

Harnessing the power of social media in international relations

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The wonderful and frightening thing about social media and Web 2.0 technologies is that their consequences are so unpredictable. When Jack Dorsey launched Twitter in 2006, did he envisage that the medium would end up playing a role in the attempted overthrow of the regime in Tehran? Did Mark Zuckerberg foresee Facebook being used by activists to help rally support for regime change across the Middle East when he was busy writing code in his college dorm room? The stunning and exciting role social media is beginning to play in our lives has sparked a fierce debate over the power of social media in international relations. Because the landscape is still so chaotic and uncertain, the debate has really only just begun.

Fear of the new

For many, the idea that anything meaningful can come out of a 140 character message (called a 'tweet') is preposterous. Suggesting these social, interactive media are stirring or enabling popular uprisings or even revolutions is heretic.

Unsurprisingly there have been plenty of people willing to step in and ridicule any suggestion that these and other social media platforms are somehow having serious, real world consequences.

One particularly heated debate has been taking place between Clay Shirky and Malcolm Gladwell. Writing in the *New Yorker* back in October 2010, Gladwell rubbished Shirky's theories on the power of social media, arguing that the medium's influence is overblown because it only fosters "weak-tie" networks that lack the strength to cultivate real world revolutions.

Shirky hit back in the January/February 2011 edition of *Foreign Affairs* by conceding that much of the activism seen on social media sites is of the "weak-tie" variety, or as he calls it "slacktivism...whereby casual participants seek social change through low-cost activities, such as joining Facebook's 'Save Darfur' group, that are long on bumper-sticker sentiment and short on any useful action."

Shirky goes on to argue that while this might be true in many cases, it is "not central to the question of social media's power; the fact that barely committed actors cannot click their way to a better world does not mean that committed actors cannot use social media effectively."

The reality, as he points out, is that "social media have become coordinating tools for nearly all the world's political movements."

Most recently, these tools were featured in the overthrow of Tunisia's long-reining president and subsequent mass protests in neighboring states, including Egypt. Indeed the gap between a 140 character 'tweet' and an entrenched dictator falling is enormous in many people's minds. This has led some to dismiss claims of 'twitter revolutions'. A recent article in *The Christian Science Monitor* (aimed particularly at countering the WikiLeaks link in the Tunisian uprising) put it this way:

Ben Wedeman, probably the best TV reporter employed by an American channel (he works for CNN) when it comes to the Arab world, is in Tunis and had this to say about Ben Ali's stunning fall yesterday, the WikiLeaks theory, and the public fury that amounted to the first successful Arab revolt in a long time: "No one I spoke to in Tunis today mentioned Twitter, Facebook or Wikileaks. It's all about unemployment, corruption, oppression."

Thinking about it, however, why would they? For Tunisians to credit these web tools would be like protesters from a previous generation crediting cassette tapes or Xerox photocopiers. Twitter and Facebook are not responsible for the overthrow of Tunisia's leader. That happened the old fashioned way: through mass protests. Social media are just convenient, immediate, mass communication tools that are free, offer a way around the authorities (although not always) and help coordinate and plan mass gatherings and protests.

The focus on so-called weak-tie networks may also be selling social media short because each of those individual networks often have very strong connections as well. The average individual may have 130 Facebook 'friends' but among them are their very closest real friends too. A modern version of crowd psychology might also be at play in some instances. Reading through the tweets using 'hashtag' #Jan25 (used by the protesters in Egypt) particularly in the initial days of the uprising, dozens of new messages were streaming in every minute. All of these were filled with passionate exhortations to rise up and overthrow the government, stories of police brutality, rumors of fleeing leaders and words of encouragement. While it was difficult to tell how many Egyptians on the street were using Twitter or how many were following this hashtag on the ground (especially after reports it was blocked), it was easy to imagine how this online bombardment could help spur people into real world action.

Clearly not every revolution that makes use of social media is successful, but there is no question they are the obvious tools to use for anyone motivated enough to get involved (particularly the young adults who grew up with this technology). The situation is analogous to political campaigns where social media is now an essential component of any outreach strategy. Yet the simple act of harnessing it does not, of course, guarantee victory.

Disrupting old hierarchies

Social media is not only powerful because it can be used as a tool in organizing a protest. It is also powerful because it disrupts old hierarchies and traditional ways of doing things, perhaps another reason why social media is so often dismissed. A big driver of this change has been the rapid spread of mobile phones and the internet and the vast reach they provide.

As the Director of Google Ideas Jared Cohen recently pointed out: "Ten years ago, the number of people who had access to the Internet was 361 million; today it's 2 billion. In the year 2000, 300,000 people in Pakistan were using cell phones; today it's 100 million. You can't say technology doesn't matter."

As an example of this dissolution of old power structures: The world has just witnessed a powerful but essentially leaderless uprising in Egypt. In the initial stages at least, there was no spokesperson for the protesters, no apparent agreed plan beyond the idea to demonstrate and no clearly articulated set of demands.

The 2008 anti-FARC protests in Colombia highlighted the transformative and empowering function of social media from an individual's perspective: An unemployed 33 year old, Oscar Morales, frustrated with FARC kidnappings, went and created a Facebook page called 'No Mas FARC'. His group soon amassed over a quarter of a million members who were assigned to different roles like assembling an anti-hacking brigade, a constitution, a Supreme Court and press liaisons. A few weeks later hundreds of thousands of Colombians had been mobilized on the streets in protest.

In both these examples, old ways of doing things were turned on their heads and traditional hierarchies ignored.

New ways to communicate

Social media's utility for revolutionaries is one dramatic example of the power of these new tools in international relations, but there is a lot more in store.

For a state to have a chance of shaping favorable outcomes in both the domestic and international environments, at a bare minimum, it needs to ensure its position, solution or

preference is included in the debate. As the forum for policy debates shifts online, online communication becomes essential, as [this Washington Post](#) profile of State Department spokesman PJ Crowley suggests. Not surprisingly then, the savvier players have adopted these platforms with alacrity but many others are yet to [catch on](#). Those that refuse to adapt to these changing patterns of communication will increasingly find that their view is not heard.

Changing communication patterns, however, are likely just the tip of the iceberg. Shirky argues that while observers have focused "on the power of mass protests to topple governments, the potential of social media lies mainly in their support of civil society and the public sphere - change measured in years and decades rather than weeks or months."

The full implications of social media's impact in the international realm are hard to predict because the speed of innovation and development of these new platforms is so fast. It is also difficult to measure its influence with precision or foresee how they will be applied. What seems likely, however, is that we can expect more unexpected consequences from social media and that those who dismiss its power are making a risky gamble.

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