

UNDP Essay Competition

Alessandra Costagliola

University of Edinburgh

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Disenfranchisement in the age of the Internet: How social media communication has increased institutional volatility and promoted new expectations for maintaining social accord

Introduction

Increasing frequency of protests around the world demonstrates a breakdown in the social contract between governments, institutions, and communities. Since 2017, over 100 anti-government protests have broken out globally (Global Protest Tracker, 2020)). Increasingly, demonstrators are demanding governments hold up their end of the bargain, whether related to political, economic, or sociological challenges. What has coincided with the increasing number of protests around the world is the use of social media as an apparatus for the spread of democratic ideals, enhancing the ability to voice frustrations amongst community members, and a tool for mobilizing and organizing protests. This essay will aim to explain that the reason we see in uptick in the frequency of protests around the world is not necessarily related to an increasing number of social breakdowns between government and communities, but rather, that the increasing use of social media has acted as a catalyst for exercising voice and empowering communities to stand up for their needs and expectations of the government and institutions.

The Arab Spring, a group of organized protests that took place between 2010 and 2011 in the Middle East, demonstrated the most significant use of social media as a tool for raising awareness and mobilization. The wave of protests launched with the spread of an image of Tunisian Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation on December 17, 2010 (Kharroub and Bas, 2016). This image marked an emotive response from Tunisians as well as other communities in the region and around the world, triggering the onset of protests. This was followed by the spread of an image of an Egyptian man named Khaled Said, who was beaten to death by police (Ibid., 1974). During the onset of the revolutions occurring throughout the Middle East, social media was used as a tool not only to document and raise awareness of the injustices experienced by community members, but also in providing a "place for conversation about sociopolitical conditions" (Ibid., 1976). In mobilizing and organizing protests, social media was used as an effective tool for logistical updates and to bypass police crackdowns (Ibid.) Since 2011, more and more protests have utilized social media to communicate frustrations and mobilize efforts to protest with the end goal of enacting change. In the sections that follow, I will analyze how social media, while not taking away from the agency of the protestors themselves who have organized and exercised voice despite the potential perils, has acted as a catalytic tool for disseminating information, garnering support, and empowering agency and engagement in protests globally. I will also highlight how the dangers of restricted access to the internet, internet blackouts as a response to

protest, and the spread of government propaganda can disable communities from enacting change. I will conclude by responding to how government and institutions can effectively respond to these frustrations and use social media as a tool themselves in addressing the needs of expectations of their communities.

Social Media as a Catalyst for Empowering Protest Movements

The use of social media as a tool for communicating dissatisfaction and organizing protests and has been catalytic to the increased number of uprisings seen around the world. As noted by Tufekci and Wilson (2012), their study of the use of social media during the protests of Tahrir Square in 2011 demonstrated that this use was “associated with significantly higher odds of protests participation” particularly on the first day of protest, considered to be the most crucial. Further observations from Thai protests analyzed by Nyblade, O’Mahony, and Sinpeng (2015) demonstrate how the internet has opened a “plethora [of] venues of engagement previously closed to ordinary citizens”. Indeed, the high level of production and dissemination of media content including imagery, video, and documentation of personal experience has effectively allowed protestors to function as “citizen journalists” (Tufekci and Wilson, 2012).

Most recently, the Hong Kong protests of 2019 demonstrated how social media could be used as a “tool to galvanize support” during political movements (Gracemzshao, 2019). In the case of the Hong Kong’s 2014 “Umbrella Movement”, not only was social media used as a powerful channel for mobilization but also enabled protestors to conceal their identities to avoid detainment (*Ibid.*) As highlighted by Tucker et.al, social media “solve collective-action problems that have long bedeviled those traditionally shut out of mainstream politics”. The use of social media has given voice to those ordinarily excluded from political engagement and allow for mobilization of those with like-minded ideas (Tucker et.al, 2017). Further, as noted by Nugent, the weakening of mechanisms of expressing discontent, including labor unions and the media, leaves social media as a primary outlet for communicating disaffection (Nugent, 2020).

As noted by Fisher and Taub (2020), one of the main changes that can explain the shift in the global wave of protests is that social media makes protests likelier to start. They note that social media allows activists to mobilize people more quickly and draw “once un-thinkable numbers” (*Ibid.*) Although social media has been used an effective tool for mass mobilization and spread of information, it also comes with a unique set of challenges related to misinformation, the spread of propaganda, and the inability to enact long-term change. This will be further explored in the next section.

