

The paper 'Political Change in the Digital Age: The Fragility and Promise of Online Organising' was given by a team of authors from the Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University. It was published for the first time on December 9, 2010. Along with portions of this paper, we are publishing the opinion of Jillian York, a Coordinator of this Center, which is dedicated to the recent revolts in Tunisia and Egypt, as well as the role played by social media in these particular events.

POLITICAL CHANGE IN THE DIGITAL AGE: THE FRAGILITY AND PROMISE OF ONLINE ORGANIZING

Bruce Etling, Robert Faris and John Palfrey

Mobs, Movements and Organizations

Popular protests, social movements, and civil society organizations represent different manifestations of social action and advocacy groups. It seems natural that the Internet benefits these bottom-up, grass roots groups since, as Yochai Benkler and others have theorized, the Internet lowers the costs of participation for citizens, increases the autonomy of the individual, gives individuals greater choice in the content they consume and the political issues they find most salient, and dilutes the power of traditional elites, gatekeepers, and institutions. The affordances of digital technologies influence the formation and activities of civil society groups, which we divide into three categories: mobs, movements and civil society organizations (CSOs).

Mobs and Episodic Popular Protests

While mass popular protests are by no means a new phenomenon, several examples suggest that digital tools facilitate their formation. Howard Rheingold argues that new technologies allow people to act in concert – in smart mobs – even when they do not know each other, and in ways they could not previously conceive, because the devices they use have both communication and computing capabilities. Two early examples of cell phone-enabled smart mobs are the 1999 anti-globalization street protests

in Seattle and the massive anti-Estrada protests in the Philippines that forced the President from office. A more recent example is the No Mas FARC protest, in which a young Colombian was able to successfully mobilize 13 million people to join in protests in Colombia and several other countries using Facebook. This was an important event given the prior reluctance of many to publicly denounce the FARC and fear of reprisals. In general, online mobilization of the 'mob' sort is episodic and more likely to be spontaneous.

Social Movements

Charles Tilly describes social movement as campaigns with a clear, long-term objective to 'right a wrong' that often has been inflicted on a well-specified population. Social movements consist of multiple means-ended actions, whose goal is to correct the wrong suffered. Tilly describes the actions of social movements as symbolic, cumulative, and indirect. **Unlike flash mobs or smart mobs, social movements hold out almost no hope that any single event will achieve their stated objective of ending an injustice or persuading authorities to enact a needed law.** While social movements operate for a longer period of time than mobs, they are rarely permanent, and frequently break up when they achieve their objectives, although sometimes they morph into persistent civil society institutions or political parties, if favor-

able political and regulatory conditions exist.

The Green Movement in Iran is best viewed as a social movement. It is hard to imagine a successful social movement today that would not seek to leverage the Internet and social media to achieve their short and long term goals. President Obama's election campaign may be seen ultimately as one of the first successful Internet-driven social movements.

Social movements differ from mobs in a number of ways. First, they are focused on a single, long-term goal. Second, they may take years to achieve that goal, so they are far more persistent and focused than smart mobs or one off political protests. Third, they will have more identifiable leadership to drive the agenda and mobilize participants. Fourth, they will tend to have more developed organizational structures.

Civil Society Organizations

The primary attribute that sets CSOs apart from mobs and social movements is their permanence – or at least expected permanence. They also have all the trappings of any other traditional offline institution: leadership, staff, advisory boards, office space, and today, an online presence and social media strategy. While all of these organizing models may entail a mix of bottom-up and top-down hierarchical structures, CSOs tend to have a higher degree of top-down organization

and mobs the least.

While we find it is analytically useful to classify online organizing in the taxonomy described above, these are not hard and fast categories. There are examples of smart mobs that become social movements and movements that develop into more permanent civil society organizations. An interesting example is MoveOn.org. Started by two Silicon Valley entrepreneurs, Joan Wade and Wes Boyd, MoveOn.org began as an online petition to protest the impeachment of President Bill Clinton. It has since evolved into a multi-issue organization that today is closer to a political umbrella institution that advocates progressive policy issues, as well as a political action committee, which collects and distributes political donations to candidates it supports.

Online Organizing and Contentious Politics

Flash mobs, social movements and CSOs in consolidated democracies can use digital tools to motivate participants, organize protest actions, gain new adherents, capture attention of the mainstream media, and otherwise exert political influence, thanks in large part to strong protections for freedom of speech and association, and the high levels of Internet and cell phone penetration. It is this type of environment that allowed the Obama campaign to develop a highly sophisticated online organizing strategy that combined top-down hierarchical organizing with the energy and enthusiasm of bottom-up emergent structures.

The Internet and digital tools notwithstanding, hierarchical organizations with strong networks – the mainstay of civil society in consolidated democracies – are not a viable option in authoritarian states. CSOs, whose offline activities are already highly regimented and watched by the state, are not exempt from the same scrutiny

and restrictions in their use of digital tools. CSOs are easy targets; their staff can be harassed or arrested and registration permits can be revoked if they stray outside the lines of accepted political organization.

The 2007 Burma protests occupy the grey area between a flash mob and a social movement. Instigated by rising gas prices, protests escalated and encompassed thousands from across society, notably including a large number of monks. Cell phones and video cameras played a critical role in reporting the events to the world. This reporting by citizen journalists and activists undoubtedly fed a sense of international support and would have strengthened the resolve of protestors. There is little evidence to suggest that digital tools were widely used to organize the protests.

The experiences from the Green Revolution in Iran follow a similar pattern. **Although there was a great deal of excitement about the role of Twitter in Iran after the presidential election, more recent evidence indicates that Twitter conversation about the Iranian protests occurred mostly among those in the West, and most likely was not used by Iranians to organize.** Instead, Twitter and other social media were used to report protest events as they unfolded, replacing the foreign press and also creating international support for the movement.

