

Helpdesk Research Report: Social Media and Reform Networks, Protests, Social Movements and Coalitions

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Query: Please provide a survey of the literature on the relationship, or use of, social media in the formation, functioning and successes of reform networks, protests, social movements and coalitions.

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1. Overview

The communication system of the industrial society was based on mass media. Such technologies allow for the mass distribution of a one-way message from one-to-many. The widespread diffusion of the Internet, mobile communication, digital media and a variety of social software tools throughout the world has transformed the communication system into interactive horizontal networks that connect the local and global. New forms of social media, such as SMS, blogs, social networking sites, podcasts and wikis, cater to the flow of messages from many-to-many. They enable citizens to interact and can accelerate cooperation and action (Shirky, 2008; Meier, 2009; Castells, 2007).

This helpdesk research report looks at the role of social media in the formation and functioning of civic groups, protest and social movements, the effectiveness of social media and success factors. Social media is considered to contribute to democratic processes (discussed in section 2), in particular to government accountability, human rights activism, and the development of civil society and practices of citizenship. Social media is also considered to be an important mechanism for collective action, protests and social movements (discussed in section 3). It lowers the costs of mobilisation and participation. It also contributes to the development of a community and collective identity and framing processes that can facilitate collective action.

While many claims are made about the effectiveness of social media (discussed in section 4), there is little systematic research that seeks to estimate the causal effects of social media. Moreover, the focus on the role of social media has been critiqued for taking away attention from the actual causes of protests and movements and the role of human agency. Those who are more optimistic about social media stress that these new technologies have brought down barriers to group action, which has allowed for new ways of gathering together and getting things done. Others argue that although social media allows for the development of community and collective identity at low cost, this does not necessarily translate into street action. In addition, there is no guarantee that even if protests and movements are to materialise, they would result in regime change or a more inclusive political future. While discussion on the political impact of social media has centred on the power of mass protests to topple governments, social media's real potential may lie in supporting civil society and the public sphere.

There are various factors discussed in the literature that may contribute to the success or weakness of social media and in turn the success or weakness of protests and movements that rely on them (discussed in section 5). These include: leadership, links to conventional media and other activists, elite reaction and external attention. Although new communication technologies tend to generate new forms of decentralised, non-hierarchical organisations and movements, effective organisation and leadership are still considered to be important to success. It is also important for leaders and activists to develop strategies and to go beyond the virtual world, conducting in person activities. Protests and movements that rely on social media should link to conventional, mainstream media and partner with broader activist communities to resonate with the wider public. The way in which existing regimes respond to the use of social media can also influence the success of communication tools and the success of protests and social movements that rely on them. Regimes can be caught off guard or they can respond by cracking down on communication tools and protestors. In some cases, regimes have learned to use social media to their benefit. External reaction can also be important. Reliance on social media tools can result in greater attention from external actors. International solidarity and political sympathy can in turn create new opportunities to generate power internally.

There are also some potential risks of adopting social media (discussed in section 6). While new communication technologies can improve the prospects of developing a collective identity and facilitating collective action, they can also facilitate intergroup divisions. In addition, social media may not be accessible to marginalised groups, which can reinforce inequalities in society.

This helpdesk report uses the terms 'social media', 'communication technologies', and 'information and communication technologies' interchangeably.

2. Social media support to democratic processes

Many claims are made about the democratising power of new media. **Social media is considered to contribute to government accountability, human rights activism, the development of civil society and practices of citizenship.** In terms of accountability and transparency, it is increasingly difficult for governments to hide or manipulate information or to act inconsistently with citizen concerns. The use of mobile phones and the Internet, for example, allow for news of any inappropriate government actions to quickly reach the public and to be challenged. It also allows for people to follow decision-making processes and discuss issues of common concern (Castells, 2007; Garrett, 2006; Mäkinen and Kuira, 2008).

