

# The Use of Social Media to Promote and Protect Human Rights

## Summary of Key Articles



### 1. Summary of Key Voices in the Debate

#### **Malcolm Gladwell**

- Advocating socio-political change is high-risk activism, which relies on strong-tie relationships and the high level organisation and leadership derived from hierarchically structured relationships.
- Social media form only weak-tie relationships in the form of networks.
- Social media are only effective at increasing (low-risk) participation, but not for increasing motivation, which is required for high-risk activism.

#### **Clay Shirky**

- Social media can prove useful in the initiating social change, however they should be seen as a *tool* for communication and organisation of real-world action (rather than a replacement for it).
- As a tool for communication, social media helps quickly propagate messages for various purposes: information, organisation, mobilisation, and transparency/accountability.
- The lack of a hierarchical structure in social media is not necessarily a negative; what matters is the discipline and coordination of the collective in question.

#### **Evgeny Morozov**

- Questions whether social media is useful in contributing to socio-political change.
- Potential benefits of social media in advocating change include:
  - Cheap but not always secure tools for communication;
  - Ease of use and accessibility of technology make it easier to hold the State accountable for human rights abuses;
  - Technology reduces the marginal cost of protests.
- Potential negatives include:
  - The State is already quite adept at using social media for its own purposes, including the monitoring (and punishment) of cyber-dissidents;
  - Technology is useless in illiterate societies/regions: "If you think Facebook will change Yemen, you're crazy...We don't even have electricity." (Member of the PGC Party (Yemen), in Chip Cummins, "Yemeni Web Activists Clash with Opposition, *Wall Street Journal*, 9 February 2011 at <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703313304576131541060415016.html>)

- “Traditional” activist and advocacy work remains vital; to increase the relevance of social media to socio-political reform, it is these people whose digital literacy must be increased.

## **2. Summary of Key Articles in the Debate**

### ***Malcolm Gladwell***

Gladwell argues that “high-risk activism” – think boycotts, sit-ins and nonviolent confrontations experienced during the US civil rights movement – “is a ‘strong-tie’ phenomenon”; the close relationship between actors is required in order for such movements to succeed. The relationships found in social media are contrary—these platforms propagate “weak ties”.

Gladwell does not discount the utility of weak ties, however. He recognises that the strength of these relationships lies particularly in their ability to serve as a source of new ideas or information. He concludes, however, that these ties generally do not lend themselves to high-risk activism, noting with disappointment that “activists were once defined by their causes [and] they are now defined by their tools.”

“Social networks are effective at increasing *participation*—by lessening the level of motivation that participation requires”, however they are not necessarily good at increasing motivation of those networks which is necessary to encourage the “real” sacrifices required by the nature of high-risk activism.

In comparing “traditional” with “modern” activism, Gladwell notes that traditional activism was subject to central organisation and hierarchy. “New” activism, on the other hand, based on social networks, is inherently different. Networks are “the opposite, in structure and character, of hierarchies.” This distinction, Gladwell argues, makes the use of social media in advocating political or social change futile; the message gets lost in the form.

In conclusion, Gladwell criticises Shirky’s view of the utility of social media in achieving social or political change, arguing that this is “simply a form of organising which favours the weak-tie connections that give us access to information over the strong-tie connections that help us persevere in the face of danger...it makes it easier for activists to express themselves and harder for that expression to have an impact...[social media] are not a natural enemy of the status quo”.

- [http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/10/04/101004fa\\_fact\\_gladwell](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/10/04/101004fa_fact_gladwell)

### ***Clay Shirky***

Shirky views social media—Facebook, Twitter and even SMS technology—as “coordinating tools for nearly all of the world’s political movements”. He recognises the restrictability of internet and other technologies, however notes that this does not negate social media’s role in instituting social change. Technology, he believes, does and will continue to change the way the public interact with one another (at both individual and group level); this includes the “conversations” between a State and its people and becomes particularly important in the discussion of social media’s role in securing change.

Shirky advocates an “environmental’ view of internet freedom; [a]ccording to this conception, positive changes in the life of a country, including pro-democratic regime change, follow, rather than precede, the development of a strong public sphere.” It is uncontroversial to

accept that media has long played a highly supportive role in social change, and Shirky concludes that this is due to media's ability to strengthen the public sphere.

