suitable for both terms.

A more recent definition emphasizes other aspects of social media outlets, defining them as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and the technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and the exchange of User Generated Content.” (Kaplan-Haenlein [2010], pp. 59) This interpretation introduces two new terms which define contemporary online communication: Web 2.0, which stands for the Internet platforms that allow for interactive participation by users, and User Generated Content (or UGC) an expression referring to the variety of ways that citizens contribute to online content through social media websites. ¹

2. Social Media As a Vehicle of Political Communication

Due to their inherently user-generated and direct features, social media sites bring about immense changes to the landscape of political communication. Even though confidence and trust in formal politics is decreasing worldwide, the Internet fosters new forms of political activism. (Demos [2013] pp. 5) The number of political actors, representatives, parties or organizations who operate pages on Twitter or Facebook has been steadily increasing over the past five years. The popularity of social media platforms is attributable to multiple benefits for political actors: firstly, they enable them to establish a more direct form of communication with their audiences. Secondly, publishing a post on SNSs is incomparably quicker than releasing official press statements. Finally, social media platforms are remarkably cost-effective compared to other media machines.

Likewise, unlike traditional, institutional forms of media, commentary on social media sites is conducted in a simplified, easily accessible language, which also makes commenting on political issues considerably undemanding for people who are not used

¹ The Organisation For Economic Co-operation and Development set out three criteria for User Generated Content in their 2007 study on Participative Web: (1) The work must be published in some context and available to a wide audience, (2) the published content must require a certain amount of creative effort and (3) User Generated Content is created outside of professional routines and practices (OECD 2007)
to the political jargon. Accordingly, political parties or organizations have adapted a more straightforward language, paired with enthusiastic expressions (i.e. the use of exclamation marks) in their communication on social media platforms, in contrast to the formal and moderated communication of traditional media outlets. Therefore, the main political actors tend to have considerable virtual support on social media sites.

While this facet of the Internet can be used to improve the public image of political participators through the sharing of content that is predictably more approachable in tone to visitors on these sites, its uncensored nature can cause clashes with the protocol of traditional political communication. Because party policies have less control over the communications that are conducted online, virtual platforms encourage the formation of new strategies and tactics in the applied language of political communication.

Ultimately, social media sites remain progressively popular among political participants due to their wide range of options, such as embedding links to YouTube videos on Twitter or Facebook posts. As creating social media profiles does not require a large apparatus, they have quickly became sought-after tools of political communication. International examples such as the English Defence League in the United Kingdom, the Tea Party Movement in the United States and more recently, Beppe Grillo’s Movimento 5 Stelle are political movements that have increased rapidly due to the successful employment of social media.

2.1. The Internet and Two-way Political Communication

Accordingly, an added benefit of the Internet compared to traditional media outlets is the fact that previously marginalized political associations are able to raise masses of supporters online in a few hours, without any additional cost of establishing a network of local contacts. Moreover, the proportion of political support is measurable—albeit not representatively—, with the amounts of likes and comments. New media facilitates their communication, which results in a far more democratic political establishment than before, as previously smaller organizations did not have the means of gaining supporters
outside their local area in weeks. The result is a more pluralistic and competitive party system. (Chadwick [2006])

Facebook also allows user participation by letting groups to set up pages committed to certain political movements or actors, and contribute to them by commenting or expressing a ‘like’ for published profiles or posts. This involvement creates a sense of ‘virtual belonging’ towards the specific online group, whether it be the profile of a citizens’ initiative or a political member. (Demos [2013] pp. 11) To reinforce this idea, the Oxford Internet Institute has found a considerable correlation between online political participation and what they call ‘political efficacy’, namely the belief of individuals in their abilities of influencing politics. (Dutton –Blank [2011] pp. 30)

As a case in point, digital media platforms are not only beneficial to the democratization of communication from actual or potential policy makers toward citizens, but vice versa, citizens are capable of giving worthwhile feedback to politicians. This can potentially result in improved policy and administrations. Consequently, numerous states have established e-governance tools to facilitate informative communication transactions and involve citizens in decision-making processes. Likewise, voters have more information on the voting records and previous statements of political actors than ever before.

Andrew Chadwick argues that as a consequence of a grass-roots control over candidates and party leaderships, the continuous interaction between candidates and supporters is going to ensue enhanced democratic control ([2011], pp.151). Previously inactive voters might feel the increase in their political power through the undemanding nature of social media equipment. Even though this is a potential favourable consequence of social networking sites, online participation is at an initial phase to be effective in these aspects and we are yet to see any results.

2. 2 The Origins of Online Political Communication In the United States

The United States of America was undoubtedly the first country to apply the Internet in political campaigning. Consequently, the evolution of online political participation and
virtual involvement can be best explored by observing they ways in which it has progressed in the country. Likewise, the cooperation between political parties and Internet outlets in the United States is also facilitated by the fact that most social media companies are based in the country.

The first landmark of online campaigning occurred during the 1992 presidential election campaign in the United States, when Bill Clinton’s staff published the texts of a few speeches online on a simple server provided by the University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill (Chadwick [2006], pp. 151). This initiative accelerated in the subsequent years with the apparition of numerous political websites run by political candidates or party representatives. However, political websites in the 1990s had a very limited amount of visitors and were mostly used to facilitate party fund-raising efforts.

Nevertheless, as online technologies steadily progressed, the influence of the Internet in widening involvement in political processes became a widely debated issue. While most scholars acknowledged the unprecedented possibilities that online technologies embodied, a lot of studies on civic engagement and political participation defied its supposedly groundbreaking efficacy. Already in 2001, Pippa Norris noted that the Internet ‘probably has had the least impact on changing the motivational basis for political activism’. ([2001], pp. 22). Interestingly, the debate concerning online participation was essentially the same, even though the technology in 2001 seems extremely limited by today’s standards.

The time period between 1992 and 2000 is referred as the “discovery phase” of online political campaigning; it was not until the middle of the 2000s and the emergence of social networking sites that political marketers realized the unparalleled potential of the Internet. In 2005, Joe Trippi, the influential political consultant of the Democratic Party in the United States stated that “the Internet is the most democratizing innovation we have ever seen, more so even than the printing press.” ([2005], 235.) During the 2006 election cycle and the 2008 presidential campaign, a large apparatus of political marketers operated the websites of political candidates’. In January 2007, Hillary Clinton announced her run for presidency by publishing a short video titled ‘Let The Conversation Begin’ (Chadwick–Howard [2010], 13) on her website, an attempt to
create a platform of connection with voters besides the traditional forms of campaigning.

It was probably no coincidence that the expansion of political campaigns partly conducted on social media began following decades of increasingly costly campaign methods (Macnair [2007], pp. 37). This new channel of networked media has been exceptionally cost-effective and ‘early riser’ political actors realized its potential prospects. While political actors did not abandon employing traditional forms of media in their campaigns, the Internet offered unparalleled prospects of communicating with citizens. Since the Internet is a two-way system, and users could articulate and share their own opinions on political matters they willingly voiced their support for political candidates online. By the time Barack Obama began his presidential campaign in 2007, there were already 500 groups supporting Obama operating on Facebook. (Chadwick-Howard [2010], 22.)

