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The Impact of Social Media on Globalization, Democratization and Participative Citizenship*

It is crucial to increase the civic and political participation during the process of democratization and globalization. There are several effective ways of achieving it in our time. Social media and networking tools have been one of the most effective tools to direct political elections and social changes. In this study, researchers discuss how social media tools have been used in the process of democratization and globalization, where those initiatives were successful, how they affected civic and political participation, and what kinds of variables in social media are important and affect people's attitudes and behaviors in Iran, Syria and Egypt.

Keywords

Social media, citizenship, democratization, Middle East

1 Introduction

Today, globalization, democratization and participative citizenship are current debated phenomenon in all around the world as countries continue to develop more and more. The main reason of these topics' being discussed in the world is the increasing level of education in almost all societies. According to the UNESCO (2006), the world's average literacy rate for males is 84 % while it is 75% for females. Moreover, huge economic changes have taken place all around the world and both the developing and developed economies have become dependent on each other as a result. Apart from these changes, the notion of democracy that had already been adopted in Europe ages ago has started to spread all around the world, specifically to the Arab nations. The latest examples can be given from Syria and Lebanon where ordinary people started to think about having their voice within their governmental departments. Even though the desire for democratization and the process itself is not painless, the choices of masses have been in that line (Lipset and Lakin 2004).

Civic and political participation are the two important aspects of developed democracies. While civic participation is defined as the actions by individuals or groups to identify and address public concern issues (Civic Engagement 2012), political participation is defined as actions conducted voluntarily to influence elections or public policy

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(Johnston 2012). It is crucial to increase the civic and political participation during the process of democratization and globalization. There are several effective ways of achieving it in our time. Social media and networking tools have been one of the most effective tools to direct political elections and social changes (Cook 2010; Marandi et al. 2010; Shaheen 2008; Guobin 2010; Smelter and Keddy 2010).

In this study, researchers discuss how social media tools have been used in the process of democratization and globalization, where those initiatives were successful, how they affected civic and political participation, and what kinds of variables in social media are important and affect people's attitudes and behaviors. Authors, apart from focusing on the successful social media movements, argue about the failures around the world within this scope.

2 Method

This paper is based on qualitative method design. Data collection for this research was collected by using document analysis method and typical case sampling procedure was used to collect documents related to the Iran, Egypt, and Syria. The data that was the subject of this study was chosen from documents written in English. Documents from other languages were not taken into consideration within the scope of this study. Content analysis was used for this study. The reason of choosing content analysis as the unit of analysis is that the terms such as social media, participative citizenship, and globalization might be used in different meanings that may not work for the aim of this study. Therefore, the contents of documents were analyzed and the most appropriate documents were chosen.

Source of data for this study are Facebook pages and twitter accounts created by activists in the countries that are the subject of this study. Besides, academic papers and governmental reports are included in the data analyzed for the purpose of the study. The data was collected between December 2011-April 2012. There were several keywords and tags used to reach the correct data source. They were: 'citizenship and social media', 'Arab spring', 'Internet freedom', 'participative citizenship', 'Middle East democratization'. The sources collected were

categorized based on those keywords.

3 Literature Review

The modern telecommunication tools, including Internet and cell phones, enable people from almost all around the world to share ideas, information, pictures and sounds more easily and with affordable price compared to the traditional media tools, like newspapers (Figliola, Addis & Lum, 2011). Taking the advantages of new media tools, it has been easier to participate in political organizations, demonstrations, and gatherings whether in person or with ideas spreading through Internet.

After the late 1990s, the impact of Internet on culture and commerce has been extensive. As more technological developments occur, newer tools, such as blogs, video sharing sites, and social networks, are being used more commonly among people. As more people start to use this technology in pursuing their rights, some governments restrict freedom on the Internet in order to maintain their authority. In figure 1, it is showed which countries restrict freedom on the net to what extend. The ratings are determined by taking three categories into consideration: Obstacles to access, limits on content, and violations of user rights. The subcategories are as follow:

Obstacles to Access: assesses infrastructural and economic barriers to access; governmental efforts to block specific applications or technologies; and legal, regulatory and ownership control over Internet and mobile phone access providers.

