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Weighing the Scales

The Internet's Effect on State–Society Relations

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HOW DOES THE INFORMATION REVOLUTION affect the relationship between governments and global civil society? Does the Internet lead to greater democratization and liberalization? The political science on this question could be best described as ambiguous.[1] This is because two very different narratives can answer this question. The more popular and prominent argument is that the Internet dramatically lowers the costs of networked communication; therefore, civil society groups are better able to mobilize action to influence governments. Countless articles have been written about how the Internet has facilitated social movements to advocate for some international treaties—like the Landmine Convention—and to block movement on other initiatives—such as the Multilateral Agreement on Investment. Decentralized forms of civil society are particularly likely to thrive with the emergence of Web 2.0[2] technologies like Facebook and Twitter; the networked structure of online communities closely mirrors the structure of global civil society. The coordination of worldwide protests that took place in the run-up to the Second Gulf War is but one example of this phenomenon.The growth of the blogosphere as a force in American politics is only the latest manifestation of this trend.

The counterargument is that states are becoming increasingly savvy in their regulation of the information revolution. The code that forms the backbone of the Internet's architecture leaves several critical nodes vulnerable to regulation by governments.[3] Discriminating governments have the capacity to decide which elements of digital information they choose to let in and which elements they can screen out. Beyond information, authoritarian governments have been willing to make life uncomfortable for the citizens who use online activities to threaten the regime in power. Governments ranging from China's to Iran's to that of Belarus have demonstrated a willingness to crack down on civil society activists and bloggers who defy the state.

These contradictory trends highlight the contradictory trends inherent in analyzing how ICT affects the art and science of politics. Does the Internet empower the coercive control of governments at the expense of citizen activists, or vice versa? As someone who has at different times advanced both sides of this argument, I fully recognize and appreciate the complexities of this question.[4] In this chapter I offer a preliminary answer—that while the Internet has probably empowered nonstate actors more than states, the effect of this empowerment is not constant across all types of political environments. In open societies, there is no question that the Internet has enhanced the power of civil society vis-à-vis the state. In dealing with totalitarian governments or international governmental negotiations, the information revolution does not fundamentally affect the state's ability to advance its interests.

There is an internal tension contained in this answer, and it comes to the surface when considering the ability of online activism to trigger an abrupt shift in public attitudes toward authoritarian states. A quiescent public dramatically lowers the costs of repression for a government. However, information technologies have the capacity to dramatically redirect the "information cascades" that promote quiescence. This forces authoritarian governments into a more stark choice than they would otherwise prefer. These governments must crack down on the global flow of information even further if they wish to protect themselves from the threat of "people power" revolts. In the process, however, they deny themselves the opportunity to exploit the vast economic potential of the information society.

This chapter is divided into five sections. The next section reviews in greater depth the contrasting takes within the political science literature regarding the effect of ICT on state–society relations. The third section discusses how the information revolution has affected transaction-cost economics. This discussion serves as a useful metaphor in understanding how ICT affects the ability of civil society to mobilize and the ability of states to repress. The fourth section examines the choice states face when encountering a civil society empowered with information technology. The final section discusses the relative brittleness of authoritarian governments in a world of information cascades.

Here Come the Smart Mobs

Scholars have generated prodigious amounts of theory and evidence to support the contention that the Internet and other communication technologies empower global civil society (GCS). Part of the logic is the compatibility of their organizational structures. Most observers argue that global civil society is organized like a network, "characterized by voluntary, reciprocal, and horizontal patterns of communication and exchange."[5] Different nodes of a network must be able to exchange information in order for this type of organization to be effective. The more dense the network—in terms of the number of nodes, connections, and diversity of participants—the more effective nonstate actors can be. One undeniable trigger for the emergence of GCS has been the persistent decline in costs of transportation and communication. The development of the Internet, the proliferation of cellular phone networks, and the deregulation of air travel enhance the networking power of global civil society.

