

REVOLUTION 2.0

THE POLITICAL IMPACT OF INTERNET AND SOCIAL MEDIA PROLIFERATION
IN AUTHORITARIAN COUNTRIES

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ABSTRACT

**NICOLAS LAURENT WENKER: Revolution 2.0: The Political Impact
of Internet and Social Media Proliferation in Authoritarian Countries
(Under the direction of Dr. Graeme Robertson)**

Within recent years, Web 2.0 Social Media tools such as social networking websites, video-sharing platforms, and micro-blogs have proliferated across the world at an exponential rate. While the spread and effects of such technologies have been well-documented in democratic societies, there has been a comparative poverty of insight into Social Media's implications for authoritarian countries. This void requires urgent redress, as it is within such countries that these new tools may have their greatest impact on the affairs of the 21st century. Civil societies and social movements have used Social Media to challenge authoritarian governments on an unprecedented scale even as these same technologies have provided repressive regimes with new opportunities for consolidating power. This thesis draws on the preliminary scholarship and a rich spectrum of recent empirical developments in order to argue that Social Media proliferation will likely prove more advantageous for civil societies than for authoritarian governments.

DEDICATION

To the brave and selfless activists who struggle in Tahrir Square, Homs, Moscow, Beijing, and every other corner of the Earth where bastions of cowardice and violence still hold out against the dreams of a better tomorrow. Social Media and the Internet are no substitutes for human courage and passion — may your countries one day enjoy governments worthy of their people.

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PREFACE

“I call this Revolution 2.0...I say that our revolution is like Wikipedia, OK? Everyone is contributing content. You don't know the names of the people contributing the content...This is exactly what happened. Revolution 2.0 in Egypt was exactly the same.”

-Wael Ghonim, Egyptian revolution activist and former Google executive

Shortly after graduating from college in December 2008, I moved to Berlin for the first time in order to begin a fellowship at the German *Bundestag*. Although I probably should have concentrated more on my program and on enjoying my time abroad, I quickly grew to spending many of my days and nights glued to my laptop screen. I was fixated by the graphic YouTube videos and tweets detailing the violent and ruthless suppression of young Iranians my own age, courageous activists whose only crime had been to call for the same right to self-determination that so many of us in democratic countries take for granted. I wanted to do more to seriously study Social Media's role in facilitating anti-authoritarian movements. A year and a half later I found myself back in Berlin, with an opportunity to explore this very topic as the subject of my Master's thesis. Barring a major catastrophe, I believe that the spread of new Internet tools will prove to be the single most important political development of the 21st century. I can only hope that the bravery and creativity of civil activists will outpace the brutality and resources of authoritarian regimes. I look forward to seeing the full potential of the Revolution 2.0 as it unfolds across 2012 and beyond.

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I. Introduction: The Emerging Connection between Revolutions, Reforms, and RSS Feeds

Within the last few years, newspapers, televisions, and websites the world over have suddenly been flooded with stories, images, and videos highlighting the growing role of new Internet technologies in the ongoing cat-and-mouse games between the governments and civil societies of authoritarian countries. From anti-corruption bloggers in Russia to political campaigns in Iran to a revolution in Egypt, the Internet and its new Web 2.0/Social Media platforms have begun playing outsized roles in the mobilization and empowerment of otherwise disadvantaged civil societies. However, some authoritarian governments have quickly adapted to these technological developments by adopting a variety of customized and sophisticated responses, ranging from China's Orwellian policy of massive censorship and surveillance infrastructure to drastic decisions in places such as Libya and Egypt to "turn off" the Internet entirely during moments of civil unrest. This purpose of this thesis is to broadly examine the political impact of the Internet and new Social Media/Web 2.0 tools on the modern-day struggle between authoritarian regimes and civil societies.

The rapid proliferation and near-universal utility of Social Media have helped to catalyze recent outbreaks of social unrest across a wide spectrum of countries and regions around the world. The details, domestic factors, and outcomes of these conflicts have varied greatly. Social Media's impact in these struggles has likewise differed

significantly. Some examples of this diversity include Social Media's central role in mobilizing the revolution that ultimately toppled the Mubarak regime in Egypt, its disputed role in Iran's failed "Green Revolution," its positive-but-minimal footprint in anti-authoritarian protests in Yemen, and its employment as an important avenue both for challenging as well as for entrenching ruling political parties in Russia and China. This diversity offers observers a rich vein for extrapolating common trends and characteristics about how and when Social Media proliferation challenges or empowers authoritarian governments. In the monumental events that have recently occurred around the world across numerous countries and regions, striking parallels and distinct patterns have become visible as otherwise very different societies have become embroiled in similar cases of civil unrest in which Social Media-inspired activism has played a role. Identifying these common trends and characteristics offers a promising direction for understanding this new and rapidly-spreading phenomenon, as it may help us to categorize the conditions under which a society's use of Social Media may place it at an either advantageous or disadvantageous position in challenging its authoritarian government.

Social Media platforms, a part of the Web 2.0 family of Internet tools, only first began to appear around 2004-2005. Well-known instances where these platforms have played a significant role in facilitating or repressing social unrest have occurred even more recently. The political novelty of these cases has been matched only by the accelerating frequency with which they are suddenly cropping up in a wide variety of authoritarian countries around the world. The suddenness of Social Media's relevance and impact has surprised western governments and NGOs, authoritarian regimes, and

sometimes even the civil societies and dissidents themselves. Political observers and actors long used to basing their calculations and policies on more traditional and predictable factors have scrambled to adjust to the sudden emergence of these new technologies. At times even experts in the academic and governmental arenas have been taken totally unaware by these developments — a problem often confounded by generation gaps and a general lack of technological familiarity. This was perhaps epitomized just a few days after the 2009 “Green Movement” protests first began breaking out in Iran, at which time U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton remarked, “I wouldn’t know a Twitter from a tweeter, but apparently, it is very important” (CBS News). Although global media coverage of Internet-powered protest movements quickly exploded following the 2009 Iranian protests, this coverage has also itself come under harsh criticism. A 2010 expert report entitled “Bullets and Blogs” even argued that such journalistic accounts needed to think “more rigorously” about their news coverage by stringently examining such stories in terms of the seven oft-neglected dimensions of “case selection”, “counterfactuals”, “hidden variables”, “causal mechanisms”, “system effects”, “new media outlet selection”, and “strategic interaction” (Aday et al. 6-7). These types of complex guidelines highlight the degree to which the Internet’s seemingly-direct impact on modern world affairs may actually conceal a multi-faceted and poorly-understood new phenomenon, particularly in the case of authoritarian countries.

The relatively small number of academics and commentators who were actively working at the niche intersection of the Internet, Social Media, and authoritarian societies prior to 2009 has meant that the existing body of work with which these events can be properly analyzed is currently quite limited. To give just one example, Evgeny Morozov

— one of the earliest and most prolific writers and lecturers in this area — only released his first book on the subject in January 2011 (Morozov, *The Net Delusion*). Even this work is already outdated; almost immediately following its publication, a chaotic year's worth of new case studies and empirical material suddenly appeared as Social Media became a factor in instances of significant social unrest and political change across the Middle East, Russia, and China. The group of experts from the "Bullets and Blogs" report have lamented, "Despite the prominence of 'Twitter revolutions,' 'color revolutions,' and the like in public debate, policymakers and scholars know very little about whether and how new media affect contentious politics" (Aday et al. 3). When discussing the impact of Social Media in authoritarian countries we are thus dealing with — relative to the new technology's great importance and rapid proliferation — a general poverty of expert insight and prior knowledge. This thesis will therefore be based primarily on direct examinations of empirical events as they have unfolded in a number of different authoritarian nations. More specifically, the thesis will evaluate and detail how civil activists, authoritarian regimes, and outside actors have attempted to use Social Media to further their own goals when conflicts emerged between the rulers and the ruled in authoritarian nations. The primary purpose of this thesis is to analyze to what extent Social Media proliferation has impacted the political struggle between civil societies and ruling regimes in authoritarian countries.

This thesis is broken up into five further sections. The second section will define and explain the technologies discussed in this thesis, trace the rapid growth of these technologies over the course of the last decade, and introduce the reader to the current state of Social Media scholarship. The end of the second section will also elaborate on the

specific reasons as to why this thesis is based on an empirical focus and will clarify how this thesis aims to contribute to the existing literature on this topic. Sections three, four, and five will empirically discuss the history and utility of Social Media from the perspectives of civil societies, authoritarian regimes, and outside actors, respectively. The third section will discuss how civil societies and dissidents of authoritarian nations have attempted to use Social Media in order to challenge their governments. The fourth section will analyze how authoritarian regimes have responded to the newfound spread and popularity of Social Media. The fifth section will examine the kinds of complications that have arisen as outside actors such as Western governments, NGOs, and Social Media corporations have become entangled in these new power struggles. The sixth and last section will crystallize the developments covered in this paper's empirical core by extrapolating several broad trends about the political impact of Social Media proliferation in authoritarian countries. These trends lead the thesis to conclude that 1) Social Media proliferation has already incurred a significant degree of political impact and 2) these changes, on balance, will likely to be more beneficial for civil societies than for authoritarian regimes in the long-term.

II. Tracing and Debating the Explosive Growth of Social Media Tools

This thesis will discuss the impact of Internet proliferation in the context of the growth of Social Media websites. More specifically, it will examine the potential for these platforms to create new communication and mobilization networks among civil societies that result in increased political pressure on authoritarian regimes. Andreas M. Kaplan and Michael Haenlein of the ESCP Europe have defined Social Media as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (61). Web 2.0 refers to a set of technologies that allowed a shift from the traditional categories of Web content publishing (such as the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* or personal websites) to an era of collaborative projects such as blogs and wikis. Kaplan and Haenlein go on to specify,

When Web 2.0 represents the ideological and technological foundation, User Generated Content (UGC) can be seen as the sum of all ways in which people make use of Social Media. The term, which achieved broad popularity in 2005, is usually applied to describe the various forms of media content that are publicly available and created by end-users. According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2007), UGC needs to fulfill three basic requirements in order to be considered as such: first, it needs to be published either on a publicly accessible website or on a social networking site accessible to a selected group of people; second, it needs to show a certain amount of creative effort; and finally, it needs to have been created outside of professional routines and practices. (Ibid.)

“Social Media” is therefore a broad label used to describe a variety of websites and programs. For the purposes of this thesis it is sufficient to be familiar with some of

the most well-known examples of Social Media like blogs, content communities like YouTube and Flickr, micro-blogs such as Twitter, social networking sites like Facebook, collaborative projects like Wikipedia, social game worlds like *World of Warcraft*, and virtual social worlds like Second Life — all platforms where millions of people from all over the world come together to create and share content, interactions, and information. In July 2010 Facebook announced that it had reached half a billion users (up from 150 million at the start of 2009), leading *The Economist* magazine to wonder whether the popular platform was eroding or even encroaching upon the traditional conception of a sovereign nation-state (“The future”). Twitter, the micro-blogging website where users publish information with 140 characters or less at a time, was described by *The New York Times* in 2010 as:

[O]ne of the rare but fabled Web companies with a growth rate that resembles the shape of a hockey stick. It has 175 million registered users, up from 503,000 three years ago and 58 million just last year. It is adding about 370,000 new users a day. It has helped transform the way that news is gathered and distributed, reshaped how public figures from celebrities to political leaders communicate, and played a role in popular protests in Iran, China and Moldova. (Miller)

Although most people today are at least somewhat familiar with these prominent Social Media platforms and companies, at this juncture it becomes important to note that scholars often refer to Social Media within the context of a broader technological wave that is itself known by a variety of different labels. This is due to not only the newness of this global phenomenon, but also because of its increasingly fluid nature — the dividing lines between home computers, laptops, cell phones, smart phones, televisions, e-readers, and other devices have become increasingly blurred. Since all of these devices are in widespread market use and constant technological development simultaneously, both

consumers and manufacturers of these devices have begun mixing and matching the utility and software of these platforms at a rapid rate. As a result, social movements and civil societies have not developed in a vacuum filled solely with Social Media; on the contrary, this social space has been flooded with numerous other tools and innovations. A democracy activist in Egypt might log on to YouTube using his smart phone, frequently patronizing the platform despite not even owning a computer. A relatively well-off dissident in Yemen might first use his laptop to help brainstorm a protest strategy over Facebook before subsequently sending out SMS cell phone text messages in order to spread the word to a wider network of activists who lack Internet access.

This complicated, interacting web of new technologies is referred to in the scholarship by a variety of labels including “Digital Media”, “New Media”, “new Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs)”, “Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC)”, and even the assumption-laden “Liberation Technology.” These other terms entail a much broader body of tools than just Social Media platforms. The initial scholarship of new ICTs originally analyzed the impact of developments such as cell phones and e-mail, which had already developed into a stable area of research by the 1990s (Garrett 202-3). The term “new ICTs” has since expanded to include not only Web 2.0 platforms, but even the new user techniques (such as crowd-sourcing and participatory video) that modern technological tools have spawned (Walton 8-9). Most of the other labels are more limited and refer only to the new technologies and devices themselves. For example, a 2010 report from the United States Institute of Peace concerning Internet use in “contentious politics” such as authoritarian states offered the following definition for New Media:

‘New media’ is an admittedly unsatisfying term that encompasses a diverse array of outlets, such as blogs, “social” media (e.g., Facebook), audiovisual hosting services (e.g., YouTube), text messaging (SMS), Twitter, e-mail, and chat rooms. While any nomenclature can be challenged, the term ‘new media’ is a convenient shorthand for various primarily Internet-based communication technologies and methods that most people can readily differentiate from ‘old’ media. New media generally involve user-generated content, interactivity, and dissemination through networks, but new media differ in their characteristics and potential political consequences. Indeed, perhaps the most important moments involve information that appears on multiple platforms. (Aday et al. 28)

In his July 2010 article “Liberation Technology”, Larry Diamond defined that particular label to mean any kind of ICT that “can expand political, social, and economic freedom. In the contemporary era, it means essentially the modern, interrelated forms of digital ICT — the computer, the Internet, the mobile phone, and countless innovative applications for them, including ‘new social media’ such as Facebook and Twitter” (70). Rather than employing these sorts of umbrella terms and analyzing the entire spectrum of recent technological advancements, this thesis will focus primarily on the types technologies included earlier under the definition of Social Media.

The primary objective of this thesis is to evaluate how the rapid growth and reach of Social Media platforms have impacted civil societies in countries that enjoy far less political freedom (online or otherwise) than their counterparts in the Western world. While Social Media may also have become a topic of interest in free and democratic societies due to the novelty of celebrity tweets (Twitter messages) or because of Facebook’s outreach during political campaigns, the rise of Social Media has been a much more profound and transformative development in those societies which are currently living under authoritarian rule. For the purposes of this thesis, “civil society” is meant to imply the same broad understanding of the term as the one used by social

scientists Steve Rayner and Elizabeth Malone (2000). These authors have conceptualized civil societies as arenas of uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values. This is similar to Mario Diani's use of the term "social movements", which is also frequently employed by Internet scholars and defined as "networks of informal interaction between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations, engaged in a political or cultural conflict on the basis of a shared collective identity" ("The concept of social movement" 1). Mainstream scholars of global social movements have even begun to single out and praise the Internet for its democratizing impact (Juris).

The Internet has not only facilitated increased communication and interaction among a given nation's citizens, but has also encouraged a growing degree of linkage between the civil societies and social movements of different countries. The Internet is such a perfect fit for the increasingly transnational nature of political and cultural issues that it has led some scholars to point to "the transition to a more complex, global information-based society that almost logically shaped the context for new forms of online activism" (Van Laer and Van Aelst 1150; Jordan and Taylor). As already mentioned, Social Media is based primarily around bringing individual users together and having exchange information and content. A 2010 report compiled by several experts on these technologies found that Social Media platforms "have played a major role in episodes of contentious political action. They are often described as important tools for activists seeking to replace authoritarian regimes and to promote freedom and democracy, and they have been lauded for their democratizing potential" (Aday et al. 3). A 2010 Helpdesk Research Project focusing on the use of New ICTs in developing countries likewise concluded that that Social Media has been "widely used to support human rights

campaigns across the developing world, and have presented important opportunities for activists in countries with repressive regimes” (Walton 7). To put these findings in another way, if we conceptualized civil societies as a sort of engine capable of generating political output, in this metaphor Social Media would be a new kind of engine fluid with the ability to smoothen and super-charge civil society’s output potential.

However, technological advancements in Internet media are not, in and of themselves, enough to have an impact on civil society — there must also be a meaningfully large enough base of the population willing and able to access these online platforms. Fortunately, Social Media’s development has coincided with an explosion of Internet use and access outside of the developed world. Take, for example, this excerpt from a 2009 article in the *Jakarta Times* describing how online activism assisted in securing the release of two senior officials of the Corruption Eradication Commission that the government had detained:

[T]he two important developments in the case are, first, the way Indonesia’s civil society rallied around an issue of national importance, and second, the way the Internet helped to facilitate this trend ... the Internet has played a critical role, serving as a platform for independent debate, so much so that mainstream media are left with no choice but to start reporting issues that are causing waves in cyberspace ... And one can only expect this process to accelerate, as technological change gathers momentum. While there were only 25 million Internet users in Indonesia in 2008, mobile penetration is 60 percent and soaring on the back of a 40 percent annual growth. At the same time, the explosive increase in handheld computing devices ... signals a dramatic expansion in Internet usage. The Internet is a ‘game-changing’ agent even in a polity such as Indonesia where the media is relatively free. (Raslan)

Larry Diamond has likewise pointed to the example of Malaysia, where citizens are finding news alternatives to their regime-dominated media as a result of a massive surge in Internet access from 15% of the population in 2000 to 66% in 2009 (70). While

scholars have long conducted their research in the context of a “digital divide” between developed nations and everyone else, exploding economic, demographic, and technological development around the globe has meant that, in the future, widespread Internet access will no longer be associated as closely with the Western world as it is today (Norris). In September 2010 the Boston Consulting Group reported that:

In 2009, the BRICI countries — Brazil, Russia, India, China, and Indonesia — represented about 45 percent of the world’s population ... and had some 610 million Internet users. By 2015, these countries will have more than 1.2 billion Internet users ... Internet penetration rates in the BRICI countries will experience compound annual growth of 9 to 20 percent from year-end 2009 through 2015.

