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Review:

The Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Information Technology and Political Islam

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Philip N. Howard. The Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Information Technology and Political Islam. Oxford University Press, 2010. ISBN-13: 978-0199736423, ISBN-10: 0199736421, 285 pages.

A besetting weakness in writing about the Internet in the Muslim world has been sampling on the dependent variable. Interested in democratization? How does the Internet promote democracy? Civil Society? How does the Internet foster civil society? New media literacies, broader intellectual horizons, online activism: How does the Internet break old molds and bring liberation? To be fair, elementary failures to distinguish between sample and universe are not entirely the fault of analysts. Engineers who developed the Internet consistently promoted it as a liberating technology, since that is what it was to them, which Ithiel da Sola Pool, observing the early development of networking at MIT and writing at the tail-end of the generation, and project, that produced Daniel Lerner's *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East* (1965), passed into political science thinking about information and communication technologies (ICTs) as technologies of freedom (1984). But analysts do have to answer for meager empirical grounds on which they cast such interpretations – actually, speculations that generalize from premises more than reasoning from findings – and then, of course, the inevitable counterarguments about how ITCs either don't matter so much after all or don't have enough dynamic inertia to overcome the

static inertias attributed to Muslim and Middle Eastern politics. *The Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* effectively closes this chapter by systematically putting speculations and arguments from single cases to the test – actually, to a quite rigorous test of modern comparative political analysis.

Howard, who is author of the prize-winning *New Media Campaigns and the Managed Citizen* (2006), and his colleagues on the World Information Access Project assembled a database of indicators (for Internet availability, access, policy, ownership, structures and uses) cross-referenced to common standard measures of democratization and development for 75 countries with substantial Muslim populations. Against this, he is able to test common claims, and presents some uncommon findings, about relations between the spread of the Internet and political Islam, both broadly defined to include the infrastructure of the Internet (in what he calls the "informational infrastructures" of these countries) and all the politics of Islam, not just the oppositional, much less just radical, ones. This is how he first establishes the universe, which he then proceeds to stratify into political types (transitional democratization, entrenched democratization, constitutional monarchies, authoritarian states, crisis states) for comparing features of the Internet from its settings in telecoms policy, to its physical implementations and locations, as media and other uses that, appearing on the screen, are what "the Internet" means to most people. The introduction of rigor is striking, not just for putting popular ideas and common observations to comparative test but also for rooting comparison in frames from which theory-driven, rather than participant-generalized, hypotheses may be generated.

Howard is careful to provide fully functional definitions of his variables, most of the time. So, he breaks down democratization into several areas of theory for conceptualizing it: policy formation, political parties, political communication, civil society, cultural politics. Addressing each in turn, he begins with an idealized image of what these look like in political theory – not to measure Muslim examples by Western ideals but to identify the variable features of policy formation, political parties, political communication, civil society, and cultural politics that link to features of the Internet

as "informational infrastructure." In other words, as additional dimensions. It would be hard to overemphasize how much this departs from the common approach that sets out to test vernacular conceptions and, in effect, to translate them selectively into social science. The downside of the strong functionalism of a rigorous comparative approach is that its characterizations will often seem a little "off" to specialists immersed inmore ethnographic realities, somewhat monochromatic, suspiciously "western." But this is always the case with comparative study, the test of which is whether it identifies patterns across a universe of cases. The gain is precision, both empirical and in locating propositions in proper, and properly established, middle range theories that can give equal weight to all cases.

The results, if not spectacular, are thus well grounded and, in some cases, unexpected. For instance, no one, except a few engineers, discussing diffusion and uptake of Internet technologies, has previously noticed how the difference between in-country hosting of Web and Internet services and hosting those outside the country distributes differentially across regime types, varies with the legal statusand social depth of parties, with monopolies in print/broadcast media, or with who constitutescivil society. Howard is able to tease this out because in almost no case is the Internet treated as an independent variable; where it is, his discussions are no more sophisticated than those he displaces, which alone demonstrates the value of his rigorous comparative approach. It also indicates clearly openings for further research and where data need to be collected.

