

# Social Media and Shifting Waves of Democratization

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## Abstract

Politics, media and democracy are intertwined for better or worse. Politics, politicians and the media go cynical about the notions of democracy, where democracy means doing things for others, where freedom of expression and association are guaranteed. What most people understand from democracy is probably, "rule of the people, rule of the peoples' representatives, rule of peoples' party, the well being of people, majority rule, dictatorship of the proletariat, maximum political participation, elite competition for peoples' vote, multi-partyism, political and social pluralism, equal citizenship rights, civil and political liberties, a free or open society, a free market economy, whatever we do.."(Beetham, David, 2006). Democracy entails different meanings at different points of time in different contexts as per our own concerns. Democracy is a symbol that stands for a series of institutions, procedures and behaviour on the part of ordinary citizens. Democracy is whatever we chose it to mean. There has been no time in history when democracy has not been on crossroads. The three shifting waves in democracy have been experienced and probably the fourth one is brought by the new wave of new media. The success of democracy can be derived only when people demand democracy, as the power lies with the people. Despite the crises, it is the most acceptable form of government. It is a model where each voice is considered to be heard. It is the tool of legitimacy in the hands of the ones who attain power. Everyone claims to be democratic. It is indeed a great concept that has engulfed humanity at different periods in history and is still continuing to engulf the human race even after thousands of years of its birth in Athens.

**Keywords:** Politics, Social Media, Democracy, Participation, Civil Society, Revolution, Shift/change

## Introduction

In a society based on the concepts of individual freedom, participation and ideals of democracy the process of dialogue is paramount. The presumption of individual power of rational thought is found embedded in the concepts and thoughts put forth by Locke, Milton, Mill and other such thinkers of 17&18th century. Robert Dahl provides the most influential definition of democracy. Dahl makes 'open contestation' and 'public competition' the centre of his conception of Polyarchy, which includes 'eight procedural and institutional considerations: 1. Freedom of association 2. Freedom of opinion 3. Right to vote 4. Right to be appointed to public office 5. Right of political elites to compete for votes and support 6. Existence of alternative pluralistic source of information 7. Free and fair elections 8. Institutions, whose policy depends on elections and other expressions of the citizens' preferences.

The contemporary Indian civil society is however rooted in the ideals of Gandhi, which touch almost all the aspects of human existence in society. The concepts of democracy, peace, stability

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and legitimacy are intertwined within the concepts of modernization and political development, which in turn are underlined by the freedom of expression and usage of new media. Social media highlights and concentrates on generation of oneness in relation to common issues and tries to seek common solutions by providing a platform for democratic expression. The role of civil societies in this context cannot be ignored.

Media and civil-society in context of recent uprisings in Arab world, India, Europe and recently in Bangladesh and in many other parts of the world present a complex and dynamic phenomenon of rise of voices. The causes that give rise to expression through shifting waves of democratization, militarization, autocratization and again democratisation are of great interest. Peace, security and economic development in countries are closely related to the development of media and new media technologies. The spread of the fabric of governance in democracy and the stability of the political institutions are the question marks in development as well as in maintaining peace and security among societies across borders. In the context of the political institutions and political upheavals in democratic systems, the role of new media technologies needs to be explored. Today, internet is responsible for dressing democracy in a totally new attire, where each individual of society, has the potential power in his hand to express himself. Social media provides the platform to vent out the hidden feelings. Social media has proved itself as the tool or the medium to take the centre stage for shifting waves of democratisation against authoritarianisation, suppressing insensitivities of the governments and bringing political changes across the nations in 21st century. Mass media as such is playing a critically important role in the countries across the globe and in their civil movements. The causes that give rise to the shifting waves of democratisation and/or revolutionization are of great academic interest and need to be enquired into by making objective as well as subjective study of the phenomenon.

