A Tenuous Balance: The Evolving Role of the Internet in Facilitating Dissent

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ABSTRACT:

The paper is concerned with examining the role of internet communications technology in the political process, arguing that the internet has given rise to an unprecedented fluid and decentralized information exchange which, until now, has aided protesters' aims. The paper also argues that, while the balance of power on the internet currently favors the individual over the state, the playing field is already tilting towards government control. The methodology of the paper consists in comparisons between the Occupy, Puerta del Sol, Orange, and Euromaidan protests with earlier protests which took place between 1989 and 1997. The paper then opens a discussion on the current state of the internet, exploring the European “right-to-be-forgotten” and similar European regulation, and discusses American whistleblower Edward Snowden's actions and their European impact.

# Introduction

Dissent against established authority is an important process of renewal within society. Dissent, as defined in this paper, is the spreading of ideas that deviate from the existing social order. At best, a dissenting voice represents the first step towards positive change. At worst, dissent can destabilize existing fair and free democratic institutions. So, while dissent can be dangerous, the right to dissent, to openly speak out against what one perceives to be wrong is an essential element of free society.

The paper argues that the role of the internet in public discourse has been growing over the past 25 years, and it now plays a fundamental role in the process of dissent. The first section of the paper focuses on mass protest movements. It argues that the horizontal nature of the internet has helped protest movements achieve their aims, but also that new suppression technologies available governments threaten to change this dynamic.

The second section discusses the tremendous influence governments exert on the general tone of discussion and dissent on the internet. In general, EU and US governments do not suppress mass movements directly; instead they intentionally and unintentionally shape the overall tone of the internet through policies and regulations.

# Part I: Protest

# Movement Comparisons

The past 25 years have seen many mass movements take advantage of the internet to achieve their objectives. The internet reduces the barriers to communication (Warf & Grimes, 1997) and in doing so changes how movements develop. Manuel Castells, in his influential 2009 book *Communication Power,* developed the notion that flatter, more horizontal movement power structures are finally feasible because the internet has dropped the cost of communication to nearly zero. Before the internet, only top-down organizations possessed the organizational capacity necessary to communicate effectively across long distances. The anti-global, Orange, Euromaydan, M15, and Occupy movements have benefited from this new power dynamic.

The anti-global movement emerged in the late 90’s and is one of the first movements to take advantage of internet connectivity – albeit in a limited fashion. Unhappy with the undemocratic influence wielded by the global financial industry and international decision-making bodies like the G8, protesters took to the streets. The famous 1999 Battle of Seattle pitted protesters against the World Trade Organization. Movement organizers used mobile phones to relocate as police positions evolved. And during the 2001 G8 protests in Genoa, organizers sent street maps to activists ahead of time to facilitate organization (Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2010). The internet did not play a major role because at that time the internet was not very functional. Connecting to the internet meant going to a desktop computer, not pulling out a phone, so it could only be used during pre-movement coordination.

November of 2004 marked the Orange Revolution. After election fraud in the Yanukovych vs. Yuschenko election, the electorate mobilized with a peaceful sit-in, forced a third round of elections (which this time were fair), and elected Yuschenko instead of perpetuating the current regime. Aside from the influential Channel 5 television news, which refused to self-censor, the traditional media kept quiet. The outspoken voices in this campaign were based online, in media initiatives founded in the early 2000’s such as Pravda, and through activist organizations including Maidan and Pora. (Goldstein, 2007).

The 2011 M15 and Occupy were loosely defined anti-capitalist media movements. The biggest technological shift between this movement and those before was the diffusion of smartphones across Europe and the United States (Costanza-Chock, 2012; Monterde & Postill, 2013). This technology facilitated not only pre-movement planning and organization, but also meant that the internet remained accessible during protest actions.

The 2011 Spanish Puerta del Sol movement (also known as 15M) began on the night of May 15, 2011, when a group of protesters angry about the high unemployment, weak economy, and rising inequality in Spain decided to camp out overnight in the Puerta del Sol square (Anduiza, Cristancho, & Sabucedo, 2013). After a forceful eviction, those involved spread the news quickly via social media and email lists, and by the afternoon of May 17, the movement had exploded. Over the course of the subsequent months, 15M demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of modern media, distributing videos, photos, and documents via radio, websites, social media platforms, and word of mouth. (Anduiza et al., 2013; Grueso, 2012; Monterde & Postill, 2013). M15 embodied the modern adaptable protest model.

