

THE BIG QUESTION

The Social Media Frenzy

HAVE SOCIAL MEDIA AND/OR
SMARTPHONES DISRUPTED
DAILY LIFE IN YOUR PART OF
THE WORLD?

FEATURING

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Social media and smartphones, the latter carrying this newest of mankind's means of communication and activism, have in many cases served as agents of change for both good and ill. We asked our panel of global experts how these new networks and those who use them may have disrupted daily life in their respective parts of the world.



CHILE: EMPOWERMENT SEBASTIÁN VALENZUELA

Chile is experiencing a social media frenzy. Nearly 95 percent of Chilean Internet users have an account on a social networking site, which they check several times a day. In the past few years, Facebook and YouTube have become two of the most visited sites, only surpassed by Google.com and Google.cl. Nowadays, campaigns, whether for political or advertising purposes, must feature a social media component. The popularity of social media is closely related to the diffusion of mobile technology among Chileans. The country leads Latin America in smartphone penetration. Indeed, after Facebook, the most downloaded mobile app is the messaging service WhatsApp.

The popularity of social media and smartphones among Chileans has changed the way people socialize. When meeting new friends, it's common to ask, “¿Tenís Face?” (“Do you have a Facebook account?”), or end a conversation with “Wazapléame” (“Let's connect on WhatsApp”). New forms of sociability and communication have also empowered citizens. Consumers expect banks, department stores, and public services to deliver customer service through social media. Protest movements, such as the environmental and student movements, coordinate street demonstrations through Facebook and other messaging services. Politicians use Twitter to engage with their constituencies.

These technologies have also brought new challenges, disrupting Chileans' daily life. Cyberbullying is becoming a major issue for school-age children and their educators. Privacy issues and social media addiction have also been reported—and increasingly so.

Sebastián Valenzuela is an assistant professor at Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, where he studies the uses and effects of social media.

ICELAND: FRAGILITY VALGEIR VALDIMARSSON

In 2010, comedian Jón Gnarr founded a political party, posted a YouTube video that went viral, and ran for mayor of Reykjavík. To his great surprise he was elected, and recently completed his term as one of Iceland's most trusted politicians. His popularity and subsequent election would not have happened without social media. We are a society of early adopters with a thirst for new technology. The country has one of the highest rates of Facebook adoption in the world, and public discourse in Iceland principally takes place on social media.

Also, Iceland's old media network is fragile. With a population of barely 320,000, the market for traditional media is tiny, so non-state media has largely been subsidized by political and business interests. With massive social media adoption among the general population, this structure is getting harder to maintain, and the strain is showing.

Political parties exist, at least in Iceland, to reduce a certain type of information asymmetry. We're starting to see concrete examples of how social media is solving this problem more efficiently by allowing individual politicians to sidestep the party system and engage voters personally and directly, using Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, even Snapchat. Not only is a new generation of social media-savvy politicians appearing, a whole new generation of voters impatiently awaits them.

Valgeir Valdimarsson founded Takk Takk, an award-winning agency that helps Iceland's companies use social media to make friends and influence people.

NIGERIA: PROPAGATION NWACHUKWU EGBUNIKE

It's easy to conclude social media's impact is effectively inconsequential for Nigeria.

With a population of 170 million and 28 percent Internet penetration, largely skewed toward urban elites, social media is far from disrupting the daily life of the average Nigerian. Still, the Nigerian social media network is not to be dismissed. Some 11 million Nigerians on Facebook represent the largest group in sub-Saharan Africa and the continent's third largest country on Twitter. The 2012 #Occupy-Nigeria Protests and the 2013 #Bring-Back-Our-Girls campaign focused international interest in Nigeria and further propelled online activism. While traditional media offered a better, more nuanced discourse of these issues, the social media-led awareness about #Bring-Back-Our-Girls campaign is undeniable.

Another problem with smartphone/online activism in Nigeria is the rising trend of rumor propagation. This is particularly worrisome as traditional media in the country increasingly canonizes these falsehoods from social media platforms. Fact checking, balance reportage, and fairness associated with journalism are not principles that Nigerian bloggers always respect. Nigerian netizens have successfully demanded transparency, accountability, and freedom of expression from their leaders on numerous occasions. However, a downside to social media's growth as a tool for activism is the belief that real institutional change can simply come from data plans and smartphones. The subsequent effect is the illusion of a digital echo chamber, not meaningful political reform.

Nwachukwu Egbunike, media researcher in Ibadan, specializes in social media, political participation, and social movements. He edits AfricanHadithi and writes for Global Voices Online.

