GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2011

INTERNET RIGHTS AND DEMOCRATISATION
Focus on freedom of expression and association online

Introduction

Alan Finlay

The authors of these country reports were encouraged to select a story or event to write about that illustrates the role of the internet in defending human rights. The result is a rich collection of reports that approach the topic of the internet, human rights and social resistance from different angles – whether discussing the rights of prisoners to access the internet in Argentina, candlelight vigils against "mad cow" beef imports in South Korea, the UK Uncut demonstrations in London, or online poetry as protest in China.

The contexts in which these stories occur are diverse, with different implications for social mobilisation using the internet. In many, the potential of the internet to galvanise progressive social protest has proved critical. In the United Kingdom (Open Rights Group) events demonstrated how social media have become the "standard mobilisation toolkit" for civil protest. In Bosnia and Herzegovina (owpsee foundation), "Facebook, with all the criticism of its privacy and security, is today the space where grassroots initiatives and informal groups in Bosnia Herzegovina start their activities, connect with each other and *do* things."

These reports also show how the internet has an extraordinary power of making visible that which many would prefer to keep secret. Indonesia (EngageMedia Collective Inc.) demonstrates how difficult and delicate documenting the invisible can be – and the country report is worth reading for practical (and ethical) issues to take into consideration. "Making visible" is not only a way of documenting and speaking out, and of mobilising widespread support for a cause; it is also used to hold authorities accountable for their actions. Activists in Jordan (Alarab Alyawm) "always take into consideration the worst that the police could do. Because of this they assign some participants the task of documenting everything in the events, especially if police attack demonstrators."

While countries like Iran (Arseh Sevom School) look to create a "halaal" internet – "one that is pure from immoral websites" – Morocco (DiploFoundation) shows how the internet can disrupt entrenched ideas of citizenship:

[T] he common citizen (...) took refuge in the social and citizen media channels to lead a radical change of the idea of the state-citizen relationship. This relationship was based on a top-down approach to decision making when it came to state policies – while the internet helped to make these decisions evolve around the citizens' needs.

In Tunisia (Arab World Internet Institute), the internet catalysed an essentially "leaderless" revolution, and in Costa Rica (Sulá Batsú), "the essential part [of the internet] is the spirit and the power of organising without organisations."

Reports show that it is not always civil society organisations with formal mandates that galvanise social resistance. Often protests are catalysed by self-organising individuals who meet online and instigate protests and campaigns for change, and who otherwise would have very little to do with civil society causes. Resistance to importing "mad cow" beef into South Korea (Korean Progressive Network Jinbonet) is sparked by spontaneous interactions amongst young people: "In the beginning, the most energetic participants were young people who had spent the entire day at school and used the internet and SMS to organise their friends and debate various issues."

The role of satire in social protest is seen in a number of reports collected here. In China (Danwei) this is felt in poems written in response to a hit-and-run incident involving the son of a deputy director at a public security bureau (known as the "My dad is Li Gang" online protests), made all the more striking in that they draw on classical Chinese poetry and philosophy:

The philosopher Mencius (*Mengzi* in Chinese, 372-289 BC) said:

君子穷则独善其身
达则兼善天下

If a gentleman is poor, he does good works in solitude; if he is rich, his work is for the good of the whole world.

The Li Gang version:

穷则独善其身
富则开车撞人

If a gentleman is poor, he does good works in solitude; if he is rich, he drives his car into people.

But what is equally striking is that many authors – often long-time activists for internet rights – show a growing ambivalence to the idea of the internet as simply a positive social phenomenon. The role of the internet activist, the reports suggest, is an increasingly complex one; and few unequivocal statements can be made about its social agency. Countries such as Bulgaria (BlueLink Foundation) show that as much as the internet can be a force for progressive political change, it offers a vehicle for reactionary politics too – a different kind of "social resistance". In that country reactionary groups are incisive in using the internet to push their agenda:

> [E]xtremist online groups are meeting more frequently offline than online social activists. While social researchers point out the growing number of Facebook groups and causes in support of neo-fascism, reminiscent of Hitler's treatment of minorities, and protest against social policies supporting the long-term unemployment of Roma, offline incidents show the neo-Nazis do act in accordance with their claims. In the summer of 2010 two cases of violence emphasised the fact that the problem of intolerance is not a dormant or discursive one any more.

