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AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES AND SOCIAL MEDIA: CONTROLLING THE MESSAGE TO DOMINATE POPULATIONS AND ENSURE POLITICAL LEGITIMACY

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**AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES AND SOCIAL MEDIA:
CONTROLLING THE MESSAGE TO DOMINATE
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One of the largest implications of social media is the change in how information is distributed, and more directly, who now operates the levers. Social media has no obvious gatekeeper. Anyone can join, participate and influence.

> - Jason Gainous and Kevin M. Wagner, *Tweeting to Power: The Social Media Revolution in American Politics*

INTRODUCTION

Nearly one in four people worldwide used some form of social media in 2013. The number of social network users around the world in 2013 was estimated at 1.73 billion and, by 2017 the global social network audience is expected to reach approximately 2.55 billion.[1] Today, authoritarian states such as the People's Republic of China (China), Russia and some countries within the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region have had no choice but to deal aggressively with this phenomenon.

> … The use of the web has created a communication protocol that is difficult to contain and limit using the more traditional heavy-handed approaches to opposition media. Since many repressive nations maintain themselves through state institutions that restrict political communication and organization, the Internet appears, at least facially, as a potential antidote.[2]

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[1] E-Marketer, "Social Networking Reaches Nearly One in Four around the World*"*, 18 June 2013. Last accessed 6 April 2015.

[2] Jason Gainous and Kevin M. Wagner, *Tweeting to Power: The Social Media Revolution in America Politics*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 7.

Traditional forms of media, such as television, radio and print, which were predominantly controlled by these states in the past and used to format and control state-themed messages directed at their populace, have started to lose their reach and influence. By formatting and controlling the message, an authoritarian regime will dominate and control their population. They will project power, manipulate and maintain influence over their people; furthermore, authoritarian regimes also believe that by controlling the message, they also ensure political legitimacy.[3]

Due to the rise of the Internet and increased use of social media over the past decade, authoritarian regimes have been forced to deal with an increase of opposing messages.[4] Today contradictions of messages, including information wars, are being waged on a global scale by various actors through the use of social media. In fact, social media has allowed the courageous, along with the oppressed to express their views, encourage social change, promote a new found freedom of individual expression and gain a sense of political liberty.[5]

> … Throughout history communication and information have been fundamental sources of power and domination. This is because the fundamental battle being fought in society is the battle over the minds of the people. The way people think determines the fate of norms and values on which societies are constructed.[6]

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[3] Manuel Castells, "Communication, Power and Counter-power in the Network Society", *International Journal of Communication* 1 (2007), 238.
[4] Rita Safranek, "The Emerging Role of Social Media in Political and Regime." *Proquest Discovery Guides, March Edition.* (March 2012). Last accessed 2 April 2015.
[5] S.K. MacBeth, "The IPhone as the AK-47 of the 21st Century: Influencing Outcomes through the Indirect Approach." (Master's Thesis, Canadian Forces College, 2014), 48.
[6] Castells, "Communication, Power and Counter-power …, 238.

Not only has social media created a venue for individuals to directly challenge messages that come from authoritarian governments, but the pace of information distribution is becoming an added challenge for such governments. To further complicate matters for such states, those non-state actors previously unable to voice their views now have a platform with an unimaginable reach on-line. This dilemma has created a growing number of competing messages fighting for space, a global audience and world attention. Social media has enabled everyone from WikiLeaks[7] to citizen-journalists, including on-the-ground eye witnesses to share stories that directly counter messages issued by authoritarian regimes.

THESIS

These authoritarian regimes have been selected in order to demonstrate that all three examples – despite differences in population size, geography, history, leadership, and culture – are those of regimes that continue to find ways to format and control state-themed messages in order to protect their image, control and maintain influence over their population, and ensure political legitimacy and survival. This essay will focus on why China, Russia and the MENA Region perceive social media as a threat and demonstrate how they have responded in limiting its impact on promoting real social change within their borders.