By 2013 and Euromaydan, the internet was accessible to many more Ukrainians, who used it to dissent against the government’s refusal to sign an association agreement with the European Union. Protesters also expressed discontent against the system itself, arguing that the Orange Revolution of 2004 had failed to do more than change the top leadership of a fundamentally corrupt government (Khmelko & Pereguda, 2014). As in the cases of M15 and Occupy, smartphone video recordings of police brutality played an important role in galvanizing popular resistance (Khmelko & Pereguda, 2014).

Writing after the events of the Orange revolution, Goldstein (2007) contends that activists made better use of the internet than the government, and therefore the relative advantage of the medium was in their favor. In all of the movements examined in this section, it appears as though the relative advantage of the internet favored the protesters. However, the outright deactivation of the internet in several countries during the 2011 Arab Spring, and the presence of new repressive technologies demonstrates that governments are adapting these technologies to their advantage. (Hussain & Howard, 2013).

# Government Responses to Mass Movements

If a government does not agree with the objectives of a specific protest movement, it can choose to suppress it. Non-disruptive techniques – the “hearts-and-minds” strategies – are more likely to avoid a backlash than direct suppression techniques (Siegel, 2011) but to understand the true balance of power over the internet both technique categories must be discussed.

Eriksson et al. (2009) break down control over the internet into three dimensions: access, functionality, and activity. The first dimension, controlling internet access, translates into blocking internet access during manifestations. In Europe and the United States, governments have neither the jurisdiction nor the power to demand the deactivation of the entire network. In the highest-profile case to date, California Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) police disabled wireless signal at several metro stations during a period of 2011 unrest – and immediately received widespread criticism and comparisons to the former Egyptian dictator Hosni Mubarak (Chittum, 2012; Empson, 2011; Mills, 2011).

Less disruptive, less restricted, and harder to trace technologies exist in the form of signal jammers and IMSI catchers. A signal jammer is a device which emits powerful signals at frequencies designed to disrupt all electromagnetic communication in a limited area. They are relatively simple to manufacture, and are produced around the world. If activated in a protest zone, a jammer would indiscriminately block all radio-frequency-based-communication within its range. Private firms from all over the world manufacture such jammers, including models which are built into normal-looking cars and developed for the express purpose of disrupting mass demonstrations (“Vehicular Jamming Solution,” 2014) but also for other purposes, such as protection from Improvised Explosive Devices in warzones (“Selex ES GUARDIAN,” n.d.).

The second tool at the disposal of governments are IMSI catchers: fake cell towers that trick cell phones into connecting with them instead of real cell towers. Unlike a signal jammer, an IMSI catcher tracks every device that connects to it and can serve as a man-in-the-middle in the network, reading everything. IMSI catchers track all data sent through them and can be programmed to allow or disallow any communication on a user-by-user basis. IMSI catchers can even deliberately run down the target’s smartphone battery (“PIRANHA,” n.d.).

If a government wants to crack down on a movement, it can use several general tactics: infiltrate movement communications, track the every move of individual users, and, if all else fails, jam the network completely. Western governments have never employed these techniques systematically and effectively, thanks to strong democratic traditions, but they exist and could one day be used to stifle dissent – hence, they deserve mention for informed debate.

# Part II: State of the Internet

In the second part of this article, we shift focus from mass movement tactics and counter-tactics to a broader issue: how government policy shapes the internet.

Professor Siegel[[1]](#footnote-2) of Duke University writes that information technology simultaneously improves the ability to coordinate dissent, and improves the ability of governments to intervene. Thus far, we have seen improved coordination of dissent, but effective digital resistance has been conspicuously absent. The lack of the second half is explained simply: it has taken time for governments to learn how to put together effective counterstrategies. It is easy for an individual to distribute a message using with an internet-connected device. Governments, on the other hand, have been slow on the uptake due to bureaucratic inertia and a skill gap. In a 2004 report comparing EU and US approaches to internet jurisdiction, Chen noted that the European Union in general, much less European governments, lacked skilled information technology workers. However, we are finally seeing governments get over technical hurdles and learn how to use these technologies in their favor. Italian technocrat Mario Monti expressed support for a European Single Market in a 2010 report to the European Commission; this initiative was finally passed into law in early May of this year (Traynor, 2015). Passing these common-sense policies indicates a growing familiarity with digital technologies at the European level.

