

Social media – why it's useless for democratic politics

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2011/09/16/social-media-why-its-useless-for-democratic-politics-usipblogs-arabspring/

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Does this thing work?

I spend a lot of time writing about the [political potential of new forms of journalism](#). Though I like to think that my [analysis of social media and the Arab uprisings of 2011](#) was cyber-realist rather than utopian. Our [report by Stella Creasy MP on using social media in UK political campaigns](#) also included some downsides amidst the digital enthusiasm. And my forthcoming book about WikiLeaks is not entirely uncritical of the new forms of political communications.

But generally I am an optimist. So listening to an excellent [web-cast on the Role of Social Media in Conflict](#) that looked mainly at digital democracy and the Arab Spring, I decided, for a change, to make a list of the qualifications, criticisms, negatives and caveats that came up about how social media does – or does not – foster healthy politics:

- **Proportionality:** remember that politics is a tiny part of Internet traffic – depends how you slice it but news and politics is probably about 1-2%
- **Different Strokes:** social media is not equally social or mediated globally. Chinese bloggers for example hardly ever hyper-link, Russians link obsessively – so blogs will have different network effects.
- **Platforms are different:** seems obvious, but the Arab political activists' use of Twitter is completely different to Facebook – the former is more for alerts, the latter for organisation, for example.
- **Politics Is Not A SM driver:** most people – even activists – are driven to social media for non-political reasons – it conveys emotion, it's fun, it's social, rather than because it is a political forum, even when it ends up having political influence (see Mumsnet)
- **Social Media Is Corporate:** so far, the interests of Google etc have generally coincided with an open internet but not always and not necessarily forever (remember the withdrawal of corporate services to WikiLeaks in the US?) But without those companies you won't have those platforms
- **SM is good for changing governments but not very good at governing:** It may even have a negative effect as we see in Egypt where those people who were very good at getting people into Tahrir Square with Facebook are less good at creating political parties, let alone running a Ministry.
- **Backlash?** See the point above. Social Media revolutions may raise expectations of popular participatory democracy and highly interactive and responsive politics that can't be delivered in government (see Obama post 2008)
- **It Doesn't Always Work:** I have argued that social media doesn't create revolutions (economics, politics, and history do). It is just a catalyst and a channel. Well, it certainly didn't in Bahrain. Despite all the conditions appearing to be in place, social media did not make the difference.

Anything you'd like to add?

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