Social Media as a PR Tool for Politics and Social Activism: A View from Habermas' Perspective

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Introduction

Habermas discussed the public sphere in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Habermas, 1991). He emphasized the interaction between political activities and public opinion. He illustrated the impact of the growing predominance of mass media and the threat that capitalism – whether monopolistic or liberal – poses to democracy. Habermas presents an open, informal public sphere to mitigate the ill effects of capitalism through open discussion and debates. Utilizing a historical analysis, Habermas demonstrated that, aided by a free press, citizens could act autonomously, taking political actions in line with public opinion.

Between the 1960s – and 1970s, the Civil War, Cold War, and overall political turmoil worldwide led to a dilution of democratic power. While the government could no longer sway the public through minor alterations to taxation, wages, and welfare policies, Habermas noted that the people had become apathetic towards politics. Consumerism had set in, and people looked towards representative democracy, which, in turn, led to an intertwining of public administration and private citizenry. Around this time, Habermas notes, the press transformed into a mere tool of influence for the government and ceased to be the promoter of the public sphere.

Today, social media stands at the same crossroads as the press did in the middle of the last century. Social networking and media

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have been considered domains of expression and avenues of free speech. It has been deemed a fire starter, igniting and fanning revolutions that have toppled governments. Social media has been heralded as the new voice of democracy – the new public sphere.

While social media has been used extensively in the past few years as a means of communication and organization by political activists, it has also played a significant role in influencing and building public opinion. Social media can act as a public relations tool to instigate social and political and social reform. At the same time, political parties and governments have also begun to use this medium to interact with and engage voters extensively.

In this essay, I shall explore the effectiveness of social media as a PR tool in the political and political activism sphere. Habermas' theory of the public sphere and the role of mass media will be used as the theoretical and philosophical foundation on which this analysis is built. By placing social media in the same political crossroad that mass media found itself in during the 1960s and 70s, I shall attempt to utilize Habermas' understanding of the correlated impact of administrative infiltration into a medium acting as an open public sphere. For this purpose, the two primary texts I will draw philosophical understanding are *The Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Habermas, 1991) and *Legitimation Crisis* (Habermas, 1975), both breakthroughs work by Habermas. The findings of this essay, I hope, will contribute to PR practice by measuring the role of social media as a PR tool in the current context of political turmoil and activism.

Identification and formulation of search problem

I shall seek to answer critical questions such as how are political institutions and administrations using social media today for PR and, similarly, how are political activists doing the same? Using the cases of president Barack Obama's use of social media during election campaigns and political activists relying on the same

medium during the Arab Spring, I propose that the knowledgeable use of social media as a PR tool could act as a facilitator of democratization, liberation, and stability in nations undergoing political turmoil as well as advanced capitalist societies.

Determination of research methodology and study type

The most suitable research method for this study is qualitative content analysis. It can research complex social science issues such as social media, PR, and interaction between the government and citizenry. Mayring (2000) and Forman and Damschroder (2007) define the main comparative advantage of qualitative content analysis as the ability to process large volumes of textual data and filter out the main ideas and concepts necessary to answer the research questions. Given the substantial importance of Habermas's work, the qualitative content analysis research method proves its convenience in filtering out the main ideas and concepts that help answer the research question.

The study type is qualitative since it operates on non-quantitative data such as meanings and categories, but not percentages and numbers ("*What types of studies are there?*" 2016). The topics of PR, social media, and government interaction hint at using the qualitative content analysis research method.

Formulation of research questions and objectives

● **Research Question**

How are political institutions and administrations using social media today for PR, and, similarly, how are political activists doing the same?

● **Research Objectives**

1. Research the cases of president Barack Obama's and Donald Trump's use of social media during election campaigns and political activists relying on the same medium during the Arab Spring.

2. Propose that the knowledgeable use of social media as a PR tool could facilitate democratization, liberation, and stability in nations undergoing political turmoil and advanced capitalist societies.

The theoretical framework on which the study is based

Following this introductory section, I will discuss the critical theories by Habermas – the public sphere and legitimation – which form the philosophical foundation of this discussion. I shall then trace the history of media as a PR tool and a public sphere. This section will enable a historical understanding of the role that media plays as a political PR tool and a public sphere, setting the stage for evaluating the role of social media in this context. In the next segment, I shall seek to assess the use of social media as a PR tool in the US and nations involved in the Arab Spring revolutions. Through this section, I strive to move beyond the widespread perception that social media has acted as an effective communication tool and encourage a deeper understanding of its role in PR and the public sphere. In the next section, I shall apply the two theories of Habermas to the two cases selected for evaluation. By doing so, I hope to assess the use of social media in both these cases as a PR tool through the perspective of Habermas' theories, thereby discovering shortcomings in PR policies by governments and political activists. In the final section, I shall present concluding remarks and recommendations, if any.

