



Challenging Information Scarcity: The Effect on Internet Use on Protest under Authoritarian Regimes

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SUMMARY

This research provides a general study into whether, when and how internet use affects anti-government protest under authoritarian regimes. Its core contribution to the literature is twofold. First, rather than the democratization of authoritarian regimes, that has received most academic attention, the study investigates whether internet use promotes anti-government protest. Second, it explores when and how internet use facilitates mobilisation by examining the causal mechanisms. The study makes use of a mixed methods research design moving from large-n country year analyses, to in-depth exploratory qualitative fieldwork in Malaysia, and then back again to a quantitative analysis of multiple authoritarian regimes.

Chapter one introduces the topic and explains what is currently missing in our understanding of the relationship. It argues –among others- that our view of what internet-enabled mobilization *is*, is often too narrow, as we tend to be solely interested in events that take place just prior to, or during a protest, thereby disregarding how internet use affects political ideas before there is the call for a protest. Another flaw in our thinking that Chapter one stipulates is that close to everything we know about the relationship is based on studies of the Arab Spring, which has led to the undesirable situation where a discussion on the topic is often conflated with one on the causes of these specific uprisings. The chapter subsequently sets out the mixed methods research design to study the relationship and explains its strengths and limitations.

Chapter two provides a review of the existing literature and argues that it is the information scarcity in authoritarian regimes that makes these states possibly vulnerable to internet-enabled mobilisation: the authoritarian state's control over information and communication combined with citizens' inability to talk freely has traditionally limited the development of an independent public sphere under authoritarian rule, yet by increasing citizens' access to alternative political information, either long before, just before, or during an anti-government protest, internet use might in particular circumstances facilitate anti-government mobilisation. Chapter two proposes moreover a disaggregation of the mobilisation process by breaking it up into three analytically distinct steps, For people to become a protest participant, they 1) need to sympathize with the cause of a protest; 2) need to be informed about the upcoming protest; and 3) must be motivated to participate. The three steps allow for an in-depth investigation into the internet's role in each step separately. Chapter two concludes by proposing two important contextual factors that can moderate the effect of internet use on protest: the state's on- and offline repression, and the use of social media.

In order to understand how internet use affects anti-government protest in the three steps of the mobilisation chain, it is vital to first know whether there is a significant effect of internet use on protesting at all. Only if that question is answered positively does it become relevant to explore why this is so. The large n- quantitative studies in Chapter three, both at the country and the individual level, therefore investigate the internet's direct effect. A large-n, quantitative country-level analysis of the period 1990–2013 is carried out, looking at the extent to which the percentage of the population using the

internet predicted – *ceteris paribus* – the number of anti-government protests. A similar analysis is conducted at the individual level (2011–2015), investigating whether – other things being equal – internet users living under authoritarian regimes were more prone to protesting. In line with more cyber-optimistic ideas, the chapter shows that both at the country and individual level, internet use facilitated protest. The country-level analysis furthermore reveals that the effect held in authoritarian regimes especially, as opposed to democracies and semi-democracies, and that within the group of authoritarian regimes, the least authoritarian ones, using the least repression, suffered most from internet-enabled protest. Notably, the authoritarian states with the least freedom worldwide, such as North Korea or Turkmenistan, are not part of the analysis due to missing data. Neither the country- nor the individual-level analysis show evidence for the idea that higher online repression reduced the effect of internet use on protesting. In addition, contradicting the idea of the authoritarian state that learned over time how to prevent internet-enabled protests, the chapter also finds no evidence for a dwindling effect of internet use over time.

To investigate the causal mechanisms with the mobilisation chain, the study ‘goes’ qualitative, as the necessary quantitative data are unavailable, and because it is hard to know where to look as almost all potential causal mechanisms are based on accounts of the Arab Spring. In order to examine the processes lying between the independent variable ‘internet use’ and the dependent variable ‘protest’, the research therefore conducts an in-depth case study of Malaysia, with two periods of intensive fieldwork. The choice for Malaysia is informed by its authoritarian nature including an information scarcity, as well as by the six outbreaks of mass protest in the country in a period when internet penetration rates rose from 3% in 1998 to close to 80% in 2016.