In order to understand this form of control, the perception and use of social media by a democratic state, in particular the United States (U.S.) will be discussed. Unlike the U.S. and

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[7] WikiLeaks is an international, non-profit, journalistic organization, which publishes secret information, news leaks and classified material from anonymous sources. It was initiated in 2006 in Iceland by the organization Sunshine Press.

other Western governments that have embraced social media and support all venues that promote

free speech, China, Russia and authoritarian regimes within the MENA Region have waged a

war on the Internet and social media in their continuing efforts to format and control state-

themed messages.[8]

> … From mobilizing young voters here in the U.S. to the roots of the Arab Spring
> in the Middle East, Twitter, YouTube, Facebook and others have played not just
> an important role, but also an instrumental one [in influencing changes in
> government].[9]

Over the last decade, an increase in socioeconomic frustrations, poor governance,

disenchanted youth, and high rates of unemployment prevalent throughout China, Russia and the

MENA Region have caused much damage to the legitimacy of such regimes. Since these states

controlled traditional forms of media, such issues were concealed from the public. The notion

that their people would openly voice their concerns in any forum was unfathomable a few

decades ago. Social media has allowed people to anonymously voice their frustrations, views and

share the truth.[10]

> … The main issue is not the shaping of minds by explicit messages in the media,
> but the absence of a given content in the media. What does not exist in the media
> does not exist in the public mind.[11]

Social media has created space in an otherwise controlled information domain that

extends beyond the limits of conventional state control. Social media has leveled the playing

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[8] *The Washington Post*, "Turkey's Social Media Power Grab", April 10, 2015. Last accessed 7 April 2015.
[9] Pierre Omidyar. "Enemy of the State or Power to the People", *HuffingtonPost.com*, 1 December 2014.
Last accessed 6 April 2015.
[10] Pierre Omidyar. "Enemy of the State or Power to the People …
[11] Castells, "Communication, Power and Counter-power …, 241.

field through the dispersion of on-the-ground-truths, first hand witnessed facts, and has increased the global interactive elements of communication. China, Russia and the MENA Region have perceived social media and the Internet as a security threat and a threat to their political legitimacy. For these reasons, they have implemented systems within their borders to contain social media and this essay will demonstrate that they have achieved success by controlling the message, and by preventing social media from being used to implement real social change and dissent within their borders.

METHODOLOGY

The arguments which will be provided in this essay will draw on a method that is comparative. The sections that follow are built on accounts of three different geographic regions/examples of modern day authoritarian regimes; China, Russia, and the MENA Region and how they perceive social media and the Internet. While there are a number of differences in specific types of authoritarian states, they can generally be understood to be undemocratic: lacking of free and fair elections, being repressive to all or a large portion of their population, limiting government institutions which would challenge leadership, and exhibiting personalism, one-party and/or military leadership.[12]

Unlike their democratic counterparts which allow freedom of expression, authoritarian states are wrestling with social media, and grasping at maintaining control over state-themed

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[12] Barbara Geddes, "What do we know about Democratization after twenty years?," *Annual Review of Political Science* 2 (1999), 118.

messages in order to maintain influence over their people. As noted earlier, sections in this essay will discuss how these authoritative states have successfully implemented systems to control social media and the Internet within their borders and these states will be compared with a democratic system, such as the U.S. By comparing the ways in which the U.S. government utilizes and perceives social media with how China, Russia and the MENA Region perceive social media, it will become obvious to the reader that these authoritative regimes have implemented bold and repressive systems to control state-themed messages.

DEFINING SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media is a term used so frequently today that it is globally understood. In order, however, to understand the impact of social media, it is crucial to understand precisely what the term means. For the purpose of this paper, social media refers to social networks, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, message boards, and applications used to generate two-way communications.[13] The common thread is for users to come together to engage in a form of media that is truly social and active, regardless of the users' background and location in the world. Something of importance to note is that social media depends heavily on "smart" communication technology (mobiles and tablets, for example) and web-based technology to create a rapid form of interactive platforms that people, along with communities, use today to share, create, inform, discuss, and modify the content available on the web.[14]

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[13] Alex Marland, Thierry Giasson, and Tamara A. Small, *Political Communication in Canada: Meet the Press and Tweet the Rest* (Vancouver, UBC Press, 2014), 254.
[14] Jason Gainous and Kevin M. Wagner. "*Tweeting to Power*" …, 10.

Finally, it is important to note that social media has become more popular than traditional forms of media, such as television, radio and news-print, which at one point in history were dominant fixtures. The theory behind social media is that it allows for a more interactive form of communication that provides real-time and unfiltered distribution of information, characteristics which are lacking in traditional forms of media. Furthermore, because social media can be accessed from "smart" technology, it has also become more mobile than traditional forms of media.

