Media Conflict and DEMocratisation

Christian Christensen

Theorising democratisation conflicts: from Liberation Technology to Media Ecology

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For further information please contact Barbara Thomass, barbara.thomass@rub.de

Affiliation of the authors:

Christian Christensen

University of Stockholm

christian.christensen@ims.su.se

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Executive Summary

The purpose of this paper is to provide a conceptual framework for considering the role of ICTs (broadly defined) within democratisation conflicts. The ultimate purpose of the project, 'Media, Conflict and Democratisation' is to investigate the role of traditional media and ICTs in conflicts that accompany and follow transitions to democracy. The focus of the project is on four areas of contentious politics: (1) citizen politics and identities, (2) political power and accountability (3) elections and (4) transitional justice.

- The potential use of ICTs for communication management is at the forefront of the thinking for this paper, in which existing policy initiatives in relation to ICTs for conflict resolution will be addressed. It is important to note, however, that the role of ICTs in exacerbating conflict (and not simply ICTs in conflict resolution) will also be addressed.

- We review a number of reports and studies in which the use of ICTs in relation to democratisation and transition are addressed. Two things emerged from these studies that are noteworthy: first, socio-political context was discussed as a key factor in understanding the role of technology; and, second, relatively little mention was made regarding the inter-relationship(s) between ICT/social media and established mainstream media or alternative media outlets.

- A brief overview follows of three critical perspectives on technology in relation to social and political change: (1) Technology Discourse, (2) Technological Constructivism, and (3), Liberation Technology/Technologies of Liberation. These three areas have been chosen because they provide intellectual frameworks for considering (in a critical fashion) the relationship between technology, information and emancipation; and, in addition, how these definitions and operationalisations could potentially impact broader social understanding(s) of the affordances of contemporary social networking technologies.

- In the final section of the paper an attempt is made to connect ICT use in democratisation conflicts with what we might call 'mainstream' media use (newspapers, magazines and radio), and to do so without falling into the trap of techno-determinism or techno-utopianism. This is done through a presentation of the concepts of ecology, technologies of deliberation as an inter-connected theoretical framework for understanding this new, more complex inter-relationship.

- These theoretical frameworks dovetail with a number of the common recommendations made by the reports presented in the early part of the paper, particularly with regards to understanding ICT use within specific local contexts. The concept of media ecology is particularly useful in this respect, as the relationship between ICT use/content and

mainstream news coverage is a major factor in the media democratisation project. An empirically-grounded understanding of the relative level of disintermediation within particular ecologies will be crucial to developing suggestions for future policy, as well as an understanding of how positive or negative deliberation does (or does not) evolve within those ecologies.

Introduction

The purpose of this Working Paper is to provide a conceptual framework for considering the role of ICTs (broadly defined) within democratisation conflicts. The ultimate purpose of the project, 'Media, Conflict and Democratisation' is to investigate the role of traditional media and ICTs in conflicts that accompany and follow transitions to democracy. The focus of the project is on three areas of contentious politics: (1) constitutional conflicts, (2) accountability conflicts and (3) election conflicts. The point of departure is that media cannot be sufficiently understood in isolation, but have to be seen as part of an arena of public contestation occupied by multiple actors, each of which thriving to dominate the interpretations and outcomes. Based upon research carried out in Serbia, Egypt, Kenya and South Africa, the way in which traditional media in emerging democracies portray conflicts and whether media coverage contributes to the polarisation or moderation of divisions is a central question, with the diffusion of conflict messages through ICT a component of that issue. The project will closely work together with relevant stakeholders to develop recommendations for communication interventions that help to prevent conflicts and provide strategies for effective conflict management and conflict resolution. In particular, we will provide knowledge and skills as to how ICT tools can be used for effective communication management during conflicts.

It is this final point – the potential use of ICTs for communication management – that will be at the forefront of the thinking for this paper, in which existing policy initiatives in relation to ICTs for conflict resolution will be addressed. It is important to note, however, that the role of ICTs in exacerbating conflict (and not simply ICTs in conflict resolution) will also be addressed later in the paper. As a central concept for the paper, the connections between democratisation conflicts and the 'new media ecology' should be at the forefront of our thinking, as Tufekci and Wilson (2012) state:

> Most research on social movements and collective action centers on democratic countries (Maher, 2010), and often has little to say about the context and role of political communication, especially in authoritarian settings. There are, however, key mechanisms of control, repression, and affordances of social movements which need to be re-examined, conceptually and empirically, in the context of this emergent new media ecology. For example, Kurzman (2004) and Kuran (1997), among others, have argued citizens, especially in authoritarian contexts, fail to express dissident views and keep hidden preferences because they inaccurately believe themselves to be a small minority as a result of repression or self-censorship, thus causing pluralistic ignorance. One priority for future research is to determine how social media such as Facebook and Twitter impact this dynamic. (pp. 376-77)

In order to address these issues, the paper will be divided into three sections. In the first, examples of policy and think-tank proposals on the role of ICTs (and social media in particular) in democratisation and conflict resolution will be presented. In the second section, a selection of key theoretical and conceptual problems with mainstream thinking about ICTs will be discussed. And, in the final section, a proposal will be made for how the various ICT forms found within the proposed study might be considered (in theoretical terms) in order to maximise the utility and relevance of the work.

