

Liberation Technology: Social Media and the Struggle for Democracy

by Larry Diamond and Marc F. Plattner. (eds)

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A key point of the Internet and the World Wide Web for many has been the view that they provide arenas that are free from authoritative control, havens of free speech and freedom of expression. In the past few years, the role that social media in particular have played in various struggles for democracy in certain countries not only indicates the power of social media in civil struggles, but has led to them collectively being described as ‘liberation technology’ (Diamond 2012: xi). Diamond makes this point in his introduction to *Liberation Technology*, citing the circumstances and various incidences of civil unrest in which the Internet, the blogosphere, social media and mobile phones had played a crucial role. While admitting that the term had faced criticism, Diamond, as can be seen from the book’s title, maintains its relevance.

Liberation Technology, however, offers a range of perspectives on the use of Internet and social media during periods of social upheaval in countries around the world. The chapters, by diverse academics such as Evgeny Morozov, Ronald Deibert, Xiao Qiang and Patrick Meier, are neatly characterised into sections headed ‘Liberation vs Control in Cyberspace’,

‘Liberation Technology in China’ and ‘Liberation Technology in the Middle East’. In this way, discussions of both liberation in and control of the Internet provide the opposing debates surrounding the arguments pave the way for discussion on the manner in which digital technologies have been used in the Far East and Middle Eastern arenas.

As a whole, the contributors to *Liberation Technology* offer a wide-ranging examination of the way ICTs have been used by people who are not political activists, but people who use and consume digital technologies and who utilise them as platforms for publishing their views and sharing information. They signify the blurring of the boundaries between professional reporters and digital media users, between news and personal opinion, between the provision of information and the shift into political action. The contributors further examine the ways in which civil advocacy, political debate, elections, the role of mass media in democracies have all been subject to the impact of modern digital technologies. These chapters look at the way the new arenas for political communication provided by digital technologies, offer publication platforms for a wide range of political views.

Other chapters, however, challenge the view that the Internet and digital technologies is unregulated and argue that in fact there are more boundaries in the online world than are realised. Some of these boundaries are socially constructed, because people may join Internet groups which focus on their own political and social beliefs. By doing so, they may restrict themselves to communicating only with other people who share these belief systems and wall themselves off from other people who hold

opposing views. In other countries governed by oppressive regimes, Internet users may find their ability to access certain search engines and Internet sites restricted by arrangements between the international conglomerates which own the digital platforms and the country's government.

Liberation Technology offers a balance of views; those which illustrate the empowerment offered by the Internet and digital technologies to citizens ruled by oppressive regimes and in contrast, the empowerment of such regimes to censor Internet sites, to monitor and take action against those of their own citizens whose digital communications are seen as subversive. The book further highlights control over the Internet exercised by privately owned companies and discusses the need for an international policy on the Internet. As Deibert and Rohozinski point out 'the regulation of cyberspace tends to take place in the shadows, based on decisions taken by private actors rather than as a result of public deliberation' (p. 31). This range of content ensures that *Liberation Technology* is an interesting and informative addition to academic literature on digital technologies.

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