THE GLOBAL REACH OF SOCIAL MEDIA

In accordance with the displacement of *traditional* media (such as television, radio and news-print) by social media, the *traditional* news reporter (professional journalist) has largely been challenged by the rise of the citizen-reporter. Working through social media, the citizen-reporter has revolutionized the news industry. One of the best examples of the global reach of social media and the influence of the citizen-reporter occurred in Pakistan during one of the most important events to take place in modern history. On May 2nd, 2011, social media was used by a local resident (not a professional journalist) to provide first-hand accounts of what is arguably one of the most important U.S. military operations in their fight against terrorism; the death of Osama bin Laden.[15]

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[15] Steven Myers, "How 4 People & their Social Network Turned an Unwitting Witness to Bin Laden's Death into a Citizen Journalist*", Poynter.org*, 24 November 2014. Last accessed 6 April 2015.

In Abbottabad, Pakistan, at approximately 1:00 am, on May 2nd, 2011, Sohaib Athar, an IT consultant Tweeted under the handle *@ReallyVirtual*: "Helicopter hovering above Abbottabad at 1AM (is a rare event)," and "Go away helicopter – before I take out my giant swatter." Mr. Athar then described hearing a "huge windows shaking bang." For the next few hours, he connected to other Twitter users to discuss theories on the loud explosions and the unusual sightings of helicopter movements. Inadvertently, Mr. Athar had just described the actions of Navy SEAL Team 6 and the breaking news concerning the death of Osama Bin Laden.[16] He ended his night's Tweets with the following: "Uh oh, now I'm the guy who live-blogged the Osama raid without knowing it."[17]

The impact of social media can only be fully appreciated when the reader truly comprehends what occurred on May 2nd, 2011. A U.S. military operation, which was undoubtedly known by only a handful of government and military personnel aimed at capturing the most wanted man in the world, undertaken by an elite team of Special Forces Operators using high tech stealth helicopters, was being Tweeted in real-time by a resident who couldn't sleep.

Another example of the importance of citizen-reporting comes from the CNN cable network. CNN, by far the largest media conglomerate in the world, revolutionized the use of social media and helped to create the citizen-reporter by developing the CNN's I- Reporter. I-Reporter is a journalism initiative that encourages people around the world to contribute imagery, videos, and news stories from their own perspective and with an overall aim of

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[16] Sohaib Athar, "Helicopter hovering above Abbottabad at 1AM (is a rare event)*", Twitter,* 1 May 2011. Last accessed 15 March 2015.
[17] Sohaib Athar, "Helicopter hovering above Abbottabad …

obtaining breaking news as it occurs. As of March 2011, there were 750,000 I-Reporters registered worldwide.

The notion of citizen-journalists is based upon the concept that ordinary people in any country can have an active role in reporting, analyzing and posting news and information on blogs, through podcasts, or simply on the many social media avenues available on the Internet.[18] A consequence of such reporting, besides the obvious transmission of news in real-time, is a challenge to authoritarian regimes and the status-quo of politics. According to Allan and Thorsen (2009), such forms of social media are "frequently associated with political activists seeking to challenge society's established institutions and power relations." [19]

Citizen-journalists, including bloggers, Tweeters, I-Reporters, and Instagrammers have proved to be a serious threat to the domination and control of the message by states such as Russia, China and the MENA Region,[20] by exposing cracks in the way such regimes represent themselves to their citizens and people across the world.

> … The protestors relied heavily on the Internet and mobile phones. One report stated: "First, the Internet allowed for the creation of a space for dissenting opinions of 'citizen journalists' in an otherwise self-censored media environment. Second, pro-democracy activists used the convergence of mobile phones and the Internet to coordinate a wide range of activities.[21]

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[18] CNN. "IReport, FAQs/Help", *CNN.com*. Last accessed 10 April 2015.
[19] Stuart Allan and Einar Thorsen, "Introduction", in *Citizen Journalism: Global Perspectives (*New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 11.
[20] CNN. "IReport, FAQs/Help" ...
[21] Philip Seib. *Real-Time Diplomacy: Politics and Power in the Social Media Era*. New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2012, 144.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE UNITED STATES

Since winning the U.S. Presidency in 2008, Barack Obama and his White House Administration have used a number of new communication technologies, including the Internet and social media to communicate with American citizens, other governments and people around the globe. The embracing of these technologies and social media by the U.S. has helped to redefine the relationship between the U.S. government, its citizens and traditional media. Social media has in some cases influenced U.S. domestic and foreign policy and helped to increase voter engagements at the federal and state level.

