

**SWITCH IT ON:  
HOW TO BRING POLITICAL CAMPAIGN FROM ONLINE SPACE INTO THE STREETS.  
THE CASE OF RUSSIA•**

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**Abstract.** With the wave of political protests burgeoning in Tunisia and reaching Thailand, Russia, and Bahrain; activism and communication technologies, that affected protests around the world, have been on the spotlight for few years now. Different scholars have different views on what role the new media, including Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, can play in political resistance. Cyber-optimists claim that modern innovative gadgets combined with enough connectivity and sufficient funding from Western democracies can topple dictators and bring freedom to the oppressed. Dystopianists argue that not only new technologies are used by governments for strict censorship, widespread surveillance and large-scale propaganda; but they are unable to turn the protests from on- to offline dimension as their functions are mainly limited to information pooling. Neither of these theories can fully explain the methods to avoid digital traps and mobilize people for real action. Comparing worldwide activism strategies and analyzing opposition practices in Russia and the Middle East countries, the paper aims to indicate effective online tools for political engagement and successful methods to transfer political campaigns from cyber space into streets.

## INTRODUCTION

Communication and information technologies played a great role in the people's struggle for freedom and democracy throughout humankind's history. As early as stone tools and extending through papyrus in ancient Egypt, technology, as a tool for education and mobilization, developed into printing presses in China and during the European religious revolutions preceding the Enlightenment, telegraphs used for workers' uprisings, tape-recorders for the 1979 Iranian revolution, and fax machines for the 1989 democratization movements (Jarvis, 2011).

The new means of communication, the Internet and mobile technologies, played a significant role in the coordination of political campaigns throughout the Middle East, Europe and the USA during the last few years. Fast mass mobilization and wide civic engagement achieved through modern technologies gave a reason to believe that modern innovative gadgets combined with enough connectivity and sufficient funding from democratic states would eventually topple dictators and bring freedom to the oppressed. New examples of political activism in Bahrain, Kenya, Sudan, and China have also instigated widespread hope that new media, including Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube can facilitate participatory politics and ignite democratizing spirits.

On the other hand, big aspirations about the emancipatory role of the Internet were criticized by various analysts and politicians. They claimed that new media can actually have a very negative impact on the process of political struggle for freedom in authoritarian states. First, authoritarian rulers, using the Internet and mass media for their own benefit, can and did stiffen censorship of the social networks to suppress demonstrators on the one hand, and disclose private information of the most active dissidents on the other hand. Second, social networks stalled at a role of largely pooling information, while being criticized for arguably disengaging civic participation in politics. Lastly, foreign support in most of the cases not only failed to help political activists, but also served as a ground to criminalize and defame local protesters for their links with foreigners.

Thus, there are two main views on the role of the new media in the political campaigns: cyber-optimists and cyber-pessimists. Cyber-optimists argue how the Internet can reinvigorate political community and democratic life. Many analysts suggest that social media and networking can create sound preconditions for empowerment of people to change political systems in their countries. Often emphasizing the

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importance of foreign financial and moral support, these analysts give a very hopeful<sup>i</sup> perspective on how access to the Internet can spur active citizenship. All of their theories can be labeled as ‘cyber-optimist[ic]’ (Hardy et al., 2009, p. 135) for their naive ignorance of all the dangers and risks the Internet has (Morozov, 2011, p. xvii). There are different names to describe the cyber-optimists. For instance, cyber-utopianists suggest that ‘digital tools of social networking such as Facebook and Twitter can summon up social revolutions out of the ether’ (Morozov, 2011, p. 23). Likewise, supporters of the theory of iPod liberalism claim that society where every citizen has an iPod can easily overthrow an oppressive government (Morozov, 2009, p. 24). Stemmed from the Cold War example of breaking Iron Curtain of authoritarianism with Radio Freedom or Voice of America, Google doctrine adherents claim that information on freedom values that bypass the censorship of dictatorial authorities can easily bring democracy to the oppressed people (Rosen, 2011).

