

Political Science: Knowledge in the Online Era

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If the Arab Spring taught us anything, it was that the Internet has become an important mean of the dissemination of ideas, creation of interest groups, mobilization of people, and changing public opinion. Although some will insist that the Arab Spring was not a social-media phenomenon but a grass roots movement, we cannot ignore the power of unhampered information presented by the millions of users during the revolution. Images posted on Flickr or Facebook and videos uploaded on YouTube were being seen by the world without the framing bias and “coloring” from traditional media outlets.

Not only has social media allowed groups to finally find an arena for communication and mobilization relatively protected from the repression of authoritarian regimes, but it has become a major force in democratic regimes as well. When the U.S.A. Congress was considering approving SOPA and PIPA, over 100,000 Internet companies asked their users to petition their elected representatives to oppose these bills. And so they did, Google reported that in one day 4.5 million people signed the petition opposing SOPA and PIPA. There was no need to rally people in Washington to successfully oppose SOPA and PIPA. In fact, without the Internet and Social Media we would not have experienced the rate of success that the anti-PIPA/SOPA movement had [1].

What the Internet and Social Media has done is to allow us to have access to almost an infinite amount of information. The physical and monetary constraints that previous generation faced in accessing information are almost eliminated today. We are online, interconnected to a remote world full of incomprehensibly large amount of information. Never before have men or women been able to transmit ideas to one another around the globe, within seconds, in the comforts of their own homes. For example, when in 2011 United States' East-Coast was hit by an earthquake, people in New York City read about it on twitter 30 seconds before they felt it. This shows that the way we now receive and share information has changed dramatically thanks to the Internet and social media [2].

We are seeing a rise of a generation that will be empowered by this online world. According to International Communication Union in 2006 the share of Internet users was only 18% of the total world's population. From these most users lived in the developed world. However by 2011 (5 years later) the share of Internet users has increased to 35%; 2.5 billions of people now use the Internet. This dramatic shift has come mostly from the developing world. The developing world now is 62% of the Internet users from 44% just five years ago. However what the developed and the developing world have in common is that most active Internet users are 25 years old or younger. If anybody would benefit from wealth of information available through Internet is, I believe, the youth in the developing world.

The inevitable question is: what does the Internet have to do with us in Political Sciences or Social Sciences in general? Certainly access to Internet has for many represent a challenge within the realm of academic publishing. We, in the Social Sciences, face the irony of working in a field that is meant to promote the understanding of man in his environment, while zealously protecting this same understanding under walls of copyrighted-work, membership-access-only journals, and expensive books hidden away in dark libraries [3].

Therefore we shall further ask: How can we advance our epistemic community with the resources available in this online-world? Internet and the dissemination of knowledge should not be a challenge but rather an opportunity for in the Social Sciences. Today, more than ever, we as scholars can have the greatest impact beyond the traditional confinements of the classroom. We have the opportunity to democratize our knowledge.

Open Access Journals like the Journal of Political Sciences and Public Affairs are precisely examples of the democratization of our epistemic community and examples of using the valuable resource that the Internet represents. Open Access Journals, allows to extend readership beyond the traditional. In an attempt to assess the impact of Open-Access Journals, a recent study by Kristen Antelman found that open-access articles have a greater research impact than not-freely available ones. Furthermore, she found that from the different fields analyzed, Political Science has the greatest impact in terms of citation rates. Without a doubt these are important and encouraging findings. However, measuring citation rates can only assess the impact of a work in a formal and academic setting. We forget that there are millions of potential readers who will be influenced by our work and will never write about or formally cite it. Assessing the impact of our discipline in this sense is almost impossible, yet very important [4].

Although Open-Access Journals challenge the conventional profit-structures of traditional publishers, we should ask: For what and to whom are we producing knowledge for? If our goal is to produce knowledge and understanding of the forces that affect people, then this knowledge and understanding is only valuable as long as it can reach the same people it studies. Therefore, Open-Access Journals will benefit precisely those who are not enrolled in an academic institution nor have the means to pay for journal subscriptions. If we want to continue to be relevant and disseminate our knowledge and ideas, we need to reach out. We need to use the internet to our advantage, and even social media; all this with the hopes of elevating our discipline from the obscurity that its currently surrounded by to the lights of the non-traditional reader, the non-academic, the youth, and any other who by mistake finds our writings. This is where our work will flourish the most.

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