

Social media  
effecting political  
democracies world  
wide media essay



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This paper will attempt to distinguish the connections between democratization and information and communications. The relationship will be addressed by focusing mainly on how the advancement of technology, in this case social media, has effected, and is effecting, political democracies world wide. In order to discuss the connections of democratisation and social media I will first attempt to provide a definition for democracy and the process of democratization. The essay will further discuss different scenarios in various countries that have either led to the declination of political empires, or assisted the rise of a political party, through the involvement of social media. Furthermore, these views will be supported by discussing the contrasting views of a cyber-utopian versus a cyber-cynic, i. e. Clay Shirky versus Evgeny Morozov, respectively.

## **Democracy and its roots**

In order to understand democracy, it needs to be defined and like most concepts it is relative, like Clinton once quoted 'depends on how you define...' democracy. According to Ivo Mosley democracy is " government by and for all the people which literally means the 'people rule'". However the definition has evolved through history, which is why it is necessary to backdate to its origins tracing it into the present. (Charles Tilly, 2007, Democracy, Cambridge University Press, New York).

The word democracy originates from a Greek word 'demokratia' and literally means people-power and this in itself is ambiguous. The ambiguity of the term aroused questions such as; did the power actually belong to the masses or specific qualified individual citizens? Many theorists believed that the word 'demokratia' was a term exploited by enemies of democracy, said to be the <https://assignbuster.com/social-media-effecting-political-democracies-world-wide-media-essay/>

elite class who were against being out voted by laymen who were classed to be economically and socially inferior. ([http://www. bbc. co. uk/history/ancient/greeks/greekdemocracy\\_01. shtm](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/greeks/greekdemocracy_01.shtm))

However, over the centuries democracy rose, fell and varied in character, where and when it multiplied (Charles Tilly, 2007). In the 18th century despite not being defined as democracy, the US showed interest in experimenting with the doctrine of natural freedom and equality. Their Constitution administrated a government elected by the masses and took into account to protect civil rights and liberties to some extent. (Jacqueline Newmyer, " Present from the start: John Adams and America", Oxonian Review of Books, 2005, vol 4 issue 2). By the 19th century many European regimes adopted the Greek democratic model. They made effort to provide equality and citizen rights.

Democracy, as a concept, can be molded according to local needs, however is not a blueprint that can be copied and pasted in all regions of the globe. It did, however, gain popularity around the 20th century; after WWII many new countries came into being due to decolonization, when democracy as a concept caught on, not because it was a norm the world valued, but because it was used as a 'weapon' against the threat of communism. This was also the basis of the onset of the cold war. It was the war of ideologies, and democratization of the newly independent states begun. As Potter stated 'why has democratization been a strong impulse in some countries, a weaker or non-existent impulse in others?' (1997, Democtatization, Blackwell, pg. 1) He then defined democratization as 'political changes moving in a democratic direction' (pg 3). Webster (2011) stated in his lectures that <https://assignbuster.com/social-media-effecting-political-democracies-world-wide-media-essay/>

'democracy is on the march, majority of the world's states are now democratic'. Amartya Sen (1999) defined democracy as 'A universal value'. According to freedom house (2006) 47% of countries in the world are classified as free.

Though the statistics show that the concept of democracy is being enforced around the globe, it is difficult to adapt in some parts of the world. North Korea being one of the controversial cases where they state that the country is officially " the democratic people's republic of Korea". According to modern economists North Korea is strikingly different as it is cut off from the existing world as they live in their own separate reality, where the leaders of the country maintain complete control and the masses have restricted freedom of expression; anyone opinionated against the regime can be detained.

Many theorists including Potter and Barber discuss the existence of different political regimes in terms of strong and weak democracies, also known as liberal and partial economy that lead to either the rise or the fall of economies. The USA being a prime example - a capitalistic and democratic country - enforcing democratization on nations as a tool to gain world dominance, or even to maintain their existing status as the global super-power. However the means of public expression, which is being enhanced through the internet and its various means of communication, is becoming a more accurate form of democratic thought.

Social networking sites such as Facebook, Orkut, Hi5, Twitter, and even blogs has evolved to allow civil society to become more active in the governance in its countries. It has encouraged the process of bringing about a tool that

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enhances democracy through the 'true' will of the people, even in strong dictatorship regimes.