Recent literature review

Obama owed his victory in 2008 to a more effective use of social media than McCain, but Trump also took advantage of social media when beating Clinton in 2016 (Groshek & Koc-Michalska, 2017). "Donald Trump says Facebook and Twitter 'helped him win'" (Groshek & Koc-Michalska, 2017, p. 1; McCormick, 2016). Social media indeed helped right-wing populists like Trump

become more popular than in the case of using only the TV influence on the audience (Groshek & Koc-Michalska, 2017). At the same time, the era of social media had a detrimental effect on Bernie Sanders' campaign.

Hughes and Allbright-Hannah (2010) called Barack Obama the first US President who used social media not only as a way to raise money but also as a platform for creating a network of enthusiastic volunteers from ordinary Internet users. Apart from just the social media, this network of volunteers further also used online video hostings, text messages, and emails to promote Barack Obama, but they also united thanks to the social media in the first place. Obama had four times more Facebook supporters and twenty-three times more supporters on Twitter than Republican presidential nominee McCain. People also watched Obama's videos on YouTube four times more than the related videos of McCain. Obama's campaign team also sent 1 billion emails across the nation. His team created 10,000 unique email messages to 13 million email addresses. Back in 2008, people used Facebook and other social media primarily using their PCs and laptops but not mobile phones because Obama's campaign reached only around 3 million people on Facebook via mobile phones while having 50 million viewers on YouTube. Obama's campaign team created two million profiles on www.my.barackobama.com. These people initiated 200,000 offline events, wrote 400,000 blogs, and created 35,000 volunteer groups. The Obama campaign had 3 million donors.

Most of the $639 million were raised through the Internet. Volunteers generated $30 million on 70,000 personal fundraising pages.6 out of 6.5 million donations were less than $100 each. Apart from using just Big Tech such as Facebook or Twitter, Obama's campaign also used the minority platforms such as AsianAve, FaithBase, BlackPlanet, and MiGente, targeting Asian Americans, Christians (religious perspective of segmenting the

market), African Americans, and Hispanics (Harfoush, 2009). A separate way was to approach the LGBTQ community online (Harfoush, 2009).

In comparison with ordinary websites, the shtick of social media was the ability to come to different audiences from the same sources. Before social media, Obama's campaign team would have to create separate accounts on the minority platforms. Still, thanks to social media such as Facebook, the trend went the other way – potential voters got together all in one place where they were easily accessible by the players such as Obama's campaign team. Each target group is expected to reach out in a certain way, using a particular language and online etiquette. Even though Obama's campaign team could have different teams working with each minority group, they were all united on Facebook, being able to develop unique messages and thus creating an illusion that they were reaching out to all audiences all at once while delivering personalized messages to each group.

Moreover, before social media, web page owners would have to update their pages to deliver new messages regularly. The social media and built-in messengers made it possible to provide new messages without updating the entire webpage. Moreover, the inclusion of videos on social media allowed to enrich the user experience when visiting the social media websites such as Facebook since they could both read textual messages and watch videos that would also certainly include audio – the users had a variety of options to choose from.

Katz (2013) brought up the term "digital engagement" when referring to Barack Obama's presidential campaigns of 2008 and 2012. One more ideological advantage of the social media is the ability of ordinary supporters to implement their ideas of support thanks to the fact that the social media are free to use, i.e., the regular supporters do not need budgets to spread the word about the candidate they support as in the case of Barack Obama. They

can deliver messages and receive feedback, creating millions of communication channels supporting Barack Obama at the grassroots level. Katz (2013) called Obama "the Social Media President." The author also defined three modalities of social media interaction between government and citizens. They are the proliferation of the President's messages, making them more visible to the public and creating opportunities for the citizens to provide feedback. The third modality allows the government to detect the most active and enthusiastic volunteers and activists who can later be hired and paid or otherwise rewarded.

Wolfsfeld, Segev, and Sheafer (2013) discuss the political environment as a primary factor affecting using social media. Suppose the political climate is heated up as it was at the beginning of Arab Spring in 2011. In that case, social media will inevitably become a "battlefield" of political struggle against the corrupt dictatorial regimes of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Social media and any new kind of media emerging will provoke a new wave of protest and political activism. It means that some percentage of the population always feels oppressed and is just waiting for the momentum of rebelling against the authoritarian rule as they see it. The new media, like social media, provides this oppressed population with a new weapon that the government has not yet taken under complete control.