Consequently, it was Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign that called attention to the potential political uses of social network sites that prior to that were mostly used for apolitical entertainment. According to data cited by Chadwick from Obama’s new media director, Joe Rospars, the 2008 Obama election campaign kept regular contact through e-mails with a database of 13 million Americans, moreover, besides being an avid user of Twitter until his election to presidency, the political marketing team behind Barack Obama established its own social network, MyBarackObama.com of two million supporters ([2010], pp. 28). Furthermore, the campaign also managed to gain five million supporters from commercial network sites. (Rospars [2009]).

2.3 A Transformed Environment For Politics-Related Media

Even though the Internet is mostly a platform for sheer entertainment, encountering political subjects is an almost unavoidable by-product of visiting social media sites, even if one is not particularly interested in political matters. As political news are embedded in a flow of personal or entertainment-related information, it is inevitable to gather information on public affairs through the posts of virtual contacts. Therefore it is irrefutable that unlike previous forms of online outlets, social media sites advance the
forming of more politically aware citizens, perhaps even to a greater extent than conventional forms of media used to.

Accordingly, the two-step flow model, originally coined by Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet ([1944], cited by Chadwick [2010]) in an attempt to describe traditional media outlets is applicable to the online flow of political information. The model proposes a more complex study of the circulation of political information, stating that certain kinds of political communication, such as manifestos, speeches or blog posts are relatively more likely to reach highly informed activists than a mass audience. However, as these “opinion leaders” conduct interpersonal discussion with citizens in their immediate surroundings, they are indirectly informing less engaged individuals, thus creating a two-step communicative process. This model is wholly applicable to the unavoidable flow of political information that apolitical users experience on social networking sites.

2. 4. Civil Political Discourse On YouTube

In many aspects, the most multifaceted social media tool for creating shareable political content and initiating discussion is YouTube, the video-sharing website created in 2005. YouTube allows citizens to circulate video recordings of real-life events and express their opinions in *viva voce*. The website has shown remarkable growth rates in the second half of the 2000s, as data suggests that the number of unique visitors grew by 300 percent in just a six-month period in 2006. In 2008, the site has created a separated section for political campaign videos for the 2008 presidential election in the United States (Davis *et al* [2009], pp. 21).

Beyond the shareable nature of these videos, recorded political speeches that are easily accessible for an unlimited amount of time facilitates the transparency of political campaigning. These videos can easily point out any inconsistency of a candidate’s political communication, policy priorities and possible embarrassing comments. As a result, the Internet has become a feeding soil of ‘gotcha journalism’, a scandalous way of reporting news sponsored by a candidate’s rivals in order to sabotage their rival’s political persona. Some reporters go as far as following politicians 24 hours a day in
order to capture an embarrassing moment that was not intended for viewing. (Davis et al [2009], pp. 21)

Apart from using YouTube for political campaigning, it is also an ideal tool for promoting civil protests. The video-sharing website enables civil protesters to raise awareness to issues that they find important with relatively low costs. Popular videos then go viral due to the fact that YouTube videos can be easily embedded to Facebook or Twitter posts and shared with large audiences simultaneously. It is difficult to predict what ensures that a video goes viral globally, but there are some similar patterns that can be easily observed in successful videos – most of them use recognizable faces (many of whom are more famous on an underground level instead of commercially) and a lot of them are recorded with web cameras, which is understandably cost-effective, but the home-made quality might also make the topic more approachable to audiences.

A well-known example of this was the Kony 2012 video, a 30-minute documentary published in the beginning of 2012 on YouTube, introducing an Ugandan guerrilla leader called Joseph Kony. The documentary, which has been watched almost 97 million times in a year, has triggered an immense frenzy among global web audiences, resulting in protests worldwide, despite the fact that Joseph Kony was relatively unknown among the numerous global threats to human rights previously. What is more, as the documentary had no immediate effect and Joseph Kony was not prosecuted, online interest quickly plummeted and declined in the following months. The credibility of the video was also corrupted by the reportedly scandalous behaviour of its director. (Halliday [2012]).

2. 5 Does Social Media Influence Decision Making?

It is irrefutable that despite the enormous power of social media sites in stirring up public activity, these tools do not ensure more democratic global governance in itself. Social media sites are merely efficient tools, which should not be overestimated in their political power. Firstly, as the Kony 2012 enthusiasm manifested, although viral content is exceptionally apt at producing large virtual numbers, whether it be numbers of likes, shares or watches, it does not ensure alone that real-life action follows these rates. It is
partly because there is no fact checking behind content shared on Facebook or YouTube and the makers do not bear any responsibility for the accuracy of their content.

User-generated content often lacks correctness or credibility, but its informal wording makes it easier to reach wide audiences than traditional media outlets. Nevertheless, it is not only beneficial for global democracy and civil awareness, but can also be a harmful tool of misinforming citizens about public matters. Interestingly, online content generally meets high levels of public trust, even more so than traditional print and broadcast news media (Shah, McLeod and Yoon, [2001], p. 11)

Secondly, social media has a long way to go in its efficacy in facilitating governance. At the present time, it creates an entirely new media environment, but it is not yet proven to have democratizing effects in terms of affecting policy makers in significant decision-making processes. Online political communication is still in its experimental phase and it is difficult to evaluate its power.

Nonetheless, as online political participation is increasing in a time of generally low levels of public trust, it is predictably going to be an instrument of fighting public apathy and creating a developed and more complex landscape of political communication, equipped with cost-effective, thus democratic alternatives of traditional models of political campaigning.

3. Social Media As a Tool For Civil Society

Probably the most often cited advantage of social media networks is its undeniable functionality in organizing and supporting protests, most notably against authoritative regimes globally. The usage of Twitter and Facebook accounts attracted enormous attention away from traditional media outlets in the past years, due to their entirely novel and unpredictable nature. Most importantly, the explored social media outlets were not set up with the intention of affecting political establishment. For this reason, it is all the more surprising how the public finds new, spontaneous and unconventional uses provided by its platforms in times when traditional media outlets are largely
censored or shut down by authoritarian governments in the Middle or Far East, thus making their application all the more difficult.

