

Analysis of Digital Technology Usage During the Saffron Revolution

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Present day uses of information and communications technologies have great potential in the scope of political engagement and reform. From ease of information retrieval and online discourse, several experts and theorists explore optimistic possibilities of radical change in governing systems (Fishkin 23). According to many philosophers, having a more engaged public and a platform for deliberation is a pillar of a strong democracy. However, digital technology alone cannot enact these changes on its own, especially in the context of revolutions. I argue that digital technology is a neutral tool that does not necessarily favor a certain user and therefore will only change an institution if the movement is sustainable. Thus, its impact on revolutions and societies is very dependent on who the users are and how much preexisting power they already have. This paper will explore the application of the instrumental theory of technology primarily in the context of the Saffron Revolution.

As opposed to technological determinism, the instrumental theory is more socially deterministic. I believe that preexisting social structures direct technology's impact, rather than the opposite. It is not necessarily optimistic nor is it pessimistic about the impact of digital technology; the foundation of the argument is that technology is a neutral tool. Since the society is very much shaped by time and space, digital technology too will be impacted by the limitations of where and when it is developed. Therefore, it is necessary to have a more comprehensive understanding of the historical context as well as a more thorough understanding of current applications to inform what the interactions between technology and society actually are. In recent history, digital technology has helped promote democracy but has also been leveraged by authoritative regimes. ICTs bring people & information together but not necessarily all for better. Technology affords society certain tools for organizing and sharing information,

however, norms and behaviors will not suddenly change due to its usage. These all argue that digital technology alone does not change society, but it can be used as a tool to do so.

While cases of political movements and revolution may not be the typical applications of digital technology, they present important intersections of the technological & social and thus provide a better understanding of how these tools are used in general. Kessler uses the framework of looking at the “margins”, extreme or atypical cases, to inform a better understanding of general norms and policies (Kessler 22-23). I will be using this framework to understand technology’s impact on global society, by using “extreme”, outstanding examples to better understand the typical, overall impact on a majority of the population. Using this framework of examining unusual or extreme cases, we are better able to understand the norms, policies and practices surrounding the application of technology based on these assumptions.

Political Activism

Digital Technology is often used as a method of outreach for community change. It can be used to organize the masses or launch reform initiatives. For example, in India, programs were launched so citizens could report common practice corruption through digital technology. Programs such as “I Paid a Bribe” and zero-rupee notes use technology to facilitate the interventions, but they are not the interventions themselves (Panth).

Twitter on platform that is often referenced for political deliberation happening through the social media. The Arab Spring is used to exemplify the positives of being able to organize and share narratives online (Shirky 2009). This platform gives visibility to communities that may not have garnered the attention of traditional mass media. The Arab Spring is one of many cases where marginalized communities have been able to leverage the Internet and digital technology

to benefit their communities and society overall. Parts of the Native and Indigenous Rights movement have found success with these platforms, especially in engaging youth and getting them involved with politics (Shaw 2015). These communities in particular are facing the dying out of their languages, declining population, and a sense of loss of tradition and culture (Shaw 2015). Technology affords activists from the Native and Indigenous rights community an opportunity to spread awareness of their conservation efforts and organize in a digital space to engage more youth.

They are not alone in mobilizing. To raise awareness and document their experiences, Hong Kong protesters utilized the symbol of a yellow umbrella to share and document the youth organized grassroots movement (Sile 2015). To get their message out, organizers turned to Facebook and Twitter to inform global news networks about events and used Google Docs to handle logistics (Sile 2015). Even at the University of Michigan, student activists could organize and gain national awareness of issues happening locally. student movements used Twitter hashtags, such as #BBUM and #UmichDivest, to collect their narratives and experiences in order to build a stronger case for higher education reforms. These hashtag movements are at times symbols for events happening offline and create channels of public awareness. They are used as tools to support community efforts by broadcasting their work through digital technology. While subsequent changes are difficult to measure tangibly, they still showcase how empowered users can employ technology to support their organizing efforts.