Comunello and Anzera (2012) offered a conceptual framework for understanding social media and the Arab Spring. They also considered International Relations (IR) and specifics of the Middle Eastern governments and the architecture of the social networking sites when developing it. Social media grants grassroots and independent journalism a platform for spreading information independent of the government of the MENA region and is free of charge. The major constraint to the effectiveness of social media is the population's access to the Internet, especially

mobile Internet access. Whereas the governments used to control all channels of information that were primarily TV and radio stations that, in turn, needed to hire personnel that the government could easily control them, the social media offers grassroots and independent journalism a full-fledged media in their hands that was free of charge and accessible via any laptop or mobile phone, i.e., reaching out to each Internet user individually. The MENA regimes depended on such an "information monopoly" because it allowed them to remain unchanged for decades. The authoritarian regimes enjoyed their information monopoly because it also removed any political competition that, in turn, led to the preservation of the same power for decades. Neopatrimonialism of the MENA region offered the population two extremes – extreme dependence on the government and thus extreme submission to it. Such a dichotomy did not satisfy the freedom-loving people of these countries that wanted to be neither dependent nor obedient to the regimes. Social media targeted these people and granted them power over their governments by providing an accessible and personalized source of information capable of reaching out to whoever has a laptop or mobile phone.

Technology firms such as Microsoft, Facebook, Twitter, and Google started shaping political communication, allegedly predetermining the victory of President Donald Trump, as highlighted by the Cambridge Analytica scandal on Facebook allegedly handing over private data of its users to Trump campaign management (Kreiss & Mcgregor, 2017; Rehman, 2019). Facebook collects the users' data, analyzes their online activity and profile, and predicts their political preferences. Such information allowed Facebook to personalize online ads for each user. Hence, the analytics of Cambridge Analytica could quickly develop different rhetoric for people with other political preferences. Donald Trump chose overtly xenophobic rhetoric during his 2016 presidential campaign. Still, thanks to Facebook data harvesting, he could have approached the Facebook users with

different rhetoric, using the company's algorithm. While the core supporters of Trump's xenophobic agenda were happy about it and thus they needed no rhetoric change online, handing over private data to Cambridge Analytica allowed Trump to extend his support that, contributed to his victory over Hillary Clinton, which turned out to be paying less attention to the opportunities of the social media.

The Cambridge Analytica scandal of 2016 showed how much power has been accumulated in the hands of Big Tech in terms of collecting and exploiting the private data based on online activity, revealing the critical ethics crisis (Zunger, 2018). Whereas scientists are constrained by the American Psychological Association (APA) Code of Ethics, which rests on five ethical principles: nonmaleficence, responsibility, honesty, respect for dignity, and justice (Koocher & Keith-Spiegel, 2008). The Code of Ethics was created in 1953 and was primarily motivated by witnessing the atrocities of WW2. The 2016 scandal involving Cambridge Analytica shows that Big Tech needs to adopt the Code of Ethics likewise to the scientists dealing with the human subjects. The historical analysis shows that first, humanity comes up with some destructive weapon and develops a moral counterweight afterward, as in the case of any weapon of mass destruction (WMD). The 2016 election scandal indicated that the time has come to develop the Big Tech Code of Ethics.

Afriat et al. (2021) justified the Cambridge Analytica activities with free-market capitalism. Anything that works for making money serves as a justification for subtly collecting, processing, and handling over private data of Facebook users. Since Facebook is not funded by the government, it is free to use; it needs a stable source of income – online advertisement. Since most users do not want to pay for using Facebook, the company had to develop a business model that would keep it afloat and allow it to increase its income.

Schneble, Elger, and Shaw (2018) pointed out that the Internet itself has become a source of conducting research in the recent years, causing all hazards mentioned above, such as the ethics crisis of the Big Tech and the necessity of living off advertisement and thus the need to collect the private data and sell it to the third parties such as Cambridge Analytica working for Donald Trump during the 2016 campaign. The major problem is that most users never carefully read the text of the License Agreement and Privacy Policy when they use websites such as Facebook (Schneble, Elger & Shaw, 2018). It means the global community should work on a Code of Ethics for all parties – the Big Tech and the Internet users that must be more careful and responsible.

Some Internet users are ready to give up on their privacy rights to keep using the services such as Facebook (Brown, 2020). Very few users stopped using Facebook entirely because of the Cambridge Analytica scandal. Despite their rights being violated, the users keep using Facebook because of its "monopoly" on online communication worldwide. At the same time, Berghel (2018) called the Cambridge Analytica scandal a full-scale "dystopia" because adapting the rhetoric through individualized ads targeting Facebook allowed Trump to put every Facebook user into a virtual reality of psychological manipulation. The ethics crisis mentioned by Zunger (2018) takes the form of a transition from persuasion to manipulating the voter's consciousness since they no longer know who they vote for. Despite Trump's official rhetoric on mainstream media, ads targeting Facebook allowed them to bypass its side effects for wider audiences that would not vote for Trump after his xenophobic allegations like "Build the Wall!" and others.

