

SOCIAL MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY

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Abstract: *Social media allow citizens and activists to share information which is often difficult to access through traditional media. They give the power to control the expression of public opinion in political debate, present a new and innovative way to unite aspirations, spur immediate and mass mobilization, and produce change on wide ranging. Strengthening the link between social participation and internet is an essential condition to ensure the vitality of democracy. People participate in different discussions and surveys, follow the institutional activities and get impressed by the thoughts of others. At the same time, a lot of politicians are using this tool to ensure their online presence and stay in contact with the public.*

- *How to use social media to increase the democratizing governance aspect instead of dealing with the fact that people often have the wrong information?*
- *Do information sharing and coordination actually create real effect in the form of pressure for change?*
- *How to turn the debates of opinions in decision-making procedures?*
- *Social media are a powerful tool and have greatly increased the number of people who say they are activists. But how committed are these new activists, and how effective can they be if all they do is sign an online petition being at home?*

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Social media as a new form of communication

As Locke said "man is unfit for loneliness" and, since he appeared on earth, he felt the need to identify with a group. Human beings, by nature, have the need to interact with others using the means of communication that are available.

The new frontier of socialization and communication today is called the Internet and social networks.

It was almost the end of the twentieth century when the internet was introduced for a common man, and now it has integrated in everyone's life. It has proved itself to be a very useful invention in a number of different ways, and the most interesting thing that became available through the internet to the public is social media, as the success of facebook, twitter, badoo, netlog will attest. The emergence of new technologies has formed a new arena for public debate.

Social media has established new and innovative ways for people to get in touch with each other. The use of social media is not limited to discussing family events and sharing photos and videos: it can actually create history and make a difference to the real world [5,8].

The advent of social networks globally revolutionized the world of communications. With their appearance the entire media system has experienced changes such as radically changing the method of news dissemination. In doing so, it has created a sophisticated communications network for which news arrives, in real time, anywhere in the world to anyone who is enrolled in a social network.

The chance of creating new, constructive, informative, global networks and partnerships is endless.

Social media allows citizens and activists to share information which is often difficult to access through traditional media and to also bypass censorship.

Is it therefore possible that social media are able, somehow, to incorporate all the knowledge and redistribute it to the community constantly and fairly?

Certainly this possibility makes the idea of social media not as something useless, unnecessary, but as a new fundamental means of expansion of democracy in terms of dissemination of knowledge.

Open social media interchanges and dialogue has enabled communities and organizations to respond instantly to the needs of partners, to events on the other side of the world where you can have work or delegations and to engage in constructive planning and even implementation; e.g. trainings, curriculum delivery, conflict prevention and just simply meeting like-minded people who may be future partners. The possibility to convene working meetings around the globe, partner with people and organizations that we never knew existed is a great advantage [2].

The power of social media

A person cannot live peacefully if he is not living in a politically stable state. And often a country or state is considered politically stable, when democracy is the successful ruling power there. In democracy, the nation of a country is allowed to elect its leadership, and the electorate with the majority wins the race. Politicians and political parties run campaigns to promote themselves and their agenda to win the heart, trust, and vote of people. They use different means for this purpose. Even in this era of technology, most of these means are traditional, but many of today's politicians can understand the strength of social media.

They give the power to control the expression of public opinion in political debate, present a new and innovative way to unite aspirations, spur immediate and mass mobilization, and promote wide ranging change. Strengthening the link between social participation and internet is an essential condition to ensure the vitality of democracy [1].

People participate in different discussions and surveys, follow the institutional activities and are influenced by the thoughts of others. At the same time, a lot of politicians use this tool to ensure their online presence and stay in contact with the public. Through their official websites, they communicate their activities, stance on different matters, and stimulate people to share their point of views with them. In this way, they appear active in front of their followers.

Twitter and Facebook are categorised as social networking services and, of the two, Twitter is more important in its impact on the arena in which societies discuss their political issues. Founded as a side project to share messages among a group of friends, Twitter has become the de facto newswire for the planet. And, unlike the recognised newswires (Reuters, AP etc.), it is available to everyone, which is why even governments sometimes now use it to release news before they give it to mainstream media [9].