FRANCE: THREATS MATTHEW FRASER

Social media and smartphones have been disruptive to business models in a host of professions—from public relations and advertising to journalism and the music industry. Social media diffuses power to the margins and tends to flatten hierarchies. Some would call it democratization, though we know hierarchies always react (and use the web) to preserve their power. In France—historically closed, elitist, rigidly hierarchical, and bureaucratic—social media has been perceived as a profound threat to established interests. French politicians, long used to media complicity in the cozy and closed Parisian chattering classes, have been destabilized by the virus of media reports on the web. They can't control these messages, and often sue for defamation.

When Uber arrived in the French market with its smartphone app-based taxi service, Parisian taxi drivers paralyzed the city's traffic in protest. So the French government backed down, thwarting Uber's entry to the market. These reactions are aggravated by France's lack of a strong free speech tradition, ironic given that France is the cradle of the Enlightenment.

Courts in France frequently rule in favor of personal privacy and against freedom of expression. A French court fined a blogger who wrote a nasty restaurant review that appeared high in Google display rankings. In French companies, employees get fired—and lose appeals in court later—for items they post on Facebook. To be sure, such tensions arise in other countries, but they are particularly contentious in France, with its rigid hierarchies and closed systems of elitist power suspicious of innovation and change.

Matthew Fraser, associate professor of communications at the American University of Paris, lectures at the Institut d' Études Politiques de Paris.

GHANA: ONLINE CLASS ARABA SEY

In Ghana, mobile phone subscriptions have officially passed 100 percent penetration, and mobile broadband coverage is high. Internet diffusion was 40 percent in 2013, mostly from mobile data subscribers. According to a 2014 Pew Internet Research report, 77 percent of Internet users in Ghana access social media. The numbers make it easy to understand the population's prevalent use of smartphones and social media. Still, there remains a significant population that cannot access social media. For those who can, access to social media is mostly at cybercafés or through mobile phones with Internet capabilities but which lack the advanced functionality of smartphones.

For most Ghanaians, active use is constrained by the expense of smartphones and mobile data, availability of relevant content, and awareness of just how Internet services might be used. Barely 20 percent of mobile phone users have smartphones, 19 percent of mobile phone owners access social media from their phone, and the reach of Facebook, the most popular social networking site in the country, stands at about 7 percent.

So any disruptive impact is limited to the small population that can afford smartphones and mobile data, and for whom Internet content is relevant. Most are urban-based, middle class, and young (18-29 year-olds), a subset of the vast mobile phone population. Lives currently unaffected by social media and smartphones include the rural, low-income, uneducated, elderly, disabled, and illiterate portion of the population. Still, there are visible signs of change. Network providers are beginning to offer more affordable options, including lower cost smartphones, unlimited data bundles, and social media access packages. Stripped down versions of social networking plat-

forms are also available for future phone access that will eventually broaden access, while lowering barriers across the board.

Araba Sey, Ghanaian research assistant professor at the University of Washington Information School, is studying appropriation of communication technologies by populations in low- and middle-income countries.

TAJIKISTAN: DISCONTENTS TOHIR PALLAEV

Barely 16 percent of the population in Tajikistan has Internet access, but even this small fraction creates enough of a headache for the current regime, leading to several efforts to block social media networks entirely. Social media has become a platform for expression of popular discontent of the Tajik government, especially directed at the ruling Rakhmon family. Citizens, behind social media's shield of anonymity, can post videos, images, and statements critiquing the reigning political elite. As a response, the government consistently tries to restrict access to these "dangerous" websites. The government ordered all Internet providers in the country to block access to Facebook, which Director of Communications Services Beg Zuhurov deemed a "hotbed of slander."

YouTube is also a frequent target for censorship in Tajikistan. The regime blocked YouTube in 2012 when videos of military violence in Gorno-Badakhshan leaked, and again in 2013 when a video featuring the apparently intoxicated Tajik president was uploaded to the site. Currently, access to YouTube and other Google services remains partially restricted.

Social media allows citizens to expose a devastating reality, which directly contradicts the official narrative promoted and cherished by political elites and state-owned media. Because of the government's fear of social me-

dia's impact, it's reasonable to expect that the regime will continue to tighten its grip over these new opportunities for self-expression.

Tobir Pallaeu, student of international and comparative politics at the American University of Central Asia, is a journalist interested in nationalism and ethnic conflicts.