Heawood (2018) mentions the term "pseudo-public political speech" when discussing the Cambridge Analytica scandal. It means that public political speech is no longer public the way it used to be. For example, Karpf (2017) brings up the topic of

Internet trolls – paid "mercenaries" that distort communication online, provoking ordinary users, etc. Anonymization of online communication allows the interest groups such as Trump's campaign manager to distort the perception of what is going on. One more power that distorts online communication is the Internet bots or robots that are software for running various operations online, such as sending uniform messages on platforms such as Facebook (Priyadarshini & Cotton, 2020). Nowadays, Facebook users no longer know if they communicate with a natural person or a robot online. The new generations of the internet bots started bypassing CAPTCHA (Completely Automated Public Turing test to tell Computers and Humans Apart), i.e., the technology that was supposed to filter out bots that try to enter websites such as Facebook and act like human users. It means that the methods of manipulating online communication have become more sophisticated and thus dangerous for users that seek information and communication online. At the same time, politicians like Trump can exploit more opportunities provided by Facebook, Cambridge Analytics, Internet trolls, and bots that bypass technologies such as CAPTCHA. Careful human users can easily and quickly detect they are involved in a chat with the robot, primarily given the short volumes of text typed and sent by robots and the time lag they respond to depending on the user's message volume (Gianvecchio et al., 2008).

One of the functions of Internet trolls is to warp the target affective audience (Karpf, 2017). The trolls may deal primarily with young adults as the most emotional target audiences. The term "troll farm" has become notorious, and the social media scandals erupted during the 2016 presidential campaign. Moreover, the troll/bot farms could target Hillary Clinton on behalf of allegedly Bernie Sanders supporters, creating an illusion of a fundamental crisis and divide within the Democratic Party and thus encouraging the hesitant supporters to opt for voting for Trump.

Trolls and bots are capable of causing a "fake news tsunami" by repeating the same message multiple times under lots of fake accounts and personas. Karpf (2017) also brought up the term "controlled interactivity" of communication during election campaigns. Whereas Hillary Clinton managed to control interactivity, Trump did not, i.e., communication between Trump supporters was more chaotic. However, Karpf (2017) points out that uncontrolled interactivity better represents the idea of liberal democracy, partially serving as an explanation of why Trump won the 2016 election. Online manipulation on social media will persist because of people's ego and shame to confess they were cheated or never read the License Agreement and Privacy Policy of Facebook or any other website they are using (Hinds, Williams, & Joinson, 2020).

Trump's use of social media depends on its architecture, functionality, algorithmic filtering, and datafication (Bossetta, 2018). The content may vary depending on the platforms such as Snapchat, Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. Some messages may overlap, whereas the others may not. For example, "Snapchat lacked a comprehensive datafication incentive to reward politicians' who invested in the platform" (p. 21). Facebook remained the primary source of investment, unlike Instagram or Snapchat, because they were launched later than Facebook. Bossetta (2018) also concluded: "Instagram allows campaigns to control the image of their candidate via uploading polished content at scheduled times. Snapchat, while carving its niche in the social media marketplace through its live and disappearing broadcast features, was arguably riskier (and less useful) for campaigns to adopt than Instagram" (p. 21).

Habermas, the Public Sphere, and Legitimation

Habermas' conceptualization of the public sphere and his definition of mass culture has influenced the understanding of public opinion in PR studies. Although his theory almost entirely

focuses on cultural conditions in advanced capitalist nations, Habermas placed politics and society at the center of culture. Hohendahl and Silberman (1979) propose a new approach to understanding Habermas' theory by considering it a reformulation of the dialectic relation between the political and socio-cultural systems. Habermas, relying on an extensive socio-historical evaluation, presents a cyclic interaction where cultural change is triggered by the political system driven by economic conditions. The public sphere acts as the mediator between these systems (Fraser, 1990).

The critical discussions in a public sphere are not constant and arise only when the society undergoes a significant phase (Habermas, 1974, p. 50). Historically, such spheres resulted from the oppressive environments created by early forms of capitalism, when the advent of the press and cross-border trade transformed the feudal society into the liberal bourgeois public (Habermas, 1991, pp. 14-26). Habermas notes that the public sphere can constitute private people belonging to different geographies, as long as they can deliver sound arguments on any topic and hold an open-ended discussion (Habermas, 1991, p. 36).

Should a public sphere display the three conditions mentioned above, Habermas states that it develops a rational, inclusive, and critical discussion. This state is termed Rasonnement. In the bourgeois state, groups of small private organizations prevent any one institution from holding majority power. Such a public sphere does not exist to strive for power but to ensure liberation (Habermas, 1991, pp. 79-88). However, such a public sphere exists only theoretically and has never taken practical shape due to the non-fulfillment of the prerequisite conditions.

