

# From Revolution to Participation: Social Media and the Democratic Decision-Making Process

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“Egypt is offline”. At the time when this news came over the ticker on 2011-01-28, the so-called “Facebook revolution” had already reached a new high. According to Hosni Mubarak, who was still president of Egypt to that time, and according to his regime, it was no longer sufficient to sporadically shut off cellular networks and social media services, such as Facebook, Twitter, etc. Instead, the entire Internet seemed to become an uncontrollable threat to the governmental machinery of power which made it necessary to take this drastic step for the first time ever (Kremp 2011). What had happened?

The phenomenon of disseminating information via social media services against the will of regimes of totalitarian states was not new. Subsequent to the presidential elections in Iran, for instance, in 2009 news concerning the opponent’s protests almost exclusively reached the foreign public via the micro-blogging platform Twitter and the video website Youtube (Meller 2011). While in Tunisia the video website Youtube had already been shut down in the end of the year 2007, in 2010 the population’s displeasure was increasingly channeled into the social network Facebook (Lobo 2011). Thereby at the beginning mainly information on the deplorable state of affairs within the country, which had been run down by the corrupt regime of Zine el-Abdine Ben Ali, was shared (e.g., on the social inequality, the huge number of (especially young) unemployed, the officials’ wide spread arbitrariness). In the course of time also protest meetings were specifically organized via social media services and news on their progress was spread. Thus Facebook became the central communication platform of the protests, with more than 300,000 Tunisians registering within two months (Lobo 2011). This represents an enormous number regarding the just four million people having Internet access in the country. Even while the regime was still attempting to stem the tide by stealing Facebook passwords and spreading targeted disinformation (Madrigal 2011), Tunisia’s president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali finally felt forced to flee on January 14th, 2011. Although social media services like Facebook are mainly ascribed the role of a catalyst for piled-up public displeasure (Lobo 2011), it was precisely these that drew the accumulated attention of the traditional media like radio broadcast and television to these events. The subsequent wide dissemination of the news about the protest within the Arabic world was especially expedited by the Arabic news channel Al Jazeera (Meller 2011). Few weeks later, on February 11th, 2011, also Egypt’s president Hosni Mubarak resigned as a consequence. With about 5.7 million registered Facebook users (n.a. 2011c) and a variety of other intensively used social media services like Twitter or Windows Live Messenger (formerly MSN), here again the digital networking played a decisive role (Meller 2011).

For fear of the events in North Africa and the Middle East recurring, governments in many places react with preventive counteractions or try to exploit social media services for their own purposes. In analogy to China, where numerous social media services have been restricted or shut off for several years, shortly after the eruption of the protests the social network LinkedIn, which mainly aims at business contacts, was – among others – shut off in fear of the search item “Jasmine Revolution” (n.a. 2011a). Simultaneously several states focused on setting up such services themselves as usually such services can be more easily controlled and censored (Morozov 2011, p. 13). Examples for such services can be found, e.g., in Russia and several former GUS states (e.g., <http://vkontakte.ru>) as well as in Vietnam (e.g., <http://go.vn>). In contrast, the government of Bahrain tried to manipulate existing social media services, for example by flooding Twitter with pro-governmental news shortly after the first protest within the own country in order to undermine the credibility of this news service (Morozov 2011, p. 13). These arrangements demonstrate the immense respect of especially authoritarian regimes regarding a shift of power within society, away from individual information providers towards a close-knit and dynamic network composed of an arbitrary number of consumers and providers. These developments provide the possibility

to question even established instances of power (Meller 2011). As a consequence, social media services seem to support and expedite the democratic decision-making process in authoritarian states.

