

THE FUTURE OF DIGITAL ACTIVISM

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ABSTRACT

One of the first moments when the new information and communication technologies were used in a political protest was the Orange Revolution that took place in Ukraine from late November 2004 to January 2005. Ever since that moment social media proved to be an important tool of political revolt. The London protests, the Arab Spring or Moldova's Twitter Revolution are only a few of the most representative moments when digital media were used in organizing political protests. Obviously, the new communication tools paved the way for a new type of organizing collective action and political uprising. Once the Orange Revolution took place, media theorists and political philosophers emphasized the role of the new media in political reform. Most of today's articles analyzing this phenomenon share a rather optimistic perspective on the role the new social media is playing in political reform, offering a "microphone to the masses". My perspective is rather pessimistic. I think that, before enthusiastically embracing the benefits of the new digital media, we must acknowledge the indisputable dangers that threaten the ideal of liberating technology. What I try to prove in my article is that there are two types of challenges when it comes to the role the new information and communication technologies play in political protests. First of all, there are state regulations used by the political leaders to restrict access to the new technologies, to identify those opposing their regime and to use the new media as a propaganda tool. These bear direct negative influences on the way the new digital media are used. But, as I shall try to prove in my article, there is also another type of challenge that could endanger the ideal of liberating technology. The neoliberal deregulation of media led to a so-called "feudalization" of the Internet, whereby huge media trusts try to control important parts of the information market, transforming it into a closed and controlled environment.

Keywords: social media, political protest, feudalization of the Internet, liberating technology, oppressive technology

Introduction

Recent political events such as the Arab Spring or Moldova's Twitter Revolution were individualized by the use of the new information and communication technologies. The mainstream press reporting on social networks and social media emphasized the merits of these new communication technologies in building a collective action and political protest. The optimist wave of social media supporters created a so-called "techno-utopianism" assigning technology the central role in social progress. The main assumption of those supporting the idea that technological progress in the communication area could lead to social progress is that *better technology equals better society*. This type of reaction was balanced by more realistic studies focusing on the actual impact of social media on the political reform. It seems that the enthusiasm following the Arab Spring events was not entirely supported by statistical data. Only few of the people living in North Africa or the Middle East have access to the Internet. This is why Jon B. Alterman thought that "the revolution will not be tweeted"². In fact, according to Alterman, "(...) what is striking about the political movements of early 2011 is no so much the power of the 21-st century media, but rather the power of 20th century media. (...). It was not Twitter and Facebook, but television that was absolutely fundamental to the unfolding of events, playing a decisive role in expanding protests of thousands into protests of millions".

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² Jon B. Alterman (2011) "The Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted", *The Washington Quarterly*, 34:4, 103–116.

As tempting as it may seem, it is not my intention to provide the ultimate answer to the question regarding the role of digital media in the recent political events. My concern is with a more general problem regarding the current challenges digital activism has to face. My article is an attempt of listing and classifying all the things endangering the use of the new communication and information technologies for democratic purposes. I side with the skeptics when it comes to the liberating force of the new technological tools. I think that there is no such thing as technological determinism. New technologies are but mere tools and their use is by no means sociologically shaped. As other media researchers have showed, liberating technologies can also be oppressing technologies allowing authoritarian governments to use them in order to trace down and repress political opponents more efficiently.

In the first section of my article I shall focus on the characteristics of the new communication and information technologies and their many uses in political conflict. Many theorists compare these new technological tools to the Gutenberg Revolution, since the Internet is thought to become a “microphone for the masses”. There are multiple facets to this new technology allowing people with a cell phone to become “citizen journalists”, to analyze the political events, to communicate more efficiently, to organize political protests and to broadcast their actions.

The current enthusiasm for the techno-determinist perspective can be justified if we look back into the history of technology. In the second part of my paper I shall focus on several arguments that can explain the current techno-determinist perspective. It is the merit of researchers such as Tim Wu³ or Evgheny Mozorov⁴ to focus on the idea that the historical perspective on the evolution of technology is the best way of understanding today’s optimistic perspective on the liberating potential of the Internet. The third section of my paper starts from Wu’s endeavor of finding a certain pattern in the way new technologies are developed, enthusiastically accepted and, then, after the industrial factor takes control over the innovation one, disappointingly abandoned, provides the setting for the third section of my paper.

