Government & Politics: Cyber-Influence

Introductory Essay from Dr. Patricia Campbell and Christy Stevens

Information and Communication Technologies in a Globalized Political Landscape

> *Each and every one of us has a vital part to play in building the kind of world in which government and technology serve the world's people and not the other way around.* -Rebecca MacKinnon

Over the past 20 years, *information and communication technologies* (*ICT*s) have transformed the globe, facilitating the international economic, political, and cultural connections and exchanges that are at the heart of contemporary *globalization* processes. The term ICT is broad in scope, encompassing both the technological infrastructure and products that facilitate the collection, storage, manipulation, and distribution of information in a variety of formats. While there are many definitions of globalization, most would agree that the term refers to a variety of complex social processes that facilitate worldwide economic, cultural, and political connections and exchanges. The kinds of global connections ICTs give rise to mark a dramatic departure from the face-to-face, time and place dependent interactions that characterized communication throughout most of human history. ICTs have extended human interaction and increased our interconnectedness, making it possible for geographically dispersed people not only to share information at an ever-faster rate but also to organize and to take action in response to events occurring in places far from where they are physically situated. While these complex webs of connections can facilitate positive collective action, they can also put us at risk. As Ian Goldin observes in his TEDTalk "Navigating Our Global Future," the complexity of our global connections also means that there is a built-in fragility in our globalized world, since what happens in one part of the world can very quickly effect the entire globe.

The proliferation of ICTs and the new webs of social connections they engender have had profound political implications for governments, citizens, and non-state actors alike. Each of the TEDTalks featured in this course explore some of these implications, highlighting the connections and tensions between

technology and politics. Some speakers focus primarily on how anti-authoritarian protesters use technology to convene and organize supporters, while other TEDTalks expose how authoritarian governments use technology to manipulate and control individuals and groups. Other speakers analyse both the rewards and risks of technology propelled globalization processes, acknowledging that while technology continues to unleash new potential for innovation and development that can improve people's lives around the globe, the ever growing complexity of globalization is also accompanied by systemic risk. Other TEDTalks in the course look more specifically at the ways technology has been, is being, and may one day be used to advance the agendas of a variety of political actors. When viewed together as a unit, the contrasting voices reveal that technology is a contested site through which political power is both exercised and resisted.

Technology as Liberator

The potentially liberatory power of technology is a powerful theme that several of the speakers in this course address. Journalist and Global Voices co-founder Rebecca MacKinnon, for example, begins her talk by playing the now famous George Orwell inspired Apple advertisement from 1984, which, in addition to selling Macintosh computers, was also about selling the underlying narrative that "technology created by innovative companies will set us all free." While MacKinnon examines this narrative with a critical eye, other TED speakers focus on the ways that ICTs can and do function positively as tools of social change, enabling citizens to challenge oppressive governments. In a 2011 CNN interview, Egyptian protest leader, Google executive, and TED speaker Wael Ghonim, for example, claimed "if you want to free a society, just give them internet access. The young crowds are going to all go out and see and hear the unbiased media, see the truth about other nations and their own nation, and they are going to be able to communicate and collaborate together."[1] In this framework, the opportunities for global information sharing, borderless communication, and collaboration that ICTs make possible encourage the spread of democracy. As Ghonim argues, when citizens go online, they are likely to discover that their particular government's perspective is only one among many. Activists like Ghonim maintain that exposure to this online free exchange of ideas will make people less likely to accept government propaganda and more likely to challenge oppressive regimes.

A case in point is the controversy that erupted around Khaled Said, a young Egyptian man who died after being arrested by Egyptian police. The police claimed that Said suffocated when he attempted to swallow a bag of hashish; witnesses, however, reported that he was beaten to death by the police. Stories about the beating and photos of Said's disfigured body circulated widely in online communities, and Ghonim's Facebook group in particular, "We are all Khaled Said," is widely credited with bringing attention to Said's death and fomenting the discontent that ultimately erupted in the 2011 Egyptian Revolution, or what Ghonim refers to as "revolution 2.0."

