

From Innovation to Revolution: Do Social Media Make Protests Possible?

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ABSTRACT

While reading Clay Shirky's "The Political Power of Social Media" (January/February 2010), the author was reminded of a trip he took just over ten years ago, during the dot-com bubble. He went to the catalog clothier Lands' End in Wisconsin, determined to write about how the rise of the Internet and e-commerce was transforming retail. What he learned was that it was not. The lesson here is that just because innovations in communications technology happen does not mean that they matter; or, to put it another way, in order for an innovation to make a real difference, it has to solve a problem that was actually a problem in the first place. If you look at the way the Internet has affected businesses such as Lands' End, you will indeed conclude that not much has changed, but that is because you are looking at the wrong thing. The competitive landscape gets altered because the Internet allows insurgents to play by different rules than incumbents.

FULL TEXT

An Absence of Evidence

While reading Clay Shirky's "The Political Power of Social Media" (January/February 2010), I was reminded of a trip I took just over ten years ago, during the dot-com bubble. I went to the catalog clothier Lands' End in Wisconsin, determined to write about how the rise of the Internet and e-commerce was transforming retail. What I learned was that it was not. Having a Web site, I was told, was definitely an improvement over being dependent entirely on a paper catalog and a phone bank. But it was not a life-changing event. After all, taking someone's order over the phone is not that much harder than taking it over the Internet. The innovations that companies such as Lands' End really cared about were bar codes and overnight delivery, which utterly revolutionized the back ends of their businesses and which had happened a good ten to 15 years previously.

The lesson here is that just because innovations in communications technology happen does not mean that they matter; or, to put it another way, in order for an innovation to make a real difference, it has to solve a problem that was actually a problem in the first place. This is the question that I kept wondering about throughout Shirky's essay-and that had motivated my New Yorker article on social media, to which Shirky refers: What evidence is there that social revolutions in the pre-Internet era suffered from a lack of cutting-edge communications and organizational tools? In other words, did social media solve a problem that actually needed solving? Shirky does a good job of showing how some recent protests have used the tools of social media. But for his argument to be anything close to persuasive, he has to convince readers that in the absence of social media, those uprisings would not have been possible.

Shirky Replies

Malcolm Gladwell's commercial comparison is illustrative. If you look at the way the Internet has affected businesses such as Lands' End, you will indeed conclude that not much has changed, but that is because you are looking at the wrong thing. The effect of the Internet on traditional businesses is less about altering internal practices than about altering the competitive landscape: clothing firms now have to compete with Zappos, bookstores with Amazon, newspapers with Craigslist, and so on.

The competitive landscape gets altered because the Internet allows insurgents to play by different rules than incumbents. (Curiously, the importance of this difference is best explained by Gladwell himself, in his 2009 New Yorker essay "How David Beats Goliath.") So I would break Gladwell's question of whether social media solved a problem that actually needed solving into two parts: Do social media allow insurgents to adopt new strategies? And have those strategies ever been crucial? Here, the historical record of the last decade is unambiguous: yes, and yes.

Digital networks have acted as a massive positive supply shock to the cost and spread of information, to the ease and range of public speech by citizens, and to the speed and scale of group coordination. As Gladwell has noted elsewhere, these changes do not allow otherwise uncommitted groups to take effective political action. They do, however, allow committed groups to play by new rules.

It would be impossible to tell the story of Philippine President Joseph Estrada's 2000 downfall without talking about how texting allowed Filipinos to coordinate at a speed and on a scale not available with other media. Similarly, the supporters of Spanish Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero used text messaging to coordinate the 2004 ouster of the People's Party in four days; anticommunist Moldovans used social media in 2009 to turn out 20,000 protesters in just 36 hours; the South Koreans who rallied against beef imports in 2008 took their grievances directly to the public, sharing text, photos, and video online, without needing permission from the state or help from professional media. Chinese anticorruption protesters use the instant-messaging service qq the same way today. All these actions relied on the power of social media to synchronize the behavior of groups quickly, cheaply, and publicly, in ways that were unavailable as recently as a decade ago.

As I noted in my original essay, this does not mean insurgents always prevail. Both the Green Movement and the Red Shirt protesters used novel strategies to organize, but the willingness of the Iranian and Thai governments to kill their own citizens proved an adequate defense of the status quo. Given the increased vigor of state reaction in the world today, it is not clear what new equilibriums between states and their citizens will look like. (I believe that, as with the printing press, the current changes will result in a net improvement for democracy; the scholars Evgeny Morozov and Rebecca MacKinnon, among others, dispute this view.)

Even the increased sophistication and force of state reaction, however, underline the basic point: these tools alter the dynamics of the public sphere. Where the state prevails, it is only by reacting to citizens' ability to be more publicly vocal and to coordinate more rapidly and on a larger scale than before these tools existed.

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