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New ICTs and Social Media in Political Protest and Social Change

The use of the Internet and new media for political activism has been researched and debated on since the 1990s. In countries under authoritarian rule in particular, the new public sphere and scope for political organisation provided by the Internet and social media offer great potential for political and cultural democratisation and for resistance against authoritarian rule. While it is widely agreed that this potential exists, there are warnings not to get caught up in the spirit of early Internet euphoria and hope that the dissemination of new



A citizen uses his mobile phone to capture events during a demonstration on June 22nd 2012 in Tehran, Iran (source: wpmu.mah.se)

media will make democratic political and cultural change happen by virtue of some sort of technological determinism. During the 'Arab Spring', for example, some people argued that we are witnessing a new form of social and political revolution in which social media play a crucial role. Others have criticised this point of view as being exaggerated or a narrowly Western or Eurocentric perspective. The discussions often overlook the fact that the Internet and new media are not only repressed by authoritarian regimes but are also used for counter-revolutionary and anti-democratic purposes by such regimes or by pro-authoritarian social movements of various shades. Furthermore, the obstacles to realising participatory and emancipatory potentials in democratic countries are still often overlooked or inadequately dealt with in academic literature.

Against this backdrop, the special issue explores the complex interplay of old and new forms of political protest that take advantage of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) and, more broadly, the roles played by the latter in social movements and social change. ICTs appear to enable or at least support new forms of political organisation, yet they are at the same time embedded in and shaped by existing social structures and power relations. Besides a variety of political uses of new ICTs and social media in 'developing countries', recent developments in Europe and North America also justify a closer look at the role of ICTs in movements aimed at bringing about radical social change. The indignant movement in Spain and Occupy Wall Street, for example, developed as a backlash to political and economic measures and policies that were more typical of developing countries in previous decades.

What role have new ICTs and social media actually played in such movements? Do new ICTs and social media allow for the development of political community building, thereby helping movements to grow, consolidate and proliferate, or do they not make any (significant) difference? What relationships exist between the use of new ICTs and social media on the one hand, and street demonstrations and other traditional expressions of social revolt and political protest on the other? Does their use go hand in hand with new, less hierarchical forms of political activism and, if so, what are the strengths and weaknesses of these new forms? How can new ICTs support human rights and anti-authoritarian social change, and what dangers are conceivable in this regard, also with respect to the shaping and use of new ICTs and social media by governments and other key players in the global 'information society'? Have these technologies and media themselves become a new sphere of political conflict and socio-cultural change? And how does their pervasive character in modern societies influence global politics and local socio-political movements?

It is these and other such questions that are discussed in the contributions to this special issue. It therefore addresses a wide variety of political protests and social movements in different parts of the world, while at the

same time providing more general analyses of the current relevance of new ICTs and social media, including reflections on core features of our global 'network society' (Manuel Castells).

Kay *Mathiesen* argues that there is a right to Internet access that can be derived from the right to communicate. States should guarantee access to the Internet. She holds that Google and Facebook – though often



During the Egyptian protests, the government shut down the entire Internet for almost five days (Interact SpA)

seen as core elements of an "imperialistic Internet" – can be used by people in developing and least developed countries for communicating in a way that reflects their local, national and regional cultural needs and is adapted to the respective contexts.

Some governments, however, disconnect "their" digital networks from the rest of the world in an attempt to limit communication by blocking domain names, disabling telephone networks and at times even trying to isolate an entire country from the Internet. Ulrik *Franke* discusses two primary self-professed reasons for such state censorship of the Internet, namely (i) protecting political authority and (ii) preserving the public good. Assessing the normative force of these reasons from the viewpoint of rights-based theories and utilitarianism, Franke concludes

that neither rights-based theories nor utilitarianism in general support the disconnection of digital networks to achieve these aims. This conclusion gains additional substance as it is supported by two normally opposing normative theories.