Examples of Policy/Think-Tank Views on ICT and Democracy

In a wide-ranging survey on Media and Democratisation conducted on behalf of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at Oxford University, Jebril, et al. (2013) reached five broad conclusions about the state of the field. First was their contention that, "a state of the discipline for the study of mass media and democratisation is difficult to construct as there is little coherence between the various theoretical and analytical approaches employed" (p. 2). One of the central reasons for this lack of coherence is the variation in the 'quality' of mass media across democratising nations. Second, there is a paucity of research providing concrete evidence of how the media meet their normative roles and their contributions to democratic institution building. Third, the authors suggest that research is unclear as to whether or not media are instigators of political change, or are merely reacting to change, and that the expectations from the research community that media reform will simply result in a mirroring of Western structures and practices is short-sighted. Fourth, the assumption that media, "play a (generically) positive role in democratic transition, particularly for citizens of transitional countries" is called into question, and that, "assuming a simple and positive relationship between media reform – i.e. changes in the quantity and quality of information sources and enhanced freedom of expression – on the one hand and successful democratisation on the other hand can be misleading." Finally, the role of new media as a catalyst for democratisation and transition, the authors argue, "has found little empirical support." The evidence for the role of social media in bringing about regime change during the so-called 'Arab Spring' is not supported by empirical evidence. (pp. 2-3)

I would like to take the last point made by Jebril, et al. (2013) on the role of social media as a point of departure for examining a number of other recent studies and proposals on the role of ICT and social media in processes of democratisation: studies by the World Bank (Comninos, 2013), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP)/United States Agency for International Development (USAID) (Mancini, 2013), and the National Democratic Institute (2013). In recent years, there have been a broad number of academic studies investigating the

impact of ICTs in countries going through various stages and forms of transitional and/or democratisation conflicts (e.g., Postill, 2014; Liu, 2011; Moyo, 2009; Paul and Rath, 2014; Hackett, 2007). While these are valuable studies in their own right, in this section larger-scale organisational and NGO examinations into technology and democracy will be examined. These studies represent a good cross-section of recent policy and NGO insight and opinion in relation to the use of ICTs in democratisation conflicts and transitional periods. In addition, the studies and documents reflect an important interplay between academic, political and commercial interests in relation to ICT use.

Comninos (2013), in a paper written for the Transnational Demobilization and Reintegration Program on behalf of the World Bank, wrote the following on the study of ICT use in relation to transitional, post-conflict societies:

> ICT4Peace practice and literature has to a large extent been focused on the period of time in the immediate run-up to a conflict, and during the conflict, as well as in its immediate aftermath. Comparatively, there is a lot less literature on the use of ICTs after peace agreements, in the post-conflict phase; that is in using ICTs for post-conflict reconstruction, in building long-term and sustainable peace, and in resolving the root causes of conflict. (p. 4)

Interestingly – in relation to the current project – Comninos makes note of a particularly problematic shortcoming in policies and guidelines in relation to post-conflict ICT use: the potential of what he describes as "Web 2.0" and "user-generated content" (UGC). The ability of users to create their own content, at a relatively low cost and with the potential to reach large audiences, is one of the hallmarks of contemporary online media. In addition, UGC such as blogs, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and Instagram can bypass the editorial filters traditional mainstream media (as well as national censorship), thus allowing for greater freedom of expression. However, Comninos is also quick to point out the potential downsides of these affordances:

> In Rwanda an 'old ICT', the radio, played a major and rather negative roles in the conflict. Radio was used to threaten and intimidate Tutsis, to encourage Hutus to commit violence against Tutsis, and to coordinate atrocities committed by the interahamwe. Could new ICTs also have been used in a similar manner, were the Rwandan genocide to happen in contemporary social media era? Furthermore, events in the post-election violence in Kenya in 2008 and more recently in India have shown that technologies such as SMS can be used to inflame ethnic tensions and to spread hate speech and orchestrate violence. In the recent Kenyan election,

because of this threat there was extensive monitoring of social media channels by authorities and NGOs. (p. 11)

The conclusion in the World Bank analysis, therefore, was mixed: the use of social media and other platforms in post-conflict and democratisation scenarios is context-bound, and their use can both alleviate and enflame existing tensions.

