New media revolution?

Julia Hoffmann and Arif Kornweitz

In 1994, US vice-president Al Gore addressed participants of the World Telecommunication Development Conference in Buenos Aires asking them to help build what he called a Global Information Infrastructure (GII). This ‘network of networks’ would not only ‘promote the functioning of democracy by greatly enhancing the participation of citizens in decision-making’, but its ‘distributed intelligence’ would help ‘spread participatory democracy’ leading to a ‘new Athenian Age of democracy forged in the fora the GII will create’.

With the emergence of online publishing, networking techniques and user-generated content, similar hopes have been conjured up about the democratizing potential of social media. In very much the same way, these claims focus on the potential social media seem to hold for enhancing democracy on the one hand by providing new ways of inclusion and direct citizen participation and spreading democracy on the other by means of inhibiting secrecy by repressive governments and providing unprecedented possibilities to self-organize. It seems worthwhile to evaluate the validity of these promising claims in order to assess the potential social media offer.

Enhancing democracy

Social media rely on the Internet, the infrastructure similar to the GII Gore called for. In order to examine their potential, it seems necessary first to have a look at who is connected to this infrastructure in the first place. While it is often perceived as a truly global network, today’s Internet could better be described as a global patchwork with a variety of types of access, mirroring persisting global but also local inequalities.

Disparities along the lines of economic development become immediately apparent: while in the ‘developed world’, 71.6% of the population is online; this proportion drops to 21.1% in developing countries. On a global scale then, in 2010, about 70% of the world’s inhabitants were not using the Internet.

These numbers suggest that Gore’s prediction of a new Athenian age has indeed come true, though he presumably did not intend to evoke this vision of the ‘information society’: as in Athenian democracy, where women, slaves and all non-Athenians were excluded, online participation is limited to a select few. The digital agora is by no means representative of the world’s citizens, even if we merely take the minimum measure of access into account.

Let us then continue with considering the first of the two claims about the democratizing function of the Internet, and particularly social media. In modern democratic nation-states, the media arena is the playing-field for democratic politics. The interactivity of ‘new’ media then, holds the promise of increased engagement, a radical change from mass communication to interaction, from information transmission to dialogue. The Internet’s potential for empowerment of the citizenry has received much attention – we were promised electronic town hall meetings and direct democracy in a new ‘information society’.

The availability and usability of social media appear to be unique. Citizens are able to publish their views immediately; politicians are present on online platforms, creating the impression of direct accessibility and transparency. Activists can now use networking platforms for organizing supporters and raising awareness. These and other features are
indeed offering new ways for participating in democratic processes. It remains questionable however, if they actually enhance democracy itself.

**Virtual participation**

For once, social media are simply a new way of getting engaged rather than a new incentive to do so. In addition, while engagement may have become easier, it may have also become less meaningful and consequential. Supporting your city’s homeless shelter by joining a concerned Facebook group may make you feel more like an engaged citizen, however, this does not necessarily translate into a more vibrant democracy. In fact, these new forms of engagement might lead to what can be termed ‘virtual participation’, where clicking on a ‘thumbs up’-icon on your desktop substitutes for more costly, time-consuming and potentially more thought-through real life activism – where going public is confused with making a difference; speaking up with being heard.

The public sphere has become fragmented and new media users can actively adjust their media diet to their personal interests, potentially narrowing down the range of specialized topics they chose to be engaged with in the first place. It usually requires quite some attention or publicity gained through the traditional mass media, before a weblog is read by a wider audience. Being read, in turn, does not translate into democratic debate. It is characteristic of these dynamics that a recent study found that 71% of the Twitter posts do not generate a reply. In sum, it would mean falling into a familiar trap to assume that any characteristic of a new technology would inherently alter social or political relations into a specific, pre-determined direction. The essential ingredients for democratic participation remain the same: an active, well-informed citizenry which has the means to debate freely and is taken into account by those who govern.

Specifically, the latter is hardly being brought about merely by advances in the means of expression when there is no corresponding alteration in power relations. While the available tools may have changed, they are not to be mistaken for a substitute for the active citizenship skills that are required for what Benjamin Barber termed ‘deep democracy’.