Within research, academics have attempted to explore 'civil society' to explain processes of democratization by reference to societal context (laurence white head, 2002, democratization, theory 7 experience, oxford univeristy press). Macmillan defines civil society as 'the part of society that consists of organizations and institutions that look after people, their health and their rights. It does not include government of the family' e. g NGO's, research institutes, e. t. c. [http://www. macmillandictionary.](http://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/civil-society)

[com/dictionary/british/civil-society](http://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/civil-society) This leads to an interesting concept explored by Habermas which reflects suspicions on markets ability to answer democracy's needs the 'public sphere' concept that aids civil society to communicate. It focuses on social democratic perspective on information and society. Where citizens can get together and freely express their opinons. Webster lecture 2011). Benkler (2007: 123) focuses on internet as one of the strong mediator to 'public sphere'. which then gives birth to the rise of social media in playing a vital role in deciding the faith of these democratic nations.

Gary C. Gibson December 20, 2007 a blogger defined 'Democracy is about individual liberty and political primacy; corporatism and other forms of neo-authoritarianism such as socialism are about the primacy of collectives under the authority of elites'. Another blogger Rahman Haq March 21, 2008 stated 'Democracy is a beautiful concept not particularly for its denotative implication that puts the majority opinion into context but rather due to the values and ideals that constitute the bundles of liberties derivative of the <https://assignbuster.com/social-media-effecting-political-democracies-world-wide-media-essay/>

concept'. While Rayne Brit may 13 2008 commented that 'One of the most fantastic parts about democracy is 'freedom of speech' everyone likes 'freedom of speech' unless someone speaks in contradiction to them. But that is the beauty of our constitution it allows diversity of opinion.

<http://www.helium.com>

The key elements in this process of a public sphere are communication and information. How important are these to democracy and what is the link between them?

## **The power of Communication/Information and the birth of social media**

In the modern society we live in, communication and information have rapidly built great importance and brought about a turning point in different sectors. (McNair, 2006: 1). The information society plays a vital role in the development of the modern social analysis (webster, (2004), The Information Society Reader Routledge). The fast paced wide spreading of globalization and the rising of the network society have led this modern society to heavily depend on them, impacting the society to rely on informative communication networks that possess knowledge and views to either built or unbuilt trust, the decisive source of power. Power being the utmost important process in the society. (Communication Power, Manuell). According to Webster (2004, 2) 'in the wider society, the idea that we are entering a new information age, or knowledge society, is a common place'. Max Weber defines social power as the 'probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will, despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests' (1978, 53).

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The ideology of social democracy - a leftists political philosophy, which seeks to reform capitalism in line with principals of social justice, while upholding capitalistic approach of production, instead of creating a an entirely new socialist economic system - has been the essence of debates of information. When analyzed it prominently points out the disadvantages of capitalism when providing information to its viewers: thereby suggesting that the market creates diversion, gossip and trivia, while being inadequate to supplying reliable news. In retaliation, the social democratic approach would recommend the state to intervene to make sure that the information requirements delivered to the public could be adequately met. Hence, it is understood as social democratic because of the inclination of the state intervention. A policy as such could be considered, by many, an inescapable introduction to tension seen as many of the advocates are impressionable to the growing of the 'spin' within the literate society, the development of what they have galvanized as an antagonistic market to its inadequacies. Moreover Webster criticizes the argument that the market cannot be relied upon to produce information required to support a healthy democracy.