# Policy

The greatest strength of the internet is the fact that it is a single network which unifies most of the world. A significant risk to the open culture of the internet is the potential for balkanization, or fragmentation, of the internet along regional or political lines – for an example, see China’s Weibo. Even if a state has no intention to censor, regionalizing the internet recreates barriers between cultures and promotes chilling effects. Between the United States and the European Union, the right to be forgotten, and the permissibility of state surveillance are critical and unresolved issues which threaten the unity of the internet as a medium for free information exchange.

In January 2012, the EU Commissioner for Justice announced the creation of the right to be forgotten on the internet. The idea of this right is to give individuals the power to remove information about themselves that is no longer relevant. This right develops the existing right to privacy established in many European countries, including France’s right to oblivion (Rosen, 2012). While this sounds good in theory, the ability to remove information on the internet raises the very real specter of censorship. The United States, on the other hand, has “traditionally emphasized freedom of expression over privacy, as a fundamental value” (Bennett, 2010). For a multinational trying to do business in both areas, it becomes difficult, technologically and in terms of policy, to implement a cohesive strategy. Difficult as it may be to reconcile two diametrically opposed positions, finding a middle ground between promoting free speech and protecting privacy is in the best interest of everyone. The alternative is a splintered network – one which is less conducive to cross-border dissent.

Wikileaks in 2011 and the case of Edward Snowden in 2013 are examples of how US policies are fostering “chilling effects” on the internet. In 2011, Wikileaks made over 250,000 sensitive US diplomatic cables available to five major newspapers, which then published a fraction of them. On the leaks, Defense Secretary Robert Gates wrote:

Other nations will continue to deal with us. They will continue to work with us. We will continue to share sensitive information with one another. Is this embarrassing? Yes. Is it awkward? Yes. Consequences for U.S. foreign policy? I think fairly modest (Benkler, 2011).

The United States initiated a shock and awe campaign against Wikileaks to deter future leaks, as theorized in an earlier 2008 Pentagon Report (Benkler, 2011). The US Government portrayed Wikileaks as an irresponsible organization whose leaks jeopardized the safety and security of the United States, despite the lack of evidence supporting that claim. The subsequent chilling effect snowballed and became immense, as demonstrated in two examples. First, under pressure, Visa, Mastercard, and Paypal’s suspended Wikileaks financial accounts. Second, across the country, American college students received warnings that looking at the leaked cables endangered their chances of getting jobs with the United States Government (Benkler, 2011). These are examples of a government influencing the internet by pressuring citizens to conform to certain digital activity.

Edward Snowden restarted the debate with his 2013 leaks detailing the surveillance capacities of the United States Government. Snowden, in concert with the Guardian and other sources, revealed the immense depth and breadth of United States surveillance programs, programs which lack adequate safeguards to prevent misuse (MACASKILL & DANCE, 2013). Europe is much more focused on privacy than the United States (Bennett, 2010). If people are afraid that their government is tracking their thoughts, writings, and actions without probable cause or a warrant, people may self-censor out of fear.

# Conclusion

For the past two and a half decades, the internet has been instrumental for protest movements around the world. The internet has changed the dynamics of protests, but the fundamentals remain unchanged: if people are unhappy enough they will do something about it.

Contrary to simplistic internet-optimist perspectives, challenges to openness have already emerged and will continue to emerge. From a purely technical perspective, the internet has a number of weak points which governments can exploit to disrupt protest movements. Signal jammers and IMSI catchers have not been used with malicious or counter-democratic intent in Europe nor the United States, but they exist, and their effective application would likely stifle a movement’s digital communications.

Government policy significantly influences the internet’s overall atmosphere. Mass movements have benefited from a general lack of government savvy, but this advantage is now evaporating as governments slowly catch up to speed. Recent US Government actions have fostered international chilling effects, encouraging self-censorship and making people less likely to speak their minds online. In the words of Evgeny Morozov, “preserving the liberating potential of the net will be hard work” (Morozov, 2011).

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1. Email correspondence with D. Siegel, author of: (Siegel, 2011) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)