Limits on Content: examines filtering and blocking of websites; other forms of censorship and self-censorship; manipulation of content; the diversity of online news media; and usage of digital media for social and political activism.

Violations of User Rights: measures legal protections and restrictions on online activity; surveillance; privacy; and repercussions for online activity, such as legal prosecution, imprisonment, physical attacks, or other forms of harassment (Kelly & Cook 2011).

As shown in Figure 1, Estonia is the country where people face least restrictions while using Internet. USA, Germany, and Australia follow it. When we look at the bottom of the list, we see that China and Iran are the countries where restrictions on Internet are at high level. People in these two countries are not that free compared to people in Estonia, USA, or Germany when trying to access information and to seek for their own rights.

Beginning from 1990s, the population of Internet users in all around the world increased from millions to billions. It became an important part of life for civil society, activists, nongovernmental organizations, software providers, and governments (Shirky, 2011). However, while some governments looked at the Internet usage as freedom of speech, which is

Figure 1. Freedom on the Internet (0 best, 100 worst)
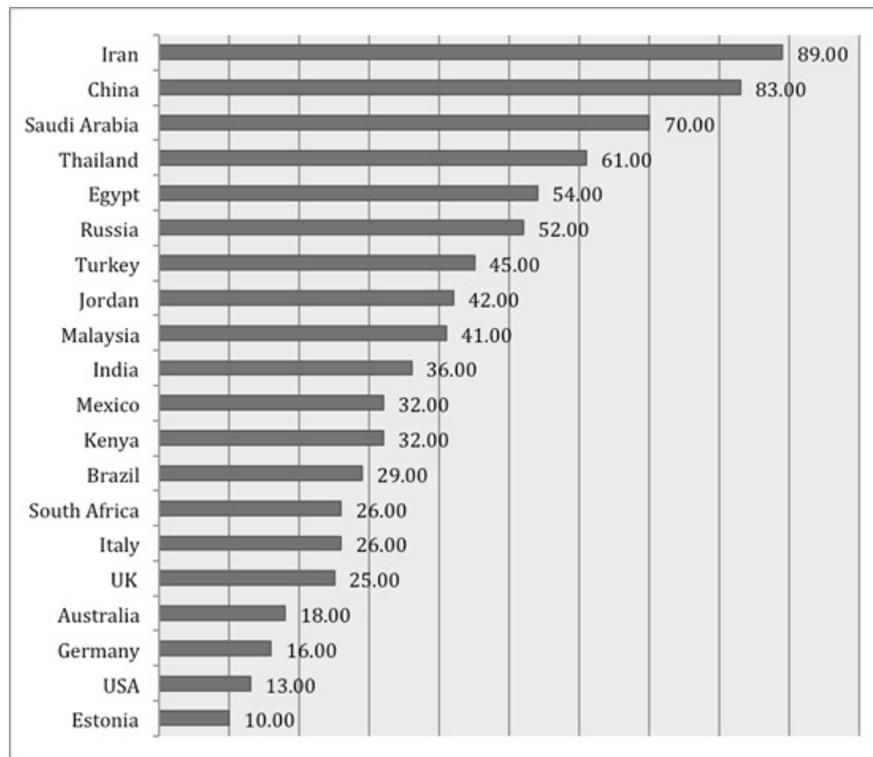
Source: "Kelly & Cook, 2011. Freedom on the Net: A Global Assessment of Internet and Digital Media.

defined as 'the political right to communicate one's opinions and ideas' (Freedom of Speech 2012) and freedom of expression, some others tried to block the usage of it in order to control people living in their territories (Zuckerman 2009; Shirky 2011; Smelter and Keddy 2010).

