

Digital media, civic engagement and political mobilization in repressive regimes

Research Seminar, 10-11 November 2008. Organizers: Institute for Society and Globalization, Roskilde University, Denmark. Partner institutions: Danish Institute for Human Rights (IMR/DIIS) and the Research School for International Development Studies (RUC).

The overall theme of this seminar is the growing impact of electronic media (digital networked technologies) in repressive regimes. The seminar is designed to present ongoing international research as well as to promote new original research and facilitate academic exchange, aiming at the publication of an edited volume. The specific purposes of the seminar are, first, to discuss how Internet and other digital networked technologies may provide a novel component in the public sphere in repressive regimes, and secondly, to examine the extent and significance of the Internet for activism and social mobilization.

As the Internet both globalizes and deepens it gets a real-life impact in the private as well as the public sphere. Citizens and organizations use digital networked technologies to engage in civic life, and at the same time contribute to increasing media diversity at local, national and global levels. Digital networked technologies have special significance in repressive regimes, however, where crucial restrictions apply to public debate and the media. China and Iran are particularly relevant to examine as they share a number of characteristics: they have large well-educated population segment and rapidly growing numbers of Internet users; their governments exercise strong control on all public expression, including direct public action, mass media, journalism and blogging; and they have the world's most extensive electronic filtering systems.

In a range of other important cases, digital networked technologies are used by activists and pro-democracy organizers. Some recent examples are savvy activists and journalists using Internet and mobile phones during the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, monks using Internet in the uprisings against the regime in Burma, the Movement for Democratic Change in Zimbabwe using an international homepage for mobilization against Mugabe's rule, journalists and students using Internet in Cuba for access to alternative news media, human rights activists in Uzbekistan using Russian homepages in their struggle against their regime, and so forth. Further examples may be drawn from Africa to the Middle East to Asia and beyond; a range of repressive regimes are presumably linked by common filtering software and official security exchanges.

Digital networked technologies and the public sphere

Conventional Habermasian conditions for a well-functioning public sphere are equality, transparency, inclusion and rationality, where the public sphere is signified by rational discussions and exchanges with implications on the surrounding society. Jürgen Habermas further argued that public debate – already long ago – moved from physical spaces to electronic mass media such as radio and TV. As a contrast, in China and Iran television and radio are fully government controlled, newspapers are under heavy censorship, web journalists and bloggers tend to self-censorship or avoid using their real names, and government agents everywhere mix with bloggers and activists. Direct public action, including meetings, demonstrations and strikes, are restricted. In both

these and in a range of other countries, where government authorities seek to control the digital networked technologies to prevent pluralistic opinion from destabilizing state power, challenge their worldview or threaten the public order, the conditions for an open, equal and rational debate in the public sphere are obviously missing.

The diversity of the Internet constitutes another problem for Habermas' concept of the public sphere. The global and inherently pluralistic nature of the Internet precludes consensus based on rational and democratic debate. As the Internet may bring about seclusion into smaller, sectional forums, Habermas regards it as fragmenting. However, prominent Internet theorists such as Yochai Benkler and Luke Goode argue that the Internet is far from fragmenting, having instead a network structure. This is especially apparent in the blogosphere, where the commentary function of blog-rolls and other hyperlinks are central in establishing a new, interactive public medium. Enabling a pluralistic exchange of opinion, the digital networked technologies may instead contribute to the eradication of conformity and prejudice.

Through digital networked technologies populations in repressive regimes have potentially gained access to an open, pluralistic and horizontal debate, which meets several conditions for a well-functioning public sphere. Participants get training as active discussants, making them better informed and politically more conscious citizens. The society-transforming potential of the digital networked technologies may still be debated, however, since electronic media are only instruments for social interactions.

Digital networked technologies may be instrumental in disrupting existing structures of power in government-controlled media, thus breaking the regimes' monopoly on public representation and interpretation of reality. Digital networked technologies in themselves foster new virtual organizing and their potential for broad and immediate real-life mobilization is recognized by all, activists and governments alike. A range of repressive regimes have mass mobilizations as the historical roots of their ascendance to power: the symbolic meaning of mass mobilization intensifies the threat to government from joint and spontaneous public action. In fact, repressive regimes commonly use the rhetoric of people's government, the will of the masses, or the dictatorship of the proletariat, if not claiming a divine mandate to rule.

Access to public voice and representation are in the forefront of all political strife. Today, a large body of international literature on social movements and networks emphasize comparable trends across continents as the penetration of global capitalism set common conditions for labour, migration and economic development, while there is increasing attention to the role of digital media for mobilization. Further, it should be noted that reactions to globalization many places include non-rational or immaterial strategies, giving rise to, for instance, new spiritual, religious or fundamentalist mobilizations. In places like China and the Middle East, both religious and anti-religious paroles form important parts of digital struggles.

China, Iran and beyond

There is an explosive increase in the number of Internet users in both China and Iran. In China from 2005 to 2008 Internet usage grew from 94 to 200 million. The countrywide Internet penetration is still modest, however. The Chinese blogosphere had more than 20.8 million blogs at the end of 2006, and in 2008 some sources suggest that it has 47 million active bloggers. A large majority of urban young Chinese use the Internet, and several social networking sites like Facebook are online. The number of mobile phones users grows equally fast, having reached 350 million. Similarly, in Iran Internet usage

has increased drastically from 2000 to 2008, by far the largest growth in the Middle Eastern region.