*Fig. 1. PC Penetration Rates in BRICI Nations, the US, and Japan
(Boston Consulting Group)*

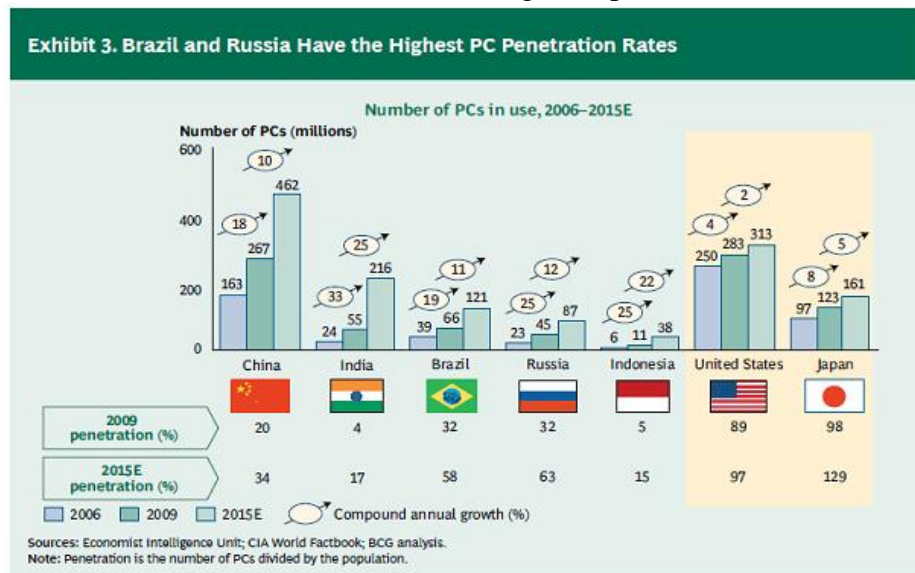
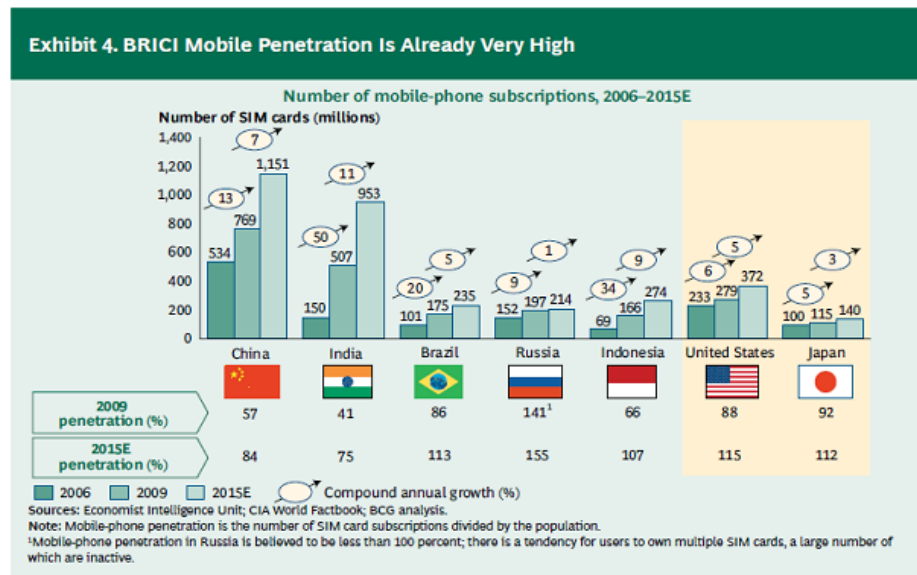


Fig. 2. Mobile Phone Penetration in BRICI Nations, the US, and Japan (Ibid.)



Of course, the growth of the Internet is a major story in developing countries other than just those with the largest or fastest-growing economies. The following two global maps, taken from a report on Internet censorship by University of Kansas Geography Professor Barney Warf, show how much Internet access has spread beyond developed countries:

Fig. 3. Number of Internet Users Worldwide, 2010 (Warf 2)

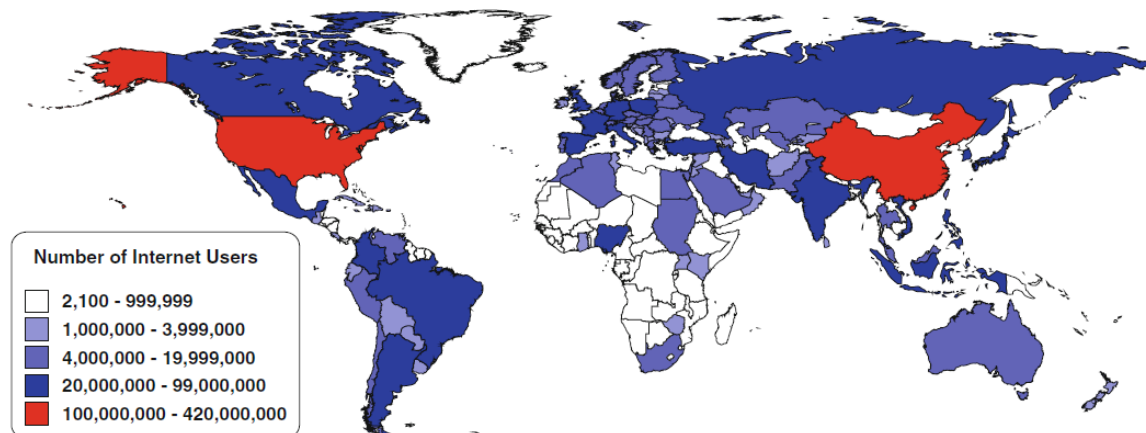
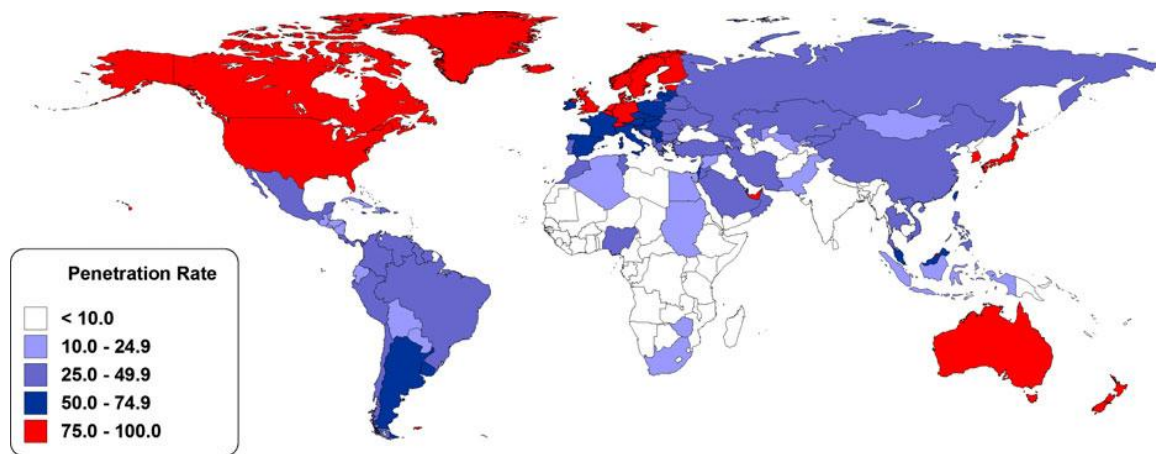


Fig. 4. Internet Penetration Rate Worldwide, 2010 (Ibid. 6)



This explosion in Internet access in the BRICI countries and across the developing world has naturally occurred in tandem with the proliferation of other information and communication tools. For example, while only 2 out of every 100 people in the developing world was a mobile phone subscriber in 1998, by 2008 that number had surged to 55 out of 100 (Heeks 22). By 2009 it was estimated that the developing world had 2.2 billion mobile phones and 305 million computers (Walton 1). The global blogosphere had grown sixty times in size just in the three years between 2003 and 2006, with English accounting for less than one-third of blog posts (Castells, “Communication” 247). A 2007 article in the *International Journal of Communication* argued:

[E]ven accounting for the differential diffusion in developing countries and poor regions, a very high proportion of the population of the planet has access to mobile communication, sometimes in areas where there is no electricity but there is some form of coverage and mobile chargers of mobile batteries in the form of merchant bicycles. Wifi and wimax networks are helping to set up networked communities. With the convergence between Internet and mobile communication and the gradual diffusion of broadband capacity, the communicating power of the Internet is being distributed in all realms of social life, as the electrical grid and the electrical engine distributed energy in the industrial society. (Ibid. 246)

OpenNet Initiative co-founders Ronald Deibert and Rafal Rohozinski have similarly argued that the proliferation of new cyber-technologies like Social Media

represents a crucial turning point: “No other mode of communication in human history has facilitated the democratization of communication to the same degree. No other technology in history has grown with such speed and spread so far geographically in such a short period of time” (“Liberation Vs. Control” 43). This diffusion of communication power has extended to some of the unlikeliest of places. Even in North Korea, arguably the world’s most isolated society, citizens are smuggling in mobile phones from China and using them to report on their horrific situation to the outside world via the Chinese mobile network (Sang-Hun).

Increased access to the Internet and other communication tools have been accompanied by another important trend emerging across much of the developing world — demographic shifts that have resulted in extremely young populations. Even before the emergence of Web 2.0’s powerful networking tools, scholars in the early 2000s were already drawing connections between increases in Internet use and significant booms in youth activism; one study of the so-called “Digital Generation” noted, “While it would be overly simplistic to suggest that the Internet caused this recent rise in student activism, it is clear that online communications have played an important role in facilitating activism, both domestically and globally” (Montgomery, Larson, and Gottlieb-Robles 88). Many of the authoritarian countries that will be examined in this thesis are predominantly comprised of young populations that are willing to protest against the government and are likely to have the technological know-how needed to network and organize over the Internet.

For example, one empirical study of the Internet’s political impact in Iran highlighted, that “International Telecommunications Union data suggests that 32.3

percent of Iranians used the Internet in 2007, compared to 4.7 percent in 2002. Among urbanized youth populations likely to be involved in contentious politics, Internet usage is almost certainly higher” (Aday et al. 13). Many non-Western countries today feature extremely young populations where the majority of citizens are less than thirty years old, creating cultures that are accustomed to an increasingly-interconnected world where the Internet access is a routine social phenomenon. Even China, an overall aging society, added more new Internet users in 2009 than the entire population of Germany (Reuters). Looking closely at its user growth, it becomes apparent China has also followed the same youth-centric trend; Fengshu Liu of the University of Oslo has noted that “the Internet in China is so far a predominantly urban-youth phenomenon, with people under 30, especially 10- to 19-year-olds...as the major group of netizens” (7). As a result of recent economic, technological, and demographic changes, many authoritarian countries have been exposed to a variety of new conditions that are slowly enabling the citizenry of these nations to take full advantage of Social Media’s socio-political dimensions.

Despite the prevalence and importance of this development, we are — as mentioned in the introduction — currently dealing with a general paucity of comprehensive academic literature and scholarly insight into this phenomenon. The last several years have already generated a substantial pool of academic and professional literature (particularly in the field of communication studies) offering a more generalized analysis of Web 2.0 tools and popular Social Media platforms (see for example Zickuhr, Smith, and Fox). Regrettably, more specific studies of how Web 2.0 technologies have impacted reform and social movements in authoritarian countries are still largely missing — and characterized by high degrees of academic disagreement even when available

(Zuckerman).

The state of Social Media literature is slowly beginning to improve as scattered pieces of scholarship coalesce into a more comprehensive pool of substantial work and meaningful debate. Huma Haider (2011) recently produced an insightful literature survey testifying to this progress. Haider's survey led him to conclude that the current literature places an emphasis on several factors that "may contribute to the success or weakness of Social Media and in turn the success or weakness of protests and movements that rely on them," namely leadership, links to conventional media and other activists, elite reaction, and external attention (2). Some authors have even offered up tentative and preliminary methodological frameworks. For example, Jeroen Van Laer and Peter Van Aelst (2010) have created a generalized model for mapping various types of online activism based along the two dimensions of "Internet-supported versus Internet-based" and "high versus low threshold." Another collaboration between several experts resulted in a model for evaluating particular case studies; the authors found that "The impact of new media can be better understood through a framework that considers five levels of analysis: individual transformation, intergroup relations, collective action, regime policies, and external attention" (Aday et al. 3). Other models are certain to emerge in the near future as scholars begin to test, debate, and improve these kinds of frameworks.

Nonetheless, despite these and other examples of recent progress, an enormous amount of work remains to be done before observers can fully get a grip on such a new and important phenomenon. In the words of one expert, "We have yet to see the real social or political impact of the participatory Internet because it simply hasn't existed for long enough" (Sasaki). A joint report by several experts in late 2010 lamented this dearth

of information by writing, “Do new media have real consequences for contentious politics — and in which direction?...fundamentally, no one knows. To this point, little research has sought to estimate the causal effects of new media in a methodologically rigorous fashion, or to gather the rich data needed to establish causal influence” (Aday et al. 5). Ya-Wen Lei of the University of Michigan complained just recently in 2011 that “There is a vast literature empirically studying the Internet’s political implications in Western liberal democracies, but there are few such studies researching authoritarian countries, where, ironically, political development is a more critical issue” (292). Scholars analyzing the impact of ICTs on social movements have likewise noted that the “empirical analysis of the negative consequences of new ICTs” has been “largely absent in the literature” (Garrett 218). To date, much of the literature in these fields has fallen into one of two categories of analysis: either it discusses and partially links the variety of involved actors and factors in a heavily theoretical framework, or it aims to provide a more concrete, empirical analysis of one isolated incident. Very little scholarship exists that has attempted to analyze the full range of relevant cases and actors while still remaining grounded in a case-heavy, primarily empirical discussion. This thesis seeks to help address this deficit by providing a comprehensive, empirically-based overview of recent global developments across numerous countries in which various civil societies, authoritarian regimes, and outside actors have sought use the Internet and Social Media to achieve their political objectives.

The thesis therefore aims to contribute to the literature in three primary ways. Firstly, it will provide a primarily empirically-based discussion of this subject by tackling the daunting task of analyzing Social Media’s impact in the context of a wide variety of

country/incident cases. It is hoped that by presenting a large body of empirical data derived from across a broad spectrum of recent international events, this will serve to persuasively highlight the strikingly repetitive patterns in Social Media's political utility for otherwise different civil societies and authoritarian governments. This should demonstrate the near-universality of Social Media's characteristics, in that different civil societies have embraced Social Media with astonishing speed and consistently similar tactics (such as citizen journalism or street mobilization) even as different authoritarian regimes have responded with consistently similar exploitations of Social Media's innate weaknesses (i.e., limiting or disabling telecommunications infrastructure, spying on social networking sites, etc.). Highlighting these consistencies across a large quantity of different examples should help to overcome a common criticism that some scholars have made about the empirical studies that focus exclusively on individual cases (e.g., the 2009 Iranian election protests): that the "data" offered up for discussion is merely a limited smattering of potentially-misleading anecdotes and can therefore not be used to extrapolate any broad conclusions (Aday et al. 3).

Secondly, this thesis aims to go beyond the typically limited focus of empirical Social Media papers — which usually focus exclusively on the civil society-regime struggle — by including a section analyzing the complicated involvement and motivations of outside actors such as democratic governments, NGOs, private corporations, and the actual Social Media companies themselves. This will hopefully provide readers with a more comprehensive and informed understanding of Social Media's complicated role and varying degrees of impact in recent world events.

Thirdly, this thesis incorporates new, key empirical cases that occurred in 2011

and in the beginning of 2012. This most recent wave of Social Media-influenced protests in the Arab Spring countries, China, and Russia has not only greatly contributed to the quantity of empirical data, but has proffered up the most striking cases to date of instances where Social Media has played a direct role in impacting and sustaining social movements and civil societies in authoritarian nations. As most of the already-limited body of empirical scholarship currently available in the literature dates to 2010 or even earlier, it is hoped that a thesis incorporating up-to-date information will be useful to those interested in Social Media's political impact. In order to accomplish these three goals, the following sections will therefore empirically trace the history and utility of Social Media from the perspectives of civil societies, authoritarian regimes, and outside actors, respectively. The next section begins this discussion with an examination of Web 2.0's beneficial implications for social movements and civil societies in authoritarian countries.

III. Social Media and Its Utility for Civil Societies, Dissidents, and Social Movements

2011 marked an important turning point for Social Media's impact in authoritarian countries. Web 2.0's powerful potential — which had been only tentatively and tangentially harvested by civil societies during protests in the years immediately prior — suddenly exploded across a large number of high-profile cases in several different authoritarian countries around the world. This sudden surge is most likely due to a variety of factors, including that Social Media tools have become more technologically robust, that more citizens have obtained Internet access, that more users have become active members of Web 2.0 social networks, and that the leaders of dissidence movements have become more comfortable and skilled with using Social Media as tools for political mobilization and organization. Some of the better-known examples of the 2011-2012 Social Media explosion include the Cairo “Facebook flats” that played a pivotal role in Egypt's uprising, the amateur YouTube videos of ballot-box stuffing recorded by dutiful citizens on their cell phones during the 2011 Russian elections, and the increased quantity and boldness of socio-political micro-blogging activity in China.

This current wave emerged in the wake of what could be considered a type of initial incubation period from roughly 2004 to early 2009, during which time the earliest Web 2.0 tools and social networks were only used intermittently by dissidents, reform movements, and anti-authoritarian protestors. The earliest high-publicity incident that can

be traced to this initial wave occurred in the Ukraine. After analyzing the 2004-2005 Ukrainian “Orange Revolution”, Harvard’s Berkmen Center concluded:

While a wide range of factors shaped the events and out-comes of the Orange Revolution, the Internet and mobile phones proved to be effective tools for pro-democracy activists. First, the Internet allowed for the creation of a space for dissenting opinions of ‘citizen journalists’ in an otherwise self-censored media environment. Second, pro-democracy activists used the convergence of mobile phones and the Internet to coordinate a wide range of activities including election monitoring and large-scale protests. (Goldstein 9)

Larry Diamond arrived at these same findings in his own scholarship, noting in 2010, “Liberation technology figured prominently in the Orange Revolution that toppled the electoral authoritarian regime in Ukraine via mass protests during November and December 2004” (78). In addition, he says, digital tools “also facilitated the 2005 Cedar Revolution in Lebanon...the 2005 protests for women’s voting rights in Kuwait; the 2007 protests by Venezuelan students against the closure of Radio Caracas Television; and the April 2008 general strike in Egypt” (Ibid.). These events — and the supposed role that Social Media and the Internet played in facilitating them — received varying degrees of attention from media and policy-makers and solicited mixed conclusions from scholars. Even Moldova’s widely-publicized, so-called “Twitter Revolution” — which culminated in a 20,000-person Social Media-organized “flash mob” storming the Communist-controlled parliament building — has been the subject of fierce and inconclusive debate as to whether Social Media actually played a significant role in the event (Stack).

Iran’s captivating “Green Revolution” in 2009-2010 marked a global turning point in the amount of public, media, and scholarly attention paid to Social Media’s political potential (Mackey). The lead-up to the Iranian presidential election and its bloody aftermath present perhaps one of the most reported (and contested) examples of

Social Media as a tool for powering reform movements (Cohen, R., “Iran’s Day of Anguish”; Morozov, “Iran Elections”; Esfandiari, “Misreading Tehran”). Even before the election, Iran’s young population gave the country the “highest Internet penetration in the region,” inspiring the country’s collective nickname of “weblogistan” and a growing frequency of arrests and persecutions of Iranian bloggers by the regime (Macintyre). As Larry Diamond has pointed out, in the years preceding the 2009 election protests, “Iran’s online public sphere had been growing dramatically...the explosion of Facebook to encompass an estimated 600,000 Persian-language users; and the growing utilization of the Internet by news organizations, civic groups, political parties, and candidates” (79). Other scholars using even higher figures have noted, “Indeed, with an estimated 75,000 blogs, the Iranian blogosphere may exceed the size of its entire Arab counterpart” (Aday et al. 13). Over the last decade, new ICTs have suddenly come to play a fundamental role in facilitating self-expression and conceptions of personal identity among urban Iranian youth. One empirical study even analyzed Bluetooth’s pivotal function as a “hidden medium” for facilitating social dynamics among young people living in Tehran (Niknam 1187).