Shirky subscribes to Katz and Lazarsfeld's two-step theory on the formation of political opinions; first, transmission of opinions via media; second, echo/reinforcement of those opinions by family, friends or colleagues – it is the second stage at which opinions are formed. The ability to discuss political opinions – from a literacy rather than freedom standpoint – is central to the formation or emergence of a public sphere which is necessary to instigate social change.

Disciplined/coordinated groups are generally more successful than undisciplined ones, however the utility of social media lies in it replacing the role of formal organisation. As a result, larger, looser groups can be organised at a lower cost than possible previously due to the ability of social media to quickly increase shared awareness of social issues through the networked propagation of messages.

The mere existence of "slacktivism" cannot rebut the fact that committed actors can and do use social media as an effective tool to coordinate real-world action, rather than replace it.

Shirky does not necessarily disagree with the criticism that social media is just as likely to strengthen repressive regimes as it is to collapse them. However, he notes the power of medium, commenting that "the best practical reason to think that social media can help bring political change is that both dissidents and governments think they can."

Shirky promotes the "net advantage" of the use of social media in advocating change: "the easier the assembly of citizens, the more ubiquitous the ability to document atrocities...[a]nd the more the self-damaging measures which states take – like shutting down mobile phone networks – will resolve themselves as a net advantage for insurrection within authoritarian regimes."

- <http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/2009/12/the-net-advantage/>
- <http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/2010/01/the-twitter-revolution-more-than-just-a-slogan/>
- <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67038/clay-shirky/the-political-power-of-social-media>
- <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67325/malcolm-gladwell-and-clay-shirky/from-innovation-to-revolution>

### ***Evgeny Morozov***

Morozov is a self-proclaimed sceptic of the power of the social media to contribute to socio-political change.

His scepticism stems from the State's ability to match, overpower and in some cases silence the voices of so-called cyber-dissidents. Addressing Shirky's argument that the development and emergence of an active civil society helps to correct State monopoly of political discussion and information, Morozov observes that "while the internet may take the power away from an authoritarian (or any other) state or institution, that power is not necessarily transferred to pro-democracy groups...Social media's greatest assets— anonymity, 'virality,' interconnectedness—are also its main weaknesses."

Additionally, he questions the utility of social media in advocating change where it is currently—in a geographic and political sense—more likely to occur: “doing something online doesn’t work that well with populations that are predominantly offline and predominantly illiterate.” This is a particularly critical observation for populations living under authoritarian regimes. A further disadvantage is the fact that “[s]ocial networking... has inadvertently made it easier to gather intelligence about activist networks.”

On the other hand, Morozov recognises the (potential) benefits provided by social media to political change.

1. Can give cyber-dissidents cheap, often (but not always) secure tools with which to communicate.
2. Technology – digital cameras and the ease of sharing captured images – makes “bloody-crackdowns” riskier for the State in question.
3. “[T]echnology reduces the marginal cost of protest, helping to turn ‘fence-sitters’ into protesters at critical moments.”

In contrast to Shirky, Morozov believes that the argument that social media has increased the ease of organising mass protests (for example) is only partially true; in order to reap the full benefits of any online organisation, the underlying cause must be “well-disciplined...with clearly defined goals, hierarchies, and operational procedures”. Where these characteristics are absent, use of social media to organise such events may only serve to expose vulnerabilities in the movement.

Morozov reiterates the importance and prevalence of “analogue” activists, and the importance of increasing digital literacy among these “traditional” individuals and groups.

- <http://bostonreview.net/BR34.2/morozov.php>
- <http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/2009/11/how-dictators-watch-us-on-the-web/>
- <http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/2010/01/why-the-internet-is-failing-irans-activists/>
- <http://www.wired.co.uk/magazine/archive/2010/01/features/rebooting-britain-ditch-twitter-it's-dangerous-for-democracy>
- [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/04/26/think\\_again\\_the\\_internet?page=full](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/04/26/think_again_the_internet?page=full)
- <http://www.evgenymorozov.com/writings.html>

### ***Courtney Radsch***

Though ‘social media are not a panacea to the political, economic and social problems plaguing [the Mid-East] region...[they are] potentially powerful tools for organizing, mobilizing, communicating and putting domestic issues on the international agenda”.

