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## Social media and democracy: critical reflections

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Source: <http://www.n-tv.de/politik/Die-Zeit-ist-noch-nicht-reif-article2708041.html>

The creation of new forms of digital social media during the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has transformed the ways in which many people communicate and share information. However, the effects that the emergence of social media platforms, such as Facebook, 人人网 (Renren), Twitter or YouTube as well as blogging environments and online discussion fora, have had on political processes remain controversial and not well understood. Indeed, much discourse in this field seems to be driven as much by political ideology itself, as it does by rigorous academic enquiry. There is a strong will to believe that these social media are indeed making political processes more democratic, and yet the evidence is not always there to support such assertions.

At one extreme, there are popular activists who 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” (see Huffington Post, 2011). In contrast, 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-increasing control over citizens (for a review of evidence, see Kelly and Cook, 2011). As Loader and Mercea (2012, p.x) have argued, on the one hand, there is often an assumption that “the widespread use of the Internet for social networking, blogging, video-sharing and tweeting has an elective affinity with participatory democracy”. However, they go on to suggest that “Such optimistic claims for the political benefit of social networking are in sharp contrast to much of the mainstream academic discourse surrounding the prospects for digital democratic governance” (Loader and Mercea, 2012, p.x).

The aim of this short background paper is therefore threefold:

- To highlight that there is considerable ambivalence in approaches to the role of social media in political processes, particularly with respect to democracies (taking cognizance of Held’s, 2006, important emphasis that there are many different kinds of democracy);
- To focus attention particularly on the impacts of social media on the engagement of the poorest and most marginalized in political processes; and
- To emphasise the importance for governments to enable all of their citizens to have the opportunities to participate in these new forms of political engagement.

At the outset, it is necessary to emphasise that technology is not an autonomous power that can inherently be used for ‘good’ or ‘bad’. Far from it. Historically, there is strong evidence that technologies have usually been shaped and used by those in power to maintain their positions of power (Habermas, 1978; Unwin, 2009). A question that therefore arises is whether new ICTs are actually any different from this; whether or not they have indeed created a new information age (Castells, 2000) whereby existing structures and political processes can be fundamentally changed. There is no simple answer to this.

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

- The freedom that mobile technologies offered for people to communicate increasingly between any parts of the world and at any time, or what might be called *space-time liberty*.
- 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 a *sharing liberty*.
- 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 miniaturized digital technologies such as mobile phones and cameras – what might be termed *access liberty*.

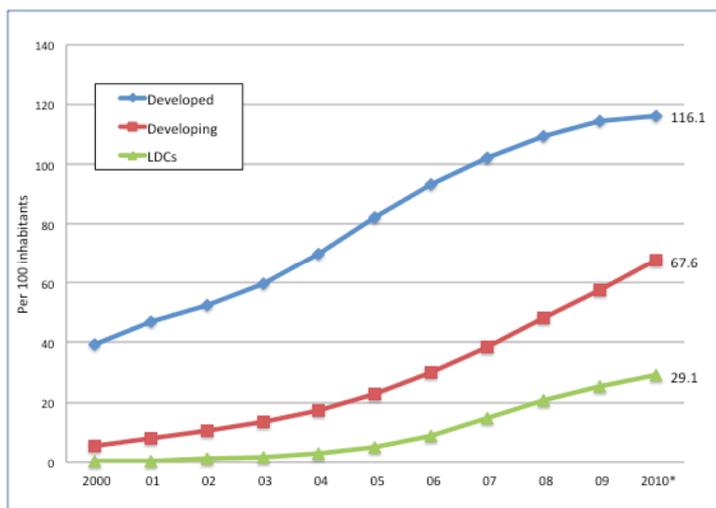
These ‘liberties’ have had dramatic impacts on political processes, both enabling governments and politicians to spread their messages directly to individuals, as with texts sent to mobile phones to encourage people to vote in particular ways, but also for individuals to share graphic images and accounts of things happening to others anywhere in the world, thus raising global awareness of political actions by regimes with which they disagree, as evidenced in the ongoing conflicts in Syria.