Human rights violations have also been publicised by citizens who have taken advantage of social media tools. During the Kenyan presidential election crisis in 2007–2008, an online human rights campaign called Ushahidi spread awareness of incidents of violence (and their location) using Google Maps and a tool for users to report incidents via mobile phone or Internet browser. Ushahidi allowed for cooperation on a massive scale and provided an outlet for frustrated citizens (Goldstein and Rotich, 2008). More recently, bloggers in Egypt were instrumental in publicising human rights violations through text and audio-visual materials documenting government and security forces excesses. In Tunisia, bloggers were at times the only sources for information in the recent revolution (Ottaway and Hamzawy, 2011).

Much of the literature on social media discusses the contribution of social media more generally to the development of civil society and practices of citizenship. **New communication technologies have become the infrastructure for sharing and learning about diverse views and for new approaches to political representation and participation** (Howard, 2011; Mäkinen and Kuira, 2008). In Egypt, the April 6 movement, which relies on Facebook and other social media tools, has provided a structure for a new generation of Egyptians to assemble virtually and communicate about their grievances. They fall outside of the small, traditional group of activists and opinion-makers in the country and represent a new form of civil society organisation (Shapiro, 2009). Howard stresses that new civic associations are emerging throughout the Muslim world due to the supportive information infrastructure provided by information and communication technologies. The formation of such groups is especially important in these countries, where political parties can be illegal (Howard, 2011).

Citizens have also become involved in the public sphere as ‘citizen-journalists’. In Kenya, for example, citizens who were dissatisfied with self-censorship of the mainstream media during the crisis became reporters and digital activists. They used blogs to challenge the standard narrative, which resulted in the broadening of views (Goldstein and Rotich, 2008; Mäkinen and Kuira, 2008). In Iran, the active blogosphere is seen to resemble a genuine online civil society (Aday, 2010).

3. Social media support to collective action and social movements

The adoption of social media is widely cited in the literature as an important mechanism for collective action, protests and social movements. Leaders of social movements have used new information and communication technologies, such as mobile phones and the Internet, to mobilise public opinion, organise mass protests and publicise concerns and demands locally and globally (Howard, 2011).

The most commonly cited benefit of the use of social media is its ability to lower the costs of mobilisation and participation. Information and communication technologies reduce costs associated with publishing and accessing information and facilitate communication and coordination across distances. This, in turn, reduces the transaction costs for organising collective action and the costs of participation (Aday, 2010; Meier, 2009; Garrett, 2006). More specifically, the Internet for example, allows groups advocating for social change to spread not only their ideological messages but also their training programmes and operation plans. YouTube videos enable core activists to explain a movement’s principles and tactics to dispersed followers without having to travel (Papic and Noona, 2011). Ushahidi in Kenya has significantly reduced the costs of participation in a collective human rights campaign, the sole requirement being a mobile phone signal (Goldstein and Rotich, 2008).

Social media is also considered to contribute to mobilisation and participation through the development of a community and collective identity. Communication technologies can foster collective identity across a geographically dispersed population. Individuals may get the sense, through online discussion groups for example, that they are members of a larger community with shared grievances (Garrett, 2006; Aday, 2010). This allows civic groups to find and attract new members and to build affiliations with groups in other cities and countries (Howard, 2011). Relationships can be strengthened through the maintenance of networks across distance, sharing information and discussion. The creation of community and collective identity can in turn facilitate mobilisation in support of collective action (Garrett, 2006; Aday, 2010).

Social media can also facilitate collective action through framing processes. The creation of particular group understandings regarding the meaning and significance of specific events and politics can be crucial to support for a movement. In Iran, for example, social networking services and satellite television circulated videos filmed by mobile phone of the killing of a young woman, Neda Agha-Soltan, during post-election demonstrations in 2009. She became a symbol of the protests and a signal to the general public that the protestors are “like them” (Aday, 2010). This framing was particularly significant in an environment where the government had attributed the protests to foreign agitators.

4. The effectiveness of social media

The effectiveness of social media to actually bring about social change is highly contested. There is **very little systematic research that seeks to estimate the causal effects of social media.** Most accounts are based on anecdotes rather than rigorously designed research (Aday, 2010).

