Power to the People?

(Con-)Tested Civil Society in Search of Democracy

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Public diplomacy initiatives and social media – ways to support opinion leaders in the Middle East

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In the last few years, the Internet, digital and mobile technologies and social media tools like blogs, Twitter, YouTube, Facebook and other user-generated content (UGC) have rapidly changed the way information is shaped, shared and spread. We are witnessing a shift in power from governments and traditional media to ordinary citizens, and we are now provided with a window into the events and lives of people who were distant in the past. What does this paradigm shift mean for civil society engagement in the Middle East, and how can Sweden continue to support and strengthen democracy in the region?

In the Middle East, the increasing use of social media is changing civil society engagement as well as shifting previously cemented power relations. New social media platforms enable the general public to participate in political and global affairs. In the digital era information is spread in increasingly creative and diverse ways, and new tools are used to circumvent censorship. The Internet and social media have in recent years come to serve as forums for political activists, human rights defenders and artists, whose governments or conservative societies want to suppress their voices, and the voices of other democratic forces. Building public diplomatic relationships and global social networks with these people in the Middle East is a crucial way for fostering change in Middle East society.

A June 2009 study by the Berkman Center for Internet and Society, a research institute at Harvard University, shows that the majority of the Arabic blogs surveyed are written in diary form, featuring personal accounts and observations on everyday life. When it comes to politics, Arab bloggers tend to offer a critical view of political leaders. In other
words, bloggers play an important role in disseminating information on issues rarely covered in the mainstream press, such as police brutality, sexual harassment and torture (Etlin et al 2009). Social media is also transforming international and diplomatic relationships in the way Sweden and other countries speak with citizens around the world (Wait 2009). Over the past couple of years, a number of European countries have organised programs focusing on intercultural and interfaith dialogue between Europe and the Middle East with an increasing focus on incorporating social media literacy. In 2008, the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs commissioned the launch of Sweden’s Young Leaders Visitors Program (YLVP) in an effort to build “a social network of young leaders and opinion-makers in the MENA region and Sweden to work on issues concerning freedom of expression and human rights.” These efforts fall under the realm of public diplomacy.

In the three years of the program’s existence, YLVP has helped form strong relationships between the participants. Through social media these networks have expanded and become stronger. However, in order to lay a foundation for dialogue, mutual understanding and knowledge-sharing among young opinion-makers from different Arab countries and Sweden, social interaction is critical. Social media only connects people; it is real-life social interaction that changes people and the world.

YLVP is a Swedish Institute initiative, in line with the public agency’s goal to create mutual relationships with the Middle East (Kabani Rizvi 2008). The program focuses on improving the participants’ leadership and social media skills, in order to empower them and help maximise their potential. Human rights, freedom of expression and democracy are some of the topics that are presented and discussed via lectures, workshops by prominent speakers and study visits. The participants are encouraged to come up with ideas for future social networking platforms that can help improve the level of freedom of speech and social change around the world.

The result is a passionate network of young leaders with sound social media skills that help them share and support each other through their own democratic endeavours in their respective countries. Anyone can listen to the dialogue between these young leaders on twitter by searching for the “#ylvp” hashtag and by reading their blogs.
Some argue that while social media technologies might provide a utopian ideal for decentralised civil society engagement, they could also support extreme dictatorial political systems. The argument put forth here is that the two major restraints to true democratic participation is economic access and citizen participation. First, there is an enormous economic barrier to internet access in the Middle East. Second, the democratic systems are not fully developed and, therefore, a democratic culture is not yet consolidated, which might reflect on the attempts at online democratic exercises (Guedes 2002).

On the other hand, recent statistics illustrate that the number of internet users in the region grew 13-fold from 2000 to 2008, far surpassing the two-fold increase worldwide. Studies estimate that the Arabic language blogosphere consists of about 35,000 regularly updated blogs (Miniwatts 2009).

Using USA as a case study, Vesser maintains that from the perspective of public diplomacy, social media tools should not only be deployed on issues such as cultural exchanges but also on the tough questions, such as engaging in direct diplomacy with countries like Iran. She goes on to state that

...building these bottom-up communities means that the conversation can’t be one way. It means taking criticism publicly. It means investing the resources to build the communities and keep the dialogue going. And it may mean responding with policy changes where warranted. While not a substitute for official diplomatic channels, encouraging this global dialogue sends strong signals of participation, collaboration and transparency – reinforcing values consistently promulgated by the administration (ibid).

Hence, social networking tools should be used not only as a way to support opinion leaders in the Middle East but can also be used as a powerful tool for engaging in the dialogue of nations.

It is a trajectory form of public diplomacy which we should be heading towards. We need to look into the future to find ways to support democracy in the Middle East. True leadership comes from listening first, identifying the needs and maximising all the tools and resources available
to build tools at the global level without being afraid of the risks. While there are economic barriers to people’s access to internet today, this might not be the case tomorrow. In the West, and particularly in Sweden, we often speak about the lack of democracy in the Middle East. We claim that we need to do more to support democracy in the region. However, we do not need to support democracy; instead we need to support people who are democratic forces, and we need to build respectful relationships, networks and alliances with these people. Young men and women are risking their lives to get the free word out to the world.

References

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