It is my intention to prove that there are mainly two types of challenges digital activism has to address, namely the indirect danger represented by the neoliberal deregulation perspective allowing the Internet to become a highly restricted and almost “feudalized” environment, and the direct and obvious dangers authoritarian regimes bring forward when trying to transform the liberating technologies into oppressive ones. In the second section of my article I shall examine several situations where authoritarian regimes transformed the so-called liberating technologies into oppressive ones, using them to trace down and repress political opponents. The case of the 2009 Iranian presidential elections or the (in)famous case of China are very good examples supporting my argument. The inventors of new technologies cannot develop them by themselves. They need the support of major private companies that in time will take over the control of the new technology, transforming it from an open access one into a restrictive and closed environment. It is common sense knowledge that the Internet was first developed as a free way of sharing information. Once huge corporations such as Google entered the scene, the Internet became one of the most successful businesses of all times. Unfortunately, this led to a sort of “feudalization of the Internet”, where several Internet providers dominate the information market and the public is not the first one to gain something from this way of organizing the information environment. The neoliberal deregulated media market could by no means offer the suitable background for an objective, rational and balanced digital agora. “Rather than being an ungoverned realm, cyberspace is perhaps best likened

³ Tim Wu (2010) *The Master Switch: The Rise and Fall of Information Empires*: London, Atlantic Books, 366 pp.

⁴ Evgheny Mozorov (2011), *The Net Delusion: How not to Liberate the World*, London, AL, 408 pp.

to a gangster – dominated version of New-York: a tangled web of rival public and private authorities, civic associations, criminal networks, and underground economies”.⁵ When information is transformed into a mere commodity there are no ways of providing a rational place for political debates. Better algorithms can be developed in order to prevent disseminating one-sided biased information by filtering information. But who is willing to pay for such a project? Certainly not the authoritarian regimes or the software companies dominating the world wide web.

The many faces of digital activism and digital divides

In 2009 Moldova, one of the poorest countries of the Ex-Soviet Block, was the scene of one of the most effective political protests organized using the Internet. After nine years of economic crisis, the Communist Party was enjoying majority in the Parliament. In April 2009, the journalist Natalia Morar and other members of an NGO tried to organize a flash mob using Tweeter and other Internet-related communication tools. Here is what she said for the BBC news report:

“It just happened through Twitter, the blogosphere, the Internet, SMS, websites. We just met, we brainstormed for 15 minutes, and decided to make a flash mob. In several hours, 15,000 people came out onto the street. None of us could imagine that such a thing could happen, but it shows there exists a very big protest inside society and within young people. Moldovan youth are not pleased with what is happening in Moldova. Liberty is a great thing for us and we don’t want to live in a Soviet kind of society.”

The first remark I would like to make is that we should not fall into the trap of believing that the gathering of 15,000 people in a central square is the sole result of the use of Tweeter. The nine years of economic crisis and the dominance of the Communist Party were undoubtedly key factors in bringing people to the streets of Chisinau.

There is a big difference between digital and real political activism. It is common sense knowledge that signing up an online petition is not the same as actually participating to a political revolt. The so-called “dotcauses”⁶ are surely more appealing since they do not require their supporters to leave the comfort of their homes. Most sociological studies focus on the use of the Internet for political purposes by reporting the Internet users to the total number of the population and then establishing the sociological profile (age, gender, income, etc.) of the users. It is equally important to notice that for the Internet to count as a liberating technology it has to influence a wide variety of people, not only those who are already politically active offline. Recent findings⁷ prove that online and offline activities are often correlated in participative cultures but, it takes other factors besides online communication to have a real political protest.

What is important in Natalia Morar’s statement is that it clearly shows that digital activism can take many forms. First of all, there is the possibility of easily communicating to thousands of people. Then, digital activism allows the live broadcasting of important events taking place. This is probably the main reason why some media researchers considered the Internet as a “microphone for the masses”. In 2009, at the G20 London meeting, as in the case of the Romanian 2012 protests,

⁵ Ronald Deibert, Rafal Rohozinski (2010) “Liberation versus Control: The Future of Cyberspace”, *Journal of Democracy*, 21:4, 43–57.

⁶ John D. Clark, Nuno S. Themudo (2006) “Linking The Web and the Street: Internet-based “Dotcauses” and “Anti-Globalization” Movement”, *World Development*, 34:1, 50–74.

⁷ Fadi Hirzalla, Liesbet van Zoonen (2011) “Beyond the Online Offline Divide, How Youth’s Online and Offline Civic Activities Converge”, *Social Science Computer Review*, 29:4, 481–498.

several footages of police forces savagely beating protesters proved how violent the boys in blue can be. In 2009 a businessman provided *The Guardian* with a mobile phone footage showing a police man assaulting a passing-by citizen who collapsed in the street. This and other video-documented moments of the political protests made it impossible for the authorities to portray the people in the street as violent troublemakers. From that moment forward it was no longer possible for the authorities to control the information reaching the public. The Internet is the place of many divides⁸ but the “power of the medium is that profound tweets also appear side by side with banal ones – second by second, minute by minute, and hour by hour. It is from this perspective that Twitter affords citizen journalists the possibility to break profound news stories to a global public.”⁹

These are of course important reasons to be optimistic about the many uses of the new communication and information technologies. We are now witnessing a very important moment in the history of the mass-media: a lot of people have access to it. It is no longer dominated by an elite – the professional journalists – every citizen with a cell phone can gain access to it. It is a very cheap form of communicating globally. But there are still many obstacles to be surpassed.