THAILAND: INFORMATION WARS PAVIN CHACHAVALPONGPUN

With some 15 million Internet users in Thailand, social media has served as a catalyst for the distribution and sharing of information, with a substantial impact on the political situation, and by extension, Thais' daily lives. Opposing political camps have actively engaged in information wars through social media networks, which in turn have played a significant role in the current political crisis and the entire democratization process. For the first time, Thais are able to have direct and, to a degree, equal access to political information from diversified sources. Such a variety allows citizens to compare content and make decisions based on this information, examine the issues from alternative viewpoints, or even challenge information controlled and disseminated by the Thai state.

Social media also makes information affordable, pervasive, and available, which contributes toward consolidating the democratization process. Social media has the power to tear down certain barriers and allows the people a freedom of expression that was previously unavailable. Information flows are no longer one-way, but interactive, loosening the grip on power of the Thai state. Citizens, whose views and opinions are now voiced freely through Facebook and Twitter, are even defying some media outlets that have historically worked to guarantee the interests of the political elite.

New media has been associated with democratic political communication, which may help erode information centralization—a condition Thailand is experiencing.

Pavin Chachavalpongpun is an associate professor at Kyoto University's Center for Southeast Asian Studies.

TURKEY: STAY CONNECTED ERKAN SAKA

The rise of social media usage in Turkey has accompanied a dramatic increase in smartphone ownership. While a strong government dominates Turkey's mainstream media, the political authority cannot contain news production and growing social opposition. So smartphone-empowered social media opens up more news channels, allowing social opposition to be mobilized, organizing events like those in Gezi Park. The summer 2013 protests drew hundreds of thousands of citizens to downtown Istanbul, opposing the conversion of one of its major parks into a mall. Although protests waned, political critiques have persisted in social media.

Mobile usage does not necessarily lead to explicit challenges to political authority, however. Citizens use various applications and mobile services as they live their daily lives, choosing between services offered by private and public institutions. From big state institutions to local municipalities, from large corporations to small business, all players must be more alert to public feedback as smartphones come to occupy a central place in daily communications. An informed citizenry can disrupt traditional governance. After heavy rain in Istanbul in July, people documented failing municipal infrastructure across Istanbul in smartphone photos.

Social media usage can also create opportunities for creative sectors, which can lead to

restructuring cultural industries and related businesses. A digitally-empowered citizenry can disrupt ongoing business models like news media, music, cinema, and publishing industries. Recently, the daily newspaper *Radikal* transitioned to an online format in response to shrinking hard copy sales. Several news sites are already competing online for more traffic as they recruit distinguished columnists. Mainstream television channels are broadcasting online to compete against pirate sites. Furthermore, Internet sites like Ekşisözlük and Bobiler.org have become places for young users to engage in peer learning, which helps prepare them for the work force in advertising and related industries. Beneath an authoritarian government, Turkey's super-connected, smartphone-powered base is disrupting and profiting from the nation's traditional systems.

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UKRAINE: DIGITAL TOOLS IGOR LYUBASHENKO

At the end of 2013, more than 50 percent of all Ukrainians were actively using the Internet. Though apparently unimpressive, the pace of change is striking. In 2008, this figure was barely 15 percent and had only reached 25 percent by 2010. Social media has provided an information infrastructure for Ukraine, which faced the deteriorating freedom of traditional media after 2010. Events, like the recent Euromaidan protest in Kiev, a mass movement prompted by the authorities' refusal to sign the Association Agreement with the European Union, proved the ultimate confirmation of the reach and influence of this infrastructure. Social media was not a cause, but rather a significant tool that allowed the protest to achieve scale and intensity. It allowed the emergence of part time

revolutionaries—people living their normal lives, but joining mass meetings in the most crucial moments of confrontation with the authorities. Coordinating activities through social networks enabled small-scale engagement on a mass level, a feat that was previously much harder to achieve.

In turn, the turbulent political events in Ukraine triggered the popularity of social media. During the period between September 2013 and March 2014, the number of click-throughs from social media to Ukrainian news websites (many opposition related) rose to 2.5 million daily. This is a perfect example of authorities' shrinking ability to control the flow of information or impose their dominant narrative via traditional media.

Still, decentralized communication using digital tools can fragment public opinion, causing people to close themselves within an information bubble corresponding to their beliefs. This can be grounds for manipulation. For example, with the rise of separatist movements in the east of Ukraine, social media has acted as a disseminator of propaganda. Ukrainian society remains in an early phase of digital communications, and the social impact is still developing.

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