

Social media, democracy and good governance¹

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Introduction

The creation of new forms of digital social media during the first decade of the 21st century has transformed the ways in which many people communicate and share information. However, the effects that the emergence of social media platforms have had on political processes remain controversial and insufficiently understood. There is a strong will to believe that these social media are indeed making political processes more democratic, and yet the evidence does not always support such assertions.

At one extreme, popular activists seek to propagate the view that major political changes, such as those in the Middle East since 2010, can indeed be seen as a direct result of the use of social media, and are a veritable 'Facebook Revolution'. In contrast, there are those who see governments and large private sector corporations as increasingly using social media and the internet as a means of surveillance and maintaining ever-greater control over citizens. More and more, academic research is suggesting that the optimistic claims made about the positive impact of social media on democracy and good governance may not be warranted.

This short paper highlights three important issues:

1. The ambivalence in approaches to the role of social media in political processes, particularly with respect to the character of democracies.
2. The impacts of social media on the engagement of the poorest and most marginalised in political processes.
3. The importance for governments to enable all their citizens to have the opportunities to participate in these new forms of political engagement.

Technology is not an autonomous power that can inherently be used for 'good' or 'bad' – far from it. Historically, technologies have most frequently been shaped and used by those in power to maintain their positions of power. A fundamental question that therefore arises is whether new information and communication technologies (ICTs) are actually any different from this; whether or not they have indeed created a new information age whereby

existing structures and political processes can be fundamentally changed. There is no simple answer to this.

Technology and expanded liberties

In the early years of the 2000s, many believed that there were certain attributes of modern ICTs that did indeed offer opportunities to change the rules of the game. These included, but were not restricted to:

- i. The increasing freedom that mobile technologies offered for people to communicate from any part of the world and at any time, or what might be called *space-time liberty*.
- ii. A change in the balance of distributional power, away from the 'top-down' dissemination of information by media corporations that were often state owned, to the co-creation of information, and more recently the widespread sharing of ideas, 'news' and information between 'peers', what might be called *sharing liberty*.
- iii. A dramatic reduction in the cost of information creation and communication, making it much more accessible to poorer people, witnessed through the dramatic explosion and take-up of miniaturised digital technologies such as mobile phones and cameras – what might be termed *access liberty*.

These 'liberties' have had dramatic impacts on political processes. For example, they have enabled governments and politicians to spread their messages directly to individuals – as with texts sent to mobile phones to encourage people to vote in particular ways – and allowed individuals to share graphic images and accounts of things happening to others elsewhere in the world, thus raising global awareness of political actions by regimes with which they disagree.

The emergence of new concerns

Increasingly, three sets of concerns have emerged. First, governments and global corporations have very often been able to use these technologies to gain considerable additional knowledge about, and power over, citizens and consumers. Where governments are benign, and really do

have the interests of their people at heart, such knowledge can indeed be put to good purpose. But not all governments, or for that matter politicians, do necessarily have such motivations. The potential abuse of digital biometric and ethnic data by regimes intent on genocide is, for example, greatly enhanced by the creation of national digital databases. Likewise, global corporations such as Google now have vastly more information about individuals than was ever the case previously, and many people are concerned about the implications of this, particularly with respect to privacy issues.

Second, social media are not ubiquitous, and access to them is highly differentiated. Although mobile telephony and the internet have indeed spread rapidly across the world, there are still places and groups of people who do not have access, and as a result are becoming increasingly marginalised. As richer individuals and countries have ever-faster broadband connections, enabling them to use even more creative social media sites, those who do not have the physical access, or cannot afford it, become ever more distanced from the political processes that such technologies permit. Such differences apply not only between countries, but also between urban and rural areas, between those who have more disabilities and those who have fewer, between young and old, and very often between men and women.