A clear example that supports the argument of subjective and questionable informative medium is the invention of Wikipedia. A popular multilingual encyclopedia promoting free content and writers to contribute to this content from around the world. What makes it interesting is that anybody can edit an article, given the right references, using a wiki markup language eventually leading to a well balanced article including all the pro's and con's. Even though Cass Sunstein<sup>10</sup> and Brian Leither, <sup>11</sup> oppose citing Wikipedia, Sunstein (in Webster about Sunstein, 2006: 2), states Wikipedia as an

example of collective intelligence. Thus, indicating the decrease in the necessity of a public sphere. Ludovic Denoyer, Patrick Gallinari, Volume 40 Issue 1, June 2006

ACM New York, NY, USA

This clearly emphasizes on Friedrich Hayek's theories of defending the free market system. He supported the principle that every human has rights and is free to make their choices. He argued against that the 'public sphere' concept as he believed that all actions made by the consumers give messages to the market that are later adapted by them, he argued in favor of capitalism, Hayek (2002: 8). Jimmy Wale stated 'Hayek's work is central to my own thinking about how to manage the Wikipedia project'. However John Gray (1948) belonged to the conservative group who argued that free market can destroy order. He argued it is most obvious that changing the diverse world economy, on the basis of the singular model of the free market, would be an impossible task to carry out. The diversity of cultures around the world should be a self-evident reflection of the global varied economies. Thereby it would be safe to state that all economic systems are imperfect; no one system is universal, thus any attempt to do so would result in a disaster. " Yet the fantasy that the free market can and should be adopted throughout the world became for a while a litmus test of sound thinking, not only on the neo-liberal right but also in the ranks of the center left."

<http://www.scribd.com/doc/7221539/John-Gray-on-Free-Markets-Not-for-the-First-Time>

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In the modern Information Age that we have entered, there is an effort to enhance brainpower by globally providing information services and by implementing the power of computation as and when needed [http://www.cnri.reston.va.us/what\\_is\\_internet.html](http://www.cnri.reston.va.us/what_is_internet.html). Technological innovations have given birth to information and communication mediums like television, radio, telephone etc. but one of the most powerful and upcoming media tool, a contribution to the 'network society' is the Internet. This is considerably different from the old traditional ways, this allows more interactivity and many-to-many communication, rather

than one-to-many. (THE PUBLIC SPHERE, SOCIAL NETWORKS AND PUBLIC SERVICE MEDIA, Petros Losifidis, 31 January 201). This impacts the youth mainly gen Y and Z the focal users of this platform when they find overflowing information and rely on just this medium for rational. Murru (2009, p. 143) contributes to this thought by adding, 'in online contexts anyone can potentially take the role of speaker with practically no cost, thus multiplying the source of news and freeing the flux of communication and information from any sort of system control (economic or political)'. Webster (2010) discusses that this overflow can lead to 'fragmentation' of users creating 'information cocoons' that filter undesirable information.

According to Losifidis (2010) the ever existent Habermasian concept of the national public sphere as discussed earlier is now said to have given birth to a multi-dimensional platform of online and social networks. The idea of networking is not new; Webster's dictionary dates the term to 1940.

However these networks are now rapidly growing to become significant in engrossing and influencing citizens and also playing a vital role in the <https://assignbuster.com/social-media-effecting-political-democracies-world-wide-media-essay/>

communication process within which realistic and legitimate discussion takes place. He further argues that the internet and new media in terms of 'social media' is being mis represented by extreme exaggeration and it represents technological optimism due to reasons like chaotic open to all policy, censorship, inclusiveness, partisan content, and most importantly the absence of the very essence of the public sphere 'extensive dialogue and critical discussion'.

As social media is the new phenomenon taking over the world it is giving birth to new jargons like 'infosphere', 'blogosphere', 'twittersphere'.

Participants find this platform as an ideal place to start discussions mainly on public debate and social change. Stumpel (2009) in contrast emphasizes that these new online forums, which allows people to unite in discussions to exchange veivs and knowledge either political or economical even critical in nature portrays a patten of similarity to Habermas's concept of the 'public sphere'. He argues that forums like facebook, twitter, myspace and other net spheres are public places that are outside state control where public-minded rational consensus can be developed.

This widespread of information is worrysome for some. Webster (2004: 76) stresses that the society must prevent them from being misled as 'technological developments are always socially mediated'. Fukuyama's fears that over flow of information in the society will substitute the traditional community 'based on religion, tradition, race or culture' with the modern community 'based on a formal social contact among rational individuals' (ibid: 7)

But can the Net act as a public sphere where critical discourse can emerge and influence political action?

## **The power of Social media and its effect on democracy**

As we experience the rise of the communication platform, there seems to be a tremendous increment in the participants to engage in public speeches which is portrayed through 'blogger' and more interestingly different events have contributed to the public taking collective action by using these advanced technology mediums.

