Chapter 13

A Grassroots Approach to the Democratic Role of the Internet in Developing Countries: The Case of Morocco

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the role of the Internet in collective action in Morocco, and examines the extent to which the medium has empowered civil society and social movements in the North African country. Drawing on in-depth interviews conducted with activists belonging to key social movement organizations, the article analyzes how the appropriation of the Internet in activism is mediated through the socio-economic and political structures proper to Morocco as a semi-authoritarian and developing country. In so doing, it sheds light on various intersections between technology diffusion, social movements’ organizational structures, and multiple forms of power relationships among social and political actors. The article argues that the Internet has certainly transformed collective action repertoire deployed by Moroccan social movements; nevertheless, it also demonstrates that the impact of the Internet is conditioned by multiple forms of digital divides that are significantly shaping its implications for social and political change in the country.

INTRODUCTION

The potential of the Internet for democracy and politics is well researched. A considerable body of literature has developed since the mid 1990s, discussing various applications of the medium in political communication such as its contribution to building civil society and, providing good governance and good public services, encouraging direct democracy and deliberation, as well as supporting radical and agonistic public spheres. However, research studies addressing the political implications and applications of ICTs in developing countries have predominantly focused on how the new technologies can proote e-governance and e-government; they have all but ignored the use of
these technologies by grassroots advocacy groups, civil society and oppositional social movements. The limitations of this dominant paradigm have been clearly exposed in the last few months as the world’s attention was captivated by the uprisings in the Arab world, particularly the North African part of it. The revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt that ended two of the most entrenched dictatorships in the region have demonstrated that radical forms of collective action empowered by new communication technologies can be effective in challenging these regimes when appropriate historical conjunctures arise. In other words, the structures and regimes of power and exclusion behind despotism in Africa and elsewhere in the developing world can be altered when challenged by oppositional democratic movements at the grassroots level.

Accordingly, this chapter explores the role of the Internet in enhancing the capacity of oppositional social movements in Morocco—a semi-autocratic North African country—to challenge hegemonic political, social, and cultural orders. It also examines the extent to which various social movements capitalize on the potential of the Internet in collective action, and how a group’s organizational structure can shape its efficiency in using the Internet. In the process, the article analyzes how the diffusion and appropriation of the Internet is mediated through the socioeconomic and cultural structures particular to Morocco. In so doing, the chapter sheds light on the interplay of the various levels of intersection among technology, social and political structures, and human agency at the micro, meso, and macro levels. Such a task is highly urgent given the limited literature on the political role and democratic potential of ICTs and the Internet particularly marked by what many commentators have termed a dichotomy between “utopian” and “dystopian” stances on technology (Saco, 2002; Dahlgren, 2005; Bentivegna, 2006; Dutton, Shepherd & de Gennaro, 2007;). A similar dichotomous theorization characterizes the scholarly examination of the role of ICTs in development insofar as two development paradigms are currently dominating the literature: on the one hand, there is the “modernization” development paradigm, and, on the other, the “social injustice” development one. While the modernization paradigm maintains that ICTs are crucial for development perceived to spread from the west to southern countries, the social injustice paradigm argues that ICTs exacerbate existing inequalities since they only benefit those who are “already dominant politically and economically” (Zembylas, 2009, pp. 18-19). Despite the polemics surrounding the issue, more evidence has emerged in the last few years as to the capacity of new technology to contribute to social and economic development, as the debate on the potential of ICTs has “shifted from whether but how ICT can benefit development” (Walsham, Robey, & Sahay, 2007, p. 317).

Compared to the large body of research on ICT4DEV, the implications of these technologies for and their impact on the political sphere and democracy in developing countries have received