Why Technology Hasn't Delivered More Democracy

New technologies offer important tools for empowerment — yet democracy is stagnating. What's up?

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The current moment confronts us with a paradox. The first fifteen years of this century have been a time of astonishing advances in communications and information technology, including digitalization, mass-accessible video platforms, smart phones, social media, billions of people gaining internet access, and much else. These revolutionary changes all imply a profound empowerment of individuals through exponentially greater access to information, tremendous ease of communication and data-sharing, and formidable tools for networking. Yet despite these changes, democracy — a political system based on the idea of the empowerment of individuals — has in these same years become stagnant in the world. The number of democracies today is basically no greater than it was at the start of the century. Many democracies, both long-established ones and newer ones, are experiencing serious institutional debilities and weak public confidence.

How can we reconcile these two contrasting global realities — the unprecedented advance of technologies that facilitate individual empowerment and the overall lack of advance of democracy worldwide? To help answer this question, I asked six experts on political change, all from very different professional and national perspectives. Here are their responses, followed by a few brief observations of my own.

1. Place a Long Bet on the Local

By Martin Tisné

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A partial solution to this puzzle lies in the well-known but critical fact that shrewd authoritarian leaders are able to limit the empowering effects of technology on ordinary citizens both by cracking down on civic space — which they are doing in many countries — and by using new technologies for their own anti-democratic ends, such as tracking the whereabouts and actions of pro-democracy activists.

But I would also emphasize a different, less-discussed factor: Many instances of democratic empowerment enabled by technology take place at the local level and thus elude national-level measures of democratic gains. Restless citizens in many countries may be unhappy with their non-democratic political leaders, but they use accessible technological tools to focus their energies locally — engaging in their local community with FixMyStreet, holding local and regional officials to account on spending issues using BudgIT, and tracking the performance of their local schools with Mejora Tu Escuela. In other words, technology's positive political effects are now gaining traction in sub-national ways. They're making democratic action thicker in localized pockets of many countries (a community-led campaign in Rio de Janeiro, a participatory budgeting exercise in Manila), without yet producing many changes of the national regime-type.

The next decade or two may well produce a different overall picture of global democratic change as technology-enabled patterns of political innovation spread to high-density urban environments, making mayors and local councils the spearhead of broader democratic change. Moreover, new technologies are empowering individuals in many facets of their lives not directly related to politics, for example by giving the poor access to previously unattainable banking services and helping map the property rights of the poorest communities. These slow-burn socioeconomic forms of empowerment will likely also have significant larger political effects in the years immediately ahead.

2. Autocrats Know How to Use Tech, Too

By Larry Diamond

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One reason for the anomaly is that democracy's global fortunes are shaped by many different causal factors. While some potent pro-democracy factors are currently present — such as widespread economic development, the diffusion of "liberation technologies" (especially mobile phones), and the broader growth of civil society — their positive impact is being blunted by harmful factors that unfortunately abound these days: the growing power and influence (regionally and globally) of autocracies like China, Russia, and Iran; the waning effectiveness and resolve of the established democracies; and the "war on terror," which tends to undermine pressure for human rights and good governance in key developing regions. Also, democracy expanded in previous decades to many parts of the world where the objective conditions were not very favorable. So it takes a determined partnership of international and domestic actors to keep shaky new democracies countries from being derailed by problems like systemic corruption and ethnic conflict.

Second, while these new communications technologies are definitely empowering, they not only empower individuals and groups to do democratic things; they also become platforms for the rapid dissemination of rumors, ethnic slurs, xenophobia, and other extremist and intolerant sentiments (and even ideologies). "Hate radio" played an important role in the Rwandan genocide. Today, social media can fan hatred and prejudice. Social media also help polarize politics in some transitional countries — such as Thailand — in the same way they do in the United States and Europe. When polarization happens without a robust consensus on the rules of the democratic game, constitutional rule is endangered.