Naturally, the roles played by new ICTs and social media also deserve attention in crisis situations that do not involve censorship by authoritarian states. In his article on the public's use of social media in Japan in response to the TEPCO (Tokyo Electric Power Company) Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster, Kenji *Saito* provides us with a personal account of how such media were used in the aftermath of the disaster by citizens and various societal actors (such as corporate representatives and public officials). In a moving personal account, he reveals how reactions by citizens included not only defiance aimed at protecting children, but also protests against the government's nuclear policies. A decline in the influence of mass media is apparent during the course of the events. Saito argues, however, that multiple levels of divides have prevented people from progressing beyond criticism to achieve effective activism.

The political conflicts that took place in South Korea in the late 2000s represent another example – in the same region of the world – of changes accompanying the rise of new ICTs and social media and involving more players than the state and the citizens. Dong Hyun *Song* provides us with a thoughtful and detailed analysis of the struggle between the Korean government, web portals and Internet users that emerged in the aftermath of the 2008 Candlelight protests, also reflecting the wider evolution of cyberspace in Korean society. He concludes that the distrust of power holders among Korean internet users and their traversal to global providers had a great impact on the reconfiguration and expansion of Korean cyberspace, resulting in global web service providers becoming successfully established in several sectors of the Korean market. The Korean web portals then changed their attitude: having previously been submissive to the state, they became champions of the freedom of speech of their users. In response, the Korean government changed its regulatory framework because of its inability to control global web service providers and as a result of complaints from local corporations about neutrality. While one could argue that the move to global service providers resulted in a significant destabilisation of dominant power relations in Korean cyberspace, Korean internet users also appear to have seamlessly integrated global web services into the Korean cyberspace constellation.

In a provocatively titled article, Emad *Khazraee* and Kristene *Unsworth* propose that the relationship between new ICTs and social movements should be examined from a socio-technical perspective. They argue that Actor-Network Theory (ANT) can help us better understand the relationship between social media and social movements and that the role new ICTs play in social movements and social change is neither linear nor constant over time. Following this approach in an exploratory analysis of the use of Facebook among Iranians, Khazraee and Unsworth conclude that social media can have counter-effects in the mid-stage of a social movement development by serving as a pressure valve to relieve some of the frustration built up by various societally imposed disappointments and to give vent to the steam that may drive social change. In their opinion, there is more to the situation than the technical capability afforded by the use of technology: it is also important to consider the political and historical contexts of the action.



A group of people protest against the military coup at Siam Square Thailand, Bangkok (CC, <http://gnarlykitty.blogspot.com>)

Melanie *Radue* also contests the libertarian conviction that the Internet stimulates political liberalisation and democratisation *per se*. It depends on the context, she says, emphasising that the Internet is only a means of organising a movement that must eventually act in the real world rather than solely in the virtual one. She underpins her argumentation by discussing the case of the Bersih social movement in Malaysia. According to her analysis, the main role of the Internet was to help organise the movement and to globally spread information. It was not the Internet that gave rise to the movement's success, however, but a long history of different developments and political changes, coupled with collective action on the part of the country's people as well as unintended incidents and consequences.

Examining the use of Facebook within the Egyptian 6th of April Youth Movement based on a content analysis of the movement's Facebook page, Manaf *Bashir* questions the notion of the horizontality of Internet activism and the idea that the advent of social media applications has fundamentally affected the relevance of leadership, organisation and coordination for social movements. His media content analysis shows that the leadership and ordinary participants of the movement used similar cause, motivational and consequence frames, but that the leadership used these frames more frequently than the participants and had a greater influence than the participants in the overall framing of the 6th of April Youth Movement. The findings suggest that while some social movement dynamics have changed due to the use of new ICTs and what they offer to the general participants, social movement activism, in terms of framing, primarily remains a function of its leadership.

Based on an analysis of a sample of more than 250 articles about protests and social mobilisation in three Egyptian English-language newspapers, Luis Fernando *Baron* argues that the Egyptian 'Arab Spring' of January 2011 was more than a 'Facebook revolution', emphasising the relevance of socio-political contexts. He argues, however, that social media (i) provided alternative mechanisms for political expression and organisation and (ii) decisively contributed to the genesis and consolidation of the movement, to the establishment of youth political identities, and to the movement's global visibility. His findings suggest that the combination of "bits and streets" amplified not only the movement's mobilisation but the degree of opposition experienced by the Egyptian regime.

