THE DEMOCRATIC POWER OF SOCIAL MEDIA:
A THEORETICAL REVIEW

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The paper analyzes the approaches of several notable researchers to the issue whether social media promotes democracy. It generalizes some of the crucial theoretical arguments, elaborated by these scholars, and divides them into two groups – cyber-optimists and cyber-skeptics. The first group of scholars argues that social media has become coordinating tools for almost all modern world political movements – from broad and nationwide to small and local, – while the second questions its ability to produce any pro-democratic changes per se. In the end the paper proposes a theoretical framework, in which the relationship between social media and political institutions can be analyzed. In particular, it argues that social media causes merging between mass and interpersonal communication, and, in doing so, challenges the link between media and political institutions, which, according to the classic book "Four Theories of the Press" (F. Siebert, T. Peterson and W. Schramm), characterized media in the epoch of traditional broadcast and printed outlets.

Keywords: social media, political institutions, political regime, democracy, authoritarianism.

Since its public appearance in the 1990s, the Internet has evolved from being only a repository of information, allowing its users to simply view or download content, to a bi- and multi-lateral communication tool, enabling people to communicate with each other in real time and to share records that become instantly available either to small groups involved in that communication, or universally to individuals who may not be known to the senders. Web tools specially designed for such forms of communication are called social media. They include social networks, which allow users to create personal accounts and share with each other text messages, photos, videos, and music, and web-blogs, which are online diaries that provide their authors with a possibility to reflect on various topics, and in so doing gather a vast audience of readers.

Researcher and media analyst Brian Solis suggests that the new communication phenomenon implies "the democratization of information, transforming people from content readers into publishers. It is the shift from a broadcast mechanism, one-to-many, to a many-to-many model, rooted in conversation between authors, people and peers"[17]. This definition highlights two major features of information in the social media: it is user-generated and reciprocal. The latter means that anyone who posts something online can potentially get a response and then initiate a dialog or discussion with the responder.

The importance of social media is that it is ubiquitous. The number of users of such information sources as Twitter, Qzone, LinkedIn, or Vkontakte amounts to more than 100 million each, while Facebook in the first quarter of 2012 grew to unite more than 1 billion users. Over the last decade these communications tools have become more and more available, and today they are no longer associated only with prosperous countries of the West, but have become increasingly popular in developing countries as well. They transcend political and geographical borders, unite continents and nations, and thus become a true embodiment of Marshall McLuhan's prophecy for "the world's village".

Virtually all spheres of human activity from politics and economy to sport and entertainment are involved in the use of social media. Its impact upon politics became evident for the first time in January 2001, when text-messages were used to mobilize a vast number of people during the Philippine protests against President Joseph Estrada. Since then, several major political protests and actions that took place in both democratic and authoritarian countries involved social media, including the ouster of the Spanish Prime Minister José Maria Aznar in 2004, the massive march against the FARC Marxist rebels atrocities in 2008 in Bogota (Colombia), the civil unrest against official parliament elections results in Moldova in 2009, the Green revolution in Iran in 2009, and most recently, the Arab Spring, the "Occupy Wall Street" demonstrations in New York, mass protests against official parliamentary election results in Moscow's Bolotnaya Square, and the EuroMaidan revolution in Ukraine. Some of these actions achieved their goals or initiated reforms, while others were not so successful. The attempts to explain relationships between social media and politics, particularly in the matter of democratization, have resulted in opposing viewpoints. These can be grouped into two blocks – those who are optimistic about the ability of social media to produce political change, and those who are skeptical of this result.

Clay Shirky, Professor of New Media at New York University, is, perhaps, the most famous representative of the first group's viewpoints. Social media, he believes, become coordinating tools for almost all modern world political movements – from broad and nationwide, like the anti-Estrada protest in the Philippines in 2001, to small and local, like regional anti-corruption campaigns in China. "As the communications landscape gets denser, more complex, and more participatory, he suggested in his paper "The Political Power of Social Media", the networked population is gaining greater access to information, more opportunities to engage in public speech, and an enhanced ability to undertake collective action". [19] New communication tools enable activists to instantly spread calls to action among very broad audience of "netizens", while the possibility to upload images and videos directly from the demonstrations via camera-phones in many cases prevents governments from using open violence against the protesters.

