The New Social Media in Transitional Societies: Politics, Ethics, Responsibility

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Twitter, Facebook, Blogging: these are referenced as the "new social media." Like any technological innovation, the social media in themselves are value-neutral objects. Any new technology, including these media, can be employed for socially constructive or socially destructive purposes, can be used fairly or abusively, legally or extra-legally, by reasonable or unreasonable individuals or groups in transitional societies.

The proliferation of social media tends to undermine the traditional media institutions, i.e. newspapers, opinion journals, and even television. Politically oriented social media are at the cutting edge of the trend toward lower quality. This type of media often serve as tools of personal expression, sometimes as vehicles for self-described "activist" groups, usually outside an institutional media framework, and often without editorial discipline.

Professional standards of journalism are observed very unevenly in the social media. Many among politically activist bloggers are amateur journalists (trained, if at all, more in politics than in journalism). By the very nature of their situation they are more interested in promoting specific agendas than in learning and practicing the profession of journalism. Most of their followers do not even require social media to adhere to professional journalism's standards. Social media are also expected for the most part to deliver advocacy, rather than analysis; and they deliver as expected. Thus, the proliferation of social media has generated a trend toward de-institutionalization and de-professionalization within the overall media landscape.

Politically, the rise of new social media coincided with the sunset on the "color revolutions" and the onset of the "Arab Spring." This entire series of events tied in closely with the notion of externally-induced or -assisted "regime change" in some countries. These upheavals illustrated the new social media's potential for short-term political mobilization among urban youth. Mobilization through social media quickly overturned the political order. The authorities were caught unprepared in each case. But the "tweeting youths" and "Facebook kids," who triggered the upheavals, were quickly pushed aside by far deeper and stronger forces from within those societies.

In 2009, Moldova became the scene of the world's first-ever "Twitter Revolution." An opposition group called for an anti-government demonstration via twitter. The government was Communist in name only; was in fact working closely with the European Union, and had just won OSCE-certified free and fair elections for the third time. The tweeting youths' appeal generated a large crowd that plundered and set on fire the buildings of the state presidency and parliament. To this day, those buildings—the main seats of state authority—remain unusable. Video recordings of those events on YouTube show horrifying scenes of vandalism and collective frenzy. Western media coverage downplayed or ignored this while enthusing over the "Twitter Revolution": a world premiere.

Egypt's "Facebook kids" enjoyed a longer and wider spell of Western celebrity, so that their story need not be retold here. Youth groups using social media in large cities became the first battering ram that brought down the political order in Egypt and elsewhere during the "Arab Spring." But the vacuum was promptly filled by obscurantism, misgovernment, and violent chaos. In Egypt, the state has finally reasserted itself; and even the one-time "Facebook kids" have taken shelter into state-sponsored order against the anarchy they had, perhaps unwittingly, helped to unleash.

What explains the enthusiasm in some Western circles (in the United States more than in Europe) about social media being used for political mobilization in non-Western societies? First, a belief rooted in simplistic technological determinism, that the spread of social media is inherently a force for democracy. Second, a utopian yearning for democratic revolutions to replace perceived authoritarianism in foreign cultures that are poorly understood in the West. Third, a celebration of youth and renewal, associated with new technical toys and political happenings staged by the young against the "old order," as seen through Western media lenses. Even the serial failures of color revolutions and Arab-Spring revolutions do not seem to have laid those misconceptions entirely to rest.

The new social media, including those openly political, have their legitimate right to operate in a country's pluralist media environment. They should, however, operate within a specific legal and regulatory framework, professional codes, and financial disclosure requirements. Such a system of norms and rules, governing the traditional media, has not yet been fully developed for the social media sector in many countries, including Azerbaijan. The country's President, Ilham Aliyev, has assured this Forum that there is not and will not be censorship in this country. Social media must adhere to those norms and rules, along with professional media standards, in order to enjoy the protections of free speech.