In Iran’s 2009 presidential election, the more liberal, reformist candidate ran a campaign powered to a large extent by Social Media and SMS text messaging and the hordes of young Iranians who knew how to use them (Etling). The government (controlled by the hard-line incumbent) responded with forays into blocking or banning Facebook and other applications (Kirkpatrick, M.). After hundreds of thousands of protestors marched in Tehran and other cities to protest the incumbent’s supposed re-election victory, the government responded with not only violence and arrests but also a

massive and all-encompassing black-out campaign on traditional news outlets and Social Media (Foster). As a result, an electronic civil war erupted in Iran as tech-savvy dissenters utilized advanced Web tricks and “proxy” servers offered by the global diaspora and sympathizers in order to continue mobilizing and to digitally smuggle YouTube videos and Flickr pictures of graphic government violence to the outside world — all while transnational “hacktivists” groups launched attacks on government websites and servers (*The Washington Times*; Ahmed; Bray, “Finding a way”). Although the sudden frenzy of media attention surrounding the role of the Internet in Iran led at times to inaccurate and overenthusiastic reporting and analysis, this should not take away from either the successful use of online tools by protestors or from the importance that Web 2.0 platforms played in allowing Iranian protestors to globally broadcast media showcasing the brutality of the regime and proof of the Green Movement’s mass support.

Even more so than the Green Revolution, events in the Arab world since January 2011 have provided a stunning display of Social Media’s political power at work. Commentators such as the American journalist Roger Cohen have discussed the importance of Social Media in energizing civil society during the Arab Spring by pointing specifically to the online applicability of cultural feelings such as “Arab dignity” (Cohen, R., “Facebook and Arab Dignity”). For example, in Tunisia, membership in protest groups on Facebook and cell phone photos uploaded to the site spread like wildfire as people went online to finally vent their long-held feelings of humiliation at the hands of an authoritarian regime unable to satisfy basic needs such as jobs for the swelling ranks of unemployed youths (Ibid.). Likewise, in the lead-up to the massive show-down with the regime in Egypt, Web-savvy young Egyptians helped to mobilize

people by using Social Media to appeal to public outrage; as reported by *The New York Times*, “In the days leading up to the protests, more than 90,000 people signed up on a Facebook page for the ‘Day of Revolution,’ organized by opposition and pro-democracy groups...The organizers framed the protest as a stand against torture, poverty, corruption and unemployment” (Fahim and El-Naggar, “Violent Clashes”). The young, mostly under-30 online activists on Facebook and other platforms eventually coalesced together in order to organize and lead more effectively, merging together online movements such as the April 6 Youth Movement that had originally first up in 2008 (Wolman, “Cairo Activists”).

Happily surprised at the 90,000-plus turn-out for the “Day of Rage,” they took a commanding lead in continuing and strengthening the anti-government protests spreading throughout the country. This surprised and largely circumvented traditional, older opposition groups like the Muslim Brotherhood and Mohamed ElBaradei’s liberal faction; as *The New York Times* reported during the uprising:

They decided to follow a blueprint similar to their previous protest, urging demonstrators to converge on the central Liberation Square. So they drew up a list of selected mosques around Cairo where they asked people to gather at Friday Prayer before marching together toward the square. Then they distributed the list through e-mail and text messages, which spread virally. They even told Dr. ElBaradei which mosque he should attend, people involved said. (Kirkpatrick and El-Naggar)

Although many of these Web-savvy organizers initially came from the ranks of Egypt’s relatively elite class of university students and young professionals, they quickly adapted their tactics and messaging to appeal to and rally larger segments of Egypt’s extremely young population (Kirkpatrick, D., “Wired and Shrewd”).

By combining Web 2.0 tools with a shrewd understanding of their fellow citizens, the online activists were thus able to link massive numbers of people with lightning-quick

organizational and leadership capacities:

They brought a sophistication and professionalism to their cause — exploiting the anonymity of the Internet to elude the secret police, planting false rumors to fool police spies, staging ‘field tests’ in Cairo slums before laying out their battle plans, then planning a weekly protest schedule to save their firepower — that helps explain the surprising resilience of the uprising they began (Ibid.).



Egypt's experience in 2011 thus became one of the best-known symbols of Web 2.0-facilitated social movements to date, despite the fact that its proportion of Internet access (barely 20%) is much lower than in Tunisia or Iran (Sifry). This demonstrates that authoritarian leaders cannot necessarily depend on widespread poverty or low overall levels of online access to blunt the political potential of Web 2.0 tools.

Fig. 5. Facebook Event for Egypt's "Day of Rage" on January 25th, 2011 (Rusila)

Fig. 6. Pro-Facebook Graffiti in Cairo during the Egyptian Uprising (Badawai)



In the new digital age, even a small core of dedicated elites can use the Internet to quickly take advantage of mass social unrest among the general public. Gone are the days when it took many years and an elaborate unifying ideology for revolutionary leaders like the Bolsheviks to gather together and successfully rally movements against the government. *The New York Times* has even published a “digital road to Egypt’s revolution” from 2008-2011 that traces key events in cyberspace that helped to pave the way for the country’s eventual uprising (Wolman, “The Digital Road”). Wael Ghonim, the celebrated online activist and Google engineer who played a central role before and during Egypt’s uprising, has since taken to referring to the role played by Social Media in the Arab Spring as a new kind of “Revolution 2.0” (*The Economist*, “Revolution 2.0”). Social networks make it much easier for dedicated political activists and dissidents to find one another, coordinate their efforts, and widen their networks of willing participants.

The ongoing crisis in Syria provides another gripping example testifying to the strengths as well as to the limitations of Internet-supported social movements. It is important to note that there are numerous differences between the situation in this country and the one that unfolded in Egypt, such as the existence of ethnic and religious minority sects loyal to the regime as well as the government's willingness to use heavy military force against its own people. Nonetheless, there are several parallels to the Egyptian case in terms of how the civil societies in Syria and elsewhere have attempted to use Social Media for political purposes. The Assad regime has been very active about monitoring and censoring the Internet since well before the advent of the Web 2.0 age. Syrian bloggers and online activists have frequently been warned, harassed, and arrested with sometimes startling randomness throughout entirety of the 2000s (Worth). Despite these campaigns of intimidation, the socio-political use of Social Media grew steadily in Syria prior to the Arab Spring. For example, these platforms were used to share feelings of outrage over hot-button issues such as teacher violence against students, at times forcing the government to take action on particularly egregious issues (Ibid.).

Now that the Arab Spring has reached Syria and conflict and unrest have spread throughout the country, Social Media is being used in capacities similar to those seen in other Arab Spring uprisings. In scenes directly reminiscent of those seen in Cairo apartments in the first half of 2011, Syrian refugees and activists set up a hodgepodge of "revolutionary media centers" in cellars and refugee camps. The Spartan conditions of these operations — one *New York Times* journalist described a "bare room whose floors were covered with thin mattresses strewn with digital cameras, laptops, modems and a tangle of cords" — show the dedication of these netizens and the importance that they

attribute to their sustained ability to stay connected to the outside world by uploading pictures and videos (Ou and Harris; Stack). Social Media's key role in getting information and recordings out of Syria has led activists in the region to call the conflict the "first YouTube War," with an estimated 80% of the international mainstream media footage of the violence coming from amateur recordings shot inside the country (Nordland).

Fig. 7. Political Cartoon on Social Media's Prominence in the Syrian Conflict
(*The Economist*, "The tide turns").



Of particular interest are developments like the Shaam News Network, a Syrian website put together by dissidents in order to collect cell phone pictures and Twitter updates streaming in from across the country's ongoing uprising. Despite what were likely quite low investment costs of manpower and actual money, SNN's coverage has been picked up by the international media networks banned from Syria (Friedmen). These examples of the so-called "You News Network" have been garnering increased attention from both the global media and from serious academics (Tsotsis). Some scholars have responded to this growing display of citizen journalism by analyzing it under the framework of "participatory media." Global Voices executive Director Ivan

Sigal authored a 2009 report on Digital Media in conflict-prone societies in which he applied such a framework and noted, “Several characteristics of digital media platforms have changed the dynamic of participation in the production and distribution of information” (15). In his view, the shift to Digital Media primarily encompassed the following four changes and benefits:

*Fig. 8. Ivan Sigal’s Dynamics of Participation Changes Stemming (Digital Media)
(Sigil 15-6)*

- Radically reduced cost for person-to-person communication, via Internet, digital and cellular telephony, using applications such as text messaging and voice-over-Internet protocol (VOIP).
- Reduced cost and ease of entry for producers of information with desktop publishing, digital video and photography.
- Direct, unmediated links between individuals in peer networks, collectively creating a networked public sphere.
- Shifting demographics of information communities beyond traditional nation or state audiences, driven by the transnational nature of Internet, cell-phone networks and satellite TV.

It should be noted that, as positive empowering as such new participation opportunities may be, significant political impact is not guaranteed. It is certainly possible for these types of citizen journalism to successfully pressure authoritarian regimes, but only if they succeed in capturing the attention of domestic or international actors capable and willing to exert leverage on the government. For example, after the junta in Myanmar initiated a brutal crackdown in 2007, “Burmese people connected among themselves and to the world relentlessly, using short message service (SMS) and E-Mails, posting daily blogs, notices on Facebook, and videos on YouTube...This exposure embarrassed their Chinese sponsors and induced the United States and the European Union to increase diplomatic pressure on the junta” (Castells, “The New Public Sphere” 86). In the Syrian case, to what degree Web 2.0’s ability to disseminate information across borders will actually

help the dissidents already under brutal assault still remains to be seen. Transnationalization is not in and of itself automatically sufficient to change a regime's behavior, a fact that will be examined in more detail in the fourth section of this thesis.

The events of 2011 have also neatly demonstrated the huge discrepancy among different authoritarian governments in how seriously they prepared for the Internet's latent political potential. In contrast to pre-existing programs for online surveillance in Egypt and the Mubarak government's constant suspicion of Facebook, the Tunisian regime of President Ben Ali seemed in many ways to have been caught largely off-guard when it experienced its own Social Media-facilitated protest movement. Before it eventually fell to protestors, the government attempted a sudden eleventh-hour effort to finally recognize and adapt to the growing importance of Social Media; as *The New York Times* reported in January, "It was an apt symbol that a dissident blogger with thousands of followers on Twitter, Slim Amamou, was catapulted in a matter of days from the interrogation chambers of Mr. Ben Ali's regime to a new government post as minister for youth and sports" (Shane). Authoritarian governments trying to keep a lid on dissent often walk a fine line between over- and under-reacting to online activism.

The experiences of the Arab Spring countries have also highlighted how the transnationalization capacity of Web 2.0 tools have challenged regimes used to dealing with largely closed, domestic systems of social control. It is clearly much more difficult for repressive regimes to continue maintaining a tight lid on domestic affairs in an age where movements and information are becoming increasingly transnational and international. Online activists and Internet-publicized social movements in a particular country can quickly gather global sympathizers, as already discussed in the case of Iran.

Since the beginnings of the Arab Spring, the large, unpredictable, and devastatingly effective global hacker group known as Anonymous has been paralyzing the websites of authoritarian governments and political parties in the Middle East (Somaiya). Human rights organizations and other NGOs have also been actively involved in distributing and developing anti-censorship and anti-surveillance software and tools, as will be discussed more in the fifth section of this thesis. Not only did Egyptians and Tunisians go online to trade tips and tactics with each other (such as how to build barricades, withstand teargas, and avoid online surveillance), leaders from both movements had spent the prior few years studying the successful tactics of Serbia's successful youth movement Otpor, which was itself inspired by the writings on non-violent struggle by American political thinker Gene Sharp (Sanger and Kirkpatrick). The ability for ideas and information to cross national borders — always a persistent challenge for autocratic regimes — has become super-charged in the Web 2.0 era.

Of course, the simple exchange of information is not sufficient to bring people to the streets, especially in the face of the time-tested and effective repression tactics usually practiced by authoritarian governments. Social Media can also embolden and empower reform movements and popular protests by removing the omnipresent sense of fear and isolation that authoritarian regimes try to cultivate through the use of force and through state control of traditional media outlets. As a result, ordinary people can see when their peers pour into the streets *en masse* to protest and demonstrate, even when these events are occurring in different parts of the country. For example, as events in Libya got underway and the Gadhafi regime's propaganda continuously insisted that it faced very little popular opposition, one technology expert set up cameras with live online-streaming

throughout Benghazi, allowing Libyans in other cities to see the growing size of the protests (CNN Wire Staff). When rebels eventually took the capital much later on in the uprising, they made it a priority to immediately head to the state telecoms company to text message the news to citizens across the country and to restore Libya's Internet access, which had previously been cut off by the government in order to limit information about the extent of the revolution (*The Economist*, "Going, going...").

Web 2.0 sharing and networking tools are also excellent for conveying and sharing traditional vehicles of revolutionary messages such as art and music. In Tunisia, rappers used Social Media to post and share music videos and songs in order to spread messages criticizing the regime — music which in some cases went electronically viral throughout the country only *after* the artists were arrested as a result of releasing the songs, demonstrating again that the publicizing ability of the Internet can complicate traditional authoritarian tactics for suppressing dissent (Curry). The Mubarak regime at one point found itself in a similar situation when it arrested and detained former Google executive Wael Ghonim for running the opposition Facebook group "We Are All Khaled Said," a blunder that ultimately resulted in Ghonim's emotional T.V. interview and the subsequent revitalization of street protests (Kirkpatrick, D., "As Egypt Protest Swells").

The story of anti-authoritarian rappers in the Middle East also directly parallels Bert Hoffman's findings regarding rappers in Cuba, which he believed represented the "development of the collective identity of actors empowered by digital media" (23). Hoffman believes that "The...movement of critical rap singers whose increased autonomy vis-à-vis the state relies on the use of digital media can be understood...as a 'new modus of non-conventional collective action' within an authoritarian context" (Ibid.

23; Geoffray). Under this perspective, Internet-enabled defiance of the state can actually have a three-pronged effect; it challenges the authority of the regime by circumventing state control of media and cultural propaganda, it allows citizens to carve out a new, non-state-owned public sphere, and it creates new types of social bonds and communities as citizens join together in challenging the state within this new sphere.

In countries where the Arab Spring has not yet taken root, the potential for mass participation in — and eventual political mobilization via — Social Media still remains quite rich. In the case of Iraq, it has an even younger population than Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia, with almost 40% of the population at or under 14 years of age — raising the possibility of widespread Web-friendliness among voters in the body politic even a few short years down the road. In the words of one 19-year-old law student from Kirkuk, “The youth is the excluded class in the Iraqi community, so they’ve started to unify through Facebook or the Internet or through demonstrations and evenings in cafes, symposiums and in universities” (Arango). Social Media may come to play a role even in Yemen, which is the poorest country in the Arab world and has a 45% illiteracy rate and limited Internet access. The country has already experienced protests wherein young netizens held pro-Facebook signs and used Social Media to spread information about the government’s attacks on dissidents (CNN, “Yemen’s Youth”).

Depending on how deeply Internet access has penetrated a country, civil societies have shown themselves to be remarkably creative in combining different mediums and technologies — in effect using Social Media to whatever extent possible while still using other methods to reach fellow citizens who are not available online. In the case of Yemen, young activists began organizing mass youth protests and demonstrations by

combining Social Media tools with heavy text messaging campaigns (Kasinof and Goodman). In July 2011 Philip Howard and Muzammil Hussain published a paper about the role of digital media in the Arab Spring in which they noted that:

[O]ne of the most consistent narratives from civil society leaders in Arab countries has been that the Internet, mobile phones, and social media such as Facebook and Twitter made the difference this time. Using these technologies, people interested in democracy could build extensive networks, create social capital, and organize political action with a speed and a scale never seen before. (35-6)

The authors argued that the digital road of the Arab Spring could be traced clearly in the six unfolding phases of “preparation,” “ignition,” “streets protests,” “international buy-in,” “climax,” and “follow-on information warfare” (Ibid. 42). The events of 2011-2012 represent a rich starting point for making large strides in the academic literature, as these new sample cases are complex and numerous enough that they allow for preliminary models that can then be tested against future events.

Although some authoritarian countries have allowed only heavily monitored and limited access to the Internet in a bid to prevent an online socio-political discourse among its citizens, the simple fact is that a large enough pool of people engaged in networking and communicating online will inevitably and unendingly discuss common social issues and current events. Such topics are, of course, often inherently political. Some skeptical scholars from the early 2000s flat-out doubted the Internet’s potential for any kind of meaningful social change because they simply assumed that any public sphere to eventually emerge online would be intrinsically constrained by existing political institutions and economy (Papacharissi). This particular argument now looks less convincing as some of the subsequent Web 2.0-era scholarship has since suggested that new ICTs — and Social Media in particular — have resulted in the globalization and

transnational of a “new public sphere” (Castells, “A New Public Sphere”).

Under this opposing perspective, particularly optimistic scholars assert, “In sum, the global civil society now has the technological means to exist independently from political institutions and from the mass media” (Ibid. 86). This is substantiated by some empirical studies that have shown that “the more [a citizen] uses the Internet, the more autonomous he/she becomes vis-à-vis societal rules and institutions” (Castells, “Communication” 249). Bert Hoffman’s Web 2.0-era analysis of Cuba similarly found that, in contrast to the “struggles for associational autonomy within the state-socialist framework” of the pre-Internet early 1990s, “A decade later, web-based communication technologies have supported the emergence of a new type of public sphere in which civil society debate is marked by autonomous citizen action” (3). Hoffman’s analysis of Cuba led the author the same conclusion that James Holston reached in a 2008 study of Brazil; both scholars felt that citizen-created media created a type of “insurgent citizenship” in which “using citizen media becomes a civic action in itself” (Hoffman 23; Holston). Not only is it incredibly difficult for authoritarian states to successfully facilitate a type of partly-usable Internet environment that somehow avoids any discussion of social problems, the very act of pushing such restrictions can backfire by transforming ordinary Internet use into a deliberate expression of civil activism.

Defying or skirting around the government’s restrictions in such a manner can, in turn, create new ties and communities founded on anti-authoritarian disobedience. Similar to how the Tunisian regime’s attempts to suppress rap music actually resulted in the opposite effect, active efforts to censor and limit the emergence of an Internet-based public sphere can actually result in the creation of new social ties and group identities

based on anti-authoritarian defiance and resentment. This phenomenon seems so widespread that scholars may one day move beyond asking whether or not Social Media can facilitate anti-authoritarian communities; if a consensus emerges that this possibility definitely exists, experts will then be confronted by the more difficult task of tracing what happens to such movements in the event that they succeed in toppling authoritarian regimes.

For example, it remains to be seen what degrees of influence the Arab Spring's so-called "Facebook youth" will manage to exert once their authoritarian governments have been toppled and the messy work of long-term democratization and political maneuvering begins (MacFarquhar and Amar; Seligson). In the case of Egypt, the ruling military council has taken to imprisoning bloggers and other online activists who rose to prominence during the revolution and has resorted to attacking foreign pro-democracy groups aiming to revitalize the country's civil society (Associated Press, "Egypt's Army"). These efforts have, in turn, refocused popular attention on key criticisms of the country's military, including the mass detention and prosecution of civilians through military trials (Ibid.). The continuing tug-of-war between activists and authorities in Egypt even in the post-Mubarak era demonstrates that the Internet is only a medium by which social movements and dissidents can leverage their demands — not a magic bullet for instantly curing all of country's political problems.

Growing Internet access and the proliferation of Social Media networks have placed authoritarian regimes into a difficult "damned if you do, damned if you don't" dilemma in which typical tactics of asserting control no longer offer straightforward results. One of the reasons the Egyptian April 6th Youth Movement was so quickly able

to gather so much steam with its discussion of social issues was because the traditional opposition movements. This effectively gave the April 6th leaders and their outraged calls for mobilization a high level of comparative credibility and popular support (Shapiro).

