

The Impact of the Internet as a Factor of Participation in Protests: Cross Country Analysis

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In the last ten years the role of the Internet in the citizens mobilisation has been widely discussed in the academic community (Castells, 2012). In particular, some studies have shown that protesters in Northern African and Middle East countries have been using social networks for coordination and information exchange (Breuer, 2012). Others have demonstrated that, using Facebook or Twitter, citizens created groups where they posted news, calls, announcements and other items concerning protests (Gaffney, 2009, Allagui, 2011).

The start for this rapidly growing research interest was given by the ‘Arab Spring’ that was followed by a whole stream of papers about protests in Chile, Iran, Belgium, Spain and the Arab countries themselves (Lotan, 2011, González-Bailón, 2013), which indicates the importance of the subject (Howard, 2010). However, most of these papers are case studies or they compare no more than a few countries from the same region, while demonstrations emerging in many other countries remain unwitnessed (Wolfsfeld, 2012) and cross-country comparisons stay underdeveloped. Case study or regional approaches do not allow for singling out the influence of the Internet on protests from among influences of other social or political factors. In this paper, we perform a cross-country analysis that establishes relationship between individual use of internet as a news source and protest participation controlled for other variables. To evaluate the general significance of the Internet in comparison with other predictors most reliably, it has to be checked if the proportion of protestors was less before massive internet penetration. However, this question will be addressed in our further research, while here we focus on the contemporary situation.

Data and Methods

In this research we used the international database of the World Value Survey (WVS) project that has been exploring people's values and beliefs in many different countries and nations during several decades. The database provides longitudinal data, from 1981 to 2013, which contains 6 waves. Each wave covers from 10 to 60 countries (over 1,000 cases for each) and includes roughly from 100 to 400 variables. Since we are interested in the latest protests, we have used the 6th wave which contains data collected between 2011 and 2013. 41 out of 57 countries were included in the final models as not for all countries selected variables were available. Nevertheless, the total sample includes approximately 50,000 cases.

The dependent WVS variable, describing the fact of a respondent's participation in lawful political demonstrations, after recording, contains two categories: 0 – a respondent did not participate in a protest during his/her lifetime, 1 – a respondent was a protestor at least once . The data analysis showed that total amount of protestors in 41 countries equals around 8,000, and more than 6,000 of them have participated recently.

The 6th wave provides 395 variables which poses a question about variable selection for the final models. For this purpose we first calculated a measure of association between the dependent variable and the rest variables, provided by the WVS. The result of this correlation analysis allowed to eliminate the least significant predictors, while the top predictors were further analysed and selected based on our sociological hypotheses. As a result, the final model contained eight variables: the use of Internet and friends as news sources, interest in politics, education, religion, employment status, political views and materialist/post-materialist index.

To find the relationship between protest participation and the independent variables we applied logistic regression which predicts a probability of an event if a dependent variable is a binomial one. The R implementation of two-level regression was used, although at this stage of the research country-level variables were not included so far.

Analysis and Results

As expected, all given variables have a significant effect on the dependent variable. The daily Internet use is most substantially related to the probability of a respondent's participation in a protest. Calculations reveal that the average regression coefficient for the Internet use across 41 countries equals 0.42. Therefore, holding other variables at a fixed value, we see that the probability of whether a citizen, reading news on the Internet, joins a protest is 52% higher than if he/she does not. The findings suggest that almost every second respondent interviewed in 2011-2013, who participated in political demonstrations, uses the Internet for news every day or week.

However, this result describes the overall situation in all 41 countries. To find if the relationship between the Internet use and protest participation is different in different countries, we then used a random effect model, that is, we calculated the effect of the Internet for each of the 41 countries separately. Effects for all other variables in the model remained constant. This model showed that the effect of the Internet is positive in most countries. Only in three states – Japan, Kazakhstan and Peru – the effect is negative.

In other countries usage of the Internet turns to be a significant positive predictor. However, coefficients of the effects among them vary vastly: from 0.1 to 0.8. Therefore, we grouped these countries by values of their coefficients into four groups from the countries with the lowest effect of the Internet on protests to the countries with the highest effect. The highest coefficients (0.7–0.8) were observed in the following countries: Chile, Colombia, Ghana, Tunisia, Libya, Yemen, and Pakistan. They all combine moderate GDP, according to the World Bank, with the rapid growth of the Internet penetration during the last ten years, according to the Internet World Stat. Although this demands further research, it can be preliminarily assumed that the probability of whether the citizens participate in protests is much higher in the countries where the Internet penetration is growing sharply while GDP is fairly low and, moreover, the political regime violates human rights. Thus, having access to the online information resources and social media, people can read about and discuss problems of their states and find support from other users (Morozov, 2011). As a result, when demonstrations occur, citizens join them easier if they are acquainted with the current situation in their country through the Internet (Kalathil, 2003).

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