In her article, Christina *Schachtner* summarises the results of a project that started before the 'Arab Spring'. She observed and analysed the formation of a transnational public sphere in the Middle East since the mid-2000s. With reference to a conceptualisation by Nancy Fraser, Schachtner identifies conditions that are necessary for digital media to play a political role, namely normative legitimacy and efficiency of the communicative authority of digital arenas. According to her analysis, digital media are not only means to organise 'offline' political protests but can already serve as spaces of reflection and dialogue in the run-up to such protests.

During the course of the protests, the results of the reflection and dialogue processes become globally visible – again enhanced by new ICTs – and help shape actions in urban public spaces. The ‘real life’ impacts of communication in digital media depend on action outside the Internet, but this communication can prepare the ground for street protests and enhance their efficiency and global visibility.

Enrique *Díez Gutiérrez* analyses the potential role played by ICTs in the development of direct democratic participation, referring to a number of initiatives and widespread practices in recent years. Pointing out the relevance of such instances of social and political protest as the numerous worker strikes in Egypt at the end of the 2000s, he demystifies the hype around the use of social media in social movements and political protests.



A protester holding a placard in Tahrir Square referring to Facebook

New ICTs and social media can serve emancipatory goals, but can also contribute to the creation of new and to the stabilisation of existing constellations of dominance.

Drawing attention again to the recent political protests in Egypt, *Mohammad Abdelhamid* offers an innovative analysis of graffiti as a special means of self-expression mirrored in the digital sphere. In his essay, he discusses five impressive wall writings taken from the most visited and commented-on Facebook page concerning the Egyptian Revolution. Referring to John Dewey, *Abdelhamid* argues that we have witnessed the birth of new, active publics in Egypt who are longing for political freedom. Social media give graffiti an entirely new meaning, transforming the local nature of the product into a message spread all over the world. Taking into account the difficulties associated with

analysing these ‘messages’ and their contexts, he characterises these ‘transgressive objects’ as means of anonymous self-expression, at once marginal and globally present.

Considering the global context of recent protests and youth activism and basing her statements on an analysis of the impacts and limits of political use of new ICTs and social media, *Natalia Garrido* provides us with an examination of developments in Argentina. Her article shows that a new form of political agency is emerging on the basis of Internet and social media use, but also that this agency exhibits significant limits with respect to genuine democratic participation. She discusses whether the deliberation spaces created in the new socio-technical environments really fulfil the requirements of democratic deliberation and are able to represent general interests, emphasising the relevance of the social and political contexts of such new digital environments which are highly popular among young people.

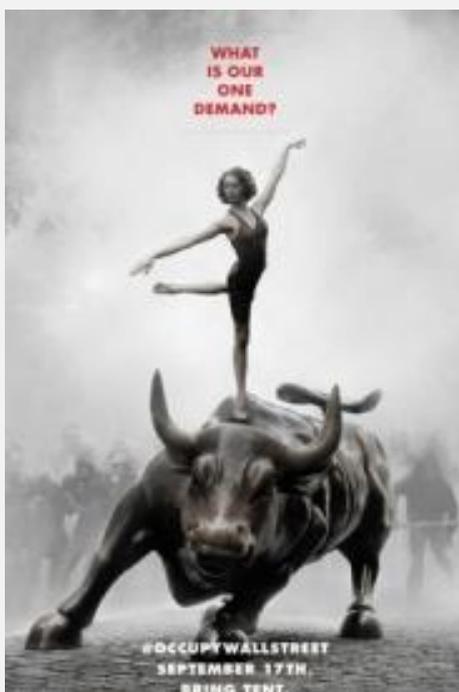
Examining the potential of new ICTs and social media to support social movements and emancipatory processes, *Julian Marcelo* provides an analysis of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) connected with their use, focusing on the recent 15M movement in Spain. He regards the different types of social networks as specific socio-technological environments. Special attention is given to the question of whether these environments help create new systems of political, social, economic and cultural relations, and what types of organisational structure are appropriate to these endeavours. In the concluding sections of his article, *Marcelo* discusses the results of his analysis with respect to the tensions between emancipatory processes, market forces and technocratic political stances.

