Chapter 13
Social Media as Public Political Instrument

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ABSTRACT
Due to its large number public cannot gather in one place and speak as a single voice, and consequently it cannot represent itself. However, public is always needed as political legitimation, therefore political forces compete to make their own definitions of public and use them as the basis of political claims. To make their definition of public close to the real people, democratic mechanisms have been developed. Once in a number of years, people elect candidates who will represent and govern them. But, most of the time they will be silent and ignored by the changing dynamics of politics. Conventional media does not help the public much to express its voice. Most often it becomes the tool of the elite for indoctrination or the mobilizing of bias. However, social media might empower people, because it allows them to voice their own concerns and to have conversation with each other. But, to have a real impact, the conversation must be directed to solve a real problem. Leadership is required to mobilize people’s voice virtually and then turn it into a real political pressure.

INTRODUCTION
The recent intensive uses of social media in social and political activisms indicate that it has a great potential to reshape modern democracy by giving people their voice back which previously must be delegated to their political representatives. Social media might take the practice of democracy back to its original form as in Ancient Athens in which it was practiced directly by citizens without any representative mediation (Ober, 1996). Theoretically practicing democracy on social media would be more inclusive than that of the Ancient Athens which excluded women and slaves, because social media allows everyone to speak out their opinions without the limitation of gender, social status and, even, space and time.

The optimism regarding the positive impact of social media on democracy is supported by the recent social movements, from Occupy Wall Street to Arab Spring. Just as in the pre-social media era, in order to have a real political impact a social movement needs to manifest itself in public urban spaces, such as

as streets or squares. Prior to the mobilization of the masses, activists need to do various efforts, from having coordination among themselves to raising issues to public. Most of these activities are conducted through the networks of acquaintances and contacts, and social media can best facilitate such activities by enhancing the speed of information exchanges and broadening the participation of people. During the Arab Spring, for example, Howard et al. (2011) found out that:

1. Social media played a central role in shaping political debates in the Arab Spring,
2. A spike in online revolutionary conversations often preceded major events on the ground, and
3. Social media helped spread democratic ideas across international borders.

The Arab Spring has been hailed as a political change forced by people who organized themselves using social media. It has increased the rhetoric of the impact of social media on democratization. However, after years of turmoil, the expectation of democratization has steadily faded away as the old political players get back to the center of power, disappointing those who want a radical change in politics. While social media still facilitates people to express any political view, it cannot prevent the return of the unwanted political power despite the many refutations against them can always be expressed freely on social media. This indicates that the impact of technology, including social media, on democratization is not deterministic. There is no unique correlation between technological progress and distribution of power (Feenberg, 1999, p. 76). Social media gives the opportunity to advance democracy, but, it is also possible, that this technology is used to preserve the existing hierarchy of power.

This chapter will discuss the extent to which social media can be used by citizens to promote and advance their political interests. It will also discuss if its extensive and intensive use will lead to democratization.

THE POLITICAL CONSTRUCTION OF PUBLIC

Politicians often speak on behalf of public as if it is a single concrete entity. But, does public really exist? If yes, then why it needs others to speak on its behalf? Can public not speak by itself? Habermas asserts that the main character of public is the existence of interactive speaking among its members, “A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body” (Habermas, 1974, p. 49). Public, as well as society, consists of individuals who interact with each other. While society, by definition, can emerge in any condition, free or oppressed, under totalitarian or democratic regime, whereas “Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion - that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions - about matters of general interest” (Habermas, 1974, p. 49).

It is hardly imaginable that populations of a town, moreover of a country, mostly strangers to each other, through conversations could converge into a single entity called public. The notion of public is abstracted from a society by reducing its complexity and variety that makes public to have only specific attributes and aspirations in accord with the interests of power holders which determine it. Therefore, public can be perceived as a political construction having weak correspondence with the reality, even though “those, who do possess power can only claim legitimacy by speaking in its name and acting in its interests” (Coleman & Ross, 2010, p. 8). Even strong dictators need to claim everything they do is on behalf of the public.
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