The reason behind the U.S. government's strong use of social media is the awareness that more Americans than ever before are using social media to participate in political and civic engagements. A case in point is the fact that 60 percent of American adults use either social networking sites, such as Facebook or Twitter to engage and become informed. Furthermore, according to a recent study, 66 percent of the American-adult social media users mentioned previously have undertaken at least one civic or political activity through social media.[22]

President Obama's first active use of social media tools, such as Twitter and Facebook started in 2008 during his presidential campaign as part of his overall communications and marketing strategy targeting millennial voters.[23] Soon after becoming President, Mr. Obama

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[22] Lee Rainie, Aaron Smith, Kay Lehman Schlozman, Henry Brady and Sidney Verba. "Social Media and Political Engagement." Pewresearchcentre.com, 19 October 2012. Last accessed 20 April 2015.

[23] Pamela Rutledge, "How Obama Won the Social Media Battle in the 2012 Presidential Campaign", *Mprcenter.org*, 25 January 2013. Last accessed 2 April 2015.

created a new White House social media team to help manage his Administration's social media presence.

He also called on all U.S. federal departments and agencies to create Twitter and Facebook accounts in order to demonstrate transparency, encourage two-way communications, invite public input and inspire community collaboration. According to Obama, "… My administration is committed to creating an unprecedented level of openness in government. Openness will strengthen our democracy and promote efficiency and effectiveness in government."[24]

> … Relationships between people are the glue of any society. For a society, especially a democracy, to function, scholars have theorized that a citizen's political participation is a product of their investment or connection within a society and with the people around them.[25]

The continued efforts by the U.S. President, along with U.S. federal departments and agencies to effectively utilize social media are not part of an ongoing strategy by the U.S. to format and control the message. In fact, social media is quickly becoming an important part of how the U.S. public communicates directly with its government and is helping to build a social connection between elected officials and constituents within the United States.[26] Furthermore, freedom of the press is protected within the First Amendment to the United States Constitution and The Constitution guarantees freedom of expression by prohibiting Congress from restricting

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[24] United States, *The Whitehouse Home Page*. Last accessed 26 April 2015.
[25] Jason Gainous and Kevin M. Wagner. *Tweeting to Power …,* 96.
[26] Pamela Rutledge, "How Obama Won the Social Media" …

the press or the rights of individuals to speak freely. In other words, the U.S. President can never completely format and control the message without being challenged by professional media.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE MENA REGION

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region has one of the most youthful populations in the world, with people under 25 making up between 35 to 45 percent of the population in each country. They also happen to make up the majority of global social media users, including having close to 17 million accounts on Facebook and approximately 40,000 active blog users.[27] This is an important fact that authoritarian regimes within the MENA Region failed to realise. As they continued to format and control state-themed message on traditional forms of media, the youth within the MENA Region were using social media networks to contradict and challenge their regimes' messages by providing real-time, on the ground truths.

Information and imagery spread by citizen-journalists and other non-state actors via social media and social network websites played an important role in supporting global social activism over the last decade, specifically in relation to the Arab Spring.[28] To have the ability to immediately share an immense amount of uncensored and accurate on-the-ground videos and audio through social media played a significant role in bringing global attention onto the Arab Spring.

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[27] Rita Safranek, "The Emerging Role of Social Media" …
[28] Rita Safranek, "The Emerging Role of Social Media" …

Authoritarian regimes within the MENA Region simply could not control the message quickly enough due to the speed and global reach of social media. Through social media, people taking action during the Arab Spring not only gained the upper hand over authoritative dictatorships, but also introduced average citizens to on-line communities where common beliefs and values could be shared. And through these on-line communities, people began to see through formatted and controlled government messages.

