

Digital Networks, Democracy, and Dictatorship

Course Syllabus

Fall 2012

CourseNo: INAFU6206_001_2012_3
Meeting Location: INTERNATIONAL 402B
Meeting Time: M 09:00A-10:50A

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Course Hashtag: #SIPA402

About The Course

Since the beginning of the year there have been significant changes in North Africa and the Middle East. Zine El Abidine Ben Ali had ruled Tunisia for 20 years, and Hosni Mubarak reigned in Egypt for 30 years. Yet their bravest challengers were 20- and 30-year-olds without ideological baggage, violent intentions, or clear leaders. Political change in these countries inspired activists across the region. Some tough authoritarian governments responded with tear gas and rubber bullets, others with policy concessions, welfare spending, and cabinet shuffles. The groups that initiated and sustained protests had few meaningful experiences with public deliberation or voting, and little experience with successful protesting. These young citizens were politically disciplined, pragmatic, and collaborative. Where did they come from? How do young people growing up in modern, entrenched, authoritarian regimes find political inspirations and aspirations? Are digital media important parts of the contemporary recipe for democratization?

Social media played a central role in shaping political debates in the Arab Spring. A spike in online revolutionary conversations often preceded major events on the ground. Social media helped spread ideas about political change across the borders of authoritarian states. Technologies such as mobile phones, computers, and the internet, have become a fundamental information infrastructure for political communication during elections—even rigged elections. Contemporary elections are ideal occasions for revealing the processes of social computing, because it is in these focused moments that political parties, civil society groups, journalists and the voting public that opinion is configured and reconfigured. Twitter is a tool that organizes collective action in Moldova, YouTube hosts video content that expose corruption in Tunisia and human rights abuses in the United Arab Emirates. In Iran, the internet, mobile phones and a host of digital tools quickly became means of coordinating mass protest and circumventing restrictive state media during the summer elections of 2009. Elections in developing countries

with restrictive media systems—such as those forthcoming in Egypt—are ideal sites for investigating the process of social computing because it is in those places where information and communication technologies (ICTs) are the primary means of conducting independent political communication.

In 1998, Suharto's rule over Indonesia was broken by a student movement that successfully used mobile phone infrastructure to organize their protests. During Kyrgyzstan's Tulip Revolution of 2005, democratic leaders used mobile phones to organize at key moments to throw out a dictator. When the authoritarian government of Kazakhstan shut down opposition websites, democratic organizations moved their content to servers in other countries. Threatened political elites in authoritarian regimes and emerging democracies often try to strip social movements of communications tools: Iran and Albania have blocked internet gateways and mobile phone networks during politically tumultuous periods. In Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Syria, blogs and YouTube submissions are nascent deliberative democratic practices and reflect the real opposition there. Two years ago, a Tunisian citizen used digital photos from the websites of plane watching clubs to track the Tunisian President's wife using the government plane for shopping trips, causing a public debate about the government use of taxpayer funds in a country not known for media openness. Azeri youth have begun producing their own national news broadcasts, distributing them through YouTube. In these countries, as in Egypt, the internet is the primary place for open dialogues about race, gender, and the interpretation of Islamic texts. In the United States, social media has come to serve both the campaign managers of traditional political parties and the mobilization strategists of the #Occupy movement.

Yet there are also important examples of how social media can be a tool of authoritarian rule. There are plenty of examples of strong dictators who use social media to track down and entrap activists, and several examples of authoritarian regimes incorporate social media in counter-insurgency propaganda. So how can we make sense of the multiple and complex outcomes of social media use? Are there ways of "adding it all up", or is the role of social media in political change different in every country?

Readings

All readings will be made available electronically. In order to focus our discussions, students will introduce readings, offer their critique, and suggest what important questions remain unanswered. Some of the readings for particular weeks may be reorganized so that we can be responsive to current events and student interests.

Meeting Schedule

Meeting 1, September 10th: Introductions

This first meeting will be an opportunity to review the syllabus, make introductions, and begin the conversation about what countries and crisis we will want to follow during the semester. As much as this class is about investigating the connection between technology diffusion and political change, we will be doing "real-time social science", meaning that students will have to

be following current events in international relations. This first meeting will include a substantive lecture by the instructor on digital media and the Arab Spring.