The concepts of democracy, media and legitimacy are intertwined with the concepts of modernization and political development. "Twentieth century methods of warfare brought a re-integration of civilian and military institutions. The process of industrial mobilization involved the re-direction of civilian institutions. The importance of the institutions has always been enhanced by the existing periods of governance.

While using political power, media manipulations by ruling government becomes evident on the face of huge amounts of poverty, injustice, corruption and chaos. Such societies look toward civil society benignly but helplessly and want it to decide right and wrong, as far as it can. Thus, when the regimes try to democratize and try to maintain freedom of speech, indulge in lot of propaganda through media as Noam Chomsky calls, "propaganda is to democracy, what violence is to totalitarianism." Propaganda is important for legitimating the authority, as the art of democracy requires the 'manufacture of consent'. Power must be responsible and accountable. If it does not do so the mainstream media, the pillar of functioning democracy will take sides of the civil society. Media manipulates the nationalism and modernisation ideals using mass media to

form public opinion. The governments in such situations try to control broadcasting, censor newspapers and magazines and even assets and take severe action against media persons.

Of the many democracies which emerged in the past century, have witnessed the civil society upsurge. The latest upsurges saw the use of social media e.g Arab Uprising, Anna Hazare Uprising, uprisings in Europe due to death of Indian doctor on issue of abortion, in India on the issue of safety of women and now in Bangladesh regarding punishing 1971 war criminals. The governments in twenty first century are facing lot of challenges of legitimacy and credibility. They remain under various encounters such as opposition political leaders, corporate processes, meeting socio economic targets etc. These tendencies of meeting the demands and expectations ultimately settle in unrest.

Knowledge transmission and enhanced transparency are regarded as ingredients of an effective strategy by development policymakers. Pro-governance and development requires improvement of media's capacity of reporting on socio-economic and development issues. Gagging the media is not the answer to solve the political crisis, media and politics are closely inter-linked as democratic processes are difficult to get established until the media is allowed freedom of speech and expression in its true spirit and electoral processes are free and fair. Media plays a vital role in strengthening of democratic institutions.

They therefore, differ fundamentally from the military-led revolutions that swept away the colonial regimes in the 1950s and 1960s. The outcome of the media led transformation is continuous one. Whether the governments all around the world cling to the new role and behave professionally to give way for democratic expressions, generated through such social media and civil society forces and pave way to fourth wave of democratization is however yet to be seen.

## Research Questions

The basic questions which form the basis for the assumptions are that, the social media has a tremendous potential to develop possibilities for the change, the democracy, the development and the concerns about peace and security as well as for the civil society to play important role:

- How social media and new media affects the shifting waves of democratization and unrest? Does the use of social media lead to more collective action than individual actions?
- To understand the varying dimensions of upsurges vis a vis social media as an instrument of peace, security and development and change
- To review the social media/new media platforms like 'Youtube', 'Myspace', 'Flicker', 'Facebook' and 'Blogging' as tools to generate and foster public opinion. These are few areas which need to be deliberated upon and understood through descriptive and analytical approach in the changed environmental perspectives offered by social media.

## Theoretical Insights

The mass media constitutes the backbone of democracy. The media is supplying the political information that voters'/citizens' base their decisions on. They identify problems in our society and serve as a medium for deliberation. They are also the watchdogs that we rely on for uncovering errors and wrongdoings by those who have power. The most important democratic functions listed in an often-cited article by Gurevitch and Blumler (1990) include surveillance of sociopolitical developments, identifying the most relevant issues, providing a platform for debate across a diverse range of issues, holding officials to account for the way they exercise power, provide incentives for citizens to learn, choose, and become involved in the political process, and resist efforts of forces outside the media to subvert their independence.