Also referring to the recent developments in Spain, Bruno *Castillejo* and Dimitrina J. *Semova* argue that a new kind of political agency is in fact emerging. Based on a quantitative and qualitative analysis, they examine how social media were used in the Spanish national elections of 20 November 2011. In their view, the new agency exhibits a kind of collective intelligence that traditional electoral campaigning techniques are inappropriate to deal with. These elections were the first in which the major political parties used social media in their campaigns; however, small parties that achieved unexpectedly good election results also won in this field. Castillejo and Semova also discuss how members of the 15M movements used social media to attack the two major political parties, making use of a flawed online communication strategy of these parties.

In their essay, James *Anderson*, Kiran *Bharthapudi* and Hao *Cao* resort to the Foucauldian concept of "heterotopia" to analyse the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement, arguing that the movement has altered processes of collective consciousness in a world shaped by neoliberalism and that these processes prefigure the emergence of another world. In this context, new ICTs and social media can help promote cooperative autonomy and strengthen these processes. The authors argue that the networked heterotopia wherein OWS discourses perform "counterpower" should be viewed as fertile ground for igniting innate alternative praxis suppressed by normative neoliberal conceptions.



Protester with a Guy Fawkes mask in the iDemocracia Real Ya! (True Democracy Right Now!), in Puerta del Sol, Madrid, May 17, 2011. The banner hashtag is both a detournement of the Monty Python joke "Nobody expects the Spanish Inquisition!" and a reference to the decisive role played by Twitter and other social networks (Wikimedia Commons)



Placard of Occupy Wallstreet. September

In his article, Dylan E. *Wittkower* uses an Arendtian framework in order to argue that we can interpret distinctive and effective elements of the OWS movements as forms of non-action related to prior strategies of non-violence, the propaganda of the deed, and coalitions of affinity rather than identity. In his view, this interpretation allows us to see that, while the use of social media in the movement does not offer the same capacities for building and maintaining power as physical occupation does, and while an online community clearly cannot be a substitute for physical community in many relevant and consequential ways, Facebook does nonetheless provide a platform well-suited to maintaining power through these distinctive forms of non-action.

In a reconstruction of the complexity of economy in our contemporary societies, Peter *Fleissner* shows the essential openness of our future. Current developments can either lead to new forms of dominance being built on existing power structures or can open up pathways to social and environmental sustainability on a global scale. Following the stepwise method of Karl Marx, but adapting it to the present situation, three additional layers are re-constructed: finance capital, the state and the information society. On this basis, Fleissner reflects on crucial contributions and specific opportunities offered by new ICTs to restore and strengthen "mutuality", understood as an essential element of a future society built not on competition but on cooperation.

In his article, Tomasso *Gravante* assesses the relevance of net-activism practices in the citizen protests of Oaxaca (Mexico) in 2006 on the basis of his ethnographic research in this region. Gravante focuses on the emotive aspects and motivations of collective actions and on the question of how new ICTs and media are linked to citizen empowerment. The re-appropriation of new ICTs took place in a bottom-up process that created a socio-political identity. In order to adequately understand such processes it is crucial to fully take into account the emotive elements of the construction of autonomous and emancipatory subjectivity.

With a special focus on Spain, but arguing on a general level, Josep Maria *Reniu* analyses how the use of new ICTs is and should be managed by political institutions. He warns that top-down approaches to fostering democratic participation by means of new ICTs are insufficient and can even be counter-productive. Reniu concludes that these approaches can gravely hamper civic participation and that new ICTs cannot be a substitute for 'real life' civic participation due to 'digital divides' and other reasons. E-democracy tools should therefore be introduced in a gradual manner and only as a complementary means of civic participation, targeting for example young people. They do not provide technological fixes to social and political problems.

Following his critique of new ICTs from an environmental perspective, Robert *Rattle* analyses their political use in Canada in his article. In his view, the Canadian federal government has taken a pro-authoritarian stance in this context. While many positive applications of new ICTs exist that could promote community empowerment, they can also be used to suppress democracy, foster social exclusion and stimulate wealth inequalities even in an established democracy such as the Canadian one. New ICTs serve all social actors but favour those who have the greatest capacities to project their ideologies and values, privileging and reinforcing existing power structures.