Ghonim's Facebook group is also illustrative of how ICTs not only allow people to consume information that might otherwise have been unavailable to them but also enable citizens to produce and widely distribute information themselves. Many people have already begun to take for granted the ability to capture images and video via handheld devices and then to upload that footage to platforms like YouTube. And because so many use this technology primarily to share things like cute kitten videos with the world, its politically powerful potential can sometimes be obscured. As Clay Shirky points out, however, in his TEDTalk "How Social Media Can Make History," our ability to produce and widely distribute information actually constitutes a revolutionary change in media production and consumption patterns. The production of media has typically been very expensive and thus out of reach for most individuals. The average person was therefore primarily a consumer of media, reading books, listening to the radio, watching TV, going to movies, etc. Very few, however, could independently publish their

own books or create and distribute their own radio programs, television shows, or movies. ICTs have disrupted this configuration, putting media production in the hands of both individual amateurs on a budget, or what Shirky refers to as members of "the former audience," as well as professionals backed by multi-billion dollar corporations. This "democratization of media" allows individuals to create massive amounts of information in a variety of formats and to distribute it almost instantly to a potentially global audience.

Shirky also points out that ICTs are linking us to one another in a variety of new communication configurations. "The Internet" Shirky observes, "is the first medium in history that has native support for groups and conversations at the same time." This shift has important political implications. Citizens can of course disseminate their political ideas on their own websites and blogs. However, because many of these sites are also highly social, both the creators of such sites and the consumers of their content are also able to engage in dialogs with each other. Citizens can also often explicitly "talk back" to their own political leaders via the commenting and discussion board features on their leader's social networking sites. Moreover, citizens on these same sites can then connect with and talk to each other about their political leaders and specific policies, as Shirky notes Obama followers did when he changed his position on the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act. The outcry of his supporters did not force Obama to revert to his original position, but it did lead him to the realization that he needed to address his supporters directly, acknowledging their disagreement on the issue and explaining his position. Shirky observes that this scenario was also notable because the Obama organization realized that "their role was to convene their supporters but not to control their supporters." This tension between the use of technology in the service of the democratic impulse to convene citizens vs. the authoritarian impulse to control them runs throughout many of the talks in this course.

Other speakers explicitly examine the ways that ICTs can function as powerful political tools that give individual citizens the ability to document governmental abuses and to upload this footage to the web for the whole world to see. In this framework, ICTs empower citizens by giving them tools that can help keep their governments accountable. Wadah Khanfar, in his talk "A Historic Moment in the Arab World," provides some very clear examples of the political power of technology in the hands of citizens. He describes how the revolution in Tunisia was delivered to the world via cell phones, cameras, and social media outlets, with the mainstream media relying on "citizen reporters" for details. Former British Prime Minister Gordon Brown's TEDTalk also highlights some of the ways citizens have used ICTs to keep their governments accountable. In Burma, for example, monks used blogs to challenge the regime and ensure that the political prisoner Aung San Suu Kyi was not forgotten. In 2001, opponents of Philippine President Estrada sent more than one million text messages in an effort that became known as the "Coup d'text," bringing his corrupt regime to an end. Brown also recounts how citizens in Zimbabwe used the cameras on their phones at polling places in order to discourage the Mugabe regime from engaging in electoral fraud. Similarly, Shirky's talk begins with a discussion of how cameras on phones were used to combat voter suppression in the 2008 presidential election in the U.S. ICTs allowed citizens to be not only participants in and but also protectors of the democratic process, casting their individual votes but also, as Shirky observes, helping to "ensure the sanctity of the vote overall."

Technology as Oppressor

While smart phones and social networking sites like Twitter and Facebook have arguably facilitated the overthrow of dictatorships in places like Tunisia and Egypt, lending credence to former Prime Minister Brown's vision of technology as an engine of liberalism and pluralism, not everyone shares this view. As TED speaker and former extremist group member Maajid Nawaz points out, there is nothing inherently liberating about ICTs, given that they frequently are deployed to great effect by extremist organizations

seeking social changes that are often inconsistent with democracy and human rights. While Ghonim credits platforms like YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook with helping the freedom seeking Egyptian protestors by letting them know that they were not alone and that "there were lots of people who actually shared the same dream," Nawaz points out that the same types of technologies function in a similar way for extremists and terrorists. Where once individual extremists might have felt isolated and alone, disconnected from like-minded people and thus unable to act in concert with others to pursue their agendas, ICTs allow them to connect with other extremists and to form communities around their ideas, narratives, and symbols.

