

BROUGHT TO YOU BY:

NEW TRENDS IN CRM
Read what the experts have to say



The Customer Collective

CLICK HERE
to download the e-book



[Sign up](#) | [Log in](#)

[Home](#)
[Post on this site](#)
[FAQ](#)
[Help](#)
[About Us & Contact](#)

Submit

Are the Internet and Social Media 'Tools of Freedom' or 'Tools of Oppression?'



Tags: [Arab Spring](#) [democracy](#) [Open Government](#) [Social Media & Networking](#) [social tools](#)

[comments](#) Posted March 8, 2011 by [Alexander Howard](#)

0

[retweet](#) **9** [Share](#)

The role of the Internet and social media in what has been described as the "Arab Spring" in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and the rest of the Middle East is one of the hottest topics in technology and foreign policy. Every day, it's seems there a new paper, forum or op-ed. Are YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, cellphones, crisis mapping and other technology platforms creating the conditions for revolution? Or are the autocrats whose iron rule has carried over from the 21st century using Facebook and mobile technology to track down dissidents?

The short answer is that these technologies can be both. Cellphones equipped with cameras and connected to the rest of the world have become the eyes and ears of young people in the Middle East. They can also be used to track them.

In a year when the leader of Libya mentioned Facebook by name and Egypt shuts down the Internet, it would be easy to simply celebrate the role of people power accelerated by social media. Not so fast. These social media platforms of 2011 can and will be used to people, governments and covert organizations to greenwash, astroturf or distribute propaganda or misinformation. This reality has been articulated by Evgeny Morozov in [The Net Delusion](#) and emphasized again in a commentary today on the role of [social networking in the Arab Spring](#). While Wael Ghonim said that without social networking, this wouldn't have happened, Morozov emphasizes that it took the bravery of millions of young people to show up in real life in Tahir Square in Egypt or in the streets of Tunisia for this to become a reality.

"Smarter social networking" in the service of the ends of dictators and autocrats can and will happen, along with so many other spheres of public life. As Ben Scott, innovation advisor of the State Department acknowledged at an [AMP Summit](#) in D.C. on social networking and Egypt last month, it is happening, with more use of tools for negative purpose to come. "The question is no longer does technology matter," he said. "It's how, and in what ways."

"Network effects are politically agnostic," said Scott. These connection technologies are not causing revolution. "They're accelerating them."

The question of whether these connection technologies are by their nature aligned with greater freedoms has also, literally, been up for debate. When it comes to a bigger question — whether connection technologies are more useful for democrats or dictators — Scott said that on the whole, he thought the proliferation of connection technologies is good for democracy. The online audience in a recent [debate at Economist.com between Stanford's Evgeny Morozov and Harvard's John Palfrey](#) decided by a narrow margin that the Internet is "inherently" a force for democracy. The full dialogue between the two men is well worth reading in its entirety.

» **Already a member? [Login now for faster comment moderation!](#)**

Connect with us



Latest Comments

You tube is a great medium to reach the target audience....

February 26, 2011 by [Web design Georgia](#)

Thanks for this report! This is a great idea....

February 24, 2011 by [DrWJK](#)

"Absolutely our No. 1 priority" is identifying Americans...

February 11, 2011 by [MarthaGonzalez](#)

Sure enough, the Government of Canada departments have...

February 9, 2011 by [Material Eléctrico](#)

Interesting article, thanks. I'm just finding out about...

January 26, 2011 by [Alan](#)

This is a great example how the use of commercially...

January 3, 2011 by [tennesseer](#)

Categories

- » [Case Studies](#)
- » [Data](#)
- » [Education & Training](#)
- » [eGov & Government 2.0](#)
- » [Fiscal Policy](#)
- » [Future Technologies](#)
- » [Governing People Exclusive](#)
- » [IT](#)
- » [Leadership & Management](#)
- » [Legal Issues](#)
- » [Money & Taxes](#)
- » [Open Government](#)
- » [Policy](#)
- » [Security](#)
- » [Social Media & Networking](#)

Popular

READ	AUTHORS	COMMENTED
------	---------	-----------

The Curious Case of Media Opposing Government Transparency

Whether that view or this architecture of the Internet itself persists has other members of the academy concerned as well. As Harvard computer science professor Jonathan Zittrain observes in the Scientific American, [keeping the Internet open](#), distributed and free is not a certain outcome.

Attacks on Internet sites and infrastructure, and the compromise of secure information, pose a particularly tricky problem because it is usually impossible to trace an attack back to its instigator. This “attribution problem” is so troublesome that some law-enforcement experts have called for a wholesale reworking of Internet architecture and protocols, such that every packet of data is engraved with the identity of its source. The idea is to make punishment, and therefore deterrence, possible. Unfortunately, such a reworking would also threaten what makes the Internet special, both technologically and socially.