Researchers have argued that global civil society played a crucial role in a variety of international negotiations, ranging from human rights advocacy to the Landmine Convention. Perhaps the first exemplar case is the role that transnational activist networks played in the failure of the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI). The MAI was an OECD initiative launched in 1995 that would have standardized how governments could regulate foreign direct investment. A broad array of activist groups opposed the aims of the MAI and took active steps to sabotage

the negotiations. Anti-MAI organizations posted draft versions of the treaty on their Web sites. Activists, representing 600 organizations from approximately 70 countries, dogged the negotiators at the OECD headquarters in Paris. In 1998, they also protested the agreement at meetings of the WTO and UNCTAD. French officials acknowledged civil society opposition as a factor in the breakdown of negotiations.[6] Stephen Kobrin concludes: "The story of the MAI is a cautionary tale about the impact of an electronically networked global civil society."[7] Other scholars studying global civil society share this assessment, though it is not without its detractors.[8]

At the domestic level, it has been commonly predicted that the information revolution empowers civil society at the expense of the state. Internet enthusiasts have long dismissed the ability of states to block specific kinds of Internet content. In 1993 John Gilmore, a co-founder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, famously concluded: "The Net interprets censorship as damage and routes around it." Civil society activists and bloggers have played a prominent role in agitating for greater openness in repressive societies. Weblogs provided crucial information for protesters during the Ukraine's "Orange Revolution" in November and December 2004. They also provided an accessible window to global media outlets through which reporters could interpret and report on breaking news. For the protesters themselves, some blogs functioned as message boards—otherwise known as "focal points"—for coordinating street actions.

The advent of Web 2.0 technologies such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter has provided civil society activists with additional mechanisms for coordinating social action. In 2009, Facebook's vice president for global communications and public policy observed, "Some of the most interesting uses of Facebook have been for the purpose of social action, which is essentially political action" (quoted in Tselik 2009).[9] Twitter became a means of rapidly mobilizing flashmobs in Moldova; Facebook became an important forum for Pakistanis to discuss the future of their society.[10] In the aftermath of the June 2009 disputed presidential election in Iran, the U.S. State Department's Policy Planning Staff requested that Twitter delay its scheduled maintenance—to allow protesters to communicate with one another and the outside world. Graphic videos of Neda

Agha-Soltani being shot to death in Tehran were uploaded to YouTube, acting as a focal point for protesters in Iran. With the Iranian government imposing severe restrictions on the activities of Western media outlets, journalists began relying on Web 2.0 sources of information to supplement their news accounts. Prominent bloggers such as Andrew Sullivan and Nico Pitney acted as information aggregators of various Twitter feeds emanating from Iran.[11]

These anecdotes suggest that, under certain circumstances, online activists can affect politics in regimes where there is no thriving independent media sector. For starters, activist Web sites can become an alternative source of news and commentary in countries where traditional media are under state control. Blogs and social networking technologies are more difficult to control than television or newspapers, especially under regimes that are tolerant of some degree of free expression. Faced with various domestic obstacles, online activists based inside these countries, connected to diaspora communities based outside these countries, can try to influence foreign media, with knock-on effects at home. Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink note in *Activists Beyond Borders* that activists who are unable to change conditions in their own countries can leverage their power by taking their case to transnational activists, who in turn publicize abuses and lobby their governments. Keck and Sikkink call this a "boomerang effect," because repression at home can lead to international pressure against the regime from abroad. Indeed, the advent of Web 2.0 technologies allows many online activists to make direct appeals to the global public sphere, bypassing editorial gatekeepers in traditional media outlets.

The State Strikes Back

Despite the apparent symbiosis between the growth of the information society and global civil society, other scholars have pointed out that repressive states have been able to control information technologies more effectively than previously thought. Technological measures to regulate the Internet include the creation of firewalls and proxy servers, routers, and software filters to block content deemed undesirable. Nontechnological measures include the imprisonment of relevant individu-

als, active policing, high taxation, and pressuring Internet service providers (ISPs).[12] Even if these measures are not 100 percent effective, their enactment affects the cost/benefit analysis of activists seeking to use the Internet as a means of acquiring officially frowned-upon content. As Jack Goldsmith and Timothy Wu have observed, "if governments can raise the cost of Internet transactions, they can regulate Internet transactions, even if the regulation is imperfect."[13] Combined, these steps can block undesired content as well as retard Internet use.

The result has been effective government regulation of Internet content across countries. For totalitarian states, the modes of regulation have been historically crude but effective. Cuba simply outlaws the sale of personal computers to individuals; until 2002, Myanmar outlawed the personal ownership of modems.[14] The Syrian government has arrested numerous citizens for using the Internet to send information about government demonstrations.[15] Saudi Arabia censors the Internet by requiring all Web access to be routed through a proxy server that the government edits for content, blocking access to pornographic, religious, and politically sensitive material.[16] An assessment of the Saudi filtering system concluded that substantial amounts of Web content are effectively inaccessible from Saudi Arabia. Similarly successful Internet restrictions have been imposed in countries as diverse as Tunisia and Vietnam.[17]