Finally, the autocrats have also upped their game significantly in monitoring, constraining, and even shutting down liberation technologies. China and Russia are furthest along, but autocracies generally are sharing their tools of Internet censorship and digital suppression. Democrats must innovate and organize in response.

3. Limits on Technology Persist

By Senem Aydin Düzgit

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Amid the excitement over the potentially transformative power of new communication technologies, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that large numbers of people outside the wealthy, established democracies still do not have access to such resources. For example, in Turkey — a relative economic success story among emerging democracies — approximately half of households still lack internet access. They thus continue to rely on traditional media, such as television, for news and political information. Coupled with effective government censorship of such media — vividly evident during the 2013 Gezi protests, when a significant segment of the Turkish population was dependent on government-sponsored news to make sense of the startling developments — the liberating effects of the internet as a source of alternative information are muted. Even new media instruments that are often perceived as irresistible sources of citizen empowerment can be censored. For instance, YouTube and Twitter have been shut down in Turkey on multiple occasions by the courts, acting at the behest of the political authorities. The government passed a new Internet Law in February 2014, allowing the Turkish Telecommunications Authority to block any website within four hours, without prior court authorization.

Moreover, technological advances have made it easier for authoritarian regimes to track down and suppress opposition. For instance, the 2014 Internet Law requires Internet providers in Turkey to store for two years the data that they collect on web users' activities and to make it available to the authorities upon request. There have been multiple cases recently in Turkey of people being put on trial for "insulting the president" on the basis of messages they posted on Twitter and Facebook. Finally, the polarizing effects of social media instruments may hit some weak democracies especially hard, reinforcing the hostile camps into which citizens have gathered, fostering political exclusion and conflict.

4. The Harder Task

By Rakesh Rajani

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We like to think that Gutenberg's press brought on the Reformation. That's probably because we prefer a compelling narrative to a messier truth.

In 2009 I started Twaweza, an ambitious social change initiative in East Africa, in part to realize the "deeply democratizing" potential of communication technologies. The spread of independent (or rather not government-controlled) radio, television and newspapers, cheaper mobile telephony, and the Internet was profoundly important because it allowed ideas to be generated and shared anywhere and by anyone, at unprecedented speed and cost. Authorities would no longer be able to keep a lid on what happened and what people thought; innovation and aspiration would flourish.

But over six sobering years of trial, error, and partial success, we learned that it doesn't quite work that way and probably never has. Technology does not drive anything. It creates new possibilities for collecting and analyzing data, mashing ideas and reaching people, but people still need to be moved to engage and find practical pathways to act. Where the fear of being beaten or the habits of self-censorship inhibit agency, technology, however versatile, is a feeble match.

In pursuing social change, our most complacent assumptions are about what makes people tick. The ways in which authorities and corporations exercise power to stifle human agency are real and increasingly naked. That these need to be exposed and disrupted is clear. But the much harder task is to figure out how to motivate and organize people to press for social change, where fear is warranted, bandwidth is crowded by a thousand demands, and success is uncertain.

The Gutenberg press, the ballot box, and the Twitter feed are wonderful inventions to propel democratic impulse. But we fetishize them at our own peril. The truly revolutionary aspect of human revolutions is the hard work of forging collective belief and action.

5. Don't Forget Institutions

By Diane de Gramont

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Picture a democratic activist. The image likely to come to mind is of a heroic dissident fighting bravely for freedom against a repressive state. Technology can be a powerful tool for such individuals to disseminate criticism of the government, locate potential allies, and coordinate public protests. It thus naturally appears as a liberating force.

Yet the challenge of advancing or consolidating democracy in many countries is not only — or even predominantly — about increasing avenues for citizen expression. It is also about establishing credible representative institutions that can respond to citizen demands and needs. Building such institutions has been an uphill battle for many aspiring democracies, and technological fixes can only provide limited assistance.

