Information technologies and democracy in a closed society

Emergent Research Forum

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Abstract

IS research has a lot to say about how information and communication technologies (ICT) can support democracy in closed societies, i.e., those ruled by undemocratic regimes. Evidence suggests that technologies indeed facilitate the creation of non-standard communication networks that connect citizens and allow them to share information and participate in activities that foster democracy. Because these action networks are an ensemble of technical artifacts and social mechanisms (e.g., contextual conditions and historical events), IS research can offer an insightful perspective on how to untangle the sociomaterial practices that bring about social outcomes in this phenomenon. This research uses closed societies as a reference and aims at explaining how censorship-resistant communication networks emerge as different social actors actualize the affordances of different IT artifacts. An interpretivist case study about 14ymedio, the first independent digital media in Cuba, is proposed as the method to answer our research question.

Keywords

ICT-driven democracy, digital network, democratic participation, censorship, IT affordances.

Introduction

Lately, IS researchers’ interest in the role of information and communication technologies (ICT) in the solution of societal problems has been noticeable (Majchrzak et al. 2016). One case in point is digital media and their potential to offer citizens access to diverse information and unrestrained participation in democracy (Carpini 2004). A theoretically stimulating problem is to investigate the mechanisms through which ICT can contribute to democracy in a closed society, i.e., one ruled by an undemocratic regime. On the one hand, closed societies may reap the benefits of ICT. Technologies reduce the cost of communication; hence they support citizens in the creation of networks for sharing information and coordinating action (Howard et al. 2011). On the other hand, the benefits of ICT may be thwarted by the Internet censorship prevalent in these societies and the psychological (e.g., self-censorship and brainwashing) and cultural factors that discourage individuals from developing an interest in democracy (Morozov and Docksai 2011).

Some IS research studies have found a positive influence of ICT on democracy. For example, Web 2.0 technologies have been shown to help less known candidate to reach wider audiences during election campaigns (Wattal et al. 2010). Similarly, social media has been shown to impose less restriction on the societal discourse around a social issue as they relax authorship and influence constraints for people willing to participate (Miranda et al. 2016). Despite some studies about IT-driven democracy, research about the influence of ICT in democracy within closed societies remains scarce. The IS research most closely dealing with this phenomenon was Oh’s et al. (2015). They examined the role of social media in the emergence of social protests against the totalitarian regime that ruled Egypt in 2011. Investigations in referent fields have approached the phenomenon of IT-enabled activism by looking at how the development of digital technologies enable the creation of networks of people that engage in connective action (Bennett and
Segerberg 2012). IS research is well appointed to study these action networks as they are the result of an ensemble between technical artifacts and social structures (Holeman and Barrett 2017). IS researchers are particularly well suited to parse out the role of the material properties of the technologies that form these networks from the influence of social and historical conditions (Averou 2013; Holeman and Barrett 2017).

Two constructs relevant for studying democracy in closed societies are citizens’ democratic participation and censorship circumvention, neither previously explored in IS research. Democratic participation refers to citizens’ activities intended to affect the selection of elected representatives as well as participation meant to address public concerns through methods outside of elections (Carpini 2004). Within closed societies, censorship and democratic participation are connected in a fundamental manner: avoiding censorship to access information freely is the first step to participate in democratic actions (Howard et al. 2011). We propose to study digitally enabled action networks in closed societies by focusing on these two target constructs. Our research question is: How do technologies intertwine with local social mechanisms to produce censorship-resistant digital networks that empower citizens’ democratic participation? We propose to ground the research on a qualitative case study about 14ymedio, the first independent digital media in Cuba. 14ymedio fits our goal because it runs within an undemocratic regime, and it relies on the premise that ICT will help Cubans avoid government censorship and participate in democracy.

Background theory

IS research about the role of ICT on democracy

Reports from the IS research devoted to evaluating the effects of ICT on democratic outcomes at the societal level are mostly positive. Wattal et al. (2010) indicate that during election campaigns, the use of Web 2.0 tools lower the barriers of entry for less known candidates since they can use these technologies to circumvent traditional media and disseminate their message widely and inexpensively. Another positive result indicates that government official’s adoption of Twitter make their voting orientations move closer to the views of the citizens they represent (Mousavi and Gu 2019). Oh et al. (2015) studied the role of Twitter in the emergence of social protests against the totalitarian regime that ruled Egypt in 2011 and found that Twitter’s main contribution was facilitating the creation of a collective sensemaking. Twitter hashtags allowed the public discourse to evolve from chaotic milling into organized keynoting discourse, which helped to join disconnected groups of people and the emergence of collective sensemaking and action (Oh et al. 2015). Regarding the effects of digital technologies on the public discourse about a social issue, Miranda’s et al. (2016) research alerts us of possible dual effects. On the one hand, social media are emancipatory because they impose less limitations to societal discourse as they relax authorship, citation and influence constraints for people willing to participate (Miranda et al. 2016). On the other hand, the discourse that emerges on social media, especially on lean social media, e.g., Twitter, is less framed (less nuanced) than the one occurring in traditional media (Miranda et al. 2016).