In his famous book "Here Comes Everybody", Shirky wrote that the ability to instantly distribute data places the protestors in a "win-win" situation: "If the state didn't react, the documentation would serve as evidence that the protesting was safe. If the state

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did react, then the documentation of the crackdown could be used to spur an international outcry" [18]. Shirky states that many more people use social media for entertainment and socialization than for political purposes. However, he regards this as advantageous, since governments and security services face many difficulties trying to track down politically inconvenient information in multiple informational flows. Governments realize that shutting down the whole network could radicalize those citizens who were formerly apolitical.

The instrumental function of social media, implying its mobilizing and coordinating role, is not the only function capable of producing political change. According to Shirky, social media play an important role in strengthening civil societies all across the World, as they engender dialog between various social groups and thus reinforce the social capital. The professor quotes a famous sociological study of Elihu Katz and Paul Lazarsfeld, who discovered in 1948 that news itself does not change people's minds, but rather, that news that first is echoed by friends, family members, and colleagues will only then affect an individual's political opinions. The advantage of social media compared with traditional broadcast media is that social media do not only transmit information, but also allow people to simultaneously debate it and thus form opinions. "Access to information is far less important, politically, than access to conversation", Shirky argues [19].

Another important issue about social media is the so called "conservative dilemma", which points out that the independent spreading of news brings about two potentially opposing pictures of events – that given by official news sources and that given by social media. As the gap between these two pictures grows, it can become harder for a government to support its legitimacy.

Clay Shirky praises freedom of speech on the Internet and supports the policies of Western countries promoting it throughout the world. At the same time, he suggests that the role of social media in reinforcing civil societies in authoritarian states (an "environmental view") is far more important than regarding that role as simply a tool to displace the ruling leaders (an "instrumental view"). The support of only the instrumental function while underrating the environmental one can backfire for the Western countries and bring more harm than good. That is why they should strengthen the existing social structures rather than openly support the online opposition [19].

Clay Shirky's views were met with enthusiasm during the Arab Spring in 2011. One of the protest's key figures, WaelGhonim, a Google representative in the Middle East and founder of the "We are all Khaled Said" Facebook page that sparked the mass gathering in the Tahrir square in Cairo, said in his interview on the CNN channel that: "Our revolution is like Wikipedia. Everyone is contributing content, but you don't know the names of the people contributing the content. This is exactly what happened. We drew this whole picture of a revolution. And no one is the hero in that picture" [4]. According to Ghonim, the Internet and social media were the most important contributorsto the success of the Egyptian revolution: "If you want to liberate a society, just give them the Internet", said Ghonim [14].

Clay Shirky's statements have met strong criticism from several notable scholars, particularly Malcolm Gladwell and EvgenyMorozov.

The main argument that Gladwell puts forth against social media's ability to produce political change consists in its ability to create only "weak ties," while political movements need "strong ties" to succeed, that is, trust in each other and determination to fight in the face of danger. On the contrary, those "weak ties" with which the social media abound, designate a broad, but low-cost participation, increased by lessening the level of motivation that is required. Merely joining Facebook groups or giving "likes" to photos cannot force an authoritarian government to step down. At the same time, a picture of protests on the Internet doesn't always correspond with this picture in reality. A bright example to this was put forward by scholar Eric Schwarz, who studied the effects of social media in Azerbaijan. According to Schwarz, after a mass killing in the Azerbaijan State Oil Academy in 2009, more than 40,000 signatures were gathered protesting the government's decision to forbid students from conducting a traditional mourning ceremony over their colleagues, but when a demonstration was planned, only 100 people came [16].

