Since the invention of the printing press in the 15th century, different forms of media have played a critical role in the spread of revolutionary thought and in bringing about political, economic and social change.

During the 1917 Russian Revolution, the Bolsheviks’ first steps were to seize the telephone exchange, the railway stations and the main bridges going in and out of Petrograd, the capital of the Russian Empire. This allowed them to control the message about the revolution and to prevent counter-revolutionary propaganda. They then used the wireless room of a loyal warship to broadcast messages appealing to the Russian people to support the revolution.

During the 1979 Iranian revolution, a popular uprising similar to the ones we are witnessing today in Tunisia and Egypt, revolutionary ideas were spread through “small media” such as audio cassettes and printed leaflets that carried the messages of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomaini.

Authoritarian states, to preserve their control and to stifle opposition, have gone to great lengths to control the mass media, with a great deal of success in recent decades. But the emergence of social media – Web 2.0 – has presented a major challenge to the state’s ability to control the message and contain popular dissent.

The Tunisian and Egyptian governments’ censorship and media controls, not to mention their repressive restrictions on free speech and political association, could do little to prevent enterprising youths from organizing the initial demonstrations that would unleash upheaval in both countries. Short of shutting off the Internet and mobile phone communications, these states have been unable to contain the viral anti-regime activities of their wired citizens.

Facebook and Twitter certainly aren’t solely responsible for the growing wave of revolutionary ferment in the Arab world; pent-up frustrations had been bubbling for some time. But they helped to channel that frustration into action. The first major demonstrations in Tunisia and Egypt were organized via Facebook and Twitter, with activist leaders directing followers where to congregate and how to avoid blockades. Those gatherings then snowballed, drawing in citizens from all walks of life.

So what does this mean for Western democracy promotion efforts? Western states need not lecture repressed populations about the value of freedom or guide them in the building of democratic movements. Events in Egypt, Tunisia and even the 2009 post-election protests in Iran have shown that...
the focus of Western efforts needs to be on strengthening the Web 2.0 platforms that can facilitate the networking of activists, the sharing of ideas and the organization of movements.

Although many authoritarian regimes have been caught flat-footed by the emergence of social media and their political applications, others have been ahead of the game. China, for instance, has developed sophisticated cyber-control strategies that have included strikes against organizations such as Google that challenge that control.

Those seeking to defy such efforts by states like China must focus their efforts on keeping the Web 2.0 political space open, whether through technological innovation or by leveraging economic and political power to persuade regimes, corporations and private organizations to cease interference in free virtual expression.

There are more than 500 million Facebook and 200 million Twitter members in the world today, and the number is growing, particularly in the developing world. In fact, social networking is the Web communication medium of choice in the developing world, with those who are wired typically spending more time on social networking sites than e-mail. Chinese bloggers, for instance, are the most prolific in the world, despite increasingly stringent government controls.

There were revolutions, of course, before Facebook and Twitter, and most of the world’s population, particularly its poor and disenfranchised (those most in need of revolutionary change), still lack access to the Web. Nevertheless, the situations in Tunisia and Egypt have clearly shown the revolutionary potential of Web 2.0.

If Western states are serious about democracy promotion, they must work to harness this potential. This will require continued investment for innovation in social media technologies and the political will to keep them open and free at all costs. It will also require more openness among Western states themselves – which, in the era of WikiLeaks, may encounter some resistance. Like the printing press, radio and television, social media are evolving into a powerful tool to mobilize people and to promote positive political change. Let’s not miss the opportunity to use it.

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