

Chapter 34

Googling Democracy: A Comparison of Democracy Promoters on the Internet

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ABSTRACT

The spillover of the Arab Spring is often attributed to the increased use of the Internet and various social networks. In addition, many established democracies and international organizations have adopted democracy promotion as their foreign policy objectives. Heads of states regularly praise democracy and reiterate their commitment to its promotion. However, the on-ground activities of democracy promoters remain largely unknown to the broader population. Nevertheless, given the growing influence of non-democratic but economically successful and resource-rich countries, democracy promoters more than ever need to “win the hearts and minds” of these populations. This chapter compares techniques and the extent of publicising democracy promotion, by focusing on the online presence of democracy promoters as the most cost-effective opportunity of communicating goals, strategies, and accomplishments. The chapter categorizes individual Websites of democracy promoters according to their structural, graphic, informative, and programmatic features. This chapter focuses on the EU and USAID in Eastern Europe, Middle East, North Africa, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia. Quantitative and qualitative cross-country and cross-promoter variances are explored by analyzing a wide array of explanatory dimensions. The results suggest that the two promoters vary in their levels of e-activeness and their involvement in Internet-based activities of democracy promotion, with the EU showing a systematically higher commitment in the studied regions. In addition, Internet penetration, the level of democratic development, and geo-political factors are likely to affect a promoter’s e-activeness.

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INTRODUCTION

Whether positive or negative, the role of the Internet-based media in snowball revolutions in Northern Africa is currently undisputed. Social networks such as Facebook and micro-blogging website such as Twitter were used in the mobilization of thousands of people, proving to be more effective and efficient than other traditional methods of protest. Regardless of the consequent effectiveness of these democratic protests, early 2011 events demonstrated the widespread penetration of the Internet and its success in mobilizing civil society to a degree, previously not achieved by any democracy promoter (Kalathil and Boas, 2003; Ott and Rosser, 2007). This spillover of protests requiring democracy occurred after nearly 20 years of continuous democracy promotion by the most influential international actors. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, democracy promotion has become one of the pillars of international actors, prompting them to engage in the internal affairs of other countries. However, not all international actors publicize their democracy promotion activities to the same extent and while often maintaining close relations with governmental offices, their activities remain largely unknown to the general population.

Internet seems to increasingly provide opportunities for democratization and political transformation, especially in societies where freedom of speech and expression is constrained by the government (Abbott, 2010). However, it seems that not all international actors equally avail themselves of the opportunities offered by the growing array of information technologies. Thus, to show whether international actors similarly to local ones adapt to the developments in information technologies, this chapter compares techniques of publicizing their promotion of democracy and their own image among local populations by the extent of their e-activeness.

Growing involvement of politicians in information sharing through the Internet has proven

to become a worldwide phenomenon, however, with greater popularity in North America than in Europe (Dizard, 2001; Westcott, 2008). With the steadily increasing perception of the Internet as the main information source, the importance of e-activeness of democracy promoters leaves no place for doubts. In addition, democracy promotion projects remain limited to their target groups with the general public remaining largely unaware of international actors' involvement and often demanding more active actions (Jönsson and Hall, 2008). As interviews with opinion leaders and general public in European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) partners show, while opinion leaders have relatively good knowledge on the European Union (EU), general public often confuses basic facts and even mentions UNICEF as an EU institution.¹ While the level of awareness on different democracy promoters may vary, unawareness of their activities may damage their objectives of democratic reforms and developing vibrant civil societies. In addition, the low level of awareness of local population should not only be attributed to their disinterest but also to possible low level of openness of an international actor.

By focusing on e-activeness of the main democracy promoters—the EU and United States Development Agency (USAID)—this chapter examines the range of online tools used in publicizing democracy promotion activities in Eastern Europe, the Middle East, North Africa, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia. The choice of comparison is based on the relative similarity of these two international actors in political and economic leverages they can exert or incentives they can offer for democratic transformations. Thus, the choice has been made not with the goal of selecting two most diverse or two most similar cases but with the goal of selecting cases that are comparable for their organizational resources and international coverage. To control for possible blockage of promoters' online activities, only countries that have welcomed democracy promotion or promoters' other related activities

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