Despite that the digital architecture of Twitter and Facebook ensures that they become natural tools of civic engagement, which largely enables the sharing of User Generated Content, it was only in 2009, about four years following the date of their set up that these sites became popular platforms of organizing, coordinating and reporting civic protests online. The first uprising among many that have been labeled as a ‘Twitter Revolution’ was the 2009 chain of pro-democracy protests in Moldova following the country’s parliamentary elections. However, the validity of such a label in the case of the Moldovan events can be significantly questioned in the light of the fact that although some protesters did organize demonstrations on social media, their number was very few, and many of the protests were eventually recognized as government-powered stagecraft. (Gladwell [2011], pp. 2)

3.1 Why is Twitter suitable for mobilizing citizens?

In order to understand the reason behind the popularity of social media networks such as Facebook and Twitter and the causes of labels such as the ‘Twitter Revolution’, it is important to examine its inherent elements that differentiate them from other forms of online communication. Twitter is a highly versatile social media outlet that allows its users to send and read text-based messages up to 140 characters in length; it provides a platform for short, focused and to the point messages or updates on global events. The audience of these posts depends on the settings of each user, as they have the option to choose between a public or private profile. The published messages may contain links to other websites or embedded YouTube videos; thereby despite their brevity, they are effective tools for spreading relevant and lengthier information on global affairs, such as newspaper articles or studies dealing with pertinent subjects. Short posts, which have been posted publicly, can be ‘retweeted’ to other users’ profiles, enabling them to go viral on the Internet.

Posts published on Twitter are organized by incorporating hashtags at the end of each message. Hashtags are selected expressions preceded by the # sign, which link posts
together according to their main topic. To take an example, the most common hashtag for posts on the Iranian uprisings in 2009 was #IranElections, meaning that posts on the mentioned topic were searchable upon entering this expression on Twitter’s search engine. By the very nature of this tagging system, visitors have the tool of easily recognizing communication transmissions that pertain to selected topics.

The tagging system of Twitter is not only beneficial for protesters or Internet users looking up certain topics, but also provides a vast and constantly expanding database for scholars engaged in research of user behaviours and patterns of online political activity. (Devin Gaffney and Zizi Papacharissi are among the many scholars who have conducted studies on Twitter, examining as many as 1.5 million posts published online. Gaffney, Devin [2009] and Papacharissi-Fatime Oliveira [2011], pp. 10).

3. 2 The 2009 ‘Twitter Revolution’ in Iran

However, the first turning point related to the functionality of Twitter in times of political unrest was in Iran, when protests were coordinated online following the election day on 12 June 2009. The reason behind the civic uprisings was the fact that many citizens believed that the elections, which resulted in the victory of the incumbent president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad against the leader of the opposition, Mir Houssein Moussavi, were based on fraud and unreflective to the measure of support for leader of the opposition.

As a consequence, Iranians set up Twitter feeds and fan groups on Facebook in support of the leader of the opposition, voicing their anger over the unrepresentative outcome of the election. However, the government reacted by enacting a media blackout and shut down text-messaging services on Election Day and limited the access to Facebook. (Cohen-Stone [2009]). What made Twitter particularly resilient to censorship was the fact that it had many ways of originating posts on the Internet, as it is essentially a platform for publishing information coming from a wide range of sources. Therefore Twitter became the focal point of global attention concentrating on the events in Iran.
On June 16 2009, the State Department of the United States of America requested that Twitter, ran by American web developers, postpone updates to the service, stressing in that that it was an important form of communication for citizens living under the conditions of censored media. As a highly publicized result, Twitter delayed a planned shutdown for updating their services in Iran. For the first time, social media became the subject of public diplomacy by being a tool of facilitating the freedom of expression, one of the core values of Western democracies.

Most importantly, published information accelerated citizens’ global awareness and support to the movements. Online protesters could directly post to platforms that were popular destinations for international users seeking various forms of information (often not necessarily related to political events) on the Internet, hence, informative posts from activists met with substantial expressions of solidarity worldwide. Also, these reports were considerably quicker and more numerous than those of traditional media outlets and the often time-consuming reports of non-governmental organizations. (Joseph[2012], pp. 153) Furthermore, as many of the posts published online is written in English, the common language allowed for an easy identification with protesters in Western audiences. More recently, during the 2011 uprisings in Egypt, a lot of traditional media outlets obtained information from posts on Twitter or Facebook, developing their own ways of fact checking to ensure their accuracy.

III. 3 Patterns of Social Media Use in Tunisia and Egypt

The Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings in 2011 highlighted newly developed patterns of online participation in civil unrest. While Twitter was mainly used to report about events happening in Iran in 2009, and the majority of the posts were published from outside the country, it was no accident that the uses of social media outlets practiced during the Tunisian and Egyptian events attracted bigger attention globally. For the first time, authoritative leaders were overthrown following uprisings that have been closely linked to social networking sites.

After street vendor Sidi Bou Zid set himself on fire in 2011 as a way of protesting against the high level of corruption in Tunisia, videos of arresting events quickly began
circulating on Facebook, a site that was not blocked in Tunisia (unlike other video sharing sites, such as YouTube, Open Net Initiative [2009], pp.2). Following this, other websites like Nawaat collected and published the footages, which were then picked up and broadcast on television by Al-Jazeera through its satellites.

However, it was during protests organized in Tahrir Square in Egypt that the world truly began to pay attention to the ways in which Twitter and Facebook can facilitate revolutionary processes. This was the result of numerous technological, economical and social drivers, which differentiated the Egyptian events from Tunisia. Firstly, a number of well-educated and Internet savvy members of the Egyptian public have been publishing User Generated Content long before 25 January 2011 with the aim of informing citizens and the world about matters that were not reported in the television or the printed press. (Papacharissi-Fatima Oliveira [2011], pp.2) Therefore, social media technology was already rooted in Egyptian civil society, albeit a very small part of it.

Secondly, for the first time, activists imported strategies that were traditionally used in commercial uses of marketing in order to attract publicity and involvement in civic uprisings. Wael Ghonim, the activist who founded the Facebook page ‘We are all Khaled Said’ was employed as Google’s Middle East marketing director at the time of the uprisings. He clearly has had a strong understanding of the driving forces behind successful marketing campaigns, and applied them efficiently when setting up the Facebook page with a slogan representing a strong message that people could identify with. In these terms, he created a brand out of the democratizing efforts, by naming Khaled Said, (an Alexandrian computer programming professional arrested and killed by policemen in June 2010), a young man people could easily identify with, as the face of the revolts.

The Facebook page opened by Wael Ghonim quickly collected a large number of virtual supporters. Besides calling attention to the brutality of Khaled Said’s death, it aimed at promoting democracy, social equality and human rights during the time of an exceedingly tight labor market, rising prices and high numbers of youth unemployment. The administrators behind the page organized non-violent civic protests to be held on 25 January 2011, the day of the National Police in Egypt. By this day, the social media movement had approximately 500, 000 supporters online. (Alterman [2011], pp. 110)
Although initially the movement’s online supporting rates did not translate to real-life attendees (as only a few hundred people were present in the streets), Al-Jazeera, the Arabian satellite television network labeled the uprisings ‘revolutions’ only two days after the initial protests. (Alterman [2011], pp.110). Likewise, after an Egyptian blogger called on the world media to use the term ‘uprising’ instead of ‘chaos’, CNN changed its headline of reporting the events from ‘Chaos in Egypt’ to ‘Uprising in Egypt’. (Papacharissi-Fatima Oliveira [2011], pp. 16) It is irrefutable that these events strengthen the image of social media and online movements as influential tools of expression, which has affected events depiction on conventional media outlets.

