The lost revolution: New media and activism

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The quick spread of social networks (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) in Albania brought about hopes on revolutionary experience of communication in other countries, along with hopes of revival of civic and political activism. This hope is not fulfilled today in most democratic contexts, but is strongly justified in authoritarian cases. In this paper I will try to show why the supposed potential of a revolution in communication has not led and will not lead to the expected effects in the Albanian case, at least in the medium term, against the current background of information technology.

We currently face two opposing attitudes when analyzing the role of new digital media in civic and political activism. The first position notices a massive liberalization of public communication and consequently a huge potential for reviving activism. The second position, somewhat more pessimistic, states that the potential of new digital media does not change the essence of the nature of communication; it merely amplifies the familiar spects of classical communication means, or imitates them in new ways.

In this text I will focus more on the most ovbious and frequent attempts in Albania to revive this activism: the social networks. (The influence of different blogs and websites passes considerably through the republication in these networks and this is the main reason why in this text I will analyze mainly these networks.) This focus is explained mainly from the weight these media have in daily communication, but also with the fact that social networks tend to turn new digital media in instruments of their functioning. For example, most young people aged 15-25 years old currently use Facebook messages to communicate, while until a few years ago digital communication was considered a new form of communication, which took the shape of e-mail. Currently, it can almost be said that the only function of e-mail for teenagers is that of registering a Facebook account. So, during the organization of a competition in one of Tirana's high schools, when the participants were asked to provide an e-mail address, 50% of them provided the addresses of their parents. It is very likely that these addresses have been used initially to start accounts in social networks and then they have deactivated the options of e-mail notifications. Currently, the social networks, mainly Facebook as the most used one, according to studies in Albania, offer more convenient communication functions for group users, including the functions that were earlier covered by e-mail. These functions consider the needs of users to virtually control their communication in a way that can prove difficult to take place in the physical communication or communication through traditional media. The organization of group or collective activities is one of the main functions that social networks successfully offer. It is also one of the reasons why these neworks have had the above-mentioned role in different countries, giving rise to hopes of increased activism.

In order to analyze the truthfulness of the two above-mentioned positions we have to look at the necessary conditions to change the nature of communication in new media. In other words, in order to verify any revolutionary role of theirs in public communication, we have to examine the potential of creation of new and unknown possibilities to traditional media, as well as eventually prove that these possibilities possess sufficient influence to change the nature of communication through new media.

In different periods, researchers and other actors involved in public and political communication have perceived revolutionary processes that result from communication means. They were right regarding some of the means. However, in other cases these means did not live up to their expectations, either qualitatively (in the inability to change the nature of communication,) or quantitatively (in the inability to have sufficient influence.)

Last century, during the 40s, going against the widespread belief in the major influence of the press (let us recall that at the time the newspapers were the main means of communication, radio was on its first stage, while television was only a lab experiment), researchers like Lazarsfeld and Berelson discovered that voters used a simplified psychological and comforting mechanism to process information. According to the researchers, this mechanism was (and is) used to avoid cognitive dissonance, namely the clash of new information obtained from media with pre-existing beliefs. For this reason, the voters tend to receive information only from media sources that are expected to support their beliefs and opinions and avoid information from media sources that are expected to offer opposing views. This finding directly affects democracy theories, which are founded on their belief in communication and on molding a rational opinion out of a judgement process of opposing information, including from John Dewey at the beginning of last century to Jurgen Habermas in this age.

It is clear that in this case the influence of the media remains limited and in fact is preceded by previous developments. What kind of developments are these? First of all it should be said that shaping of attitudes, opinions or voting trends among individuals is catalyzed more by socio-economic factors (awareness of social affiliation, religion, ethnic origin, etc). Many authors viewed this as a confirmation of the theories of voters' irrationality. However, after the influence of methodological individualism, whose roots start with Max Weber, rationality assumes a conditional and contextual shape. Consequently, a position is recognized as a fully rational one when it is supported in an individual's own interests and beliefs as perceived by him or her.

To this major obstacle in media influence we can add the sociological finding that individual attitudes, opinions, and beliefs are essentially affected only at the inter-personal level of communication, or small group communication. Here comes to the fore the role of what are considered as opinion leaders: individuals acknowledged as legitimate interpreters of the complex political reality in a simple language of average citizens. (Here I am not only referring to public opinion-makers, but also to opinion-makers within small groups or at a personal level). In fact, any individuals can be under the influence of opinion leaders in a particular environment, while playing the role of a leader in another environment: e.g. a student that is influenced by the teacher in a cafe, but can influence opinions of his less educated parents at home. Current models of analysis of media influence indicate that the explanation for media influence is inaccurate if it is not completed by interpretation of the media by opinion leaders.

In the case of the influence of social networks the question we should ask is whether they have managed to change the scheme of influence, hence from the sources of information to opinion leaders and then to the individual sufficiently to considerably change the nature of communication and eventually increase citizens' activism.