As outlined by these examples, modern day movements and revolutions have strong ties to citizen journalism and activism through digital technology. These revolutions have been documented when traditional journalists do not have access and have new ways to engage on the Internet. The Burmese Saffron Revolution of 2007 is a prime example to question digital

technology's impact on revolutions. Digital technology served as a means to document the atrocities committed by the national government. It also helped support Burmese in exile and overseas to gain international support to pressure for change (Chowdhury 8). However, many would argue that this movement did not result in any tangible governmental changes. Though the international media community and governments were aware of the issue, the Burmese military regime responsible for the violence against its citizens continues to stay in power to this day. While there are several other examples where digital technology and more specifically the Internet seemingly play an important role in bringing about revolutionary change, this case presents evidence that the digital technology alone cannot about this change.

The Saffron Revolution

Officially called Myanmar, but still recognized in the UK and many other countries as Burma that do not support its current regime, traces its unification history to 1057 AD (Fisher). Burma achieved independence in 1948 after being colonized by the British, who were unable to keep its colony after WWII (BBC News). The following years were filled with political coups and reforms. In 1962, a coup was led by General Ne Win to overthrow the Prime Minister's leadership. Since then, the government has been run by a military regime as a single-party state, called the Socialist Programme Party (BBC News). Burma has been overrun with inter-ethnic tension, poverty, and violent uprisings over the last 50 years.

Some of the most well-known protests, marches, demonstrations, and riots happened in 1998, or known as the 8888 Uprising in Burma. This anti-government movement led thousands of protesters being killed by the government (Fogarty). Tens of thousands fled to Thailand to escape the violence. In addition, in order to dispel the insurgent sentiment of the protesters, the

military regime exiled many leaders and others were put under house arrest. One of these leaders is the prolific Aung San Suu Kyi, known her work through non-violent protest and her Nobel Peace Prize.

In 2007, the government ended subsidies on diesel gas and natural gas. As a result, costs for cooking oil and other necessities significantly rose. The Burmese public, already struggling with poverty, were upset by these changes and sparked protests involving students, Buddhist monks, and others. This movement was called the Saffron Revolution, named after the color of Buddhist monks' attire in Burma (Chowdhury 4). Soon after, the protests gained momentum and reached over a hundred thousand participants. In hopes for international support and awareness, Burmese citizens would take pictures and videos and upload them to the Internet (Diamond & Plattner 121). Many of the international initiatives were spearheaded by Burmese exiles abroad and as a result, the international media community was aware of the issues at hand.

There were also negative consequences for using the Internet during the Saffron Revolution. Critics of the military regime argue that due to the power of anti-government content that emerged the regime became extremely wary of the potential in the Internet (Chowdhury 12). The Burmese government at first took action with digital technology as a means for propaganda and later to control information. After attempting to "rebrand" themselves on the Internet. The government took measures during the revolution to restrict access to the Internet and eventually shut down all international links and suspended mobile phone services (Chowdhury 13). Since there were only two internet service providers, this was a manageable feat by the regime. In this context, the Internet was used as a tool to keep the government accountable, because of the international coverage. However, once that tool was taken away from the protesters, they were unable to organize in the same way.

In this case, the instrumental theory of technology does explain digital technological usage the event. Protesters relied on digital technology to share their messages. They were the ones who documented and created the messages to be told. However, because there was not enough leverage to pressure the military regime, digital technology did not create lasting change in the infrastructure. The government could take away usages of digital technology from its citizens, also showing that their authoritative power can have more control over the tool. The regime was also able to access to the Internet, stifling the work being done by protesters and restricting the information being shared with the international community. It severely limited the ability of organizers to continue to share their coverage and as a result, created a context for their issues to be forgotten from the international limelight.