While acknowledging the potential of technology, Goldin also adopts a cautionary tone, warning listeners about what he calls the "two Achilles heels of globalization": growing inequality and the fragility that is inherent in a complex integrated system. He points out that those who do not experience the benefits of globalization, who feel like they've been left out in one way or another, can potentially become incredibly dangerous. In a world where "what happens in one place very quickly effects everyone else" and where technologies are getting ever smaller and more powerful, a single angry individual with access to technological resources has the potential to do more damage than ever before. As Goldin warns, "An individual for the first time in the history of humanity will have the capacity by 2030 to destroy the planet, to wreck everything through the creation for example of a biopathogen." The question becomes then, how do we manage the systemic risk inherent in today's technology infused globalized world? According to Goldin, our current governance structures are "fossilized" and ill equipped to deal with these issues.

Other critics of the notion that ICTs are inherently liberating point out that ICTs have been leveraged effectively by oppressive governments to solidify their own power and to manipulate, spy upon, and censor their citizens. Journalist Evgeny Morozov, in his talk "How the Net Aids Dictatorships" expresses scepticism about what he calls "iPod liberalism," or the belief that technology will necessarily lead to the fall of dictatorships and the emergence of democratic governments. Instead, he argues that the same tools citizens use to challenge their governments are also used by governments to spy upon and manipulate their citizens. Morozov uses the term "spinternet" to describe authoritarian governments' use of the Internet to provide their own "spin" on issues and events. Russia, China, and Iran, he argues, have all trained and paid bloggers to promote their ideological agendas in the online environment. Rather than solely relying on censorship, deleting posts and websites that the government finds unfavourable, governments sometimes hire bloggers to create online content that advances an alternative perspective on a given issue or to attack people writing posts the government doesn't like in an effort to discredit them as spies, criminals, etc. who cannot be trusted.

Morozov also points out that social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter are tools not only of revolutionaries but also of authoritarian governments who use them to gather open-source intelligence. "In the past," Morozov maintains, "it would take you weeks, if not months, to identify how Iranian activists connect to each other. Now you know how they connect to each other by looking at their Facebook page. KGB…used to torture in order to get this data." Instead of focusing primarily on bringing Internet access and devices to the people in countries ruled by authoritarian regimes, Morozov argues that we need to abandon our cyber-utopian assumptions and do more to actually empower intellectuals, dissidents, NGOs and other members of society, making sure that the "spinternet" does not prevent their voices from being heard.

The ICT Empowered Individual vs. The Nation State

While Goldin warns that a single individual or small group can wreak mass destruction through bioterrorism or other weapons of mass destruction, the case of Wikileaks' founder Julian Assange

demonstrates that one person or a small group of people (i.e., the Wikileaks staff) armed only with information can threaten many nation states simultaneously. Assange used Wikileaks to make public thousands of documents that not only challenged governments' versions of events but also divulged state secrets for mass consumption. Assange's critics charge that he has been reckless with sensitive information, while his champions defend his actions as consistent with the values of open and democratic societies. Indeed, he is a hero to many who see openness as critical to democracy. However, in a world where nation states are accustomed to determining what information they would like to make public, Assange has also become a target. He was arrested by Britain in response to an extradition request made by Sweden, which has rape charges pending against him. He has argued that the charges are not only false but also being used to extricate him from Britain in order for the U.S. (a country particularly vexed by the Wikileaks documents) to arrest him. Assange later took refuge in Ecuador's embassy to avoid extradition. Ecuador granted him asylum, but Britain has nevertheless refused to allow him to leave the UK. His muddled legal status serves to illustrate just how confused nation states are about how best to handle the threat that he and others like him pose.