Media critics claim that commercial mass media controlled by a few multinational conglomerates have become an antidemocratic force supporting the status quo (Kellner 2004; Herman and Chomsky 1988; Herman and McChesney 1997; Alger 1998; McChesney 1999; Keane 1991). The news are more entertaining than informing, supplying mostly speculations and gossip, scandals, sex, and violence. Political news is more about personalities than about their ideologies and concerns. The so called serious debates revolve around sensationalism rather than the gravity of the problem. In the absence of serious debate, citizens are left with paid political propaganda containing only meaningless slogans as per agenda making them disinterested and cynical about politics. It is also claimed that the watchdogs are barking of the wrong things or to say to believe that watchdogs have become lap dogs pampered and fed by the powerful. At times minor dangers are hysterically blown out of proportions; while much more serious dangers in our society go largely unnoticed. Critics also complain that the media fail to report wrong doings in the industry (Glassner 1999).

If all these claims have any merit at all, then we have to drastically revise our view of the way our democracy works. The Concise Encyclopedia of Democracy (Dehsen 2000) makes only brief mentioning of the possibility of political, commercial or other influences on the mass media. Most other treatises on the theory of democracy make no mentioning at all of any such problems.

Early research on the internet's potential for reshaping democracy was clearly influenced by the normative values presented in the works of direct democracy and public sphere advocates (Habermas, 1989; Bohman, 1996; Dryzek, 2002; Putnam, 2000). These argued for more inclusive public participation and deliberative exchange between ordinary citizens and political elites. Negroponte (1995) and Rash (1997) argued that the internet offered the potential for a renewal of direct democracy. However, new media could potentially reconnect party leaders to ordinary, local members, thus improving accountability as a consequence of better 'intra-party democracy' also.

Manuel Castells (1998) maintained that global networks of both computers and people are transforming work, business, politics, psychology, romance and entertainment. People think and act in the 'net work society'.

Though 'digital divide' is the barrier which threatens along with the lines of income, education, age, race and, above all, an existing predisposition to participate in real-world politics among masses.

In her book *Convergence Journalism: Writing and Reporting Across the News Media*. In an introductory text on how to think, report, write, and present news across platforms, Janet Kolodzy predicts that the new century will be an era of change and the future will involve all sorts of media: old and new, niche and mass, personal and global.

Today that enthusiasm has given way to more sober or pessimistic assessments of the internet's potential for reconnecting political elites to citizens or party members. Politicians, parties and government institutions have been slow to adopt online participative and deliberative tools. New media needs to be viewed as an alternative tool for civil society, political organization or service delivery and be used as an additional one-to-many promotional medium. Lately, it has become the mouthpiece of the masses and civil society in India as well as all across the world.

The consequences of the internet knit society are the development of well-organized 'smart mobs' (Rheingold, 2002) and polarized, fragmented interest group ghettos and instant gathering of people for common causes of concern.

The social movements that are revolutionary in nature occur when there is total rejection of the values and institutions of society and the existing regime. These revolutions seek to bring about comprehensive change in society in a radical fashion. But the strategy for change depends on focusing and attracting attention to the existing problem of society and proposing and developing the programs that facilitate solving these problems. In context of Arab Islamic world, it is interesting to see the democratic wave spreading and this liberal/democratic movement is not necessarily pro- American. The dimensions of social media and role of civil society need to be perceived in the larger context.

However, it is clear that uprisings arise due to the gravity of the phenomenon resulting from the reduction of civil and political liberties, to temporary interruption of democratic process, whether by the military or civilian executive. The context of growing political polarisation, violence, indecision, government resistance and oppression provide the familiar, fertile ground for change. It is also clear that one can not separate or isolate the organisational variables from that of environmental variables as both are complementary and supplementary to each other. The modus operandi of phenomenon has a circular causation having cumulative effect. The relative importance of variable depends upon the contextuality and historicity which trigger the spark for uprisings. In twenty first century the social media is a potent and handy tool for such sparks.

## Role of Social Media Affecting and Shifting Waves of Democratization and Civil Upsurges

The recent uprisings have ascertained immense role and importance of social media. It has helped masses to understand

the basic political set up of authoritarian regimes and the way these regimes have affected the lives of many. With the growing popularity of the social networking it is indispensable to note the effect of these sites as a tool of mobilizing people. The Arab World faced a widespread revolution in which the new social media had a notable role.