Some argue that the Internet actually did bring about change in the Burmese government. The Saffron protests were very similar to the 8888 revolution, which saw casualties of thousands of civilians compared to these hundreds during the Saffron revolution. Many argue that due to the number of people recording and sharing what was happening in Burma, the Saffron Revolution did not have nearly as many fatalities. However, it was not the Internet alone which brought this shift. I argue that the Internet was used as a tool to help spread information, leading to foreign government pressure, especially from the US and UK. Since these governments have certain foreign policies and authority over other countries, they hold power over the Burmese government. Therefore, it was not the Internet that lowered the casualty count, it was the work of protesters which was communicated to powerful international government bodies and foreign governments. Digital technology is dependent on what is happening in society and how society decides to use it.

The Zapatista Movement

There are several examples in which digital technology is used by smaller communities to advocate for international support. The Internet provides an opportunity for organizers to build awareness in a more low-cost way. A similar usage of digital technology can be seen with the movement started by the Zapatista Army of National Liberation in 1994. The group advocated for the indigenous groups in Chiapas, located in Southern Mexico, and declared war against the Mexican government. Going public after the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) came into effect, the Army protested against its signing, arguing that it would increase the wealth gap in Chiapas (Burke). The conflict resulted in firefights for 12 days, ending after hundreds of deaths and casualties (Burke). The army's goal was to spark a revolution throughout the entire nation. As part of their movement, the army was able to use information to "scare" foreign investors and fought for policy change (Martinez-Torres 352). They bridged work done by through civil society and guerilla warfare (Martinez-Torres 349). They also used the Internet in their demonstrations and used information warfare, focusing on appealing to the international community to pressure for change in the local Chiapas community. Even though many people did not have coverage, intermediaries helped connect the local with the international. During the rebellion, the rebels were able to organize the Indigenous community and raised national conversations of what it means to be Indigenous Mexican with a political voice (Burke).

While these movements are similar, their outcomes were completely different. The Zapatista movement could advocate for their rights and see national policy change over time. The Burmese protesters, however, did not see the same results. The Internet was used to spread awareness of their communities' struggles in spaces where traditional media was unable to report. They helped give a platform to lead to more discussion and hopes for external pressure.

For Saffron Revolution in particular, traditionalist journalists were killed for publishing stories speaking against the government requiring other means of raising awareness (Chowdhury 4). Both examples show how citizen journalism arguably led to more government accountability. Compared to the 8888 revolution, the protesters saw significantly fewer casualties as opposed to the thousands of lives lost in the previous demonstrations. For the Zapatistas, their mission was to create an environment at the time of NAFTA's approval so that foreign investors would be too scared to participate as well as build a stronger, collective voice for the Indigenous Mexican community. As opposed to the Saffron Revolution, they were able to create lasting change within their national government. Overall, the Saffron Revolution can be viewed as a more positive protests due to fewer casualties, however, it also is an example of how the digital technology cannot be used for technologically deterministic reasoning for societal change.

Conclusion

These examples of political movements and revolutions show that digital technology affords easier access to mass communication, within the communities and for international awareness. Since I argue that technology is a tool for change, the outcomes of these uprisings heavily depend on the institutions they emerge from. Sentiments such as anger may spark organizers and protesters but do not lead to lasting change. As an avid read of Grace Lee Boggs and Thích Nhất Hạnh, I may be biased in stating that outcomes depend on how much power the leaders and governing systems have. Their outcomes cannot be entirely predicted but looking at patterns in history, it is much harder for movements under authoritative regimes to persevere.

In the future, digital technology will not necessarily bring about social change if institutions do not support marginalized communities. If the tool cannot support the oppressed

and silenced, we will not be seeing democratic results. It will raise ethical questions about who is able to control access points and how they are controlling these systems. If these fundamental questions are not addressed, it will be hard to see consistent usage of digital technology to support lasting societal change. I do foresee the Internet becoming an important tool for international responses, however, these pressures are dependent on how much influence that government. Once the society is able to support a fairer infrastructure, only then will they be able to create enduring changes while using digital technology as a tool.

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