In her talk "Let's Take Back the Internet," MacKinnon maintains, "the only legitimate purpose of government is to serve citizens, and…the only legitimate purpose of technology is to improve our lives, not to manipulate or enslave us." It is clearly not a given, however, that governments, organizations, and individuals will use technology benevolently. Part of the responsibility of citizenship in the globalized information age then is to work to ensure that both governments and technologies "serve the world's peoples." However, the difficulty here lies in the fact that there is considerable disagreement about what that might look like. People like Assange, for example, argue that government secrecy is inconsistent with democratic values and is ultimately about deceiving and manipulating rather than serving the world's people. Others maintain that governments need to be able to keep secrets about some topics in order to protect their citizens or to act effectively in response to crises, oppressive regimes, terrorist organizations, etc. While some view Assange's use of technology as a way to hold governments accountable and to increase transparency, others see this use of technology as a criminal act with the potential to both undermine stable democracies and put innocent lives in danger.

ICTs and Global Citizenship

While there are no easy *answers* to the global political questions raised by the proliferation of ICTs, there are relatively new *approaches* to such questions that look promising, including the emergence of individuals who see themselves as global citizens—people who participate in a global civil society that transcends national boundaries. Technology facilitates global citizens' ability to learn about global issues, to connect with others who care about similar issues, and to organize and act meaningfully in response. However, global citizens are also aware that technology in and of itself is no panacea, and that it can be used to manipulate and oppress. Global citizens fight against oppressive uses of technology, often with technology. Technology helps them not only to participate in global conversations that affect us all but also to amplify the voices of those who have been marginalized or altogether missing from such conversations. Moreover, global citizens are those who are willing to grapple with large and complex issues that are truly global in scope and to attempt to chart a course forward that benefits all people, regardless of their locations around the globe.

Gordon Brown implicitly alludes to the importance of global citizenship when he states that we need a global ethic of fairness and responsibility. As Brown points out, our problems are global in nature and thus require global solutions. Human rights, disease, development, security, terrorism, climate change, poverty, etc. cannot be addressed successfully by any one nation alone. Individual actors (nation states, NGOs, etc.) can help, but a collective of actors, both state and non-state, is required. Brown suggests

that we must combine the power of a global ethic with the power to communicate and organize globally in order for us to address effectively the world's most pressing issues.

Brown is not alone in arguing that existing governance structures need to be radically revised. Goldin, for example, claims that "the governance structure in the world is fossilized," that it cannot begin to cope with future challenges. Both Nye and Tharoor touch upon this issue as well in their reconceptualization of "power" and their specific focus on importance of "soft power." Defining power in terms of military size or numbers of nuclear weapons is anachronistic. Rather, power, as Nye suggests, is diffuse. Individuals and groups today are able to exert influence that is disproportionate to their numbers and the size of their arsenals through their use of soft power techniques. This is consistent with Nawaz's discussion of the power of symbols and narratives. Small groups can develop powerful narratives that help shape the views and actions of people around the world. While governments are far more accustomed to exerting power through military force, they might achieve their interests more effectively by implementing "soft power" strategies designed to convince others that they want the same things. According to Nye, replacing a "zero-sum" approach (you must lose in order for me to win) with a "positive-sum" one (we can both win) creates opportunities for collaboration, which is necessary if we are to begin to deal with problems that are global in scope.

Let's Get Started!

Collectively, the TEDTalks in this course explore how ICTs are used by and against governments, citizens, activists, revolutionaries, extremists, and other political actors in efforts both to preserve and disrupt the status quo. They highlight the ways that ICTs have opened up new forms of communication and activism as well as how the much hailed revolutionary power of ICTs can and has been co-opted by oppressive regimes to reassert their control. By listening to the contrasting voices of this diverse group of TED speakers, which includes activists, journalists, professors, politicians, and a former member of an extremist organization, we can begin to develop a more nuanced understanding of the ways that technology can be used both to facilitate and contest a wide variety of political movements. Global citizens who champion democracy would do well to explore these intersections among politics and technology, as understanding these connections is a necessary first step toward MacKinnon's laudable goal of building a world in which "government and technology serve the world's people and not the other way around."

Let's begin our exploration of the intersections among politics and technology in today's globalized world with a TEDTalk from Ian Goldin, the first Director of the 21st Century School, Oxford University's think tank/research center. Goldin's talk will set the stage for us, exploring the integrated, complex, and technology rich global landscape upon which the political struggles for power examined by other TED speakers play out.

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[1] "Welcome to Revolution 2.0, Ghonim Says," CNN, February 9, 2011.
http://cnn.com/video/?/video/world/2011/02/09/wael.ghonim.interview.cnn.