As supporters of the Egyptian protests shared photographs, videos and reports with their cellphones, audience members turned into involved activists of the opposition. While the government of Hosni Mubarak limited cellular network activity and made efforts to block Internet, according to a poll conducted on Facebook by the Dubai School of Government, 56% of the respondents stated that these efforts were counter-effective in disenchanting protesters, and made them more creative in organizing and communicating their opinions. ([2011] pp. 7, cited by Alterman [2011], pp. 111) Furthermore, the Internet blackout meant that getting out to the street became a more important way of collecting knowledge about the events in the country.

The scarcity of traditional media coverage in the region was another factor that contributed to the high levels of interest in information on the events online. Most Western television networks have cut back their reportages on Middle East events, leaving Al Jazeera English to be the sole satellite network that is actively present in the region with offices. However, the channel is only available in Washington D.C., Ohio and Vermont (Rich [2011]). Therefore, international attention focused on the Internet as a source of information more than ever before.

### 3.4 The International Acclaim of the Power of Social Media

“If you want to liberate a society, just give them the Internet,” said Wael Ghonim in an interview he gave to CNN on the day of Hosni Mubarak’s resignation 19 days after the
start of the protests in Egypt. (Hofheinz [2011], pp. 1417) It comes as no surprise that certain people identified with the power of online movements so strongly that they equated the success of a liberating process with the power of the Internet.

After all, what most distinctly differentiated the Tunisian and Egyptian protests from previous movements associated with the power of social media was its success in overthrowing political leaders. This time, unlike in Moldova or Iran, authoritarian political leaders did leave their office following public unrest, proving that the ‘power of the people is stronger than those in power’ (Hofheinz [2011], pp. 1421.). Although this could easily be a coincidence facilitated by socioeconomic hardships in the region, Internet helped people overcome their barrier of fear of retortion. In countries famous of their authoritative leaders, a big gap between the leaders of the society and the rest and corrupted and occasionally brutal police forces, the Internet proved to be an inexpensive, undemanding and quick way of spreading opinion and creating a community that could share a sense of awareness and connectedness among these conditions.

Also, it is an important aspect of organisations set up on social media that unlike other well-known revolutions, uprisings organized on the Internet generally lack a clear hierarchy. While traditionally organized oppositions always have a distinct leader figures, such as Ayatollah Khomeini, Václav Havel or Lech Wałęsa, protests organized online are more suitably linked to less pronounced and well-known figures, who spontaneously become the faces of the revolutions, such as Khaled Said or even Wael Ghonim. Therefore, these oppositional groupings are noticeably different in their organizational structures than previous ones. As a consequence, it is definitely more difficult to pinpoint and prosecute individuals in governmental attempts to block the acceleration of these movements.

Sarah Joseph, a Professor of Law at Monesh University, Melbourne brings a convincing case comparison to strengthen the argument behind social media’s efficacy: namely, the differences between the international awareness related to two accounts of extensive human rights’ abuse in Syria. Joseph refers to an article published in the New York Times in April 2011 reporting that videos, photos and messages were spread over the world through social media platforms by no more than a group of roughly twenty Syrian
exiles (Shadid [2011]). This small group kept awake the international awareness of the violent attacks against peaceful reporters right from the beginning of the conflict in Syria. Coverage of the Syrian events has grown considerably in the two years following the outbreak of the revolts in Syria at the time of writing, but this fact does not undermine the potency of the initial group generating online content on Syria through social networking sites.

The quick spread of online reports since 2011 is strikingly impressive in comparison to the Syrian massacres in 1982, when the national army slaughtered tens of thousands of Syrian civilians in the town of Hama in a time span of about a month. Joseph stresses the fact that the world did not find out the events until much later, and even then only in a form of scattered and incomplete information. The immediacy of documenting events online is chiefly important because just like any violation of human rights, it is increasingly difficult to find proof after a considerable amount of time has passed following the incident. (Joseph [2012], pp. 154)

It comes as no surprise that international media personalities have shared Wael Ghonim’s enthusiasm on the beneficence of social networking sites: three days following the use of tear gas and water hoses against the protesting crowds on Tahrir Square, CNN’s prime-tie reporter, Piers Morgan expressed that the use of social media was hat he thought to be “the most fascinating aspect of this whole revolution” (Rich [2011]). This excitement characterized the whole of the Western media at the times of the uprisings. However, it is important not to overestimate the use of these tools in the events, as a form of Western patriotism hailing two American digital innovations as the cornerstones of the uprisings.

3.5 The Main Arguments Against the Efficacy of Social Media Tools

Even though social media does play a pivotal role in organizing participation, promoting ideas and creating a shared awareness in societies, it is indisputable that the main drivers of revolutions associated with online platforms have been socioeconomic and sociopolitical factors. The different outcomes of the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, compared to Iran are also likely to be attributed to these distinct characteristics. Both
Tunisian and Egyptian societies have a relatively large proportion of young people in their population who have been disillusioned by the economic hardships in the region and general low rates of youth employment. Unemployment and the high levels of corruption and social inequality were the main triggers behind both uprisings. The fact that disillusioned young people also happen to be avid users of the Internet, might be only a coincidence, and does not necessarily prove that these uprisings would not have taken place without the help of Facebook or Twitter. Furthermore, Internet penetration is relatively small in these countries; therefore online network citizens only represent a small fragment of their population.

The overthrow of censorial regimes does not guarantee democratic outcomes per se. However, an increasing flow of reliable online news reportages, and the potential of online discourse could assure progressively aware civil societies in the long term. Although still relatively low, Internet penetration is growing in the region, and citizens are more and more well informed of world events. Still, it is impossible to predict if there is going to be a significant development in Tunisia and Egypt.\(^2\)

Therefore, it is crucial to assess the actual importance of digital tools in order to assuredly comprehend how they shape and re-shape political communication and organization. In terms of technological advancements, there is a long-standing theoretical argument between so-called technological determinists, scholars who believe that technological innovations and advancements are driving forces behind change and technological instrumentalists who argue for the importance of human reasons and human action behind influencing information technologies, which equally enable democrats and authoritarians to use information in their own ways. Jongpil Chung’s standpoint –detailed in his study on censorial methods in China– is the most convincing, maintaining that relations between technologies and institutions are interdependent, and while technological advancements may spontaneously cause democratic circumstances and equality online, they are very strongly defined by the approach of policy makers or activists in each country (Chung [2008], pp. 731)

\(^2\) A 2013 conducted by the Northwestern University in Quatar examined the disparate ways people use the Internet in eight Arab countries, Tunisia and Egypt among them. Most participants agreed that the quality of new sreporting has improved during the past two years, but respondents were bleak for all media but television. (Northwestern 2013)
3.5.1 Social Media Skepticism: Gladwell and Morozov

There are a number of scholars who argue that social media tools are not only unsubstantial factors behind political organizations, but can pose counter-effective risks to oppositional forces. According to author Malcolm Gladwell, one of the most vocal critics of social media, online platforms provide the opposite of what is required for powerful oppositional activities: in his view, online connections encourage weak ties and low-risk activism, so-called ‘slactivism’. Online activities, such as liking or sharing a news or report do not require a lot of effort, which mean that a large number of users support online movements. However, these numbers hardly ever translate to real-life attendees or activists. In his expression, ‘Facebook activism succeeds not by motivating people to make a real sacrifice, but by motivating them to do the things people do when they are not motivated enough to make a sacrifice.’(Gladwell [2010]). Still, his argument does not prove that citizens who are particularly committed to common causes cannot use social media vehicles efficiently.