However, to graph the fall of a public sphere, Habermas selected the decades beginning from the 1960s – to the preceding decades of the century marking the nearest fulfillment of the preconditions mentioned before (Habermas, 1991, pp. 141-180). The small

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private organizations begin to form unions so that liberal trade gives way to protectiveness. Notably, the line segregating the personal and the public arena begins to blur and increasingly so. Consumerism replaces Rasonnement, and PR campaigns and propaganda infiltrate discourse in the public sphere by cartels or larger unions. Habermas terms this as Re-feudalization (Habermas, 1991, pp. 181-186).

The re-feudalization mentioned above regresses the public sphere to a state where the public becomes mere spectators of performances made by organizations (Habermas, 1991, p. 299). Genuine public opinion is replaced by 'quasi-public opinion' and 'manipulative publicity' (Habermas, 1991, pp. 244-250).

In his later works, Habermas made modifications to his theory, taking into account self-acknowledged oversights which had skewed his interpretations dramatically, creating only two possible spheres – the ideal political public sphere and the current sphere made by social-welfare states that are mass-democratic (Habermas, 1992). In his revised version of the public sphere theory, Habermas presents a significant angle of networks that communicate opinions and information, disbursing these through the medium of communicative action (Habermas, 1992, p. 436).

The new public sphere plays a critical role in the second theory that is significant in the analysis being made through this paper – the idea of legitimation. In his book, *Legitimation Crisis*, Habermas (1975) presented the legitimation system of an advanced capitalist economy. In a scenario where the public and private domains are integrated and are interdependent, maintaining the impression of a welfare state becomes critical to retaining legitimacy. In involvement of the state in socio-economic aspects results in a greater need for legitimation, wherein the state moves beyond its traditional role to create a formalized democratic system that seeks to eliminate the

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ambiguities of class that it may attribute to politics (Habermas, 1975, p. 33).

To achieve this, the state has to acquire the loyalty of the masses without being directly involved in the public sphere. It needs to apply a civic context to the privatization of the political realm. Finally, the state needs to constantly highlight the advantages of the political system to the public. A capitalist economy can represent itself as a welfare state (Habermas, 1975, p. 35).

When the state is viewed as a welfare state, the class structure becomes silent and anonymous, social reforms are used to resolve conflicts within the society, and high wages are disguised as costs. Although risks arising from inflation, wage conflicts, and consumer pressure groups remain, a genuine interest in the political system is generated. Although social and class inequalities remain marked and witness growth, the public assumes a dual role of being a participant and victim of the system (Habermas, 1975, p. 36).

To attain legitimation by creating the conditions mentioned above, the state must constantly balance its capitalist and democratic responsibilities, thereby leaving scope for a legitimation crisis. In his work, *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, Habermas (1979) illustrates the legitimation problems a modern state face. The state needs to address legitimation as a continuous and formalized process, torn between being a welfare state and a state-mass system. With voting citizens becoming an integral part of the legitimation process, the loss of legitimation results in the fall of the government (Habermas, 1979, p. 194).

The state needs to maintain a stable economy, leading to a mass democracy being deemed a welfare state. As such, the state is constantly negating the ill-effects of the economic system through social welfare reforms (Habermas, 1979, p. 195). With the private sector holding a significant influence over the political system,

business policies, collective gains driven by structured production, and minimization of social inequalities become the touchstones of measuring government performance (Habermas, 1979, p. 196).

Problems of legitimation arise when there is a conflict between the roles of the government as a welfare state and a capitalist economy. While the traditional segregation of the private and political systems led to no loss of legitimation for the condition in an economic crisis, it now became the state's responsibility to ensure social welfare through financial stability. At the same time, to lead the said economic stability, the state has to make decisions that may compromise welfare (Habermas, 1979, p. 195).

Habermas states that the state cannot address the issues of legitimation by presenting a false image of a welfare state but by introducing the achievements of a capitalist economy as the sole and optimum means of addressing the problems of the public (Habermas, 1979, p. 196).

However, resolution by this method is restricted by several conditions. Firstly, as mentioned earlier, there is a constant conflict of goals between the economy and the state, resulting in a never-ending need for the state to balance its policies between capitalism and social welfare. Secondly, with globalization extending the impact of domestic policies to global operations, legitimation is required domestically and within the international community.

In addition, whereas nationalism was once the ideal means of drawing acceptance of controversial policies by the public, a dilution in national consciousness through international integration has rendered this method obsolete. Finally, with the horizontal and vertical growth of education, which it has become possible to reach a much wider audience through mass media, the

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public has also gained access to information that would contradict the representations of the state (Habermas, 1979, pp. 197-198).