Cross-national studies provide strong support for the argument that authoritarian and totalitarian regimes have been successful in mitigating the spread of the Internet. One 2001 study found that the combined Internet bandwidth used by eight Arab countries was roughly equal to that used by 500 cable modem subscribers in the United States. Richard Beilock and Daniela Dimitrova found that countries with lower Freedom House scores for civil liberties had significantly lower Internet usage—even after controlling for economic development. Helen Milner's research into Internet diffusion yields similar results. Using multiple measures of regime type, time series cross-sectional regressions demonstrate that, *ceteris paribus*, democracies permit much greater online access, both in terms of Internet users per capita and Internet hosts per capita.[18]

State control over the Internet goes beyond crude repression techniques, however. Authoritarian states with a greater interest in maximiz-

ing economic growth have—to date—succeeded in restricting political content on the Internet without sacrificing its commercial possibilities. Singapore would be the exemplar for this sort of regulatory framework; its government has been eager to attract foreign investment in information technologies. At the same time, a 1996 law required all political parties, religious organizations, and any individuals with Web pages discussing either religion or politics to register with the Singapore Broadcasting Authority.[19] Singapore's approach has been the model for many East Asian governments, including China's.[20] Starting in 2000, China passed a series of laws criminalizing the production or consumption of "unauthorized" political content.[21] In July 2002, China was able to persuade more than 300 Internet service providers and Web portals, including Yahoo!, to sign a voluntary pledge refraining from "producing, posting, or disseminating pernicious information that may jeopardize state security and disrupt social stability."[22] The central government also rerouted attempts to access search engines like Google to search engines owned or regulated by the government.[23]

State efforts at censorship have also succeeded in disrupting Web 2.0 technologies when it serves government interests. Governments can stymie their citizens' access to a large fraction of the blogosphere by filtering out standardized blog domains such as Blogger and Typepad. In 2005, China required all bloggers with independent Web sites to register with the government. Microsoft, acceding to the Chinese regime's request, also blocked blog entries that contained words like "freedom," "democracy," "human rights," and "demonstration."[24] Google and Yahoo! took similar steps.

Increasingly, however, coercive governments are learning how to turn Web 2.0 technologies to their advantage. By monitoring social networking sites like LiveJournal, Belarusian authorities were able to end the use of "smart mob" tactics in 2006; as Evgeny Morozov observes, "social media created a digital panopticon that thwarted the revolution; its networks, transmitting public fear, were infiltrated and hopelessly outgunned by the power of the state. . . . The emergence of new digital spaces for dissent also [led] to new ways of tracking it."[25] Similarly, the Iranian government struck back at Green Revolution protesters by identifying their leadership through their use of Facebook and Twitter. Expatriates

who criticized the regime discovered that their relatives still in Iran faced persecution.[26] Nor is this activity limited to authoritarian states—the Israeli military has formed a unit to combat anti-Israeli rhetoric on Web 2.0 platforms.[27]

A Transaction Costs Metaphor

As the previous section suggests, parsing out how ICT affects the tug-of-war between states and civil society activists is exceedingly difficult. Metaphorically, the problem is akin to the one economists face when predicting how the communications revolution would affect the optimal size of the firm. Beginning with Ronald Coase, economists have argued that individuals face transaction costs when they use the market, and that these costs determine the optimal size of firms.[28] Transaction costs can range from the time spent searching for more information about prices, costs, and the reputations of other buyers and sellers. If these costs of market exchange exceed those of more hierarchical governance structures—that is, firms—then hierarchy is the optimal choice.

As communication costs have fallen over the past years and decades, the obvious prediction from transaction costs economics would have been a concomitant decline in the optimal size of the firm.[29] There were lots of predictions about how the communications revolution would lead to an explosion in independent entrepreneurship.[30] Empirically, however, there has been minimal change. Corporate size remains relatively unchanged in the aggregate. To be sure, the Internet has encouraged firms to engage in various forms of outsourcing, offshoring, and subcontracting as a form of experimentation in management.[31] This has not affected aggregate firm size, however.

Part of the reason for this lack of change has been that the information revolution has lowered the organization costs of hierarchy as well. Better data management has enabled large firms in the retail sector to rationalize their inventory management, dramatically boosting their productivity.[32] Better data mining techniques have improved the efficiency of online advertising and marketing. While individuals encounter fewer costs in contracting with the market, firms experience fewer costs in manag-

ing their internal hierarchies. Indeed, for some sectors—retail finance and professional services, for example—the information revolution has increased the optimal size of the firm.