While the World Bank report was more of a thought-piece on the role of ICTs in post-conflict, a joint study produced by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and United States Agency for International Development (USAID) (Mancini, 2013) was a broad, empirically-based study on the use of ICTs in the prevention of violence and conflict. Employing case studies from Africa, Asia and Latin America, the research explored: the density and quality of ICTs utilised; triggering events for the conflict or violence as appropriate, and the role of ICTs; the role of civil society, national governments, donors, and regional and international organisations; government capacity and legitimacy, and its interactions with the community; patterns of information flow and their relevance for the quality of early warning, credibility of alerts, and number of people reached; whether and how ICT improved and/or worsened the situation; and whether and how ICT facilitated, informed, or expedited the response to the conflict situation (3). The five cases examined were varied, with violence related to crime, elections and armed conflict in a variety of political contexts, and using a diversity of technologies.

Space does not permit a discussion of each of the cases, but the general conclusions of the study are telling, as they provide some overlap with the work of Cosminos (2013). It should be remembered that the UNDP/USAID study was intended to offer policy recommendations for the use of ICT in the service of conflict prevention, yet they generate relevant questions to be addressed at a later point in this Working Paper. In summary, the following seven conclusions were drawn from the cross-national study:

1. New technologies demonstrate significant potential, but are not always the best option for a given crisis or situation. All tools need to be considered in conflict resolution.
2. The determining factors that will influence the efficacy of the use of technologies are socioeconomic, cultural and demographic. These factors will/should also influence which technologies work best.
3. The use of specific technologies can unintended 'knock-on effects' which can actually serve to incite violence and escalate conflict. The people using the technologies to these ends are known as 'spoilers' and these potential spoilers should be identified in each context.

4. The use of technologies should, when possible, be anchored at the local level and connected to pre-existing local initiatives, with local input at a premium. This will encourage 'buy-in' on the part of local communities.

5. Encourage the use of technology to ensure that information flows horizontally rather that vertically: in other words, rather than top-down it should be citizen-to-citizen.

6. To establish a consensus regarding the ownership, use and sharing of information. In addition, there needs to be consensus around the issues of privacy, access and use of particular data.

7. The promotion and development of ICT projects should ideally be done in partnership (governments, the private sector, NGOs) as synergy effects are achieved. (pp. 89-91)

The authors conclude with the assertion that, "the increased horizontal spread of new technologies across societies has the potential to revolutionize (…) traditional systems by making more information available to more people." This, in turn, "not only makes it harder *not* to do something when violence or conflict appears imminent, it also makes response more likely because it empowers local actors—who are closer to the crisis—and creates incentives to take action." (p. 92). And, to ensure maximum utility, the most effective use of ICTs is when there is a balance between decentralised grassroots efforts and "rationalized and coordinated" efforts of governments and international organisations. (*ibid.*)

Finally, the study 'Citizen Participation and Technology' (2013) published by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) investigated the role of new technologies in aiding citizen participation (and thus democratic development) in Burma, Mexico, Uganda, Egypt, Ghana and Peru. Of particular interest in the empirical work was the impact of technologies upon 'Citizen Voice', 'Political Space' and 'Government Accountability' (p. 18). While each of these three dimensions is important to democratisation, the authors of the study propose that, 'there is an underlying interrelationship (between them) that is necessary to ensure democratic governance because it is at this intersection that politics is practiced, democratic skills are developed, and democratic practices are established and deepened.' And, the project looked at how the use of technology would impact these dimensions and interrelationships. The project reached a large number of conclusions, but the most relevant to the proposed project related to democratisation conflicts were as follows:

1. "Technology can be used to readily create spaces and opportunities for citizens to express their voices, but making these voices politically stronger and the spaces more meaningful is a harder challenge that is political and not technological in nature."

2. "Technology enables citizen self-organizing and the rapid creation of loosely formed groups that can quickly react to political openings, build support, and bring focus and

energy to issues."

3. "While technology has opened up new avenues for citizens to engage with public officials and institutions, substantive input into political processes remains elusive."

4. "Some of democracy's intrinsic aspects, for example, the freedoms of speech and association, appear to be more readily advanced by technology than the development of the norms, values, and practices that are necessary for democracy to take root."

5. "Digital technologies in the hands of citizens have become ubiquitous, especially in the form of mobile devices, and have increased the possibility of political process monitoring."