The revolutions in North Africa have shown how social media can be an ally in the organisation and mobilisation of people, but also how authoritarian regimes use the internet to counter progressive social and political change. Similarly, in Thailand the internet has been used effectively to support the conservative politics of the monarchy, as Arthit Suriyawongkul (Thai Netizen Network) observes: "What can then be called a 'digital witch hunt' emerged, as users began hunting down those who were against the monarchy."

The tension between online activism and social mobilisation in public is felt throughout these reports – at times with a sense that it is difficult for authors embedded in internet practice and thinking to find words for "offline" protest and demonstration. Even though the idea that the revolutions in North Africa were "Twitter revolutions" or "Facebook revolutions" has been debunked by most, there is still a tendency to think of the internet not just as an alternate public sphere – a place of multiple counterpublics – but as something more literal: a vehicle for the creation of "cyber*countries*" populated by "netizens" that can, the South Korean report suggests, offer "cyber asylum".

While these are just ways of describing the phenomenon that the internet has become, some of the reports suggest a growing discomfort with the internet as a place of refuge, with its negative implications for active engagement in civil protest. Many reports mention the difficulty of translating support for a cause expressed through clicking on "Like" or "I'm attending" buttons on a Facebook page into public mobilisation. As Iran puts it: "The internet has also effectively turned the activist into a solitary, protesting computer user, fighting against multiple government computers."

This attention to the dangers of over-relying on the internet for social mobilisation is felt sharply in countries that either do not have access or adequate infrastructure (whether through censorship or underdevelopment). In Lebanon (Mireille Raad), for instance, activists felt excluded from the social protests taking place in the region:

> With the Arab Spring and revolutions being shared online, activists in Lebanon are feeling helpless not being able to broadcast their opinions and take on events that directly affect their own country. This showed the Lebanese that they are actually suffering from a subtle and worse form of censorship.

In Kazakhstan (Adil Nurmakov), even the most creative online interventions – a "remixed" and "redubbed" *Shrek* animation satirising a referendum – have little widespread impact because of the low levels of access in the country. In a different way, Japan shows that, in the wake of the recent tsunami, even highly developed countries face the danger of over-dependency on technology for civic mobilisation and communication.

The power of the internet to "make visible" also has the inverse effect of a kind of visibility that impacts negatively on other rights, particularly when it serves the state. In the Netherlands (Institute for Information Law), advocating for privacy rights is a key concern – it is a country that could be "sleepwalking into a surveillance society."[1] While the internet can "protect" against authoritarian regimes, it can also expose those who are already vulnerable. In Thailand:

> The personal data of victims, including their home addresses and phone numbers, were posted online. One person was even physically threatened, as the groups tracked down with reasonable accuracy – within a one-kilometre

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1   Richard Thomas, the English Information Commissioner, quoted in Ford, R. (2004) Beware rise of Big Brother state, warns data watchdog, *The Times*, 16 August 2004.

radius – where she lived (probably using social media), and offered a cash bounty to anyone who would "surprise" her at home.

But it is precisely this ambivalence towards the internet that makes the focus on online social activism for human rights such an important area to explore – and these reports, from 55 countries across the globe, make an important contribution to the discussion. The stories captured here have implications for everyone engaged and concerned with the state of the world we live in. And, as you will see, there are many worrying trends, as much as there are moments of unexpected community, of spontaneous and shared struggle made possible by the internet.

Many of these reports also offer practical advice and solutions to harness the potential of the internet to galvanise progressive social resistance effectively – actions steps for civil society – and offer ways to avoid its pitfalls. But they are not just for ICT4D specialists or internet activists. They unpack in a concrete way the growing implications of the internet for the political sphere – and the widening possibilities for social activism and engagement that are opening up for the person in the street. ∎

In the year of the Arab uprisings **GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2011** investigates how governments and internet and mobile phone companies are trying to restrict freedom online – and how citizens are responding to this using the very same technologies.

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