Further, **the focus on the role of social media has been critiqued for taking away attention from the actual causes of protests and movements and the role of human agency.** Gladwell notes that instead of being defined by their causes, activists are now being defined by their tools. The protest in Moldova in 2009 against the Communist government was dubbed the ‘Twitter Revolution’, because of the means through which demonstrators were brought together (Gladwell, 2010). Recent coverage of the revolts in Egypt and Tunisia were also labelled the ‘Wiki Revolution and ‘Twitter Revolution’. These labels and perceptions attribute to a technology what is in fact the reaction to economic, social and political grievances (Ottaway and Hamzawy, 2011; Radsch, 2010). Some argue that the use of social media today is no different from the role of the telegraph, tape-recorder or fax machine in prior revolutions (Morozov, 2011; Papic and Noona, 2011). Castells stresses that **the spread of mobilisations and movements is ‘not a technological effect, but the ability of network technology to distribute horizontally messages that resonate with the public consciousness** in ways that are trustworthy’ (Castells, 2007, p. 251).

There is some consensus that protests and social movements are not caused by social media, but rather are used by those involved. There is less consensus about the degree to which new communication technologies are essential to protests and social movements and the effect that they have on social change.

Shirky emphasises that **new technologies have brought down barriers to group action, which has allowed for new ways of gathering together and getting things done** (Shirky, 2008). A study conducted by Meier found that an increase in mobile phones empowers civil resistance movements in

countries with repressive regimes and is associated with an increase in the frequency of protests (Meier, 2009). A survey of communication practices of social movements around the world found that the new movements and new forms of insurgent politics could not have been conceived without social media (Castells, 2007). Howard in his book about democratic revolutions in the Muslim world argues that while democratic transitions are not caused by new information technologies, transition is no longer possible without them (Howard, 2011).

Others emphasise that **although social media allows for the development of community and collective identity at low cost, this does not necessarily translate into street action**, which is necessary for the success of a protest movement. New technologies might actually make citizens more passive, 'by leading them to confuse online rhetoric with substantial political action, diverting their attention away from productive activities' (Aday, 2010, p. 9). Instead of attending meetings, workshops and rallies, uncommitted individuals can join a Facebook group or follow a Twitter feed at home. This may not motivate them to leave the comfort of their homes to join the chaos of street action (Papic and Noona, 2011). Gladwell states that social media favours the development of weak-tie connections instead of strong-tie connections, developed through face-to-face interaction prominent during prior movements, for example, the civil rights movement in the U.S. in the 1960's. Weak-ties, he argues, are less likely to result in strong commitment and individual sacrifices, and less likely to help change the status quo (Gladwell, 2010). Shirky responds that although social media may not prompt uncommitted groups to take effective political action, they enable committed groups to 'play by new rules' (Shirky in Gladwell and Shirky, 2011).

Even where communication technologies contribute to mass protest and the strengthening of social movements, there is **no guarantee that such protests and movements will necessarily be successful and result in regime change or a more inclusive political future**. There are successful examples where activists have used social media to mobilise to topple regimes. These include Indonesia in 1998, Kyrgyzstan in 2005 and more recently Tunisia and Egypt in 2010 and 2011 (see Howard, 2011; Ottaway and Hamzawy, 2011). There are also examples, however, where the use of new technologies has not resulted in clear political outcomes or institutional consequences, for example Iran in 2009 and Thailand in 2010 (Shirky in Gladwell and Shirky, 2011; Howard, 2011).

There is some discussion in the literature that it is too early to assess the effects of social media. Shirky notes that **although discussion on the political impact of social media has centred on the power of mass protests to topple governments, 'social media's real potential lies in supporting civil society and the public sphere** - which will produce change over years and decades, not weeks or months' (Shirky, 2011). Social media tools such as blogging may be seen as individualistic and unlikely to contribute to the formation of lasting movements (Ottaway and Hamzawy, 2011). Others find, however, that the real impact of blogging and other forms of social media is the transformation of the individuals involved and the development of new political competencies and expectations: 'The impact of the new media technologies will likely be best measured in terms of the emergence of such new kinds of citizens and networks over the next decades, not in terms of institutional political changes over months or years' (Lynch, cited in Ghannam, 2011). Similarly, the development of innovation, entrepreneurship and new ways of thinking may eventually be important skills that contribute to social change. Wasserman notes that the real force for social change in Africa is not the technology itself but the creative ways in which Africans have adopted and adapted the mobile phone (Wasserman, 2011).