6. "Political will and the technical capacity to provide accurate data on government performance or engage citizens in policy making are lacking in many emerging democracies." (pp. 59-63)

Critical Views on ICT

In this section a brief overview will be provided of three critical perspectives on technology in relation to social and political change: (1) Technology Discourse, (2) Technological Constructivism, and (3), Liberation Technology/Technologies of Liberation. These three areas have been chosen because they provide intellectual frameworks for considering (in a critical fashion) the relationship between technology, information and emancipation; and, in addition, how these definitions and operationalisations could potentially impact broader social understanding(s) of the affordances of contemporary social networking technologies. Following this section, further theoretical frameworks will be presented and discussed with an eye toward developing a framework for the analysis of ICT use in democratisation conflicts that avoids techno-deterministic shortcomings.

Technology Discourse

One of the leading scholars in the field of technology discourse, Eran Fisher (2010a; 2010b; 2007a; 2007b) has noted that there is a prevailing assumption in contemporary discourse on technology: namely that 'a new technology enables as new society' and, thus, 'that technology makes society.' This discourse, in turn, is defined as inherently transparent and unproblematic: to propose the emancipatory power of digital technology, for example, is not seen as the proposition of a subjective opinion, but simply the presentation of fact (2010: 230). As Fisher, et al. (2003) note, this is important because within contemporary discourses on technology and globalisation, 'the assumptions become even broader, encompassing societal values, development models and trajectories, and the means of fostering democracy, literacy and human well-being' (2). This technological-determinist position has been

challenged by, for example, proponents of the social shaping of technology (SST) (e.g. Williams and Edge, 1996), yet Fisher notes that both technological determinism and SST (problematically) "share an engagement with technology as an instrument." As an alternative perspective, "*technology as discourse* is not simply a reflection of the centrality of technology in the operation of modern societies; instead, it plays a constitutive role in their operation, and enables precisely that centrality" (p. 231; emphasis added). In this respect, technology discourse is a projection of social realities, or a "technological vision, through which transformations of political, economic and social nature are filtered" (*ibid.*).

Technological Constructivism

State actors can be seen as particularly powerful agents/stakeholders in the shaping of the understanding *and* utilisation of certain technological artifacts. While the theory of the Social Construction of Technology (SCOT) developed by Bijker et al. (1987; 2010) originally placed *user* understanding of technology at the forefront, a broader theory of *technological constructivism* allowing for other key actors to be accounted for in the process of shaping understanding and use of technology is relevant for the proposed project. In this version, as Mody et al. (2006) write, "technological constructivism suggests that technology and its uses are shaped by human agents. Since technology has no inevitable outcomes, citizens and their governments are not consigned to the role of passive observers of technological development" (p. 410). In this variant of constructivism, states and other stakeholders (in addition to users) play a central role in shaping the understanding and application of technology; and, for states, policy can be a particularly important tool: "while technological determinism rejects the notion that public policy might help determine the uses of new technologies, technological constructivism posits an affirmative role for communication policies which are based on empirical investigations into the social contexts surrounding specific technologies" (Mody, et al., 2006, p. 410).

Liberation Technology/Technologies of Liberation

A third and final theoretical can be found in what has come to be known as *Liberation Technology* or *Technologies of Liberation*. It is in this theoretical realm where we can find a great number of the debates currently taking place within Media and Communication Studies (and popular media) on the role and importance of online/social media in relation to events in, for example, Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Iran. Simply put: "Liberation technology is any form of information and communication technology (ICT) that can expand political, social, and economic freedom (...) including 'new social media such as Facebook and Twitter" (Diamond, 2010, p. 70). These ICTs, Diamond writes, enable "citizens to report news, expose wrongdoing, express opinions, mobilize protest, monitor elections, scrutinize government, deepen

participation, and expand the horizons of freedom" (*ibid.*). These views on Liberation Technology are, of course, classic examples of the Technology Discourse and Technological Constructivism discussed in the previous sub-sections.