A third challenge to the notion that social media have the capacity to provide greater 'liberty' is that it is based on a fundamentally instrumentalist assumption – that technologies by themselves have the power to make changes. However, technologies are not independent of the people who make them, and they are created for particular social, economic, political and indeed ideological reasons. Moreover, most technologies have unintended consequences, with innately adaptive human beings frequently finding new and often very different uses for a device. The development of mobile banking was thus never envisaged by those who first designed mobile phones. One clear implication of this is that the same technologies can be used not only by different types of government in contrasting ways, but also by different individuals and groups among their citizenries, who can likewise use them in myriad ways. Hence the use of social media in northern Africa and the Middle East in recent years has seen very different outcomes in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria and Iran. Fundamentally, though, the poor and the marginalised are not generally those who develop new technologies, and most do not have access to them. If the poorest are indeed to benefit from social media, there must be some powerful external entity that explicitly seeks to ensure that such technologies can indeed be used in their interests, and made available at prices they can afford.

In essence, it would therefore appear that while social media have undoubtedly changed the political map, this may not necessarily have been in the interests of the poorest and most marginalised – or even of democracy.

There has been change, but whether it is for the better depends very largely on the perspectives of the observer. Mobile devices and social media have definitely widened engagement, and created new forms of collective action and social protest at an increasingly global scale, but this can and does exclude other groups of people who do not have access to such technologies. Just because mobile phones are becoming very common in many countries does not mean that vastly greater numbers of people are actually using social media on their mobiles to enhance good governance.

In March 2012, the Commonwealth Telecommunications Organisation (CTO), together with other organisations working in the field of ICTs for Development (ICT4D), convened a lively debate and discussion at the ICTD2012 Conference in Atlanta, USA, on just these issues, concluding with a review of the most important policy implications thereof. Four broad sets of significant issues were raised:

1. **The need for digital access.** For social media to contribute to democracy, 'broadband for all' is essential. Public spaces such as libraries and schools should provide access to enable those without their own personal hardware to communicate. Appropriate content is also necessary, and the digital systems should be affordable and sustainable.
2. **Lessons from the historical sociology of technology and democracy.** There are many different kinds of democracy, and it is important that our technologies are used to support systems that do indeed really serve the interests of all people. How to include greater numbers of people in the political process remains a real issue. Technology and connectivity by themselves will not necessarily lead to the introduction or enhancement of democratic processes. There is also increasing recognition of the tendency for the internet to be controlled by a small number of organisations, governments and individuals, and that this runs counter to the aspirations of those seeking more democratic processes.
3. **The 'dark side' – how ICTs can be used against democracy.** It is important to reflect on the ways that ICTs are actually being used to counter democratic processes, so that policies can be put in place to resist such actions. It is not just companies and governments that can use social media for negative purposes; individuals and small groups intent on using it for bullying, digital 'monsterring' or violent actions are equally problematic. To challenge the negative dominance of some minority groups, it is therefore important for governments to actively engage in responding to 'negative' uses of social media. Many argue that to ensure democracy, ownership of the internet itself needs to be much more democratic. Interestingly, there are also concerns about the lack of

a strong bottom-up movement for a free internet; there is far too much ‘slacktivism’ when it comes to action about digital technologies.

4. **Privacy and security.** There are very different views as to what is and should be private both within and between different cultures. Participants raised four important principles for governments with respect to digital privacy: don’t censor; don’t spy on your own people; educate people on safe social media usage; and force businesses to be more transparent about privacy and security.

Conclusion

While there are many contrasting views across the Commonwealth about these topics, they require urgent consideration and policy action by governments. Social media cannot be ignored. How they can most effectively be used to support the democratic processes so highly valued by members of the Commonwealth needs active discussion and debate between governments and their citizens. The CTO seeks to promote discussion on just these issues, and welcomes the opportunity to engage actively with the governments and peoples of the 54 member countries in developing appropriate guidelines and examples of good practice. Above all, if social media are indeed to be used effectively for good governance, we need to ensure that everyone in our societies is able to participate actively in these new forms of political process, and that those with access to these technologies do not inadvertently, or indeed deliberately, further marginalise the most disadvantaged people and communities.

Endnote

- 1 An earlier version of this text was first prepared as a background paper for the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association’s annual conference in Colombo, Sri Lanka, September 2012.

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