Meeting 2, September 17th: Big Questions about Causes and Consequences

In this class, we will discuss some of the basic network terms that are thrown around by international relations scholars and pundits, and read both the original essay about strong/weak ties and some recent examples of how these concepts are used. USIP, [Blogs and Bullets I: New Media and Contentious Politics](#), [Blogs and Bullets II: New Media After the Arab Spring](#). Guest: Mary Joyce from digital-activism.org.

Meeting 3, September 24th: Life and Lifestyle as Politics

This week, we will discuss collective action theory, how it is used to understand social uprising, and how it can be used to help evaluate the impact of digital media on contemporary political life. Granovetter, Mark. (1973). "The Strength of Weak Ties." *The American Journal of Sociology*, 78(6), 1360-1380. Gladwell, Malcolm, "[Small Change: Why the Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted](#)," *New Yorker*, October 4, 2010. Shirkey, Clay, "[The Political Power of Social Media](#)", *Foreign Affairs*, January 2011.

Meeting 4, October 1st: Technology and Participation

While there are examples of how digital media is used in times of crisis, this week's discussions will be focused on the more gradual changes in political culture that emerge through digital media. Calhoun, Craig. "Community Without Propinquity." *Sociological Inquiry* 68(3), 373-397. Howard, Philip. (2010). *The Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Information Technology and Political Islam* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press), first half.

Meeting 5, October 8th: Communication Networks and Collective Action I

This week we will return to the study of networks, with a specific look at the key concepts and definitions as they are broadly used to refer to social phenomena. Albert Laszlo Barabasi and Eric Bonabeau, "Scale---Free Networks" *Scientific American*, 2003. Committee to Project Journalists. (2012) Special Report on Vietnam. Guest host for this class: Professor Anya Schiffrin. Email Professor Howard a few lines about the likely direction of your case study.

Meeting 6, October 15th: Communication Networks and Collective Action II

We continue the discussion of how digital networks are ultimately social networks, and investigate how activists and civil society leaders use social media for organizing in times of crisis. Howard, Philip, *The Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (New York, NY: Oxford, 2010), second half. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg. (2012) "The Logic of Connective Action: Digital Media and the Personalization of Contentious Politics." *Information, Communication and Society* 15(5), 739-768.

Meeting 7, October 22nd: States and Transparency (Let's Talk About Wikileaks)

This week's conversation will revolve around the impact of digital media on international relations writ large: actors, interests and global power. Peter Haas, "Introduction: Epistemic Communities and International Policy Coordination" in *International Organization* special issue

Knowledge, Power and International Policy Coordination 46 (1), January 1992, pp. 1-35; Ronald Mitchell, "Sources of transparency: information systems in international regimes." *International Studies Quarterly* 42(1), March 1998, pp. 109-130. Jonathan Aronson, "Power and Interdependence: International Intellectual Property Rights in a Networked World", USC, unpublished manuscript.

Meeting 8, October 29th: Does the Digital Divide Create a Political Divide?

The pernicious side of the communications revolution is the digital divide, and in this class we will discuss who is enfranchised and who is disenfranchised in the modern "information society". Henisz, W., Zelner, B., & Guillen, M. (2005). The Worldwide Diffusion of Market-Oriented Infrastructure Reform, 1977-1999. *American Sociological Review*, 70(6), 871-897. Milner, H. (2006). The Digital Divide: The Role of Political Institutions in Technology Diffusion. *Comparative Political Studies*, 39(2), 176-199. Guest: Peter Van der Windt, Voix de Kivu.

NOTE NO CLASS NOVEMBER 5th

Meeting 9, November 12th: China-The Difficult Case

China is such a special and important case it deserves in-depth study. The problems and prospects for political development in this single large country will have global implications. Jonathan Hassid. (2012). "Safety Valve or Pressure Cooker? Blogs in Chinese Political Life." *Journal of Communication* 62(2), 212-230. Patricia Moy and Yuqiong Zhou. (2007). "Parsing Framing Processes." *Journal of Communication* 57(1), 79-98.

Meeting 10, November 19th: Networks, Power and Diplomacy

Castells and Benkler are two scholars whose writings have had an impact across the social and political sciences, and this class will be dedicated to understanding the network society and the exercise of political power over networks. Manuel Castells, "[A Network Theory of Power](#)" *International Journal of Communication* (2011). Yochai Benkler, "[Networks of Power, Degrees of Freedom](#)" *International Journal of Communication* (2011). Guest Dr. Alexis Wichowski, U.S. Mission to the United Nations.