The Internet is an important tool that people use to express themselves and share ideas. It has become a tool that democracy and human rights activists organize real or virtual demonstration for political, social, and economic reform. It is the power of the new technologies that make authoritarian states to think about filtering, monitoring, or manipulating the Internet (Freedom House 2012). Internet and especially social media have become an important actor in demanding civil rights for people around the world. Positive examples include the protests in Philippine by people to demand change, the demonstrations organized in Spain in 2004 against the Spanish Prime Minister, who had inaccurately blamed Basque separatists about Madrid transit bombings, and the lawsuits that the Catholic Church faced over its harboring of child rapists. However, there are examples of failing of activists over the world trying to get organized using social media tools. The street protests against President of Belarus, Aleksandr Lukashenko, in 2006 ended by leaving him to have more strict control over social media usage. Also in 2010, the protestors who came together to occupy downtown Bangkok were dispersed by Thai government and also killed dozens of people (Shirky 2011).

4 Social Media In Syria, Iran and Egypt

On the other hand, social media has started to play important role in political unrest in several Arab nations, including Syria. Even though Syria is one of those countries that have strict control over social media sites, people living there seem to overcome that barrier somehow. One important means of transmitting information regarding illegal actions on citizenship rights has been cell phones with cameras.

Due to the barriers on using social media tools, reporting issues through that link living in Syria has been difficult for people who wanted to inform the world about what is going on in Syria in terms of violations of citizens rights. Abdi Hakim Ijburi, one of the refugees, who has escaped to Lebanon, says that they started to use social media tools, like Facebook, YouTube and Twitter to get young people and activists together to protest the government's actions. He states that they came together and started to write anti-government graffiti on walls. However, he continues, after he was captured and tortured by Syrian soldiers, he escaped to Lebanon. But he continues to organize online oppositions in Syria from Lebanon (VOA 2012).

The role of social media cannot be underestimated in organizing people in Syria. Many people who do not know each other came together to protest the government and to get their voice heard by other countries in the world. Abdi Hakim Ijburi is one of

those protestors who says that he met people from his town in the opposition movement and indicates that he did not know them before coming together for protesting (VOA 2012). The social media tools played an important role in transmitting their voice to the world whether from Syria or other countries. There are many examples of posting the voice of Syrian people to the world via social media tools. In a Facebook profile created in Egypt, it is shown how Syrian soldiers beat up a Syrian young boy with a stick (Picture, 1). Internet filtering in Syria is so strict that in 2008, the Ministry of Communications ordered the owners of Internet cafes to keep identification information of all customers and their times of use. The ministry also ordered the owners of those cafes to report documents regularly to them (Committee to Protect Journalists 2009).

Picture 1

Source: We are all Khaled Said. (2012, January 5). Retrieved from https://www.facebook.com/elshaheeed.co.uk

As we have said above, social media tools have been used intensely to inform people in all around the world about what is going on in a region. Even though people living in Syria do not have enough chance to use those tools whenever they want, people from other countries, like Egypt and Lebanon, have played the role of passing information to the world by using the social media tools in their cities. Also by using photographs and drawings, the images spread to the world easily and they become more effective in terms of getting attention. This is another power of social media. As shown in Picture 2, the number of Syrian people killed during the protests is eye catching that it delivers the information directly without any other details that might cause coming down the importance of that information.

In such situations, new concepts might exist as a result of the difficult conditions people live in. Citizenship journalism can be considered as one of those concepts. Citizenship Journalism is defined as the report of information by ordinary people usually using online tools that professionals do normally (Rogers, 2012). The term 'Citizen

Journalists' might be considered as the outcome of usage of social media tools to spread information about something happening in somewhere in the world. They play important roles in providing information especially when traditional media tools become ineffective. In places like Egypt, Iran, and Syria, where the strict controls over traditional media do not allow people to reach objective news, 'citizen journalists' take the place and allow the spread of information by using their own resources.