Placard of Oaxaca Popular Assembly (2008):
"They shall not pass! Oaxaca resists until victory!
Solidarity without Frontiers!"

In her contribution to the special issue, Natalia *Grincheva* draws attention to the field of digital diplomacy. Cultural diplomacy implies the use of the art of diplomacy in promoting culture, resulting in a greater awareness of each other's cultural backgrounds, but it has also served in many historical examples as a powerful tool of cultural propaganda and manipulation. With the advance of new ICTs, cultural diplomacy is increasingly acquiring new communicative dimensions. Grincheva elaborates on the theoretical underpinnings of digital diplomacy by employing the conceptual framework of collective individuation and psychotechnologies developed by Bernard Stiegler and arrives at an ambivalent conclusion: digital diplomacy can reinforce but can also help to critically engage with existing global power inequalities.

Interrelations of cultural and political aspects of the global spread of new ICTs are also discussed in an article by Gwyneth *Sutherland*. Examining the foreign policy implications of what she sees as a pervasive cultural bias of the global information society, Sutherland argues that this bias shifts power away from the populations using the technology and towards the (mainly North American and European) actors controlling the programs and codes. The potential use of these technologies for participatory actions is therefore hampered by the strong global position of the creators of new ICTs.

The special issue concludes with an article by Rainer *Zimmermann* which provides an integral perspective of social action focusing on the concept of 'networks'. Discussing first its applications with regard to physical and biological systems, he then extends his approach to include social action, thereby also shedding light on the field of new ICTs, in which this notion is of paramount importance. Zimmermann proposes revitalising the classical concept of *kalokagathía* which brings together aesthetic and ethical aspects of daily life and invites

readers to look for practical examples, for instance in intercultural discourse, as well as for possible uses of such an integral network perspective in analysing the role played by the new ICTs in social change.

Zimmermann's article is based on a speech he delivered at the international event "Social networks: from indignation to change (ethical, political and aesthetical aspects)" in the summer of 2012; the event liaised with the 15M movement in Spain and took place at the University of León, in cooperation with the Munich University of Applied Sciences, BITrum Research Group, the International Center for Information Ethics (ICIE) and the European Project myUniversity (which analyses the development of e-democracy at European universities). The aesthetic dimension of the approach chosen for this event which was inspired by Zimmermann's perspective, entailed an artwork exhibition of the Spanish feminist emancipation movement since the 1960s and a series of classical music concerts with themes related to civic emancipation, such as Giuseppe Verdi's *Nabucco*. The articles by Díez Gutiérrez, Marcelo and Fleissner are also based on their contributions to this event. More-



Placard of the international event on "Social Networks: from Indignation to change", September 2012, León, Spain

over, the articles by Díez Gutiérrez and Reniu are based on discussions held during a workshop that took place at the University of León in December 2012 within the context of the myUniversity project.

All other contributions to this special issue were submitted in response to our call for papers. The number of submissions was much higher than expected, which also confirms the topicality and relevance of the questions that were raised in the call.

Although a number of submissions had to be rejected due to the results of the peer-review process, the articles reflect the thematic diversity that becomes evident when analysing political uses of new ICTs and social media. The contributions to this special issue make it clear once again that such uses ought to be analysed within their specific social, political, economic and cultural contexts. Having become a mature and major field of research, studies of the roles of new ICTs in

political protests and social movements nowadays are very often based on thorough empirical research, yet the field still requires comprehensive and innovative theoretical analyses that take into account the complexity of the dynamic relationships between digital communication and social change. As a matter of fact, such analyses, and indeed empirical case studies, will always reflect the political antagonisms of our present world. Hopes that the global situation will improve and that problems will be solved at local levels are not only expressed within the new socio-technical environments; these digital arenas and the technologies on which they are based will also continue to be seen as drivers of social change themselves. Information ethics and media studies in general will therefore continue to have to avoid feeding the hype surrounding new ICTs and social media by contextualising their political uses, while at the same time not ignoring the pervasive character of these technologies and media – they thus need to be open to expertise from a wide variety of disciplines.