The implications of this discussion for the Internet's effect on states and civil society should be apparent. There is a tendency among pundits to pay attention to how the Internet lowers the costs of organization among citizen activists. However, what must be acknowledged is that the Internet lowers the costs of government monitoring as well. Even if a government chooses not to censor online political activity, the enhanced monitoring capabilities make it easier for the state to anticipate and regulate civic protests.

Whom Does the Internet Empower?

Political scientists and international relations scholars think of power as a zero-sum commodity. The more power that one actor acquires, the less relative power there is for others. This begs two questions. First, even if ICT facilitates the coordination capabilities of both states and civil society groups, which actors are more empowered? Second, does the change in the distribution of power fundamentally affect politics at the domestic and global levels?

The answer to the first question is relatively clear—civil society groups benefit more from the information revolution. This is mostly due to the paucity of pre-Internet tools these groups had at their disposal. The nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that form the backbone of global civil society lack significant amounts of the hard power resources that governments possess. NGOs are characterized by limited budgets and small staffs and have a limited ability to compel state action. Long before the information revolution, governments were already able to rely on a welter of coercive instruments. The information revolution has allowed NGOs to better utilize their political tools. It has allowed previously nonexistent actors, such as bloggers, to make their political presence felt. Although the net shift in the distribution of power is less than cyberenthusiasts believe, the size of preexisting coercive resources means that the marginal benefit from the Internet is lower for governments than for nongovernmental actors.

Is this shift in the distribution of power an important one, however? The answer to this question has less to do with the power of information technology and more to do with the power of norms. Even if the Internet empowers global civil society, the question is whether governments are willing to tolerate more vocal citizen activists or not. In democratic governments, the stable rule of law automatically stacks the normative deck in favor of nonstate actors. Unless governments are willing to deploy their coercive capabilities, then obviously civil society elements will gain from the information revolution.

However, there are arenas of political contestation where existing norms—or the lack thereof—permit the regulation or control of civil society groups. In international negotiations, for example, global civil society advocates deride the "green room" process, in which key decisions are made by powerful states behind closed doors. However, because doing so would dilute their influence, great powers are decidedly unwilling to open up the green room. Analysis of the various UN conferences reveals that over time, states have become more adept at excluding various NGOs from key bargaining sessions and preparatory committee meetings.[33] Even in the case of content regulation of the Internet itself, global civil society and human rights activists have been thwarted in their efforts to establish a norm of online press freedom. At Tunis in 2005, for example, the first World Summit for the Information Society's official Plan of Action encouraged governments to "combat illegal and harmful content in media content," a stark reminder of the limits of civil society influence upon multilateral negotiations.[34] Because the power of liberal norms remains constrained at the global stage, it is unlikely that this state of affairs will change anytime soon.

Similarly, governments determined to cement their grip on power will also be willing to flout norms of open expression. These governments will be able to mitigate the ability of civil society groups to exploit the Internet. In February 2005 a spokesman for Amnesty International told the BBC that the organization "has recorded a growing number of cases of people detained or imprisoned for disseminating their beliefs or information through the internet, in countries such as China, Syria, Vietnam, the Maldives, Cuba, Iran and Zimbabwe. . . . It is also shocking to realize that in the communications age just expressing support for an internet

activist is enough to land people in jail."[35] Following the most recent wave of democratic transitions, authoritarian governments in Belarus and Uzbekistan stepped up their crackdowns on Internet activists in response to rising internal dissent.[36]

It would seem, therefore, that the Internet merely reinforces the preexisting dynamics between states and nonstate actors. In societies that value liberal norms—democracies—the Internet clearly empowers nonstate actors to influence the government. In arenas where liberal norms are not widely accepted—interstate negotiations and totalitarian governments—the Internet has no appreciable effect.

However, there is one category where the Internet could prove to have a pivotal effect on state–society relations: the large group of authoritarian and semi-authoritarian states that wish to exploit the economic possibilities of the information society. There is increasing evidence that greater access to global information flows increases growth opportunities for states.[37] However, any state that permits Internet or cellular phone use for commercial possibilities will face difficulties in perfectly censoring undesirable communication or halting all attempts at political coordination.

Information Cascades and Illiberal Civil Societies

Given the other coercive tools of government, imperfect censoring would appear at first glance to be a minor inconvenience. However, the wave of revolutions and uprisings in Serbia, Georgia, the Ukraine, Lebanon, Kyrgyzstan, Belarus, Moldova, Myanmar, and Iran suggests one area where information and communication technologies can have a dramatic effect—correcting information cascades.