What comes immediately to mind is the comparison to the effects of social networks in political activism of countries in democratic transition (e.g. "Arab spring" events). However, there is an essential difference between the situation in those events and the way that activism functions in Albania. In the case of "Arab spring" social networks played an important role in mobilizing the citizens against the background of a relative control of the authoritarian governments on classical means of communication. In these circumstances, social networks were not just another channel of communication competing with classical media, but perhaps the prevailing channel, characterized by freedom of communication and lack of censorship. Hence, in these countries, it is difficult to compare the effect of social network in political activism to the effect of traditional media, precisely because the second part of comparison is absent: traditional media are controlled by the government in power. The Albanian case is certainly a different situation. Traditional media are not under the influence of a sole center of power. In Dahl's words, there is a communication poliarchy in traditional media, which, even though it fails to necessarily guarantee professionalism, lack of bias, or objectivity in reporting, it guarantees at least the fundamental condition of democracy: pluralism. This certainly remains a selective pluralism due to the way that traditional media function and the attempts of political parties to co-opt them. However, it is obvious that attempts to mobilize, especially when targeted against current government, do not meet censorship: quite the contrary, they find powerful allies in traditional media. In this context, the efforts to use social networks for political activism compete directly with traditional media. Consequently social networks lose their exclusivity. In addition, against a background where information technology has had a delayed development, traditional media remain the main source of information. Furthermore, in Albania social networks are used mainly from the population groups that tend to abstain the most: the youth.

The only way to examine the separate and independent impact of social networks would be analizing the attempts for activism on issues that would distinguish traditional media from social networks. However, this is almost impossible. In a context of political competition traditional media try to grasp and embrace social and economic causes even when they go beyond the radar of direct political interests. This happens because traditional media and political forces that support them try to promote and amplify all potential energy coming from alternative sources, making it impossible to distinguish the effect according to the origin of the media. For example, when a television reports or emphasizes a protest that has started from social networks with the aim of showing dissatisfaction of citizens, this decision is made in the framework of the televisions's editorial policies that oppose the government.

In the absence of studies and obvious effects of mobilization through social networks we can analyze what we watch on TV or read in the press. An overview of these media does not lead to any revolutionary discoveries. The protests organized through social networks remain limited to modest participation. The latest case was that of a protest organized in front of the President's headquarters from different individuals and civil society groups against impunity (the case of the person charged with pedophilia and murder). About 150 persons participated in this protest, a symbolic number size-wise when compared to the usual political rallies organized by political

parties. Naturally, the subject of the protest makes engagement less attractice compared to the attempts to overthrow a government or government's show of power and support with festive rallies, for example.

Now we can go back to the technical aspect of influence and how it works. The effect of liberalization of communication has enabled each individual to express freely. However, there is no special reason to think or observe a change in the nature of media influence. Quite the opposite, social networks seem to just accelerate or facilitate the communication processes that have taken place earlier in traditional media. For example, many persons involved in opinion-making in traditional media are also parallely active in social networks. They usually have the largest number of followers, friends, and the most devoted attention (likes & comments). It seems that the influence they exerted previously in traditional media is also replicated in social networks. There are also cases of exclusion, when such persons do not engage in social media, but when they do, parallelism is evident.

In the absence of opposing evidence it can be said that a shift in the means of communication does not bring about a change in the essence of the role of opinion leaders. This role becomes easier, since social networks open the potential for a relative expansion of the means of communication. This expansion is relative, becalse the filtering logic also applies to social networks when it comes to individual influences or small groups. The spread of communication in social networks follows almost the same communication logic as in the physical world, through mechanisms of liking, attraction, or curiosity to the other. Although virtually the social networks offer endless opportunities for expanding freedom of expression and liberalizing participation in communication, in reality the same selection filters of traditional media apply. Again, the certified speakers have to have the ability to attract attention and their virtual "public" has to acknowledge this ability.

Another very important aspect that impedes any significant distinctions in the nature of influence of traditional media as compared to social networks is the mechanism of mobilization and participation of individuals. Social networks would have had a considerably greater impact and perhaps even a revolutionary effect on political activism if they would liberate hidden potential, as we saw in the context of censorship. However, public censorship is not the only one that exerts an impact on social network. A different kind of limitation impedes any kind of essential change and lowers expectations for "a revolution" in this aspect. When speaking of potential citizen engagement it is assumed that citizens can serve as sources of public and political activism. Naturally, this is not true. Not just for the fact that " the unknowns" or "the uncertified" from traditional media lack the necessary attention in social networks, but also due to the fact that the process of filtering influence works in the same way as in traditional media. Not every call for public activism would find support from others. Not only this, but the calls for activism are subjected to "self-censorship," ranging from the perception that a citizen has on his/her competency to the estimation of potential success in the case of an activist engagement. The game is not as harmless as it seems. Just like in physical communication, citizens hesitate to support initiatives that are viewed as potentially unsuccessful.

The only important effect that builds a basis of distinction for the influence of traditional media tfacilitatingo new media is the feedback from users. However, even this effect is a facilitative one. Individuals write and reply on blogs or social networks, yet, they remain reactive to and not promoters of activism. If you look at the concrete participation in public initiatives, such as

protests or manifestations, it can be easily deduced that the main effect of this communication is catharsis.

As a conclusion, we can say that the influence of social networks has not changed in essence the nature of communication, but only its technical aspect. In this context even public and political activism cannot experience radical changes. The limitations of initiatives that emerge from social networks out of the classical framework of power games clearly testify to this. Any change in public and political activism cannot be expected simply from technological changes in the process of communication, but rather from the change in the ability of citizens to orient themselves and think publicly and politically. Just on its own, technology cannot make a revolution.