The power of the cyber-utopian, technologically-determinist Liberation Technology discourse can be linked, Deibert and Rohozinski (2010) write, to the fact that the mainstream media reporting on technology and social movements have a bias toward —liberal-democratic ideals: In short, the *Liberation Technology* view is one in which there is a causal relationship posited between specific forms of technology and positive social change, the expansion of rights, and other forms of economic and social development. From a critical standpoint, the Liberation Technology argument leans heavily upon techno-deterministic (and some would say techno-utopian) lines of reasoning (see Christensen, 2011; 2012). The concept of *Liberation Technologies* is a fundamental intellectual basis for many of the current debates on the role of online media in the recent spate of political uprisings, as well as a number of new studies and publications. The premise – that social networking technologies have been vital tools in the struggle for freedom in, for example, Iran, Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Belarus, Moldova and Kyrgyzstan – has led to an explosion of academic and popular discourse and debate. The trigger for these debates was the popular uprising in Iran following the elections in June 2009. The protests were labelled by some as a 'Twitter Revolution,' despite the fact that there were just over 19,000 Twitter users in Iran, out of a total population of just under 80 million. A number of studies have emerged examining the role of Twitter (and other social media) in Iran (e.g., 2010; Cha, et al., 2010; Gaffney, 2010; Kraidy and Mourad, 2010), yet these studies have (for the obvious reason of time) been restricted to descriptions of use volume and patterns of Twitter, or broad reflections, rather than deeper analyses of the impact of social media use in Iran.

There have, however, been a limited number of more weighty theoretical contemplations on the events in Iran (and elsewhere) that address the ways in which social media might impact hierarchies of power. In an article written shortly after the Iranian elections, Giroux (2009) wrote that:

> The Internet, YouTube, Twitter and Facebook have reconstituted, especially among young people, how social relationships are constructed and how communication is produced, mediated, and received. They have also ushered in a new regime of visual imagery in which screen culture creates spectacular events just as much as they record them. Under such circumstances, state power becomes more porous and less controlled (...) Text messaging, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and the Internet have given rise to a reservoir of political energy that

posits a new relationship between the new media technologies, politics and public life (...) State power no longer has a hold on information, at least not the way it did before the emergence of the new media with its ability to reconfigure public exchange and social relations while constituting a new sphere of politics.

Yet, Giroux's general conceptual line vis-à-vis technology and democratic change, along with other scholars such as Shirky (2008), has been attacked as being excessively 'Techno-Utopian' (i.e. following the Liberation Technology path). In-depth studies from Iran on social media use (particularly blogging) by Sreberny and Khiabany (2010; 2007) and Khiabany and Sreberny (2007) were also critical of de-contextulised theorisation and writing on social media in Iran, noting the incredible complexity and variation within Iranian blogosphere, as well as state responses to technology. One of the most prominent critics of techno-utopianism and Liberation Technology to emerge in recent years is Evgeny Morozov (2011; 2009a; 2009b; 2009c), whose recent work offers a pointed deconstruction of what the author sees as an excessively romantic, naïve and historically de- contextualised view of the relationship between technology and state power. Of importance to the proposed study, Morozov (2011) devotes a significant portion of his book to discussion on state support, and idealistic (and misguided) attempts to utilise ICTs in the service of democratic change.

Grounding ICT Use: Disintermediation, Ecology and Deliberation

In the first part of this Working Paper a number of reports and studies were presented in which the use of ICTs in relation to democratisation and transition were addressed. Two things emerged from these studies that are noteworthy: first, socio-political context was discussed as a key factor in understanding the role of technology; and, second, relatively little mention was made regarding the inter-relationship(s) between ICT/social media and established mainstream media or alternative media outlets. Both of these elements, however, are crucial, and when taking into consideration the critical theoretical perspectives presented above, it is the purpose of this final section to attempt to connect ICT use in democratisation conflicts with what we might call 'mainstream' media use (newspapers, magazines and radio), and to do so without falling into the trap of techno-determinism or techno-utopianism discussed in the previous section. Jebril, et al. (2013) provide a good starting point for such a connection when they write:

There have been several attempts to systematise theoretical concerns and empirical research about the role of social media in political change. Some scholars suggest distinguishing between the internet as a *tool* for those seeking to bring about change from below, and the internet's role as a *space* where collective

dissent can be articulated. (1) They argue for transcending the debate between utopian and dystopian perspectives on the role of the internet in political change, (2) they propose a shift away from perspectives that isolate the internet from other media, and (3) they call for a better understanding of the dialectical relationship between online and offline political *action* (see Aouragh and Alexander, 2011, for details). Others have called for the abandoning of any technological deterministic framework: instead focusing on the complex interactions between society, technology, and political systems (Comunello and Anzera, 2012). Moreover, scholars stress the importance of considering political context before attempting to analyse the role of social media, as the nature of the political environment affects both the *ability* of citizens to gain access to social media and their *motivation* to take to the streets (Wolfsfeld et al., 2013). Finally, researchers have called for the focus to move from the newest technologies and to the long-term social and cultural effects of internet and mobile phone use.