Twitter also has the capacity to turn "ordinary" people into broadcasters. Social media make us feel as though we can all make a difference. Everyone on the Web can potentially take part in discussions and initiate topics, an area previously monopolized by mass media and other professional communicators. On the Web, topics are generated in an interactive exchange in which citizens can (at least) partially assume the functions of journalism.

It is possible to identify two things at which social media are extremely good, information sharing and coordination:

- Information sharing has been the primary achievement of social media to date: nothing stays hidden for long. Governments can no longer hope to conceal inconvenient facts or control their own narrative when there are so many sources of alternative information and analysis available.

- Coordination has been the second big success, getting people to act in unison whether to rally together to oppose government oppression, send mass emails, sign digital petitions or fund activism.

In spring 2014, the Italian premier Matteo Renzi used social media to ask citizens' suggestions for the reform of public administration.

Facebook is largely banned in China but tens of millions of Chinese people find effective short cuts to circumvent the ban. Social media will always find a way. It has a kind of evolutionary drive [3,10].

Social media and other digital information tools have had an upsetting effect on democracy in some troubled parts of the world.

They have largely been seen as positive vehicles of change since the 2011 Egyptian Revolution showed the extensive use of social media during the Arab Spring to raise and inform citizen protesters.

In Tunisia, Twitter played a major role in the awakening process of the general public, and then the whole nation got united to bring democracy to their country. A single photo on one of the most used social media, Twitter, united thousands of people with a same aim and their joint and powerful efforts eventually toppled the longtime President and Army officer, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali from the country. The efforts were successful and for the first time democratic elections were held in Tunisia. If you observe the incidents that took place in the country at that time, no doubt, you would classify Twitter, Facebook and other platforms as the democratic social networks [4].

But their power has also been harnessed by oligarchs and terrorists to control information and steer mass thinking. While technology was originally seen as a positive force for globalization, the opposite has happened in some cases, creating the "dangerous force" of nationalism.

Russian President Vladimir Putin spent a couple hundred million dollars on a "behemoth" digital information system, which has become a "truly effective propaganda machine," the result of which is that people throughout Europe believe that the United States shot down the Malaysian airliner over Ukraine [6].

Social media help democracy by lowering the collective action costs and can push to fund pro-democracy activists in non-democratic countries. Their actions can politicize the Internet and ensure that undemocratic regimes try to block access, to undermine the possibility that the Internet builds an active civil society and so perhaps creates an alternative road to the democratization of a society.

Although social media lower the collective action costs, they can do so in ways that have unintended consequences. While the protests have been sufficient to destabilize the old regimes in Tunisia and Egypt, however, they were not sufficient to build democracies. This is because collective action based on the Internet can make it difficult to build durable structures that can achieve political objectives in the medium term. The failure of the protests in Tahrir

Square to create a party or a stable political movement is strongly suggestive; although these protests have helped to break down an autocracy, they have failed to organize themselves in order to become a broad constituent politics. By contrast, the Muslim Brotherhood who had already a strong political organization, are playing a key role in the new political future of the country [8].

The social media effects

“It’s important to remember that **social media itself is value-neutral**”, said Alec Ross, senior advisor for innovation at the State Department when Hillary Clinton was Secretary of State. “It amplifies the existing sociologies on the ground and can be harnessed to serve different ends,” he said.

According to Alec Ross, social media has had **three important effects**:

1. Accelerated movements;
2. Enriched the information environment;
3. Created largely leaderless movements.

Governments now have to deal with vast amounts of **horizontal communication**, which is largely **leaderless** and can spread widely so quickly and thus is nearly impossible to predict and control. For example, ISIS’ sophisticated and widespread use of social media and web propaganda has worked very well in the group’s favor.

Leaderless revolutions have largely been a problem for public diplomacy.

The purpose of diplomacy is, first, to obtain the interruption of hostility and, then, pacify the adverse parties. This aim is achieved by offering the parties to reach an agreement for mutual benefits and concessions. When it is difficult to identify the contending parties, it is even harder to find an agreement that is mutually beneficial and that the parties are able to enforce.

