Will social media save the world?

The role of social media in (dis)abling social movements

Ana Pop Stefanija

Abstract

This paper critically discusses the role of social media in the rise and fall of social movements. It goes beyond the techno-deterministic and optimistic view of social media and offers a different insight into how the very structure and architecture of social media platform direct and influence visibility and thus "online success" of social movements. It also discusses the role of Terms and Service and use policies of the platforms. Finally, it outlines the dependency of social movements' success on both offline and online factors and events.

Keywords

social media, social movements, affordances, platform ecology, networked publics

1. Introduction

In the biggest anti-governmental protests after 2009, Iranians under Hassan Rouhani were faced once again with one of the easiest, well-known and used tactics of the (authoritarian) governments worldwide: internet blocking. But this was not the blocking the Egyptian president Moubarak used in 2011 – "turning off" the internet in the country almost entirely. Rulers worldwide now use more sophisticated and equally effective censorship tactics. In the most recent Iranian case – it is blocking the access to the social media networks Instagram and Telegram in order to stop and disable people from mobilizing and protesting against the government (Rao, 2018).

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What is the relation between digital technology and social movements? Is social media the main ingredient when it comes to the success of a movement? Despite the enthusiasm and euphoria amongst the internet evangelists praising the role digital technologies and the internet (will) have on taking down authoritarian regimes and enabling more participation and democracy, the recent history taught us that that is not the case.

This paper aims to investigate and critically review the claims that digital technologies, the ubiquitous presence of the internet and use of social media enable "Twitter and Facebook revolutions". It will be argued that social movements are both online and offline phenomena, influenced by socio-political and economical precedents and technology development. That both the rise and fall of the social movements are dependent on platforms' architecture, structure and affordance. It will also give a short overview of their shortcomings as well as tactics used by governments to silence and shut social movements, using the very same technologies.

2. Write me a recipe for a successful revolution

According to the internet evangelists, all we need for a successful social move-ment/uprising/revolution is enough digital technology in the hands of the citizens, internet connection and people logged in to social media platforms. "In the good days of the internet", the internet was praised as a tool in taking down authoritarian governments (Curran, Fenton, & Freedman, 2012; Morozov, 2011; Tufekci, 2017). This was partially due to the radicality of the new digital technology and the perceived opportunities it offered for open participation, collaboration, fast diffusion of information, lack of hierarchical structures and absence of gate-keepers (in comparison to traditional mass media). It was believed that "democratized access to knowledge and the dawn of the information age" (Morozov, 2011, p. 94) will de-crease support for authoritarian governments, and increase media literacy and critical think-ing. The unrestricted access of many (if not all) to abundance of information was believed to make societies more democratic.

Because of the characteristics and affordances of the new digital communication technologies and the internet, many fell in the trap of techno-determinism – "the simplistic and reductive notion that after Twitter and Facebook were created, their mere existence somehow caused

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revolutions to happen" (Tufekci, 2017, p.119). The digitization of information and communication (Tapscott & Williams, 2008) and the immanent-to-the-internet characteristics brought big societal, economic, cultural and political changes (see Bruns 2008, Fish 2017, Castells 2009, Mansell 2012, Benkler 2006 among others).

As a result, new forms of communities and generations are emerging – "these new communities are defined through voluntary, temporary, and tactical affiliations, reaffirmed through common intellectual enterprises and emotional investments" (Jenkins, 2006, p.27). They are characterized by the opportunity to shift between groups, depending on the actual and particular interests, forming loose and temporary ties.

As Jenkins further outlined, "new media technologies enabled the same content to flow through many different channels and assume many different forms at the point of reception. […] Digitization set the conditions for convergence" (Jenkins, 2006, p.11). This is because we now live in an information society, a society where "the widespread diffusion of ICTs means that everyone will have access to the Internet through a handheld device such as a mobile phone, or through a desktop workstation, or a television in the office, bedroom, or living room. Everyone will be able to produce or consume the information he or she values" (Mansell, 2012, p.2). As a consequence, a convergence culture emerges (Jenkins, 2006).

For Tapscott and Williams (2008) this new generation of *N-Geners* is collaborating, co-creating, sharing, self-organizing, co-innovation individuals, transforming society and culture, "rather than being passive recipients of mass consumer culture" (Tapscott & Williams, 2008, p. 47).

Bruns introduces the notion of *produsage* communities, that are "radically decentralized, collaborative, and non-proprietary; based on sharing resources and outputs among widely distributed, loosely connected individuals who cooperate with each other" (Bruns, 2008, p.17), characterized with non-hierarchal and network-centric structure.

Fish introduces the concept of *proformation*, a term for "production/reformation – technological and political action for public access to the means of production on information infrastructures" (Fish, 2017, p. 85), tightly related with the democratized access to internet, user participation and citizen journalism.

These changes in communication and in society, ultimately affecting the social fabrics, are made possible by the architecture, structure, affordances and platform ecology of the digital technologies. These very same things are the ones enabling and disabling contemporary social movements.