Chapter four investigates the internet’s role in the first step of the mobilisation chain by studying whether internet use affected Malaysians’ sympathy for anti-government protest movements and their anti-regime sentiment. Using both qualitative and quantitative evidence, the chapter shows that in Malaysia the internet functioned as an alternative public sphere that allowed for the exchange of alternative political information, thereby challenging Malaysia’s information scarcity. As a result, Malaysian internet users were exposed to alternative political information, often highly critical towards the regime, and their political ideas changed accordingly. Malaysians learned online about the actual performance of their government, and became disappointed in a regime that turned out to be more corrupt, less democratic, and more repressive than they had previously assumed.

The explanation for the internet’s effect lies in Malaysia’s asymmetry in information controls, a term that connotes an unevenness in the online (high) and offline (low) media freedoms. Whereas the traditional media was strictly controlled by the Malaysian government, the internet was relatively free, which created a space for the circulation of alternative political information. Initially, the Malaysian authorities did not want to control cyberspace as they worried that state interference in cyberspace would scare off potential foreign investors. After suffering some major political defeats, however, and seeing these as linked to the freedom in cyberspace, the Malaysian government abandoned the idea of an

uncontrolled internet, reasoning that the political costs of leaving cyberspace unregulated had become too high. Yet the chapter showed that, even when an authoritarian state tried to get a tight grip on cyberspace through increased online repression, it was not always able to do so. International and domestic constraints, the socio-technical obstacles of online repression, and the ineffectiveness of the state's interventions in cyberspace made strict control over the internet by Malaysia's regime unattainable.

Chapter five moves on to the second step of the chain and examines how internet use has changed the extent to which protest sympathisers can be informed about an upcoming anti-government protest. The chapter argues that in Malaysia, it was the use of social media, rather than internet use, that made informing protest sympathisers much easier. In-depth interviews with 22 Malaysian activists and quantitative survey material are used to show that the rise of social media greatly facilitated the diffusion of protest information into multiple networks and across very diverse publics. Whereas in the pre-social media days Malaysians still had to make an effort to find political information, thereby easily missing information about an upcoming demonstration, in the age of social media information got increasingly pushed to them over social networks. This could explain – at least partly – that, despite relatively similar internet penetration rates in 2007 and 2011, many Malaysians were not aware of the announced 2007 anti-government rally, but did know about the 2011 rally before it took place.

In trying to explain why the Malaysian authorities' online repression was unable to prevent social media's facilitative role, the chapter identifies four reasons that made social media's 'success' possible. First, the government's harsh repression of protestors in the streets was captured in hundreds of images and videos, which was ideal 'hot' content to make the protest movements' information travel in cyberspace. Second, according to the interviewed activists, with its interventions the government made some severe blunders in cyberspace – such as blocking the protest movement's website and flooding the protesters' hashtag – which unintentionally only fostered attention for the rally on social media. Third, the movements' reliance on Facebook and Twitter in their communications made them relatively invulnerable to state repression in cyberspace. Rather than that the authorities were technically unable to take down Facebook or Twitter, they most likely refrained from censoring these platforms as it would have politicised and infuriated many Malaysians who were now apolitical or even supportive of the regime. Fourth and last, the successful spread of information over social media was also the result of mild offline repression in Malaysia. Due to this mild repression, the protest movement Bersih was able to gain a lot of trust and credibility among Malaysians over the years, which also facilitated the extent to which Malaysians were willing to share Bersih's content on social media.

Chapter six examines the third step in the mobilisation chain, investigating whether and how the use of the internet affected the motivation of informed sympathisers under high risk. Seventeen in-depth interviews were conducted with Malaysians who sympathised with the protest movement Bersih and knew about Bersih rallies before they occurred, but had not necessarily joined the protests. Some of them did participate, others did not, primarily because the perceived risks were considered too high. After the interviews, a nationwide survey was also conducted to test the hypotheses in a more systematic fashion.

In contrast to steps one and two, internet use did not turn out to play an important role in Malaysia in the chain's third step. Most of the hypothesised mechanisms were inspired by Arab Spring cases, but turned out to be largely irrelevant in the investigated Bersih protests. For instance, online information about the (expected) protestor turnout was not found to decrease the perceived risk of potential protestors, nor were they more prone to take risks because they were exposed to dramatic online audio-visual materials.