Cyber-pessimists represent the opposite side of the barricades. Their theory of dystopianism and derivative theory of slacktivism have very skeptical view on the democratizing potential of social media and online communication. Dystopianism, which is recently developed by Evgeny Morozov, supposes that strict censorship, widespread surveillance and large-scale propaganda do not let activists effectively use the Internet for their anti-governmental campaigns, and thus cannot drastically help opposition movements around the world. The theory of slacktivism further elaborates the flaws of blind reliance on new media. Created out of words ‘slacker’ and ‘activism’, the theory proposes that instead of encouraging civic participation, the Internet ‘creates passivity’ (Ward et al.: 30). Criticizing cyber-optimistic theories, Evgeny Morozov supports other dystopianist scholars’ views that the Internet promotes nothing but ‘passive chequebook membership with limited long-term ties’ (Morozov, 2009). Proponents of dystopianism usually emphasize that the Internet may only ‘create the impression of communicative action without the tangible benefits that come from small-group interactions’ (Shah et al., 2005: 532). Morozov also pointed out that widespread possession of high-tech gadgets and wide access to the Internet does not guarantee revival of civic participation. The intended purpose of the Internet, i.e. for political activism, does not necessarily match with the actual use of communication and information technologies, i.e. pornography, illegal music downloading, or simple chatting (Morozov, 2009).

Yet, neither cyber-optimists nor cyber-realists can explain recent cases of productive or flawed political activism. Examples of failure accompany the successful campaigns. Opposition movements in a few countries failed to democratize authoritarian states because of the iron fist of the dictators and low coordination among protesters (Zakaria, 2009), or a poorly-thought post-revolution contingency plan (Andersen, 2009). Civil protests in other states, however, managed by a well-coordinated group with a fixed core of activists and long-term goals succeeded to make their governments comply with several opposition demands and international human rights norms (“Just making our feelings known,” 2011). Although current theories of political activism cannot provide a comprehensive framework for effective political struggle and civil resistance, more people all over the world see civil engagement and political movement coordinated through modern technologies as the only way to change the status quo and make politicians hear the demands of the people.

Though many scholars criticize the naïve belief in the power of modern technologies, including satellite television, computers, mobile phones and the Internet, to topple the tyrants, recent revolutionary movements in the Middle East demonstrated that modern gadgets help connect people and spread messages faster and cheaper than previous technologies. Nevertheless, the Internet, enhancing our mechanisms of coordination and collaboration, will not bring us directly to the harmonized future where communication and information innovations will hold nation-states accountable and transparent to society. Instead, as Clay Shirky pointed out, we will likely have 50 years of chaos when people will try to figure out how to make technology helpful to the society, safe from the Leviathan, and effective in its communication and informing functions (Shirky, 2008).

Thus, to enhance the study of political activism and make strategic recommendations for present and future activists on how to use modern ways of communication and information effectively, we have to

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<sup>i</sup> Prominent among analyses of theories of technology and political activism is the work of Open Society analyst Evgeny Morozov (Morozov, 2011). In his research, he shows how our great expectations related to the social media make us blind about dangers and flaws the Internet hides. For more see Morozov “After Arab Spring”.

critically consider the prospects for a new comprehensive approach that will explain role of technology in the success or failure of political activism.

This paper will examine recent opposition movements in Iran, Tunisia, Egypt, and Russia through the prism of the theory, proposed by cyber-activist Mary Joyce. Her theory suggests that technology can help activists with (i) information dissemination, (ii) planning action, (iii) protecting activists, (iv) sharing a call to action, and (v) taking action digitally (Joyce, 2012). Thus, I will examine how these Internet services for information spreading, coordination, security, mobilization, and cyber-activism contributed to the results of the political movements in four countries, and what challenges or opportunities modern technologies can give to political activists. I will focus on how politically active citizens can use the new media for the faster and more productive development of their opposition movements.