Conceptions of IT-driven democracy in closed societies

Technologies empower democratic participation in undemocratic contexts is through their effect on political talk. ICT can facilitate citizens to engage in political talks through the creation of alternative communication spaces such as online forums where citizens discuss politics and criticize the government using coded language (Wright et al. 2016), or blogs promoting satiric and implicitly-critical comments of the government (Esarey and Qiang 2008). IT-driven political talks can also emerge in more opened (less concealed) ways. For example, Al-Sagagf (2006) showed how the comments section in the official website of an Arab TV station (within a politically closed society) fostered discussion among readers that allowed them to express their opinions about the issue under discussion (Al-Sagagf 2006). Moreover, Al-Sagagf (2006) found that the comments section allowed users to challenge the views of the news organization about events and to offer their own versions of the truth. Protest behavior is another form of political participation empowered by ICT within closed societies. The joint use of social media and other digital technologies (e.g., cellphones) enable citizens to create non-standard communication networks for producing and consuming political content, independent of social elites, which can both result in the emergence of a sense of shared grievances and help with the organization of protest (Howard et al. 2011; Oh et al. 2015).

Several researchers concur that the development of digital technologies has enabled the creation of networks that empower a new form of digitally driven activism: connective action (Bennett and Segerberg
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2012; Couldry 2015). Digital networks afford quicker political mobilization and accelerated actions which facilitate the organization of previously unconnected people (Couldry 2015). In combination with mobile devices, social media allow users to exchange information in real time to capture and share a better description of the social reality and flexible coordination of protests (Couldry 2015). Connective action relies neither on formal organizations nor on the collective identity frames that traditionally drove activism (Bennett and Segerberg 2012). It is grounded on political content in the form of easily personalized ideas (i.e., action frames as personalized memes) that can be shared through social media (Bennett and Segerberg 2012). Using social media, other online platforms, and face-to-face organizing, citizens can create social movements without the direction of formal organizations (Bennett and Segerberg 2012).

**Existent gap in IS research**

IS research on the implications of ICT for citizens’ democratic participation within closed societies has been scarce. We suggest that IS can import the perspective that approaches political participation as digitally enabled networked action (Bennett and Segerberg 2012), and provides new angles to describe the influence of technologies in this phenomenon. These action networks are the result of an ensemble between technical artifacts and social structures, which outcomes are influenced by historical and contingent factors. Considering the IS tradition of tracing the sociomaterial practices (i.e., practices that connect material artifacts and social mechanisms) that bring about societal outcomes, we are in principle well-appointed to study these networks (Avgerou 2013; Holeman and Barrett 2017). Another aspect to consider is that censorship circumvention within closed societies has not been targeted as a phenomenon in itself. Nonetheless, censorship avoidance to access and share suppressed information can be enabled through the use of technologies (Freedom_House 2018), and it is simultaneously shaped by the social and cultural dynamics of the context where it occurs (Morozov and Docksai 2011).

IS researchers are well suited to parse out the role of the material properties of the technologies that form digitally enabled action networks. Through the lens of IT affordances (Strong et al. 2014), the observed outcomes resulting from these networks can be mapped to the relationship between the materiality of the technologies (e.g., features and functions of the technologies) and the intentions of their users. By focusing on users’ intentions, the affordance approach also allows us to consider contextual influences as users’ intentions are informed by the structures of the social context they are embedded in (Fayard and Weeks 2007). One development within the theory of IT affordances relevant for looking at the phenomenon of IT-enabled networked action is the notion of a network of affordances (Burton-Jones and Volkoff 2017; Strong et al. 2014). According to this notion, the actualization of one affordance (i.e., the use of the affordance) depends on the immediate concrete outcomes from the actualization of other affordances (Strong et al. 2014). Because IT-enabled action networks are formed by multiple technologies and actors (Wright 2012), the affordance network approach seems a suitable lens to explore how democratic outcomes emerge when the affordance-outcome units from multiple IT artifacts used by multiple social actors interweave.