5. Success factors and challenges of social media

Revolutions and movements are complex, context-specific and historically contingent processes (Goldstein, 2007). There are various examples where mass protests and social movements have relied upon social media. As noted, there are cases that have been successful in achieving political and social change and cases that have been unsuccessful in this aim. While information technologies can be a fundamental infrastructure for civic activism, protest and social movements, there are various other factors at play that can contribute to their success or weakness. These relate to organisational and leadership issues; links with traditional mass media and other partners; elite tactics; and external attention.

Organisation and leadership

New information and communication technologies tend to generate new forms of decentralised, non-hierarchical organisations and movements (Aday, 2010; Garrett, 2006). They allow for disparate groups and individuals to be linked together in the absence of formal organisation or effective leadership (Aday, 2010). The absence of clear leadership can be problematic, however. **Some argue that the lack of a centralised leadership structure and clear lines of authority can undermine strategic thinking, the development of a coherent political message and the ability to reach consensus and set goals** (Gladwell, 2010; Aday, 2010). Ottaway and Hamzawy state that the protest movement in the Arab region is currently not an organised, cohesive movement but rather based on a large number of distinct events (strikes, demonstrations and other forms of protests) that do not build on each other. Neither are there efforts to tie it into a cohesive movement. As such, it is difficult to predict whether it can develop into a large, cohesive and well-structured protest movement capable of articulating specific demands (Ottaway and Hamzawy, 2011). In addition, Papic and Noona caution that in the absence of effective leadership, protests movements can spread rapidly through communication technologies before they are ready, which can undermine their survival (Papic and Noona, 2011).

Effective organisation and leadership are thus still considered to be important to the effectiveness of social media tools and to the success of organisations and movements that rely on horizontal social media (Papic and Noona, 2011). While there is consensus that the Orange Revolution in the Ukraine would not have occurred without the Internet (which allowed for outreach, training and awareness-raising) centralised top-down leadership of key pro-democracy groups was also essential. The leadership was responsible for the organisation's outcomes, developing the culture of the organisation and controlling assets (Goldstein, 2007).

Papic and Noona argue that **in order to lead a protest movement effectively, an organisation's leadership has to go beyond the virtual world**. Leaders need to hold workshops and meet with the populace in order to learn useful strategies and to understand how to appeal to a broad audience (Papic and Noona, 2011; see also Goldstein, 2007). Morozov notes that although the organisers of the recent mass protest movement in Egypt were not considered revolutionary leaders in the conventional sense, they still did exercise leadership and acted strategically. In addition, both Tunisian and Egyptian cyber-activists did not only engage virtually, but also held in person workshops, sharing tips on how to engage in advocacy (Morozov, 2011).

Links with traditional mass media and other partners

Social media tools supplement and in some cases amplify conventional, mainstream media but should not replace it. It is important for protest and social movements to rely not only on social media but also to link to mainstream mass media, in order to reach and influence public opinion at large (Mäkinen and Kuira, 2008; Castells, 2007). The implication on relying on both forms of media means, however, that it is difficult to distinguish the effects of social media from those of mainstream media, which may be communicating the same information (Aday, 2010).

In situations where the use of the Internet or mobile phones is disrupted by government, it is also essential for protestors to be able to adopt other methods. In Egypt, protestors were able to distribute hard-copy pamphlets and use faxes and landline telephones for communications. In such cases, ingenuity and leadership were more important than social media (Papic and Noona, 2011).

Linking with other partners and broader activist communities is also essential. Discussing mass protests via social media in the Middle East and North Africa, Radsch argues that 'when such efforts are not linked into the broader activist community or public they are bound to fail, like the Facebook protest for Syria that fizzled because it was inauthentic' (Radsch, 2010). The April 6 strike in Egypt, which gave momentum to the April 6 movement, was a success in part due to its connection to a cohesive, organised group of labourers. The labour protest in turn was amplified by the April 6 Facebook activists (Shapiro, 2009).