Also in established democracies do politicians attempt to react to the increased impact of social media services and to make use of them for their own means. Thus election campaigns are no longer run only through television, election posters, and pre-election parties, but also in the Internet. In a study of the private research institute Pew Internet & American Life Project in 2008, 46% of the interviewed US citizens said they had received news regarding the elections, exchanged their opinions with others, or mobilized other voters via the Internet, E-Mail, or mobile communications (Smith and Lee 2008, p. v). Moreover, approx. 35% of the interviewees watched online videos in the context of the elections and approx. 10% used social networks within the Internet for their political activities (Smith and Lee 2008, p. v). In this context Barack Obama was regarded to be the perfect Internet candidate (Klippstätter 2008), being one of the first to know how to make use of the potential of social media services. While the digital bulletin board of Obama's Facebook page already registered 14,000 notes at the time of elections (Schnoor 2008), he managed to gain more than 10 million digital fans by July 2010 (n.a. 2010a). Also in Germany, social media services are increasingly used for the so-called election campaign 2.0; in the election year 2009 all top-level politicians and parties were represented there according to a study of the high-tech association BITKOM (n.a. 2009). The German Chancellor Angela Merkel had the largest number of "digital" followers with approx. 80,000 supporters (n.a. 2009). In the meantime she has been superseded by her ex-minister of defense Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg. Having been proved guilty of plagiarism in wide parts of his doctoral thesis, zu Guttenberg approached his supporters in the Internet via a video message after his resignation. These supporters comprise almost 590,000 followers alone on the Facebook page "Wir wollen Guttenberg zurück" (engl. "We want Guttenberg back"). However, the case zu Guttenberg also demonstrates the other side of the coin. Without the "Aufstand im Netz" (n.a. 2011b) (engl. "Riot in the Internet"), which only the social media services had really started off, the previously most popular politician could have remained in office, even though his behaviour was unacceptable from a scientific point of view. Only due to the detailed investigation of a huge number of inter alia "hobby plagiarism chasers" on the social media platform Guttenplag Wiki (n.a. 2011b) did the full extent of the affair come to light and into the awareness of the population at large. An open letter and a list of signatures from (young) scholars was also organized and published in this manner, causing the public pressure to further increase (n.a. 2011b). This made a resignation seem unavoidable in the end. But also topics not focusing on personalities such as the controversial project "Stuttgart 21" – the construction of a new underground train station in the capital city Stuttgart – are at the top of the agenda of social media services users. Thus, in the biggest ever conducted survey in Germany, with approx. 1.2 million participants within the social networks SchülerVZ, studiVZ, and meinVZ, around 650,000 people voted against this building project (n.a. 2010c). While social media services have so far mainly addressed the target group of voters aged 18 to 29, a trend towards an increasing average age is becoming apparent. For instance, according to a current study approx. 58% of all users in 19 investigated social networks in the Internet are 35 years or older (n.a. 2010b). This development may further increase the future influence of social media services on the political decision-making process even in established democracies, demanding more attention to fulfill the different information needs of the respective age groups.

Some western democracies are already a step ahead in this matter and invite the population to participate in decision processes via social media services at an early stage. For instance, in recent years the implementation of e-participation projects was encouraged in the course of the German Federal Initiative E-Government 2.0. A concrete example of successful implementation is the platform [e-konsultation.de](http://e-konsultation.de) (<http://e-konsultation.de>). Since February 2008, the platform has been used for on-line consultations to give the German people the opportunity to actively participate in shaping policy issues and projects. Other examples in Germany can be found in the most recently implemented citizen dialogues "Nachhaltigkeit" (engl. "Sustainability"; <http://www.dialog-nachhaltigkeit.de>), "Aufwachsen mit dem Netz" (engl. "Growing up with the Net"; <http://www.dialog-internet.de>), and "Aufbruch Bayern" (engl. "Bavaria on the Move"; <http://www.archiv.aufbruch-bayern.de/start.php>). Within the latter example, the citizens of the Free State of Bavaria were invited to an eight week online

public dialogue with the Bavarian State Government. With the help of various social media services like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, 100,000 participants discussed and evaluated 740 user-generated suggestions and ideas concerning the categories “family”, “education”, and “innovation”. The best contributions were finally discussed by the Bavarian Council of Ministers with regard to their feasibility. In addition, more and more international governments rely on the participation of citizens by means of social media services. The UK with “Citizen Space” (<http://www.citizenspace.com>) and “E-Community Council” (<http://www.ecommunitycouncil.org.uk>) is not the only example. Also in Australia citizens are encouraged through social media services to participate in online consultations such as those concerning the future design of parks in Victoria (<http://www.weplan.parks.vic.gov.au>). This type of citizen participation is not only used to discuss regional issues of individual cities or communities, but frequently also to discuss national concerns, e.g. concerning legislation, or even cross-national issues, such as those relating to crisis regions. The results are often taken into account in subsequent decision-making processes. Do social media services thus constitute the salvific silver bullet in the democratic decision-making process?