**Methodology**

We propose to carry out an interpretivist case study because knowing which of the forces unleashed by ICT will prevail in a particular social context is only possible if one gets a thorough theoretical understanding of that context (Morozov and Docksai 2011). Interpretivist studies are appropriate whenever gaining contextual knowledge is fundamental to addressing the problem at hand (Creswell and Poth 2017). We consider that the in-depth description of the context afforded by a case will be instrumental in learning how societal conditions shape the way actors use ICT to participate in democracy. We selected Cuba as the context for the study because it is a classically closed society where a socialist government has ruled for more than half a century, in addition to having distinctive socio-economic characteristics, for example, low Internet accessibility and a very deprived private sector. We chose to study the case of 14ymedio, the first independent digital journal in Cuba, founded in 2014. We selected 14ymedio as the research site because of the newspaper staff’s strong belief that ICT will be the decisive factor to allow Cubans access to information free of government control and participation in a democratic change.

Data collection will be divided in two phases. The initial (exploratory) phase will focus on gathering information for devising further interview protocols that more directly assess the research question. One aim of the exploratory stage is to identify 14ymedio readers living in Cuba to serve as research subjects. A second aim of the exploratory phase is to get a descriptive understanding of the different IT artifacts and
strategies involved in the creation, consumption, and dissemination of the newspaper content. For this purpose, we will use available public information about the newspaper (e.g., news and reportages). On the second phase, we will conduct in-depth interviews with both 14ymedio staff and readers which will allow us to comprehend the connection between the affordance actualizations that take place while both 14ymedio staff and readers use ICT to achieve their goals. The data from the interviews will be analyzed using the grounded theory method (GT). We adopt GT because it endorses the use of existent theories as a base from which to build inductive knowledge while recognizing the need to be open to incorporate new concepts that arise as the data coding progresses and new literature is reviewed (Suddaby 2006).

Initial exploratory results

We report the results from the analysis of the public information collected about 14ymedio. We retrieved one press article, two talks by 14ymedio staffs, and five publicly available interviews with 14ymedio’s founder. Because this information is not amenable for constant comparison and theoretical sampling, GT was not a suitable coding data analysis strategy. Hence, the coding was done following the approach for qualitative data analysis proposed by Milles et al. (2014), which consists of performing first cycle coding (the generation of general codes) followed by second cycle coding (aggregating first cycle codes into more general categories). First cycle coding resulted in 13 codes which describe 14ymedio’s actions and characteristics, 14ymedio readers’ actions, and Cuba contextual characteristics. Some examples of codes are “offline dissemination”, “online multiplatform”, “offline sharing” and “network creation”.

After comparing codes and searching for their connection, one of the insights that emerged was that 14ymedio uses technologies for circumventing censorship (14ymedio website is blocked in Cuba), and for overcoming both Cubans’ limited Internet access and their self-censorship and apathy regarding political information that criticizes the government. To overcome censorship and the Internet access issue, 14ymedio devised dissemination strategies based on offline technologies. For example, they distribute PDF versions of the articles through domestic email servers that do not depend on the Internet and through the Cuban black market of information (an illicit network that distributes censored and pirated media content). Another offline approach is to send news headlines to citizens’ cellphones using SMS. Citizens “get into” 14ymedio’s network of information by participating in the channels mentioned above, as well as by using cellphone apps with offline content-sharing capabilities (e.g., Zapya) through Bluetooth. To combat citizens’ apathy and fear, 14ymedio attempts to make their content more appealing by increasing their presence of Facebook since they notice most Cubans (especially young people) connect to Facebook as their first option.

We also found evidence of contextual phenomena that empower 14ymedio’s IT-driven efforts. For example, 14ymedio take advantage of the Cuban black market of information (which existed before 14ymedio came out) to reach interested citizens while avoiding censorship and the need for Internet access. Another empowering social factor is the growing civic society in Cuba (i.e., individual activists and other nascent independent media) since it has created a digital ecosystem where 14ymedio content is usually circulated.

Conclusions

We propose to understand how technologies empower democracy in closed societies by examining how ICT facilitate the creation of a censorship-resistant communication network that increases citizens’ democratic participation. The theory of IT affordances is advanced as a suitable lens to explore how this network emerges as different actors actualize the affordances of different IT artifacts to produce outcomes that weave together. An interpretivist case study of 14ymedio, the first independent digital journal in Cuba, offers a good perspective to achieve our goal. The limited exploratory data collected so far indicate that 14ymedio’s use of both online and offline technology can indeed create a network that interested citizens can use to engage in certain forms of participation, e.g., discussing and sharing 14ymedio content with others. Future data from interviews will offer us insights about the dynamics of this network. Some future questions are: What are the different configurations that the network can take? What technologies support these configurations? How do the affordances of different technologies connect to enable the network? Are there intermediaries between 14ymedio and its readers? We will also deepen into understanding the social conditions that assemble with the technologies’ affordances to enable their actualization.
REFERENCES