As expected, the fact that the Internet is not a free way of communicating with each other generates another type of digital divides¹⁰. First of all there is the racial divide. Marginalized populations often lack access to the new technologies of communication and information (ICT). Moreover, closely related, there is a lack of technological skills necessary to operate ICT devices. Technological illiteracy is widely spread among marginalized social categories. The poor, the elderly, women are less expected to know how to use these new communication tools. While proving to be an important source of information, there is still a long way to go before “Tweeter” could be indeed assigned the role of a “microphone to the masses”:

“(…) there remain persisting digital divides in many Western countries which keep marginalized and vulnerable populations away from Twitter and are generally amplified by Web 2.0. Though new social networks and communities of knowledge are supported by Twitter, they are strongly socio-economically stratified. This keeps Twitter inaccessible to much of the news reading public, relegating the medium to the more technologically literate ‘Twittering classes’. Furthermore, cases of hoaxes and patent misinformation on Twitter can have disastrous ramifications on marginalized and vulnerable populations. Ultimately, it is critical that we look beyond the *Zeitgeist* of Twitter and similar mediums as its cool, *en vogue* gloss masks the fact that Twitter is highly stratified.”¹¹

But the sociological findings are not the only things preventing us from becoming supporters of the techno-deterministic perspective. A glimpse into the recent history of technology may put things into a more realistic perspective.

The Net Delusion – a historical perspective on the use of technology

At this point I think it is very important to place the new communication and information technologies into a historical context. If we want to understand some of today’s exaggerated reactions toward them, it is not enough to focus only on the things that differentiate them from other types of technology. As stated earlier, it was Tim Wu that provided a theoretical framework for understanding the way in which technology is socially received. The main concept he proposes is

⁸ Dari E. Sylvester, Adam J. McGlynn (2010) “The Digital Divide, Political Participation, and Place”, *Social Science Computer Review*, 28:64, 63–76.

⁹ Dhiraj Murthy (2011) “Tweeter: Microphone for the Masses?”, *Media, Culture & Society*, 33:5, 779–789.

¹⁰ White J.C., Mannon S.E. (2010) *The Internet and Social Inequalities*, New York: Rutledge.

¹¹ Dhiraj Murthy (2011) “Tweeter: Microphone for the Masses?”, *Media, Culture & Society*, 33:5, 779–789.

that of “cycle”. In the first stage of the cycle inventors develop a new technology fulfilling human needs. At this stage, whether it is electricity, radio, telephones or television, we witness a lot of experiments and enthusiast perception. Wu is not the first to emphasize the powerful reaction toward new technology. It is common sense knowledge that magical powers were attributed to electricity for example. After the first stage it becomes clear that in order to reach as many people as possible the invention itself is not enough. This is why, in the second stage of the cycle, the inventors themselves no longer have the full control over their inventions, since the exploitation of the new technology requires several types of other resources, the most important being, of course, the financial ones. Wu calls the first stage of this cycle the “open” stage. The second one is less appealing, since the “open” systems move toward “closed” ones dominated by a few “centralizers” which can be a single corporation or, as several cases proved, a cartel. This stage can be ended by new emerging technology or by regulation.

The Internet regulations: the two sides of the coin

There is no good answer to the question whether we should regulate the Internet or not. It is the main purpose of this article to show that no simple answer could be given to this question since whatever course we may take, we are likely to run into troubles. The future of digital activism lies uncertain, since the freedom of the Internet itself is very difficult to be guaranteed. Thus, if we adopt the neoliberal stance and transform the information into a mere commodity while deregulating the information market, we may have to accept that telecommunication and software companies establish all sort of financial constraints generating the above mentioned “digital divides”. On the other hand, if we accept the fact that the Internet use must be regulated, we face the danger of arbitrary political decisions even more restrictive than the financial ones. China and Iran surely regulate the use of the Internet, especially when it comes to political digital activism, but who would agree to such restrictive and punitive regulations? I think it is fair to say that nowadays the freedom of the Internet is disputed between the authoritarian regimes and some huge telecommunication companies.