In 2001, when the congress voted to protect the President of Philippines 'President Joseph Estrada' and set aside crucial evidence against him, the citizens of Philippines in anger protested against their corrupt president. Just as the decision was announced, they arranged a rally 'Go to EDSA wear black to mourn the death of democracy' through simple forwarded text messages which later counted close to seven million. Shortly millions of people arrived, causing a shutdown of traffic in Manila. This ability of the public to arrange such a tremendous response threatened the legislators of the country and they allowed the evidence to be presented. In 3 days on this protest Estrada was gone. This was the first time social media had aided to play a part in a democratic nation to lead to a downfall of a national leader. Estrada himself blamed "the text-messaging generation" for his downfall. (Clay Shirky)

Since then this strategy has been on the roll. A similar case took place in Spain in 2004 after the Madrid train bombing where text messages aided to the downfall of Spanish Prime Minister José María Aznar who inaccurately blamed Basque separatists for the act while the protesters who believed that

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it was the doings of Al Queda forwarded the phrase " who did it" and arranged anti-govenment rallies on the day before the spring election <http://mason.gmu.edu/~cuytioco/papers/edsa2cellphones.pdf>. The Communist Party lost power in Moldova in 2009 when massive protests coordinated in part by text message, Facebook, and Twitter broke out after an obviously fraudulent election.

It is widely discussed by many theorists that the internet has provided an open channel of free communication of information that has come to be known as social media tools, which would include the very popular social networking websites such as Facebook and Twitter. Facebook initially being invented as a means for introduction amongst university students and further networking is now rapidly becoming notorious for open communication for people to connect their political views and thoughts. Another example is that of the " Twitter Revolution" In Tunisia, in reaction to a street hawker setting himself on fire, for which it was banned in the country. The revolt was being rallied and coordinated through the social site ultimately bringing protesters to the streets, and tolling up to 70 people being shot by the police.. Consequently, the " revolution" led the president of Tunisia to abandon his post.

Tunisia has only been the initial instigation of this fire which is spreading throughout the Middle East and Northern African countries. These sites are now fuelling younger generations to turn away from broadcast media - one-to-many communication of information - and through the inclination towards these sites finally becoming more involved in voicing their opinions via the many-to-many communication of information amongst themselves. <https://assignbuster.com/social-media-effecting-political-democracies-world-wide-media-essay/>

A further result of this is evident in the reaction of the Libyan government as they have banned the social media sites, such as Twitter and Facebook, from their local internet services on state orders. The radical action can be interpreted that even the libyan state is beginning to recognize the extent to which these media tools are evolving to becoming a loud voice echoing in the public spheres.

One of the main roles that has been played by the social media is that of a watchdog and whistleblower. Furthermore in many other cases public has taken aid from these social media tools to succeed in their protests. Another social media phenomenon that is gaining popularity widely in whistle blowing is through 'viral media'. A prime example is the major protest and lawsuits the Catholic Church faced for child abuse and rape. In 2002 The Boston Globe exposed sexual abuse in the church that spread like 'viral' online in just a few hours. Furthermore there are so many cases now that can be found on a new social platform 'Wikileaks'. According to BBC it is a whistle blowing website now actively effecting news. Anonymous submission are published and leaked on different area of debate. [http://www. bbc. co. uk/news/technology-10757263](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-10757263)

According to shirky (2010) 'The potential of social media lies mainly in their support of civil society and the public sphere'. As I mentioned earlier that these tools can either aid or fail in helping the activists protest, many such cases have failed to produce positive results like in March 2006 in Belarus streets were full of protest which was arranged partly by email against their President Aleksandr Lukashenko's for 'vote rigging' however the activists failed which led to the president to actively control social media. Similarly in <https://assignbuster.com/social-media-effecting-political-democracies-world-wide-media-essay/>

2009 during the month of June when the green movement was rising the activists in Iran tried very hard by using to protest against the miscount of votes for Mir Hossein Mousavi by using all sorts of technological coordinating tools but failed miserably.