> … Online communication had been used by Egyptian anti-government organizers for years before the Arab Spring, particularly by the April 6 Youth Movement, which by early 2009 reportedly had 70,000 members. Among its projects was compilation of an online manual for protestors.[29]

In countries like Egypt, Tunisia, and even Yemen, citizen-protests made up of thousands of average people were organized through social media. Facebook and Twitter were used to schedule and co-ordinate protests. Then, once people/activists were on site, using "Smart" mobile technology, government abuse was captured and immediately relayed to YouTube to share with the world. The immediate impact that social media had in ensuring the world was aware of the atrocities and into bringing communities together was pivotal in bringing forth democratic change in countries such as Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen.[30]

Social media allowed people, for the first time in their lives an ability to distribute unfiltered information quickly and without restrictions by government censorships. It is, however, very important to understand that social media did not cause the Arab Spring throughout the MENA regions, but it played a significant role in communicating the messages

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[29] Philip Seib. *Real-Time Diplomacy* …, 50.
[30] Rita Safranek, "The Emerging Role of Social Media" …

and actions within each respective country and to the world, which led to these citizens banding

together to start an uprising.[31] Authoritative dictatorships simply lost control of the message,

since the state-controlled traditional media could not keep pace with on-line social media

networks. To ensure social media is not used to encourage another uprising within their borders,

the newly elected Government of Egypt has employed a U.S.-based cyber security agency to

monitor on-line traffic, and in particular social media networking sites, such as Skype, Facebook,

Twitter, and YouTube.[32]

The Islamic State of Iran (Iran), an authoritative state within the MENA Region, was at

one point heavily scrutinized by its population, in part, due to the Internet and social media. And

in the last decade, the Internet, along with social media networking sites have had a significant

impact on Iran and its ability to maintain control over state-themed messages within their

borders.

By trying to deal with the challenges of social media and the Internet, Iran, in the past has

restricted access to certain websites and popular social media network sites; however, this has

created legitimacy problems for their regime. A case in point was the government's response to

the unrest following President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's re-election in 2009. In response to the

protests and on-line posts, the Iranian government placed a greater control on the Internet and

engaged in a practice termed *deep-packet-inspections*; this involved monitoring and gathering

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[31] Rita Safranek. "The Emerging Role of Social Media" …
[32] Sheera Frenkel and Maged Atef. "Egypt begins surveillance of Facebook, Twitter, and Skype on Unprecedented scale." Buzz Feed News. 17 September 2014. Las accessed 9 May 2015.

information about Iranian citizens. In addition, the regime altered on-line content rather than block communication altogether.[33]

The popularity of the Internet, along with the use of social media during the Arab Spring caused Iran to become concerned that their political views were not being sufficiently circulated within their cyberspace-borders and that their population were being negatively influenced through foreign-based websites. For these reasons, the authoritarian regime created Fars News, an on-line government news agency linked to the Revolutionary Guards that actively produces heavily censored and distorted versions of the news in Farsi, English, and Arabic. Fars News has provided the regime with an on-line presence and enabled the Iranian government to propagate messages in cyber space with an ability to format the content as required.[34] To Iran, these measures in place seem to be achieving the desired effect; control over state-themed messages and not allowing foreign-influence within their borders.

Not part of the MENA Region, but a predominantly Muslim nation with an authoritative government, Turkey has, in recent years limited their population's access to social media. In June, general elections will be held in that country, and social media will be censored. Most recently, the Turkish government blocked more than 100 Western-based websites, including Twitter, Facebook, Google and YouTube. At issue was the Government of Turkey's disenchantment with these websites for posting images of a Turkish prosecutor being held

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[33] Christopher Rhoads and Loretta Chao. "Iran's Web Spying Aided by Western Technology", *The Wall Street Journal*, June 22, 2009. Last accessed 5 April 2015.
[34] Christopher Rhoads and Loretta Chao. "Iran's Web Spying Aided by Western Technology" …

hostage by gunmen; the images were simply not flattering to the government and contradicted the message the government was releasing on the incident.[35]

In 2014, Twitter reported that 60 percent of the requests it received for removal of posts on its site were from Turkey; Facebook reported that requests from Turkey to remove content on their site doubled in 2014.[36] Turkey's domestic media have not been off limits either; many journalists have been prosecuted on trumped-up charges and forced to sell their news outlets or face government punishment. Turkey's recent suppression of media, traditional and social media is an indication of this government's continuous attempts at controlling the message in order to maintain political control over the country.[37]

SOCIAL MEDIA AND CHINA

China, a single-party State of 1.4 billion people has a strict Internet censorship policy and restrictions on free speech, along with any forms of freedom of expression. Their imposed limit on free speech is well known and is an example of how the Chinese government engages in censorship as a means to format and control state-themed messaged. However, according to recent reports, social media has changed the protest landscape throughout China. Its national media, consisting of traditional media outlets (television, radio and news-print) lacks plurality

