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FROM LIBERATION TO TURMOIL: SOCIAL MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY

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In 2010, *Time* magazine chose Mark Zuckerberg as its annual "Person of the Year." He had, said the newsweekly, turned "the lonely, antisocial world of random chance into a friendly world, a serendipitous world" through his vastly popular social-media platform Facebook.[1] A year later, Zuckerberg's portrait in *Time* was replaced as Person of the Year by that of "the protester." This figure represented those who had voiced dissent—often by organizing on Facebook or Twitter—against authoritarian rulers in Bahrain, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen, as well as those who had taken to the streets for months against unemployment, austerity, and inequality in, among other democratic countries, Greece, Spain, and the United States.

Fast forward six years, and *Time*'s Person of the Year was the sitting president of the United States, Donald J. Trump. The president responded to the announcement through his favorite communications channel, Twitter: "Thank you to Time Magazine and Financial Times for naming me 'Person of the Year'—a great honor!"[2] Twitter was an especially appropriate medium for his response, given the outsized role that social media were reputed to have played in the 2016 U.S. election. Indeed, the importance of social media in that election has grown to the point

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that a special counsel has been appointed and has put together a team "stacked with prosecutors and FBI agents well equipped to investigate the Moscow-connected Twitter bots and Facebook trolls that churned out campaign-related headlines boosting Trump's candidacy."[3] In other words, in only five years social media have gone—in the popular imagination at least—from being a way for prodemocratic forces to fight autocrats to being a tool of outside actors who want to attack democracies.

Social-media technology is young, but has already played a part in numerous turbulent protests and a highly polarized U.S. election. Social media have often been described as the site for conflict between "good" democratic forces who use social media to make their voices heard and "bad'' autocratic and repressive forces who aim to censor this channel to silence these liberal elements. However, recent worries that illiberal and extremist forces might use the freewheeling world of online communications to undermine democracy reversed the discussion about social media. After the 2016 U.S. election, even leaders of democracies called for greater "regulation" of the internet. In this, they echoed—to a degree at least—authoritarian rhetoric that promotes censorship and "public-opinion guidance."[4]

Is there a theoretical framework linking social media and politics that can shed light on these turnabouts and contradictions? We think that there is. Let us begin with two simple observations. First, social media give a voice to those whose views are normally excluded from political discussions in the mainstream media. With social media, people can find like-minded compatriots, organize protests and movements, and support political candidates and parties. In short, social media solve collective-action problems that have long bedeviled those traditionally shut out of mainstream politics. This can include prodemocratic forces, of course. Social media can give them new means of holding governments accountable and pressing for wider political inclusion; hence the early and hopeful talk about "liberation technology" as a feature of the digital age. Yet social media can obviously amplify other and more extreme voices as well, including those which, from the point of view of liberal democracy, are "antisystem."

Second, and counterintuitively, the very openness of the social-media environment can be used to foster censorship: The platforms of information freedom can be exploited in order to silence others. To date, these activities have been most visible in the responses of nondemocratic regimes to antiregime activity online. Authoritarian censors now know how to wield online harassment, propaganda, distraction, and denial-of-service attacks to muzzle critics and shut down or distort the information space. To complicate matters, illiberal, antisystem forces *within* democratic regimes have learned how to use these authoritarian methods for exploiting open information platforms. Thus social-media strategies pioneered by nondemocracies for authoritarian ends are now

affecting political life in the world's democracies. The question of how democracies should react to this new, technologically generated challenge remains unresolved.

This double reality of the open online world—able to give a voice to the voiceless, but also bendable toward the aims of censorship and exclusion—explains why thoughts about social media can run either to optimism or (as has been more the case recently) to pessimism when it comes to the implications for democracy.[5] The heart of the matter is that, while freedom of information online is an inherently democratic principle, social media are neither inherently democratic nor inherently undemocratic. Rather, social media constitute a space in which political interests battle for influence, and not all these interests are liberal or democratic.