The Challenges of Social Media as a tool for Enacting Sustainable Change

In May of 2013, calls to demonstrate against a local P-Xlene (PX), an aromatic hydrocarbon, project in Chengdu, China made their way to the Chinese equivalent of Twitter, Sina Weibo (Bei, Stromberg, and Wi, 2017). These calls were intercepted by the Chengdu government who took measures to limit the number of participants who could protest by requiring work and school days for the days of the protests (*Ibid.*, 118). In this case, rather than social media acting as a tool for awareness and mobilization, China’s high surveillance of the internet enabled them to curtail dissent and contain the protest.

Governments across the globe have caught on to social media as a tool for mobilizing protests and have thus enacted extreme measures to limit dissent including surveillance measures (Campbell 2019; PoKempner, 2019), internet censorship (Freedom House, 2019), or complete blackouts of the internet (Mitchell, 2019). Governments have also used the internet as a tool to spread propaganda (Bei, Stromberg, and Wi, 2017) in order to shift the narrative and quell community frustration. The ability for governments to utilize the internet to exercise political control is particularly problematic as it takes away the opportunity for communities to exercise agency and voice. Government spread of propaganda also masks the truth and spreads misinformation.

Additionally, the reliance on social media as a tool for spreading democratic ideals and community frustration can actually limit the ability to enact sustainable change. As Poell (2015) argues, in the case of the use of social media limited by state censorship, in China and Iran for instance, social media can actually act as a form of self-censorship, with such repressions having “succeeded in steering people away from directly confronting central state authorities”. Indeed, in these cases, while these tools can be used as a mechanism for expressing dissatisfaction, without mechanisms in place of addressing this directly with the government, we see was Fisher and Taub (2020) highlight as “recurring cycles of mass protest, followed by a failure to achieve change, followed by more social media-spurred protest”. This cyclical nature of expressing dissent, mobilization, protest, and failure to enact change, demonstrates the limitations of social media and highlights how the ability to enact sustainable change is reliant on mechanisms outside of the realm of social media, including institutional democratic framework and processes. Given the limitations of social media, how can this tool be used as a mechanism for restoring the social contract between communities, institutions, and governments? The next section will explore this question in more depth.

How can the Social Contract be Improved?

The essay thus far has analyzed how the use of social media has been used increasingly in raising awareness and organizing protests around the globe as well as highlighting how this increasing number of protests is not necessarily related to increasing social breakdowns between governments and communities (as noted by Nugent (2020), indicators of protest vary across discontentment related to tightening restrictions on the spread of information, cuts to subsidies, stagnating wages, income inequality, corruption, and the erosion of civil and political rights) but rather, that there is an increasing recognition of the benefits of social media as a tool to organize and mobilize protests.

For social media to become an effective tool in carrying out sustainable measures for enacting change, governments must be equally committed to using this tool for allowing freedom of voice and expression and engaging directly with their constituents to recognize that they have been heard. U.S. politicians engage in this practice, which helps to generate a sense of community and rapport between citizens and governments. The ability to communicate directly with government officials over social media breaks down barriers of communication and can allow communities to feel as if their dissatisfaction is being heard and addressed. Further, measures for enacting change cannot just stay within the realm of social media alone. Communities must find other ways of engaging with their governments directly to hold them accountable and generate mechanisms for creating institutions that can carry out sustainable solutions. Just as social media alone cannot be responsible for the agency and risk associated with

launching a protest campaign, other measures must be relied on in an effort to end the cyclical nature of social media generated protests that fail to ultimately enact social change.

Conclusion

This essay has highlighted how the increasing wave of protests around the world is not necessarily related to one or more reasons that can be tied to a breakdown in the social contract between communities, institutions, and governments, but rather, that the utilization of social media as a catalytic tool for expressing dissent, raising awareness, and garnering support has empowered communities to mobilize and express their dissatisfaction. The use of social media has become revolutionary and has forced governments to be held accountable by global communities for not holding up their end of the bargain in supporting their citizens. However, social media is a tool that does not come without limitations. As highlighted in this essay, censorship, internet blackouts, and the spread of propaganda poses increasing challenges to utilizing social media as a tool for protest. Further, the inability for social media alone to carry out effective sustainable long-term change demands citizens to engage in other measures of restoring institutional framework that would require governments to respond effectively.

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