Habermas posits that, should the state fail to maintain legitimation within the restrictive conditions mentioned above, it crosses over into a state of delegitimation. This stage is signified by the financial crisis, unemployment, inflation, overall economic instability, and a failure to check social inequality through reforms. When a government remains in the state of delegitimation, the result is frequently a change of regime (Habermas, 1979, p. 199).

The theories of the public sphere and legitimation are critical in understanding the use of media as a political PR tool as they enable a better understanding of the functioning of a public sphere, the challenges that governments face in legitimation crisis, and the pivotal role that media plays in influencing public opinion in both cases. To gain a deeper understanding of this context, a historical evaluation of the role of media as a PR tool and in the public sphere is required.

Media as a PR Tool and Public Sphere in the Past

Habermas has divided the public sphere into clear political, private, public, and literary segments. While Habermas' segregation of the spheres was based on elements such as social strata, nature of employment, and role in the administration, he did not account for several volatilities within each segment, such as gender roles and the influence of minorities (Benson, 2009). These aspects form a critical part of every public sphere and sway public opinion. In fact, in several cases of political turmoil, such as the American Civil Rights Movement, the issue at hand involved minorities (Carroll & Hackett, 2006).

This lack of inclusion of critical elements is a crucial gap in Habermas' conception of the public sphere and those who participate. However, it also needs to be understood that

Habermas acknowledged that public spheres are constantly evolving (Boeder, 2005). After a spate of human rights movements and the rise of feminism in the late 1900s, politics had to acknowledge the significance and influence of the everyday. Although Habermas may not have emphasized the relationship between everyday life and politics, public spheres eventually evolved to include this aspect as part of political PR (Benson, 2001).

Political PR itself underwent a significant change since the publication of *The Structural Formation of the Public Sphere*. While in his work, Habermas had placed mass media as the voice of the people – a medium for the discourse of the public sphere – the infiltration of the administration into the public sphere through this medium had already begun by the time Habermas' book was translated into English (Hohendahl & Silberman, 1979). Mass media was no longer an avenue for delivering the truth or providing an unbiased critique of events and administrative decisions. It had now become a PR tool that governments influenced and used to portray a positive image of itself to the public – a positive 'public image.'

To promote and protect its public image, governments have been known to intimidate broadcasting networks, often curtailing the freedom of the press by terming actions of the media as unpatriotic (McNair, 2011). For example, in the US, the Internal Security Act of 1950 restricts anyone from illegally possessing, publishing, or broadcasting any information deemed classified by the government. This act fundamentally prohibits the press from sharing information about actions of the government that may lead to its credibility and morality being questioned. The Internal Security Act continues to be a part of the Espionage Act of 1917. Governments have long been using the media to protect their public image.

At the same time, the media has acted as an avenue for political activists to convey the truth to the public, thereby upholding the critical aspect of knowledge of the truth and honest discourse within the public sphere. For example, the New York Times Co. v. the United States case in 1971 was the first instance in which the court ruled in favor of Daniel Ellsburg, who had attempted to publish parts of a study about US strategies in Vietnam. Similarly, although convicted within the US, Julian Assange – living and working out of the Ecuadorian Embassy in London since 2012 - continues to reveal government secrets through his website, Wikileaks. For a long time, mass media functioned as a PR tool for governments and political activists.

However, since Habermas conceptualized the public sphere and the role of the media in facilitating its effective functioning as a 'corrector' of governments, mass media has become substantially infiltrated by the administration and government. Today, broadcasting networks are 'pro' some political party or the other. News networks are used for lobbying and winning public support through misrepresented reports, skewed interpretation of facts, and systematic character assassination of candidates of opposing parties (Zaller, 1999).

It can be said that, with its saturation by political motivations and its ubiquitous influence on everyday life, mass media has ceased to be a trustworthy avenue of discourse within the public sphere. At this point, social media has emerged as the new public sphere. Reese-Schafer notes that, although the public sphere performs a political function, it is fundamentally private as it is formed by private citizens (Reese-Schafer, 2001, p. 38). The public sphere is where the lifeworld, or our day-to-day existence, leads to the formation of a public opinion, which influences the system or state (Lubenow, 2012). At this junction, social media can be placed today where it is a part of the everyday conversation of the public and a tool for political activism.

From the above discussion, despite government infiltration into mass media, advances in technology are constantly evolving the nature of mass media. Social media is one such step in the evolution of media. Having attained a massive reach in a relatively short period, social media today surpasses any other media in linking the public domestically and internationally, connecting governments to the public, and creating a public sphere that is presently highly difficult to infiltrate. To understand how social media may be used as a political PR tool and act as a public sphere, I will be evaluating the cases of the US government and the governments and political activists of the nations involved in the Arab Spring revolutions.