The Internet works thanks to loose but trusted connections among its many constituent parts, with easy entry and exit for new Internet service providers or new forms of expanding access. That is not the case with, say, mobile phones, in which the telecom operator can tell which phone placed what call and to whom the phone is registered. Establishing this level of identity on the Internet is no small task, as we have seen with authoritarian regimes that have sought to limit anonymity. It would involve eliminating free and open Wi-Fi access points and other ways of sharing connections. Terminals in libraries and cybercafes would have to have verified sign-in rosters. Or worse, Internet access would have to be predicated on providing a special ID akin to a government-issued driver’s license—perhaps in the form of a USB key. No key, no bits. To be sure, this step would not stop criminals and states wanting to act covertly but would force them to invest much more to achieve the anonymity that comes so naturally today.

The history of the introduction of new communication tools is a reminder that most disruptive technologies have dual uses. In 1924, Calvin Coolidge was the first President of the United States to make a radio broadcast from the White House. A decade later, Hitler and Stalin were using the same tool to spread a different kind of message.

Nearly a century later, the current occupant of the White House is using YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, apps and live video on [WhiteHouse.gov](#) to communicate with citizens, both of the United States or in other countries. While the White House can claim some [open source cred for running WhiteHouse.gov on Drupal](#), much of the rest world has long since becoming aware of the disruptive nature of a more wired society that is connected to the Internet.

The debate about the role of connection technologies in Internet freedom spans many audiences. Last month, the discussion came to the [Cato Institute](#), where a debate on social media and revolutions was moderated by Jim Harper, Director of Information Policy Studies at Cato. The discussion featured Christopher Preble, Director of Foreign Policy Studies at Cato Institute, Tim Karr, Campaign Director, Free Press, and this correspondent.

The same platforms that can and are being used to transmit breathtaking moments of wonder, hear digital cries for help or lift up the voices of the citizens in oppressed societies to the rest of the world will also be used against them. Palfrey has further explored [Middle East conflict and an Internet tipping point](#) for the Internet at MIT’s Tech Review. His conclusion is worth sharing again:

Today, we are entering a period that we should call “access contested.” Activists around the world are pushing back on the denial of access and controls put in place by states that wish to restrict the free flow of information. This round of the contest, at least in the Middle East and North Africa, is being won by those who are using the network to organize against autocratic regimes. Online communities such as [Herdict.org](#) and peer-to-peer technologies like mesh networking provide specific ways for people to get involved directly in shaping how these technologies develop around the world.

But it would be a big mistake to presume that this state of affairs will last for long, or that it is an inevitable outcome. History shows us that there are cycles to the way that technologies, and how we use them, change over time, as Timothy Wu argues in his new book, *The Master Switch*. The leaders of many states, like China, Vietnam, and Uzbekistan, have proven able to use the Internet to restrict online discussion and to put people into jail for what they do using the network. We should resist the urge to cheer the triumph of pro-Western democracy fueled by widespread Internet access and usage. The contest for control of the Internet is only just beginning.

As the rest of the world watches the changes sweeping the Middle East through snippets of cellphone video uploaded to YouTube and curated by digital journalists like [Andy Carvin](#), connected citizens have

March 4, 2011 by David Eaves
Are the Internet and Social Media ‘Tools of Freedom’ or ‘Tools of Oppression?’
March 8, 2011 by Alexander Howard
Workers vs. widgets: policing in the age of high tech
March 5, 2011 by Christa Miller
States worry over current year budget battles in Congress
March 4, 2011 by Jeff Smith
Transit data as open government fuel for economic growth
March 7, 2011 by Alexander Howard

unprecedented capacity to drink from the firehose of revolutionary media. The role of the [Internet as a platform for collective action](#) is growing. The challenge is what people do with it.

235 reads [Original article](#)

Other Posts by Alexander Howard

[Transit data as open government fuel for economic growth](#) - March 7, 2011

[Senator Kate Lundy emphasizes citizen-centric services and location in open government](#) - March 2, 2011

[Congress faces challenges in identifying constituents using social media](#) - February 28, 2011

[Improving local open government and creating online hubs](#) - February 26, 2011

[Platforms for citizen sourcing emerge in Egypt](#) - February 24, 2011

Related Posts

[Transit data as open government fuel for economic growth](#)

March 7, 2011 by Alexander Howard

[The Curious Case of Media Opposing Government Transparency](#)

March 4, 2011 by DavidEaves

[Senator Kate Lundy emphasizes citizen-centric services and location in open government](#)

March 2, 2011 by Alexander Howard

[Congress faces challenges in identifying constituents using social media](#)

February 28, 2011 by Alexander Howard

[Reorganizing Government? Start Online!](#)

February 27, 2011 by arizonacandi