The use of social media tools -- text messaging, e-mail, photo sharing, social networking, and the like -- cannot be foreseen or predicted to any foretell outcome. Thus, any attempts to create an outline on their respective effects in the political arena are more often than none to duelling anecdotes. Let us take a look at Barack Obama's presidential online campaign of 2004 for instance. Castells (Volume II, 2004: 379) states that it is also highly used in politics by describing Obama's internet campaign as an example. The use of social media tools enabled Obama to initially overcome a large portion of the presidential nominating race; and his ability to embrace the social networking sites, such as MySpace and Facebook, was considered different which became advantageous to his campaign. This approach was considered so successful that according to Professor Thomas Patterson of Harvard University, Mr Obama's use of social media tools has led to mobilise younger generation. This has been considered a group which has traditionally been uninterested in politics, according to. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/7412045.stm>

This makes us wonder do these digital tools enhance or destroy democracy?

## **Cyber-Utopians vs. Cyber-Cynics**

Cyber-utopian optimist Clay Shirky in his paper 'The Political Power of Social Media', that appeared in the foreign affair magazine, (<http://www.economist>.

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com/blogs/babbage/2011/01/politics\_and\_internet) makes a great distinction between the 'instrumental view' and the 'environmental view' of internet freedom. He describes the instrumental approach as a means to avoid states from aiding censorship of external websites like, youtube, google, e. t. c. and thereby focuses more on the public spheres, emphasizing on the citizens speech and all the uses of digital media by private and social standards. An example that supports this was the call for anti-censorship software by Hillary Clinton, America's secretary of state, in January 2010. This would particularly support the usage of sites such as Wikipedia and Google in states like Iran; give Burmese activists the freedom to blog without interference to blog; allow the Chinese public to utilise the use of instant messaging systems without being monitored, among many others. However the challenges of anti-censorship software programs like 'Freemate' and censorship-circumvention softwares like 'Haystack' portray the hardship to weaponize social media to pursue country-specific and near-term policy goals.

Many would argue that 'instrumental media' overestimates the value of one-to-many form of communication information - i. e. broadcast media - while at the same time underestimating the value of many-to-many form of media communication of information - i. e. social media tools including the internet. Instrumental media does provide a modest benefit to the freedom of information that it provides - confidential government information can get leaked through the open channels of information - however it does not extend to the freedom of speech or assembly, which in turn the internet

does provide. The popular belief about social media is a long-term tool to strengthen the civil society and the public sphere.

The "environmental" view is the contradictory outlook to internet freedom. A ground basis for internet freedom and environmental view is the gradual development of the public sphere which works like a forum of open to all opinions while relying on conversation information and media. Contrary to the West's self-acclaimed view of holding the source code for democracy, the environmental view would assume that minor change occurs in political spheres without adoption of the ideas and opinions which circle in public sphere. The viewpoint professes that the access to information does not play as big of a vital role as the access to conversation. Furthermore, a public sphere is more likely to emerge as a result to the masses dissatisfaction towards economic factors in a country rather than some obscure political ideals.

In contrast to Shirky, the cyber-cynic Evgeny Morozov disagrees, and states that while social media may have helped, it's not clear how much it actually contributes. According to an article in the Guardian that analysed Morozov's *The Net Delusion*, he argues that, if read between the lines when praising technology and its advancements, you can decypher a misinterpretation of the internet's political role and potential, through the combination of ignorance and a sense of utopianism. This idea was further elaborated to state that if careful measures are not ensued, the democratising power of new media will not promote democracy and freedom of thought, but an entrapment of authoritarian regimes around the globe. Critisizng cyber-utopianism, Morozov further believes that contrary to popular belief the <https://assignbuster.com/social-media-effecting-political-democracies-world-wide-media-essay/>



internet is not emancipatory, and supports it through the argument of the widely misguided belief in the example such as the one of Twitter-powered Green Movement of Iran in 2009 (pointing out figures that on the actual eve of the said elections, the participating numbers did not rise above 20, 000 users), stretching it to larger heights of naive hopes that international exposure through the new media will bring a diminishing result of violence in areas around the world such as that of Africa and the Middle East.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/jan/09/net-delusion-morozov-review>