3. The role of architecture, structure, affordances and platform ecology

The communication landscape was transformed as a result of many interwoven factors. The accessibility and affordability of digital communication devices, the increasing processing power, low entry costs to production and distribution, all contributed towards creating opportunities of abundance and shift of knowledge and power (Curran et al., 2012, Fish, 2017, Tapscott & Williams, 2008). As Curran et al. continue, distinctive technological attributes of the internet – its interactivity, global reach, cheapness, speed, networking facility, storage capacity, and alleged uncontrollability – should have changed the world (Curran et al., 2012). Media nowadays is embedded in social structures; we are living in a situation of faster, all-encompassing, pervasive and omnipresent media and polymedia (Deuze, 2012). Internet-centrism or internet-determinism saw the development of the digital communication technologies as a cure for everything, even for authoritarian governments. But, as we will see, these technologies turn out to be a *pharmakon*.

The digital platforms and spaces are not without limits. These limits are imposed by their structure, architecture, affordances and platform ecology. These factors, as we will see, also influence how social movements can quickly spread, but also as quickly shut down and come to an end.

As Tufekci outlines, the opportunities of information to spread fast and in dispersed directions during the social movements and thus, to enable quick mobilization, is a result of "the online architectures of interaction and visibility and the design of online platforms. These factors— the affordances of digital spaces—determine who can find and see whom, and under what conditions (Tufekci, 2017, p.10). How we can navigate the digital media spaces is dependent of these architectures.

Trying to define the notion of affordances is a quest in itself (boyd, 2010; Bucher & Helmond, 2018; Curran et al., 2012; Poell & van Dijck, 2018; Rogers, 2013; Tufekci, 2017).

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However, few traits related to social movements and use of digital technologies will be outlined, as they are important not just as an explanation of how the information-diffusion happens, but also because they afford the emergence and creation of networked publics and ad-hoc publics.

As boyd describes, "the affordances of networked publics are fundamentally shaped by the properties of bits, the connections between bits, and the way that bits and networks link people in new ways" (boyd, 2010, p.4). For Bucher and Helmond, "*social affordances* refer to the possibilities that technological changes afford for social relations and social structure. Social affordances are the social structures that take shape in association with a given technical structure" (Bucher & Helmond, 2018, p.9).

The affordances are platform-specific, and dependent on the platform's architecture and structure. Affordances will be different for Facebook (relying on likes, shares, comments, live video, events etc.), for Twitter (using # for topical conversations and issues tracking, retweets for information diffusion, replies for conversation building, trending topics for issues setting, periscope for live streaming etc.), YouTube (live video for live streaming, share for information diffusion etc.) – to name just a few. "The techno-commercial architecture of platforms fundamentally steers how users connect and interact with each other, and, consequently, how social media protest organization and communication unfolds" (Poell & van Dijck, 2018, p. 553).

However, as we will see later, and this is also outlined by many scholars (Curran et al., 2012; Gillespie, 2018; Tufekci, 2017), these structures are not neutral – "they are designed to invite and shape participation, toward particular ends. This includes what kind of participation they invite and encourage; what gets displayed first or most prominently; [...] and how they organize information through algorithmic sorting, privileging some content over others, in opaque ways. And it includes what is not permitted, and how and why they police objectionable content and behavior" (Gillespie, 2018, p. 259).

4. There is more than only social media

The change of the Web from a static environment into a highly dynamic ecology of data streams enables "acceleration of activist communication propelled by social media. [...] On

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the one hand, acceleration can be interpreted as a form of empowerment. Social media platforms allow activists to document (almost in real time) unfolding protest events, and massively share their feelings about these events" (Poell & van Dijck, 2018, p. 555).

Many times, especially shortly after the *Arab Spring*, both media and scholars were quick to praise the role of digital technologies and social media platforms in toppling down governments. This, however is not always true, not applicable to all cases, and there is certainly more to the success of social movements. Many have argued against this techno-centric and deterministic view of the role of technologies on social movements. Among them are Morozov (2011), Mansell (2012), Curran et al. (2016), Tufekci (2017).

Social media platforms and digital technologies are just one of the tools to "win the battle" and the success of social movements lays in the interplay and interdependence of both online and offline factors and actors. Their success is not only dependent on "online events" (online mobilization through content sharing), but also "offline events" – social, political, cultural, economic and historical issues and factors preceding the social movements. As Curran at al. summarize that well – "in short, the uprisings had deep underlying causes and were prefigured by protests over many years, largely ignored in the West. But the emergence of new media […] contributed to the build-up of dissent, facilitated the actual organization of protests, and disseminated news of the protests across the region and to the wider world. If the rise of digital communications technology did not cause the up-risings, it strengthened them" (Curran et al., 2012, p.54).

5. The rise of the networked public sphere

The networked public sphere that emerges as a result of the structure and affordances of new digital technologies and social media platforms has a significant influence on the dispersion of information and thus quick and great mobilization when it comes to social movements.