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[35] *The Washington Post*. "Turkey's Social Media Power Grab" …
[36] *The Washington Post*. "Turkey's Social Media Power Grab" …
[37] *The Washington Post*. "Turkey's Social Media Power Grab", …

and consistently fails to report on incidents, *grass root protests,* or any event that they feel may damage the government's perceived image in the eyes of the populace.[38]

Social media within China has expanded rapidly. Websites such as Sina Weibo, with close to 100 million active daily users and over 600 million registered users, and WeChat, a mobile texting and voice messaging application, with over 400 million registered users, of which 100 million are outside China, are growing in size each day. Such networking sites are allowing for the first time an unfiltered spread of information that has never previously been available to the populace, journalists, academia and the youth within the borders of China.[39]

In July 2012, for example, a three day protest in the city of Shifang, with a population of just over 400,000 people boasted one of the largest public demonstrations against the government on record in China. It was a protest against a proposed copper plant that protestors feared posed a risk to the environment and to the public health of citizens within the City of Shifang. Over three days, the protests drew thousands of participants and the government dispatched police to break up the demonstrations through the use of tear gas and stun grenades.

As images and videos of badly beaten protestors began circulating on Sina Weibo and WeChat, a remarkable occurrence began to take shape; the size and the composition of its participants taking part in the demonstrations started to grow. Even though the protest was growing in size, state controlled media declined to report on the demonstrators and referred to

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[38] *The Economist*, "How Does China Censor the Internet?", *Economist.com*, April 21, 2013. Last accessed 7 April 2015.
[39] E-Marketer, "Social Networking Reaches" …

the growing protest as a minor incident, and nothing more. In contrast to state media, there were approximately 5.25 million posts on Sina Weibo containing the term Shifang, with 400,000 posts containing images and 10,000 containing video of the demonstrators.[40]

The Chinese government uses two main methods of controlling what its people view online: The Great Firewall, as it is called by critics of China's system of monitoring and limiting access to Western-based websites and the Golden Shield, a monitoring system for domestic surveillance maintained by the Ministry of Public Security.[41] In recent years, China's filtering systems have become very sophisticated and can be used to block specific pages within Western-based websites, rather than blocking the entire site. Furthermore, China's internet service providers are issued with lists of restricted keywords, and these companies pre-emptively censor blog posts and other contents to avoid being penalized by the Chinese government.

China's government doesn't just censor the Internet; it tries to manipulate it by employing ordinary citizens to post positive comments on-line and on popular social networking websites. The main purpose of these *trolls* is to monitor news on China found on international news websites and social media and post counter-messages in China's favour. It is estimated that China has anywhere from 250,000 to 300,000 *trolls*.[42]

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[40] *The Economist*, "How Does China Censor" …
[41] *The Economist*, "How Does China Censor" …
[42] *The Economist*, "How Does China Censor" …

The Chinese government has thus far succeeded in managing to format and maintain control over state-themed messages through the implementation of these vast arrays of censorship methods. China's continued efforts in protecting its political legitimacy and portraying an image of a peaceful China to a global audience has significantly increased over the last decade. For these reasons, China continues to implement systems to control its messaging through traditional media, along with social media and the Internet. China's renewed focus on controlling not only the message, but the medium for the message, which includes controlling all means of unfiltered information into its nation is seen as a vital component in protecting their political power.[43] Thus far, China has succeeded in preventing major foreign-influence within its borders and continues to successfully maintain a hold on its population and the limit flow of counter-messages within its borders.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND RUSSIA

As a state well-known for restricting the freedom of its citizens, Russia has also moved to control its political image by cracking down on social media. The Government views social media as a threat and challenge to its political survival. In September of 2014, Russia passed a government bill that tightened control over Western-based Internet companies such as Google, Twitter and Facebook. The Bill states that all non-Russian based websites are required to store personal data of users within the borders of Russia. In other words, personal data on Russians will not leave Russia.[44] Russia, which promotes the idea of a *sovereign* or *independent* Internet,

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[43] Stephen Junior, "Social media changing the protest landscape in China" Indexoncensorship.org, 15 January 2014. Last accessed 5 April 2015.

now views western-based social media networks as a potential threat to cultural integrity and regime stability. Therefore in Russia, cyber space and social media are viewed as a matter of national security.