Evgeny Morozov, visiting scholar at Stanford University has highlighted the fact that media personalities, such as Andrew Sullivan, who ran a series of blog posts on the online version of The Atlantic titled ‘The Revolution Will Be Tweeted’, did not quote any evidence to support his argument for the pioneering nature of Twitter as a triggering tool of revolutions. Morozov has also emphasized that other media outlets seemed to promote that the power of Twitter can be stronger than “years of sanctions, threats and Geneva-based foreign policy actions” (Morozov [2011], pp. 3)

His argument gains further validity in the light of the fact that it was not only media personalities who presumably overestimated the power of social networking sites. Mark Pfeifle, former deputy national security advisor of the George W. Bush administration launched a public campaign to nominate Twitter for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2009 (Khan [2009]), while in the same year Gordon Brown, then-Prime Minister of the United Kingdom has stated in an interview with the Guardian that a new Rwanda would be impossible owing to the strengthened transparency and quick flow of information provided by the Internet, which is completely reshaping foreign policy in his view (Viner [2009]).
However, events over the past two years in Syria have proven that despite profound improvements of international transparency and the rapid global distribution of arresting images depicting the systematic violations of human rights, foreign intervention is not possible if substantial strategic interests do not support it. In terms of evaluating citizens’ international awareness, Morozov poses a significant question expressing the possibility of foreign affairs being merely a source of entertainment for foreign spectators on Twitter. (Morozov [2011], pp. 7). While international attention does put undeniable pressure on human rights violators, it does not assuredly prevent the events from accelerating.

Studies have been emphasizing the role of various technological tools as facilitators of the advent of democracy for a long time. As mentioned previously, technological determinists and strong supporters of the power of social media, such as Clay Shirky often compare social media’s effect to that of Xerox machines distributed in Cold War Eastern Europe in order to facilitate the circulation of samizdat literature and thus the political beliefs of the opposition. But in what extent did they actually contribute to the end of the Cold War? After all, the political and economic transition in the region was made possible by economic hardships due to the planned economy practices of communist regimes. Technological tools in itself would have been of rather little use were it not for this condition. Even though strengthened awareness and consciousness in civil society made possible by the expansion of information facilitated the political transition of Central and Eastern European countries to some extent, it is pivotal not to overestimate their importance over practical economic reasons.

Also, even in countries where citizens are experiencing domestic difficulties related to the freedom of expression, most people use the Internet for entertainment purposes. The number and opinion of individuals who actively participate in political matters online are not necessarily representative of the whole population. Furthermore, virtual numbers can be deceiving as users sharing political content online are not necessarily committed activists who are also active offline. Also, in the case of the revolts during the Arab Spring, can it be proven that organizing revolts by word of mouth would have substantially different outcomes?
Furthermore, even though Internet technologies can serve as platforms of the opposition, they are equally competent tools of censorship or even the investigation of so-called ‘subversive’ activity by governments. This facet of social media contains the possibility of undermining the chief reasons of their usage in political communication and be decidedly counter effective. While the complete crackdown of the Internet would pose huge economic and reputational costs for repressive administrations, more and more governments are working out ways to track and investigate political activity practiced online.

Moreover, some authoritarian regimes regard social media tools as a kind of digital intervention by the West, most notably the United States, an applicable instrument for monitoring their internal affairs. Both the Iranian and Chinese governments have been vocal about this. (Morozov [2011], pp. 12) Therefore, the acclaim of social media by policy makers of the United States might create unpredictable risks for online opposition movements, as many regard it as another tool of external democracy export. This interpretation could build a more credible case for Internet censorship and put increased attention on Internet activists.

Overall, it can be said that it is important that policy makers and scholars do not overestimate the power of social media in the future, and limit practicing ‘digital evangelism’ (Gladwell [2011], pp. 1). This attitude is precarious, because putting too much attention on the Internet can both pose a risk to online activity and overshadow the real benefits of online interaction and transparency. It cannot be proven that digital tools were not only an added facet to the structure of the uprisings, although very important ones at that.

3. 6 Social Media As a Tool For Civil Society

Social media vehicles are merely tools of various forms of political expressions and are used very differently according to distinct sociological, political and economic environments. Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye’s argument, stating that “information does not flow in a vacuum but in a political space that is already occupied” is valid in the context of contemporary technology and social media as well. These tools are
markedly determined by the driving forces behind their application and the governmental powers that they are opposed to (Keohane-Nye 1998, pp.84).

However, that does not mean that social networking sites do not have numerous benefits. Among the mentioned advantages of improving transparency, facilitating collective action and promoting direct links between policy makers and citizens, and the rapid flow of information, the latter can result in an increased awareness of events within states, coined by Clay Shirky as a condition of ‘shared awareness’ (Shirky [2011] pp. 36). Social and personal communication among a state’s population has the power of slowly encouraging the assertiveness of civil societies.

Shirky brings an example of a series of events occurring in China in 2008 to support his reasoning. When many weakly built schools collapsed as a result of an earthquake in Sichuan during May 2008, protesters, many of whom have lost their only child during the collapse, began circulating information on the caused damage and about their protests. While the high levels of corruption were an open secret within society previously, the disastrous consequences of the collusions between local firms and the government were documented and distributed among the population on social media.

As a result, the Chinese government, although originally allowed the media to cover the protests, suddenly banned all reportages and began arresting protesters. However, they could not erase all proof of the damages, and their abrupt change in behaviour risked alarming even more citizens. Computer and mobile-based technologies are particularly appropriate tools of the spontaneous documentation and circulation of factual evidence, as well as spurring discussion pertaining to them.

4. Institutional Approaches To Social Media

Policy makers practice diverse reactions to the spread of social media in disparate societies. While most Western governments praise the evolution of ‘Internet freedom’ and take further steps toward protecting and developing online ways of organization, countries such as Iran or China are implementing further steps in order to impede the distribution of dissident news and information by developing programs to regulate the
spread of political content. Online discussion about anti-government issues, democracy or human rights is strongly regulated in many of them, such as Bahrain, Iran or Ethiopia among them (Kelly–Cook [2011] pp. 1). Even so, China represents one of the most severe and developed cases of Internet censoring, displaying the most sophisticated systems of the regulation of online expression.