I confess now to being less certain of the potential liberties enabled by modern ICTs and social media, for three broad sets of reasons. First, governments and global corporations have very often been able to use these technologies to gain considerable additional knowledge about, and power over, individual people. Where governments are benign, and really do have the interests of all 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. Likewise, global corporations such as Google now have vastly more information about individuals than was ever the

case previously (Arthur, 2012), and many people are concerned about the implications of this, particularly with respect to privacy issues. These are typified by the critical views, particularly expressed by European governments, at the acquisition of what many consider to be private information about people's wireless networks whilst Google was also collecting images for Streetview (see Unwin, 2012a).

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 they are becoming increasingly marginalized. As richer individuals and countries have ever-faster Internet access, enabling them to use ever more creative social media, those who simply do not have the physical access, or cannot afford it, become ever more

distanced from the political processes that such technologies permit. This was graphically illustrated in the ITU's (2011) report on the use of ICTs in the least developed countries, which showed that the



*Mobile cellular subscriptions per 100 inhabitants*

Source: ITU (2011), Chart 2.12

difference in ownership of and access to a

range of digital technologies between the richest and poorest has grown significantly over the last decade. In the above chart, for example, in 2000 the difference between average mobile subscription rates in developed and least developed countries was 40%, whereas by 2010 it was 87%. 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, and very often between men and women. Put another way, Facebook has undoubtedly grown hugely in global popularity, and is widely used by the

relatively rich, but with 955 million active users in June 2012, this still only represents 13% of the world's population. Moreover, almost 40% of Facebook users come from just five countries

(<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Facebook>, 23 August 2012).

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 (Feenberg, 1991). However, technologies are not independent of the people who make them, and they are made 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, particularly MPESA in Kenya, 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 different ways, but also that different individuals and groups within their citizenries can likewise use them in different 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 marginalized are not generally those who develop new technologies. If they are indeed to benefit from social media, there therefore needs to be some powerful external entity that explicitly seeks to ensure that such technologies can indeed be used in their interest, be that political, social or economic.

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. Just because mobile 'phones are becoming very common in many countries does not mean that vastly greater numbers of people are actual using social media on their mobiles to enhance democracy. Moreover, mobile 'phones are also used extensively by those

who are seeking violently to change regimes through war, and the use of mobile devices and social media in the 'riots' in the UK in the summer of 2011 has likewise been widely reported (see *The Observer*, 2011, for example).

In March 2012, the CTO together with several other organisations working in the field of 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 (Unwin, 2012b). Four broad sets of significant issues were raised:

- *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 as a way of communication. Appropriate content is necessary, and the digital systems should be affordable and sustainable.
- *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 serve the interests of all people. How to include 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 was also a strong view that the increasing tendency for the Internet to be controlled by a small number of organisations, governments and individuals, and that this ran counter to the aspirations of those seeking more democratic processes.
- *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, because so doing can help develop understandings of the policies that need to be in place to resist such actions. There was widespread recognition that it is not just companies and governments that can use social media for negative purposes, and that individuals and small groups intent on using it for bullying, digital 'monstering', or violent actions, are equally problematic. To challenge the negative dominance of some minority groups, it is therefore

important for governments actively to engage in responding to 'negative' uses of social media. To ensure democracy, it was argued that the ownership of the Internet, and those who control it, needs to be much more democratic. Interestingly, there were also concerns about the lack of a strong bottom-up movement for a free Internet, and that there is far too much 'slacktivism' when it comes to action about digital technologies. Given that the major social media sites are increasingly prevalent, it was also noted that boycotting them is now becoming very difficult; imagine a world without gmail or Google's search engine, or Google maps!

- *Privacy and security.* Some of the issues around privacy have already been alluded to above, but it is evident that there are very different views as to what is and should be private both within and between different cultures. Four important principles for governments were advocated by many of those present: don't censor, don't spy on your own people, educate people on safe social media usage, and require companies to be transparent about privacy and security.

This background paper has sought to provoke the sharing of ideas and further discussion during the 2012 Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference. Whilst 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 it 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 citizens in all of our countries.

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