There are mechanisms that connect social media to political outcomes through the **homophily**, ie the propensity of individuals who are similar to each other to form groupings. Indeed, there are a variety of ways in which the Internet makes it more likely that individuals with similar views regroup.

In a homophilic system, the spread of new ideas, new concepts, new theories and political ideologies can be very difficult. In a heterophile the spread of innovative ideas is easier. The push for political change should then be directed to heterophile and not homophilic social groups, as with most political communities on the net.

When people join in homophilic groups, collective action becomes more likely. Collective action can, in turn, induce people to change their beliefs: when people work actively together, tend to more easily identify each other. The homophily notions also affects the distortion of opinions and preferences. It is easier to reveal their true opinions to those who think alike and who are part of the same “group”. In turn, distorted opinions influence the collective action costs.

Potential dissidents, who live in oppressive regimes, most likely will not engage in any action against the regime, if believe that others, the majority, support this regime.

Social media in the authoritarian regimes

Do information sharing and coordination actually create a real effect in the form of pressure for change?

In countries with authoritarian governments, social media are subject to **technological, economic and political barriers** which limit their influence.

Can it therefore be seen as a tool capable of exporting democracy and make the end of dictatorships?

There must be favorable conditions so that, theoretically, the Internet can bring about change. It is necessary to analyze the stability of the regime, the economic, social and tribal divisions, the youth condition, the level of unemployment in every country. **In less stable regimes, any institutional change comes more easily** due to factors of internal instability rather than the spread of the Internet and the use of social media. In the more stable countries, however, the increased use of the network does not automatically mean more political turmoil.

In the more stable countries, the business world can affect more political choices.

Globalization and markets increasingly interconnected oblige governments to choose whether to accept losing direct control over telecommunications or keep it, but risking economic isolation.

The problem stems from the fact that the main economic groups of those countries will need to be present on the telecommunications market, if they want to continue doing business. Governments are therefore forced to accept these new forms of communication. They must subsequently introduce various barriers to limit the activity of users on these instruments, in order to maintain as stable as possible their own power. If regimes decide not to open up, the only solution would be to create a reality completely closed and disconnected from the international forum, as happens for example in North Korea. As reported by Philip N. Howard of the University of Washington "Internet traffic in and out of a state can be blocked by disabling the main connection points, but, doing it, there would be strong consequences for the own national economies".

Barriers can be of various types:

- 1) economic: access to the Internet is a luxury that only a very small range and very rich society can afford. Generally those with a connection are part of the economic and political support to the regime;
- 2) technological: the ability to connect is limited only to certain areas of the territory;
- 3) political: among the political barriers there may be government control on social media and their level of credibility in the eyes of citizens. The political barriers take many forms: censorship, disinformation, block some content, persecution of those who make opposition activities through Internet. Political barriers are also government control of the media and the perception of freedom and credibility that it has the population. Technological innovations provide access to new sources of information and produce counter information, but at the same time, these allow governments to monitor and influence the public debate.

We can therefore say that the effect of the changes wrought by social media is linked to a **combination of positive factors** that make it possible to set in motion their ability to mobilize, within a context of geopolitical and economic environment and in a world where these tools have long been recognized as independent in relation to state control and not subject to effective control of censorship by the government.

Social media cannot be considered bearers of institutional change, but simply **channels through which to convey the ideas of change**, such as newspapers, radio and television. Like traditional media, they offer an opportunity to aggregate and share ideas; similar to the way newspapers can only influence public opinion, the internet is not the bearer of democratic goals or institutional change.

As stated by Lerry Diamond of Stanford University, "the technologies are merely tools, open equally to noble purposes and not. Such as radio and television can be vehicles of plural information and rational debate, so they can be guided by totalitarian regimes in order to promote fanatical mobilization or ensure state control".

Effectiveness of digital activism

How to use social media to increase the democratizing governance aspect instead of dealing with the fact that people often have the wrong information?

Social media are a powerful tool and have greatly increased the number of people who say they are activists. But how committed are these new activists, and how effective can they be if all they do is sign an online petition while sitting comfortably at home?

Social media fosters an inclination to speak without informing and without deepening the concepts, following the instinct and the emotions. Many posts on Facebook certainly would benefit from a moments pause and reflection. Not only would the time pause allow us to rethink, but it also introduces a less quantifiable, less regimented rhythm of communication that is more reflective and sensitive.