The Arab world has experienced an awakening of free expression that entered the body politic of Tunisia and Egypt and has helped break down the stranglehold of state-sponsored media and information monopolies in those countries. Indeed, from Morocco to Bahrain, the Arab world has witnessed the rise of an independent vibrant social media and steadily increasing citizen engagement on the Internet that is expected to attract millions of Arab users. These social networks inform, mobilize, entertain, create communities, increase transparency, and seek to hold governments accountable. To peruse the Arab social media sites, blogs, online videos, and other digital platforms is to witness what is arguably the most dramatic and unprecedented improvement in freedom of expression, association, and access to information in contemporary Arab history. Between 40 and 45 million Internet users were found in 16 Arab countries surveyed in late 2009, including Arab nationals and non-Arabic speakers in the region, according to the Arab Advisors Group, a research and consulting firm based in Amman, Jordan.<sup>3</sup> The Arab Knowledge Report 2009 placed the number of Arabic-speaking Internet users at 60 million. Clearly, the region's vast potential is recognized by Google, which sponsored its first G-Days conference in Egypt and Jordan, in December 2010. A Google executive told attendees that 100 million Arabs are expected to be online by 2015. Yet the advances are not without considerable limitations and challenges posed by authoritarian regimes.

Internet has important effects on authoritarian politics as Social Media Networks can trigger informational cascades through their interaction effects with independent media outlets and on-the-ground organizers. The Arab Uprising of 2011 will be remembered in history as a revolution that was shaped by the new media and new communication technologies. It is not just websites, blogs and Facebook. Video cameras and mobile phones have been equally important in transmitting images and messages which helped to mobilise the masses to protest. The link between the new media and television has also been a critical factor in sustaining the momentum of the struggle for change especially in Egypt. In this regard, the Doha based television network, Al-Jazeera, has played a significant role in the Arab struggle for justice. By adopting an unambiguous position on issues of right and wrong, Al-Jazeera has forced other television networks such as CNN and BBC whose actual agendas are often to preserve and perpetuate the interests of the west, to accommodate the contradicting voices from the Arab world.

On January 25, 2012 the people of Egypt took to the streets in a "day of rage," protesting the rampant poverty, unemployment, and government corruption seen throughout the country. Social media served to mobilize the people. One Facebook page dedicated to a protest, for instance, had over 80,000 followers. Others instructed protestors how to remove tear gas from their eyes. By January 26, however, Facebook, Twitter, Gmail, and YouTube were shut down, and the cell phone company Vodaphone suspended service. The following day Egypt's four main Internet service providers then cut off international access

to their customers. While the government claimed it was not responsible for killing the Internet, these efforts seemed targeted specifically to quell the uprising.

In the whole process the internet has inherently become a tool of democratization. The Internet has changed the balance of power between authoritarian regimes and their domestic opponents. The digital activism suggests that the Internet has important effects on authoritarian politics. Social Media does trigger informational cascades through their interaction effects thereby changing the diffusion dynamics of information across social networks. Though the authoritarian regimes become more adept at surveillance and filtering of online activities, the social media makes it difficult for them. At the same time it becomes easier even for authoritarian regimes to control the pulse of the people by making use of social media for propaganda.

At the conference, CIMA's Senior Director, Marguerite Sullivan, pointed out that governments have long struggled with this new flow of information. She quoted Wael Ghonim, a Google executive in Egypt, who said the Egyptian Interior Ministry had maintained a department of 45 people to monitor Facebook, a difficult task as over 5 million Egyptians use the social networking site among 17 million people in the region, including journalists, political leaders, political opposition figures, human rights activists, social activists, entertainers, and royalty who are engaging online in Arabic, English, and French.