Russia's hard line and maneuvering to control the Internet, traditional news media outlets, along with social media venues took on new vigor after the massive Moscow demonstrations that occurred in December 2011 to protest Putin's election win. The political legitimacy of the Kremlin, and its newly elected president, Vladimir Putin was openly being questioned by a massive public display of protest and discontent.[45] Organized through the use of social-media networks, the massive street protests demonstrated to the world, for the first time that not all Russians were pleased with the election of Mr. Putin.

An important factor to note is that Russia has recently become Europe's largest Internet market; 78 million people now have access to the Internet and most importantly, 82 percent of on-line users presently have an account on at least one social media network. Furthermore and well understood by the Kremlin is the fact that Russians with on-line access spend an average of 12.8 hours per month on social media networks while the global average is 5.7 hours per month.[46] Due to the increased use of the Internet by their population, the Government of Russia was left with no other option but to implement very strict government mandated monitoring and

[44] Paul Sonne and Olga Razumovskaya. "Russia steps up new law to control foreign internet companies." *WSJ.com*, 24 September 2014. Last accessed 2 April 2015.

[45] Paul Sonne and Olga Razumovskaya. "Russia steps up new law" …

[46] Elena Zinovieva. "Can Facebook win a bigger share of the Russian social media pie?" Russia Direct, 4 February 2015. Last accessed 1 May 205.

filtering system to limit the type of information Russians have access to, in order to maintain control over their population.

Similar to China and countries within the MENA Region, social media was one of the few remaining venues used by disenchanted and disillusioned Russians to voice their personal views and frustration with the Kremlin in an open forum, anonymously and free of persecution. The Kremlin, which is anti-West in their political views, insisted that the steps being implemented with regards to the Internet was to the benefit of Russians and was a precaution to halt the U.S. in their attempt to spy on Russia. The Kremlin also requires Russian-based bloggers that have more than 3,000 daily readers to register with the State; critics cite this move as a way for the Kremlin to remove the veil of anonymity common to the Internet.[47]

> … Russia's parliament sped up measures to tighten control over foreign Internet companies such as Google Inc., Twitter Inc. and Facebook Inc., raising concerns over state pressure on social networks that have become one of the country's few remaining spaces for dissent.[48]

During the 2014 Sochi Olympics held in Russia, for example, a rare global display of their complete control over social media was showcased. Russia banned international reporters from using all personal *smart* communications technology, such as *smart* cellphones, tablets (IPods / IPads) or even snap-and-shoot digital cameras to capture video or take photographs while covering the Olympics. Journalists were required to use only professional video and image capturing equipment.

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[47] Paul Sonne and Olga Razumovskaya. "Russia steps up new law" …
[48] Paul Sonne and Olga Razumovskaya. "Russia steps up new law" …

In other words, Russia was trying to prevent international media from posting real-time Tweets, providing up to the minute updates on Facebook or uploading instant images on Instagram.[49] Russian officials argued that this regulation imposed on international media during the Sochi Olympics was to protect the integrity of the Olympic Games and to ensure international media outlets, some paying millions of dollars for the rights to broadcast the Olympic Games were able to broadcast live without competing against individuals posting real-time updates.[50] Critics argued that this action was just another example of Russia trying desperately to control the message within its borders.

Russia's attempt to control the narrative does not stop with the Internet and social media, the Kremlin has also passed a law that limits non-Russian corporations from owning more than 20 percent of traditional Russian media outlets such as television, radio and news-print. The majority of media outlets were already controlled by the Kremlin and this move is a further attempt by Russia to influence and steer the narrative in order to protect their authoritarian regime. Since the protests of December 2011, the Government of Russia has been successful in preventing not only public displays of frustration and anger, but has also successfully prevented counter-messages depicting the government in a negative manner to be circulated on-line within their borders.

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[49] Alexander De Avila, "Sochi Olympics2014: Journalists Banned from Social Media." *Mic.com.* 11 November 2013. Last accessed 2 April 2015.
[50] Alexander De Avila, "Sochi Olympics2014: Journalists Banned from Social Media" …

AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES NEED NOT FEAR SOCIAL MEDIA

Since the creation of the Internet and the development of social media, major world events have always found their way on-line. An uprising, such as the Arab Spring, is of course a major world event and when people are protesting in countries that frown on public displays of protest, social media networks, such as Twitter tends to take off. However, revolutions, uprisings, protests usually have underlying elements in common: "an unhealthy power dynamic (racism, authoritarianism, or sexism respectively) and the resultant social, political and physical backlash of the masses."[51] In other words, social media does not cause governments to fall, but years of oppression will eventual cause social movements within borders to occur.