While some critics have asserted that Social Media activity is incapable of generating lasting social movements because online activism represents no real danger or social commitment, this presumption has come under strong assault in light of the very real dangers faced by the netizens of authoritarian countries. In his 2011 article on new ICT democratization in Africa, Herman Wasserman questioned the widely-held assumption that “social networking is low-risk” by pointing to examples like Fouad Mourtada (jailed for impersonating the Moroccan king’s brother on Facebook) and Cheng Jianping (sent to a labor camp as a result of sending a tweet) (Wasserman 147). Prominent examples of this nature are increasingly capturing the attention of the international media, such as when Saudi journalist Hamza Kashgari was deported from Malaysia to Saudi Arabia to face trial and a possible death penalty as a result of Twitter posts he made about the Prophet Muhammad (Gooch). It may well be that strict authoritarian control over traditional discourse, social norms, and media only encourages citizens to embrace the Internet as new kind of public sphere and to view one another as members in a community of shared risks and values.

In the case of Saudi Arabia, the country has employed some of the strictest policies of Internet use and state censorship programs in the world. Partly as a result of initiatives, the country has thus far been spared Arab Spring-style popular uprisings. Nonetheless, social conditions and local issues have created a potential flashpoint for online activism — as *The New York Times* reported in June 2011, “Social media, which

helped drive protests across the Arab world, seems tailor-made for Saudi Arabia, where public gatherings are illegal, women are strictly forbidden to mix with unrelated men and people seldom mingle outside their family” (MacFarquhar). As a result, Saudi Arabia — a country which was once so Internet-alienated that a religious fatwa was issued against women typing “LOL (“laughing out loud”) while surfing the web — now features religious conservatives starting their own YouTube channels in an attempt to highlight the work of Wahhabist clerics (Ibid.).

Social Media is even being used to challenge some of the most sensitive and taboo socio-political issues in the country, including the sore subject of women’s rights. In May 2011 a Saudi women’s rights activist named Manal al-Sharif uploaded a YouTube video of herself driving a car in the city of Khobar (*Foreign Policy*). Despite attempts from Saudi authorities to block the video, it quickly became a viral sensation that encouraged dozens of other Saudi women to upload similar videos. Another Saudi online activist, Eman Al Nafjan, helped to spread the videos on her influential English-language blog Saudiwoman’s Weblog — a platform she also used to call out Saudi authorities when they set up a fake Twitter feed to try to discredit al-Sharif (Ibid.). Similar creativity has also been on display in Bahrain, where activists have used Google Earth in order to “reveal the shocking size of lands expropriated by the royal family for private use” (Lynch 47). Social Media activism appears to be on the rise even in Arab countries where citizens have long been told that dissidence and protest are go against longstanding traditions of social harmony and deference to monarchies.

While the Arab Spring may have impressively showcased the more dramatic and extreme side of Social Media’s political applicability, examples of renewed online

activism in Russia and China during the same time period have also highlighted how Social Media can provide civil societies and social movements with more long-term types of utility. Unlike as in some of the Arab Spring countries, Social Media has not brought citizens in Russia and China to the streets to call for outright revolution or the total abolishment of the existing government.

This should not be taken to mean that civil societies in Russia and China have done less to embrace Web 2.0 tools than their counterparts in the Middle East, or that Social Media has failed to make a political impact in these two countries. On the contrary, the social movements and anti-authoritarian dissidents of these two nations have spent the last several years fostering close and blossoming relationships with Social Media platforms. Social Media's political utility for voicing dissent and calling the government to account has only continued to expand, despite sophisticated attempts in both China and Russia to suppress online activism and to co-opt the public sphere carved out by new Social Media platforms. This demonstrates both Social Media's flexibility in the face of state pressure as well as the long-term sustainability of reform movements that emerge out of online spaces.

Russia is an interesting environment for studying Social Media impact due to the variety of ways in which its citizens have used Web 2.0 tools to apply pressure on a government failing to deliver on needed reforms and to meet social needs. The Russian Communication and Press Ministry projected in 2011 that the country had 80 million regular Internet users, or around 56% of the total population (Razumovskaya). Leon Aron, the director of Russian studies at the American Enterprise Institute, argued in Spring 2011 that today's Russia can be divided into the two categories of the "television

nation” and the “Internet nation”; “Although most Russians still get their daily news from television, the minority who rely on the Internet are more politically engaged....The Internet is already a major factor in Russian politics — and its influence is growing almost daily” (1). Writing even before the major protests that begun sprouting in Russia at the end of 2011, Aron noted, “The Internet is the backbone of civil society in Russia — giving people both a voice and the tools to self-organize — and it is a growing force against authoritarianism” (Ibid.). Young Russians are increasingly abandoning television altogether, causing notable figures like socialite-turned-activist Kseniya Sobcha to shift from their television roots towards a greater focus on Twitter and other Social Media outlets (Stanley). Paralleling a trend currently in progress in other authoritarian societies, in Russia the Internet has enabled citizens to access and discuss examples of governmental ineptitude or election fraud ignored by the subjugated, traditional media outlets (de Carbonnel). The influence of the Internet has been rapidly expanding in the country, marked at certain points by memorable acts of online activism on the parts of frustrated individuals.

In 2009 police officer Aleksei Dymovsky (now also known as the “YouTube Cop”) rocketed to national and international fame when he uploaded two online videos in which he detailed police corruption and appealed directly to Prime Minister Vladimir Putin to address the widespread problem. In spite of Dymovsky’s subsequent firing, harassment, and arrest, other Russians soon began sharing their own videotaped stories and pleas online (Weir; McDonald; RT; BBC, “Russian policeman”; Levy, “Videos Rouse”). Florian Toepfl’s empirical study of the event led him to determine that the two “honest police Major Dymovskiy” videos produced a scandal that was, “perceived as a

major threat to the ruling elites” in Russia (Toepfl 1306).

In contrast to Dymovskiy’s refusal to endorse the government’s outreach efforts, the Kremlin was able to manage the “Living Shield” scandal that erupted in March 2010 when 29-year-old Stanislav Sutygain uploaded a YouTube video describing how Moscow traffic police used him and several other bystanders to form an unwitting human shield by parking their cars across the road to stop an escaping criminal (Ibid 1306-9). In that case, top-down management succeeded in appeasing Sutygain and massaging public outrage by using superficial gestures; the chief of the Moscow traffic police gave the blogger a certificate of bravery and one radio station even proclaimed, “The reform of the ministry of Internal Affairs has been prepared by bloggers” (Ibid 1308). Since 2009 online videos have come to play an outsized role in exposing the Russian ruling party’s abuse of office and attacks on civil society, aided in large part by the rapid spread of new “smart phones” capable of instantly recording videos of misconduct on a moment’s notice (Schwartz, “A New Kind of Election Monitor”). These cases would suggest that even sophisticated and pro-active regimes like the one in Russia are dependent to some degree on the compliance of online activists in efforts to limit damage to state legitimacy in the case of online scandals.

This implies a relative loss of control and leverage compared to the pre-Internet days during which information and credibility could be much more smoothly managed and piloted by the state. This can be discomfoting to authoritarian elites long used to the traditional rules of the offline era. Even as Russia was overtaking Germany as Europe’s largest Internet market in 2010, Vladimir Putin famously dismissed online political activism by claiming that the Internet is just “50 percent pornographic material” (Barry,

“Resolute Putin”). A January 2012 *Newsweek* magazine article noted that Putin “regards the Internet with suspicion and knows as little about it as he can, taking obvious pride in the fact that he doesn’t even use a computer” (Nemtsova and Matthews 21). While the regime has had the foresight to co-opt and hire numerous Internet and new media experts, the ruling elites are themselves sometimes personally and culturally disconnected from their country’s young and educated netizens. When older figures in an authoritarian regime show open contempt for the Internet and its growing user-base, it undermines their own efforts to co-opt and charm these very same demographics into continuing their political apathy or compliance.

In addition to video-sharing trends, other online social movements have similarly served to rouse Russia’s civil society out of its long-dormant state. For example, the young “shareholder activist” and real estate lawyer Aleksei Navalny famously received a million unique online visitors per day on his blog when he published his scoop about embezzlement at the state-owned pipeline company Transneft. Navalny developed a large following via his LiveJournal blog and eventually established his own website at Navalny.ru, building on public as well as shareholder outrage at systematic corruption at public-private companies such as those in the Russian energy sector (Kramer). At the start of 2011 he launched another website named RosPil (“Russian Saw,” from the slang for kick-backs), which was based off of a two year-old initiative by President Medvedev to make all government documents of tender open to public scrutiny. Navalny has successfully mobilized thousands of volunteers to analyze and debate government requests for tender, the most outrageous of which are analyzed by experts and eventually even subjected to crippling letter campaigns by readers of Navalny’s site (Ioffe, “One

man's cyber-crusade"). This sort of reader work- and risk-diffusion is a successful, political application of another type of Web 2.0 phenomenon known as "crowd sourcing", in which thousands or tens of thousands of online visitors contribute individual work in order to achieve massive joint projects. A December 2011 issue of *Foreign Policy* magazine released in the same month included Navalny in its list of "100 Top Global Thinkers" and noted that by fall 2011, "Navalny had saved the Russian government nearly 7.7 million rubles by calling attention to and then torpedoing wasteful deals, not to mention offering a mainstream face for the growing Russian anti-corruption movement" (60). The utility of tactics like crowd sourcing is practically limitless, meaning there is a high chance of seeing more of this kind of activity in the future in other authoritarian countries where the government is similarly viewed as corrupt and inefficient.

Russian online movements such as the one spearheaded by Navalny eventually succeeded in mobilizing to make their views felt in the real world. In December 2011 historic protests broke out in Russia of the kind not seen in the country in two decades. Russia's civil society — long since pronounced dead or in a permanent coma — turned out in force across Russia in order to protest the blatant rigging of the country's parliamentary elections. As demonstrations continued to break out across several cities, *The New York Times* reported:

The blogosphere has played a central role in mobilizing young Russians. During the parliamentary campaign, Russians using smartphones filmed authority figures cajoling or offering money to subordinates to get out the vote for United Russia. More video went online after Election Day, when many Russians in their 20s camped out in polling stations as amateur observers. (Barry, "Rally Defying Putin's Party").

In the lead-up to the protests, Navalny had managed to successfully transfer his online visibility into a public leadership role among the segments of Russian society infuriated by the September 2011 announcement that Putin and Medvedev were once again switching seats with each other for the presidency (Panyushkin). After acquiring hundreds of thousands of online followers for his Internet projects over the course of the prior two years, Navalny was openly treated like a rock star at the public speeches he gave during the December protests (Parfitt). Labeling the demonstrations the “birth of Russian citizenry”, *The Economist* magazine noted that these protestors were “mobilized by social networks rather than political parties” and that Alexei Navalny had been a key figure in transforming online activism into street action and popular discourse; “Although Mr. Navalny is recognized by only 7% of the population, his [Internet-popularized] image of United Russia as a ‘party of crooks and thieves’ is now recognized by more than two-thirds” (“Birth of Russian citizenry”). A lengthy *Time Magazine* expose on Navalny in January 2011 centered largely on asking how and when he would supposedly run for the Russian presidency (Shuster).

Following up on their prior success just a few months earlier, four times as many Russians turned out to act as election observers in the March 2012 presidential election as in December (*The Economist*, “It brings a tear”). As a result, the regime was forced to use much more labor-intensive methods to rig the vote and had to abandon the blatant rigging tactics it used in the parliamentary elections (Ibid.). While the ruling party again simply denied all accusations and rejected the validity of incriminating videos posted online, it was still pushed into a much more defensive posture this time around after hundreds of thousands of Russians set up a vast network of Web cameras to monitor ballot boxes

(Kishkovsky and Barry). Despite the fact that the Russian Orthodox Church has grown “so close to the Kremlin that it often seems like a branch of government” (Schwartz, “\$30,000 Watch”), vibrant activity among the faithful on Social Media websites and online discussions boards even pressured the influential institution into publicly taking a stand in favor of election reform (Kishkovsky).

Journalist Konstantin von Eggert has noted that the Putin regime inadvertently laid the groundwork for these protests by providing the stability and economic development needed for the emergence of a new, technology-savvy Russian middle class that is now protesting against the government in major cities (von Eggert). Many modern authoritarian regimes thus find themselves in a devilish, catch-22 predicament — they are forced to maintain economic growth and access to technological modernization in order to sustain legitimacy and avoid public discontent, but these very same factors can ultimately serve as a foundation for the rise of new, Internet-savvy demographics.

The Chinese government currently finds itself in this exact dilemma. The country’s rapid economic development and wholesale embrace of technology have been accompanied by an unbelievable explosion of Social Media adoption. This has provided Chinese citizens with a tailor-made opportunity for new dimensions of civic engagement. Writing even before the latest waves of Internet activism that recently began in China, Xiang Zhou noted in 2009 that “[despite] the gap between the potential and the reality of the Internet...academia outside China still acknowledges that the Chinese people, by and large, do have more political freedom than before” (1006). Guobin Yang, an Associate Professor at Columbia University and an expert on Internet use in China, wrote an article in 2011 in which he noted:

Protest is also increasingly common on the Internet. I recently counted 60 major cases of online activism, ranging from extensive blogging to heavily trafficked forums to petitions, in 2009 and 2010 alone. Yet these protests are reformist, not revolutionary. They are usually local, centering on corrupt government officials and specific injustices against Chinese citizens, and the participants in different movements do not connect with one another, because the government forbids broad-based coalitions for large-scale social movements. (“China’s Gradual Revolution”)

One reason online social networks have proliferated so rapidly and successfully in China and elsewhere is because the wide variety of Social Media tools and websites available allow citizens in different societies to adopt the particular platforms and programs most useful for their linguistic and social needs. University of Indiana Social Media scholar Shuo Tang has noted that the Chinese language is so succinct that most micro-blogging messages never even reach the 140-character limit typical for such platforms (*The Economist*, “Twtr”). The famous Chinese artist and activist Ai Weiwei commented in “Ai Weiwei’s Blog”, a translated collection of his 2,700 online posts from 2007-2009, that, “Twitter is most suitable for me. In the Chinese language, 140 characters is a novella” (*The Economist*, “Ai Weiwei’s blog”). Goubin Yang, the author of *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online*, has argued that Chinese presents major hurdles for even the most sophisticated Social Media-monitoring software: “Many know how to use the versatility of the Chinese language to create characters that easily beat the best filtering technologies” (“Online Activism” 35). The unbelievable growth and popularity of micro-blogging platforms in China shows that even the most quick-footed and proactive Internet-controlling regimes face a constant battle in their attempts to carefully monitor and control the proliferation of Social Media platforms within their societies.

In contrast to most other authoritarian cases, in China the impact of Social Media

has been a field of serious scholarly attention since the Web 2.0 era first began in 2004-2005. China scholars rapidly began pointing out the influence of blogs on foreign and domestic affairs and their utility as vehicles for political speech (Zhou, X. 1004). Yang has argued that growing Chinese Internet discourse is making an impact in the four distinct-but-overlapping areas of cultural, social, political, and nationalistic activism (Yang, "Online Activism" 33). Xiao Qiang has written that the turning point for Social Media impact in China can be explicitly traced, arguing in a 2011 article, "It was in 2007...that the Internet first helped to propel certain happenings into the official media despite resistance from censors. By doing so, Internet activity effectively set the agenda for public discourse" ("The Battle" 48). The exploding effect of online activity on national discourse was not lost on authorities; a 2009 study by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences analyzing the Internet's impact even identified netizens as a "new opinion class" capable of swiftly influencing society (Xuegang, Jiangchun, and Huaxin).

This analysis is not universally accepted by China scholars; a 2011 empirical study examining behavioral and attitudinal factors by Yi Mou, David Atkin, and Hanlong Fu concluded, "Importantly, the current political and social environment in China seems to truncate any liberalizing potential of the Internet, as evidenced by the limited online political discussion and strong presence of government regulation" (341). In their 2011 article, the authors particularly emphasized data that seemed to speak directly against the claims made by "Liberation Technology" optimists like Qiang; for example, they pointed to World Internet Project data from 2003, 2005, and 2007 showing that 50% of Chinese Internet users do not post their opinions at all, 30% do so sometimes, only 10% express their opinions frequently, and that the rate of political nonparticipation is "even higher

among the younger generation than in the overall population” (Mou, Atkin, and Fu 451; Shen et al.). These types of direct disagreements validate Stanley Rosen’s claim that the political impact of the Internet is quite possibly the most contested subject in Chinese communications research (Rosen 509).

However, scholars like Qiang argue that any apathy to Internet-based civic engagement will fade as the explosion of online social communication slowly bleeds into the political arena: “Although most posts are personal in nature, more and more bloggers are writing about public affairs and becoming local opinion leaders” (“The Battle” 49). Other scholars have also conducted their own empirical studies of speech diversity in Chinese Social Media platforms and concluded, “As critical citizenry, China’s netizens constitute a new social force challenging authoritarian rule” (Lei 291). Even some of the empirical work by Mou, Atkin, and Fu seemed to confirm this trend; while they argued that pre-existing political beliefs (rather than the technology itself) ultimately catalyzed online political engagement, they nonetheless found, “As citizens become more proficient with the Internet, they are more likely to engage in online political discussion” (352). This is very significant in light of the fact that “Chinese Internet users are active and prolific content producers. A January 2008 nationwide survey [showed] that about 66 percent of China’s 210 million Internet users have contributed content to one or more sites” (Yang, “Online Activism” 35). Xiao Qiang has argued that Social Media websites have essentially transformed into a cultural phenomenon, providing a much-needed medium for exposing and sharing any kind of information that is normally not distributed in China’s highly-regulated society:

In China, the nebulous nature of the Internet allows information not easily accessible elsewhere to be revealed (“*shai*”) ... Netizens have launched

endless so-called *shai* activities on bulletin boards, blogs, and video- and photo-sharing services: For ‘*shai* salaries’, people post their own or others’ salaries for comparison; for ‘*shai* vacations’, users share vacation photos and experiences; and for ‘*shai* corruption’, ‘*shai* bosses’, and ‘*shai* riches’, netizens publish information and opinions about the elite that would otherwise go unsaid. (“The Battle” 53).

Taken in conjunction, these findings would certainly confirm that the rapid expansion of Chinese Internet use poses a major challenge to the regime’s desire to control political thought and social discourse.

Despite the latest wave of heavy arrests and repression of online dissidents that took place in the country across 2011, Chinese citizens continue to use the online tools available to them in order to constantly “push the envelope” on social issues and politics. Young Chinese bloggers have created and extensively promoted a cartoon symbol called “Grass Mud Horse,” whose conflict with river crabs in a mythical Chinese narrative feeds nicely into a play on words against Chinese censorship policy. The Grass Mud Horse first appeared in early 2009 in an online music video that became an Internet sensation almost immediately (Qiang, “The Song”). The grass mud horse has become “an icon of resistance to censorship,” as “the vast online population has joined the chorus, from serious scholars to usually politically pathetic urban white-collar workers” (Diamond 74). Such online movements have started to make themselves felt in the real world. Brave activists have started to daringly run as independents in low-level elections across the country by using popular micro-blogging websites to quickly generate popular support (LaFraniere; *The Economist*, “Vote as I say”). The regime has similarly been alarmed by the growing capacity of online social networks to mobilize real-world demonstrations as well as continuous home visits to prominent Chinese activists under house arrest (*The Economist*, “Blind man’s bluff”).