These are all excellent points, and the arguments regarding considering the inter-relationship between Internet and other media, as well as the relationship between online and offline action are particularly salient. In order to address these points, it will be proposed that the concepts of ecology, technologies of deliberation and contextualisation be addressed in order to provide a rudimentary theoretical framework for understanding this new, more complex inter-relationship.

Disintermediation

The concept of 'disintermediation' provides an interesting point of departure for considering the role of ICTs in democratisation conflicts, and Aday, et al. (2013) offer the following definition:

The idea of disintermediation, concerns the relationship between new and old media. Some argue that traditional media content is actually diminishing in relevance and currency in light of the rise of citizen and activist media. This argument takes the collapse of elite gatekeeping as given and predicts that in the resulting open media marketplace, content created and shared horizontally by citizen peers will *disintermediate* traditional media, or eliminate their long-standing role as the primary political intermediary among citizens and between citizens and the state.

Against this strain of thinking, the authors continue, are

those who believe that disintermediation is becoming ubiquitous stand those who believe that large media corporations still retain significant capacity to frame political conflicts, notwithstanding the proliferation of citizen media. In this account, disintermediation has not occurred. The citizen media that non-activist publics see mostly flow through the publication channels of large media organizations, which attach their distinctive frames and biases along the way. Indeed, even social media– equipped gate-watchers may pluck more content from traditional media than from citizen media.

The debate over disintermediation is important in the context of a study that investigates the role of ICTs within democratisation conflicts because it, *de facto*, leads to questions regarding the potential interplay between social media (blogs, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and so on) and established 'legacy' media outlets. In other words: in countries in the throes of democratisation conflicts, do citizen and activist media, produced and distributed via non-mainstream platforms, find their way *directly* to citizens, by-passing traditional gatekeepers – along the lines of Hermida's (2010) notion of 'ambient journalism'? Or, is the content produced and distributed via these platforms picked up by mainstream outlets, where they find their main audience? Similarly, to what extent are social media tools used for the production of original material, versus their use for the spread (or discussion) of pre-produced mainstream news and information? Such an either/or, binary understanding of disintermediation, however, masks what is likely a far more nuanced interplay between media forms.

(New) Media Ecology

The level of disintermediation present in a particular national context is perhaps best considered within the context of the concept of media ecology: a framework that helps to avoid the dichotomous split between media isolation and interplay. In recent years, the history and development of the concept of 'media ecology' has been best addressed within the work of Scolari (2012; 2013). Scolari identifies 'complimentary interpretations' of the media ecology metaphor: the *environmental* conception in which the media is considered to be 'an environment that surrounds the subjects and models their cognitive and perceptual system,' and the *intermedia* version, which 'looks at the interactions between media, as if they were species of an ecosystem.' (2012, pp. 209-10). In this second conception, media are seen as 'species that live in the same ecosystem' and, 'analysis focuses on the relationships between media' (2013, p. 1419).

A number of scholars have utilised the concept of 'media ecology' (or simply 'ecology') in order to discuss the interplay between ICT/social and legacy media, as well as the integration of the two (e.g., Alexander and Aouragh, 2014; Cottle, 2011; Robertson, 2013;

Tufekci and Wilson, 2012). In their seminal study on the motivations to participate in the Tahrir Square protests, Tufekci and Wilson noted the need for a more complex understanding of political communication systems:

> Social media are just one portion of a new system of political communication that has evolved in North Africa and the Middle East (…) the connectivity infrastructure should be analyzed as a complex ecology rather than in terms of any specific platform or device. This new system involves three broad, interrelated components. First, satellite TV channels such as Al-Jazeera contributed to the formation of a new kind of public sphere in the Arab world (Howard, 2010, Lynch, 2006; Nisbet and Myers, 2010). Second, the rapid diffusion of the Internet and the rise of dedicated platforms such as Facebook and Twitter dramatically changed the infrastructure of social connectivity (Khamis and Vaughn, 2011; Radsch, 2008). Third, the falling costs and expanding capabilities of mobile phones have enriched dispersed communication with picture and video capabilities. In the span of a decade, societies in which it had long been difficult to access information were transformed into massive social experiments fuelled by an explosion in channels of information (Bailard, 2009; Howard, 2010). (p. 365).