As discussed earlier in the essay, discontent amongst the population due in part to underlying failures found in an authoritarian government tends to inspire a need for change. A demand for equal rights, gender equality, employment, and protection of basic human rights and security is a long term cause; a fight that takes years to establish and win.

> … As people engage with these causes via online platforms, their likelihood of actual meaningful involvement was reduced. Social media activism is often tied to image and vanity. Similar, perhaps, to the bystander effect, social media 'activists' expect the millions of others involved to help or contribute, leading to an echo chamber where ideas are repeated, but very little is acted upon.[52]

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[51] Pseudo Philosopher. "Social Media Activism – The Revolution will not be Tweeted." Pseudo.philosoph.wordpress.com, 8 February 2015. Last accessed 3 April 2015.
[52] Pseudo Philosopher. "Social Media Activism" …

Social media does, however, create global awareness and highlights real-time atrocities. In most cases, people gain a sense of 'taking part in a worth-while cause', if they speak up on social media, but real revolutions are triggered by people who are discontent with their government and its failure to adhere to the basic responsibilities of a State.

> … Social media campaigns can detract from important issues, as those involved feel contented in superficial involvement (likes or shares), potentially limiting their commitment to real action. Awareness, while necessary, will not guarantee meaningful action. People hop on the proverbial 'bandwagon issue' that is trendy to support at the time, and rarely stick around.[53]

Authoritarian governments have seemingly overlooked the fact that it is their failure to fulfil their basic responsibilities as a State that is the actual cause of discontent. The view in Western democracies is by using social media that discontent amongst the population in these states will eventually lead to more on-line mobilization and government change, similar to the Arab Spring. Needless to say, authoritarian governments have chosen instead to ignore the social realities within their borders and after initial failure at controlling the message, authoritative governments have dedicated massive efforts to control the Internet and social media and, today they continue to successfully dominate populations.

CONCLUSION

Social media has transformed the manner in which the world communicates. In Western democracies, such as the United States, social media is viewed by the government as a modern tool of democracy, a forum that adds transparency to its Administration and encourages human-

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[53] Pseudo Philosopher. "Social Media Activism" …

empowerment. Even though a large percentage of the population in Western democracies use

Facebook and Twitter to post pictures of the meals they are about to consume, they also have the

freedom to communicate freely and honestly in a global forum without fear of repercussion.[54]

> … With web-based platforms, information flows are more immediate and accelerated. It is from this information that citizens and legislators identify priorities and how best to address issues that they prioritize.[55]

This essay has demonstrated through the provision of facts that China, Russia and

the MENA Region, have perceived the Internet and social media as a threat to their

regime. And due to this perception, maintaining control over state-themed messages by

implementing strict censorship systems that filter the Internet have become a matter of

national interest to these states.

In fact, when governments assess, rightly or wrongly that both their power and influence

over their people are eroding, they start expanding their control and use of state controlled

media.[56] Their goal, as demonstrated throughout the essay, becomes the prevention of access to

the Internet and social media networks, and in some cases, they begin to monitor social media

and try to use it as another tool of oppression. We are also wrong to assume that because social

media has had a positive impact on Western democracies, that social media will drive social

change in authoritarian regimes.

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[54] Pierre Omidyar. "Enemy of the State or Power"…
[55] Alex Marland, Thierry Giasson, and Tamara A. Small, "*Political Communication in Canada",* 254.
[56] Pierre Omidyar. "Enemy of the State or Power to the People" …

As regimes such as China, Russia, and those in the MENA Region struggle to maintain control over state-themed messages and protecting their political legitimacy, the world will continue to find ways to *empower* the voices within these states. Knowing that foreign-based influences will always try to *empower* their population, authoritarian governments have had no choice but to implement state-mandated control systems for the use of the Internet within their borders.

Learning from mistakes made throughout the Arab Spring, authoritarian regimes have now imposed laws and implemented strict censorship controls and have succeeded in preventing social media from being utilized to organize public protests. And by limiting the flow of foreign-based information within their borders, they have managed to control the dialogue on-line in order to successfully continue to dominate populations and ensure their political legitimacy.

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