In 2009 Rebecca MacKinnon noted that China's blogosphere is a "much more freewheeling space than the mainstream media" in that the government's censorship varied widely across the fifteen blog-service providers that she analyzed in her research (MacKinnon, "China's Censorship 2.0"). As a result, Mackinnon concluded that "a great deal of politically sensitive material survives in the Chinese blogosphere, and chances for survival can likely be improved with knowledge and strategy" (Ibid.). She also highlighted the fact that China's "ground-breaking manifesto — Charter 08, a call for nineteen reforms to achieve 'liberties, democracy, and the rules of law' in China — garnered most of its signatures through the aid of blog sites such as *bullog.cn*" (Ibid.). MacKinnon has called this development "networked authoritarianism", a state in which "the single ruling party remains in control while a wide range of conversations about the country's problems nonetheless occur on websites and social-networking services" (Mackinnon, "China's 'Networked Authoritarianism'" 33). Although some of China's "netizens" (known officially as *wangmin*) are quickly squelched, those who gain enough popularity often enjoy some degree of protection because authorities become wary of the potential public backlash that could emerge as a result of subjecting these individuals to heavy-handed methods (Lei 291). Prominent examples include the author Li Chengpeng (who enjoys 3 million followers on his Sina Weibo account) and the celebrated racecar driver and blogger Han Han (whose personal blog has experienced hundreds of millions of visits to date) (China Digital Times; Time Magazine; Jacobs, "Heartthrob's Blog").

In recent years China has experienced a "micro-blogging revolution" in which the speed and size of micro-blogging social networks have bulldozed the government's traditional policy of carefully crafting and filtering the news through state media outlets

(Wines and LaFraniere). Even the regime's advanced censorship software and hordes of Internet police have been unable to keep up with the pace with which rumors, news, and outrage about breaking events can now spread across China. As a result, micro-blogs have become the default trend-setters of popular news and are increasingly influencing the content of widely-read Chinese-language news outlets published out of Hong Kong and America (*The Economist*, "Hidden News"). The waves of online outrage that typically follow in the wake of high-profile cases of governmental abuse or incompetence have become so influential that they have even sparked more hard-hitting and critical reporting at previously loyal state media outlets (Wines and Johnson). Likewise, the newfound power of popular Chinese authors and artists to circumvent state publishers and patronage systems by reaching audiences online has forced the market-minded government to tolerate not only increasingly incendiary artistic material, but even open criticisms of state censorship policy (Wong, "Pushing China's Limits"). Similar market forces are currently at work in Myanmar, where the ruling junta's desperation for economic development and integration with the outside world have led it to remove firewalls, restore access to Social Media websites, and host international technology conferences in the capital (*The Economist*, "Yangon's digital spring").

Even some extremely organized and powerful authoritarian governments such as China's are forced to carefully pick and choose when and how they clamp down on Social Media dissent. However, this should not be taken to mean that authoritarian regimes are defenseless in the face of growing online activism. As we shall see in the following section, most authoritarian regimes have been far from idle during the global

Web 2.0 explosion and several of them have even found creative ways to use the spread of Social Media platforms to further entrench their own holds on power.

IV. Authoritarian Regimes and Their Adjustments to Social Media Proliferation

Although the Arab Spring demonstrated that some repressive governments were clearly behind the times when it came to new developments such as Social Media, other authoritarian regimes clearly understand and recognize the potential consequences of information and communication technologies spreading freely within their societies. They have therefore responded to the creative socio-political applications of Social Media with an equally innovative variety of measures. Some governments have launched gargantuan efforts to limit the empowering potential of Social Media while still attempting to harness technological advancements in order to further entrench their own regimes.

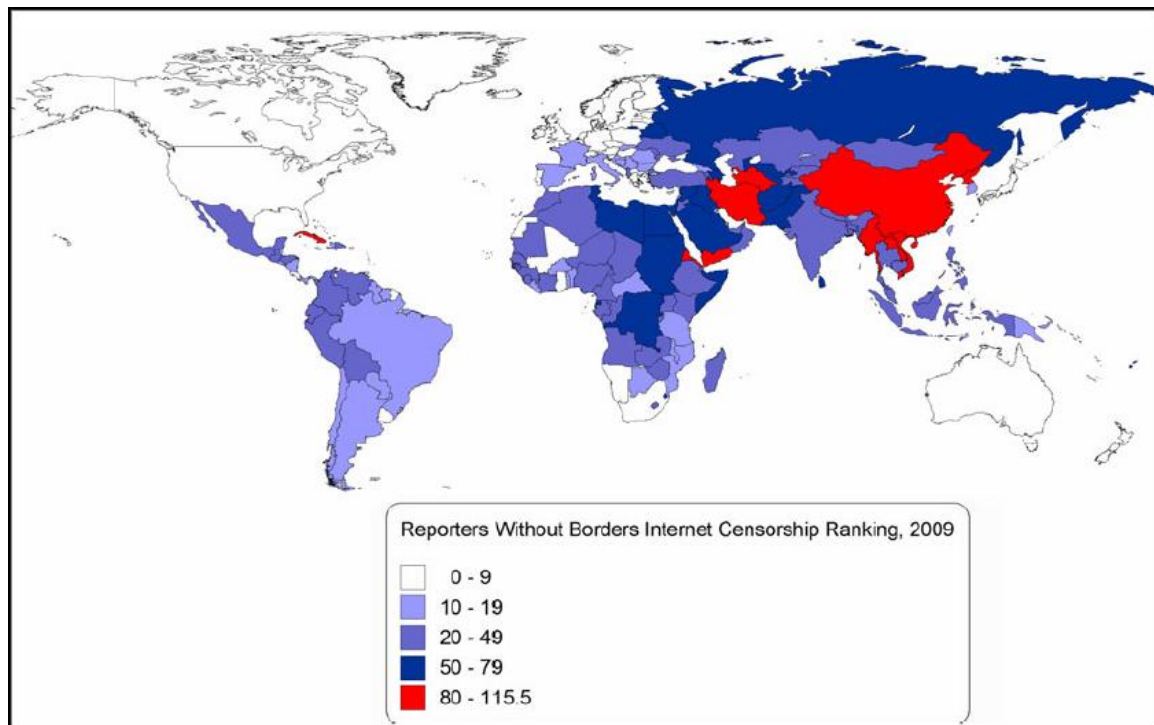
Many authoritarian governments have been extremely open and pro-active in this regard, sometimes establishing enormous domestic systems that bear only minor resemblance to the Internet known and used by the rest of the world. China is well on its way to building its own entire Web 2.0, replacing the brands and websites used by the rest of the global with domestic search engines and companies run directly or almost directly by the government (Jiang; Zuckerman). New service disruptions in Iran at the start of 2012 led observers to suspect that the Iranian regime is finally moving ahead with plans to implement domestic “*Hala*” Intranet intended to replace access to the global Internet (Chenar). Russia and other countries have also followed suit (Morozov, “Is Google”; Fisher). Nations such as Cuba and Myanmar have attempted to artificially

hamper the growth of telecommunications infrastructure for fear of a free flow of information in and out of their countries (Worth; Morozov, “Cuba and Burma”). Several scholars have also noted the same trend in Iran, which has “impeded the spread of broadband access, fearing that it would further enable Iranians to access sensitive cultural and political material that might undermine the government’s control over terrestrial broadcasting and challenge both prevailing mores and the regime’s legitimacy” (Aday et al. 13). A number of organizations and experts have already attempted to compile various concrete rankings and categorizations for Internet control and repression. Reporters Without Borders, for example, has divided suspect countries into the two categories of “Internet Enemies” and “Countries Under Surveillance”:

*Fig. 9. Reporters Without Borders Internet Freedom Categories, April 2012
(Reporters Without Borders)*

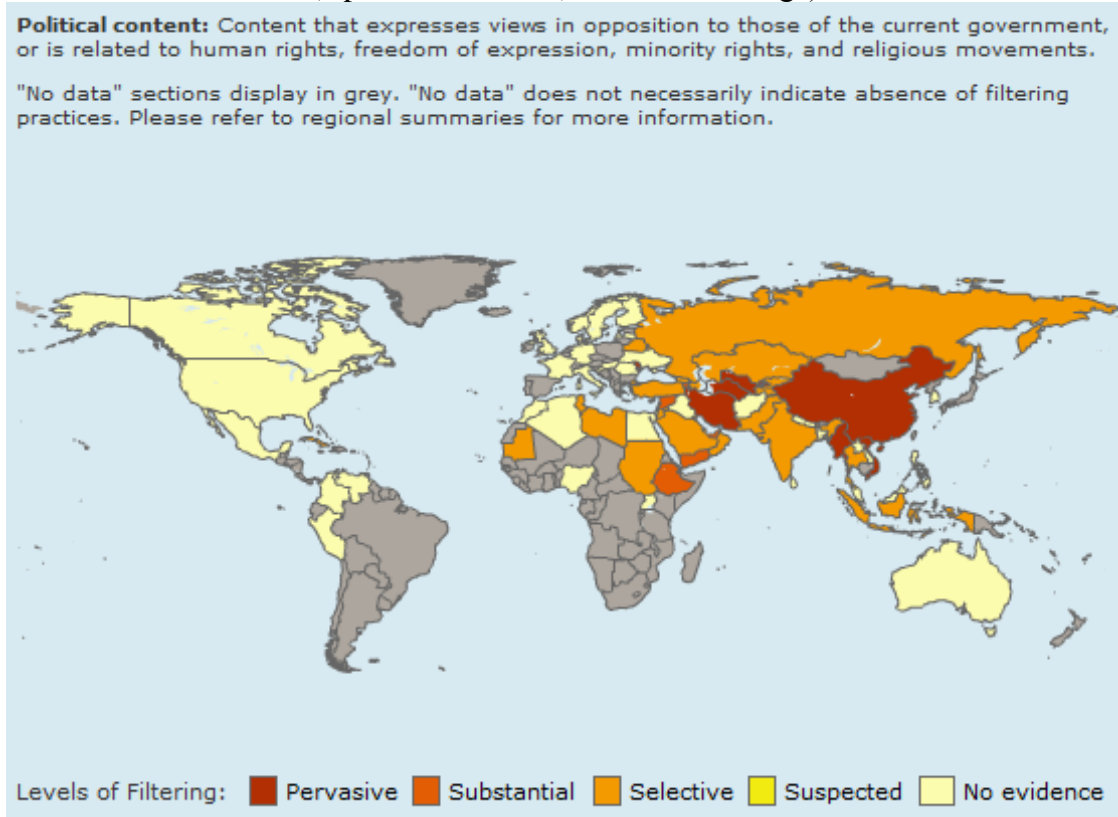
Internet Enemies	Countries Under Surveillance
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bahrain • Belarus • Burma • China • Cuba • Iran • North Korea • Saudi Arabia • Syria • Turkmenistan • Uzbekistan • Vietnam 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Australia • Egypt • Eritrea • France • India • Kazakhstan • Malaysia • Russia • South Korea • Thailand • Tunisia • Turkey • United Arab Emirates

Fig. 10. Reporters Without Borders Internet Censorship Rankings Map, 2009 (Warf)



Similar rankings have been conducted by groups like the OpenNet Initiative (ONI), a partnership between Harvard University, the University of Toronto, and The SecDev Group corporation. ONI distinguishes between four different “Global Internet Filtering Maps” (Political, Social, Conflict/Security, Internet Tools). For comparison, here is the ONI political map:

Fig. 11. ONI Global Internet Filtering Map-Politics, 2011
(OpenNet Initiative, “Global Filtering”)



ONI has even developed an interactive online map showing the various levels of global filtering of Social Media, with toggles for Facebook, Flickr, Orkut, Twitter, and YouTube (OpenNet Initiative, “Social Media”).

However, while these sorts of rankings and quantitative systems provide some helpful background, I would like to emphasize that the main purpose of this thesis is not to single out any authoritarian country as the worst offender, nor is it to provide my own quantitative analysis on degrees of censorship. Rather, I aim to provide an overview of major events and cases from recent years to the reader, thereby extrapolating some common trends and key points regarding authoritarian responses to Social Media proliferation. For the purposes of this thesis, the label “authoritarian” will be used as an all-inclusive umbrella term for an entire spectrum of governments that more specialized

scholars have distinguished as ranging from “hybrid,” semi-authoritarian regimes such as Russia on one end to “classic” authoritarian regimes such as China and Myanmar on the other (Bogaards 2009).

A fierce debate has been raging for several years as various experts have proffered starkly contrasting conclusions and predictions regarding Social Media’s anti-authoritarian potential (Open Society Foundation). Clay Shirky, Patrick Meier, and other academics have argued that the Web and Social Media are forces which represent a clear boon for dissidents and civil societies, essentially aiding in an inexorable march of freedom as authoritarian regimes struggle to deal with a free-flow of information and communication (Meier, “Digital Activism,” “Why Dictators”; Shirky, “The net advantage”). Overly optimistic predictions on the Internet’s ability to confound authoritarian regimes are nothing new. Bill Clinton once enthusiastically proclaimed that it would be impossible for China to build a giant firewall around its domestic Internet (Lagerkvist 120). In 2005, *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof happily announced, “It’s the Chinese leadership itself that is digging the Communist Party’s grave, by giving the Chinese people broadband” (“Death by a Thousand Blogs”). Today China’s citizens are far more active on the Internet than in 2005, yet the Communist Party certainly does not look like it will end up six-feet under any time soon.

Other scholars have openly voiced their deep reservations about these types of optimistic paradigms, arguing instead that the Internet simply hands police and authorities plenty of new opportunities for increasing social control (Lyon). Such skepticism has only grown in the face of inaccurate and overly-utopian commentaries from pundits, journalists, and politicians that imbue the Internet with almost miraculous

powers for democratization. Although the events of 2011 and 2012 have spoken to Social Media's ability to galvanize civil societies, critics have continued to chide famously Internet-enthusiastic pundits like *The Atlantic*'s Andrew Sullivan and *Foreign Policy*'s Elizabeth Dickinson. For example, as Tunisian regime began to in 2011, Jilian C. York, Director of International Freedom of Expression at the Electronic Frontier Foundation, wrote a piece lamenting the widespread publication of knee-jerk, unsubstantiated articles attributing of success of such revolutions to sources like Wikileaks and Twitter even after similar judgments had turned out to be famously overblown and hasty in the case of Iran (York; Morozov, *The Net Delusion*).

In a similar vein, commentators like CNet's Caroline McCarthy have worried that the growing fixation with Social Media will overshadow more important aspects of the narrative, such as the fact that revolutions are even taking place in the Arab world in the first place — in her words, “There's no such thing as a ‘social media revolution’” (McCarthy). Widely-read journalist Malcom Gladwell wrote an essay for *The New Yorker* in October 2010 entitled “Small Change: Why the revolution will not be tweeted,” in which he went so far as to openly doubt that the relatively “weak” and often impersonal connections of the kind generated on Social Media networks would be enough to encourage protestors to engage in high-risk activism of the sort seen during the American Civil Rights movement.

Author and journalist Tina Rosenberg has likewise questioned the power of so-called “Facebook Revolutions” by comparing these events to famous precedents like the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott and arguing that the importance of personal connections still far outweighs any benefits derived from modern technology (Rosenberg). In 2010

Jeroen Van Laer and Peter Van Aelst published an article similarly claiming that “it seems that the new media are losing their newness quickly, and are fundamentally are unable to create stable ties between activists that are necessary for sustained collective action” (Van Laer and Van Aelst 1146). These types of comments echo much of the academic literature from the early- and mid-2000s, during which time numerous scholars argued that the Internet is a “weak-tie instrument” incapable of generating the binding ties and strong trust between participants needed to create lasting social movements (Diani, “Social movement networks”). Even though world events in 2011 and 2012 may have invalidated some of these overly negative and pessimistic generalizations and assumptions, the various concerns that have been raised by skeptics should still be taken seriously in light of Social Media’s many intrinsic shortcomings.

While the Internet is a powerful force and Web 2.0 tools may be extremely flexible, these new technologies also contain dangerous pitfalls and limitations for any social movements hoping to embrace these mediums. Scholars have noted that new communication technologies like Social Media can “facilitate intergroup divisions” and “foster group polarization” (Haider 8). Others have also warned that these new technologies might make citizens and activists more passive by “leading them to confuse online rhetoric with substantial political action, diverting their attention away from productive activities” (Aday et al. 5). Even the very structure of Social Media-powered social movements is a two-edged sword; although so far the decentralized nature of these movements has often proven advantageous in that it makes them harder to suppress, the lack of clear leadership always represents a potential liability. Despite the eventual success of the uprising in Egypt, throughout the affair outside observers worried that the

consensual and intrinsically diffused nature of the Social Media-powered youth movement could lead to a major squabbles or communications failures — especially in the face of staunch resistance by a more hierarchical, organized, and unified authoritarian regime (Fahim and El-Naggar, “Some Fear”).

The problem of online decentralization applies to information as well as to leadership; damaging or counter-productive rumors can spread chaos during key moments such as street demonstrations. Combined with the Internet’s ability to provide anonymity, this means that government agents or sympathizers can create fake dissident accounts on social networking sites in order to send conflicting messages or in order to infiltrate the leadership structures that are emerging in newly organized civil societies. Even if these saboteurs are discovered before they manage to actively wreck any harm, such revelations could in and of themselves lead to demoralization or overt paranoia among activists and organizers.

Authoritarian regimes do not even have to be involved in order for such setbacks to occur — idle chatter or even well-meaning do-gooders are perfectly capable of dealing exactly this sort of damage. Saeedeh Pouraghayy, an Iranian dissident whose supposed murder and rape by the government was reported and quickly disseminated online, was widely hailed as a Green Movement martyr until the whole story turned out to be a hoax several months later (Esfandiari, “The Twitter Devolution”). In 2011 the world media and Syrian diaspora were captivated by the blog posts of a young American-Syrian activist operating under the moniker “Gay Girl in Damascus,” who wrote intimately about her government’s brutal crackdown on Arab Spring protestors. After several months panic ensued when her cousin updated her blog to say that the popular activist had been

disappeared by Assad's forces, even prompting a State Department investigation. After a few weeks, the world suddenly learned that Gay Girl in Damascus was, in fact, a portly 40-year-old American man from Georgia who admitted to fabricating months of journal posts for the purpose of raising awareness about the conflict (Flock and Bell). Civil society's embrace of Social Media has proven to be a messy art at best, justifying at least some of the concerns raised by skeptics about these new, complex technologies backfiring on dissidents.

Internet-skepticism has perhaps been the most publicly championed by journalist and visiting Stanford scholar Evgeny Morozov ("How dictators," "How the net," "Why the Internet is failing"). A disillusioned, former NGO-sponsored online activist in his native land of Belarus, Morozov has spent the last several years launching a veritable crusade of blog posts and public lectures to prevent the spread of two cardinal sins he calls "cyber-utopianism" (a naïve belief that the Internet is always good and has no downsides) and "Internet-centrism" (the idea that all democracy promotion should be framed in terms of the Internet). He consolidated his arguments and evidence in the publication of his first book, *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom*, just released at the beginning of January 2011. *The Net Delusion* and other publications like it serve as a sobering and comprehensive counterpoint to the one-sided enthusiasm of Social Media's unequivocal advocates.

