Remarks at Boston University Alumni Association Discoveries Lecture, “Online and Against Authority: The Role of Social Media in Political Uprisings”

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The first protests brought together thousands of ordinary citizens calling for the reform of a regime that had ruled over them for 40 years and had always responded to previous demonstrations with violent crackdowns and arrests. When regime leaders finally gave in and handed power to a transitional government, protestors in neighboring countries were immediately emboldened. In the following months, millions of citizens poured into public squares in their capital cities, calling for the downfall of longstanding authoritarian regimes. In some cases, authorities gave in to peaceful protests; in others, violent struggle was necessary before dictators could be removed; in still others, repression of demonstrators was successful at keeping the regime in place. But no one could deny the stunning wave of revolt against a series of autocrats once thought to be unshakable. Commenting on these events, a distinguished professor of government at Harvard University remarked that new communication media “made it increasingly difficult for authoritarian governments to keep from their elites and even their publics information on the struggles against and the overthrow of authoritarian regimes in other countries.”

The quote is from Samuel P. Huntington in his book *The Third Wave*, and the year was 1991. The phenomenon to which he is referring is the fall of authoritarian regimes in the late 1980s, particularly communist regimes in Eastern Europe. The “new media” to which he makes reference are shortwave radio, satellite television, computers, and fax machines. I bring this example up because the fall of communism in 1989 has striking parallels to the Arab Spring in 2011, and comparing these two episodes and the role of communication media in each one can help us figure out what is new and unique about the latter. Like the Arab Spring, revolutions against communism in 1989 spread rapidly and brought down multiple regimes within months: Poland, Hungary, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Romania. In most cases, as in Tunisia and Egypt, authoritarian leaders eventually stepped down or negotiated a transition in the face of massive demonstrations. In Romania, as in Libya, much more violence was necessary in order to bring down a personalistic dictator by force. in China’s Tiananmen Square protests, demands for political reform were met with repression, and the regime stayed in place—which happened in Iran in 2009 and may ultimately be the fate of uprisings in many other parts of the region

As Huntington’s quote suggests, communication media were thought to play an crucial role in the fall of communism. Cell phones had barely been invented, email was in its infancy, and the Internet as we know it would not exist for years, much less social media. But radio and TV broadcasts from neighboring countries are an important part of the story. In East Germany, a government spokesman’s mistaken interpretation of instructions to allow limited border crossings was picked up by West German television and broadcast widely, leading to the massive crowds at the Berlin Wall that ultimately prompted border guards to open the gates. In Czechoslovakia, massive protests against
the regime materialized seemingly out of nowhere after television coverage of events in Poland, Hungary, and E. Germany. In Romania, protests spread to the capital and brought down Ceaușescu after Radio Free Europe and Voice of America reported on violent crackdowns against protestors in a distant border region. And yet we also know that the effect of foreign television broadcasts on communist regimes was more complicated. During most of East Germany’s history, those who had access to West German television broadcasts were more satisfied with the regime because entertainment programs provided an escape from the difficult realities of everyday life.

Ten years after the fall of communism I was working in Washington, DC at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, a foreign policy think tank, on a project entitled “The Information Revolution and World Politics.” This was the period of the Internet boom, when it seemed like the stock market would never stop rising and every college graduate could find a job in a tech start-up, and there was a lot of optimism in DC about the political effects of new media. In 2000, Bill Clinton famously said China’s efforts to control the Internet were like “trying to nail Jello to the wall.” For scholars who studied the political effects of communication media, the Internet was supposed to be more conducive to democracy than radio and television because it was a “many-to-many medium” that was more difficult to control from a single point. Rather than taking over a broadcasting studio or transmission tower, a regime would supposedly need to control thousands of individual users who could send email or access the Web. The same is true of cell phone text messaging that proliferated in the 1990s.

We saw during this period that the Internet and related technologies facilitated political movements against a number of authoritarian regimes. In 1998, students in Indonesia used email to coordinate protests that ultimately led to the downfall of the Suharto regime. In 1999, followers of the Falun Gong spiritual practice in China used the Internet to coordinate a gathering of 10,000 members in the front of the Chinese leadership compound in response to prior government crackdowns on the movement. Of course, use of new media in the late 1990s and early 2000s also facilitated political challenges against democratic regimes and international organizations. In the Philippines, mobile text messaging was crucial for organizing the 2001 protests that led to the downfall of president Joseph Estrada, whose government was corrupt but not anti-democratic. And the U.S. in 1999, organizing on the Internet allowed tens of thousands of anti-globalization protestors to paralyze downtown Seattle during the meeting of the World Trade Organization—numbers that go well beyond what we’ve seen in the current Occupy Wall Street protests.