The Case of the US and the Arab Spring

Taking the case of US President Barack Obama's 2008 election campaign, Smith (2011) demonstrated that utilizing social media as a PR and communication tool had played a significant role in the political campaign and President Obama's victory over John McCain. Since Obama pioneered social media use in election campaigns that year, its use as a political PR tool has increased exponentially. Smith's research also revealed that political parties in the US have been quick to adapt to the fast-paced changes in social media technology, leveraging new forms of social networking to tap a broader voter base (Smith, 2011). The issue with social media as a PR tool and political media in the US is not related to adoption but adaptation.

While the US administration may have mastered the use of social media as a PR tool, it has also been criticized for its surveillance and censorship policies that many believe curtail open and accessible discussion of issues in public. A survey conducted by PEN America (2013) revealed that writers in the US are subjected to more intense surveillance when compared to the general public. As a result of this surveillance and out of the fear of possible consequences for voicing opinions, the report found that authors

had begun to self-censor their work – some even going to the extent of avoiding discussing sensitive topics over the telephone, or email, or even social media.

The case of the US is a good illustration of the 'two sides of the coin' of the intertwined role of mass media, politics, and the public sphere. While people may have access to a high degree of information, distributing information may lead to the government's credibility and its actions being questioned. It is still considered a risk, as demonstrated in the case of Julian Assange, Edward Snowden, and Bradley Manning; laws such as the Espionage Act and the Patriot Act provide the government with nearly limitless power to control the voicing of public opinion.

On the other side of the spectrum are the countries involved in the Arab Spring revolutions of 2010. Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya saw a string of protests and anti-government actions that triggered similar uprisings and displays of dissent across the Arab world. Political activists relied extensively on social media to communicate with fellow protesters, organize demonstrations, and disperse the truth of their circumstances throughout the international community. With social media spanning a wide array of mediums such as mobile phones and computers, it became impossible for the governments of these nations to clamp down on the torrent of information flowing from its public to neighboring states and countries around the globe.

The Egyptian revolution began on January 25th, 2011, and ended within 18 days with the Mubarak government overthrown. Mubarak implemented a complete shutdown of Internet and mobile networks on January 28th. However, this ban on their right to essential communication only increased the people's anger against the government (Howard, Duffy, Freelon, Hussain, Mari, & Mazaid, 2011). In this scenario, the Muslim Brotherhood emerged as the strong opposition to the government of President Hosni Mubarak. The group had garnered a tremendous following

amongst the Egyptian youth and had connected with the general public by dispersing its values, beliefs, aspirations, and commitments (Howard, Duffy, Freelon, Hussain, Mari, & Mazaid, 2011).

However, failing to live up to its commitments, the group soon lost its political footing. Three years after the revolution, Egypt has sworn in its 3rd president, who has only recently implemented a policy that bans public protests (AhramOnline, 2014). Ironically, the President claimed to have fashioned this policy after 'Western' laws. The public voice of Egypt continues to be heard across the world through social media, giving the world a good look into the turmoil that the nation is undergoing today and has been since the revolution began.

Compared to the US government policies and public reactions to these, the outcomes in Egypt and other smaller countries in the Arab world are starkly different. The government has years of experience using social media as a PR tool in the US. It is seemingly skilled in winning public approval – or negating dissent– where its actions are deemed questionable in the public sphere. On the other hand, the government in the Arab world was ill-prepared for the massive impact that social media had as a public sphere. As a result, governments were toppled, but present governments are also struggling to bring about a degree of stability to their nations, failing to appease the public.

The public's response to political activism through social media is vastly different in the US and the Arab Spring nations. While the American population does have, to a high degree, access to critical information and the right to speak and share the truth with the world – one can hardly imagine the US government ever shutting down internet access across the nation – there is an inherent sense of 'being watched. Although the common public still fearless tweets on Twitter, shares posts on Facebook, and passes on YouTube videos that convey their opinions about

critical and sensitive issues (Fuchs C., 2013), those citizens that are in positions that warrant authenticity and credibility of opinion do not necessarily enjoy the same constitutional protect when indulging in free speech.

From the above discussion, it is evident that social media has become one of the critical tools of political PR while acting as a public sphere where people can still hold open-ended, unregulated discussions. Next, I will evaluate social media through the lens of Habermas' theories of the public sphere and legitimation crisis.