Meeting 11, November 26th: Mapping and Blogospheres

In this meeting we will look at some contemporary efforts to model and measure the impact of digital media on political phenomena, and the cases discussed will revolve around "real-time social science" and current events of the semester. John Kelly and Bruce Etling. (2008). "[Mapping Iran's Online Public: Politics and Culture in the Persian Blogosphere](#)." Harvard University, Berkman Center Publication. Guest: Dr. John Kelly, Morningside Analytics.

Meeting 12, December 3rd: Cyberwar, Cyberterrorism and Cybercrime

****Post Sandy Amendment:** With Columbia University's closure during Hurricane Sandy we lost a class. Given that November 5th is election day, and this class remains with unusually high enrollment with 24 students. The readings for this week will not be required and we will use the time to a) continue discussing the readings we have covered and b) get into student presentations of their case study work. These citations will remain here for your own interest

and you can pull them from the library if you are interested in them, but they are no longer required reading.

Digital media presents new organizational opportunities to many kinds of actors, and drug lords, rogue generals, and radical spiritual leaders also use digital media for political impact. Denning, D. "Activism, Hactivism, and Cyberterrorism: The Internet as a Tool for Influencing Foreign Policy." In *Networks and Netwars*, edited by Arquilla and Ronfeldt. Santa Monica, CA: 4 Rand Corporation, 2001. Williams, P. "Transnational Criminal Networks." In *Networks and Netwars*, edited by Arquilla and Ronfeldt. Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2001. Some student presentations. Finish coding cases of digital activism.

Meeting 13, December 10th: Student presentations.

Evaluation

Students will be evaluated through:

- participation in class discussions (20%);
- a book review that evaluates a recent title and relates the author's ideas with course themes (10%, 1,000 words, due at any time during the class). Options include
 - Benkler's *The Penguin and Leviathan*
 - MacKinnon's *Consent of the Networked*
 - Parisoer's *The Filter Bubble*
 - Robinson's *Why Nation's Fail*
 - Searle's *The Intention Economy*
 - Shirkey's *Here Comes Everybody* or *Cognitive Surplus*
 - Weinberger's *Too Big To Know*
 - Wu's *The Master Switch*
 - Zittrain's *The Future of the Internet and How To Stop It*
- contributing a series of short case studies for a public scholarship project called the Global Digital Activism Database (www.digital-activism.org), which involves analyzing, classifying and coding examples of how digital media has been used by citizens for political objectives around the world (50%, due by the twelfth class meeting); and,
- a longer commentary piece on the role of digital media in a political event and country of personal interest to the student (20%, 2,000 words, due on the final day of class and presented to class colleagues in the final weeks of class). Students are encouraged to develop case studies of a particular country or set of countries, investigate the evolution of events during a particular crisis, or compare a series of rebellions, uprisings, or crackdowns from within the same country. The first few weeks of class will be dedicated to helping students arrive at answerable research questions, and students will have a lot of freedom to study the events and countries in which they are personally interested. A draft paper outline, including research questions, the beginnings of a literature review, and short writing plan, will be due in the fifth meeting of class.

Attendance will be taken during each meeting but will formally be part of the grade. If a student asks to appeal their final grade I will consult the attendance lists as a way of determining individual levels of commitment compared to the class average.

Academic Integrity Statement

The School of International & Public Affairs does not tolerate cheating and/or plagiarism in any form. Those students who violate the Code of Academic & Professional Conduct will be subject to the Dean's Disciplinary Procedures. Cut and paste the following link into your browser to view the Code of Academic & Professional Conduct online.

http://sipa.columbia.edu/resources_services/student_affairs/academic_policies/deans_discipline_policy.html

Please familiarize yourself with the proper methods of citation and attribution. The School provides some useful resources online; we strongly encourage you to familiarize yourself with these various styles before conducting your research:

http://sipa.columbia.edu/resources_services/student_affairs/academic_policies/code_of_conduct.html

Violations of the Code of Academic & Professional Conduct should be reported to the Associate Dean for Student Affairs.