Why this is significant is that many observers now believe that the days of government-sponsored or politically allied newspapers having a media monopoly appear to have already been eclipsed by the advent and adoption of social media. It has become clear that the unprecedented popular uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt and other countries of the region were enabled by communication and citizen mobilization via social media platforms - Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube - as well as mobile technology. And digital media, by all accounts, will thrive in the Arab market because the market has a large, technologically accomplished demographic group - its youth - who are comfortable with it and will customize it to their own requirements, the 'Arab Media Outlook 2008-1012,' published by the Dubai Press Club, recently reported. The report also said that more than 50 percent of the populations of Yemen, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Morocco, and Egypt are currently estimated to be less than 25 years of age, while in the rest of the Arab region, the under-25 "Net Generation" makes up between 35 to 47 of total populations." As for active blogs, the Arab region had 35,000 blogs in 2009, by late 2010, it had 40,000.

The effect of the social media phenomenon in the Middle East was understood before the recent shakeup around the Middle East. "Facebook and other social media platforms are beginning to define how people discover and share information, shape opinion, and interact," said Carrington Malin, an executive at 'Spot On' Public Relations in Dubai in May 2011. Social media has helped people to set their own agenda.

### **Indian Democratic Experience**

The Deterministic School of thought sees technology and mechanization as a change agent rather than as a tool of change. For instance, Davenport (230) (1) poses the question "Does mechanization affect human values, and if so, how? To what

extent and under what conditions should we allow technology to shape our definition of ourselves as a civilization or as a species?"

Some authors, however, have begun to reject this deterministic view of a computer ideology imposed from above. They see a larger role for the users of technology - particularly technology that involves the creation of a mediated or virtual environment - in shaping that environment. This scenario is supported by Giddens' (2) idea of a reflexive nature of social life, in which the structure of activity is created and recreated by the very activities constituting it. This image has particular applicability in the context of computer-mediated communication. We cannot study its effects upon the participants without at the same time studying the role of the participants in shaping and reshaping the context. Because the actors in this process are self-aware, theories developed and disseminated through the study of the medium can result in the use of that theory by the participants to further modify their communicative environment. As Giddens (23) says, "Reflections on social processes (theories, and observations about them) continually enter into, become disentangled with and re-enter the universe of events they describe."

History is witness to the fact that the adoption of every new technology has given cause for both utopias and dystopias concerning the media and its effects but it is the latter that is always the cause for more concern. Even though it is something that cannot be eradicated altogether, it behoves being understood because therein lies the ability to control future direction.

In all the above cases it is the Reflexive School that dominates. The subjects used the Internet as per their needs, fully utilizing its distinctive features of anonymity, interactivity and control. But in all instances, the control had now shifted to the machine as their usage now far exceeded their initial need. They had allowed it to assume full surrogacy of their lives. The initial catharsis had now shifted to an abusive pattern with the Internet becoming the most important thing in their lives, bringing them into conflict with those around them. It had intruded into their lives to the extent that any attempt to withdraw from it resulted in withdrawal symptoms - depression, nervousness and irritability along with physical restlessness - and frequent relapses. Rather than being a solution, the Internet had now become part of the very same problem that had initially drawn them to it - namely, their maladaptive personality structure and social isolation.

The fact that many of the respondents surveyed in the study were heavy Internet users yet did not exhibit either any maladaptive personality or any psychosocial impairment while still others reported both with only moderate internet usage, reveals that technology alone cannot be blamed for turning the user into an abuser. Often, the psychopathology exists in the user prior to his taking up the use of any technology. This creates its own dependency over time, space and person.

## Conclusions

The social media to many seem as Pandora's box in the hands of younger generations.

What is important to understand is that democracy needs to be studied and understood not as not an end in itself, but as an ever evolving process so that it does not result in disenchantment. Incompetency, inefficiency and corruption become the handy tools only when the democratic practices fail. The democratic voices the do and will make way in the interest of all. With social media at hand, it is time to bring change and usher fourth wave of democratization by learning lessons from upsurges across the globe.

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