

Revolutions on the Internet

November 1, 2011

[Original link](#)

I hate to wade into such a sterile debate as whether social media helps revolutions, but I made a point about it recently at a conference and people seemed to like it, so I thought I'd put it up here for posterity.

Jon Elster has a four-phase theory of revolutions:¹

1. A hard-core of committed activists get together to do something completely crazy.
2. The regime cracks down, attracting people who are sympathetic to the cause to rally to the support of the crazy ones.
3. As the protests grow, it seems like they might have a reasonable chance of succeeding and it seems worth it even for just normal reasonable people to start joining in.
4. The protests become so overwhelmingly large that even their opponents pretend to be part of them, so as not to be on the wrong side of history.

It seems pretty clear that the Internet helps with 1 — after all, it's brought together groups of crazy committed people about every other topic, from *Smallville* slash fiction to high-energy astrophysics. It'd be very surprising if it didn't bring committed activists together too.

It's clearly helped with 2 — YouTube videos of protestors being mistreated by police have been a staple of the #occupy movement, even though they haven't gotten much coverage on traditional TV; We are all Khaled Said presumably reached some people in Egypt.

3 and 4 are when the cable news and satellite television stations start joining in and when people support the protest just because it's such a huge physical presence in their lives. Here, I agree, the Internet probably has less effect.

The problem is that you never get to 3 and 4 without 1 and 2 — I don't think it's a total accident that all of these protests are happening now. I think they're happening because 1 and 2 have been made much easier thanks to the Internet. It's just that most people don't hear about them until steps 3 and 4, which are carried much more by traditional media. They suffer from the understandable fallacy that just because they heard about it on TV, that must be how everyone else did.

-
1. Outlined in the preface to his book *Political Psychology* (Cambridge; 1993).