Gladwell suggests that the question of how a movement is organized is far less important than the question of why it is organized: "People protested and brought down governments long before Facebook was invented or the Internet came along. … People with grievances will always find ways to communicate with each other. How they choose to do it is less interesting, in the end, than why they were driven to do it in the first place" [3].

This theoretical position by Gladwell echoes the opinion of another prominent American political analyst and president of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Jane Harman. While Malcolm Gladwell opines that "people with grievances will always find ways to communicate with each other", Harman maintains that mere communication is not enough for a political movement to succeed, since it must include three integral parts – money, message and organization. The only function, which social media can render, is facilitation of distributing the message. However, social media, in the opinion of Harman, cannot create stable institutional liaisons, which are needed to replace the existing political structures. "Social media is good in toppling governments, but it is not so good in bringing together political skills to participate in what comes next", - said Harman in an interview with Charlie Rose [5]. She illustrated this argument by the example of the Egyptian revolution (2011), where the political party Muslim Brotherhood was not very active, but won in the ensuing parliamentary and presidential elections due to its best organization.

A whole train of thought based on well-founded skepticism against social media's ability to promote pro-democratic changes was developed by Evgeny Morozov, a visiting scholar at Stanford University. According to Morozov, historical evidence testifies against the potential of technology alone to be a driver of political or ethical progress, since "just as earlier people were disappointed to see that neither the telegraph, nor the radio delivered on the world-changing promises made by their most ardent cheerleaders, we

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haven't seen an Internet-powered rise in global peace, love and liberty" [11]. Morozov argued there are several reasons why the cyber-optimism seems to be premature. First of all, the new communication tools were adapted for purposes of the regime no less successfully than for purposes of the dissenters. The police and security services have found in them a great opportunity to survey the protesters' activity and forestall their actions. Besides this, an exposure of one single protester whose account gets hacked can lead to the exposure of all people who are involved in communication with him. In Belarus, "the last European dictatorship" and Morozov's homeland, "social media created a digital panopticon that thwarted the revolution. Its networks, transmitting public fear, were infiltrated and hopelessly outgunned by the power of the state" [10].

According to Morozov, censorship is just a minor method that governments use to fight in cyberspace. Much more attention is paid to administering preemptive strikes, such as spreading alternative information that brands the opposition as marionettes of foreign governments, or splitting it from within, generating internal discord. These measures, along with the opposition's counterstrokes, often lead to wars in cyberspace, in which it is often difficult to predict winners or losers. In addition, the scholar emphasizes that the belief that social media in authoritarian countries are utilized only by fighters for freedom is far from being true. The situation in the majority of these countries cannot be viewed only in "black and white," and various extremist groups that often join the oppositions to authoritarian regimes are no less savvy about the opportunities of the Internet than those people who are truly committed to freedom.

Evgeny Morozov's skeptical views can be summed up as follows: "The Internet has certainly not ushered in a post-political age of rational and data-driven policymaking. It has sped up and amplified many existing forces at work in the world, often making politics more combustible and unpredictable. Increasingly, the Internet looks like a hypercharged version of the real world, with all of its promise and perils, while the cyber utopia that the early Web enthusiasts predicted seems ever more illusory" [11].

Another line of argumentation against social media's ability to produce positive political changes was advanced in a slightly different historical context by Holger Lutz Kern and Jens Heinmueller in their article "Opium for the Masses: How Foreign Media Can Stabilize Authoritarian Regimes." The authors suggested that broadcasting of Western German radio programs to East Germany during the Cold War produced almost antipodal effects from those that had been intended– the stability of the authoritarian East German regime only got stronger. Kern and Heinmueller argued that these radio programs "offered the people a vicarious escape from the scarcities, the queues and the ideological indoctrination, making life under communism more bearable and the East German regime more tolerable" [6].