Basically, we must critically question the increased use of social media services in both political and social life as an information source of the future. The often limited view of reality taken out of context entails great potential for misinterpretation or for one-sided and highly distorted perceptions of reality. Thus, the information provided in social media services is on the one hand filtered or restricted by the algorithms for processing information implemented by the services themselves (such as in the case of Facebook) and on the other hand by the autonomous selection of information sources and topics (such as in the case of Twitter) (Lischka 2011). Apart from that, deviating and non-conforming opinions are only in rare cases or even not at all communicated via social media services (Lischka 2011), or their free access is restricted. The frequently resulting biased view can disproportionately enhance the subjective perceptions and impressions of the users. Additionally, in some social media services, such as Twitter, information is often only provided as so-called microblogs with a maximum length of 140 characters. As a result, the transmitted information usually is not part of a broader context and thus provides leeway for diverse interpretations. So what can we do to harness the benefits of social media services in the democratic decision-making process and to identify risks in time and to minimize or avoid them?

From this question, numerous challenges can be derived both for politics and Business and Information Systems Engineering (BISE) as a discipline:

- In the course of growing diffusion of social media services across all ages and social groups, politics must increasingly deal with social media as part of the democratic decision-making process. While free access to social media services has highest priority in authoritarian states with respect to the opportunities for democratic participation, also established democracies and their politicians face challenges. Especially on a personal level it is necessary to preserve authenticity and not to sacrifice one’s own personality on the altar of a misunderstood self-dramatization and for the sake of populism. In the course of e-government it is important to make sure that the opportunities for participation in decision-making processes, such as e-participation, are utilized purposefully, are regarded as complementary to established expert bodies, and are not overestimated as a salvific substitute. In this way, e-participation can certainly help to gather ideas from the citizens and thus make decision-making processes more transparent. However, e-participation has to be designed in such a way that not only experts but also “normal” Internet users can identify with (de Maizière 2010) in order to be able to make a purposeful contribution. However, there will always be decisions which are unpopular from a regional point of view, but are unavoidable when looking at the bigger picture. Here the concept of e-participation will have to face enormous challenges. This is equally true for politics due to the dynamic dissemination of social media services.
- With respect to the use of social media services within democratic decision-making processes, BISE is able to make especially valuable contributions due to its pluralism of methods and its distinct interdisciplinarity. For instance, it is important to evaluate the use of social media services for e-participation by means of financial methods, so that utility and costs, or chances and risks, interrelate in a reasonable proportion. Furthermore, numerous issues concerning the free access to social media services as well as the security and trustworthiness of the provided data and information are to be discussed critically. Here BISE can contribute not only to theoretical advances

in knowledge by quantitative and qualitative research and the close collaboration of different disciplines, such as computer science and jurisprudence, but above all to artifacts relevant for practice. Moreover, it is important to develop suitable algorithms to filter and bundle information in a useful way in order to avoid the one-sided dissemination of information and the associated loss of information on the one hand and to ensure embedding these better into the overall context on the other hand. High potential for future research both from a scientific and a practical view is also held by issues regarding the contextual and technical integration of social media services into existing information and communication systems usually maintained by third parties as well as regarding user adoption. The wide range of methods of BISE with its various techno-economic research methods offers a very good starting point. Beside these issues several further examples can be found for how BISE can contribute to an economically and informationally useful application of social media services in our society. Its lived pluralism of methods, which is also reflected in Business & Information Systems Engineering, should assign BISE a role of particular importance as a “discipline among the disciplines”.

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