One of the most thought-provoking points raised in Morozov's book concerns the continuing pervasiveness of two competing 20th visions of authoritarianism and how these paradigms have been applied in the digital age. In his book *1984*, George Orwell emphasized the totalitarian dimensions of constant surveillance, finely honed

propaganda, and direct “Big Brother” control that were characteristic of Stalin-style regimes. In contrast, Aldous Huxley believed that ruling oligarchies would find easier and more insidious methods of social control based on taking advantage of humanity’s selfish desires and propensity to be easily distracted. In Huxley’s *Brave New World*, technology and science served to maximize pleasure and consumption, creating brain-dead and complacent masses heady with sexual fulfillment and general hedonism. Morozov not only demonstrates that the spread of the Internet is capable of supercharging a government’s pursuit of either approach, but also points out that smart regimes are increasingly using the growth of the Web to apply both styles of authoritarianism simultaneously — essentially creating a perfect storm of social control where minimal resources are applied with maximal efficiency.

It is easy to see why fears of Orwellian oppression might seem valid in an age where increasing numbers of citizens are constantly logging online to share their personal information and opinions. Many authoritarian governments have adopted sophisticated technological architectures in order to censor and control online activity. These range from Cuba’s crude-but-effective domestic programs to efforts in Russia to use Western companies and software to crack down on activists and civil society groups (Voeux and Pain; Morozov, “Tweeting your way”; Levy, “Russia Uses Microsoft”, “Microsoft Changes Policy”). Of course, the most advanced (and extensively analyzed) national program is China’s breathtakingly Orwellian “Project Golden Shield,” a.k.a. “The Great Firewall of China” (Zittrain and Edelman). Cutting-edge automated technology, tens of thousands of active censors, and countless Web portal employees are constantly at work filtering any discussions directly or indirectly critical of the government...often followed

by the intimidation, arrests, or disappearing of the offending parties (Wong, “Nobel Prize”; Wikipedia). Larry Diamond noted in 2006 that the Chinese government is also now “trying to eliminate anonymous communication and networking by requiring registration of real names to blog or comment and by tightly controlling and monitoring cybercafés” (74).

Most authoritarian countries are able to exercise such high levels of control over domestic Internet use as a result of state monopolies over telecommunications infrastructure. As Ronald Deibert and Rafal Dohozinski have noted, “While there is no official acknowledgement that service is being curtailed, it is noteworthy that the Iranian Revolutionary Guard owns the main ISP in Iran — the Telecommunication Company of Iran (TCI)” (“Liberation Vs. Control” 51). The TCI handles all Internet traffic for the nation and is said by experts to have a filtering and blocking architecture second only to China’s (Dayem; Bray, “Activists utilizing Twitter”). Iran plans to have cyber-police units in all police stations across the country by mid-2012, and the first units are already active in Tehran (Associated Press, “Iran announces”). In March 2012, Pakistan stirred up both domestic and international controversy by openly and unapologetically soliciting companies to develop an advanced \$10 million Internet censorship architecture for the entire country (Pfanner).

China has even attempted to implement programs that individually monitor every single computer user in China. In May 2009, the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT) decreed that every computer sold in China now needed to come with the new “Green Dam Youth Escort” program pre-installed. MIIT was eventually forced to back down from this decree last minute, as “While Green Dam was ostensibly aimed at

protecting children from inappropriate content, researchers outside and within China quickly discovered that it not only censored political and religious content but also logged user activity and sent this information back to a central computer server” (MacKinnon, “China’s ‘Networked Authoritarianism’” 39). The Chinese government has since instead implemented other measures, such as new regulations being tested in Beijing that would force bars, restaurants, hotels, and bookstores to install elaborate software for monitoring and identifying their otherwise-anonymous customers (Jacobs, “China Steps Up”).

Of course, sophisticated tactics and programs can also always be supplemented by good old-fashioned totalitarian arm-twisting. Iranians living abroad who criticize the current regime on Facebook or Twitter are have been threatened by violence and by the possibility of having their relatives still living in the country arrested (Fassihi). After several Belarusian dissidents began organizing a self-styled “Revolution Through Social Networks” in their country, the regime responded by attacking and threatening young activists in order to force them to spy on the movement’s founders (*The Economist*, “How to Dupe the KGB”). Sometimes authoritarian regimes with sufficient organizational capacity and a willingness to be aggressive can pre-empt even the speed with which Social Media can mobilize civil societies, given the correct combination of heavy-handed tactics. China responded to growing calls on micro-blogging sites for a “Jasmine Revolution” emulating the Arab Spring by combining digital censorship and surveillance with highly effective real-world police mobilizations, detentions, and house arrests (Jacobs, “Chinese Government Responds”).

While the emergence of the Internet has allowed authoritarian governments to

track the digital footprints of its citizens for years, the era of Web 2.0 social networking sites has provided it with rich new opportunities for surveillance and for pre-empting potential social flashpoints. Morozov dedicated an entire chapter in *The Net Delusion* to just this topic, arguing that Social Media sites make it easier for authoritarian regimes to track not only individual activists, but even allows them to study how dissident networks in their countries form in the first place (see Chapter Six: “Why the KGB Wants You to Join Facebook”). As summarized in an interview in January 2011:

The reason why the KGB wants you to join Facebook is because it allows them to, first of all, learn more about you from afar. I mean, they don't have to come and interrogate you, and obviously you disclose quite a bit. It allows them to identify certain social graphs and social connections between activists. Many of these relationships are now self-disclosed by activists, by joining various groups. You can actually go and see which causes are more popular than others. (Radio Free Europe)

The “Blogs and Bullets” case study of Iran similarly concluded, “Although there is reason to believe the Iranian case exposes the potential benefits of new media, other evidence — such as the Iranian regime’s use of the same social network tools to harass, identify, and imprison protesters — suggests that, like any media, the Internet is not a ‘magic bullet.’ At best, it may be a ‘rusty bullet’” (Aday et al. 3). In fact, some authoritarian regimes are now actually actively encouraging their citizens to sign up on popular Social Media websites. In early February 2011, the Syrian regime suddenly lifted a three-year access block on Facebook and YouTube, a move which led human rights organizations and the U.S. State Department to publicly question whether it was simply a ploy to track, identify, and attack outspoken citizens before popular unrest could spill into the streets (Preston, “Syria Restores Access”). As it turned out, just a few months after lifting these bans the Syrian regime began a country-wide campaign to arrest and beat

suspected dissidents until they handed over their Facebook passwords to the government. Once they had access to a citizen's Facebook account, state security officers then took control of the person's profile and manipulated it to spread pro-government comments (Preston, "Seeking to Disrupt").

Authoritarian governments have become more creative in their attempts to impress themselves psychologically on Internet-users; in China, "since 2007 two cartoon characters, Jingjing and Chacha (from *jingcha*, the Chinese word for police), have popped up on Internet users' screens to provide links to the Internet Police section of the Public Security website, where readers can report illegal information" (Qiang, "The Battle" 51). As one police officer from Shenzhen explained, "The main function of Jingjing and Chacha is to intimidate, not to answer questions" (Ibid.). The effectiveness of such tactics is debatable. An empirical analysis of Chinese online activity by several otherwise Internet-skeptical scholars found, "Interestingly, political intimidation in the form of the human flesh search engine and the 50-cent party does not seem to have a direct influence on online political discussion" (Mou, Fu, and Atkin 352). Of course, authoritarian governments always have the recourse of simply targeting the website operators themselves; in early 2011 the government-affiliated China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) announced that anyone wanting to register a domain name with the popular ".cn" URL would have to register in person and submit a photo, thereby eliminating anonymous .cn domain-name registration and making it, "easier for authorities to warn or intimidate website operators when 'objectionable' content appears" (MacKinnon, "China's 'Networked Authoritarianism'" 40).

When intimidation and pre-emptive arrests fail, modern authoritarian regimes

have also shown themselves capable and willing to employ far more drastic measures to prevent the continuation of online activism. The growing popularity and success of Social Media networks in China — combined with the events of the Arab Spring — so alarmed the Chinese Communist Party that in October 2011, it announced a campaign to implement some of the most restrictive measures on social networking sites and text messaging in years (Wong, Wines, and LaFraniere). Two months later, the government announced in December that it was launching yet another massive initiative to quash what it labeled as 2011's new epidemic of online "rumors" — an undefined term widely understood to mean any news topic that could pose embarrassment or political difficulties for the regime (Bandurksi, "Rumor Fever," "Control"). However, even these measures ultimately proved insufficient in stemming Social Media's take-over of the public discourse. In March 2012, after social networking sites defied governmental attempts to keep the lid on a scandal involving a top Communist Party official and the ensuing party power struggle, rumors began swirling on micro-blogging sites that a coup was underway in Beijing and that military vehicles had been seen entering the capital. Afraid of losing control of this ongoing political crisis, the Chinese government responded by detaining six people, closing sixteen websites, and disabling user comments on two micro-blogging websites that together had more than 600 million registered accounts (Johnson).

In worst-case scenarios, authoritarian governments and their allies can typically rely on the fact that they control the entirety of a country's Internet and telecommunications infrastructure. This allows them to shut down access to selective Web 2.0 platforms or even the entire Internet during periods of great civil unrest. As demonstrations got underway in Bahrain in February 2011, the government responded by

suddenly blocking websites like Bambuser and YouTube (Glanz). Egypt also initially reacted to youth-organized protests by blocking specific Social Media programs and Twitter in particular (Fahim and El-Naggar, “Violent Clashes”). As the unrest grew worse and the crowds swelled, the government eventually even managed to turn off the Internet entirely for five whole days — a feat which shocked people both in- and outside of the country and which raised fears about similar opportunities for other authoritarian governments in the Arab world:

Interviews with many [Egyptian] engineers, as well as an examination of data collected around the world during the blackout, indicate that the government exploited a devastating combination of vulnerabilities in the national infrastructure. For all the Internet’s vaunted connectivity, the Egyptian government commanded powerful instruments of control: it owns the pipelines that carry information across the country and out into the world. Internet experts say similar arrangements are more common in authoritarian countries than is generally recognized. In Syria, for example, the Syrian Telecommunications Establishment dominates the infrastructure, and the bulk of the international traffic flows through a single pipeline to Cyprus. Jordan, Qatar, Oman, Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern countries have the same sort of dominant, state-controlled carrier. (Markoff and Glanz, “Egypt Leaders”)

Less than a month after Egypt’s so-called “unprecedented” and “historical” move of taking the entire Internet down for several days, Libya followed suit by shutting down access to Facebook, Twitter, *Al Jazeera*, and eventually all national Internet connections in the country (Cowie; *The Huffington Post*).

Commenting in the shocked wake of the Internet going down in Egypt and Libya, many journalists and analysts forgot (or simply did not know) that such an extreme approach had already been previously applied by governments in Asia, most notably Myanmar in 2007 and Nepal in 2005 (Richtel). After ethnic riots in 2009, the Chinese province of Xinjiang was also cut off from the entire Internet for six whole months, along

with most types of mobile-phone and telephone services (MacKinnon, “China’s ‘Networked Authoritarianism’” 40). However, Egypt’s shutdown was truly unprecedented simply in that it showcased how vulnerable even large and well developed Internet infrastructures can be; the Egyptian shut-down was a “double knockout” that not only cut the country off from the global Internet, but also left its domestic systems in a mess after Egypt’s internal Internet turned out to be fundamentally dependent “on moment-to-moment information from systems that exist only outside the country” (Markoff). This is particularly ominous considering that in many authoritarian countries Internet service providers are typically obligated to shut down at the government’s whim as a result of licensing agreements that they are forced to sign in order to operate legally (Ibid).

The successful shutdown of the Internet in these states validated predictions made early on by information and communications analysts, such as a 2006 warning by R. Kelly Garrett that, “Increasing reliance on ICTs in contentious activity also poses a risk for social movements...In many cases, elites and their allies own and/or control the infrastructure on which new ICTs depend” (210). Even in authoritarian countries where a “kill switch” has never been flipped, such a move remains a distinct possibility since many of these nations feature a relatively small number of Internet Service Providers (ISPs) whose network interconnections are concentrated in one central hub in the capital city (van Beijnum).

However, as the Egyptian example also demonstrated, in not every authoritarian country does this sort of infrastructure-based muscle-flexing work as intended. A *New York Times* article in February 2011 quoted one Egyptian protestor as saying, “Frankly, I

didn't participate in Jan. 25 protests, but the Web sites' blockade and communications blackout on Jan. 28 was one of the main reasons I, and many others, were pushed to the streets" (Cohen, N.) Celebrated Egyptian activist Wael Ghonim has similarly argued that Mubarak's Internet shut-down backfired because it 1) emboldened the whole country by showcasing how scared the regime had become and 2) forced people to physically come out into the streets in order to obtain news and information (*The Economist*, "Revolution 2.0"). Tampering with the Internet to shut down civil societies and prevent mobilizations is a cat-and-mouse game that is often on the razor's edge, a gamble that helped the Iranian government in 2009 but turned out to be counter-productive for the Egyptian regime.

Government suppression of Social Media-powered political activism is not necessarily limited to such direct and obviously sinister manipulations as completely blocking popular websites, brazenly turning off the entire Internet, or beating activists. Some scholars have warned that authoritarian regimes might reap limited benefits from the occasional public outcry or venting on Social Media networks, as these allow the governments of countries like Russia or China to head off particularly galling cases of corruption or repression — thereby not only preventing social unrest, but further enhancing the domestic "legitimacy" of these regimes (Aron 5; Zhou, X. 1017). Florian Toepfl noted in a 2011 article that even though "some of the most heavily discussed phenomena in contemporary semi-authoritarian Russia are scandals emanating from the new, vibrant sphere of Social Media," Russia's ruling elites have proven themselves "very much capable of managing these outbursts of public outrage" (1301). There are also worries that authoritarian regimes are increasingly using the consumer- and

entertainment-based applications of Social Media to “buy off” their citizenry, trading comfort in exchange for preserving the status quo of truncated political freedoms. As *The Economist* pointed out in March 2010:

It is true that the Internet can provide an outlet for political expression for people living under repressive regimes. But those regimes are also likely to monitor the Internet closely. And in some cases there is, in effect, a new social contract: do what you like online, as long as you steer clear of politics. Government-controlled Internet-access providers in Belarus, for example, provide servers full of pirated material to keep their customers happy. (*The Economist*, “The net generation”)

These seem to be modern-day manifestations of the kind of authoritarian regimes Huxley feared, where political apathy is actively cultivated among the population by the state’s provision of consumerism and hedonism. The fact that sixty to seventy million people in China are deeply immersed in playing online games with one another certainly does not cause anyone in the country’s politburo to lose sleep at night (Lee).

China and Russia provide excellent case studies for examining the contrasting digital approaches taken by authoritarian states of the kind Orwell and Huxley envisioned, and the two nations have recently even begun to exemplify Morozov’s point that clever regimes can mix and match these two philosophies. Both countries demonstrate this ongoing process on a massive scale. China has by far the greatest total number of online-active “netizens” in the world; Russians spend more than double the world average amount of time per visitor on social networking sites (Reuters; Ioffe, “Facebook’s Russian Campaign”). For the governments of both countries, this has necessitated a carefully-tailored approach to social control where national policies towards domestic Internet usage are customized cleverly enough so that the desires of citizens are largely met while simultaneously mitigating the possibility of political

challenges emerging online.

Although the approaches taken by China and Russia represent strategies that seem like polar opposites, the goals are largely the same — accommodate individual desires, provide controlled environments for the release of political “steam” that thus fails to materialize as real-world action, and enable Internet use for non-political self-advancement by corporations and individuals. Many Russians spend so much time communicating on social networking sites not because they want to organize politically, but rather because these websites digitize the long-standing national tradition — critically important during the Soviet era — of getting ahead personally and professionally primarily through personal contacts and networking (Ioffe, “Facebook’s Russian Campaign”).

Russia’s heavy Internet use long represented a boon for the government even though the relative freedom allowed in Russian online discourse stood in contrast to direct state invention on public shows of dissent and in the traditional media (Morozov, *The Net Delusion*). As Rebecca MacKinnon put it in early 2011, the Russian Ru.net is “on the cutting edge of techniques aimed to control online speech with little or no direct filtering” (“China’s ‘Networked Authoritarianism’” 43). Russia represents the most advanced model of a Huxleyan, hedonistic-minded strategy for authoritarian Internet management. The government has adeptly recruited talented and shrewd young technophiles to its cause, filling RuNet (Russia’s version of a domestic Internet) with a potent combination of distracting entertainment and pro-United Russia propaganda. This ranges from semi-pornographic endeavors like “The Tits Show” by Russia.ru (a professional production venture with direct connections to the Kremlin and elected

United Russia officials) to constant waves of humorous videos uploaded to Ru-Tube (Russia's version of YouTube, owned by the state energy monopoly Gazprom).

After the online opposition to Russia's ruling party grew increasingly vocal in the course of 2011, a new group called "Putin's Army" suddenly appeared on Social Media sites and began uploading videos of attractive young women flaunting themselves in scant clothing to show support for Putin (*The Economist*, "It's all in Putin's head"). Putin's Army ultimately claimed to be a grass-roots organization of "beautiful, smart young women" who just happened to be highly tech-savvy and capable of producing sophisticated media campaigns (Ioffe, "Taking It Off"). One now-infamous Putin's Army video centered on a young, buxom member named Diana, who scrawled "*Porvu za Putina*" ("I'll tear it up for Putin") across a white tank top...a tank top she then promptly proceeded to rip off of her ample chest in order to encourage viewers to upload similar pro-Putin viral videos (Ibid.).

Fig. 12. Putin's Army YouTube Video (Ibid.)



By promoting these types of consumerist or hedonistic projects, Russia's government has attempted to take advantage of what Pippa Norris has called the

“democratic divide” between the Internet users who use the Internet for political aims and those who use it exclusively for personal, financial, pornographic, or entertainment purposes (Norris). The ruling party in Russia has a built-in advantage in pursuing this tactic; users typically tend to use the Internet more for non-political purposes than for political aims. In 2009 the Center for Information and Society issued a working paper on the global spread of ICTs that concluded that public access such as computer labs are “used primarily to meet personal and social needs...This is not to say that economic, political, and other such services are not patronized; only that their use is outstripped by personal and social activities” (8). With the majority of the population spending their time online engaged in personal pursuits and self-indulgence, it becomes much easier for the state to locate and control any remaining political content.

Evgeny Morozov has written about Russia’s efforts to steer the content of Russia’s blogosphere, including a project to “create a ‘Bloggers’ Chamber’ — something akin to Russia’s Public Chamber, Kremlin’s attempt to tame and co-opt Russian intelligentsia — but this time geared for taming and co-opting RuNet” (Ninenko; Morozov, “Does Silicon Valley’s new favorite,” “Kremlin no longer hides”, “Russia may soon create”). This type of approach has been so creative that even China, the world leader in direct state control of the Internet, is now studying these sorts of subtler methods:

China is looking to Russia, which may have invented an entirely new model of controlling the Internet without recourse to censorship. Having established full control of traditional media, the Kremlin is now moving full-speed into the virtual world. The authorities’ strategy is not new: establish tight control over the leading publishing platforms and fill them with propaganda and spin to shape online public opinion” (Morozov and MacKinnon)

In February 2012 the Russian wing of the international hacker-activist network Anonymous released e-mails hacked from the leaders of pro-Kremlin youth groups, including the Federal Youth Agency. The e-mails listed prices and payments offered to bloggers and journalists to praise Putin and attack his critics, complete with suggested tactics like flooding comments on websites and creating video cartoons comparing online activist Aleksei Navalny to Hitler (*The Economist*, “Nashi exposed”).