Elite tactics

The way in which existing regimes respond to the use of social media can also influence the success of communication tools and the success of protests and social movements that rely on them. In some cases, regimes have been caught off guard by new media activism (Ottaway and Hamzaway, 2011; Aday, 2010; Howard, 2011). This was the case in Tunisia in 2010-11, where mass protests that spread with the help of Facebook and Twitter and other new technologies caught the government off balance and eventually resulted in the resignation of President Ben Ali (Ottaway and Hamzaway, 2011).

In other cases, regimes have responded by cracking down on the use of social media. In many cases, elites and their allies own and/or control the infrastructure for such technologies and can disrupt Internet and mobile phone services, as occurred in Iran and in Egypt. Thus, although social media can initially help protest movements, they can also help the regime to crack down on the movement, which can have a demobilising effect (Aday, 2010; Garrett, 2006; Papic and Noona, 2011). Activists have responded though, as noted above, by shifting to the use of other tools (conventional media). In addition, others have learned technical ways to get around the disruption.

Regimes in some situations have also learned to use social media to their benefit. In Iran, for example, the regime encouraged government sympathisers to use communication tools, such as blogs, Facebook and Twitter to support the regime's position. In addition, they also used to same tools to identify, harass and imprison protesters (Aday, 2010).

External attention

Reliance on social media tools can also result in greater attention from external actors. The perceptions of protests in the outside world are very often shaped by Twitter and videos uploaded onto YouTube and Facebook. **International solidarity and political sympathy can in turn create new opportunities to generate power internally** (Aday, 2010). Placing domestic issues on the

international agenda can also have a significant effect on domestic politics. Some activists believe that it offers them more protection from the government as the regime's actions can be viewed globally (Radsch, 2010). Further, Howard argues that one of the key outcomes of the protest movement in Iran in 2009 is that the world has seen interest in change expressed from within the country. This could prove to be the most destabilising effect of the protests (Howard, 2011).

6. Risks of using social media

There are various risks associated with the use of social media. As noted, they may offer a way for elites to crack down on protest movements. In addition, **while new communication technologies can improve the prospects of developing a collective identity and facilitating collective action, they can also facilitate intergroup divisions.** Online networks and the ability to control information exposure in new media technologies allow for people to search for like-minded people and for information that reinforce their beliefs. This can foster group polarization and strengthen existing views at the expense of other opinions (Aday, 2010; Mäkinen and Kuira, 2008; Garrett, 2006). In some cases, social media can be used to exacerbate conflict. During the 2007-2008 presidential election crisis in Kenya, the use of mobile phones made it cheap and easy to spread hateful and violent messages that contributed to mob violence (Mäkinen and Kuira, 2008; Goldstein and Rotich, 2008).

However, **since SMS and online networks are multi-directional tools, unlike radio, it is possible to try to counter divisive messages.** The CEO of Safaricom, Kenya's largest mobile phone provider convinced the government that the SMS system should not be shut down but that messages of peace and calm should be sent out instead to subscribers. In addition, the administrator of a discussion board that received divisive postings launched a new site centred on constructive dialogue among Kenyans (Goldstein and Rotich, 2008).

Another issue that determines the effectiveness of social media is how accessible they are. A risk is that **social media may not be accessible to marginalised groups.** Some forms may only be accessible to the elite. Internet access is often prohibitively expensive for the majority; blogging thus is often an activity that can only be carried out by those with sufficient resources (Mäkinen and Kuira, 2008). While mobile phones are more ubiquitous, handsets and running costs can also be too high to allow for the full use of the capabilities offered by mobile technologies (Wasserman, 2011). It is important to make new communication technologies more accessible to those with limited resources (Mäkinen and Kuira, 2008)

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8. Additional information

Key websites

[Clay Shirky weblog](#), [iRevolution: from innovation to revolution](#), [The Meta-Activism Project](#), [Social Media Today](#)

Experts consulted:

Mirjam de Bruijn, Leiden University

Fatima Diallo, University of Gaston Berger of Saint Louis, Senegal

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Robin Mansell, London School of Economics and Political Science

Patrick Meier, The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University

Bettina Peters, Global Forum for Media Development

Courtney Radsch, Freedom House

Clay Shirky, New York University

Herman Wasserman, Rhodes University, South Africa

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