## **CASE STUDIES**

### **Iran**

The day after the June 12, 2009 presidential elections in Iran people started to protest against the elected president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Iranian activists used new media and technology for information spreading, planning actions, and mobilizing people in the country. Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, Flickr, and cellphone connections were the tools for spreading videos and photos on the spot, and informing about time and place of demonstrations. Iranian protesters did not use modern technologies for digital activism. Neither did they succeed in protecting themselves from the police. The Iranian authorities were widely using 'Deep Packet Inspection' to censor and persecute political activists (Heaven, 2009). Blaming Twitter for degrading the security of the activists in Iran, Will Heaven from *The Telegraph* cautioned that tweets sent by people outside of Iran either push people in the field to commit reckless actions, or represent the 'evidence against' (Heaven, 2010) cyber activists who dare to re-tweet or post the missives online. It is necessary to mention that all examined kinds of communication technology were seen by the Iranian government and majority of Islam fundamentalists as Western conspiracy. 'Islamist-inspired xenophobia' (Heaven, 2009) helped Ahmadinejad defame interactive activists and protesters who used social media for their goals.

### **Tunisia**

On December 19, 2010 clashes between hundred youths and police forces started in the Tunisian city of Sidi Bouzid after a fruit seller, Mohamed Bouazizi, humiliated (Cohen, 2011) by the police, set himself on fire ("Witnesses report," 2010). January 15, 2011 President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali fled the country (Chrisafis, 2011). Such a result became possible due to the incredible on- and offline struggle by the Tunisian activists. They made a great step in cyber activism, though new media monitoring was very 'pervasive' (York, 2011). Apart from political demonstrations in the streets of the country, Tunisian protesters successfully used online platform for digital actions. Being one of the most oppressive countries for bloggers and other cyber activists ("10 worst countries," 2009), Tunisia stifled censorship even more in the wake of national unrest (O'Brein, 2011). Nevertheless, political activists disseminated information, spread political appeals, and attacked governmental sites (Ryan, 2012) despite the iron fist of surveillance (Hill, 2011). Some observers note that years of censorship taught Internet users in Tunisia how to avoid surveillance, and mastered their 'art of cyber-subversion' ("The cyber-activists who helped topple a dictator," 2011). It is important to mention that at the initial stages of coordination and mobilization when opposition had no leader, local organizations, like the Sidi Bouzid branch of the Tunisian General Labour Union (Ryan, 2012), played a significant role. By generating 'major driving force behind protesters', such local organizations secured information spreading and mobilization of people into solidary unit with set goals and strategies.

### **Egypt**

The Egyptian revolution, that upended Hosni Mubarak after 30-year long presidency, started with popular uprisings January 25, 2011 after several. Following both the Iranian and Tunisian examples, Egyptian demonstrators nimbly used social media and information technologies for mobilization and coordination of political campaigns. It is necessary to remind that access to the Internet was blocked by the Mubarak

government during the most of revolutionary period. Not only was social media inaccessible, but also SMS was periodically blocked, and cellphone coverage was sometimes clamped down upon (Ungerleider, 2011). Nevertheless, some analysts considered Internet blockage as a trigger for mobilization of people (Applebaum, 2011). After having the Internet shuttered down, Egyptians had no other option but to come to the streets and protest (Hudson, 2011). Yet activists in Cairo and Alexandria exploited Facebook, YouTube, Twitter systems for information dissemination and rallies coordination.

Important to note, some critics blamed the activists for not having 'prefab ideological consistency' (Andersen, 2010). After ousting Mubarak, Egyptians had no clear plan how to build a democratic state (Klein, 2010). The protesters throughout Egypt understood democracy only as right to vote (Ghosh, 2010). After decades under the rule of one person, people valued right to vote more than economic prosperity or social welfare (Ghosh, 2010). And the movement coordinators did not pay attention to spreading materials about human rights and freedoms of Egyptians, while solely focusing on upending the autocrat. As for leadership, there were supposedly 13 main leaders that ran the movement in Cairo and Alexandria, including el-Ghazali Harb and Wael Ghonim (Andersen, 2010). For the fifth tool of digital activism, social media and information technology were not used as a weapon against the authoritarian regime. First of all, the access to the Internet even before the uprisings was quite limited. Second of all, even that constrained Internet flow was stopped periodically after the nationwide upheaval. To conclude, though the Internet access was unstable during the revolution, activists managed to use new media and technology for coordinating and mobilizing people.

