Chapter 16
Do the Social Web 2.0 Media Foster Democratization?

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ABSTRACT

This chapter studies the influence of the Internet and new Web 2.0 technologies on the process of democratization in authoritarian regimes. The objective is to show that the new information technologies are not necessarily helpful to dissident movements and have even some negative impacts on the process of democratization. The author questions the capacity of Internet to transmit political information discusses how the new technologies contribute to the depoliticization of societies by creating passive citizens in authoritarian regimes. This chapter also shows how authoritarian regimes use new information technologies as instruments of control and repression and questions the effectiveness of the new cyber-activism by explaining the structure of the Internet and discussing the capacity of the new technologies in creating political community.

INTRODUCTION

The impact of the Internet and mainly the Web 2.0 technologies, or as it is commonly called the social media, on different domains of society, particularly on economy and business has given birth to many research and publishing projects. This book is an example of these studies. Djamchid Assadi believes that the characteristic feature of the Web 2.0 technologies is that they dramatically reduce interaction and transaction costs between individuals, and as a result allow the development of various forms of spontaneous partnership between individuals (2015, see introduction). Crowdfunding is one example among many others such as home exchange, car-pooling, and circular economy. The turning point of these intellectual endeavors is the democratization of the business processes through social media which make interactions between a great number of individuals possible. Does this process of crowd involvement lead to democratization of the authoritarian regimes in the political sphere? The role and the impact of the Internet (and in particular of the social media) on politics are not ignored by researchers either. There has been much optimism about the impact of the Internet on democratization in authoritarian regimes.

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The social media or, as it is commonly called, the Web 2.0 technologies are considered to be important democratizing tools in these societies. So the question is: does this phenomenon of multiplication of transactions and interactions between individuals at the lowest cost in the economic sphere, holds also true in other spheres of society and in particular in the polity? In other words, can citizens participate in civil society, particularly in dictatorial regimes, at the lower social costs and well succeed in achieving their political projects, similar to entrepreneurs who aim to achieve their entrepreneurial dreams through social media?

Long before the rise of social media and Twitter revolutions, Schultz (1985) spoke about the dilemma of dictators facing new technologies: “They try to stifle these technologies and thereby fall further behind in the new industrial revolution, or else they permit these technologies and see their totalitarian control inevitably eroded. In fact, they do not have a choice, because they will never be able entirely to block the tide of technological advance.”

It seems that many recent experiences have confirmed the original optimism of Schultz and others and have led observers to believe that the Internet and Web 2.0 technologies play an important, positive role in democratization of authoritarian regimes. “Twitter revolution”, “Cyber-dissident” and “Facebook revolution” are some of many neologisms that are finding their way into our political discussions and academic studies (Marichal, 2012; Gladwell, 2010). In fact we are reliving the end of the cold war: after the fall of communism many observers attributed the demise of these regimes to “information revolution” (Builder & Bankes, 1990; Shane, 1994; Kedzie, 1990; Morozov, 2012, pp. 33-53).

However, when Schultz wrote his words, considered by many as prophetic, the optimism in regard to the democratizing role of the Internet was more a hope than reality. The fact is that we did not have enough data on the political impact of the new information technologies: when Shultz wrote these words there was almost no Internet. Recent political events and the considerable use of the Internet technologies especially during the Iranian green movement (2009-2010), the Arab spring (2012) and Ukraine revolution (2013-2014) provide more objective data about the role of the Internet in democratization and opposition movements. But what seems absent from many of the discussions about the political consequences of new information technologies is some degree of caution. Since much of the literature, which deals with the Internet and democratization, is quite optimistic, we believe that a less sanguine discussion of this subject might be helpful, at least for the sake of balance.

In our study we will use historical comparative analysis to explore some of political limitations and weaknesses of the Internet and its Web 2.0 technologies in creating and empowering democratic opposition movements against authoritarian regimes. As the current literature rather put emphasis on the advantages of the Web 2.0 technologies in politics, we believe this contribution can broaden the limits of the discussion.

In this perspective, this chapter is organized as follows. First, we will evaluate the key element of the discussions on democratizing effects of the Internet, namely the transmission of political information. Secondly, we describe how the Internet technologies can play depoliticizing role by creating passive citizens in authoritarian regimes. Thirdly, we discuss how authoritarian regimes can use new information technologies as instruments of control and repression. Fourthly, we describe the characteristics of new cyber-activism by explaining the working of the Internet and Web 2.0 technologies. Lastly we discuss the weaknesses of Web 2.0 technologies in creating political community.