Political parties, for example, are "the weakest link" in most new democracies (and older ones as well). They are distrusted and disrespected by citizens but political scientists generally believe democracy is unworkable without them. New communication technologies present as many challenges as opportunities for already struggling parties. By facilitating direct connections between politicians and voters, for instance, such tools can reduce the need for party organization in elections and boost outsider candidacies. While this may inject fresh blood into politics, it can also lead to weak and fragmented legislatures unable to support stable governing coalitions or create effective checks on executive power.

Delivering quality public services is an equally serious problem for new democracies. In some well-established democracies, such as India, technology has played an important role in enabling citizens to monitor the quality of service delivery and expose corruption. Yet efforts to export such methods to newer democracies have often proven disappointing. Magnifying citizen demands can only improve governance if state institutions are able and willing to respond productively. When they are not, increasing public awareness of state corruption and ineffectiveness can instead contribute to growing disillusionment and discontent with democracy.

6. Mixed Lessons from Iran

By Golnaz Esfandiari

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The situation in Iran highlights the difficulty of giving any simple answer to this question. A recent claim by Iran's foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, in a U.S. television interview that the Islamic Republic does not jail its citizens over their opinions triggered an enormous negative reaction on Iranian social media. Zarif's Facebook page was flooded with reminders about Iran's political prisoners. The reaction was so widespread that Iran's top diplomat felt compelled, using Facebook, to amend his remarks.

Without social media, Zarif's false claim would have gone largely unchallenged, given the lack of alternative spaces in the country for open debates. Yet such incidents have not made the Islamic Republic embrace freedom of speech. Just a few days after Zarif said Tehran does not jail people over their opinion, a prominent human rights defender was sent to jail for highlighting government abuses.

The Internet and social media have ended the monopoly of information previously enjoyed by authoritarian governments. People in most such countries are now exposed to banned news and a variety of opinions, despite attempts by their governments to limit the free flow of information. They can discuss taboo subjects, criticize their leaders, and protest against injustices. Facebook exchanges and tweets will not automatically create a democracy in Iran or in other politically closed countries, but it gives those seeking change a potentially powerful weapon with which they can reach an audience that is growing in size. For democracy to advance in such places, action on the ground is needed by citizens who are willing to pay a price. The ability to communicate and organize online may help such action occur, but it is only a small part of what is needed to create a critical mass of activity. Moreover, governments in authoritarian countries are using parallel online methods to repress their citizens, fearing the threat that well-informed citizens pose to undemocratic leaders.

7. Yes, It's Complicated

Thomas Carothers

The contributors' answers to the puzzle of why the advance of new communication technologies in the past fifteen years has not produced any overall advance of democracy in the world boil down to three different lines: First, it's too soon to see the full effects. Second, the positive potential effects are being partially outweighed or limited by other factors, including some larger countervailing trends on the international political stage for democracy, the ability of authoritarian governments to use the same technologies for their own anti-democratic purposes, and the only partial reach of these technologies in many countries. And third, technology does not solve some basic challenges of democracy building, above all, stirring citizens to engage in collective action and the establishment of effective representative institutions.

Although the contributors vary in their degree of techno-enthusiasm, none of them takes the line that technology is simply heavily overrated as a potentially transformative political element. Thus, their diverse explanations are not, at root, mutually exclusive. Without trying to create a false consensus, one can posit that all three lines of argument are likely true to at least some degree, and that taken together constitute at least a good start on an answer to the puzzle that prompted this inquiry.

Interestingly, a parallel debate is emerging in the economic domain. Paul Krugman of the New York Times recently asked, in a column entitled "The Big Meh," why all the technological development of recent years, which seemed to promise all sorts of economic leaps and bounds, has coincided with economic slow growth and rising inequality, especially in the countries most enjoying this technology. Perhaps as answers are reached about that question they can be brought together with further exploration of the political side of the ledger and a more complete answer to both will emerge from the intersection of the two accounts.

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