## **Russia**

2011-2012 opposition movement started in Moscow and St. Petersburg December 4, one day after the national parliamentary elections. Angry with the rigged vote results in favor of Putin's 'United Russia' party, people went to the streets calling for re-elections (Zakaria, 2010). Throughout the demonstrations from December till nowadays activists expanded the list of their demands with calls for ousting Putin, freedom of assembly and association, freedom for political prisoners.

Coordinated mainly through Live Journal (LJ), Facebook, and Vkontakte (Russian analog of Facebook) ("The value of friendship," 2011), activists across Russia set the places of rallies, informed each other about the slogans and agenda for the demonstrations, and educated 'new-comers' about the criminal law in Russia and human rights generally.

Although it is hard to name all the core actors in the opposition movement, it is necessary to mention Alexey Navalny (Shuster, 2012), whose anti-corruption group 'RosPil' was famous long before the December demonstrations; Ilya Yashin, leader of the movement 'Solidarnost', and Sergey Udaltsov, leader of nationalist 'Left Front'. Their groups, including 'Russia against Party of crooks and thieves', in Vkontakte are the main hubs of information and mobilization. Centralized around several groups and leaders' LJ and Twitter accounts, activists throughout Russia not only spread the information, or set long-term strategy of struggle, but also disseminate educational materials and carried out digital attacks on the governmental sites or pro-governmental activists. Though Russian government has great experience in censoring mass media, activists used digital methods of DDoS and 'botting' not less than pro-governmental henchmen.

More importantly, Russian activists, unlike their colleagues in the Middle East, started to pay attention to the fellow nationals with no or opposite political preferences. Not only dissidents tried to construct dialogue with the pro-governmental groups. They also started to spread exemplary stories about their personal contacts with policemen, for example. This step towards uniting Russians regardless of their political partisanship or job obligations played a great role in recent success of the opposition. Police departments and special army forces, like Navy, decided either to support, or protect protesters from special police forces, or refuse to arrest peaceful demonstrators when the government started to toughen repressions. The appeals to understand and get close with policemen, who are the 'same Russian citizens with the same problems', were spread in numerous copies and might have influenced the mutual sympathy between dissidents and police forces.

It is important to note that in the beginning, Russian opposition movement used mainly VKontakte. That could help them to avoid criticism from anti-American ("Putin's People," 2012), xenophobic groups.

Even Live Journal was accustomed for Russian translation Zhivoj Zhurnal, which could impact to its wide popularity.

To resume, Russian activists, relying on the experience of their Arab predecessors, succeed in using the Internet and other communication technologies for information dissemination, coordination, mobilization and digital activism. As in other countries, digital protection of Russian activists had hit-and-miss results. As we may see, the security of activists could not be provided online. Governments in four states use the Internet and mobile communication for their benefits of surveillance and censorship. For the social media' companies themselves, the reputation of 'heaven' for political activism can drastically harm the business as many governments consider shutting them off from the countries (Evangelista, 2011). Nevertheless, trying to escape surveillance from above, that governmental officials usually maintain through the social media, activists carry out their own 'sousveillance' ("Special report," 2012) from below by reporting news, spreading the words of freedom, and attacking pro-governmental sites.

### **New media and opposition movement**

Mary Joyce, the cyber-activist from the Meta Activism project, suggests that new communication technologies can fulfill five main functions for political campaigns. The Internet sites, mobile systems, and modern gadgets can help political activists to spread the information about a campaign, plan the action, protect activists, mobilize people, and solidify campaign's effect digitally. Indeed, this theory was demonstrated on the examples of political campaigns in Iran, Tunisia, Egypt, and Russia. Apart from representing how the Mary Joyce theory worked in the four countries, I will also propose several points that were left without consideration, but deserve a great attention of theorists and practitioners of political movements.

#### Function 1. Information dissemination

Political activists used the technology for educational aims. It was not only guidelines like 'how to stop the tank' that were spread from Tunisia to Egypt, from *Indignados* to 'Occupy Wall Street'. The new media educational tools were also used and developed at the local level. People not only read the information that was not accessible through populist state media, but also learnt laws, policies and trends in the agenda of authoritarian governments, so as to be able to reinforce and use critical thinking skills and develop creative new approaches. Indeed, the urgent need for websites that can teach activists how not to fall into the state's trap is already acknowledged (Cullum, 2011). And, examples such as iRevolution ("Facebook https," 2011) site's experiment, that taught Sudanese activists to secure privacy of their Facebook accounts, should be followed universally.