In contrast to Gladwell, Radsch does believe that social media may serve as a tool through which to challenge the status quo, especially in the context of authoritarian regimes. Radsch’s view is based on three pillars:

1. Spreading information can constitute a subversive act, especially in the context of authoritarian regimes. However, we must remember that social media are simply the tool by which messages of discontent are propagated rather their underlying foundation(s).

2. Social media can prove to form “an integral part of...mobilization strategies and...key communications forums [and allow] circumventing [of] censorship tools”.
3. Social media has the power to influence and set international news agendas.

Like Morozov, Radsch acknowledges the ability of repressive States to use social media to help it silence critics. She is more optimistic, however, and considers that the current balance overall favours activists use of social media.

The availability of these new tools does not mean activists have forgotten previously useful tools. In relation to the recent events in Egypt, she notes: “The digital blackout was a powerful reminder of the power of older technologies, and innovative solutions emerged to merge the best of both...while these social media were important, it was the fact that protests and popular support transcended the digital forums that have grown to become important tools for social movements to subvert state control of the media and public space in recent years that makes these recent uprisings monumental.

- [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/courtney-c-radsch/doubleedged-sword-social-b\\_826354.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/courtney-c-radsch/doubleedged-sword-social-b_826354.html)

### ***Chris Hughes***

Hughes argues that Gladwell is partially correct in his critique of “networks,” however he misses the point: networks aren’t the solution to complex political issues, but they do “enable people to come together, communicate with one another effectively, and devise a system that invests a leader with the authority to set an agenda to achieve the group’s goals.”

Hughes also takes issue with Gladwell’s interpretation of the uses of social media in an activist sense: “Few are naïve enough to believe that [liking something on Facebook] solves the issue. It’s a public statement of support...[and]does not mean they are not willing to take further action...the technology that now exists makes it easier for people to find and connect with others who share their same passions.” This is the real innovation of social media, allowing broader communication of causes and support; “The introduction of technologies that enable people to communicate their support more broadly does not mean they are taking less action. Gladwell mistakes this statement of support as the only type of activism these networks provide.”

- <http://chrishughes.tumblr.com/post/1211404093/gladwell-on-social-media>

### ***Jillian York***

York argues that the juxtaposition of “digital” with “traditional” activism poses a false dichotomy because it ignores the potential interaction of the two; while “digital activism alone is fairly useless...the utilization of digital tools can make traditional activism infinitely stronger.” Social media is can be an additional way to draw attention to a cause and encourage more people to participate, even if it is only the result of little effort.

The remainder of York’s article focuses on the narrative of each activist movement, drawing particular attention to funding of such movements by the US Government. To receive such funding is a double edged sword: on the one hand, it helps to further the cause; on the other it is disingenuous in that it imparts an imported narrative and agenda on the cause in question.

Here, York seems to agree with Gladwell's concern about "weak ties" and notes that "you simply can't build a movement from the top down".

- <http://jilliancyork.com/2010/09/27/the-false-poles-of-digital-and-traditional-activism/>

### **Alexis Madrigal**

Madrigal responds to Gladwell's *New Yorker* piece with two major points:

1. Gladwell misunderstands how Twitter functions, its impact and its usefulness in the establishment of strong ties. Madrigal questions whether face-to-face contact is the only way to establish "strong ties", arguing that social media like Twitter can help turn weak ties into strong ties, emphasising the integral nature of the former: "large pools of weaker ties are crucial to being able to build robust networks of stronger ties—and Internet use is a key to this process."
  2. Gladwell's claim that networks lack "leadership or organisation" is an overreach. The tools of social media are still new, and while we may say "that no current effort rises to the level of a sit-in", there is still the ability and possibility to develop the tools for use in this way—"who says online social networks *can't* have leadership, strategy, and clear lines of authority?"
- <http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2010/09/gladwell-on-social-media-and-activism/63623>

### **Sarah Kessler**

Kessler chronicles 4 main reasons why social media has the potential to realise change:

1. The Power of One: focus on the strength of the relationship between the person and the cause, rather than between people—the "ability of social media to quickly connect one person to the world...makes it easier for invested people to create change without a bureaucracy to back them up."
2. The Power of 1 Million: while e-petitions are "probably not the most dramatic method of activism out there", there are a large number of examples where this type of activism has led to real social change, which is the ultimate goal of taking action in the first place; the web's ability to mobilise people to take such action simultaneously (for example, to "send letters to a single target") is one source of its potential power.
3. More Loose Ties Lead to More Activists: low-cost activism, for example, liking something on Facebook, may function as the first step in the engagement between a person and a cause rather than the full expression of their activism. The more "casually engaged" people you make contact with the more opportunities there are to increase or deepen their activism on the cause. Loose ties are necessary to spread awareness and involvement in the cause—"Nothing happens without...tight ties, but nothing can spread without loose ties. Because a tightly tied inner-circle is a clique. Nobody else can get in. By definition, you cannot have a growing movement unless people can access it, and that's what loose ties are for."
4. New Accountability: social media makes it easier and ever more necessary for organisations to document and report how funds are used, "blurring the lines [between

the] inside of organisations and outside”. Consequently, organisations are forced to refocus their efforts from fundraising to “the cause”.

- <http://www.mashable.com/2010/10/09/social-media-activism/>

### ***David Weinberger***

Weinberger emphasises the need to examine the role social media has played in recent events as part of the historical context. Full understanding of such events cannot be achieved without first considering social media’s role. Historically, media has played a central role in revolutions, and it is too simplistic to discount the role of these new media without further investigation and reflection.

- [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-weinberger/malcolm-gladwell-proves-t\\_b\\_818850.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-weinberger/malcolm-gladwell-proves-t_b_818850.html)

### ***Lev Grossman, Time Magazine***

Social broadcasting services like Twitter are “ideal for a mass protest, both very easy for the average citizen to use and very hard for any central authority to control”. The ability to broadcast outside of the mainstream media – circumventing (often) State controlled systems and thus censorship – is new. Grossman recognises various counterarguments, especially in relation to State surveillance of social media and the issues that the public nature of these types of forums may raise. In relation to the 2009 protests following the Iranian presidential election, however, he concludes that “there’s no question that [Twitter] emboldened the protesters, reinforced their conviction that they are not alone and engaged populations outside Iran in an emotional, immediate way that was never possible before.”

- <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1905125,00.html>

### ***Blog, The Economist***

Rather than merely creating networks of weak ties, social media strengthen ties generally. The repeated minor interactions made possible by these media, at a lower cost than previously available, also keep stronger ties strong in ways not previously possible.

Social media may, indeed, build networks rather than hierarchies; however this is not necessarily a negative. Networks are “bottom-up”. Unlike hierarchies, they are very difficult to break. The most important conclusion to be drawn from this is that “[networks] equalise information relationships. On social networks, anyone and everyone becomes a producer of content, and this function is taken away from central actors susceptible to control by the powerful. Where social networks penetrate, governments cannot control the story.” It is this shift—and the potential carry on effects—that holds the most potential for social media as an activist tool: “in a world in which information can’t be controlled. Abuses of power should become costlier and more rare.”

- <http://www.economist.com/blogs/freeexchange/2010/09/information>

**Lee Smithey, *The Atlantic***

Social media provide discontented citizens a “relatively low-risk activity in which many [people can] participate, see their strength, and shed their fear. Suddenly, the unimaginable seems possible—and this transformation in attitudes can happen at incredible speed.”

- <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/02/the-power-of-nonviolent-resistance/71544>

**Sohail Dahdal**

The internet and social media play two important roles in initiating social change in the Arab world. First, media outlets like Al Jazeera offer alternative sources of news and information which are more or less uncensored in comparison with traditionally State-controlled media outlets. These outlets serve as “informer and agitator at the same time”—both necessary to spark civil action within a discontented population. Second, and in Dahdal’s view more importantly, social media provides a platform for quick mobilisation of crowds. This is especially important in places like the Middle East, where there is such a large proportion of youth population who are also face high levels of unemployment. Dahdal is careful to point out, however, that “social media will only ever be a tool of organising. The streets are [still] the place where revolutions can create facts on the ground.”

- <http://newmatilda.com/2011/03/04/perfect-storm>