

Established democracies, Internet censorship, and the social media test

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Abstract

Social media can test how firmly entrenched Internet freedom is in established democracies through a comparison with countries with an authoritarian track record. The method is to evaluate the use of social media in recent protests in a sample of established democracies and authoritarian regimes, and to compare differences and similarities in government responses.

Keywords

Internet censorship, intellectual freedom, social media, established democracies, authoritarian regimes

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In August 2012, Burma's (Myanmar) information ministry announced the abolition of pre-publication censorship of its media and the relaxation of its Internet rules (Burma abolishes media censorship 2012). This may not mean the end of censorship in Burma, but the LIS community should celebrate when authoritarian regimes progress in intellectual freedom. How should it, and especially IFLA's Freedom of Access to Information and Freedom of Expression Committee, however, respond when established democracies regress?

On 15 February 2011, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton affirmed the United States' commitment to Internet freedom. She argued (2011) that the Internet is "a space where activities of all kinds can take place, from grand, ground-breaking, historic campaigns to the small, ordinary acts that people engage in every day." But

on 11 August 2011, the United Kingdom's Prime Minister David Cameron shocked the international community when he called for a clampdown on social media. He told parliament that Facebook, Twitter and Blackberry's Research in Motion should take greater responsibility for the content posted on their networks. He warned that the government would ban people from social networks suspected of inciting violence (Halliday and Garside 2011). These events prompt the question of whether established democracies are less vulnerable to Internet censorship than authoritarian regimes?

Although the Internet has been a platform for political speech and social action virtually since its inception, digital communications platforms have become an increasingly central component of resistance movements and other organized social action over the past five years. It has consequently become a popular target for repression, censorship, and surveillance. A recent study tested the fragility of intellectual freedom in established democracies, and their vulnerability to Internet censorship by asking how similarly or differently established democracies and authoritarian states respond to social media activism? (Dick, Oyieke and Bothma 2012). Twelve countries were selected from several regions of the world, and arranged according to their type of government and ranking as listed in *The Economist Intelligence Unit's Index of Democracy 2011*. The countries are located in Africa (Libya and South Africa), Asia (Australia, China, Myanmar, Pakistan, and Singapore), Europe (Finland, Turkey, and the UK), South America (Chile) and North America (The US).

These countries represent the four types of government used in the Index, namely full democracies, flawed democracies, hybrid regimes, and authoritarian regimes. At the one end are full democracies (Australia, Finland, the UK, and the USA), which are countries with basic political freedoms and civil liberties underpinned by a democratic political culture as well as media that are independent and diverse, and an independent judiciary. An established democracy is usually a full democracy that has been stable over a long period of time. At the other end are authoritarian regimes (China, Libya, Burma), which include dictatorships. Elections, if they do occur, are not free and fair and the media are either state-owned or controlled by groups connected to the ruling regime. Criticism of the government is usually repressed and censorship is pervasive. Between these extremes are the

flawed democracies (Chile, South Africa) and hybrid regimes (Pakistan, Singapore, Turkey).

Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube were selected as the social media primarily used by political activists during protests and social unrest, and because they have been the main targets for government clampdowns on the social media. Incidents of social media activism over the past five years were listed for each country using Reporters Without Borders; Open Net Initiative; Freedom of Connection, Freedom of Expression; Global Voices Online; and The Guardian. The technical and legislative controls used by government officials to increase censorship, as well as the counter-efforts by activists to defend and expand freedom of access to information and freedom of expression were identified. The data was analysed to show movement towards either rising levels of Internet censorship or towards greater intellectual freedom, and to assess differences and similarities between established democracies and authoritarian regimes.

The *Index of Democracy* reveals that for shifts in rankings between 2010 and 2011, Australia remained unchanged at 6th position, Finland slipped from 7th to 9th position, the UK improved from 19th to 18th position, and the USA dropped from 17th to 19th position. A noteworthy feature is the sharp increase in the number of incidents in the past five years in these countries. The riots in the UK and the 'Occupy Wall Street' movement in the USA are good examples not only of the increase in incidents of social media activism, but of the growth of Internet censorship and the kind of government reactions in established democracies. Tougher legislation, calls from across the party political spectrum to curb or shut down the social media, and the rise in number of actual censorship actions such as banning, blocking, filtering, blacklisting, and cyber-attacks in the established democracies show more similarities than differences from authoritarian regimes (Dick, Oyieke and Bothma 2012: 46).

Australia's mandatory national web-filtering system, Finland's increased Internet surveillance for terrorist threats, the UK's Internet Censorship and Disconnection Law, and the USA's Stop Online Piracy Act and Protect Intellectual Property Act are some of the technical and legislative mechanisms used to clampdown on the use of the social media. They are also indications of the vulnerability of established democracies to regress in their freedom of access to

information and freedom of expression. There is clear evidence from the social media test that the established democracies of Australia, Finland, the UK, and the USA are not less vulnerable to Internet censorship than authoritarian regimes (Dick, Oyieke and Bothma 2012: 44-8).

It may be argued that they are actually more vulnerable since they have much at stake, and because the globalisation of threats like terrorism, climate change, and economic austerity following the global economic crises in 2008 and 2009 have elicited the kinds of actions that are stripping away some layers of media freedom. Their responses to social media activism have not differed significantly from the responses of authoritarian regimes. Sustained and active vigilance is urged upon all established democracies for the sake of freedom of access and freedom of expression worldwide. Educating the LIS community to conduct this kind research is one way of alerting established democracies to their vulnerability.

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