This simple theoretical framework explains how social media can be at once a technology of liberation, a technology useful to authoritarian governments bent on stifling dissent, and a technology for empowering those seeking to challenge the status quo in democratic societies—including previously marginalized extremist groups. Two caveats are in order, however. First, while we think that there has been a historical evolution of the use of social media—democrats harnessed social media to oppose authoritarianism; authoritarian regimes responded by raising their own "online game"; then antisystem forces in democracies started copying the new authoritarian methods—this sequence is for now best treated as a hypothesis for testing rather than as a proven fact. Second, although we focus on the ways in which social media have given voice to democratic actors in nondemocratic systems and antisystem actors in democratic systems, our overall claim is that social media have given voice to marginalized groups. This can also include groups that run with, rather than against, the grain of the regime; in other words, social media can also be useful to prodemocratic voices in democracies and antidemocratic voices in autocracies.

A New Hope: Liberation Technology

Social media have transformed the way we communicate, interact, and consume many kinds of information, including political information. In technological jargon, social media form a set of interactive Web 2.0 applications that enable the creation and distribution of user-generated content (such as text, photos, and videos) instantly and across vast networks of users. Unlike previous computer-mediated technologies, social media enable users to become active producers of content (rather than merely consumers), while articulating and making visible their connections with other individuals with whom they interact and collaborate. Social media have changed the structure of communication by allowing individual users to broadcast information. This creates a "many-to-many'' structure of

communication that differs from the traditional "one-to-many" structure, which allows only a few users (various elites, traditional media) to broadcast to the wider public. This many-to-many structure allows for coordination among individuals and for messages or content sent through such platforms to go "viral"—that is, to be spread horizontally across peer-to-peer networks almost in real time.[6]

These new features highlight what makes social media such a potent political tool both within and beyond the ambit of institutions. First, about two-billion people, or more than a quarter of the world's population, take part in social media. Across societies, social media are quickly becoming the primary source from which people get their information. According to data from the Pew Research Center, 62 percent of U.S. adults now get their news via social media, while the 2016 Reuters Institute Digital News Report shows that 46 percent of Europeans use social media for news.[7] Further, there is some evidence that social media can produce a better-informed public and increase exposure to cross-cutting political views.[8]

When unrest challenges nondemocratic regimes, social media's ability to convey information shines. International journalists, people "on the ground," influential regional and global actors, and general readers can all connect over social media. The Arab Spring is an oft-cited example of how social media can catapult the marginalized to national and international prominence overnight. During Iran's 2009 Green Wave movement, social media provided street-level protesters with communications and brought the Islamic Republic's abuses of power to the attention of international media despite heavy censorship and a regime crackdown on the internet. Social media linked cheated voters, disaffected young people, and beaten protesters, creating serious problems for the regime.[9]

The many-to-many nature of social media makes it possible to coordinate collective action in ways that enhance participation in democratic societies, sometimes even in the absence of formal organizations. Personal stories and symbols spread via social media can be potent mobilizers. Empirical research on Facebook's mobilization effects during elections has shown that the appearance of messages on users' news feeds can directly influence political self-expression, information-seeking, and voting behavior.[10] Studies of the Indignados movement in Spain found that, even aside from influential users and their information cascades, the sheer numbers of grassroots and common users involved in low-cost social-media activism can give them wide audience reach.[11] Relatedly, by making available new and expressive forms for participation in the political process, social media have become important for facilitating the diffusion of messages from highly committed groups of users across networks and toward less invested peripheral participants who help to increase the magnitude of *online* mobilization by way of mini-participation.[12] This in turn can lead to an increase in public and

media attention—as exemplified by the emergence of the Tea Party and Black Lives Matter movements, as well as the possibility for *offline* mobilization, exemplified by the Arab Spring protests, Occupy Wall Street, and Spain's 15M.

Thus social media have the potential to aid democratic movements by spreading information, reinvigorating participation, and facilitating collective action. In a nutshell, social media can democratize access to information and communication tools. Groups that would ordinarily be censored or silenced can reach a mass public and find it easier to hold powerful elites accountable.

