The spread of communications technology may facilitate increases in levels of anti-government violence

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By Democratic Audit UK   2016-7-8

Communications technology has developed at an almost bewildering pace since the development of the internet, with first mobiles and then smartphones ensuring that we are in near constant contact with our peers. But what impact has this had on violence, and more specifically anti-government violence. **Blake E. Garcia** *and* **Cameron Wimpy** *argue that there is a correlation between access to communications technology and aggression directed at the state and its proxies.*

A Sarajevo graveyard *Jodie Gallagher, CC BY NC 2.0*

The spread of violence across state boundaries has been a long-standing concern for democratic governments. Justifications for international military interventions often involve the stated mission to prevent the spread of violence into neighbouring states and even economic development aid is often contingent upon such prevention. Although there is strong empirical evidence that many forms of violence (e.g civil wars, domestic armed conflicts, terrorism, riots, etc.) do spread into neighbouring states, how this process occurs is still unclear.

One explanation argues that large-scale conflicts tend to generate significant refugee populations, who flee into neighbouring states. This can intensify resource competition as well as already existing ethnic frustrations, leading to the spread of conflict. A second explanation suggests that upon learning from their observation of a successful rebellion in a neighbouring country, individuals are more likely to emulate those actions to achieve a similar outcome at home.

While both arguments are compelling, the first cannot explain the spread of different types of violence that we regularly observe, such as anti-government violence, riots, and terrorism. Civil wars tend to produce refugees while other, often less intense forms of violence do not. The second explanation assumes that actors within one country are always more likely to be aware of the violent events occurring in their neighbor, rather than some more distant state, simply because they share a border. Thus, empirical tests attempting to capture spatial dependence in violence do not incorporate the variation in actors' awareness of neighbouring events, thereby potentially

overestimating the degree of dependence.

We argue that in order to emulate violent events in neighboring countries, actors must become aware of these events through their exposure to information about them. We believe that increased communications capacities in neighboring states should therefore help to facilitate the extent to which the neighboring publics emulate the violent actions of their neighbors.

This idea is not new. For example, a substantial amount of political commentary during the Arab Spring speculated about the role of social media in the spread of anti-government violence across northern Africa. We believe that this might be a more generally occurring process in less developed states where there is greater variation in access to communications capacities.

In a forthcoming article in the journal, Political Science Research and Methods, we tested the claim that increased access to communications technologies facilitate the spread of anti-government violence in an analysis of 44 African countries from 2000 to 2011. We utilised a unique spatial connectivity matrix that incorporated measures of state contiguity and access to communications technology. We found that when anti-government violence increased in one country, the expected number of violent events in its neighbours increased by 32 percent as the percentage of cell phone subscribers moved from its mean level to one standard deviation above the mean (27 percent to 57 percent of the population).

In addition, the expected number of violent events increased by 18.9 percent when the percentage of internet users increased by one standard deviation above the mean (4.49 percent to 11.23 percent of the population). In other words, greater access to communications technologies can, in fact, facilitate the spread of anti-government violence, which has potentially significant implications for democratic governments that are providing economic development aid to less developed countries.

The U.K. government, for example, spent over £10 billion last year alone in foreign economic aid, much of which went to countries included in the study presented here. This aid is often spent on development projects that include the building of mobile phone towers, wireless internet connection, and other forms of advanced communication technology. The concern then in the short term is that this aid will indirectly help to facilitate the spread of violence.

However, in the long term, it appears that higher degrees of access to this technology may be correlated with democratic institutional features that reduce the likelihood of the spread of violence. Indeed, our research shows that the spread of violence actually dissipates at significantly higher levels of mobile phone and internet usage. This might mean that our findings appear to apply only to changes in usage at already particularly low levels.

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The paper on which this blog is based won the Political Science and Research Methods 2015 Best Published Paper Award. Cambridge University Press has made the article free to access for the next year.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of Democratic Audit UK, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our comments policy before posting.

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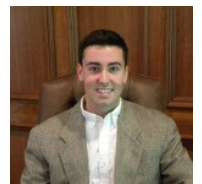
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