The Political Power of Social Media Revisited

Full Paper

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Few words are used so frequently with so little seeming need to reflect on their meaning as power, and so it has been for all the ages of man.

John Kenneth Galbraith, 1983

Abstract

This paper revisits an article published in Foreign Affairs magazine titled “The Political Power of Social Media” (Shirky, 2011) in light of the explosion in the use of social media for political purposes subsequent to its publication. It examines how social media have exerted and will continue to exert power to effect political and social change, focusing on five specific functions – raising community awareness, framing issues, engaging with mass media, stimulating and organizing protest, and obtaining resources.

Keywords

Political power, social media, mass media, power, community awareness, framing, protest, resources.

Introduction

In 2011, Foreign Affairs magazine published an article by Clay Shirky (2011) in its January/February issue titled “The Political Power of Social Media.” At the time, social media outlets were just beginning to undergo a period of rapid growth. Facebook had fewer than 40% of the number users it has today, Twitter had fewer than 25% and Instagram, still in its infancy, had fewer than 20%. The Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia had just begun, and is not mentioned in the article. The article preceded and could not have addressed the role of social media in the Egyptian Revolution that overthrew Hosni Mubarek, the worldwide Occupy Movement, the election of Barak Obama in the United States, the protests of the Black Lives Matter Movement, or ISIS’s use of social media for recruiting advocates and soldiers. The article was prescient in addressing the potential of social media to foster democracy, the ability of repressive governments to identify and punish anti-government social media users, and strategies that the United States and other democratic governments should use and those they should avoid in supporting democracy-seeking movements. But since the publication of the article, world events have demonstrated that the power of social media to effect political action goes well beyond the establishment of democratic governments. This manuscript examines the ways that social media have exerted and will continue to exert power to effect political and social change.

For purposes of this paper, we define “social media” as the postings on platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, which allow users to share such posts with selected individuals or the public at large. We define “social media users” as those who write or read social media posts.

The Meaning of Political Power

The Foreign Affairs article that explores the political power of social media fails to define the meaning of “power” or “political power,” terms that are central to its thesis. The literature suggests that power is difficult to define because its application varies by context (Henderson, 1981; Krausz, 1986). Definitions include having an ability to achieve a goal (Kanter, 1977), being able to influence others (Anderson & Berdahl, 2002; French et al., 1959; Thorelli, 1986), and being able to control or impose one’s will upon
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others (Behera & Muzaffar, 2015; Weber, 1954). Power is often perceived to be a dyadic construct in the sense that one person or group has power over another (Dunbar, 2004; French et al., 1959). But, in addressing the political power of social media, the wielding of power is rarely dyadic and is most often focused directly at achieving a goal.

Galbraith (1983) identifies three ways in which power is wielded. Condign power is power wielded by force and by punishment of those who refuse to yield to it. This is the power of governments, especially authoritarian regimes. Social media has little ability to generate condign power, but it does provide a means for those under the yoke of condign power to organize against it. Compensatory power is obtained by providing compensation or rewards to those submitting to it. Compensatory and condign power are related in the sense that withholding punishment can be considered compensatory and withholding rewards can be considered condign. Conditioned power is power exercised through influence, bending people to one’s will by influencing their beliefs and understanding. This is the principle way by which social media can help people exert political power.

Sharp (2011) defines political power as “the totality of the means, influences, and pressures available to determine and implement policies and governance of a society.” In democratic states, people can exercise political power though social media directly by influencing those who govern and indirectly by influencing those who vote. In less democratic and totalitarian environments, social media can wield political power only by directly influencing or controlling those who govern. Usually, this requires a show of force through military action or street protests. Social media is particularly suited to inciting and coordinating street protests, which can bring a government to its knees, especially if members of the military command perceive justice in the protests, weakness in the totalitarian leadership, or opportunities to grasp power for themselves.

Although the political power of social media is exercised almost solely through influence, the means by which people use social media to exert influence on policy can be quite varied. Influence can be wielded more effectively when people of the same ideology operate as a group rather than individually. Social media are effective in building communities of interest by raising the awareness among individuals of others who share their point of view. Social media can help a community of interest sharpen its arguments in support of its viewpoint and against its detractors. Social media can also influence policy by framing a community’s viewpoint in such a way that it resonates with policy makers and with people who are not part of the community. Social media have the ability to engage with mass media and by doing so, extending the power of its users to reach and influence those beyond the reach of social media. Social media can increase a group’s influence by supporting tactical and operational needs, such as raising money and organizing protests and other events. Each of the following sections illustrate one of the means described above by which social media can wield influence to exert political power – raising community awareness, framing arguments, engaging with mass media, stimulating and organizing protests, and obtaining resources.