According to surveys (CASS), Chinese Internet users tend to believe that the Internet is changing politics in China. They agree that it will increase political transparency and expand discourse and that the Internet provides more opportunities to express political views. In Iran there is also a very positive approach towards the Internet from its users. A survey from the Iranian Students News Agency showed that a great part of the Iranian population (45.5 % of the participants) consider the Internet as the most reliable media. This may indicate that the Internet represents an alternative news source and functions as a watch dog in relation to the established media.

Even though the Chinese, Iranian and other repressive regimes do not share the same ideology, they share their approach to the Internet and other digital networked technologies in order to control the public sphere. The pluralistic space of the Internet is a challenge to these regimes, as they seek to accommodate two contradictory lines of action: They encourage activity on the Internet as much as they restrict it, reflecting the continuing schism between tradition and modernity. The Iranian supreme leader Khamenei and President Ahmadinejad have their personal websites, and the latter has launched his own blog; the Chinese premier Wen Jiabao is active on Facebook. Moreover, the current Iranian government has hosted an Iranian blog festival and supports organizations that help all religious students to get their own blogs. At the same time both regimes seek to limit access; for instance, Chinese President Hu Jintao wishes to promote “healthy online culture”. In addition, China has introduced the idea of a new system “China Wide Web”, which is to be separate from the World Wide Web. The extensive Internet filtering called “The Great Firewall of China” is only one of the means to control the public sphere, the control also include web site and blog closures, and the detention of web journalists, writers and activists. During the last several years a substantial number of people are known to be imprisoned for online activities.

Together with Iran, China probably has the largest and the most sophisticated electronic filtering system in the world, although the Chinese government claims that there are no restrictions on the Internet. In Iran the authorities have limited the bandwidth on broadband access, since October 2006, which severely hinders development. Another element of the authorities’ Internet regulation is the bill on Internet-related crime. The bill, which can be compared to the Iranian Press Law, includes intense monitoring of cyber cafés and control of ISPs, and harsh sentencing, such as long-term imprisonments and large fines, for Internet-related crimes. There have already been reported numerous imprisonments and persecutions of web-journalists and bloggers in Iran, reported by several international human rights organizations. Yet another initiative from the Iranian authorities has been the registration of blogs.

In addition to China and Iran, material may be drawn from relevant countries and regions across the world. According to available reports from sources like BBC, US State Department, OpenNet Initiative, human rights organizations and independent writers, the Middle East and North Africa may be of special interest, as is the increasing use of digital media as a tool for civil society activists in places like Zimbabwe, Cuba, Burma, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Armenia, Kazakhstan and Belarus.

Internet communication is rapidly becoming an issue in international relations. Governments set up departments to control international hacking and attacks on government institutions. Both economic and political struggles take place in cyber-

space, giving rise to cyber-protests and even 'cyber-wars'. Just as civil society activists see the Internet as an important medium, governments across the world also use Internet for citizen-services, information dissemination, self-representation and propaganda. In repressive regimes government departments may be active bloggers or pay groups of citizens to promote government views by fake blogging.

We can no longer see local protests and movements as isolated phenomena. With increasing frequency, local social protests use the global electronic media for protection and support. Since NGOs and interest groups work internationally for freedom, democracy, or change of government, also government agencies or pro-government actors in repressive states may see an interest in influencing, intimidating or sabotaging the Internet traffic and websites of such groups, while at the same time building their own parallel sites. How does this augur for the said democratizing effect of the Internet? Is democratization inevitable or will repressive governments outsmart the civil society activists by means of massive state funding and use of advanced surveillance technology?

Focal points for seminar presentations and book contributions:

- Methodological issues

A specific task is to examine and discuss central concepts and approaches for introducing Internet activism into the social sciences, for instance in relation to public sphere and social movement theory. Further, media controls are everywhere applied (laws and regulations, actual enforcement and pressures, independent orientations and preferences of the individual media, cultural predispositions, self-discipline etc.), but occur in a range of mixtures. In a political sense, is a distinction between 'repressive' and 'democratic' regimes at all relevant or do we need more precise concepts with regard to various regimes' digital media tactics?

- Digital media and their challenge to conventional public sphere thinking

The concept of 'public sphere' already from the outset having a Eurocentric ring, what are the new concepts, approaches and understandings of the public sphere in relation to digital media in repressive regimes? How may we expect Internet and digital network media to develop in China, Iran and beyond and how may they contribute to the public social and cultural life? How will the authorities' adoption of digital media for propaganda and hacking affect the Internet as a 'public sphere'?

- Mobilizing for political change through digital networked technologies

Digital networked technologies may potentially mobilize civic action. How can activity in the virtual world have real-life impacts? We need to examine this relationship and find ways to assess the influence of these technologies on society. What role do digital networked technologies play in authoritarian regimes compared to democratic societies? Many other examples may be added to those of the Orange Revolution in Ukraine and the opposition movement in Burma. Have digital networked technologies created new opportunities for networking and association? We need elaborations on the intricate functions and purposes of digital media controls, including discussions of interests, political goals, values and strategies of government versus users and activists

Program outline

(Arrangements in progress - keynote speakers will be announced)

10 November: Digital Media Controls and the Public Sphere

Presentations and round-table discussions

11 November: Digital Networked Technologies in Action

Presentations and round-table discussions

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