Picture 2
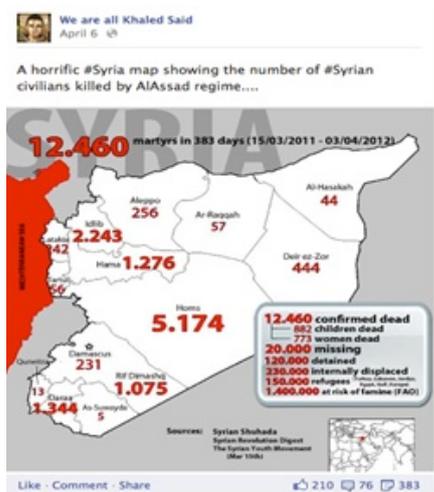
Source: We are all Khaled Said. (2012, April 6). Retrieved from https://www. facebook.com/elshaheeed.co.uk

Iran is one of the countries that apply strict control over printed and online media tools, like Syria. When we look at the increase in the number of Internet users in Iran, we see that while the number of Internet users were under one million in 2000 (International Telecommunications Union 2000), this number has increased to twenty three million users in 2008 (International Telecommunications Union 2008). The increase at such a sharp rate shows its effects on the number of blogs in Iran. It has been calculated that approximately 60.000 blogs were written in Persian language in 2008, which is a large number considering the censorship implemented by the government (Kelly & Etling 2008). As a result of this governmental control over media, it becomes very difficult to reach reliable and necessary information about what is going on in that country. However, people using technology effectively can somehow overcome these barriers as in the case of Iran. In 2008, the Iranian government strictly banned the use of social media in order to stop the flow of information about the protests in different cities to the world. However, Iranian or people from other nations in different countries have become successful in providing information about the unrest in the country by using Youtube, Facebook and Twitter (Zuckerman 2009).

It is also discussed by several authors that social networking has impact on political and social life

in all around the world (Cook 2010; Marandi et al. 2010; Shaheen 2008; Guobin 2010; Smeltzer and Keddy 2010). In the case of Iran, we see that the government have noticed the possibility of uprising before and after he presidential election of June 2009 and took precautions accordingly. After the elections, the Iranian authorities have waged campaign against Internet freedom by not only filtering content to be shared online, but also they have also hacked opposition websites, monitored dissenters online and arrested them, ordered blogging service providers in Iran to remove posts and blogs, and filled the web with propaganda and misinformation (Kelly & Cook 2011). The technology that Iran uses to filter and block web sites is also produced domestically because the government does not rely on Western technologies (Country Profile-Iran 2009). In such an atmosphere, it becomes difficult to look for citizenship and human rights to be at work. When we look at how the Iranian government has established control over Internet usage, we see that usually pervasive filtering is implemented in areas like political, social, security, and Internet tools (Figure, 2).

Considering the ratio or Internet users in Iran, which was 31.9% in 2009, succeeding on filtering Internet is not an easy task but it seems that Iranian government has succeeded it till now. However, for the Iranian expatriates, the situation changes. Because the government does not have the ability to control Internet access abroad, Iranian people living in different countries have used Internet to publish their opinions in opposition to the government (Country Profile-Iran 2009). However, it should be kept in mind that as people have problems with someone, they might provide misinformation about him/her. In the case of Iran, one should be aware of the possibility of misinformation both from opposition groups and government.

Figure 2: Internet Filtering In Iran

Filtering	No evidence of filtering	Suspected filtering	Selective filtering	Substantial filtering	Pervasive filtering
Political					☐
Social					☐
Conflict/ Security				☐	
Internet tools					☐

Source: Country Profile. 2009. Iran, OpenNet Initiative, (http://opennet.net/research/profiles/iran)

Freedom of speech is among the rights that each person should have regardless of his race, religion, gender, and social position. In Iran's constitution it is declared, "the media should be used as a forum for healthy encounter of different ideas, but they must strictly refrain from diffusion and propagation of destructive and anti-Islamic practices" (Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1979). However, it seems that it has been difficult to apply the principles written in constitution to the Internet (Country Profile-Iran 2009).