4.1 Regulations of Internet Freedom In China

As social media provides a multi-route interactive medium, it is slightly more difficult to regulate it than conventional, one-way channels of online media, such as online media or blogs, but the Chinese government has been increasingly consequential about ensuring that their people have access to information matching governmental attitudes, which support the state’s propaganda. There are two main strategies recognized to be practiced by the Chinese government in order to filter Internet content: first, to run sophisticated technical methods and an effective cyber police system, and second, to implement methods of surveillance that lead to a flourishing system of self-censorship within the society. Occasionally, online activity labeled to be dissident by the Chinese government has lead to detentions in the country (Chung [2008], pp. 732-734).

Furthermore, currently China even possesses the required technology to filter and control undesirable content while keeping the so-called ‘cute cat’ sites online. (Kelly-Cook [2011]) The cute-cat theory has been coined by Ethan Zuckerman of Harvard University’s Berkman Center for Internet and Society referring to the fact that social media sites are used in a considerably larger context than solely for political opinion-making, making these sites a lot more risky to censor without making apolitical Internet users politically active citizens (Zuckerman 2007). Therefore, broader tools that are used for general entertainment, such as sharing pictures of cute cats are harder to shut down by the state.

The Chinese censorship system is now a sophisticated organization that not only filters uploaded information but also triggers arguments within the population about public morals in order to encourage operators of the Chinese Web to censor their users and to users to even censor themselves. (Shirky [2011], pp. 39) The state also operates a
system of active keyword filtering, blocking specific content but enabling access to a given site, a tool especially efficient when controlling social media sites. Furthermore, the Chinese state has up to 30,000 members of cyber police employed in order to selectively block online content (Chung [2008], pp. 735).

It is easy to investigate the power of social media by examining governmental reaction and punishments for social media activity labeled subversive by authoritative officials. According to the Freedom House’s 2011 report on Internet freedom, a Chinese woman was sent to a labor camp over a satirical Twitter message in the examined year (Kelly-Cook [2011], pp. 3) Likewise, political censorship finds less sophisticated and more direct ways in order to control socially or politically relevant content on the Internet. Contacting a content producer and host advising them to remove particular information from their websites has become a common method in the country. In many cases, User Generated Content has been removed from social media outlets following complaints made by regime supporters, thus these societies have developed schemes where it is not necessary to practice active state powered Internet filtering in order to delete content.

Certain alarming cases has also proven that commercial interests overrule Western democratic values in practice. Shi Tao, a Chinese journalist working in the city of Chansha situated in south-central China has been serving her 10-year prison sentence for leaking “state secrets” through his Yahoo! email account in April 2004. When state officials learned of the journalist’s communication, they demanded Yahoo!’s Hong Kong office to supply Shi’s personal account information, a request that was willingly fulfilled by the company. It is crucial to understand that promoting Western values through the Internet becomes questionable in an environment where most foreign Internet portal companies cooperate with the Chinese government in the suppression of the flow of free information in order to secure their position in the market (Allen [2006]).

It can be seen that China’s state officials are implementing more and more strict steps in order to adapt to the challenges proposed by social media. The state administration has chosen a path that ignores the conservative dilemma of censorship – the risk of strengthening the civil sphere and opposition by executing steps against them – and rigorously controls specific information or topics (such as discussion about the
Tiananmen Square protests in 1989) for being published or spread by the Internet. The flourishing system of self-censorship is made possible of decades of similar self-regulatory system within the Chinese society, and a general lack of trust or openness when discussing political matters. However, a great number of even democratic states control some sort of Internet censorship. The scale and aims of each depend on the internal sociopolitical establishment of individual states. Therefore, Keohane and Nye’s thesis about the defined nature of the information age is a valid argument.

Despite all this, the previously described case study on the consequences of the earthquake in Sichuan demonstrates that the Internet does contribute to a remarkably quick flow of information in spite of all of the regulation practiced by the state. While it remains merely a tool of spreading awareness, it does play an influential part in supporting civil societies. However, the fact that China has a long history of violating the freedom of expression and encouraging self-censoring within the population means that the society is more apt at regulating Internet freedom than many other countries, therefore social media has limited efficacy in promoting political change.

4. 2 The U.S. Department of State’s Directive For Internet Freedom

On January 21, 2010 former Unites States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared a new Internet freedom policy, placing increased emphasis on promoting online mediums worldwide. In her speech at the Newseum, an interactive museum for news and journalism at Washington D.C., she outlined a new course of strategies based on leveraging online communication technologies in state policy (Clinton [2010]). She stressed several types of freedom, such as the freedom of expression and freedom of worship, emphasizing that the possibilities provided by information technology correlate with these ideas deeply embedded in the chief beliefs of the United States.

Clinton announced that the U. S. State Department was “supporting the development of new tools that enable citizens to exercise their rights of free expression by circumventing politically motivated censorship.” (Clinton [2010]) She introduced a funding for the development of tools designed to reopen access to the Internet in countries that control it. Stating that “the more freely information flows, the stronger
societies become” she described a new plan of cooperation between the private sector and foreign governments in order to harness the power of connection technologies and leverage traditional diplomacy. The Secretary of State also went on to voice the governmental intent in making the issue of Internet freedom a priority within the United Nations as well.

In Clay Shirky’s interpretation in his essay published in the *Foreign Affairs*, the main focus of this strategy is preventing states from censoring foreign, mainly Western web sites, while its focus on public speech and private or social new of the media is only secondary. Therefore, he concludes that this policy overestimates traditional forms of media, such as broadcast journalism, while underestimating discussion between citizens provided by social media platforms. However, while Clinton did address the importance of Google’s altered operation in China (moving its servers from Google China to Google Hong Kong in an attempt to evade continuous censorship of the Internet in Mainland China), a substantial part of her speech focused on the flow of information made possible by dialogue among the public, naming Twitter and Facebook as generators of this activity several times. Therefore, the speech itself did not suggest that traditional forms of one-way Internet outlets were the pivots of the strategy proposed in Washington.

Nevertheless, it is irrefutable that this instrumental strategy has not been proven effective in the three years that has passed at the time of writing. There is no proof of government-supported censorship-circumvention to be effective, while the United States is cautious not to harm their relations with China. While most successful social media services are based in the United States, they operate according to their commercial interests, and are not known to have a strong cooperation with the State Department. As Morozov pointed out, even the call to reschedule Twitter maintenance amidst the 2009 protests in Iran was merely a low-level contact from a young official in the State Department (Morozov [2011], pp. 9)

While a state policy of Internet freedom is without a doubt a high-sounding undertaking, its implementation lacks consistency, as the United States has often preferred stability to the free flow of information in their alliances with countries such as Saudi Arabia or
Bahrain (Joseph [2012], pp. 171). For this reason, such aims and intentions can easily become the subject of critics claiming it to be hypocritical.