**Spreading democracy**

Images of Buddhist monks marching defiantly through the streets of Burma filled with the anticipation of a violent crackdown hit the world stage in 2007 despite the efforts of the military junta to enforce a total media blackout. In the face of severe restrictions on access of foreign reporters, the advent of mobile phones with inbuilt cameras and the Internet had enabled technologically savvy – and extremely brave – dissidents to get their message out. Unlike during the 1988 protests, that message reached an international audience via the likes of the BBC which aired the footage and contributed to organizing and informing protesters by rebroadcasting through the Oslo-based media outlet Democratic Voice of Burma.

When in April 2009 mass demonstrations erupted in Moldova, seemingly triggering the next in a row of Eastern European revolutions, the lively discussions on social network sites and the manifest turnout of people in the streets were quickly linked: the world was witnessing a ‘Twitter Revolution’. The admittedly catchy phrase was soon to be cited in authoritative media across the board and the assumed causalities hardly questioned.

The use of Twitter during and after the Iranian election in 2009 has by now become the textbook example of the power of social media, seemingly heralding a new age of fast, cheap
and easy Internet revolutions which will sweep the world and eradicate powerless authoritarian regimes.

With the traditional news media in Iran seriously impeded by the regime, supporters of the oppositional Green Movement allegedly moved to Twitter and other social media in order to report, organize action and gather support. So great was the belief in its powers, Twitter was apparently asked by the US State Department to delay a scheduled maintenance so as not to disrupt its availability.¹⁰

Had the Green Movement indeed relied on Twitter to coordinate protests in Iran, most likely they would have been preempted by the Iranian secret police even faster and more effectively. Logically, the rather small number of users, less than 100 according to one estimate,¹¹ was closely watched by the Iranian regime. If before repressive regimes needed to use elaborate spying schemes, blackmail or even torture to extort information on the nature of dissident networks, parts of this kind of information are now rather easily available on the likes of Facebook.

In addition, thanks to a European surveillance system called Monitoring Center, the Iranian regime is able to monitor internet and mobile phone activity. According to its manufacturer Trovicor, ‘popular applications’ include ‘Speaker Recognition’ and ‘Location Tracking’ – enabling operators to identify and physically locate users.¹² As Amnesty International has pointed out, Iranians that used social media to express their views during and after the election period have subsequently been locked up and tortured.¹³

**Pulling the plug**

Despite the image of the apparent uncontrollability of information due to the new media phenomenon, it is clear that governments are also in the process of adapting. Not only are they monitoring online activity, they have also been anticipating Internet use by opponents by simply cutting off access. In the Burmese case, the shutdown of Internet access across the country and the disabling of international mobile phone connections did not seem to cause the junta much trouble. Anyone transmitting information faced possible arrest and hardware was confiscated. Even though a handful of local citizen journalists still managed to get some pictures out, the effects of the news blackout were felt rather directly when the continuous streams of pictures needed for consistent international media attention abruptly faded and the spotlight of attention quickly moved on.

It is in fact neither an exceedingly difficult nor as uncommon a policy option as it may seem for governments to quite literally ‘pull the plug’ when it comes to new forms of communication media. As Global Voices Advocacy reports, the Chinese government cut off Internet and sms after riots in Urumqi in July 2009.¹⁴ Access was cut in all of the autonomous region of Xinjiang for several months during which only governmental institutions could use Internet services. Besides incidental cases like this, the Chinese government also constantly engages in filtering and deleting content.

Also the up-and-coming mobile phone networks are hardly exempt. In a number of African countries, including Mozambique and Guinea in 2010, sms services have been shut down without much ado. In the case of Ethiopia in 2005, after a contested election, the ban was in place for two years. During the post-election violence of 2008 in Kenya, the government had considered such a move in the face of violence-inciting messages had gone viral.¹⁵

Naturally there are always more capable citizens finding ways through the barriers set up by governments. In Xinjiang for example, citizens used dial-up and satellite to access the Internet. In these cases, social media can offer low-barrier access to a global publicness, the ability to raise global awareness. Once online, production costs are nil, time and space are
almost unlimited, and there are few problems with traditional obstacles posed by professional gatekeepers to the stage of international news.

Such decentralization of the news making process should promise a radically new, more representative, view of the world. Yet, trying to raise awareness means competing for attention and, in times of a constant flow of information, merely publishing content does not guarantee reception.

**No media revolution?**

Finally, we may want to wonder if the various ‘Twitter revolutions’ have in fact taken place at all – if the benchmark of actually changing a system of governance is accepted as a minimum requirement to qualify as a revolution. In Moldova, after a vote recount, the Communist regime remains alive and kicking. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is still Iran’s president. The Burmese junta has smothered all protest, locked up citizen journalists and predictably won the 2010 elections.