For long-term, sustainable, and effective political struggle it is not enough to simply spread information. In order to bring true democracy, activists should teach people how to more effectively use gained information to make enduringly effective political decisions. As Jim Ife pointed out, sustainable democracy and respect for human rights need people to not merely follow imposed strategies, but understand political issues and make their own judgments about the status quo (Ife, 2010: 173).

Furthermore, technology should be considered as a tool for constructing dialogue with the supporters of authoritarian regimes. Through productive communications with opponents, political activists will not only revise their strategies according to the position of the other side, but also break the divide and conquer strategy of creating the 'us-and-them'<sup>ii</sup> mindsets that are so beneficial for the authoritarian government.

#### Function 2. Plan of action

Considering the function of action planning, few revisions must be made for the comprehensive theory of new media and political activism. As any other forms of activism, interactive political activism must

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<sup>ii</sup> While Jim Ife emphasize 'potentially dangerous, counter-productive' segregation between the activists and theorists of democracy and human rights (Ife, 2010: 208), Carne Ross focuses on the 'divide-and-rule' principle that let authoritarian governments divide society and make them fight with each other leaving the corrupted officials in peace (Ross, 2011: 141).

consider leadership factor in order to develop sustainable and effective democratic struggle. And modern communication and information technologies can help it enormously to accomplish the task.

Neither cyber-optimistic, nor cyber-pessimistic theories, however, pay proper attention to centralization of the activism through the Internet. As the examples of Wael Ghonim in Egypt and Alexey Navalny in Russia showed, the revolutionary movement needs a strong leader, organizer or initiator of the activism, though his role may later be passed to the hands of few most active dissidents or even several activist groups.

Leaderless revolution (Slaughter, 2011) must still be developed around one group. As Malcolm Gladwell proposed, the civic movement must be concentrated around one central body with a clear hierarchy and managed division of responsibilities (Gladwell, 2010). Loosening of horizontal, network-type structure, and strengthening of vertical strings inside of activists groups can let political dissidents coordinate their campaigns faster, safer and more succinctly. Though Anne-Marie Slaughter tries to persuade that young people who came to the streets in Egypt were tired of being voiceless, deprived by their rulers of their freedom to make decisions, she still admits that for such a campaign as political opposition people need 'central nodes... who convene, connect, catalyze, and facilitate the action of others' (Slaughter, 2011). In case of Egypt revolution, Wael Ghonim depreciated his role as a leader (Stephens, 2011) while refusing to call himself this (Morozov, 2011).

Besides, developing common strategy on the base of one, or two main opposition organizations can help followers of organizations filter crowdsourced information easily. Consequently, concentration of political activity in a few dissident organizations or groups will help build strong ties and interpersonal trust that are essential for political struggle. Moreover, it is easier to control 'trolls' or 'bots', which spread either false information or propaganda, if the movement has a few official SNS groups or blogs.<sup>iii</sup>

### Function 3. Protection of activists

Activists must understand that governments never considered the Internet as a burden. Instead, states used to exploit modern technologies of information and communication for their own benefit by surveillance and censorship. As an example of Syria shows, in times of revolutions governments can even open free access to social networks that used to be prohibited for better monitoring, tracing the locations, and intimidating activists (Cakiroglu, 2011). In Egypt several activists were arrested after being spotted in Facebook (Wolman, 2011). Russian security services in May 2012 started a wide-scale campaign of hunting activists after identifying their faces in pictures from demonstrations and matching them with the photo database in VKontakte.

As Morozov said, media companies like Facebook and Twitter are still working for their benefit.<sup>iv</sup> Thus, it must not be a surprise when Facebook restricts the rules for registering accounts with pseudonyms (York, 2010) in order to secure transparency and facilitate monitoring of the users.

Restrictions of privacy policy, however, could also be generated with good intentions. Facebook security team complicated registration procedures in 2009 in order to prevent governmental hackers from stealing passwords of interactive activists in Iran (Madrigal, 2011).

