

Social media helps dictators, not just protesters

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FULL TEXT

The following is a guest post from University of Toronto political scientist Seva Gunitsky. It is related to his research for a recent article published at Perspectives on Politics, and which has been ungated (made available for free) to readers of The Monkey Cage.

Since its euphoric beginnings, the Arab Spring has followed a path all too familiar to scholars of democracy: from hope to doubt to disappointment. The role of social media as a way to foster democracy, which first came to the fore in the Arab Spring, has followed a similar painful trajectory. Initially welcomed as a democratic panacea, social media has increasingly come to be seen as a mixed blessing – a potentially useful tool that can nevertheless be blocked and sidelined by clever tyrants. The most recent research suggests that in some cases, social media may actually help dictators, so long as they put up sufficient barriers to contrary views.

But what are the actual mechanisms through which autocrats can subvert social media for their own purposes? In a recent article (ungated), I document the co-option of social media by governments in Russia, China, and the Middle East, and find four different ways in which they have begun to use social media to prolong their rule. These methods go beyond simple censorship in which rulers block or suppress the flow of information. Instead, social media is increasingly being used to actually boost regime stability and strength, transforming it from an obstacle to government rule into another potential tool of regime resilience.

First, social media is becoming a safe and relatively cheap way for rulers to discover the private grievances and policy preferences of their people. This information is extremely valuable but usually remains hidden – the absence of free expression and the suppression of public dissent means that autocrats often lack a clear idea of what their citizens are thinking. And since people in autocracies tend to falsify their private views, rulers often cannot anticipate moments when silent miseries transform into vocal protests. (This was one of the reasons, argued Timur Kuran, that East European despots were caught off-guard by the revolutions that swept the region in 1989.) As China's president Hu Jintao told The People's Daily, the Internet "is an important channel for us to understand the concerns of the public and assemble the wisdom of the public." And Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny observed that the Putin regime uses the Internet as a "focus group" to find out the concerns and desires of ordinary Russians. In this way, social media allows autocrats to get a much clearer view of people's real opinions – and therefore anticipate potential unrest – without prying open the larger marketplace of ideas

Second, social media is a reliable way to gauge the effectiveness of local officials, who are often unaccountable to their constituencies. Since they usually operate through opaque and byzantine institutions, the central government often knows little about the competence and popularity of their local representatives, who have every reason to lie

about their performance. In the absence of unfettered expression and free elections, these local elites can govern with relative impunity, creating the potential for corruption and local discontent that undermines the legitimacy of the regime as a whole. By allowing citizens to call attention to local problems, social media offers a way to hold these officials accountable, both to the public and to their bosses. Cracking down on local corruption in turn makes the central government appear more responsive, increasing its effectiveness and legitimacy. Xiao Chiang, editor of the blog China Digital Times, has argued that outrage on social media is sometimes the only channel for party officials to get honest feedback about their local apparatchiks.

Third, social media provides an effective way to reach out to the regime's supporters. Just as opposition leaders use social media to mobilize protesters, regimes can use it to organize and rally their own domestic allies – military or business elites, but also regular citizens motivated by patriotism or ideology. Few regimes exist without some public legitimacy; domestic support for the government in Russia or China, for example, is not just a phantom artifact of oppression, but reflects real popularity derived from economic performance, nationalism, or anti-Western ideology. Leaders in such regimes can draw upon social networks to maintain and strengthen connections with these supporters. "If the authorities do not like what is happening on the internet there is only one way of resisting," Putin said in 2011, suggesting that the Internet should be used as a resource "to collect a larger amount of supporters."

Finally, social media offers a convenient way to shape the contours of public discourse among the public at large. Governments have always used mass media – newspapers, radio, and TV – to disseminate regime-friendly propaganda. Social media, however, has the added benefit of being inherently decentralized, interactive, and non-hierarchical, and can thus more easily avoid the appearance of artifice. Incumbent rulers can employ it to disseminate propaganda in a more efficient way, and to shape online discourse in a more precise and subtle manner. Two years ago, for example, a "factory for internet trolls," with apparent links to a Kremlin-sponsored youth group, was set up on the outskirts of St. Petersburg. Its employees are expected to produce approximately 100 posts per day, pouring scorn on the West and Russian opposition leaders while praising Russia's culture and political leaders – all without explicitly identifying themselves as pro-Putin supporters.

So what does all this mean for the future of democracy?

First, active citizen involvement in social media may not mean a revolution is in the wings – in fact, it could actually make the regime stronger and more adaptable. The opposite of Internet freedom may not be brute-force censorship but a deceptive blend of control, co-option, and manipulation. Second, democracy in mixed and autocratic regimes could become stuck in a low-level trap. While social media can make regimes more responsive at the local level, it also produces a shallow sort of democracy. Populist causes, such as municipal corruption, are taken up by the central government, sometimes with great fanfare, even as the chances of fundamental reform, such as free elections, become more remote. Third, social media co-option may help regimes inoculate themselves from the reach of transnational social movements, suggesting greater obstacles for the diffusion of protest tactics across borders. By shaping dominant narratives and mobilizing supporters, social media can help incumbents to guard themselves not only from domestic unrest but also from external pressures for reform.

Unlike censorship, these strategies strengthen the regime rather than just mitigate the effects of dissent. Autocrats have proven to be remarkably adaptive and resilient in the face of new challenges, and their subversion of social media could mean long-term problems for the future of democracy.

For more from The Monkey Cage on the Russian regime's use of digital media, see:

How Russia Today is using YouTube

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