As social media's potential advantages and benefits for those seeking to further democracy become more evident, however, so do social media's weaknesses. Although these platforms clearly enable disparate and previously unconnected individuals to organize sudden protests, it is not so clear that they can put sustained pressure on elites, an essential requirement not only for the process of democracy-building, but also for keeping a given issue on the agenda. The difference between these outcomes, moreover, may be precisely the hierarchical organizations that social media are so good at obviating. Without such organizations, internet-enabled democratic activism can turn out to be a flash in the pan, giving off some heat and light but quickly burning out and having no lasting effect. However, this is likely also the case because autocratic governments, too, can harness the internet to deactivate the potential for long-term change. We turn to this perspective next.

The Empire Strikes Back: Repression Technology

Resistance to social media's democratic potential has always been inevitable. Governments threatened by efforts to hold them more accountable would look for ways to push back. As some pointed out early on, autocratic regimes quickly adapted to limit the impact of this new technology.[13] Many of the tools that they use for this purpose are familiar censorship strategies—devised long ago offline, but now deployed online—that are meant to silence opposition to authoritarianism. Others, however, are new and specific to the world of social media. These include tactics designed to exploit the many-to-many nature of the internet in ways that amplify the regime's messages while muffling the opposition's. All the tools, old and new, can be sorted into three categories that Margaret Roberts, in her forthcoming book, calls "the three Fs": There is fear, which is the force behind censorship that deters. There is friction, which is censorship that delays. And there is flooding, which is censorship that distracts or confuses.[14]

First, autocrats can aim to limit online activism by intimidating and jailing (or worse) those who use online platforms for dissent and opposition. "Fear" tactics are part of the autocrat's traditional toolbox, meant

to make those inclined to speak out keep silent instead. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, 259 journalists were in jail around the world as of December 2016.[15] Many of these journalists have published stories online dealing with matters such as inequality, protests, and corruption—all "forbidden topics" in the eyes of powerholders who do not want to be held accountable. Examples also abound of governments targeting ordinary citizens who have used online platforms to spread information that governments do not want disclosed. Although there is no formal tally of how many bloggers are behind bars, a Google News search for "blogger arrested" yields thousands of hits. In the hands of states, the digital tracking power of the internet has made regime foes easy to identify and apprehend.

Even allowing for all this, however, the internet has so dramatically expanded the numbers and types of people who take part in the public sphere that traditional forms of repression are becoming too costly for authoritarian regimes to bear. Only in some totalitarian regimes can all or nearly all the people be held in fear; in most autocracies, omnipresent fear can create backlash as well as problems for information collection and innovation.[16] Therefore, autocrats have created quieter "friction" tactics to use against the internet. These include sophisticated blocking systems such as the infamous "Great Firewall of China," internet slowdowns and shutdowns, surgical removal of social-media posts, and algorithmic manipulations of search results to suppress information that autocrats dislike. In many cases, social-media users may not even realize that they are being affected by such censorship, making it all but impossible to avoid or counter.[17]

While autocrats can use repression technology to undermine freedom of information online, these same regimes can also twist the free and open nature of social media to their own advantage. The battle for the social-media space goes to those who can push their information to the top of the pile. Recognizing this, authoritarian regimes have harnessed the ability of anyone to post on social-media platforms in order to promote regime agendas and drown out those of regime opponents. This is "flooding."

For example, authoritarian governments can pay posters to spread strategically timed messages on social media. They can also use automated bots weaponized to promote government propaganda or flood antiregime protest hashtags. These human or automated online armies may promote regime propaganda, or they may disrupt the opposition by creating distractions. They may also spread misinformation to confuse people and degrade the usefulness of online information, or they may harass regime opponents online.[18]

Government-coordinated online campaigns to push propaganda or silence critics are simultaneously forms of participation and censorship. The internet's open nature allowed regime opponents—shut out of

mainstream, state-run media—to publicize their views and organize for political action. Authoritarian governments, however, then try to counter them by organizing mass online campaigns of their own. That something as quintessentially liberal as the internet's very openness can be used in efforts to censor and to promote illiberal values is a quandary for scholars and policy makers alike. Like the dangers that "clickbait farms" pose to search engines and that fake reviews pose to online reviewing systems, the strategic introduction of pseudonymous political information threatens social media's already fragile status as an arena for true public deliberation. The trick of "flooding the (social-media) zone" as a form of censorship is therefore a particularly powerful political tool, and it can be more widely harnessed than just by state actors attempting to undermine broad political participation and discussion in their own countries.