Egypt is considered as one of the freest countries

country in Arab world in terms of freedom of speech and freedom of Internet. When we look at the figure 3, we see that there is almost no evidence of political, social, security, and Internet tools filtering in the country. However, it is also known that several politically sensitive web sites have been blocked in the past and in 2009, the country was chosen among the ten worst countries to be a blogger in (Country Profile-Egypt, 2009). Even though the country profile of Egypt does not show any Internet filtering, it is known that authorities monitor Internet activity on a regular basis. The Internet service provider in Egypt is owned by a state-controlled company that sells bandwidth to customers (Kelly & Cook 2011). As a result of regular monitoring, critical bloggers are usually detained for open-ended periods. In 2008, more than 100 bloggers were detained for their activities and sharing in Internet (Committee to Protect Journalists 2009).

Although the authorities in Egypt monitor Internet usage regularly, Egyptian online activists have somehow managed to organize street protests and reveal human rights issues in Egypt. In 2008, the postings of those online activists about two government officials torturing prisoners resulted in their being arrested and imprisoned (Reporters Without Borders 2008).

Figure 3: Internet Filtering In Egypt

Filtering	No evidence of filtering	Suspected filtering	Selective filtering	Substantial filtering	Pervasive filtering
Political	☐				
Social	☐				
Conflict/ Security	☐				
Internet tools	☐				

Source: Country Profile. 2009. Egypt," OpenNet Initiative, (http://opennet.net/research/profiles/egypt).

Despite the restrictions and monitoring, social activists have been using social media tools, like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to post their content, share information and connect with large audience. Although the use of those social media tools are usually for entertainment, over the last two years, they played important role on political and social activism in Egypt (Kelly & Cook 2011).

Controlling the Internet infrastructure, the Egyptian government has enormous power on social media. Even though the country report says that there is no evidence of filtering, from January 27th to February 2nd 2011, the government shut down the Internet nationwide in order to control actions of people. This shows that during the times of political and social unrest, authorities in countries like Egypt may lay human rights aside (Kelly & Cook 2011).

5 Conclusion

Web 1.0 was only one-way interaction where the producer of the content could send the material to the Internet users and not received any feedback on the production from users. However Web 2.0 has changed this situation dramatically where many users can participate in the production and consumption of contents in Internet (Musser and O'Reilly 2006). Besides corporate and private use of social media tools, it becomes common to see those tools, like Facebook, YouTube and Twitter used by governments especially in developed countries. Britain is one of those governments that plan to use Facebook to establish and make social services better by the participation of citizens on Internet (Bovaird 2007).

A quick literature review on the effects of social media tools on social relations shows that "...social use of the Internet [rather than 'antisocial' independent browsing] is positively related to interpersonal connectivity" (Zhao 2006). This study tells us that people using Internet and social media tools to communicate with others have more social ties compared to those who do not use them or who use them in a unidirectional way.

Social media tools, like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have played a strategic role in getting citizens in developing countries together to fight for their rights that each person in democratized nations enjoy having them from birth. However, for those who are under strict control from a centralized point, it becomes very difficult to reach what they want.

Freedom of speech, Internet, voting, protesting, organizing, sharing, criticizing, and being opposition part should be normally to right of each person without any objection. However, in authoritarian countries, it is usually up to a person to decide to what extend people should be free.

One should keep in mind that freedom of using Internet and social media tools are restricted mainly as a result of the dictatorial practices. In countries, where dictators control every aspects of daily life, not only Internet but also other tools, like TVs and newspapers, are under the control of the central government. Those governments restrict the use of such tools by all people regardless of race, color, and religion. Only those pro-government people might have access to those tools easily compared to ordinary people. In Egypt, for example, the use of Internet was restricted both for Muslims and Christians. In Syria, no matter from which religion people are, they are not allowed to use Internet and Newspapers freely. However, even though those governments restrict the use of those tools, people have achieved to a certain level to benefit social media channels that spread their words to other people within those countries and also to the world.

Measuring the effectiveness of social media tools on citizenship rights is not an easy task especially if the units of analysis are countries where having reliable information about social media is difficult. One should rely on the information given by national authorities or the international organizations. But both sources might be misleading as one might try to show the system transparent whereas the other part might try to show it as problematic as possible. This point should be taken into consideration while analyzing social media tools and citizenship activities.

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Endnote

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