Raising Community Awareness

The ability of a group to effect change is more than the sum of the abilities of its individual members. Social media can be effective in bringing together people with similar ideas to create a community of interest (Campbell et al., 2014; Zhou et al., 2012). In the absence of social media, people with minority viewpoints will likely experience a sense of hopelessness, feeling an inability to do anything to forward their agendas. Even those in a majority can feel isolated and disheartened if a minority controls the mass media because in such cases members of the majority lack a means to assess the magnitude of support for their viewpoint. Social media provides an outlet for silent majority and the passionate minority to express their views and find others who share them.

Often, online community formation around minority ideas starts with a blog post that elicits responses such as “I feel exactly the same way,” or “I agree. What can we do about it?” Just knowing that others share your ideas can be very encouraging. But, more important than providing encouragement is social
media’s ability to help thought leaders solicit followers and create groups. Equally important is social media’s reciprocal ability to enable others to become followers and join groups. These interactions create a social network, a community of people who reinforce one another and strengthen their resolve to see their ideas acted upon (Zhao et al., 2012). The diversity of ideas and connections among members of such a community and the political and social pressure the community can exert through its numbers provide it with power that individuals within the community could not otherwise generate.

Many examples exist of social movements arising through this process. One such example is the formation of the Black Lives Matter movement. In July of 2013, Alicia Garza watched a television news story that reported on the acquittal of George Zimmerman, a neighborhood watch volunteer who had shot and killed an unarmed African-American named Trayvon Martin. Garza was disheartened to learn that many people blamed the black community for Martin’s death and posted a short message on her Facebook page reading “Black people. I love you. I love us. Our lives matter, Black Lives Matter.” The message was shared by her friend and community activist Patrisse Cullors with the hash tag “#BlackLivesMatter.” This phrase spread on social media platforms like wildfire and later became a rallying cry picked up time and time again after an incident of police brutality against an unarmed African American. From one person’s outcry, it has become a true social movement, with the ability to provoke street protests, raise money, and engage politicians on matters of policy. It has become a source of comfort for those who were powerless as individuals in the face of police brutality, but felt strength in a community that recognized and gave voice to their views.

Another example of social media’s power to create community awareness occurred at the start of the 2011 Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia. Tunisia was, at the time, ruled with an iron hand by its president, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. The Ben Ali regime was considered repressive by Amnesty International and other human rights groups, and the mass media were heavily censored. The Internet was censored as well, although Facebook was allowed. Ben Ali had been elected every 5 years with over 80% of the popular vote. Anyone who had doubted the populace’s support for regime must have thought that they were in a tiny minority. However, discontent was boiling under the surface. In December of 2010 a street vendor doused himself with gasoline and set himself on fire after his fruit cart was confiscated by police and his pleas for its return were summarily dismissed. His self-immolation was captured on video and spread through Facebook and Twitter. These social media posts were picked up and rebroadcast on mass media by Al Jazeera, which expanded the community internationally and brought awareness of the event to those in Tunisia who were not using social media. Once the extent of disaffection with the Ben Ali regime was out in the open, it became relatively easy to organize protests through Facebook, Twitter, and text messaging. Less than a month after the street vendor’s self-immolation, Ben Ali resigned and fled with his family to Saudi Arabia in fear of his life at the hands of his own military.

While many factors affected the outcome of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, Donald Trump’s electoral success can be attributed in part to his campaign’s focus on building community awareness among a section of the populace that felt disenfranchised. Lee and Lim (2016) found that while Hillary Clinton used Twitter primarily to express opinions about campaign issues, Trump used Twitter mainly to share citizens’ supportive quotes. Because of this, Trump’s supporters learned that they were not alone. They perceived that they were a significant community, possibly even a majority, and that Trump spoke to their common concerns.

**Framing Arguments**

People with different points of view may perceive the same reality in very different ways. For example, some people view abortion as the murder of a fetus while others view it as a pregnant woman’s right or as an issue of health. Political and social movement actors attempt to influence others by communicating their points of view in ways that resonate with as many people as possible. Researchers in the fields of sociology, political science, economics, and decision theory have extensively studied this process, called framing, (Borah, 2011; Chong & Druckman, 2007).
The conversation, commentary, and back-and-forth argumentation that takes place on social media platforms among advocates of a social movement help create a common or collective framing of the issues and positions relevant to the advocates’ cause (Oh et al., 2015). Social media help those interested in a cause to fine-tune how it is framed so as to generate a strong collective sense of identity and a persuasive call to action (Haug, 2013). Prior research overwhelmingly supports the assertion that the success of a social movement is highly dependent on the creation of such a collective frame (for example, Benford & Snow, 2000; Fominaya, 2010; Oh et al., 2015; Polletta & Jasper, 2001; Steinberg, 1998).