There are also fears that this authoritarian exchange of tactics between Russia and China may move in the opposite direction as the Kremlin becomes increasingly tempted to experiment with a Chinese-inspired style of more direct Internet censoring and filtering (Morozov, “Is Internet censorship,” “Russia considers”). In April 2011, the communications and special-information head of the FSB (the KGB’s successor) even stated that the agency would officially recommend that the government ban Skype, Hotmail, and Gmail as “Uncontrolled usage of these services may lead to massive threat to Russia's security” (*The Telegraph*). Although these revealing comments were quickly disavowed by the Kremlin, they display the nervousness and back-and-forth at play even inside relatively entrenched regimes as they weigh the levers of Huxley versus Orwell in the pursuit of repressing digital activism.

Autocratic regimes are perfectly capable of entering the Internet’s public sphere and distorting the communities and discussions that take place on Social Media platforms. With vast state resources and long-standing expertise at manipulating public opinion at their disposal, such governments certainly possess the ability to covertly flood Social Media websites with their own propaganda. One scholar warned early on in 2006 that the Chinese government was “deliberately taking the initiative to occupy

cyberspace” and moving to transform the Internet into an echo chamber that only promotes state-approved views and ideologies (Zhou, Y. 146). China’s ruling party actually pays tens of thousands of people to constantly surf China’s domestic Internet and flood social networking sites with fake pro-government posts. This has given the Chinese Communist Party the nickname “The 50-Cent Party,” for how much hired guns are supposedly paid by the regime for each fake pro-government post (Shane). In 2008 a Hong-Kong based researcher named David Bandurksi determined that the actual “50-Cent Party” of propaganda agents consisted of at least 280,000 hired employees at various levels of government — not counting similar work done by volunteers such as retired officials or Communist Youth League members (MacKinnon, “China’s ‘Networked Authoritarianism’” 41).

Even authoritarian regimes with far less resources and expertise than those of China’s are moving aggressively into Web 2.0 spaces. Hugo Chavez has hired 200 people to manage his Twitter account and has become Venezuela’s “Top Tweeter” in order to fight the “online conspiracy” of his opponents, despite once decrying the micro-blogging site as a “tool of terror” (Elliott; Dybwad; Chubb; Carroll). Some have called Fidel Castro “Cuba’s Supreme Blogger” due his regime’s enthusiasm for publishing his opinion pieces on state-owned blogs and because of the Cuba Informatics University’s so-called “Operation Truth” directive to produce disguised, state-owned blogs to counter anti-government material online (Hoffman 21). As these examples demonstrate, the communication potential of Social Media to spread political messages is often just as rich for authoritarian governments as it is for dissidents and reformers.

There is major misconception rampant among some over-enthusiastic pundits and

policy-makers that somehow only the reform-minded citizens of authoritarian nations have embraced Social Media. In many such countries, small cores of ethnic, religious, military, corporate, or other kinds of constituencies have heavily invested in the regime and will fight fiercely to maintain the oppressive status quo. In the case of Syria a pro-Assad “Syrian Electronic Army” has emerged, whose 60,000-member Facebook page gave instructions on how to launch online attacks on dissidents and human rights activists (Facebook has since deleted the page) (Preston, “Syria Restores Access”). As Evgeny Morozov repeatedly points out throughout *The Net Delusion*, the nationalism fanned by many authoritarian governments in the 20th century has translated quite well as a tactic for the 21st. Authoritarian propaganda machines can exploit sentiments like nationalism, religious fervor, or a fear of outside forces as pretexts for repressing online communities. Laws against blasphemy, national embarrassment, defamation, and the dissemination of “false information” have also been used to take legal action against Social Media platforms and social networking users in countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh, Lebanon, and Venezuela (Rohozinski and Deibert, “Liberation Vs. Control” 50-1).

In Libya, even some Web-savvy youths have sympathized with the government’s decision to eviscerate Internet access as “people were putting up bad things about Libya” — in effect fully buying into the nationalistic propaganda that online criticisms of the regime equate to anti-patriotic attacks on the country itself (Kirkpatrick, D., “In Libya”). The assumption that all of a country’s Internet-centric citizens want an empowered civil society and shift away from autocracy is unfortunately too idealistic. Nationalist hackers in Russia and China (but also in places like Saudi Arabia and Belarus) routinely attack foreign and domestic critics, bloggers, and activists. The methods range from the

extremely sophisticated to mundane-but-effective DDoS (Distributed-Denial-of-Service) attacks, in which websites are taken offline again and again as their hosting services are overwhelmed with fake Internet traffic.

Repressive governments and their proxies have also made use of a technique called “just-in-time blocking,” in which key Internet services or websites frequented by the opposition are disabled or attacked only at crucial times (such as during protests or right before elections). Ronald Deibert and Rafal Rohozinski have remarked that just-in-time blocking, “may be the most effective tool for influencing political outcomes in cyberspace” and that, “The attraction of just-in-time blocking is that information is disabled only at key moments, thus avoiding the charges of Internet censorship and allowing for plausible denial by the perpetrators” (Rohozinski and Deibert, “Liberation Vs. Control” 53). The OpenNet Initiative has empirically documented this strategy at work in Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and numerous other countries (Ibid.).

After the widely condemned December 2010 elections in Belarus, the government actively stepped in to head off any political mobilization that could have been organized through Social Media. The regime succeeded in forcing the popular Facebook-copycat site Vkontakte to delete a 120,000-strong opposition group called “We stand for great Belarus,” which had already posted an online event for a planned “Millions March” demonstration with over 40,000 sign-ups (Ostroumova). In China, as the 20th anniversary of Tiananmen Square approached in 2009, “the government temporarily shut down countless websites — including Facebook, Twitter, and Wikipedia — ostensibly for ‘technical maintenance’” (Qiang, “The Battle” 51). During the December 2011 Russian parliamentary elections, the popular Social Media platform LiveJournal and the website

of the election-monitoring organization Golos were likewise brought down by massive-cyber attacks (*The Economist*, “Losing their grip”). Iranians were once again cut off from the Internet in the run-up to the February 2012 parliamentary elections (Electron Libre). Just-in-time blocking, online surveillance systems, denial-of-service attacks, and other techniques used by authoritarian regimes and their proxies are often particularly successful because “many civil society organizations lack simple training and resources, leaving them vulnerable to even the most basic Internet attacks” (Rohozinski and Deibert, “Liberation Vs. Control” 54). Authoritarian regimes clearly have a variety of technological options available for dealing with the development of an online public sphere.

In the worst-case scenario, authoritarian regimes also have one last, obvious response to Social Media activism: simply ignoring it. Some repressive governments are entrenched enough that they can shrug off any pressure that Social Media may generate inside or outside of the country. While YouTube and Twitter may have galvanized Iranians to defy the government and solicited widespread global sympathy for the Green Movement, the theocratic-militaristic regime ultimately crushed the protests through brute force, abductions, arrests, torture, censorship, and a general apathy regarding international outcries. One empirical study of the Green Movement protests found that, despite online media’s success in calling the world’s attention to the events in Iran, outside actors’ lack of leverage meant that “there was little prospect of any short-term ‘boomerang effect’” by which ordinary Iranians could solicit these actors for concrete assistance (Aday et al. 25). This led the authors to conclude that “Absent a ‘boomerang effect’ feedback loop, or some other meaningful mechanism, information dissemination

to the outside world is insufficient to affect significant domestic change” (Ibid. 27). Syria currently seems to be on the path of confirming this finding by repeating the Iranian scenario.

While the horrifying videos of the Assad regime’s crackdown are being successfully smuggled to a global audience through Social Media, this transnationalization has amounted to little in the face of the regime’s willingness to endure getting kicked out of the Arab League, being condemned at the U.N. General Assembly, losing the support of Hamas, and turning into an international pariah state. This parallels the pre-Internet experience of China in 1989 during which the Chinese government remained steadfast in its autocratic ways even as smuggled videos and photographs of the Tiananmen Square crackdown generated worldwide outrage. There is no reason to assume that today’s authoritarian regimes will reform simply because some graphic clips are being uploaded to YouTube. Hurdles against reform are sometimes compounded due to the decisions made by non-governmental actors from democratic countries. Not only do civil societies confront daunting challenges in their pursuit of digital activism even in the best of cases, but this struggle is often complicated by Social Media’s multi-faceted entanglements with a variety of outside actors.

V. The Complex Involvement of Outside Actors

Any discussion of Social Media's proliferation or of the rise of online activism would be incomplete and misleading if it framed the affair as a straightforward conflict between dissidents and their oppressors. Ronald Deibert and Rafal Rohozinski have written that "the actions of businesses, governments, civil society, criminal organizations, and millions of individuals affect and in turn are affected by the domain of cyberspace...Such a complex network cannot accurately be described in the one-dimensional terms of 'liberation' or 'control'" ("Liberation Vs. Control" 45-6). They argue that the Internet is instead, "composed of a constantly pulsing and at times erratic mix of competing forces and constraints" (Ibid. 46). The turbulent dynamics of Social Media proliferation have only become more complicated as recent world events have made the political dimensions of Internet access impossible to ignore.

Most Social Media and Internet tools (with the exception of some NGO-sponsored anti-censorship/anti-surveillance software) are owned by private, for-profit corporations. The events of the Arab Spring have widely raised two concerns — firstly, that markets will become locked off to these companies as authoritarian governments worry about possible Social Media-facilitated revolutions in their own countries and, secondly, that the profit-minded shareholders of companies like Facebook will as a result push to limit how these platforms assist civil societies living under authoritarian governments (Lake). A December 2011 article in *Foreign Policy* magazine entitled

“Does Facebook Have a Foreign Policy?” noted:

While Zuckerberg says entering China is one of Facebook’s top strategic priorities, it’s hard to imagine the service being allowed to operate inside China with the filtering and censorship routinely applied already to other Social Media. A Facebook spokesperson ... recently told *The Wall Street Journal* that the company could even conceivably cooperate. (Kirkpatrick, D., “Does Facebook” 55)

Facebook’s current roster of notable share-holders includes Russian media tycoons who actively fired and censored journalists who reported on voter fraud in Russia’s December 2011 elections (Schwartz, “2 Leaders”). In January 2012 Twitter announced a new “micro-censorship” policy based on technology that would allow it to censor specific tweets when these comments are viewed in countries where their contents would displease authorities (Sengupta, “Twitter Announces Mico-Censorship Policy”).

Vodafone’s cooperation with the Mubarak regime during the 2011 turmoil in Egypt shows that many companies are perfectly willing to perform a two-faced act, apologizing profusely to Western audiences back home while continuing to assist authoritarian regimes with propaganda bombardments and telecommunication shut-downs abroad (Rushkoff). This seems to be a part of an ongoing trend where profit-hungry technology companies and other corporate giants — most of them ironically from Western countries — have begun a feeding frenzy to join in on a new and growing “cyber military-industrial complex” estimated at between 80 and 150 billion dollars annually (Rohozinski and Deibert, “The new cyber military-industrial complex”). In a 2005 article John Lagerkvist identified this phenomenon early on as the “love affair and continuous rendezvous between managers of companies in the affluent world and security organ officers in the developing world”, at the time singling out Cisco Systems, Secure Computing, and Nortel Networks for particular criticism (Lagerkvist 121). In March

2011 the Canadian newspaper *The Globe and Mail* reported that Egyptian protestors raiding the headquarters of the state security headquarters found a contract for cyber-war software from a German company, with the article pointing out:

[A]s the Egyptian security service files show, the market knows no boundaries. Advanced deep pack inspection, content filtering, social network mining, cell-phone tracking and computer network attack and exploitation capabilities, developed primarily by U.S., Canadian and European firms, are sold to hungry buyers worldwide – many of them authoritarian regimes. (Rohozinski and Deibert, “The new cyber military-industrial complex”)

Even when outside companies are not willing conspirators they may still pose a danger to dissidents. They may be too complacent or naïve in the face of dramatic measures sometime taken by authoritarian regimes, as was “dramatically illustrated in the case of Time-Skype, in which the Chinese partner of Skype put in place a covert surveillance system to track and monitor prodemocracy activists who were using Skype’s chat function as a form of outreach” (Rohozinski and Deibert, “Liberation Vs. Control” 52). Social Media corporations and other tech companies are stuck in an uncomfortable position where they have to simultaneously placate shareholders, Western governments, authoritarian regimes, other companies, foreign civil societies, and NGOs. This leads to complicated situations where private companies engage in sometimes contradictory behavior. It should not be forgotten that Google — whose unofficial company motto is “Don’t be evil” — largely complied with China’s censorship policies for almost four years.

In addition, many telecommunications and Internet companies have recently clashed with human rights activists and organizations because their generic policies and user-agreements conflicted with the needs and interests of a growing number of social

movements. Facebook has long insisted that its users use only their real names despite the obvious and grave risks that this poses for activists in authoritarian countries. In one famous case Facebook deleted the Arabic version of a popular anti-Mubarak Facebook page in the midst of Egypt's uprising simply because the page's founder, Wael Ghonim, had set the page up under a fake name (Sengupta, "Rushdie Runs Afoul"). Even recent policy changes by Facebook to accommodate celebrities with stage names still required these users to post their legal names somewhere on their profiles (Sengupta, "Lady Gaga Now"). Other popular platforms have similarly damaged online activism as a consequence of sticking to generic company policies. YouTube has occasionally deleted graphic videos proving state torture or violence, and Flickr has deleted similar images simply because the pictures posted on the popular graphic-sharing site were not originally shot by the same individuals who ended up posting them (Preston, "Ethical Quandary").

High-profile efforts have been made to push companies towards adopting sophisticated policies that protect human rights and dissents. This famously includes the Global Network Initiative, a voluntary code of conduct for technology companies set up in 2008. However, many of the primary Social Media and Internet companies increasingly used by civil societies are powerful enough to shrug off such calls in the face of possible hostility from authoritarian regimes (Preston, "Facebook Officials"). This seems to indicate that sometimes more pressure will need to be applied to large Social Media websites and technology companies by Western audiences and governments in order for these corporations to be motivated enough to adjust their policies. The issue of corporate culpability is obviously even more acute when dealing with the Web tools and companies that actually come from authoritarian countries of origin. Many of these have

extremely complicated public-private relationships with the regime and are thus easily pressured — an issue compounded by the fact that authoritarian governments have typically made moves to provide these domestic platforms with advantages or total monopolies compared to outside (and especially) Western websites and Social Media tools. Yandex, a popular Russian search engine with a two-thirds domestic market share, ended its practice of featuring blogs in its news section based on popularity once the content featured there pushed past the Kremlin's tolerance for regime-critical content (Kempf).

However, despite numerous challenges, many new bright spots have emerged for those who view the Internet as a potent instrument for freedom and civil empowerment. The progress of technological advancement means that even regions that currently seem rather devoid of online activity and Internet access contain the potential to develop online activism and citizen networks in the future. For example, in 2010 Facebook announced its new Facebook Zero program, a service with 50 African mobile operators in 25 countries letting African mobile-phone users access and use Facebook for free even when they have no credit left on their phones (Hersman). In April 2011, Charles Shield of the TechChange Institute interviewed Dr. Raul Zambrano of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), who emphasized how dramatically technological developments from the mid-2000s on have altered online access even in poorer countries:

[With traditional computers] you need space, and the space needs to be air conditioned. This adds to electricity costs, and infrastructure. You need to maintain the computers and update them ... This is what makes mobile technology so important. It doesn't require the extensive infrastructure, people can use the technology from within their traditional social networks, and they are able to have a broader voice through SMS, social media or email. (Shield)

Shield himself described seeing this change in action as a Peace Corps volunteer in Samoa in 2006, when the first GSM digital mobile phone system went online: “Prior to that mobile phones were rare, and only worked in the capital city. When the GSM system came online, mobile telephony became accessible countrywide, and suddenly texts, photos and emails were being sent from the farthest corners of the island” (Ibid.). In same vein, future innovations might also offer new and creative ways for civil societies to get online even in countries already featuring extensive telecommunications infrastructure.

Shervin Pishevar, a technology expert and angel financier who helped to inspire some parts of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s “Internet Freedom” speech, responded to the authoritarian assaults on Internet infrastructure during the Arab Spring by starting a new global volunteer project called OpenMesh to create “ad hoc wireless mesh networks” with tiny private routers that can be hidden in people’s pockets:

“OpenMesh’s basic idea is that we could use some new techniques to create a secondary wireless Internet in countries like Libya, Syria, Iran, North Korea and other repressive regimes to allow citizens to communicate freely. By creating mobile routers that connect together we could create a wireless network that mobile phones and personal computers can connect to ... each connected node in the network may act as an independent router or ‘smart’ device, regardless of whether it has an Internet connection or not. Mesh networks are incredibly robust, with continuous connections that can reconfigure around broken or blocked paths by ‘hopping’ from node to node until the destination is reached, such as another device on the network or connecting to an Internet back haul...When there isn’t [local Internet available], mesh networks can allow people to communicate with each other in the event that other forms of electronic communication are broken down.” (Pishevar)

The New America Foundation is likewise currently developing mobile kits for Wi-Fi networks that can be set up and run outside of government control in authoritarian countries (Andrews).

Other organizations are no doubt working on similar projects, meaning that new

possibilities for online social activism are rich even in those countries where authoritarian regimes are growing increasingly sophisticated at monitoring and controlling existing Internet infrastructures. Freedom House even has its own “Internet Freedom Team” that provides services to global dissidents and activists, including online YouTube tutorials on installing anti-censorship and anti-surveillance software (Freedom House). Google and Twitter were especially proactive when the Arab Spring began in January, hot-fixing a “speak-to-tweet service” within a matter of days (Google). As the Mubarak regime responded to the unrest by cutting off Internet access while still mostly retaining mobile-phone and telephone landline services, Google and Twitter created a program where Egyptians could simply call an international phone number and leave a message that would automatically be translated into tweets with the “hashtag” (the term for a Twitter topic identifier) “#Egypt” (Ibid.). Similarly, after Egypt’s Internet was first shut down, over 30 international ISPs offered Egyptian dissidents dial-up services for getting online by creating dial-in numbers and entry codes via international phone lines (*San Francisco Chronicle*).

Internet skeptics and pessimistic academics are naturally extremely wary of foreign governments and NGOs blazing onto the scene to help civil societies in their complicated struggles. This position is perhaps best epitomized by Morozov’s scathing criticism of the U.S. State Department’s decision to publicly intervene in 2009 when Twitter was set to go temporarily offline for scheduled maintenance during a key moment in the Green Revolution. Arguing that this disenfranchised the real-world actions of the protestors and enabled the Iranian regime to paint Social Media and its users as tools of Western imperialists, Morozov has made a small career of highlighting these sorts of

“policy blunders” (Morozov, *The Net Delusion*). Although outside actors have certainly made mistakes since the advent of the Web 2.0 era, the consequences of these decisions are not always as clear as either Internet proponents or Internet skeptics portray them. For example, Iranian journalist and filmmaker Maziar Bahari, author of the new book *And Then They Came for Me: A Family's Story of Love, Captivity and Survival*, publicly advocates more foreign support for online activism in Iran. Despite spending 118 days in solitary confinement in Tehran’s notorious Evin Prison in 2009 and despite observing the regime’s suppression of Internet activism, Bahari struck an optimistic tone when interviewed about the future of his country in 2011:

The Iranian regime is a 20th-century dictatorship. It is not equipped to rule in the 21st century. It is a regime that is prepared to block short-wave radios and newspapers. But it cannot fight against the Internet, text messaging, and satellite television ... we are witnessing the flourishing of citizen media. Young Iranians are using the government's deficiency in targeting new media to their advantage ... I think that with time and more training, and with the help of the outside world, [online citizen journalism] could flourish and be more effective in gathering and disseminating information. (Nikou)

Outside help and training have certainly been on the rise. In addition to the efforts of NGOs and private companies mentioned earlier, the U.S. State Department has in recent years embarked on a major journey of global support for Internet dissidence.