In the decision-making process, the numbers game is not enough. **Quality matters are more important than quantity.** Well-informed, well-networked and influential voices in strategic offline locations are far more likely to make a difference, if a difference can be made, than the names of five million invisible people on an online petition. Long-term commitment, detailed expertise, committed organizers, mobilized communities and shared purpose can be enhanced by social media, but they cannot be replaced by them.

To transform the political world fundamentally will require some **real world structures and institutions** like clear lines of accountability, effective governing structures, nuanced political judgment, and legitimate leadership. Sustainable transformation takes time that is measured in years not moments. However fast social media moves, the reality of people living in real places, controlling real material resources, and meeting personally in rooms and corridors and across the barricades, will always be where the real action is.

Traditional social movement organizations normally survive on the efforts of highly motivated individuals, detailed evidentiary claims against opponents, some degree of management, and meetings. Cohesion comes when people work together face-to-face in the same endeavor. **Social media without concrete and well-researched actions on the ground have little impact on power.**

In conclusion, social media are not carriers of institutional change for three reasons:

- the first refers to their nature, ie the fact that they are born as neutral tools, where the user is expected to perform as a primary task to enter any kind of content;
- second, because they are not accessible to all means, as there are necessary skills and possibilities which lead to excluding large sections of the population;

third, because they are not really part of the territory or of the daily life: they always need an extra step, of a physical entity, as groups, parties and associations, that turn into facts any virtual aspirations.

How to turn the debates of opinions in decision-making procedures?

How does technology and social media affect democracy?

In trade, the tendency to use the Internet and social media to consult reviews of products and services and to write new is globally widespread. In Italy, for example, over 60% of consumers do not proceed to purchase until they have read some opinion on the web. Normally users consider correct to write reviews to witness a positive or negative experience relative to a made purchase. All this information, more or less real, provided by users, helps to strengthen or weaken the brand reputation of companies. These are therefore encouraged to improve their offer taking into account the views expressed by the users, acting on the quality and price of the product and presenting it as real as possible. All this produces competition and definitely has a positive effect on democracy.

Can we say the same with the political institutions?

There is a strong will to believe that these social media are making political processes more democratic, but yet the evidence is not always there to support such assertions. The effects that the emergence of social media platforms have had on political processes remain controversial and not well understood.

We have seen that in countries where there are democratic institutions, politicians use social media to acquire consent from the voters.

This does not mean that they put into practice the public proposals. Certainly the proposals can inspire the rulers, but not impose choices. Indeed, it often happens that the debate is driven in order to get to the implementation of the policies advocated by the same political elite. For the same reasons, it happens that the outcome of the debate is being manipulated so as not to be easy to understand.

The debates on social media can turn into decision-making procedures only according to the law. It is necessary that the **legal system provides for this possibility and establishes the conditions to achieve it.**

I can make assumptions.

To ensure that social media have effect on institutions must be institutionalized.

To do so, the sorting needs to meet the following conditions:

- 1) promote the dissemination of that specific social media;
- 2) identify with certainty the user, in order to have certainty of the sources;
- 3) create rules for the debate, with the presence, for example, of one or more discussants;
- 4) specify the terms to exercise the voting;
- 5) ensure the uniqueness and anonymity of the vote;
- 6) establish to what issues the vote will have binding effect on institutional decisions.

In this way there is a kind of digital referendum.

A few examples: some institutions, a political party or, simply, some users may propose the debate and vote on issues of social and cultural interest, such as the liberalization of the use of certain drugs, homosexual marriages, prostitution legalization, etc.

There can also be specific social media that discuss technical matters whose members belong to limited categories of users. For example, the institutional reforms can be discussed via social media by legal scholars of universities, the destination of the areas on which stands Milan Expo 2015 can be decided via social media by a group of planners, economists, sociologists and architects registered with professional bodies.

It will take time until social media penetrate into the legal order of the countries, but I think that sooner or later the road to democracy will lead to this.

One further problem is how to best protect freedom of expression and free flow of information without compromising other human rights.

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