Return of the Antisystem Forces: Tumultuous Technology

As we have seen, the same infrastructure that can empower democratic opposition can also be used for authoritarian purposes. The tactics pioneered by authoritarian regimes, however, are also available to groups that operate within democratic societies to pursue illiberal aims. The same mechanism that played such a huge role in the Arab Spring—social media's ability to give voice to the voiceless—is now empowering groups on the margins to challenge core democratic values. Perhaps the clearest example of this is the manner in which terrorist groups such as ISIS have turned social media into their main communication channel—to recruit foreign fighters, to coordinate attacks, and to amplify their activities by instantly reaching vast international audiences.[19]

But this trend is not limited to external groups. As Alice Marwick and Rebecca Lewis note, "while trolls, white nationalists, men's rights activists, gamergaters, the 'alt-right,' and conspiracy theorists may diverge deeply in their beliefs, they share tactics and converge on common issues."[20] There are many reasons, of course, for the recent increase in visibility of these groups, yet the rise of social media has undoubtedly made it easier for people who hold minority views within their own communities to find like-minded others in other locations and form larger communities than would have been possible before the digital era.

At the same time, as journalists and traditional media outlets see their gate-keeping and fact-checking roles diminish, more controversial ideas can go unchallenged; they can be bolstered by the algorithmic features of online platforms that incentivize clickbait headlines and emotional messages, and then propagate widely with the help of paid trolls and bots to reach larger segments of the populace. In this way, antisystem actors in democracies can not only draw on the lessons learned by those who originally harnessed social media on behalf of prodemocratic move-

ments in more authoritarian countries, but can also use the very tools (such as trolls and bots) developed by authoritarian regimes to counter democracy movements. Indeed, as some have suggested, antisystem movements in democracies may *literally* be using the tools—such as bot-nets—that authoritarian regimes developed to combat their own online foes.[21] This new situation may very well have caught democratic political systems off guard in much the same way that social media surprised nondemocratic regimes earlier in the decade.

As noted, social media can lend a voice to anyone whose attitudes and beliefs may traditionally have been considered too far outside the mainstream. This can include antisystem forces that actively seek to undermine liberal democracy, but also political groups whose aim is to transform democratic politics to reduce economic and political inequality. Although not all these groups express outright hostility to liberal democracy, a common thread is their eagerness to raise the profile of policy preferences that previously had been found unacceptable or otherwise unworthy of attention by mainstream politicians, parties, and media organs.

The emergence so close together in time of populist parties of the right and left in Europe, of Donald Trump's electorally successful anti-immigrant and protectionist platform in the United States, and of movements to protest socioeconomic inequality (such as Occupy Wall Street in the United States or the Indignados movement in Spain) underlines the growing importance of social media in democratic systems. To be clear, we are *not* saying that social media can explain the recent rise of populism. Yet populists have clearly found online platforms helpful as their once-marginalized voices have gained volume under the new rules of the digital age. These rules are transforming democratic politics in two important ways.

First, campaigns and movements of this new type have learned not only from their own patterns of use across the years, but *especially* from the diffusion and mobilization practices of election campaigns in democracies. In the United States, pioneering social-media campaigns by Democratic Party politicians such as Howard Dean and Barack Obama had a massive impact on how information and communication technologies have been deployed in order to win over the public.[22] At least since Obama's win in 2008, actors both inside and outside the electoral arena have taken note of innovative political uses of social media, and learned to reinvent their methods of approaching the public. What was once the province of mainly young and technologically literate politicians has now gone mainstream, and an entirely new political battlespace has opened.