Advocates of same-sex marriage found that their cause was better accepted when framed as an issue of equality rather than the individual rights of gay people. Accordingly, they began to use the phrase “marriage equality” rather than “same-sex marriage” or “gay marriage” to frame their arguments and solicit support. There is no evidence that any advocacy group promoted this framing. Rather, it seems to have simply evolved as people found it resonated with friends and acquaintances who supported egalitarianism even though they might have been cool to gay rights. Gainous and Rhodebeck (2016), for example, found that among African Americans, who as a group often opposed gay rights, reframing same-sex marriage as marriage equality was effective in soliciting support. Using a national survey, they demonstrated that black support for gay marriage increased precipitously as the term “marriage equality” increased in usage during 2012.

In March of 2013, when the U.S. Supreme Court began deliberations on the constitutionality of some state laws barring same-sex marriage, the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) advocacy group asked supporters of marriage equality to change their Facebook profile pictures to an image of a red equal sign on a black background. One source (Fitzpatrick, 2013) reported that more than 10 million people changed their Facebook pictures or Twitter avatars to that image. While this response almost certainly had no effect on the members of the court, advocates felt that it would, at a minimum, influence friends of those who changed their pictures to support the equal marriage initiative (Penney, 2015).

Framing can also act to personalize for a large number of people a cause that might otherwise be too abstract to generate interest. The slogan, “We are the 99%” is a fine example of how the generic concept of income inequality could be framed to appeal to the masses. The fact that wealth and income inequality exists in most societies is well known but hardly actionable. In contrast, recognizing oneself as belonging to the bottom 99% of the population in wealth accumulation provokes an urge to reduce the privilege of the top 1% and to examine, with an intent to alter, the means by which that top 1% retains its wealth superiority. Bennett (2012) has argued that social media help to create framing such as this when individuals share their unique, personal, but easily relatable stories with one another to help construct a collective sense of identity.

Engaging with Mass Media

The story of the Occupy Movement demonstrates the ability of social media users to amplify their political power by engaging with mass media. The Occupy Movement, whose objective was to bring the world’s attention to economic and social inequality, began as a smaller, more local movement, in September 2011, with a call to march on and occupy, for an indefinite period of time, several locations in New York City’s Wall Street financial district. Police blocked access to the activists’ major targets, so they instead occupied a small privately owned plaza nearby called Zuccotti Park, from which they launched protests on Wall Street. The mass media initially paid no attention to the occupation, and its cause might have been lost entirely if not for social media activists who, in a period of twelve hours tweeted more than 30,000 messages on Twitter documenting and praising the occupation (Conover et al., 2013). Bloggers were also vigorous in covering the occupation and its objectives, posting more than 10 million blog entries about it in the short period of one month (DeLuca et al., 2012). The explosion of coverage in the social media could not be ignored forever, so finally, about a week after the initial occupation, the New York Times included a short piece about it placed, unobtrusively, on the inside pages of the paper. Other major U.S. newspapers and television news stations were even slower to provide coverage. (DeLuca et al., 2012). But, social media kept the public informed and as word spread, mass media outlets began to cover not
only the occupation but also the social media buzz about it. Two weeks after the initial occupation, the NY Times devoted a front page article to it. The story was picked up by international newspapers and broadcast on television in the United States and elsewhere as protests spread. At one point in late October, roughly one and a half months after the initial occupation, the New Zealand Herald reported that protesters had set up 2,300 “occupied zones” in 2,000 cities worldwide (Barton, 2011). The “Occupy Wall Street” movement had become the “Occupy Movement.”

The world has changed considerably since 2011. It would now be inconceivable for the mass media to ignore an event that went viral on social media. In the U.S. 2016 presidential elections, the mass media monitored and reported on a daily basis tweets from Republican candidate Donald Trump. The major newspapers, television networks, and news wires all monitor social media, and many news stories are first reported via eye witness videos, photos, and accounts on social media outlets. Parmelee (2014) found that political tweets affect which events mass media journalists cover and help determine the people they interview, the quotations they use, and the background sources they access to fill out their stories. The reverse is also true – social media users identify and rebroadcast news reports from mass media outlets that they think will resonate with their friends and online communities. This tight interaction between social media and mass media adds power to social media users no matter which way the information flows.

Stimulating and Organizing Protest

Street protests are both an exercise of political power and a means of increasing political power. Street protests demonstrate condign political power to the extent that they may disrupt or distort the normal activities of government, divert government attention and resources to the protesters’ cause, or directly affect policy, regulation, or law. Street protests increase political power by displaying the protesters’ fervor and commitment to people who don’t know much about their cause, so as to change or influence their attitudes towards it.