This view was reflected in the work of Alexander and Aouragh (2014) - also writing about Egypt's 'unfinished Revolution' - who note that instead of defining social media use or a given platform as either positive or negative, and instead of utilising a 'deterministic' approach to addressing online and offline media, it is far more productive to consider how different activist practices can be connected to a 'larger media ecology.' (p. 891)

In the context of the proposed project (and the use of ICTs), the value of an ecological perspective – particularly the intermedia version discussed by Scolari (2012; 2013) is particularly useful. In each of the case studies (Serbia, Egypt, Kenya and South Africa) under analysis, there existed a wide variety of online and offline media, yet the chronological differences between the cases (from post-Apartheid South Africa to recent events in Egypt) mean that the technologies available were not always comparable in terms of architecture, accessibility, impact/influence, ubiquity and so on. For example, while Facebook and Twitter played a role in the Tahrir Square protests, these technologies were not available 10 years ago in South Africa or Serbia. Thus, the focus should not be on a comparison of the affordances of particular platforms, or their relative efficacy in the spread of pro- or anti-democratic messages, but rather to what extent and how the media technologies that existed in particular places and particular times interacted, as species do within an ecosystem.

Within the discussion of media ecologies, there is also a tendency to favour what we might describe as "conventional" forms of communication: radio, television, films, radio, social media, websites, etc. However, it is important to note that the concept of ecology should also be expanded to include media forms such as music (e.g. Mano, 2007; Hudson, 2010), or poetry (Ducaale, 2002). These alternative forms are particularly important for two reasons. First, communicative practices much as music and dance are used for the purposes of political communication in many areas of the world, and, in many cases, to powerful effect. Recognising this is a component of 'de-Westernising" media research. Secondly, these communicative forms are often used as 'hidden' forms of political resistance, often going under the radar of official government surveillance.

Deliberation Technologies

A decade ago, Bennett (2003, p.144) wrote that while "many activists cite the importance of personal digital media in creating networks and coordinating action across diverse political identities and organizations", questions remained regarding the true use, efficacy and impact of such technologies, and the problem of whether or not 'the ease of joining and leaving polycentric (multi-hubbed) issue networks' (*ibid.*) leads to difficulties in controlling and maintaining movements. Of central importance to Bennett was the issue of if (and how) digital media allowed for the development of new forms of political networks which challenged mainstream, hierarchical systems. In examining the impact of digital media upon activists around the turn of the millennium, Bennett found that such media had a wide range of effects upon political activism, 'from organizational dynamics and patterns of change, to strategic political relations between activists, opponents and spectator publics.' Bennett also noted that participation patterns were impacted by communication networks which allowed citizens to, "find multiple points of entry into varieties of political action." (*ibid.*).

Working off of this early research, and building upon later work (e.g. Bennett and Segerberg, 2011; Bennett, et al., 2011), Bennett and Segerberg (2012) developed the theoretical framework of "connective action" in contrast to the common concept of "collective action" to explain how digital media in general (and, in recent years, social media in particular) have contributed to the formation of loosely (and occasionally not-so-loosely) configured activist networks. Via connective action, individuals are able to participate (in varying degrees) in activism via social networking systems; and, in this form of action, "taking public action or contributing to a common good becomes an act of personal expression or recognition or self-validation achieved by sharing ideas and actions in trusted relationships" (pp. 752-3).

Thus, while traditional collective action is rooted in significant levels of centralised organisation, the creation of a collective identity and a significant investment of time and energy

on the part of participants, connective action is found in, 'personalized content sharing across media networks' (p. 739). For Bennett and Segerberg, two factors are key within rationalized connective action: (1) a message or political statement which is easily transformed/personalized, and (2) the use of technologies such as social media which allow for these themes to be shared and further personalized.

The "sharing of themes to be personalized" addressed by Bennett and Segerberg (2012) links to a second conceptual framework for considering the role of ICTs in democracy conflicts: the notion of 'deliberation technologies' (Pfister and Godana, 2012). One question to be asked in relation to the concept of connective action is the extent to which there exists the possibility of debate and deliberation, and not merely the circulation of information. As Pfister and Godana note:

> After an oppressive government has been overthrown with the aid of liberation technologies, as in Tunisia and Egypt, what then? It is all too easy to see the overthrow of a dictator as the hard work of a revolution; indeed, the violence that accompanied the Arab Spring is a testament to just how difficult this task remains. But the larger ongoing task of building a robust civil society capable of sustaining this hard- fought freedom is, in many ways, a harder and longer slog. A modest reframing of the conversation surrounding 'liberation technology' might help the intensive project of building more democratic societies. In short, we need a '*de*liberation technology' movement. Deliberation technologies facilitate not just information circulation, but discussion and debate. Deliberation technologies focus not just on the hardware of communication, but on the software and the practices that support a broad-based conversation amongst affected citizens. (p. 2)

