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Internet as a hope or a hoax for emerging democracies: revisiting the concept of citizenship in the digital age

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Abstract

This paper revisits the existing literature on the concept of citizenship in digital age. It provides a detailed discussion on the proponents and opponents of technological determinism. The paper should be read as an effort to reinitiate an important debate in the scholarship, which has been largely undermined while studying the Internet phenomenon in the information age. Thus, instead of offering a solution-oriented conclusion, the paper sets the stage to invite mass media and communication scholars' attention back to revisit the important ideological concepts, so as to evolve and improve our existing theories on communication and change in the society.

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1. Introduction

With the advent of the Internet and the rise of social media, communication scholars who fall in the category of technological determinism have started predicting the Internet's ability to enhance citizenship and promote democracy both in western and non-western settings. This argument gained more momentum and strength by the political uprisings of Tunisia and Egypt during late 2010 and early 2011, commonly referred to as the Jasmine Revolution (Tunisia), and the Arab Spring, Egypt (Arif, 2014; Cook, 2012). Thus it becomes imperative in the scholarship to further critically analyze following questions: whether it is the technology or human beings who bring

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about change in society. What constitute citizens? Who is more useful for democracy: “netizen” or citizen? Which one is more real: online community or offline community?

While reviewing literature on the issue, the researcher came across the inconsistency in concluding whether the Internet was the only factor that led to the enhanced citizenship in a relatively closed societies like Pakistan, Tunisia, and Egypt, or it were some other circumstances that contributed to the democratization of these countries in recent years, particularly between 2007 to 2011 when the citizens of the three countries started enjoying their virtual freedom because of the introduction of the Internet and social media. However, the paper came up with some evidence of citizens’ participation in the online political discourse on some social media platforms such YouTube, but this kind of discourse was very limited and was not quality-oriented. While analyzing the use of social media during the political unrests of Pakistan, Egypt, and Tunisia (Ghannam, 2011), it was observed that online political discourse did occur no matter how limited impact it might have on the overall political deliberation of these countries. Thus the idea of citizenship in the context of digital/new media remains a mystery. As stated earlier, this paper is not meant to draw a conclusion whether the Internet is an inevitable tool in promoting citizenship for democratic purposes, but it should be taken as an avenue to expand communication and media-related research questions beyond data-driven research, so as to ignite the intellectual debate in the field.

Talking about citizenship as the selected theme for this paper, it is important to discuss other themes such as technological determinism, change, and empowerment, which are necessary tools to understand the role of technology in society. Thus, this paper utilizes “citizenship” as an umbrella theme and discusses empowerment and change in the context of the selected theme.

In order to recall the discussion on the digital media and democracy, the researcher revisited the works of (Hafez, 2007; Harb, 2011; Lin and Atkin, 2008; Negroponte, 1995). Most of these reviewed studies represent a clear-cut divide among communication scholars while discussing the digital media’s role in shaping or reshaping our everyday lives. The proponents of the Internet were celebratory of the social media as an agent of change, democracy, citizenship, and empowerment (Negroponte, 1995; Papacharissi, 2010).

The opponents, however, argued that historically it were always the human beings who brought about change, promoted citizenship and worked toward the empowerment of average citizens (Carey, 2009; Hafez, 2007; Thussu, 2000). They argued that technology (new media of a particular time) was always used just as a tool to achieve those objectives. The opponents of technological determinism do not see any difference between the Gutenberg’s printing press (15th Century) and the Internet of 21st century (Carey, 2009). To them, both of these mediums were celebrated the same way by the technological determinists. Others compared the Internet with the history of radio when people thought that this medium will change the entire face of democracy and will create new political and public spheres based on its wide reach to the audiences.

Furthermore, the proponent scholars believe that the Internet will change the meanings of political engagement, public spheres and civic engagement because of its unique ability to bring people from all over the world together (Habermas, 1989; Negroponte, 1995; Papacharissi, 2010). However, the opponent scholars look at the Internet as a medium of political disengagement, which may prove fatal to the existing democratic values of society (Fandy, 2000; Sparks, 2005). Before we discuss the Internet’s role to enhance citizenship for democratic purpose in today’s world, it is imperative to understand the core concept of citizenship first.

2. The concept of citizenship

The concept is defined as the “status of a citizen with its attendant duties, rights, and privileges” (Freeditonary.com, 2010) in a democratic system. The concept arose in ancient Greece, where citizenship was granted only to property owners. The Romans initially used it as a privilege to be conferred upon or withheld from conquered peoples, but it was granted to all the empire’s free inhabitants in AD 212. The concept disappeared in Europe during the feudal era but was revived in the Renaissance (Freeditonary.com, 2010).

Citizenship is imbedded in the idea of public participation in democratic and state affairs. “The term ‘public’ connotes ideas of citizenship, commonality, and things not private, but accessible and observable by all” (Papacharissi, 2002, p. 10). Thinking in these terms, we can say that citizenship creates communities (based on common interests) and the communities form public sphere (Dewey, 1954). Thus, citizenship becomes an integral tool for a sustainable democratic society. In the age of the Internet, social media contributes to create online public

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