Efforts at digital organizing in Iran do not appear to have been effective. In the run-up to the disputed election, the Mousavi campaign sought to use Facebook to rally supporters. The government responded by simply blocking access to Facebook. Online communities that congregate at a single URL are easily dismantled; organizations that rely on a centralized nodes and hierarchical structures are trivial to break up.

The activities of social movements will gain influence only to

the extent that they are able to avoid the scrutiny and controls of the state. The use of digital tools does not lessen the ability of the state to crack down on leaders and disrupt social organizing. A possible alternative for CSOs and social movements in hostile online environments is to operate under the veil of anonymity. However, anonymity diminishes the effectiveness of the very factors that facilitate effective social and political organizing: leadership and displays of unity and commitment. It is therefore not surprising that there are no examples of influential political movements comprised of anonymous participants. These meager alternatives greatly diminish the potential for online organizing in states that are intent on preventing such activity.

Smart mobs, however, particularly where they emerge organically and take governments by surprise, may be possible in all but perhaps the most restrictive authoritarian regimes. In a few cases, the ability of a mob to quickly overwhelm unprepared governments has been successful. The cell phone-aided resignation of Estrada in the Philippines is perhaps the best example of political change that was preceded by mass protests; other offline examples include the quick fall of the governments in Serbia and Kyrgyzstan. In other cases, short-lived protests may induce little or no change. The failure of the 2007 protests to topple the regime in Burma is an apt example.

The Uncertain Future of Digital Organizing

An interesting prospect is that digital communities will emerge to serve as venues for deliberation and to provide collective leadership for smart mobs. Currently, the closest manifestation to such a decentralized deliberative body is the blogosphere. The Egyptian blogosphere is a possible example. It is comprised almost entirely

by those in opposition to the government, and includes a range of opposition voices, including secular-minded bloggers connected to the Kefaya movement, more conservative Muslim Brotherhood bloggers, and those dedicated to stopping torture and abuse by police. Many of these communities exist both online and off, some loosely affiliated and some with tighter networks. These groups serve as ideal outlets for sharing stories and exchanging visions of change.

These online communities in Egypt promote reform and serve as a rallying point when key events take place such as the arrest of bloggers and activists. Reform movements may be pushed forward by ideas and reports of injustice, such as the treatment of Khaled Said, but they are sustained by communities, such as these loosely affiliated online communities in Egypt. It is an open question whether these communities can emerge as coherent social movements while

remaining decentralized bottom-up institutions.

The Russian drivers movement offers another example where online organizing is contributing to a social movement, but also shows that change will most likely be limited to improved 'responsive authoritarianism' instead of fundamental political change. The core of this movement includes car clubs, such as the Federation of Car Owners, that organize largely online. They have organized successful protests against increased taxes, traffic police corruption, police scandals, and a series of fatal auto accidents involving wealthy and politically connected drivers who often escape prosecution for their crimes. Indeed, there have been a number of cases where the victims are blamed, despite video or witness evidence to the contrary.

One famous incident involved a senior executive of a large Russian oil company, which spawned a video appeal by a

popular rap musician that had 600,000 hits in just a few days. Video and witness evidence are gathered, shared widely on YouTube, debated in blogs and on other online forums, and eventually picked up by mainstream media where they generate further outrage. These protest events appear to have contributed (or at a minimum, hastened the president's decision) to fire 16 high-level police officers and order a restructuring of the Interior Ministry, one of Russia's 'power ministries.'

Following the 'horns of wrath' caravan protests in a number of Russian cities, drivers also successfully halted a doubling of taxes on car owners. While this type of change is limited, and will likely not lead to a change in regime type or greater democratization in Russia, it is significant in a country where there are few remaining opportunities for bottom up political action, and the Internet is a fundamental part of it. ■

GOOGLEDOCS IS MORE CONVENIENT THAN A PAPER PAMPHLET



JILLIAN YORK is a Project Coordinator at the Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University. She is involved with Global Voices Online, where she serves as an author on the Middle East/North Africa team, as well as Global Voices Advocacy. She is also a member of the Committee to Protect Bloggers

Exclusively for RJ

In both Egypt and Tunisia, social media and other technologies have been widely employed for protest purposes. In Tunisia specifically, Twitter and Facebook, as well as blogs and videos, have often been used to help fill in the coverage gap left by the mainstream media. Tunisians felt that their story was not being accurately portrayed, and thus uploaded videos, photos and other media to help inform the world.

In Egypt, we saw lots of organisation happening online prior to the beginning of the protests on January 25. **On Twitter, Egyptian activists pre-selected the hashtag #jan25 to represent their struggle** and that tag is now being widely used by media, supporters, and Egyptian residents on the ground in order to

aggregate information. **On Facebook, Egyptians have organised specific elements of the protest**, ranging from how to behave to what to wear and what to bring with you, as well as how to handle arrests or react in the case of tear gas attacks.

A lot of these tools were used in a very organic way. For example, a shared Google Doc was used in place of a paper pamphlet since, that way, it can be kept updated without having to make new prints or copies.

A Google Doc is better than paper because an unlimited number of people have access to it and it doesn't have to be reprinted each time there is an update: you simply need to have the skills to publicise it widely.

And if you need as many people as possible to see a video during as short a time period as possible, then you can download it via Facebook. For example, in Syria, we recently saw young people post videos of classroom abuse on Facebook and this action resulted in the firing of several abusive teachers. In practice, Twitter has also been used to help locate missing individuals.

But without the will of the people, any technology is useless. Without the desire and means for an uprising, one would not happen; these technologies simply make it easier for people to communicate. ■