An *informational cascade* takes place when individuals acting in conditions of uncertainty strongly condition their choices on what others have done. More formally, an information cascade is a situation in which every actor, based on the observations of others, makes the same choice independent of his/her private information signal.[38] Less formally, an information cascade demonstrates the power of peer pressure—many individuals will choose actions based on what they observe others doing.

Information cascades can often lead to suboptimal outcomes when compared with decentralized and independent decision making.[39] In

repressive societies, information cascades often lead citizens to acquiesce to government coercion, even if a broad swath of the public would prefer coordinated action. Citizen coordination and mobilization is highly unlikely among risk-averse actors unless there is some assurance that others will behave similarly. At the same time, however, a shock to the system—a scheduled election, natural disaster, sporting event, or unrest in a neighboring country—can trigger spontaneous acts of protest and trigger a reverse in the cascade. This explains why repressive societies often appear stable for years and yet without warning can face a massive scaling up of protests and civic action.[40] A little bit of public information can reverse a longstanding *informational cascade that contributed to citizen quiescence.* Even if people may have previously chosen one action, seemingly little information can induce the same people to choose the exact opposite action in response to a slight increase in information.[41]

The spread of information technology increases the fragility of information cascades that sustain the appearance of authoritarian control. This effect creates windows of opportunity for civil society groups. While governments may be able to censor Internet content and repress activists during periods of "normal" levels of unrest, that ability may not remain constant over time. This is particularly true as more and more Web 2.0 technologies are created that bypass the state's ability to control the flow of information.

At moments when a critical mass of citizens recognizes their mutual dissatisfaction with their government, the ability of the state to repress can evaporate. In some cases of "people power" mobilization, government-controlled media outlets have often switched sides and supported activists against repressive governments.[42] Such moments dramatically increase the state's price of using coercion to reassert political control. The role of new media—be it Twitter or text messaging—has the potential to be even more significant.

If repressive governments were previously unaware of the information revolution's effect on political coordination, the most recent wave of democratization has undoubtedly made them aware. Recent events in Moldova and Iran demonstrate that repressive governments can still coexist with the information revolution. If civil society movements fail to dislodge a repressive government during the first set of large-scale protests, those governments will be more likely to keep information cascades

working in their favor. And yet, while these governments can choose to crack down even harder on civil society groups that exploit the Internet, the long-term opportunity costs of such a crackdown are also on the increase. Over time, authoritarian governments will be faced with a difficult choice—accept a greater risk of popular revolt, or engage in costly acts of repression.

This does *not* mean that if repressive societies become more open, they automatically become more liberal. The term "networked civil society" conjures an image of law-abiding, civic-minded activists committed to Western notions of liberal democracy. The reality is quite different. In the United States, the Internet has fueled extremist groups dedicated to the proposition that the George W. Bush administration caused the 9/11 attacks, or that Barack Obama is actually a radical Muslim not born in the United States. As Cass Sunstein has observed, online networking allows for information to be filtered through rigid ideological lenses, contributing to more extreme political beliefs.[43]

These effects are equally likely to be at play in the rest of the world. The 1979 revolution in Iran and 1994 genocide in Rwanda showed that information technologies are conduits for any kind of information transmission—not just "desirable" forms. Extremists, criminals, terrorists, and hypernationalists have embraced the information society just as eagerly as classical liberals. Insurgents have used text messaging from cell phones to recruit, track, and intimidate other Iraqis—as well as set off improvised explosive devices. One of the most robust forms of online activism in China has been nationalist outrage over Chinese investments in the United States. In Lebanon, the political actor that has adapted to Web 2.0 technologies the quickest has been Hezbollah. YouTube is popular among Mexican criminal gangs because they can upload assassination videos as a form of intimidation. Russian nationalists contributed to cyberattacks against Georgian Web sites and have targeted ethnic minorities via Google Maps.[44]

The U.S. State Department has begun to invest serious resources in the use of online technologies to promote civic activism. In November 2009, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton announced the Civil Society 2.0 Initiative to build the capacity of grassroots organizations though the use of blogs, social networks, and other Web 2.0 technologies. In her announcement, she pledged that the United States would "send experts

in digital technology and communications to help build capacity" for civil society groups worldwide.[45] This initiative might yield the desired results, but it suffers from the misperception that these technologies aid only "good" groups. It is also possible that the initiative could fail because of the coercive apparatus of a repressive government—or succeed in empowering illiberal forces worldwide.

Notes

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