Today the same effect can be observed regarding social media. In many cases they can be regarded as a valve, letting people vent complaints that would otherwise lead them to conduct protests in the streets. Dictators, therefore, can knowingly tolerate these tools, understanding that shutting them down could be a fatal mistake.

An interesting opinion regarding the role of social media in recent political events was expressed by Constance Duncombe from the University of Queensland, Australia. The author analyzed the way the 2009 Green Revolution in Iran and the 2011 anti-Gaddafi protests in Libya were presented in Western media and concluded that in highlighting these events, there were four widely spread "representational schemas," i.e., axiomatic statements that were taken for granted and lacked enough empirical proof. These "representational schemas" included, firstly, the suggestion that the information communication technology (ICT) platforms facilitated and accelerated democracy, while exposure to sites such as Twitter and Facebook was the real reason the pro-democracy protests occurred; secondly, the statement, that public figures who used the ICT platforms were necessarily pro-democratic; thirdly, a schema that posited ICTs as sources of unadulterated truth; and, fourthly, a schema that worked to coalesce non-Western protest movements into a homogenous wave of democracy, wherein authoritarian regimes were toppled in favor of Western governmental structures [2]. The facts from the 2009 Green Revolution in Iran (biggest demonstrations happened in Tehran on June 12-19, 2009) and/or the 2011 anti-Gaddafi Rebellion in Lybia (which started on February 16, 2011 in the Eastern city of Benghazi and resulted in civil war that ended with the murder of M. Gaddafi on October 23, 2011) were viewed in Western media through the prism of the "representational schemas," while the schemas themselves manifested the hegemonic discourse of the powerful West/subordinate non-West.

An important issue regarding the political role of social media is distribution of influence between different communicators within them. Social media users have unequal positions. They can be divided into an active and highly politicized minority, which produces content, and a passive majority, which receives messages and cues from the elite. This distinction is highly important, as many analysts who study political implications of social media, do agree that most their users are not very politically sophisticated and use them mainly for entertainment and socialization. The unevenness in distribution of influence, however, should not be regarded in all cases as an argument to view social media as politically irrelevant. There are both theoretical arguments and empirical data showing that people who are less interested in politics can be driven into action under the influence of elite communicators. In political science there have been developed two main approaches toward mechanisms of such influence: cue-taking and message priming. According to the cue-taking approach, "instead of grappling with the various reasons elites offer in support of a particular position, citizens rely on their evaluations of the message source in deciding whether to accept or reject the source's position" [13].

From this perspective, an elite's influence depends on the characteristics of the messengers rather than arguments messengers offer in support of their political position. The message priming approach maintains that it is the content of the message that matters, and an elite's cues can produce effects only when they enhance the citizens' prior beliefs. The empirical endorsement to these statements can be found in both Egyptian and Russian

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social media protests, which were organized by highly authoritative bloggers, whose messages, in addition, voiced the populations' oppositional moods.

The foregoing theoretical studies present arguments both in favor of and against the social media's ability to be a driver of political change, and particularly, of a change towards democracy. In my opinion, these studies, despite their conflicting premises, can be synthesized into a broader paradigm of relationships between social media and politics. This paradigm explains these relations insofar as the new communication tools become more and more significant to society in comparison with traditional broadcast and printed media. However, before examining the main features of this paradigm, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of important studies from the field of communication science that are relevant to an understanding of the historical development of "media studies".

American mass communication researchers presented important theoretical perspectives during the Cold War period after WWII regarding the operation of news media in the Communist bloc of countries in Eastern Europe. "Four Theories of the Press" (1956) by Fred Siebert, Theodore Peterson and Wilbur Schramm shaped the worldviews of several generations of American journalists regarding the role of the media in democracies and autocratic forms of government. The media were presented in this work as the most important tool for creating public discourse or the interchange of information. The authors argued that "the press always takes on the form and coloration of the social and political structures within which it operates. Especially, it reflects the system of social control whereby the relations of individuals and institutions are adjusted" [15, p. 1-2]. They defined four models of how the press operates within society – Libertarian, Social Responsibility, Authoritarian, and Soviet Communist. The difference between the polar models "libertarian" and "authoritarian" was based on the dichotomy that the press was either free from control of the state or subjected to it. In turn, this dichotomy determined that the main functions of the press in society were either propagandistic or independent from the control of government.