In spite of Burmese opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, shortly before being released from house arrest, having announced her plans to begin tweeting right away ‘in order to communicate with the younger generation’ we should not forget that, given that less than 0.5% of Burmese have access to the Internet, the Diaspora and international (media) organizations may be more likely to become her regular followers. The most pressing question therefore remains not how to communicate, but who is listening and with what effect.

This is not to say nothing changed: during post-election violence in Kenya, the ban imposed on broadcasting propelled Kenyan bloggers into the limelight, who now provided the only source of information on the developing situation. From this, Ushahidi developed, a service combining mobile technologies and the Internet to assemble, visualize and track violent incidents across the country, making it possible for citizens to send reports via their cellphones. The same system has also been used to monitor the November 2010 elections in Egypt.

Developments like these have surely made it yet more important for governments to engage in perception management, as, if nothing else, the recent publication of diplomatic cables from U.S. embassies by Wikileaks has shown. Eventually, it is certainly worth exploring the actual participation possibilities social media offer as additional means for active citizens, provided that their limitations are determined and kept in mind.

In the context of repressive regimes, the democratizing potential of new technologies may have been overstated by an overly enthusiastic Western blogosphere and mediasphere. To dream about a time when changing the world is just a click away – joining one of the many existing virtual support networks for causes ranging from democracy for Iran to praying for Obama – may have been too tempting an idea.

Social media activism remains largely virtual. All its potential may in fact be outweighed by the capacity of governments to control and monitor access and content. And while there may now be more people who know who Neda Agha-Soltan is, it remains doubtful whether the mere availability of information translates into the ability or greater political will of international actors to in fact influence outcomes.

In the end, the claims about the presumed inherent, automatic revolutionary impact of social media seem to be but the latest version of a phenomenon which the introduction of every new medium has witnessed: technological determinist visions of utopia and dystopia. When television for the first time brought near-live coverage of the human costs of warfare from Vietnam, spilling blood on the living room carpets of US citizens at the home front, it
was doubted whether democracies could in fact ever go to war again in the face of public outrage.

Indeed, never again was there to be another ‘uncensored war’, yet arguably no less violence. When the 24/7 news network CNN emerged as a global player during the First Gulf War of 1991, it was thought the international community would now be literally forced to intervene in humanitarian crises around the globe signaled by the ‘eyes and ears’ of a global citizenry, arousing a global conscience. Then came Rwanda, Congo, Sudan... When judging the potential of the next ‘media revolution’ allegedly caused by social media, it would seem to be important to be aware of their context-dependant nature.

Notes
4. See e.g. the writings of Alvin Toeffler
5. The milestone being the infamous ‘Battle of Seattle’.
6. A rather cynical example of the use of new media to foster a sense of responsible global citizenship might be the recent launch of an online game ‘to end hunger’ See: http://www.freerice.com/.
7. See e.g. the blog of Bagdad blogger Salam Pax.
9. Digital exclusion should arguably be seen as an issue of citizenship rights in what Mark Bovens has termed the ‘digital Rechtsstaat’ in which digital information and services increasingly define modern state bureaucracies and their relations to the citizenry.
15. They instead opted to send an sms to all subscribers warning them about illegal activities and calling for calm. Balancing Act Newsletter, in English 17 Sep 2010.
17. Exact, reliable figures are hard to come by. Burmese authorities claims there are about 400,000 internet users in the whole of the country. According to Mottaz’ (2010) estimation, there are about 214,000 citizens with access to a mobile phone, while a mere 31,500 have Internet access. The CIA factbook lists 448,000 mobile phone for 2009 and 108,900 Internet users for 2008.
20. Iranian woman shot during protest in Iran whose last seconds were filmed with the help of a mobile phone and broadcast around the world. It is a sad footnote to her death that another Iranian woman, who happens to carry a similar name, had to flee from Iran after receiving threats. Several news media had used her Facebook profile picture and had published it as Neda Agha-Soltan’s.

Julia Hoffmann (PhD) studied Communication Science, International Relations and International Public Law. She is a lecturer at the Department of Communication Science at the University of Amsterdam, Netherlands.

Arif Kornweitz is a student of Communication Science at the University of Amsterdam. He is also studying Conflict Studies and Literature.