In addition, Morozov and Shirky believe that external support puts even peaceful oppositions at risk of tainting them as being directed by foreign governments (Morozov [2010], pp. 36, Shirky [2011], pp. 32). Certain oppressive regimes react even harder to online activists. In late 2012, Iran was planning to launch a project called “Halal Internet”, creating a parallel, state-controlled and national Internet operating in accordance with the Iranian government’s views (York [2012]).

Furthermore, social media can be just as harmful to ethics and beliefs of the United States as beneficial. As Sarah Joseph points out in her study on social media and political change, many online activists are more hardline than their governments in opposing democratic reforms and pluralist tolerance. What is more, following the British riots in August 2011, which had no pronounced political demands but resulted in widespread property damage, British Prime Minister David Cameron party blamed social media for the events (Joseph [2012], pp. 173-174). Although the organizers of the riots used Blackberry messenger instead of the open platforms of social media for organizing the protests, it indeed can be a platform for organizing destructive commotions as well. However, former Secretary of State Clinton clearly expressed the plan of setting up a cyber security program in order to achieve a balance between liberty and security in her speech (Clinton [2010]). This element of the outlined strategy demonstrates that the U.S. State Department has been fully aware of the possible negative outcomes of Internet freedom.

In early 2011, Clinton updated her Internet Freedom speech at the George Washington University and expressed a scheme to connect “NGOs with technology and training that would magnify their impact” (Clinton 2011). Joseph gives an example of links between pro-democracy NGO Freedom House, the International Republic Institute and the April 6 Youth Movement and the Bahrain Center for Human Rights. (Joseph [2012], pp. 172)

The Internet Freedom strategy of the United States is a positive initiative that can contribute to the boost of civil society worldwide. However, the State Department has to provide more visible results in order for it to be a successful strategy in the country’s
foreign affairs. Nevertheless, it demonstrates a radically different approach to online mediums than authoritative regimes, one that has the potential of being the focus of the digital diplomacy practices of the United States.


Frank La Rue, Special Rapporteur of the United Nations’ Human Rights Council has issued a detailed report in 2011 outlining the U.N.’s means in ensuring the protection of the freedom of opinion and expression. The report affirms that the Internet is a key tool in achieving a range of human rights and increasing political development. Moreover, it asserts that the systematic blocking of Internet content and the increasingly sophisticated filtering mechanisms concerns the Special Rapporteur. Therefore, it maintains that Internet censorship must be provided by the law and meet the criteria of the necessary and least restrictive way of serving the protection of the rights of individuals, national security, public order or public health and public morals (La Rue [2011] pp. 19)

The report also outlines that any legislation that restricts the freedom of expression should be applied by a body that is independent of any political or commercial influences. Likewise, it goes on to state that any restriction should be adequately reasoned by the listed principles. Although it is critical to map out key principles and demand a more transparent and licit way of blocking online content, there is a remaining risk of authoritative regimes labeling any oppositional activity as possibly dangerous to public order. Even so, if any palpable reasoning supports it, at least there remains a chance of investigating its verity in aim of protecting the freedom of expressing opinions.

By describing the Internet as an instrumental asset to expand and achieve the freedom of expression in all parts of the world, the United Nations Human Rights Council acknowledged the importance of User Generated Content as accelerators of political development. Predictably, the protection of online expression and supervision of governmental censorships are going to evolve into one of the focal points of the United Nations in the future.
Conclusion

The application of social media tools does not have a single and predictable outcome. Social media use is strongly determined by sociopolitical and socioeconomic factors and do not guarantee democratic transitions *per se*. Therefore it is irrefutable that there is a need for caution when praising the possibilities presented by them, since social media outlets are applied in markedly different ways according to distinct political, economical and demographic environments.

It is undeniable that online platforms have affected the lives of billions of citizens who are currently equipped with ways of initiating two-way conversations between policymakers and the public. However, online participation does not always translate to real life support. As most citizens use social media outlets as sources of general entertainment, global political events become a part of this broad form of amusement online. Citizens can just as quickly abandon political issues that they were previously passionate about as they can engage with it. Likewise, the Internet offers a rolling source of information, and social media outlets are not capable of ensuring the fact checking and accuracy of news coming through them.

Moreover, many nondemocratic countries have a considerably smaller extent of Internet connections than Western societies, and only a minor proportion of the population have reach of social media networks. Also, the Internet can be a tool of disruptive forms of online engagement as well. Nevertheless, while the Internet has not changed the political landscape, it has increased global transparency in a way that is comparable to the impact of CNN’s 24-hour international news reports during the late 1980s.

According to some critics of social media, activisms initiated on the Internet are built around weak ties and do not increase motivation, but only participation. While this is a partly valid argument, it does not mean that citizens committed to a certain cause cannot use social media vehicles efficiently. It is undeniable that participation during the Egyptian events would have been less organized throughout the country, had it not been for a common source online. Also, social media provides transparency for the individual violations of human rights: murders of civilians such as Khaled Said attracted
considerable international attention. In the present climate, oppressive regimes not only have to face domestic protests, but global attention on individual events like this. Mobile technology also ensures that photographic evidence traverses the Internet in extraordinary speed.

There are many aspects of the efficacy of social media that needs to be further examined in the future. Online networking sites have proposed a new chapter in digital democracy that presents novel challenges and choices in international relations. Governmental approaches are not limited to policies in advancing or regulating online expression in general, but can pertain to rapid digital reactions to individual events in particular. This importance of this aspect of foreign policy is bound to increase in the future.

Nonetheless, social media’s power in political change lies in long-term results. The constant flow of political information might contribute to a civil awareness that is necessary to initiate political transitions. Likewise, social media is not only a platform for the present: the Internet also records previous political engagements or violations of human rights in the long term. In this sense, it also evokes a feeling that political acts do not remain hidden in the world’s current information infrastructure. Online platforms have created a global public space that accelerates transparency, consciousness and interdependence in the world.
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A közösségi media szerepe a politikai kommunikációban és a politikai változásban

Rezümé

Bevezetés

A közösségi oldalak az utóbbi évtized legjelentősebb hatású találmányai közé tartoznak. Az internetes médiumok 2006, azaz a Facebook elérhetőségének kiterjesztése óta a másik két nagy közösségi oldallal, a Twitterrel és a YouTube-bal egyetemben billiók mindennapi kommunikációját és kapcsolattartását alakították át gyökeresen. Ezeknek a változásoknak a politikai kommunikáció is részét képezi, hiszen az Interneten a felhasználók újabb és minden eddiginél elérhetőbb interakciókon keresztül oszthatják meg ismerőseikkel, illetve online közösségeikkel politikai nézeteiket.