These precepts introduced by Siebert, Peterson and Schramm were critically reviewed in 1995 in the book "The Last Rights: Revisiting Four Theories of the Press." A group of researchers from prominent American universities collaborated to argue that the system of relationships between the media and the state underwent radical changes after the appearance of new means of electronic communication. The authors argued that, "New media are replacing the press as conduits for information flows from governments to people and from people to governments," and "in similar fashion, the press is losing its privileged role as a definer of facticity" [8, p. 174].

The best way to illustrate these changes is to highlight two of the levels at which communication occurs in society – mass and interpersonal. The mass level includes specific institutions – the broadcast and printed media – that specialize in gathering and disseminating information. The researcher Scott E. Caplan describes this level as "involving an organizational source that conveys messages to a large, relatively

unknown and relatively unresponsive audience" [1]. The interpersonal level takes place during everyday communication between people. According to Caplan, "interpersonal communication involves a relatively smaller number of participants who exchange messages designed for, and directed toward, particular others" [1].

The mass level, due to its institutional essence and ability to access a vast number of people, is tightly related to political power. In authoritarian countries the state-supported broadcast and printed media play crucial roles in spreading the government's propaganda, while mass-media in democratic countries as "the fourth branch of government" act as a "watchdog" over the actions of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government. At the same time, even in autocratic societies the interpersonal level of communication is typically free from control of the state. Only the most repressive totalitarian political regimes openly try to subdue this level as well.

The distinction between the two levels of communication (mass and interpersonal) characterizes the communication paradigm of the traditional media that has been in operation since the first newspaper was published, and that continued to evolve through the introduction of broadcast technology. This paradigm coexists with, but in the view of some researchers has become outdated by the appearance of the social media, as each individual user of traditional media has the possibility to upload and publicize independent information, which, in turn, can almost instantly be shared through a chain of re-posts or re-tweets. The scholars who work in the field of electronic communication suggest that this newest media type promotes either "blurring the boundary between interpersonal and mass media", [7] or heralds the "emergence of new ways of communicating that do not fit the traditional definitions of either mass or interpersonal communication" [12]. Whether we are witnessing merging of the two levels of communication or the appearance of an entirely new "third" level, it seems that a transition to a new communication paradigm is taking place, and this transition can have long-running consequences for political change.

Not so long ago, it was vital for opposition forces in governments to gain control over the channels of information flow. Accordingly, the telegraph, the post, and the radio station were primary targets of those planning a revolution. Today the situation is changing as the Internet and social media have given access to volumes of user-generated data and various contrasting opinions all over the world. What is taking place now can be compared to what happened in Europe in the 16th century when the printing-press, invented by Johannes Guttenberg, became a powerful tool for unprecedented spreading of religious dissent. In those times, due to this technical innovation, the authorities – the church and the state – lost their exclusive control over information that was circulating within society. The printing press facilitated not only the Reformation, which quickly spread over all of Central and Northern Europe, but in the long run, also promoted the appearance of political systems of a new type – representative democracies, including broad public participation in decision making through elections and referendums.

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Since the social media is a relatively new phenomenon, existing for only some 10 to 15 years, its long-running consequences are difficult to predict. Its short-term impact on politics, including political change in the two countries considered in this article, are likely to be the following:

1. The social media is a relatively new phenomenon, and the freedom of communication that it grants is still lacking in legal and institutional regulation. This freedom will likely pose a threat to both authoritarian and democratic countries until some conventional standards of regulation are adopted.

