

Social media and democratic governance: the next decade (Wilton Park paper)

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These are the notes for a presentation I gave as part of the [Wilton Park conference on 'media, social media and democratic governance'](#).



Wilton Park

This has been an extraordinary period for news and also for the way that news is created and consumed. I think that we see some substantial trends emerging are more than passing fads or exceptional circumstances.

I want to step back a little from the immediate detail of what is happening and try and put it in a conceptual framework that I think will help us frame policy ideas.

This paper is informed in diverse ways: by my role as chair of the Informed Societies Council at the World Economic Forum as well as POLIS research. We have been analysing the role of the media in the current Arab uprisings and I am currently writing a book on the significance of WikiLeaks and the other new forms of political communication. My work focuses on the impact of changing global media on national publics and the role of actors such as NGOs and political parties in the new forms of

information mediation. At the heart of my analysis is the idea and practice of journalism – or what I call networked journalism# – and how that changes as other factors such as technology or social structures change.

It is now axiomatic that we live in a new media environment and that media is itself environmental.

- The Internet and mobile telephony make communications universal and connected.
- Media is simultaneously personalised and ubiquitous, immediate and complex.
- These almost endless networks of communications are now characterised by increased speed and volume of information that is hyperlinked and interactive.

But:

Media is still subject to the shaping forces of those with power and resource and control over the wires, channels and platforms that provide these networks:

1. Commerce (cf Timothy Wu's Masterswitch puts this in a historical perspective) – business shapes markets, public access, quality and content of media through ownership, pricing and production
2. Government – shapes through Regulation, Censorship and Manipulation

So although it is an extraordinary space, the digital environment is still subject to the laws of physics, economics and politics.

There are real dangers in this new media environment of fragmentation, of a lack of access and digital divides – often internal – a loss of standards, of over-information, a failure to inform (Iran, China, local media) and a lack of investment.

But there are also opportunities provided by these new information technologies:

- building social capital through linking communities and individuals online

- improving access to information but also to services and resources through connectivity
- of improving standards of information – for example open gov't data
- Of enhancing creativity and boosting economic growth

So the new media environment is a place of policy choices – not a 'natural' ecosystem or a Wild West.

But before we discuss the policy lets first look at what's changed.

Personal Media Change

Firstly, let's understand how personal and social communication has changed:

As our research has shown in the context of families for example# – there is a co-evolution between changing social factors such as increasing longevity or education and technological change, such as increased telecommunications mobility, that is re-shaping people's personal media lives.

There is a similar process of re-shaping going on for organisations as they respond to new change factors such as climate change or in co-evolution with changing communications technologies. So business looks to new information technologies to help make production greener, for example. Technology enables but does not determine change. It is a two-way process of influence.

Public Media Change

Now let's think about how this media change impacts on public and political communications.

We only have to think about this extraordinary period of global news which most journalists think is unusual. They mean the events of the last 12 months or so, but is also the mediation of them that is different.

Consider and compare the coverage of sudden and massive events from Haiti to Japan, for example, in terms of how global attention is mobilised to one place on an extraordinary scale and with an extraordinary range of representation and connection – and then it moves on again. How does that change our understanding and response to that kind of sudden crisis? How does it change the reaction of agencies?

Think of the scale of WikiLeaks' activity in the last 12 months – bearing in mind that they have only released a fraction of the cables – but more importantly, perhaps, their immunity from sanctions and their diverse global impact. Understand that in its wake both mainstream and alternative media is changing to take advantage of these new opportunities for challenging journalism.

Think of the uprisings in north Africa and the Middle East. Of course, Twitter did not free Tunisia of a dictator. A whole series of socio-economics conditions underpinned the uprising and a range of political conditions and actions made it happen. But in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Yemen, and elsewhere, activists and governments both recognise that social media is a catalytic factor. And it is especially potent when it networks into the mainstream media such as the news channels like Al Jazeera (which are themselves a form of new media actor).

So not only is social media providing tools for change-makers, it is also showing the rest of the world more closely, more instantly (and perhaps more engagingly) what is happening.

So media changes but does power and politics?

Cyber-realism should replace cyber-utopianism and we should ask what changes are sustainable? And how can we shape those changes to political or policy goals?

We need a new typology that understands these emerging forms of political communications. They are potentially

but not necessarily more progressive.

I would agree that many of these social media are made up of weak links but in networks they become stronger. They are more diffuse which allows them to be more disruptive, dynamic and durable. This is creating a new kind of political communications and possibly new kinds of politics.

Policy Interventions and The Uncertainty Principle

Policy interventions – and especially in humanitarian and development policy – need to recognise the Uncertainty Principle. This means that media is changing rapidly and will change again. The new networked communications introduce a range of variables that mean that planning has to be more responsive and adaptable. The US State Department has recognised this in relation to WikiLeaks but also to the wider growth of global social media. So it is reviewing its internal information management processes but it is also developing much more open and interactive communications tools. Beyond that it is also deploying, somewhat controversially, policies for open digital communications as a soft power tool for its 21st century statecraft programme. If the most powerful nation on earth thinks this works, then perhaps the development world should, too.

It is important to think this through in the development context. All organisations are now media organisations and how they communicate will have impacts on their work and their public. # Disintermediation of communications provides opportunities, for example, for iNGOs to communicate directly with both donor publics and publics in countries where they work directly without relying on news media. But it also puts new ethical responsibilities upon them when they do that and new practical challenges to making that communication effective.

Media Citizenship

I have been talking about media organisations, governments and NGOs but I would like to end by putting the citizen back at the centre of this process with the idea of media citizenship:

Media Citizenship is the idea that all individuals should be enabled to participate fully in the information society. They should be empowered with media literacy in the broadest sense: skills, understanding and creativity. And all aspects of economic and political policy should now recognise that full citizenship must be based on unfettered and comprehensive access to information flows and networks.

If journalists are learning that they must become networkers than surely so should our politicians and civil society. And as we are now part of the networked journalism process this means that all of us must now attend to the ethical and policy implications of media change.

The next decade is a vital phase of what Tim Wu calls the 'media cycle' and it could shape a generational opportunity to foster media for development and democracy.

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