THE SOCIAL MEDIA:
The new power of political influence
Social Media

• Since the rise of the Internet (1990s), the world's networked population has grown from the millions to the billions.

• Social media have become a fact of life for civil society worldwide, involving many actors:
  regular citizens, activists, non-governmental organizations, telecommunications firms, and software providers, or governments
Social Media

As the communications landscape gets denser:
• more participatory, the networked population is gaining greater access to information,
• more opportunities to engage in public speech, and
• an enhanced ability to undertake collective action

E.g.: The Communist Party lost power in Moldova in 2009 when massive protests coordinated in part by text message, Facebook, and Twitter broke out after an obviously fraudulent election.
CHISINAU, Moldova) As several thousand protesters returned to the streets of Moldova's capital for a third day to protest the Communist Party victory in Sunday's elections, RFE/RL's Bureau Chief in Chisinau was receiving emails, text messages, and 'tweets' from organizers of the protests.

"The messages were spreading quickly and the senders were asking everyone to forward them to all the people they know," said Vasile Botnaru, who manages RFE/RL's Chisinau bureau. Botnaru said it appears that text messaging and social networks like Facebook and Twitter played a key role in driving young people into the streets. He reported that authorities seemed taken by surprise by the sudden appearance of thousands of protestors in front of Moldova's parliament building.
Social Media

The potential of social media lies mainly in their support of civil society and the public sphere...

Most widely used social media tools are: text messaging, e-mail, photo sharing, social networking, and the like... All of these tools are so newly used in protests.
During the June 2009 uprising of the Green Movement in Iran, activists used every possible technological coordinating tool to protest the miscount of votes for Mir Hossein Mousavi but were ultimately brought to heel by a violent crackdown.
On 13 June the incumbent Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was declared winner of Iran’s presidential election, with a reported 64% of the national vote.

His nearest rival, Mir-Hossein Mousavi, won (according to official figures) just under 34%. Mousavi and his followers immediately disputed the results; and widespread protests mushroomed throughout Iran, of a size and nature not seen since the 1979 Iranian Revolution.

As the protests grew in strength, the Iranian authorities cracked down on foreign media reporting in the country, disrupted cell phone use and text-messaging, and restricted internet access, making it hard to get information out of Iran.
Iranian Revolution, 2009

• Although the authorities had banned access to Facebook during the run-up to the elections, users found ways around the restrictions and, during the demonstrations, Mousavi himself used Facebook to contact supporters and the outside world.

• As Ahmadinejad was calling the protesters “football hooligans”, messages relayed via the social media (often repeated on global media outlets such as the BBC and CNN) showed the protests to be peaceful.
Iranian Revolution, 2009

- These events show the potential role of social media such as Facebook, Twitter, blogs and YouTube in facilitating protest and dissent during times of conflict and suppression — as well as enabling the spread of state propaganda and surveillance.
- The Iranian case reveals the new and complex role of social media in contemporary geopolitics. For traditional media such as newspapers, television and radio are often territorially-bound, and thus subject to national laws (libel, censorship) and political-economic power structures (political pressure, ownership bias, advertiser demands); whereas social networking media are often decentralised, non-hierarchical and contain user-generated content.
Iranian Revolution, 2009

- [www.twitterfall.com](http://www.twitterfall.com) = showing which subjects are generating the greatest number of messages from Twitter users
• While the majority of tweets on Iran came from outside the country, a handful of highly influential individuals inside became vital sources of information, both for people inside Iran and for international news organisations whose operations inside of the country had been severely restricted (the BBC’s John Lynne was expelled, the Tehran bureau of the Dubai-based satellite channel Al Arabiya closed, etc).

Iranian Revolution, 2009
Icons of Protest, 2009

• Twitter, Facebook, YouTube etc also contributed to the dissemination of the iconic visual image of post-election Iran: video footage showing 26 year-old philosophy student Neda Agha-Soltan bleeding to death after reportedly being shot in the chest by a member of the basij (the paramilitary voluntary militia).
• The video – uploaded to YouTube and published on Facebook only minutes after the killing by an Iranian asylum-seeker in the Netherlands whose friend who had filmed the event on his mobile phone and mailed it to him (1)– attracted well over a million YouTube views in under a week.
• Neda became the opposition’s figure.
Icons of Protest, 2009

• The images of her lifeless eyes staring into the lens of the camera, blood flowing from her nose and mouth.
• Her image went out instantaneously across the world.
• The access to/posting of information (such as the images of Neda and the tweets of Mousavi1388) on social media within Iran has become one of the central issues in the battle between the Iranian authorities and anti-government protesters.
Icons of Protest, 2009

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• The regime is engaged in a “proxy war” with Mousavi supporters: as access was restricted to sites such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter, people in Iran began to use “proxy servers” to regain access.

