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On Leadership



LEGAL SCHOLAR

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Fear and the Internet

Question: *Through the effective use of online social media, a small group of political amateurs were able to organize and instigate street demonstrations across Egypt that now threaten to topple the Mubarak regime. How does their success change our notions of what leadership in the Internet age is all about?*

Like nature, the Internet is an implacable, impersonal force. In moments of popular revolt, it can be used both to overcome fear and to create it.

In both Egypt and Tunisia, the Web appears to have played an initial role in organizing demonstrations against autocratic regimes.

But, before people can organize they must conquer fear---the fear of being arrested, imprisoned, tortured and killed by an unaccountable government with near absolute power. This is story as old as time.

The Internet can help people shed their fear in at least two ways. It can stoke anger in tens of thousands through its immediacy and its imagery. It can tell stories and show pictures of individuals who have died as a result of government attacks on their human decency and dignity, and it can ridicule symbols, like seaside villas, of governmental rot and corruption. Towering anger may crush paralyzing fear.

The Internet can also help people gain strength in numbers. For those living in Egypt a month ago, venturing out in tens or hundreds to protest the government's violence and corruption would have risked being taken away to an uncertain fate by the Egyptian security forces. But when tens of thousands or even hundreds of thousands can be simultaneously connected by the Internet, then they can march together at a specific time and place knowing that they will not be alone---creating the strength of the community to counter the fear of the individual.

Yet, an authoritarian government is not powerless in the face of the Internet. It can, as Egypt did, shut down the Web (although not before the protests had gained great momentum), with "work-arounds" reaching far fewer people. It can wage a constant censorship war (as in China).

Moreover, as an increasing number of commentators have noted, autocrats can also use the Internet to sow disinformation among the people--to grow the weeds of discord among a broad coalition joined in opposition to the regime but divided by many social and economic characteristics (secular vs. Islamist, Muslim vs. Christian, old vs. young, rich vs. poor, professional vs. laborer). In a widely dispersed medium like the Internet, an autocrat's propaganda and Big Lies will not monopolize communication--but they can certainly create confusion, division, rumor and fear just because the Internet is so widely dispersed, without any "authoritative" source of information.

The constant battle over the use of popular media (powerful speakers, the penny press, the mainstream press, radio and television) between the leaders of revolt seeking to mobilize "the people" and the leaders of repression seeking to mislead, pacify or terrorize "the people" has played out in dramatic fashion in the revolutions and social movements of the past two centuries. Propaganda was, of course, taken to hideous heights in the Nazi and Stalinist dictatorships.

Why shouldn't this historic battle continue in the medium of the Internet? Yes, its "democratic" form is a great boon to leaders of revolt, who can avoid the dead hand of state-controlled press and TV. But leaders of repression, beyond "finger-in-the-dyke" censorship, are likely to develop the black arts of Internet propaganda and disinformation.

Both shocking truth and carefully crafted lies may go viral in all directions.

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