The only mechanism for which some evidence was found that internet use affected the motivation of informed sympathisers was through 'conducive social media networks'. The 17 in-depth interviews (not the survey) revealed that their increased online visibility affected the informed sympathisers' motivation to join the rally. Either because they wanted the social rewards of going ('cool thing to show to your peers online'), or were afraid of the social costs of not going ('if you don't go, you will be frowned upon'), their use of social media made it more likely that they would participate.

The aspect that makes this research distinct from most mixed-methods designs where regression analyses (Chapter three) are combined with an in-depth case study (Chapter four-six), is that it makes the 'full circle' by also taking the case study findings back to a the large n- regression analyses comparing multiple countries. By using individual level survey data, Chapter four's Malaysian findings are tested in Chapter seven in multiple other authoritarian regimes, while the wider applicability for Chapter five and six findings' is explored on the basis of secondary literature and theoretical reflections.

Chapter seven shows that the asymmetry in information controls, which was crucial in making Malaysians more sympathetic towards protest movements, is not a necessary condition to make internet users under authoritarian rule think less about their government. In a quantitative study of 25 authoritarian regimes (2010–2015), the chapter shows that, even in states with more symmetric information controls, internet use increased anti-regime sentiment, which makes it imperative to reflect on why internet use could still make citizens more negative about their governments despite the fact that the internet – at least at first sight – did not offer more freedom than the traditional media. Tentatively, the chapter proposes two explanations: First, authoritarian states were perhaps, despite high online repression, still not able to prevent the circulation of alternative information in cyberspace. In other words, an apparent symmetry in information controls (little on- and offline media freedom) might in reality not have been so symmetric. A second explanation is that authoritarian regimes were able but did not want to control the internet very strictly, as a relatively free cyberspace might also have provided regimes with valuable information both about citizens' concerns and about the functioning of local bureaucracies.

Chapter five's claims, which suggested that social media, rather than internet use as such, was conducive for the informing of protest sympathizers in Malaysia, is likely to only have similar explanatory value in authoritarian regimes with relatively mild forms state repression. In more repressive authoritarian contexts, social media is less likely to be conducive to the informing process, as people living in those regimes often do not dare to share information about a protest on their own social media accounts, because the necessary trust in protest movements is often lacking there, and because more repressive

authorities can often hinder the online informing of sympathisers in the wake of a protest by shutting down the most popular social media platforms or even the entire internet.

With regard to Chapter six' finding that conducive social media networks increased the motivation of Malaysians to protest, Chapter seven suggests that this mechanisms is likely to work similarly in other authoritarian settings, though again under the condition that sympathisers dare to share their support for a protest or a protest movement on social media. The hypothesized mechanisms that the chapter did not find support for in the Malaysian case, might according to Chapter seven still have explanatory value in other authoritarian circumstances, but they might also be overgeneralized findings from the Arab Spring cases.

Chapter eight discusses the findings collectively and reflects on their implications for authoritarian sustainability. On the one hand, the chapter warns for not being overly optimistic about the finding that internet use facilitates anti-government protest under authoritarian rule, as internet-enabled protests are not necessarily a threat to the regime in power. Yet, on the other hand, Chapter eight suggests that the internet's facilitative role in the mobilisation process can be a challenge to the sustainability of authoritarian rule. Not only because of internet-enabled protests themselves, but also by causing a decreasing legitimacy of the regime, that in the Malaysian case might hurt the authorities most at the ballot box.

The recommendations for civil society with which the research ends contain three points. First, albeit often heavily criticized on various grounds, American-based social media like Facebook and Twitter can play an important role in challenging the information scarcity in authoritarian states, because they are not as easily controlled by regimes as other websites. Second, the fight for rights in cyberspace should always be part of a broader strategy that aims to improve civil rights, and the freedom of speech and access to information in particular. Third, for the evaluation of the internet's success in authoritarian regimes, one should take a more long-term perspective, considering whether internet use has contributed to challenging information scarcity under authoritarian rule, and appreciating more gradual changes in society.