"Deliberation technology" is an extension of Diamond's (2010) concept of "liberation technology", and one that places an emphasis upon the extent to which technologies facilitate (or do not facilitate) broader deliberation. Van Gelder (2012) writes that the issue is "whether and how new communication technologies can be used to enhance the operation of democracy once it has taken hold" and that, "technologies might enhance democracy by improving democratic deliberation." (p. 1). The concept has not been properly theorised, nor have any empirical studies using the idea been conducted to date, yet the move from a techno-centric liberation perspective to (a slightly less deterministic) deliberation perspective is potentially useful. In the original form proposed by Pfister and Godana (2012), the concept is related to the development of specific technologies that promote productive deliberation. This not the focus of the proposed project, yet the concept of 'deliberative technologies' in relation to media ecology would appear to provide an interesting synergy: the question to extent to which ICT

use in democratisation conflicts is absorbed into broader media discourse, and, if so, how such absorption leads to deliberations over elements of culture, politics, economics, and so on. In other words, rather than looking at one technological platform and asking if deliberation takes place, it is worth expanding the discussion to ask if the media *interplay* within the media ecology under investigation lead to deliberation, or it is merely an echo chamber, or – to take the work of Bennett and Segerberg (2012) – the simple personalisation and relaying of a constant stream of messages without broader debate?

Theoretical Considerations and Conclusions

What can this combination of theoretical approaches contribute to the current project in terms of a conceptual and analytical framework? First is the fact that the central concepts of Disintermediation, Ecology and Deliberation are able to encompass both the ICT and non-ICT components of the MeCoDEM project. The ICT element is not meant to be a compliment to the project, but rather a key component. As such, the material gathered in the future analysis of ICT use must be able to be theoretically anchored in, and connected to, the data gathered in relation to other areas of the project, such as newspaper content and interviews with journalists. It is here that we can say that concept of media ecology plays an important role by placing a focus on the totality of the media environment rather than specific media or platforms, and upon the interplay of different communicative forms, media ecology can act as an anchor. So, for example, when examining the role of journalists and journalistic organisations during times of democratisation conflicts in Serbia, Egypt, Kenya and South Africa, the role of online communication and (if applicable, social media) can be one area of focus. Another area of focus, however, can be an examination of social media content, and to see the extent to which this content links to established outlets, and the extent to which news and information about conflicts are covered by users outside of organised structures. Similarly, the use of social media can be examined to see how alternative forms of political communication (art, music, protest) are spread on these platforms.

As discussed previously, the use of the theory of media ecology dovetails very well with that of disintermediation, and the use of this theoretical perspective allows for addressing a number of fundamental issues: (1) the extent to which ICT/social media are actually in and around democratisation conflicts; (2) the extent to which ICT/social media are used to "bypass" traditional media gatekeepers; (3) if traditional gatekeepers are bypassed, who are the actors/organisations taking on the role; (4) if traditional gatekeepers are not being bypassed, which media organisations are being cited/linked/spread, and what does the popularity of certain outlets (local, national, international, critical, state) tell us about the instrumentalisation of ICT/social media use during times of crisis? These questions get at the heart of a number of assumptions regarding ICT use: namely their supposed ubiquity (the idea that 'everyone' is

using them), as well as the techno-romantic, liberation technology notion that ICT/social media are central components in/of democratic movements. While both may, in fact, be true in the cases of Serbia, Egypt, Kenya and South Africa, a more critical perspective on technology is needed in order to account for a the reification of already-powerful media organisations, as well as the (more troubling) anti-democratic or suppressive uses of ICTs.

In sum, in this paper at attempt has been made to give some background regarding recent work on the use of ICTs in democratisation conflicts and periods of democratic transition, particularly by those working at the intersections of government, NGOs and academia. As has been pointed out by a number of authors, the field of media and democratisation is far from unified, and the diversity of socio-political, economic, demographic and technological present in individual national case studies makes cross-cutting theories based on empirical research difficult to establish. It was for this reason that, rather than consider the affordances of particular technologies/platforms, or to look at individual instances of ICT use in isolation, theories which help to contextualise ICT use within broad ecologies were suggested. These theoretical frameworks dovetail with a number of the common recommendations made by the reports presented in the early part of the paper, particularly with regards to understanding ICT use within specific local contexts. The concept of media ecology is particularly useful in this respect, as the relationship between ICT use/content and mainstream news coverage is a major factor in the media democratisation project. Addressing the level and scope of disintermediation in the carious case studies is also useful, as it would serve to shed light upon the extent to which mainstream media news organisations are still (or are not) gatekeepers within democratisation conflicts. And, with a great deal of literature addressing the role of social media in conflict, but without an ecology perspective, an empirically-grounded understanding of the relative level of disintermediation within particular ecologies will be crucial to developing suggestions for future policy, as well as an understanding of how positive or negative deliberation does (or does not) evolve within those ecologies.

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