Morozov's argument emphasizes the insignificant contribution of the social media tools whereas Shirky promotes the idea that however small the contribution may be the governments should accept it and promote the communication of many-to-many as it is an aspect of democracy. With the growing numbers of the West where social networks such as Twitter and Facebook are used among the masses, in the East it is only a smaller percentage that have access, or the ability, to use it. Having said that, no matter how insignificant the numbers may appear to be at this point in time Shirky's argument brings more to the debate as it is an escalating factor which supports the point that the public sphere, through social media tools, do play a rising role in today's democratic states around the world. Morozov's argument supporting misguided beliefs about the 'cyber-utopians' who cannot bring about any change in world, can also be refuted that in the short-run it may not display acute figures of revolution supporters, or how it affects political stance, but in many countries where the social media tools is used on a day-to-day basis it surely can take the initial step to creating awareness which could, in the long-run, create a stir in a mass so large that

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it cannot be ignored by any democratic country. -- " These tools probably do not hurt in the short run and might help in the long run -- and that they have the most dramatic effects in states where a public sphere already constrains the actions of the government."

Through the promotion of pro-democratic tools put forth by the government it is also aiding authoritarian governments to track down any revolts, while infiltrating social networks and propogating their own agenda, and out-smarting their beleaguered citizens. However, the debates tend to culminate in stalemate whenever put to discussion. Access to information is far less important, politically, than access to conversation. 'Authoritarian governments stifle communication among their citizens because they fear, correctly, that a better-coordinated populace would constrain their ability to act without oversight.'

### **Add to essay where ever required**

According to Marsha McLuhan this world is now a global village. With the spread of globalization or as Herbert Schiller (1919-2000) would term it as 'Americanisation' there has been a rise in the technological advancement hand in hand. Webster (2010, chapter 2: 20) states that globalization is leading towards the irrelevance of a public sphere, or even to the establishment of multiple public sphere. Globalization of democracy said to be western and a form of imperialism. Fernand braudel commented (1902-85) thorough globalization there is a homogeneity of cultural practices. A more tolerant framework within the society. Yet events like the Danish Cartoonist in 2006 who drew the forbidden drawing of the Holy prophet in an insulting manner led to unrest around the world or like the event posted up <https://assignbuster.com/social-media-effecting-political-democracies-world-wide-media-essay/>

on Facebook in 2009 'draw Muhammed day' yet again let to unrest in the muslim world speacially Pakistan where the govenment was part of the protest to delete such an offensive page makes one think how far true are these motions of tolerance. However thinkers like Ronfeldt (in Allison, 2002: 39) claims that the internet will not divide the world, but that it 'will provide community, democracy, empowerment, wealth and peace'.

Robins and Webster (1999: 226) speak of a cyberculture on the internet with its endless circuit of communication that will create global cities. The cyber-culture has also given birth to e-democratisation which leads to e-govenment and e voting. however democracy demends to surville if all votters are eligible. it aso questions wheather bloggers are now acting as e democracts. However some criticize it by calling it 'couch potato politics'.. Castells (2001: 117) further adds that digital divide is a result of 'virtual communities' that is another form of escapism.

## Conclision

Carruthers (2000: 201) argues that the global distribution and access of all modern technologies (telephone, radio, television and the internet) must first be continued and improved before we can truly speak of its 'global' or 'universal' effects

However, if one scrutinizes the numbers involved in the actual protests, or what leads up to them, according to Morozov's The Net Delusion one cannot be entirely sure as to the extent of influence the uprising has towards the respective governments in the countries in question; the revolt in Iran in

2009 which was caused by Twitter it was said, however according to <https://assignbuster.com/social-media-effecting-political-democracies-world-wide-media-essay/>

numbers tracked the number of users on the set day of election did not rise over 20, 000.

Shirky's argument refutes these statements though stating that the numbers are escalating and the masses have found an efficient and free channel to communicate amongst themselves, and the result .... This instrumental view of the matter where the state intervenes with censorship may cause a further uproar and more use of softwares created to slip through the crack; softwares such as Freegate and Haysmarket.

It only seems to be a matter of time before the time bomb of the social media tools will explode and cause an uncontrollable uproar that even the strongest of states cannot even handle.