A dolgozat a közösségi média oldalak Andreas Kaplan és Michael Haenlein által megfogalmazott definíciójára támaszkodik, amely értelmezésében a közösségi oldalak „internetes alkalmazások olyan csoportja, amely a web 2.0 ideológiai és technológiai alapjaira épül, ami elősegíti, hogy kialakuljon és átalakuljon a felhasználó által létrehozott tartalom” (2010). Írásomban azt a kérdést vizsgálok, hogy a közösségi oldalak és a felhasználók által létrehozott tartalmak hogyan segítik az események dokumentációjára és az ezekről kezdeményezett online párbeszédeken keresztül a civil táradalom erődödését. Tézisem az, hogy a közösségi oldalak használatát igen erőteljesen meghatározzák a regionális politikai, gazdasági és kulturális tényezők, azonban elindíthatnak olyan csatornákat, amelyek hosszú távon erősíthetik a társadalmi párbeszédet. Ahhoz, hogy ezt alátámaszszam, részletezem a politikai kommunikáció internetes szintereit, majd megvizsgálok a 2011-es tunéziai és egyiptomi események során a közösségi média valós szerepét, illetve az ezt övező nagymértékű nemzetközi visszhang okait. Végül kiemelten foglalkozom a Kínában alkalmazott internetes cenzúrával, illetve az Egyesült Államok és az ENSZ az internetes véleménykifejezést hirdető direktíváival.

A közösségi média, mint a politikai kommunikáció csatornája

A közösségi oldalak folytatott politikai kommunikáció, –a tradicionális médiával ellentétben– több csatornás és többszintű, hiszen az Interneten azonos
minőségben kommunikálhatnak egymással a politikusok és az állampolgárok, továbbá a felhasználók igen hatékony módon toborozhatnak támogatókat saját politikai kezdeményezéseikhez. Mivel ez némileg növeli az újonnan alakult és kis költségvetésű pártok esélyeit arra, hogy számtettevő mértékű potenciális választó támogatását megnyerve ellensúlyozzák a nagyobb pártok infrastrukturális előnyeit, a közösségi oldalak által biztosított lehetőségek az egyes államok pártösszetételének bizonyos mértékű esélykiegynöveléséhez vezethetnek.

Az online politikai aktivitás elterjedése különösen jelentős az utóbbi évek egyetemesen alacsony bizalmi mutatóinak tekintetében. A felhasználók jellemzően aktívak az Interneten, és bátrabban fejezik ki politikai véleményüket, valamint szívesebben támogatnak egy-egy politikust virtuálisan, mint valódi eseményeken.

Az Egyesült Államokban a kilencvenes évek eleje óta alkalmazzák sikeresen az Internetet politikai kampányok részeként. Az ország politikai szerveződései szokásának megfelelően kezdetben döntően anyagi támogatások gyűjtésére hoztak létre pártszervezetek honlapokat, azonban a 2008-as Obama kampány rendkívül eredményesen alkalmazta a közösségi oldalakat a választók széles rétegeinek megszólítására. Az internetes platformok skreszen mozdították a választókat, és az elnök megválasztása idején már több mint 500 Barack Obamát támogató Facebook csoportot regisztráltak.

Ugyan a felhasználókat igen változatos kezdeményezésekkel próbálják bevonni – elsősorban az Egyesült Államokban – a döntéshozatali folyamatokba, ezek eredményessége jelenleg nem hangsúlyos. Éppen ezért óvatosan kell kezelni a közösségi média hatékonyságát dicsőítő nézeteket, mivel ezek az oldalak pusztán a véleménykifejezés újabb eszközei, amelyek önmagukban nem vezetnek jelentős változásokhoz. Alkalmazását alapjaiban határozzák meg a felhasználók szükebb, illetve tágabb értelemben vett szociopolitikai körülményei.

A közösségi oldalak és a civil társadalom

Utóbbi állítás igaz az úgynevezett „Twitter forradalmakra” is, a közel-keleti régió olyan mozgalmaira, amelyek aktivistái –egyéb eszközök mellett– az Interneten fejtették ki nézeteiket, illetve toboroztak támogatókat tiltakozásaikhoz. Míg a 2009-es iráni események során a tiltakozásokat a Mahmud Ahmanidezsád vezette kormányzat sikeresen akadályozta az Internet forgalom blokkolásával, a 2011-es tunéziai, illetve különösen az egyiptomi események során olyan hatékonynak szervezett internetes
kezdeményezések által a tiltakozások mögött, amelyeket a kormányzati cenzúra bizonyos mértékben inkább erősített, mint gyengített, ezért sikeresen döntötték meg Zín el-Ábidin ben Ali, illetve Hoszni Mubarak rezsimjét. Az olyan emberi jogi jogértések, mint Háled Szaid brutális kivégzése a mobil és internetes technológiáknak köszönhetően igen nagy nemzetközi nyilvánosságot kaptak, pedig ilyen technológiák hiányában valószínűleg csak az áldozatok szükebb köre szerzett volna tudomást az eseményekről.

Önmagában a sikeres szerveződés és kormányváltás azonban még nem vezet demokráciához. Clay Shirky véleménye szerint a közösségi oldalak egyféleképp vezethetnek az autoriténk berendezkedéseket gyengüléséhez és a civil társadalom megerősödéséhez, mégpedig a korrupció, illetve az alapvető emberi jogok megsértésének dokumentálásával és az erről kialakított folyamatos diskurzussal. Ez jóval hosszabb távú, azonban sok szempontból hangsúlyosabb eredményekhez vezethet, az internet-hozzáférés terjedésével pedig egyre szélesebb rétegeket vonhat be a az online folytatott társadalmi párbeszédbe.

A közösségi oldalak térnyerését azonban a legtöbb autoriténk nem kívánatos nyugati beavatkozásáért éli meg, ezért egyre fejlettebb Internetes cenzúrát működtetnek. Az ilyen törekvések legkésesebb példája a Kinában alkalmazott cenzúra, amely olyan szífisztikált szűróprogramokat fejlesztéséhez vezetett, amelyek képesek kiválogatni a hivatalos indoklás szerint szubverzívnek minősített tartalmat a közösségi oldalakról, és pusztán ezek elérhetőségét blokkolni az egyébként továbbra is változatlanul elérhető interaktív oldalakról.

Az Egyesült Államok vezetése radikálisan eltérő nézeteket vall az interneten folytatott vélemlényvilágítással kapcsolatban. 2010 elején a hivatalban lévő külügyminiszter, Hillary Clinton részletesen ismertette az Internetet, mint a véleménykifejezés fő eszközet támogató és annak az USA külpolitikájában központi szerepet biztosító direktiváját. Ennek értelmében az Egyesült Államok lépéseket tenne az Internet szabadságának, és egyben biztonságának garantálására. Ez a direktíva bizonyos tekintetben a smart power külpolitika részének tekinthető, azonban egyelőre nem vezetett egyértelmű eredményekhez.

Az internet szabadságát az Egyesült Nemzetek Szervezetének Emberi Jogi Tanácsa is kardinális kérdésként fogalmazta meg, 2011 jelentésében Frank La Rue, az ENSZ különleges megbízottja kísérellet tett az internetes cenzúra alkalmazásának szabályozására három, a véleménykifejezés védelmét szolgáló kritérium kitűzésével.