There are many definitions of the networked public sphere and networked publics (Ausserhofer & Maireder, 2013; Bruns & Burgess, 2011; Friedland, Hove, & Rojas, 2006; Ito, 2012; Tufekci, 2017). One of the most comprehensive definitions of networked publics comes from danah boyd, underlying both how the formation of these publics and networked public

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sphere is possible by re-organizing the flow of information and the reaction to that, and how this is enabled by specific affordances:

> Networked publics are publics that are restructured by networked technologies. As such, they are simultaneously (1) the space constructed through networked technologies and (2) the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice. [...] While networked publics share much in common with other types of publics, the ways in which technology structures them introduces distinct affordances that shape how people engage with these environments. (boyd, 2010, p.1)

This networked public sphere is not uniform. It is made of many, diverse, sometimes opposing voices and groups, all gathering around the same issue/events at the same time (Tufekci, 2017). But the main feature is that it is "characterized by participatory culture, citizen journalism, dialogue among communities or social movements, democratic decision-making, and social ownership of the means of media production and distribution" (Fish, 2017, p.62).

However, the emergence of networked public and networked public spheres also does not guarantee a successful social movement.

6. The affordances strike back

In a media environment where much of the traditional media (even their digital versions) is guided by private/governmental interests, social media is the only channel for activist and social movements worldwide. Affordances enable and give rise to, but they also disable and silence social movements. There are many ways how this happens, but two of the most important are algorithmic filtering and companies' terms-of-service and policies. Silenced by a terms-of-service complaint or by an algorithm, as Tufekci (2017, p. 163) frames it.

The architecture of both search engines and social media relies on algorithmic selection and filtering. This means that what is visible, what is seen and whose voice is heard, what content is given priority (both on Facebook's news feed and Google's page ranking, to name just a few) depends on a very complex set of algorithms. "Although in principle everyone can produce and diffuse information easily with the help of the internet, not all information is visible to the same degree and gets the same attention" (Curran et al., 2012, p. 134). How the

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sorting, filtering and prioritizing works is obfuscated and it is result of a code design, algorithms, machine learning and companies' business interests (see Tufekci 2017). The "echo-chambers" created that way also contribute towards the conversational filter bubbles, additionally making the content in discrepancy with one's own – invisible.

The particular platform and company's policies have a distinctive role in the diffusion of information online. "The policies and user agreements of social media platforms, including those of Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, have resulted in the banning of activist users, the removal of activist content and accounts, and the handing over of sensitive activist user information to governments" (Poell & van Dijck, 2018, p. 554). What gets flagged as inappropriate/hate speech, what gets deleted and who gets banned, it all depends on the internal policies and Terms of Service of platforms, many times decided by the moderator that gets to be at work that day.

7. The governments strike back

The Internet is not too big to be censored, to paraphrase Morozov (2011). The internet was built as a decentralized network (Curran et al., 2012), but still a network with its own vulnerabilities.

Although governments are still able to shut down the internet entirely, nowadays they use more complex, sophisticated and subtle tactics to limit and silence the dissidents/activists' voices.

Throttling internet traffic, blocking VPN, use of filternet, digital surveillance of particular subjects and repression are just some of the "traditional" forms of online censorship. They still are used, but enforced by the use of a set of other measures and tools.

Censorship by disinformation, censorship by information glut, using bot- and troll armies to either discredit activists or to make a different topic trending (and thus make invisible the particular issue), online harassment of activists, distraction by fake news distribution on the one hand and accusation of something as fake news on the other, denial of attention – all these tactics (ab)use the affordances of online media platforms.

Additional issues are the well documented cases of companies cooperating with governments and complying with their requests to take down content, ban accounts and delete pages (see Alimardani, 2018). Also, the decisions of companies to not enable certain services, like Google's decision to block Google AppEngine service and thus disable the end-to-end encryption messaging app Signal's availability in Iran, is also something to be tackled. And that is the responsibility of companies in providing technical infrastructure for citizens and activists, disregarding the will of the governments (see tweets thread by Anderson, 2017).

8. Conclusion

Digital technologies are not neutral, they are neither bad nor good. They are also "not inherently liberatory […] The practices of new media may be liberating for the user but not necessarily democratizing for society" (Curran et al., 2012, p. 142). The workings of the web and the social media platforms as we saw are dependent on their architecture, structure and affordances. They enable quick information diffusion, thus providing means for fast mobilization for social movements. But on the other hand, these very same affordances provide tools for governmental tactics for censorship and silencing.

Being online is not enough. Many people being online at the same time, with their devices in their hands is not enough. There is more to the success of social movements than digital technology. The success of social media movements is a complex one. It depends on "offline", pre-existing and preceding factors, issues and events. Digital technologies are just one of the tools that contribute to their rise. But they also contribute to their fall, as well. "One reason why the 'internet as the grave digger of dictatorship' thesis proved to be overblown was that it failed to appreciate that democracy is only one source of governmental legitimacy" (Curran et al., 2012, p. 49).

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