• A proxy server is software that can be run on any computer; it allows an individual to “share” their computer (and thus their internet access) with a stranger, regardless of location.
Icons of Protest, 2009

• Politics has to do with the power to define what is right and wrong, what is legal and illegal, what is legitimate dissent or treason.

• Traditionally, it has used the mainstream media (newspapers, television, radio, film) to disseminate these discourses with access (in terms of production) limited to a narrow elite, and with content subject to varying political and economic agendas.

• Social media have made possible the presentation of alternative discourses to local and global audiences, challenging the orthodoxies of those in power.
The Red Shirt uprising in Thailand, 2010

- **The Red Shirt** uprising in Thailand in 2010 followed a similar but quicker path:

  protesters savvy with social media occupied downtown Bangkok until the Thai government dispersed the protesters, killing dozens.
Social Media

• They have all represent the revolutionary wave of demonstrations and protests (both non-violent and violent) and riots, in different parts of the world.

• They have all used social media to help organise such protests and mobilise their responsible agents.
Do social media (e.g. digital tools) enhance democratic participation?
The Tools of Social Media

Most of us know social media from its different tools and communities:

Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, Flickr and Wikipedia are the most famous.
Social Media

• These tools probably do not hurt in the short run and might help in the long run.

• They have the most dramatic effects in states where a public sphere already constrains the actions of the government.
What is Social Media?

• Social media are useful instruments to coordinate national and international actions, and they have become essential to keep up with the latest news about different movements.

• Alarmingly, an increasing number of democratic governments, (ex: Turkey) are trying to limit access to it!
• The potential of social media lies mainly in their support of civil society and the public sphere.
What is Social Media?

• Political freedom has to be accompanied by a civil society literate enough and connected enough to discuss the issues presented to the public.

• In a famous study, the sociologists Elihu Katz and Paul Lazarsfeld discovered that mass media alone do not change people's minds; instead, there is a two-step process.
Two Step Flow Model
(Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955)

- Mass Media

- Opinion leader

- Individual in social contact with an opinion leader

Personal Influence
The Part Played by People in the Flow of Mass Communications

Elihu Katz & Paul F. Lazarsfeld

With a new introduction by Elihu Katz and a foreword by Elmo Roper
Two-step flow model

Opinion leader

Individuals in social contact with an opinion leader
What is Social Media?

• Opinions are first transmitted by the media, and then they get echoed by friends, family members, and colleagues.

  • *It is in this second, social step that political opinions are formed.*

  • *This is the step in which the Internet in general, and social media in particular, can make a difference.*
What is Social Media?

*The power of social media to affect society is based exclusively on its social aspects:*

- This means interaction and participation. In several different studies of citizen voting habits - results have shown that voting decisions are not usually based on one-step communication.

- More noteworthy is two-step communication, which means conversation with opinion leaders, colleagues, friends and acquaintances who can either consolidate or weaken the voter’s opinion.
What is Social Media?

- As with the printing press, the Internet spreads not just media consumption but media production as well -- it allows people to *privately* and *publicly* articulate and debate a welter of conflicting views.
Case I: Social media in the 2011 Egyptian Revolution

- The transition of power in Egypt was the most significant change in the so-called Arab Spring – it happened in a large, populated and traditionally Arab state.
- The chain of events leading up to it was quite intense, and social media played a central role.
Case II: The French presidential election of 2007

- In 2007, the centre-right *Union for a Popular Movement (UMP)* party’s Nicolas Sarkozy scored a decisive victory over the opposing Socialist Party candidate Ségolène Royal for the French presidency.

- Social media had a strong influence on the outcome of the election: over 40% of Internet users reported that conversations and other activities on the Internet had an effect on their voting decisions.
Case III: Elections in Berlin and the Pirate party

- In Germany, in the 2011 Berlin state election, the Pirate Party (a party of the information society) unexpectedly received 8.9 per-cent of the vote and 15 seats in state parliament.
- The party collected their 120,000 votes from many different sources: those who had just reached voting age, past silent voters, the Greens, Social Democrats, the left-wing, liberals and Christian Democrats.
- One in five voters aged 18-34 gave their vote to the Pirate party. And all this was achieved on a €50,000 budget!
Case VI: Blogs and the electoral success of the True Finns party

• In the Finnish parliamentary election of 2011, there were clear indications that the True Finns were the first party in Finland to succeed in using social media to mobilize their supporters.
Social Media and Societal Communication

Social media has changed the way people communicate. Here are 8 central changes:

1. The anonymity of its agents, which means that those who write and comment often use nicknames. Use of the writer’s real name makes the message stand out (for example, in the “Letters to the Editor” in newspapers), since the author wants to be identified as owning that comment.
2. The richness and diversity of information social media provide.