A second way in which social media allow challengers to the status quo to profit from new rules is the terseness that dominates social-media exchanges. Twitter, with its 140-character limit per tweet, is not only poorly suited to fostering nuanced discussion, but also can be used to undermine basic tenets of the democratic public sphere.[23] Online trolls are usually not interested in argument-based conversation:

Their goal is to trigger a cascade of harassment that can silence or demobilize other individuals or public officials, or to create distractions that refocus online users on another issue or message. Social media have been elevated as powerful tools in the hands of populist candidates and parties precisely because social media allow them to create spectacle rapidly, while simultaneously avoiding discussions that they might appear to "lose." Why even engage in a discussion when you can get all the exposure you need through a provocative statement?

Far-right parties in Europe provide excellent examples of this trend. The founder of the German anti-immigrant movement Pegida (the word is a German acronym that stands for Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the West) appeared to resign from his leadership position after an alleged image of him posing as Hitler was released, yet he was reinstated shortly after.[24] Dutch politician Geert Wilders, who has routinely used Twitter to cause outrage by calling his leftist rivals "Islamofascists," tweeted a month before the March 2017 election a photoshopped image of the parliamentary leader of an opposing party, showing him at a rally with Muslim protesters holding up banners with messages such as "Islam will conquer Europe" and "Shariah for The Netherlands."[25] While Dutch politicians across the spectrum condemned Wilders for this, it kept the news spotlight on him for several days during a very critical time of the election, in which his party went on to finish second.

While the uses of social media by antisystem groups in democracies are diverse and cannot be captured here in their entirety, many rely on the same mechanisms that democratic groups and repressive regimes alike use to harness social media's power. For example, the proliferation of misinformation across social media follows the same cross-network and cross-platform diffusion logic that enabled protesters in Egypt to turn their personal and emotional stories of beating and repression into the gunpowder of revolution. Precisely because social-media posts spread through weak ties and are presented in the context of powerful social cues, "fake news" can travel rapidly across social networks without being challenged. Similarly, attention-hacking techniques that authoritarian regimes have used, such as clickbait and manipulated search results, benefit immensely from rapid diffusion. This process may gain strength from users' accidental (as opposed to selective) exposure to content shared via social media. Such content, even if it is out of line with users' beliefs, will in at least some cases rouse their curiosity when otherwise they might never have looked into the topic.

The Law Awakens: Restricting Technology?

Much as liberation technology created problems for autocracies, the success of social media has fueled political turmoil in democracies. Some of this turmoil belongs to the sharp but normal cut-and-thrust

of freewheeling debate in democratic societies. Some, however, falls within the ambit of extremism, even violent extremism. Can or should democratic governments do anything about this, and if so, what? After the 3 June 2017 London Bridge terrorist attack—it killed eleven (including the three attackers), injured 48, and was the third such high-profile assault in the United Kingdom since March—Home Secretary Amber Rudd attributed the attack to "radical Islamist terrorists."[26] The same day, Prime Minister Theresa May called for closer regulation of the internet in order to "prevent the spread of extremism and terrorism planning."[27] A few weeks later, looking ahead to the Bundestag election set for September 2017, the German government passed a law decreeing heavy fines for social-media companies that fail to remove within 24 hours racist or slanderous (in the words of Justice Minister Heiko Maas, "obviously illegal") comments and posts.[28]

These decisions may test the limits of freedom of expression in democratic societies and put forcefully on display an enduring structural asymmetry between democratic and nondemocratic regimes. While authoritarian regimes can take steps described previously to diffuse dissent on social media, democratic regimes may be much more constrained: A democratic state cannot as easily hire trolls, arbitrarily change laws, or start arresting people who back controversial policy ideas.

The new reality *has,* however, led to highly controversial measures. For example, the similarity of the new German law to "opinion-guidance" efforts in autocratic societies leads to troubling normative questions about whether this regulatory infrastructure could be repurposed by democratic governments for repression, censorship, and surveillance. Moreover, the almost immediate adoption of a virtual copy of the German law by Vladimir Putin's Russia led to sharp criticism from civil society organizations. "When leading democracies devise draconian legislation," complained Reporters Without Borders, "they provide repressive regimes with ideas."[29]

To further complicate matters, it is unclear whether the outcomes envisioned by governments taking such steps are even possible: Tasks that may seem trivial to many—detecting online bots or trolls, categorizing content as real or fake news, and deciding what is "obviously illegal"—are notoriously difficult to implement. What is also unclear is if such efforts will succeed. Fact-checking interventions may induce backlash effects,[30] and terror networks may resort to other platforms on which they are harder to track. Further, attempts to regulate speech may run into all sorts of new technical challenges, such as separating citizens with legal rights from foreign actors—and even foreign intelligence agencies—that may not be entitled to the same rights, to say nothing of the challenge of separating humans from evolving forms of artificial intelligence.

