Chapter 83

Use of New ICTs as "Liberation" or "Repression" Technologies in Social Movements:
The Need to Formulate Appropriate Media Policies

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ABSTRACT

Participants in varying but recent citizen-led social movements in Kenya, Iran, Tunisia, and Egypt have found new voices by employing new ICTs. In some cases, new ICTs were used to mobilize citizens to join and/or to encourage use of violence against other ethnicities. In nearly all cases, the combined use of new ICTs kept the world informed of developments as ensuing protests progressed. In most cases, the use of new ICTs as alternative media motivated international actors' intervention in averting or resolving ensuing crises. Foregoing engagements have also induced state actions such as appropriation of Internet and mobile phone SMS for counter-protest message dissemination and/or termination of citizens' access. Against the background of the sociology and politics of social movements and a focus on the protests in Kenya and Egypt, this chapter broaches critical questions about recent social movements and processes: to what extent have the uses of new ICTs served as alternative platforms for positive citizens' communication? When is use of new ICTs convertible into "weapons of mass destruction"? When does state repression or take-over of ICTs constitute security measures, and when is such action censorship? In the process, the chapter appraises the roles of local and international third parties to the engagement while underscoring conceptual definitions whose usage in studies of this kind should be conscientiously employed. Authors offer suggestions for future investigations.

INTRODUCTION

The term alternative media had previously been employed in descriptions of non-commercial, non-mainstream and traditional or old media– that is newspapers, newsmagazines and radio (clandestine and otherwise)–whose contents were produced to challenge power structures or induce social change. Lately, usage of alternative media has witnessed an expansion in scope and horizon with the employment of platforms that now broadly include new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) such as the Internet and mobile telephones (Armstrong, 1981; Atton, 2002; Downing, 2003; Downing, 2008; Atkinson & Cooley, 2010).

As such, it is important to establish that research examining the intersection between social movements and the employment of alternative media in the construction and execution of resistance predate the first and second decades of the 21st century. What is also not new in the construction of 21st century social movements via new ICTs is the raison d'être; typically, participants disenchanted with actors in government either over human rights, sit-tight syndrome, reluctance to democratize or combination of all the above, seek social change. This does not exclude participants in counter-movements whose goal may be to sustain the status quo.

What is, however, of contemporary concern and our interest in this chapter are contingent issues such as: (1) the efficient employability of new ICTs; (2) the resultant procedural and communicative empowerment of citizen dissenters; (3) the procedural response and presumed communicative disempowerment of the contemporary state; and (4) the convergence and morphing of traditionally distinct concepts that raise new questions about a longstanding citizen, media and state engagements in the trajectory of social movements. In the attempt to unpack foregoing issues, we pose the following questions: (1) To what extent has the use of new ICTs served as alternative platforms for citizens' communication during protests for social change? (2) When is use of new ICTs convertible into "weapons of mass destruction"? (3) When does state repression or take-over of new ICTs constitute security measures, and when is such action censorship?

Foregoing probing questions help to drive our examination of the two cases cited in this paper. In the process, we underscore actions of local and the intervention of international actors such as new ICT providers and foreign governments who step in to mediate. New questions posed by contemporary engagements in social movements are only partly motivated by the employment of new ICTs. Some of our questions are motivated by the fluidity of social movements, which tend to delimit their ability to be organized. Hitherto (Downing, 2008) old media roles in social movements have been accorded a back seat position. We suspect that protesters' efficient or inefficient usage of new ICTs will draw differential responses from the state. By juxtaposing social movements in Kenya and Egypt, we attempted to resolve some of Downing's (2008, p. 40) concerns: First, we de-marginalized new media analysis from the "main discursive arena" of "social movement phenomena" and, by so doing, underscore the central role of old and new media in aiding social movements. Doing so enabled our exploration of ways in which the structural and operational processes of new ICTs can either serve as opportunities for social movements or pose constraints to their success. Second, studies of social movements have paid little attention to social movements in Africa and elsewhere in the third world. Yet and as Downing (2008, p. 43) informed,

Social and political movements are clearly central to contemporary political life as well as to earlier modern history. The widespread decay of inherited political institutions such as parliamentary parties and the rise of hard to check transnational corporate power are factors further intensifying the current significance of social movements on

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