Habermas and Social Media as a PR Tool and Political Media Today

As presented by Habermas, the ideal public sphere requires direct, critical debate. However, this aspect is often missing from most PR crises. Maier (2005) cited the 2003-2003 Roman Catholic Church Scandal. Although the Church did adopt new policies that appeased the public, it also intensively tried to control and influence the discourse. In another example, Carthew notes the stark difference between the highly violent May 2010 'red Shirt' rally in Bangkok and another to commemorate this event on September 19th of the same year. While social media had been extensively used in May by political activists to rouse the public to join their cause, the government had initiated a complete clampdown on social media, including blogs and traditional media such as radio and television broadcasting. As a result, the May 2010 revolt never transformed into an outright political revolution, as in the case of the Egyptian revolution (Carthew, 2010).

As such, while it may appear that Habermas' direct debate public sphere is functioning, it is also true that forces opposing this critical element are mighty in their presence, as illustrated by the above examples. Such a situation results in an increasing level of dissent amongst the people of a nation. Their concerns and

problems go unaddressed, and they are not even given the scope for holding a discourse in a free public sphere. This leads to a constant state of political turmoil and instability, unhealthy for any state and public.

Hauser (1999, pp. 37-56) attributes the predicament mentioned above to the undermining of the complexity of the public by Habermas. He notes that the public may not always make itself heard loudly. However, its discourse can be traced in unconventional avenues. Through his theory of Vernacular Discourse, Hauser posits that the everyday, natural public conversations are as critical a part of public opinion as discourses held in informal settings. Maier (2005, p. 223) adds that, in comparison to Habermas, Hauser does not objectify the public, thereby acknowledging a greater need to study and understand it.

Based on Habermas' theory of political infiltration into public spheres, the situation in the US and the Arab Spring nations are contrasted. Through its surveillance policies, the US administration demonstrates a high degree of influence on social media as a public sphere. Although the public has the impression that it is free to discuss critical issues, the government retains control through surveillance and systematic management. On the other hand, governments in the Arab Spring nations, having no previous exposure to treating social media as a public sphere, have no tact when attempting to infiltrate the media and, as such, use the only method to control their voice – banning and censorship.

While social media, as a public sphere, may be replete with everyday discussions and sharing of opinions on sensitive topics, the literary public sphere in the US, as highlighted by Habermas, consisting of journalists, academics, writers, and thinkers, is cautious about what they speak through this medium and often indulge in self-censorship. On the other hand, the literary sphere of the Arab Spring nations, along with its general population, are so dedicated to their cause that the possibility of bearing dire

consequences for voicing their opinions does not prevent them from doing so. Further, the dissent among the general public is so high in these nations that, even with the absence of the literary sphere, the public is mobilized enough to bring about political change.

Considering both these cases under the light of the legitimation theory by Habermas, it would appear that the US is using social media to finely balance its public sphere and maintain the legitimacy of its administration. Despite several scenarios, such as the 2003 war on Iraq that shook the legitimacy of the Bush Jr. government, or the recent spate of controversial economic policy reforms being implemented by President Obama, US administrations have consistently managed to win the approval or at least control the dissent of its public, thereby maintaining its legitimacy.

Habermas notes that when legitimacy fails, the administration falls into a state of delegitimation, and regimes change (Habermas, 1979, pp. 193-199). This is what one witnessed with the toppling of Mubarak's government. The failure to gain legitimacy resulted in the fall of the subsequent governments in Egypt. The current government, too, is struggling to win the approval of its people, to present itself as a welfare state that is set to try and meet the needs of its people.

Conclusion

Through this essay, I have sought to illustrate how Habermas can help us understand social media's current role and future scope as a political PR tool and the public sphere. Social media shows tremendous potential for transforming into a public service media or PSM (Iosifidis, 2011). Despite government infiltration and even complete clampdowns, the monumental reach of the medium, and the sheer number of active users, it is highly probable that social media will be able to retain most elements of

a public sphere. Although it may not develop the aspect of direct debate as required by Habermas' theory, it may still hold the power of mobilizing the public sufficiently to influence political change and social reform.

Governments of nations that have only recently awoken to the function of social media as a public sphere need to be aware of the pivotal role that social media plays in crisis communication and PR (Wigley & Zhang, 2011). In times of crisis, the legitimacy of the state becomes more questionable. Hence, intelligent management of public opinion during such a time is critical to retaining legitimacy. Legitimacy becomes more critical in a globalized world where the boundaries of a nation's public sphere can extend beyond its political and geographic boundaries (Castells, 2008).

There is tremendous scope to evaluate how governments in emerging democracies can leverage social media to bring about political stability, thereby facilitating economic growth and legitimation. At the same time, it will be interesting to assess how governments in advanced capitalist economies can use social media to measure and track public opinion. Although I have relied on the extensive and significant works of Habermas in the realm of the public sphere and legitimation, a more sizable addition needs to be made to PR practice by employing the results of other scholars such as Hauser. A more in-depth understanding of social media as a political PR tool and public sphere could improve PR practice in different forms of societies and political systems.

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