Following the gripping events of Iran’s 2009 Green Revolution, the State Department began a set of policy adjustments that ultimately culminated in a set of projects called the “21st Century Statecraft” initiative, unveiled by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in her “Internet Freedom” speech on January 21st, 2010 at the Newseum in Washington, D.C.:

To meet these 21st century challenges, we need to use the tools, the new 21st Century Statecraft. And we’ve begun to do that. We have seen the

possibilities of what can happen when ordinary citizens are empowered by Twitter and Facebook to organize political movements, or simply exchange ideas and information. So we find ourselves living at a moment in human history when we have the potential to engage in these new and innovative forms of diplomacy and to also use them to help individuals be empowered for their own development. (Heritage Foundation; Morozov, “Is Hillary Clinton”, “The 20th century roots”)

This speech outlined the U.S. new position on the global use of online communication technologies, adding a new, fifth fundamental “human freedom” to the four first articulated by President Roosevelt in 1941 — namely, the freedom to connect to the Internet.

By aggressively championing such a full-throated defense of Internet freedom, the State Department seems to have perceptively positioned itself at the forefront of an emerging global opinion trend. In June 2011 a special rapporteur to the United Nations issued a report on the Arab Spring which argued that the Internet had “become an indispensable tool for realizing a range of human rights” (Olivarez-Giles). A 2010 BBC World Service poll across 26 different countries found that 80% of those polled agreed that Internet access is a fundamental right, and numerous international bodies such as the E.U. are increasingly tying Internet access to the “fundamental rights and freedoms of citizens” (BBC News, “Internet access”). These developments have accelerated as a result of the monumental events that transpired across the globe in 2011; high-level European Union officials are now increasingly highlighting the link between Social Media and human rights and noting that infringements on free Internet access by authoritarian governments would amount to a “violation of fundamental rights” that would elicit a response from the E.U. (European Union Delegation). Interestingly, the E.U. is even following up on the implications of this paradigm by working on legislation

that would grant its own citizens a spectrum of new digital rights such as the “right to be forgotten,” which includes a person’s prerogative to force Social Media corporations and other Internet companies to delete all of the data it has collected on that individual (*The Economist*, “Private data, public rules”). While some experts have warned not to confuse the human right to speech or privacy with a right to a *medium* such as the Internet (Cerf), the very existence of this discourse speaks to the philosophical seriousness with which public figures are now debating Internet use and access.

In February 2011 Secretary Clinton gave a second Internet freedom speech which largely followed up on the events unfolding across the Middle East as a part of the Arab Spring. Her second speech reiterated the U.S. position advocating global access to a free and safe Internet and touted State Department involvement in projects like the Global Network Initiative and the Civil Society 2.0 Initiative (RealClearPolitics). As the Arab Spring developed, it eventually materialized that the State Department was far more closely involved in sponsoring foreign online activism than previously thought. As revealed by *The New York Times* in April 2011:

Even as the United States poured billions of dollars into foreign military programs and anti-terrorism campaigns, a small core of American government-financed organizations were promoting democracy in authoritarian Arab states ... the United States’ democracy-building campaigns played a bigger role in fomenting protests than was previously known, with key leaders of the movements having been trained by the Americans in campaigning, organizing through new media tools and monitoring elections. A number of the groups and individuals directly involved in the revolts and reforms sweeping the region, including the April 6 Youth Movement in Egypt, the Bahrain Center for Human Rights and grass-roots activists like Entsar Qadhi, a youth leader in Yemen, received training and financing from groups like the International Republican Institute, the National Democratic Institute and Freedom House, a nonprofit human rights organization based in Washington. (Nixon)

Although such funding for Social Media and organizational training for foreign activists already indicated an extremely close level of American involvement, a second follow-up article later reported that the State Department's projects have actually extended far beyond even those measures: "The Obama administration is leading a global effort to deploy 'shadow' Internet and mobile phone systems that dissidents can use to undermine repressive governments that seek to silence them by censoring or shutting down telecommunications networks" (Markoff and Glanz, "U.S. Underwrites"). These efforts include collaborations with NGOs, academic institutions, hacktivists, and global dissidents on projects ranging from mesh networks to surveillance-evading Bluetooth phone networks to anti-cyber-surveillance training for foreign activists. According to State Department figures, spending on circumvention efforts and similar technologies were projected to have totaled seventy million dollars by the end of 2011 (Ibid.).

Unfortunately, even with all of the Western funding and attention now being spent on supporting Internet freedom and foreign dissidents, missteps and sloppy holes in national policies still occur. Counter-productive Web 2.0 technology bans to authoritarian countries and a continuing flow of Western technological expertise involved in the construction of digital censorship and tracking architectures demonstrate that democratic governments still have a lot of work left to do if they want to be fully supportive of the online activities of foreign civil societies (Rhoads; *New York Times*; Morozov, "Does Wen Jiabao"). The State Department's bungled attempt to help Iranian dissidents by blessing unpolished, privately-developed anticensorship software resulted in an embarrassing scandal now known as the "Haystack affair" (*The Economist*, "Worse than useless"; Morozov, "More tech-related," "One week," "Were Haystack's"). Initiatives

supporting Internet freedom have also not come without a diplomatic price; authoritarian countries such as China have repeatedly blasted the United States for promoting Internet freedom and Social Media in Iran and other places (Hornby). Future efforts to foster online activism and free Internet access are certain to become entangled in the messy affairs of global geo-politics and international business interests.

VI. Conclusions – Judging the Consequences of Social Media Proliferation

The scholarship on Social Media's impact in repressive countries is currently in fluid but inconclusive shape. Optimists are sparing with pessimists in defining the possibilities as well as limitations of Social Media's current and future political potential. Some scholars are straddling the fence on this issue, seemingly unable to decide whether the glass is half empty or half full. This seems to some degree like a repeat of the academic debates on Internet democratization that took place in the pre-Web 2.0 era; in 2004 political communications scholars Bruce Williams and Michael Delli Carpini remarked:

[O]ptimistically we believe that the erosion of gatekeeping and the emergence of multiple axes of information provide new opportunities to challenge elite control of political issues. Pessimistically we are skeptical of the ability of ordinary citizens to make use of these opportunities and suspicious of the degree to which even multiple axes of power are still shaped by more fundamental structures of economic and political power. (Williams and Delli Carpini 1209)

Ironically, this modern-day return to a more hesitant, inconclusive consensus concerning the Internet's impact is, in and of itself, to some degree a sign of progress.

In the first several years following the emergence of Web 2.0 tools, scholars often fell into camps either overestimating or underestimating Social Media's political potential. As a result, by 2010 experts were advocating that "Scholars and policymakers should adopt a more nuanced view of new media's role in democratization and social change, one that recognizes that new media can have both positive and negative effects"

(Aday et al. 3). The empirical information collected and analyzed in this thesis would concur with this recommendation, insofar that it suggests that the Internet and Social Media platforms are complex tools that can be wielded effectively by both civil societies and by authoritarian regimes. When the accelerating rate of Internet- and security-related technological development and other factors such as the involvement of outside actors are added in as well, we are left with a context in which it becomes very difficult to predict in advance whether or not these new online tools will succeed in providing meaningful leverage to a particular civil society or social movement.

Despite such (warranted) equivocations, the inherently rapid, fluid, and chaotic nature of the Internet will likely favor social movements and civil societies over authoritarian governments in the long-term. The spread of Web 2.0 platforms may ultimately prove to be more advantageous for burgeoning social movements and civil societies than for repressive states as a result of the Internet's capacity and tendency to transnationalize conflicts. In the late 1990s scholars were already finding that ICTs were making collaboration between different social movements more likely (Ayres). Bert Hoffman remarked in January 2011, "The forms of and degree of the limits various authoritarian regimes impose on public articulation of voice vary, but no matter which regime is in question, the regime's reach is largely limited to the territorial boundaries of the nation-state in which it exercise power" (6). In contrast, the Internet's transnationalization of communication and social movements is of great benefit to civil societies, as "The inherently trans-border character of web-based communication and media technologies challenges established 'filters' in access and patterns of regulation in any state" (Ibid.). Philip Howard and Muzammil Hussain highlighted this digital

transnationalization of the Arab Spring in a 2011 article, pointing out that, “Within a few weeks, there were widely circulating PDFs of tip sheets on how to pull off a successful protest. The Atlantic Monthly translated and hosted an ‘Activist Action Plan’, boingboing.net provided tips for protecting anonymity online, and Telecomix circulated the ways of using landlines to circumvent state blockages of broad networks” (40). Anti-authoritarian activists and protest movements are much more likely to trade Internet-related expertise and experiences over national borders than sovereign, authoritarian states.

Of course, cross-border information-, technology-, and technique-sharing is not universally lopsided purely in favor of dissidents. Several authoritarian regimes (such as those in Syria and Iran) enjoy unusually close and mutually-supportive relations. Larry Diamond has noted, “[A]uthoritarian states such as China, Belarus, and Iran have acquired (and shared) impressive technological capacities to filter and control the Internet, and to identify and punish dissidents” (70). Such exchanges actually began long before the Social Media protests of the modern era first began spooking authoritarian rulers. In 2005 John Lagerkvist wrote about his long-term concerns about the possible circulation of learning within “authoritarian networks”, noting, “Networking between the governments of China, Vietnam and Singapore on how to control modern information and communication flows is increasing” (121).

If anything, world events since 2009 may encourage repressive regimes to significantly ramp up efforts at such collaborations. Nonetheless, authoritarian states are typically characterized by numerous incentives not to engage in this type of close cooperation. Whereas — as discussed throughout this thesis — social movements can

greatly benefit from the successful transnationalization and international advertising of their plight and causes, authoritarian states by definition fear both foreign and domestic challenges to their hegemonies on power. This discourages them from sharing sensitive, embarrassing, or potentially compromising information on internal security challenges and information controls. The amplification of anti-authoritarian causes and social movements to a more global stage does indeed seem to provide a much bigger opportunity for civil societies than it does for authoritarian governments.

Most repressive regimes would most likely prefer to return to a pre-Internet age in which the public sphere was dominated by the state, unfiltered information was hard to obtain, and social movements were easier to monitor and slower to explode. As one local propaganda official in China has put it, “It was so much better when there was no Internet” (Qiang, “The Battle” 56). Although the rise of Social Media has provided authoritarian governments with new avenues for monitoring and influencing their citizens, this advantage is largely dependent on maintaining a type of technological superiority that will be constantly challenged by the creativity of dissidents and by the interference of outside actors. This thesis therefore agrees with the findings promoted in 2010 by Peter Van Aelst and Jereon Van Laer when they wrote that,

Although Goliath can use the Internet as well, the relative advantage of this new technology is bigger for David. Several authors have indeed shown that social movements, being networks of diverse groups and activists, are especially keen on using the Internet because of its fluid, non-hierarchical structure, which ‘matches’ their ideological and organizational needs. This is far less the case for organizations or actors that have a more hierarchical and formal structure, where the Internet is often seen more as a threat and less an opportunity (Van Laer and Van Aelst 1146)

The great bulk of the more skeptical literature written on this topic by Lyon, Morozov, Gladwell, and even Van Laer and Van Aelst themselves were published prior to the emergence of enduring Internet-supported reform movements in the Arab Spring countries, Russia, and China in 2011 and 2012. The empirical cases discussed in this thesis seem to refute earlier pessimists who claimed that the Internet lacks a core capacity to bind people together in sustained and politically noteworthy social movements.

Web 2.0 platforms such as Social Media have had a greater and faster political impact than prior Internet tools because they are shaped to such a large extent by user feedback and user interactions. One scholar noted in 1999 that Internet activism can be lower than expected because websites are “often designed with simplistic and often unfounded assumptions about why individuals participate in politics, which may result in design flaws” (Tambini 322). In contrast, Web 2.0 tools and Social Media platforms in particular are extremely fluid, as their political utility and sometimes even their actual user-interfaces are constantly reshaped by user feedback and online interactions. Manuel Castells has written, “The new media politics shows remarkable capacity to innovate, following the steps of the culture of social networking reinvented every day by web users” (“Communication” 256). Empirical studies of new ICTs in developing countries have similarly found that Web 2.0 tools “create new modes of social interaction” and that “the users create and shape new applications and functions as well as influence and determine the development of new technology. This is a unique aspect of new ICTs” (SIDA 86). Given such responsiveness and utility, it seems less surprising that Social Media has been adopted so successfully and widely by many burgeoning civil societies and social movements — even in countries under authoritarian rule.

This adoption represents a fundamental change in the internal political dynamics of nations ruled by repressive regimes. As proven by a flurry of recent events around the globe, the Internet's impact on social movements is powerful, complex, and sometimes unpredictable. The Internet's low barrier to participation and its ease of transnationalization have had such a profound socio-political impact that the findings of several scholars "suggest that we even need to reconsider" the relevance and applicability of the existing "terms of traditional social movements and mobilization literature" (Tatarchevskiy 300). So-called "Internet optimist" Clay Shirky has summarized these developments by writing that, "The current change, in one sentence, is this: most of the barriers to group action have collapsed, and without those barriers, we are free to explore new ways of gathering together and getting things done" (*Here Comes Everybody* 22).

In addition to studying the Internet's implications for social movement literature, scholars have also worked in the reverse direction by using frameworks developed in the study of social movements in order to better understand new ICTS (Garrett). These findings have complemented the academic literature of the pre-Web 2.0 era of the early 2000s, which generated strong evidence to suggest that "people who use the Internet to gather information and exchange ideas are more socially and politically engaged" (Mendelson 183; Quan-Hasse et al.; Shah, Kwak, and Holbert; Zeitner and Jennings). Other scholarship from this period likewise found, "In some locations, public access ICT users have been found to develop leadership characteristics, becoming more active in local and national politics, as well as public access centers themselves acting as meeting grounds for civil activity" (Center for Information and Society 13; Etta and Parvyn-Wamahiu; Patra, Pal, and Brewer). The early literature on Internet proliferation therefore

suggested that this growth could have a transforming effect on how individuals viewed and approached society as a whole.

The more recent developments discussed in this thesis seem to corroborate this phenomenon. Several studies have concluded, “New communication technologies have become the infrastructure for sharing and learning about diverse views and for new approaches to political representation and participation” (Haider 3). The early research on Social Media has found that these tools can lower the cost of mobilization and participation, contribute to the development of community and collective identity, and facilitate collective action through framing processes (Garrett). A 2009 empirical study of democratization in Africa reported that the rapid spread of new ICTs “is making information available instantly and at low cost to a degree unprecedented in history” a revolutionary development that, “enhances freedom of expression and the right to information, and increases the possibilities for citizen’s participation in decision-making processes” (SIDA 29). Communications scholar Manuel Castells has argued, “For new social movements, the Internet provides the essential platform for debate, their means of acting on people’s mind, and ultimately serves as their most potent political weapon” (“Communication” 250). China scholar Xiao Qiang wrote in April 2011 that, in China “the expansion of the Internet and Web-based media is changing the rules of the game between society and society” and that the Internet is now acting as, “a catalyst for social and political transformation” (“The Battle” 47, 60). A 2010 empirical study of the Arabic blogosphere found that, despite increases in the harassment and arrests of Arabic bloggers, it was rapidly fostering an emerging area of political discourse that met Yochai Benkler’s definition of a networked public sphere (Palfrey et al. 1240; Benkler).

The most recent wave of Social Media-powered protests in 2011 and 2012 have brought in a flood of new and world-changing cases that have made the connection between the Internet and social movement a top priority for academic study; Philip Howard and Muzammil Hussain argued in July 2011, “Scholars of social movements, collection action, and revolution must admit that several aspects of the Arab Spring challenge our theories about how such protests work” (48). In their eyes, Social Media now represents, “the scaffolding upon which civil society can build.” (Ibid.). A 2011 *Foreign Policy* magazine article on the global protests of 2011 used a similar metaphor: “Facebook is a common thread in all these movements — it has become the new infrastructure of protest” (Kirkpatrick, D., “Does Facebook” 55). The technological tsunami sweeping the globe in recent years has generated an increased capacity among many of the citizens living in authoritarian nations to exchange information, voice opinions, and communicate freely through growing Social Media and Internet access. This has amounted to a dramatic infusion of the building blocks required for civil societies to successfully foster reforms and social movements.

Social Media’s most profound impact may therefore turn out to be long-term. Although the street revolutions and reform petitions that have been inspired and facilitated by Social Media are noteworthy (to say the least), the most important legacies of these new tools may lay far outside any empirical analysis possible at present time for such a new phenomenon. In its 2009 working paper on the global spread of ICTs, the Center for Information and Society concluded, “Changes brought about as a result of the use of information and communication generally occur through indirect processes, making it difficult to identity causal relationships. Debates rage about impact and when it

happens” (16). The report decried the “tendency to view impacts in binary and/or linear terms,” as “In reality, the process through which ICT impacts may or may not occur is more complex, and an apparent absence of impacts could be misleading” (Ibid. 17).

Clay Shirky has argued that “Social Media’s real potential lies in supporting civil society and the public sphere — which will produce change over years and decades, not weeks or months” (“The Political Power”). A 2009 empirical investigation by the SIDA institute on the same subject agreed, concluding that new ICTs “change the notion of business, trade, civil society, the media; they enable direct democracy and non-traditional forms of advocacy and engagement between citizens and the state” (SIDA 60). In the context of Russia, Leon Aron has written that Ru.net is not only a source of uncensored information and news, but even “an open public space where public opinion is shaped and through which policies occasionally could be influenced — a virtual town hall, where one’s voice can be heard and debated by fellow citizens” (3). Russia’s netizens and online media sites have even attempted to “forge democratic institutions to parallel the ones subverted by the regime” by holding virtual elections for the mayor of Moscow and the national parliament (Ibid. 5). If it is indeed true that the Internet will eventually generate new public spheres of the kind long discussed by mainstream scholars (Habermas), then it may well be that the most important consequences of Social Media proliferation still remain to be seen.

Language barriers, geopolitical divisions, poverty, telecommunications control, infrastructure derailment, surveillance innovations, physical repression, and co-option tactics have all failed to stave off either Social Media’s popularity or its tendency to challenge individuals about their roles in society. There is a great deal of evidence to

suggest that Social Media proliferation may prove to be a “game-changer” for traditional assumptions about the growth and limitations of social movements. A wide variety of events around the world are increasingly pointing authoritarian regimes towards the same tentative but terrifying conclusion: Social Media’s accelerating impact stems not only from the dizzying pace of technological innovation, but also from Web 2.0’s ability to fundamentally transform how individuals interact with one another and within society as a whole.

These ongoing transformations will likely plow steadily forward even in the face of the most sophisticated repression tactics and the largest possible cadres of Internet police. Since bottom-up technological and social innovation are extremely difficult for centralized regimes to artificially reverse with top-down measures, authoritarian governments will likely come to find that Social Media is a genie that can never be put back in the bottle. This threatens the carefully-crafted narratives and social norms meant to persuade citizens in authoritarian countries that their social and political identities can only exist inside the frameworks constructed by the government. If Web 2.0 tools succeed in freeing not only the voices but even the very *identities* of citizens living under authoritarian rule, this would represent a fundamental, irrevocable change for such societies — a revolution in the truest sense of the word.

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