There is a little place for hope since there are notable exceptions to this rule. Although there is a lack of evidence that access to the new communication and information tools can actually improve the democratic climate, the Swedish government embrace enthusiastically the idea of finding ways to encourage digital activism. Gunilla Carlsson, the Swedish Minister for International Development Cooperation is the author of a very favorable article towards digital activism, published in one of Sweden’s most popular newspapers, the *Expressen*. The title of the article is more than relevant: „Net Activists Are the New Democracy Fighters”. As a result of the large scale use of Tweeter in the Arab Spring, as well as in other political revolts, Gunilla Carlsson launched a call for proposals having as main topic the way in which the new information and communication technologies would lead to democratic change in developing countries. She also offered generous amounts of money for the purpose of improving the freedom of speech and democratization. The Swedish government can be accused of being too naive and of adopting an almost techno-utopian perspective on the liberating powers of the Internet. Christian Christiansen¹² is quoting what might seem a very optimistic and encouraging government speech praising the use of social media in the democratization process only to criticize the naive perspective of the Swedish government:

„The speed with which the Swedish government appeared to accept popular discourse regarding the role of social media in the North African and Middle Eastern uprisings, and then

¹² Christian Christiansen (2011) “Discourse of Technology and Liberation: State Aid to Net Activists in an Era of “Twitter Revolutions”, *The Communication Review*, 14:3, 233–253 .

converted this acceptance into a public call for project proposals on net activism, suggests an opportunistic, ad hoc political strategy.”¹³

Maybe Christiansen is right in accusing the Swedish government of opportunistic strategies, but, opportunistic or not, this initiative proves an interest in the development of future digital activism. And, compared to other types of political perspectives, this is a rather positive one. Unfortunately, not all the governments are so open when it comes to digital activism.

In what concerns the Internet Regulations, the debates are more heated than ever. Ranging from full acceptance to total rejection, the opinions regarding the Internet regulation are very passionate since we are probably witnessing the moment when the future of this new technology is decided. Many researchers think that the myth of deregulation, as appealing as it may seem, leads only to lack of freedom of expression. Quoting a personal communication from Harold Feld¹⁴, Sascha Meinrath manages to present a very vivid point of view regarding the Internet regulation:

“The Internet managed to evolve quite nicely over the last 30 years because, contrary to popular myth, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) regulated the ... out of it. Specifically, until the Bush administration took over, the FCC required the companies that owned the lines over which the bits traveled (the phone companies) to leave the traffic alone — no getting in the way of customers and the information they want to download, the applications they want to run, or the devices they want to attach to the network.”

If regulating the Internet has such positive effect, why not adopting it? The problem with state regulation is a very controversial one. The freedom of the Internet equals the freedom of speech, the freedom of online association, and it is not at all easy to protect those things. The fact that the authorities regulate the use of the network offers no guarantee whatsoever that abuses will not occur. Technology cannot offer by itself the settings for a more democratic society. The case of Iran is typical here. Ever since 1996 the number of Internet users in Iran has increased at an incredible rate. The number of Internet users in Iran has mushroomed from only 600,000 users in 1996 to 36,500,000 in 2011.¹⁵ According to the Internet World Stats, Iran has one of the highest penetrations of Internet use in the world. The virtual world served the Iranian people well, being a place where especially youth and women could express more freely than the conservative society rules compelled them to do. This offered hope for the supporters of the techno-deterministic perspective. The U.S. government's obsession with regime change in Iran made them provide technological „support” in the information war taking place in Iran. The U.S. government gave license of distribution for a program designed to bypass Iranian censorship. The program proved to be a total failure, allowing the Iranian authorities to track down its users more efficiently. The high rate of Internet penetration in Iran does not represent much by itself, since the regulations are restrictive and punitive. Once digital activism threatened to move from the online environment to the real world, the authorities have developed very strict regulations. In 2000 the Iranian authorities launched an organized filtering of websites. Internet providers were forbidden to have direct connections, they had to obtain license to operate and then begin to filter the „anti-Islamic” sites. The state control expanded and all Internet providers were controlled by the state. In 2002 a Committee in Charge of Determining Unauthorized Sites was formed, its task consisting mainly in censoring those trying to express critical points of

¹³ *Loc.cit.* p. 19.

¹⁴ Sascha D. Meinrath, Victor W. Pickard (2011) “The New Net Neutrality: Criteria for Internet Freedom”, *online document* : <http://www.saschameinrath.com/files/The%20New%20Network%20Neutrality%20v10.pdf>

¹⁵ <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats5.htm>

view. Advanced filter programs were acquired from governments sharing the same fears (China) and up to this day Iran has one of the most elaborate set of regulations regarding the Internet use.

This is a very important example of how regulation can be developed and implemented against Internet Users. The „open-access” supporters and the „net neutrality” supporters should bear this in mind when asking for more state regulations.

4. Conclusions

There are mainly two important dangers digital activism has to face: political or corporate control and there are no simple answers to the question regarding the Internet regulation. Only a truly democratic political government could develop regulations favoring the public. Offering the state’s authorities the power to control the Internet providers is by no means less dangerous than the formation of monopolies and cartels. The deregulated information market protects the intellectual rights to the direct benefit of major media corporations while creating „digital divides” and placing the marginalized population outside the world wide web. The state control over the Internet providers protects mainly the political leaders. This leaves very little room for the public willing to freely discuss political topics in the digital arena.

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