Users are no longer dependent on a single source for their news and other data any more, but can flexibly use several different media side by side.
3. Omnipresence – there are no longer any isolated places or hiding holes.
The private and public lives of society’s most influential figures have merged and become public space.

E.g., a politician has had to face the fact that a phrase taken out of context or a joke they told during a private conversation has been recorded by outsiders and quickly made public on the Internet.
4. Speed: News and information are spread more quickly than ever before, and the demand for speed can also lead to reports without any confirmation.
5. The multitude of roles that users assume, and their relationships to each other. The lack of a clear hierarchy is characteristic of social media.

A good example is the online encyclopedia, Wikipedia, which doesn’t really have a main editor, but an army of tens of thousands of writers, inspectors, and editors. So, if inaccuracies are found, to whom at Wikipedia should complaints be directed?

The answer to this: *don’t complain*! Instead, supplement the article in question and correct perceived mistakes alone.
Social Media and Societal Communication

6. The move from objectivity to subjectivity.

E.g., in the US, some of the so-called traditional mainstream media have abandoned the promotion of equality and pluralism. One case observed across different social media platforms has been the rumor that the current president of the United States, Barack Obama, is a Muslim. Over 20% of Americans still believe that Obama is a Muslim, even though this false information has been repeatedly disproved!
7. The new ability to combine different kinds of recorded information in very flexible ways.

Social media isn’t just text, pictures, audio, video, and animation, but all of these combined.

With today’s compact video cameras, sound recorders, laptop computers and other mobile devices, combined with affordable software, one can easily create and edit impressive presentations.
8. The near absence of traditional methods of regulation. A government can attempt to restrict the content of social media, but traditional censorship cannot keep up with ever-changing web pages.

China and Saudi Arabia, for example, tightly control their citizens use of the Internet and social media. On the other hand, it is technically difficult to interfere in even in the most radical web-distributed propaganda.
Forms of Social Media

**BLOGS:**
They mostly resembled online personal diaries. The main difference to a real diary is that this online version can receive comments, links, and other feedback from readers.

A blog is, above all, the writer's tool for the publication of their own thoughts and opinions.
TWITTER:
• Twitter is a free, Internet-based micro-blogging service, on which users can send short, 140-character messages to each other, most commonly called “tweets”.
• These tweets form a current of messages that are followed in chronological order from a computer screen or some other screen, like a cell phone.
• A sort of keyword called a “hashtag” can be added to tweets to connect the current message to some other message, making it easier to follow the messages.
TWITTER (cont.):

- In short messages, there is no opportunity to justify a point of view or cite sources, and because of this, political messaging and conversation can be more heated and critical here than on other social media platforms.
- Despite this, Twitter can be used for active political discussion. Twitter can also be used to steer the user to more detailed content elsewhere, through web links or other references.
WIKIS:

- Wikis and similar text-based works of collaboration are web pages that can be modified by anyone who has the right to do so.
- Wikipedia is the most famous example of all wikis and “wiki-like” works.
- The basic idea behind wikis is to provide voluntary, decentralized and open information. Text can be added or corrected, and new sections can be added without the need to modify the structure of the entire page.

Forms of Social Media
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YOUTUBE:

• YouTube is the Internet’s leading video service.
• It began operating in 2005, and grew very quickly, with 50 million visits to the site just by the end of the same year.
• The basic idea behind YouTube is that users upload videos to the site and at the same time, watch and comment on what they see.
• Based on the number of viewers, the most popular videos on YouTube are music videos, entertainment programmes, and news videos.
• YouTube is also an important channel for parliamentary and regional election candidates, with a much lower cost than TV commercials.
Forms of Social Media

FACEBOOK:

• Facebook is the Internet’s leading online community. Most consider Facebook as the very image of social media.

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• The basic idea is to offer each registered user the chance to create a user profile with pictures and to keep in touch with their so-called “friends”, or contacts they link to on the site.
FACEBOOK (cont.):

• The worldwide fascination with Facebook is based on the possibility it offers to be in contact with people whose e-mail addresses and phone numbers have changed or become outdated.

• An even more important feature of Facebook is the chance to create networks.