2. The social media can facilitate organizing a protest, but in order to be successful, the protest also requires clearly defined ideological goals that can pose an alternative to those formulated by the ruling regime. The main strength of the social media is at the same time its main weakness, since the lack of institutionalization in protesting activity means a simultaneous shortage in its ideological integrity.

3. The social media can split a society in authoritarian countries into two classes with different political preferences – the class of TV watchers and the class of Internet users. Older people who usually spend their leisure time watching the state-controlled television stations are usually more supportive of the ruling regime, while young people who are more aware about the Internet are at the same time more oppositional.

4. The social media's ability to spur political change is dependent on political regime. The "Twitter-revolution" is less likely to happen in countries where the population believes that the ruling regime can be changed through elections or legal procedures.

5. A political protest can be viewed at a macro-level, aiming at changing the ruling regime as a whole, and at a micro-level, wherein local campaigns with clearly defined goals usually take place. While the macro-level encounters many organizational and ideological difficulties, the micro "step-by-step" level can prove to be far more successful in promoting pro-democratic transition.

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ДЕМОКРАТИЧНА СИЛА СОЦІАЛЬНИХ МЕДІА: ТЕОРЕТИЧНИЙ ОГЛЯД

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У статті розглянуто теоретичні підходи до проблеми, чи соціальні медіа сприяють демократії. Стаття узагальнює декілька ключових теоретичних аргументів, які висунули ці дослідники, і поділяє їх на дві групи, які умовно названі "кібер-оптимістами" та "кібер-скептиками". Перша група дослідників стверджує, що соціальні медіа стали знаряддям організації та координації майже усіх сучасних політичних рухів від міжнародного до локального рівня. Поширюючи інформацію про факти порушення прав людини, розширюючи сферу громадянської участі та сприяючи діалогу і дискусії, соціальні медіа не лише мобілізують суспільство проти авторитарних та корумпованих політичних режимів, але й сприяють демократичному розвитку в тривалій перспективі. Друга група вчених, однак, вважає такий висновок передчасним. Вони стверджують, що соціальні медіа формують лише т. зв. "слабкі зв'язки", тоді як для успіху демократії потрібні "сильні", а диктатори по всьому світу пристосували їх для стеження за опозиціонерами та попередження їхніх кроків. У статті запропоновано узагальнену теоретичну модель співвідношення між соціальними медіа та політичними інститутами. Основним положенням цієї моделі є твердження, що соціальні медіа стирають різницю між масовою та міжособистісною комунікацією. У такий спосіб вони кидають виклик класичній моделі, описаній у книзі "Чотири теорії преси" (1956), згідно з якою традиційні ЗМІ завжди набувають ознак інституційного середовища, в якому вони оперують. В кінці зроблено кілька припущень про майбутню взаємодію між політичними інститутами та соціальними медіа, які полягають в тому, що: 1. Соціальні медіа, скоріше за все, становитимуть небезпеку для стабільності як авторитарних, так і демократичних режимів поки не будуть вироблені формальні юридичні правила їх регулювання. 2. Соціальні медіа здатні успішно мобілізувати протестні ресурси суспільства, однак не утворюють стабільних інституційних зв'язків та ідеології, які необхідні для успіху демократії в тривалій перспективі. 3 В суспільстві можливий поділ на т. зв. "партію Інтернету" і "партію телебачення", які можуть суттєво відрізнятися за рівнем лояльності та підтримки керівної політичної еліти. 4. Ймовірність "Twitter-революції" істотно нижча в тих країнах, чиє населення вірить в те, що на владу можна впливати через легальні процедури. 5. Політичну мобілізацію через соціальні медіа можна розглядати на макро- та мікрорівні. Якщо макрорівневий протест пов'язаний із суттєвими організаційними та ідеологічними труднощами, покрокові кампанії на мікрорівні можуть відігравати не менш важливу роль для поступу демократії.

Ключові слова: соціальні медіа, політичні інститути, політичний режим, демократія, авторитаризм, масові та міжособистісні комунікації.