Social media is superbly suited to inciting protests. Because the average Facebook user has more than 300 friends (Smith, 2014) and the average Twitter user has more than 200 followers (Bullas, 2014), it takes very little time for an emotional message to reach thousands or even hundreds of thousands of people. Powerful videos and photos of shocking events can be shared easily and rapidly on platforms such as YouTube and Instagram. For example, a short documentary film about atrocities allegedly committed by Ugandan war lord Joseph Kony reached one million viewers in only six days (Statista.com, 2015) and more than 100 million views by August 2016 (YouTube, 2016). In this case, the objective was not to incite street protest but simply to raise awareness and funds, which it succeeded in doing. Shortly after the video was released, both houses of Congress passed resolutions for Kony’s capture and Congress agreed to increase its aid to the region from $5 million to $10-15 million (The Guardian, 2012).

A call to protest may be generated when members of an online community use social media to share images of or thoughts about an event that moves them emotionally. This is particularly true when the event is the death of what appears to be an innocent person, especially if at the hands of a person or institution that is already the target of community animus. In Tunisia, the call to protest that eventually became the Jasmine Revolution was triggered by the self-immolation of a street vendor who objected to his treatment at the hands of a regime that was widely perceived to be repressive and corrupt. In the United States, calls to protest have arisen as part of the Black Lives Matter movement several times since the start of the movement, when innocent African-American men have been killed by police officers. In 2014, the shooting of Michael Brown, who according to some reports had his hands up when he was shot, led to a successful call for street protests in Ferguson, Missouri by people using the #handsup and #handsupdontshoot hash tags. Similar protests occurred in 2014 in Staten Island, New York, after the death of Eric Gardner, which protesters attributed to a police choke hold, and in 2015 in Baltimore, Maryland, after the death of Freddie Gray, which protesters attributed to rough handling after his arrest. The sense of anger at the lack of justice and despair at the unlikelihood of change were palpable in the
tweets calling for protest and elicited an emotional response that, in each case, brought people together to protest in the streets.

Social media platforms help those calling for a protest to distribute maps and plans while the event that triggered their reaction is fresh in the minds of community members. Research has documented the importance of social media in coordinating actions and countering the responses of government or counter-protesters in movements as diverse as the 2012 Egyptian Revolution (Tufecki et al., 2012), the 2009 Copenhagen Climate Summit (Segenberg & Bennett, 2011), and the 2009 London G20 Summit (Ward, 2009). Hashtags make it easy for interested parties to find and keep informed about protest plans.

**Obtaining Resources**

Resource mobilization theory (Jenkins, 1983; McCarthy & Zald, 1977) holds that a necessary condition for the formation and success of a social movement is the collection and aggregation of resources that can be directed to support the achievement of its goals. Resources include not only economic ones, such as capital and labor, but also facilities, media, and existing social networks, among others. Political power research affirms the notion that power can be achieved by the control and use of resources (Parsons, 1963; Schmidt, 2005).

Some structure is usually needed to organize the collection, aggregation, and distribution of resources in support of a social movement. A social movement organization (SMO) provides such a structure. The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) are examples of SMOs that supported the civil rights movement in the U.S in the 1960s. SMOs continue to exist in the digital world, but they should be significantly leaner, requiring fewer resources to support their own operations because they can use social media to recruit labor, raise funds, and build networks.

Crowdfunding is the process of raising money from a large number of people, typically in small amounts per person. Social media are well suited to support crowdfunding campaigns because they can take advantage of social connections. Research shows that members of a community can increase giving by publicizing their own giving and by expressing sympathy with their cause through “likes” and other attestations of support (Moisseyev, 2013; Saxton & Wang, 2014). By circulating relevant news stories and personal stories and by the judicious use of videos, social media posts can trigger empathy and moral outrage that result in gift giving (Chakrabarti & Berthon, 2012; Skågeby, 2010). The previously mentioned campaign to stop Ugandan war lord Joseph Kony is a prime example of how social media can be brought to bear on the task of raising funds. Invisible Children, the SMO that initiated the “Stop Kony” movement, raised more than $30 million through the social media campaign it waged on YouTube (Sanders, 2014).

**Conclusion and Suggestions for Further Research**

Social media are a potential source of political power. Through their ability to raise community awareness, frame issues, interact with and augment mass media, stimulate and organize protest, and obtain resources, they can generate and amplify the political power of their users. Because analysis of political power generation through these means remains sparse, additional research is needed to validate these findings and to explore best practices for using social media to achieve political power.

**References**