That apart, social media companies are not secure from clampdowns of local governments (York, 2010). Even if Twitter and Facebook are eager to help protesters in authoritarian states and sometimes follow requests of Western powers to postpone technical closedown (Labott, 2009) that can jeopardize democratic movements in pariah states, they will still have to open confidential information about the activists under the pressure of local governments. In case of Russia, the founder of VKontakte social network Pavel Durov was finally forced to open free access to the secret activist groups after number of threats and summons to the National Security Service office.

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<sup>iii</sup> For more information see the guideline series of the not-for-profit organization *Movements* at <http://www.movements.org/how-to/>.

<sup>iv</sup> Jillian C. York in her numerous reports shows how Facebook selectively applies its Terms of Service to different groups: blocking and deleting some activists groups, while leaving groups with obvious call for violence. (For more information see Jillian York, 2010)

#### Function 4. Mobilization

Cyber-pessimists were right warning activists about predominance of disadvantages over advantages in using the Internet for mobilization. Not only is it easier for the police to prepare in advance for opposition demonstrations coordinated online, it is also much simpler to lure activists in particular place using fake accounts. Russian security service widely used VKontakte to create a one-day group to invite people to a demonstration that had no legal approval from the authorities. Thus, activists were arrested as soon as they come to the set place. The same practice took place in Sudan (Cullum, 2011).

As it was in Egypt and Russia, pro-governmental supporters, usually being paid for every post, joined opposition groups and spread information about cancellation of demonstrations, get personal data of the participants, or simply blast opposition activists and posting pro-governmental messages (Preston, 2011).

#### Function 5. Digital actions

No matter how sophisticated, however, the surveillance techniques of the authoritarian regime, activists still have a few options for digital action. Electronic petitions, DDoS attacks, and 'botting' can prevent demobilization of protest movement, and secure coordination inside the opposition.

Those apart, local cyber-activists can successfully cooperate with foreign groups of hackers, as it was during Tunisian revolution (Hill, 2011). "Operation Tunisia", carried out by famous hacker group "Anonymous", helped local activists throughout Tunisia demand their freedom of speech.

Most importantly, cyber-activism must never substitute protest actions in the streets. Digital politics of activism must facilitate coordination and mobilization of street protests, and inspire people to join political movement offline.

### CONCLUSION

During the last few years the population of protest reached 3 billion (Stengel, 2012). People in Russia and Syria ("Syria," 2012), Bahrain and Azerbaijan ("Azerbaijan," 2012), Cambodia and Myanmar ("Power outrage protests hit Myanmar," 2012) raise their voices in protest against undemocratic policies of their governments. Beside traditional tools for political activism there are new forms of communication and information that can affect opposition campaigns. Facebook, Flickr, YouTube, and Twitter along with mobile connection and satellite television demonstrated their potential to inform, coordinate, and mobilize masses. At the same time, social media serves well for surveillance and monitoring too. The effectiveness of new technologies, consequently, depends on who is using it and for what purpose (Alexander, 2011).

I tried to examine recent revolutions and opposition movements in Iran, Tunisia, Egypt, and Russia to investigate the progress of activists' use of modern communication and information technologies for political activism. Considering the arguments of cyber-activists Mary Joyce, I scrutinized what functions new media can maintain for the success of political activism. To avoid extreme reliance or pessimistic negligence of the technology in political campaigns, I considered necessary to elaborate Mary Joyce' approach of political activism and new media.

Finally, I conclude that new means of communication and technology should be considered as tools for the following strategic functions. First, technology should not only inform potential participants of mass demonstrations, but also teach activists and those who want to join opposition movement about law, human rights and politics in and outside the country. Education must also expand to the dialogue construction between supporters of the status quo and dissidents. Second, activists should use social media and communication technologies for easier and faster coordination, mobilization, and protection of protesters. Finally, cyber space of new media should become a comprehensive platform for online political campaigns. Emphasize on direct action offline, however, must never be diminished.

As a revolutionary movement expands every month involving more people under its wings, the discussion about the power of people to reinforce struggle for democracy with new media must not get stuck on

either advantages or disadvantages of technology solely. Without understanding roles, challenges, and opportunities of all actors involved, political activism may not expect success.

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