To state that these developments pose new challenges for scholars, policy makers, social-media companies, courts, and political actors would be

an understatement. As difficult as it is to answer questions regarding how democratic governments should monitor or regulate social-media platforms used by terrorist groups, it gets that much harder when we rephrase the question in terms of groups in democratic societies that appear to be using social media to take actions that undermine democracy and democratic norms. Different countries have historically approached the question of offline speech in different ways, but is such a country-by-country approach feasible when the effect of speech is no longer even remotely constrained by national boundaries? Indeed, the vast majority of social-media posts (especially outside China and Russia) that are made on any given day take place via giant multinational companies such as Twitter and Facebook, and these posts influence the search rankings maintained by another giant multinational company, Google.

Do companies have a role to play in ensuring that their platforms are not used for censorship and harassment? Facebook's hiring of a large number of content reviewers to address these challenges, and Google's implementation of machine learning to help in removing extremist content, suggest that companies are beginning to acknowledge their responsibility in fighting the spread of extremist ideas through online networks.[31] How should they react to government requests for data or to shut down specific accounts? Here the answer may lie in greater transparency in such dealings and in further consultation with civil society.

Finally, is there anything that citizens can do to support online inclusion and democratic deliberation? For example, given the importance of social cues in the spread of information, should fact-checking one's social ties—that is, speaking up when one sees one's contacts sharing misinformation—be considered a new responsibility of citizenship? While these kinds of steps may give way to new forms of interpersonal backlash (for example, "defriending"), scholars have long argued that the collaborative environment of social media gives rise to new notions of citizenship and political engagement. Indeed, some who have studied the matter are cautiously optimistic that citizens, especially younger ones, will reject passive information consumption in favor of more critical and discerning engagement with the world of claims and counterclaims that stream back and forth online.[32]

These questions and more suggest how important it is to reflect on the new responsibilities of governments, corporations, and citizens in a digital age. Scholars can play a role here. Some of the questions posed above are normative: *Should* governments regulate speech online? Yet others are positive: Can we develop algorithms to identify bots as they evolve over time? Do attempts to regulate speech online raise or lower support for democratic norms? Both types of questions pose challenges. Our hope is that the framework sketched in this essay will prove useful to those both inside and outside the academy as they wrestle with what the evolving internet world means for politics, democratic and otherwise.

NOTES

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12. Pablo Barberá et al., "The Critical Periphery in the Growth of Social Protests," *PLoS ONE* 10 (November 2015), *http://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0143611*.

13. Evgeny Morozov deserves special credit for noting as early as 2009 that "most authoritarian states are . . . eagerly exploiting cyberspace for their own strategic purposes." "Iran: Downside to the 'Twitter Revolution,'" 12. See also his book *The Net Delusion* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2012). Larry Diamond grasped this possibility too, noting that "authoritarian states such as China, Belarus, and Iran have acquired (and shared) impressive technical capabilities to filter and control the Internet, and to identify and punish dissenters. Democrats and autocrats now compete to master these technologies. Ultimately, however, not just technology but political organization and strategy and deep-rooted normative, social, and economic forces will determine who 'wins' the race." "Liberation Technology," 70.

14. This section draws on Margaret Roberts, *Censored: Distraction and Diversion Inside China's Great Firewall* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, forthcoming 2018). See also Sergey Sanovich, Denis Stukal, and Joshua A. Tucker, "Turning the Virtual Tables: Government Strategies for Addressing Online Opposition with an Application to Russia," *Comparative Politics* (forthcoming, 2018), for a different but related classification scheme based on offline responses, limits on access to online content, and engagement with online content.

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