It was clear in 1999 that new media could facilitate protest against authoritarian as well as democratic regimes. But the political impact of the Internet and related technologies was a more complicated matter. In a 2003 book, Open Networks, Closed Regimes, Shanthi Kalathil and I argued that some uses of the Internet pose challenges to authoritarian regimes, but their leaders may be able to effectively respond to these challenges, and other uses of the Internet may actually strengthen authoritarian rule. The subsequent eight years have largely borne out our predictions. Most authoritarian regimes we examined remain solidly in place even though Internet use has proliferated,
and new social media such as Twitter and Facebook have arisen and become popular. In China, where optimists once hoped that Western Internet firms would bring freedom of information, Yahoo, Google, and others cooperated for years with the government’s censorship laws. Last year, Google stopped filtering searches and then pulled out of mainland China, but this was largely a response to its Gmail servers being hacked by Chinese authorities, not a political statement. Interestingly, the only authoritarian regime we examined that has since fallen is the one that had placed the fewest restrictions on the Internet: Egypt.

This brings me to the role of social media in recent political uprisings in the Arab world and beyond. It is undoubtedly the case that social media like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube are useful as a logistical tool for organizing protests against authoritarian as well as democratic regimes. We’ve seen it used not only by demonstrators in Tahrir Square in Cairo but also by the Occupy Wall Street and Occupy Boston protestors, and in the London riots several months ago. Twitter makes it much easier for one individual to get a message out to millions of followers worldwide than did email, text messaging, or traditional websites. It is even more many-to-many than earlier forms of new media, so it has accelerated the same trends we saw in the 1990s. Social media also make it that much easier to get information out to the rest of the world, whether it is about the military firing on protestors in an authoritarian regime, or excessive use of force by police against protestors in a democracy, like many Occupy Boston participants are now charging. Traditional media play a crucial role here as well, such as when Al Jazeera broadcasts videos initially posted on YouTube, or photos and videos from Occupy events get posted on CNN.com’s iReport.

The bigger question for me as a political scientist is: What are the political effects of these uses of technology? Here is where I think the media hype goes well beyond the evidence, just as Bill Clinton did in 2000 when he made that comment about nailing Jello to the wall. The Arab Spring was not the “Twitter Revolution” any more than the fall of communism was the “Television Revolution.” In both cases revolutions were made by people in the street, assisted with the use of technology. It’s hard to envision use of social media in an authoritarian regime having any political effect on its own. There’s some evidence that it can do so in a democracy: people argue that a social media campaign in Spain after the 2004 Madrid train bombing, three days before a general election, was able to change the outcome by shifting enough votes away from the incumbent party. But to bring down an authoritarian regime you need something more than changing minds—you need to mobilize people to go to the streets when they otherwise would not have done so. Any short-term effect of social media use on authoritarian regimes will always involve concrete political action, and often people willing to give their lives.

If we are interested in whether social media-facilitated protest can bring down an authoritarian regime, we also have to pay attention to factors other than the people in the streets. This past February, there was a boost in discussions of the Arab Spring on social media in China and also an upsurge in real physical protests. This had some analysts asking “is China next?” But China is a very different type of authoritarian regime than Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya were. One way concerns leadership succession. Hu Jintao
in China was chosen through an institutionalized succession process, is subject to term limits, and will be replaced with a new Chinese president in a few years. By contrast, Ben Ali, Gaddafi, and Mubarak all came to power through irregular mechanisms that involved violence, stayed in office for 2-4 decades, and showed no plans to leave on their own. Personalistic dictatorships like these may look stable but are inherently more vulnerable to spontaneous collapse. In Egypt, it was crucial that the military turned their backs on Mubarak. Top officers who had secretly wanted him removed from power may have seen this as their one opportunity to act. The same thing is much less likely to happen in China, because there is an institutionalized process through which new leaders are chosen on a regular basis.

I want to close with one reflection on what might be legitimately new about the role of social media in the Arab Spring versus the fall of communism. Azer and I were talking about this several months ago, and we agreed that social media make it much easier for small events, such as a vegetable seller setting himself on fire in Tunisia, to spark a chain reaction. In contrast, the fall of communism in Poland, the first of the Eastern European revolutions, was the culmination of nine years of political organizing by the opposition labor union Solidarity. I think we agree that this is a major difference between then and now, and with that, I’ll turn it over to him.