The payoff comes in his discussion of how political parties behave online. Starting from the observation that the "political web sphere, even in countries where political parties are banned, is increasingly vibrant and competitive" and the proposition that "Parties compete for the attention of journalists and voters,"he advances" a nuanced argument … about the connection between democratization and technology diffusion. In these countries [with the most political content online] the pressure to include Islamists in national political life is very high, and ICTs have allowed the political system to accommodate competing interests and discordant voices in a way that

allowed for stability in the democratic institutions they do have" (p. 96). Variations on this finding recur when looking at political communication – opening the "informational infrastructure" to Islamic politics produces a majority that is mainstream, not radical or even oppositional – or at civil society, at changing news cultures, at cultural politics pursued online, where extremists, by comparison, drive their news and views not into a public but across affinity groups. Quasi-parties are comparatively quicker to take up the Internet, actually to move from other forms to something more like parties when the Internet is their primary outlet, making it a space of ideological diversity.

Giving such propositions – or others, such as that state dominance of traditional media drives journalism online, in effect drives demand for online news – proper theoretical framing makes them testable across a broader range of experience and treating all (including our own) within the same frame instead of privileging one, implicitly or explicitly, as the standard of comparison. So, in effect, Howard is able to identify "political Islam" not by its outliers but by its central tendencies. Students of political Islam as ideology (theological or cultural) or, more sociologically, as movements may find this unsatisfying, but the point is not to measure what is political about Islam onlinebut to locate it with respect to what else is political and online.

When this rigor flags, the effect is noticeable. In chapters on political journalism and civil society, his indicators are less precise and more are proxies. Here, argument tends to stay conceptual, in the realm of ideals, particularly about journalism, whose "theory" tends to be a set of value propositions that define it as what it should be/do (e.g., objective, critical, speaking truth to power). Or with civil society: although he defines it functionally, as non-state voluntary associations, he does not go so far as to include as "non-state actors" terrorists, like al-Qaeda, in civil society which by functional logic he should and could benefit his analysis. Are they not also voluntary associations, a "self-generating and self-supporting community of people who share a normative order and volunteer to organize political, economic, or cultural

activities that are independent from the state" in the definition of civil society that he adopts from Lawrence Diamond ("Rethinking Civil Society: I. Toward Democratic Consolidation," Journal of Democracy 1994)? Not, apparently, if one also requires a value commitment to pluralism. Actually, what his analyses show is that is not necessary when the "informational infrastructure" in which they operate is in practice pluralistic.

There is much to praise in this study. It should provide a goldmine for students, both to stimulate more critical thinking and for generating theoretically-grounded hypotheses; but it is really more a capstone than a point of departure. It is the matured version of a line of thinking, largely speculative, some of which it puts to rest, other it regrounds in theories that in first rushes of enthusiasm were neglected. Some has roots in the old modernization theory with which Ithiel da Sola Pool worked over a generation ago and in which the prime – very nearly the sole – mobility of technology is that it diffuses and that diffusion widens worlds. The notion of "diffusion of technology" is part of the analysis that does not measure up to the rest. The result of thinking in terms of "diffusion of technology" is, if not to render its mechanisms invisible, to equate them with functions that analytically define technology in terms of use. We do not learn, because the methodology of comparison of functionally-identified entities does not retrieve, how news cultures are changing (other than opening to additional information, moving to additional sites), cultural politics are expanding (beyond that they are), policies are devised and implemented (beyond identifying structures that promote the former and impede the latter). Comparison, at least this comparison, does leave us one remove from the action.

But it also leaves us with a more comprehensive view of the field of action. Among the more interesting and, looking forward, more useful conceptual innovations in this study is to shift from thinking about "the Internet" as a thing ontologically or methodologically as a variable, to thinking about how ICTs constitute variable "informational infrastructures." An innovative feature of this study is its adoption from the engineers of trace route and other Internet mapping technologies (also used by the OpenNet Initiative and in

tech-savvy Berkman Center studies of the Iranian and Arabic blogospheres, but here better integrated into social theory) to identify where Internet sites are actually kept and what they actually are connected to – in other words, the structure of what's behind the screen as something as variable as regime type. This opens up two lines of analysis. First is analysis of what Howard calls "digital transitions," the accumulating changes in both informational and political infrastructures by which "a country goes from a condition in which very few [politically] active citizens are on line to one in which most active citizens have internet access" (p. 140), and so how those roll out in different kinds of regimes, parties, policy and informational environments. Second , where arguments for democratization have proceeded by treating the Internet as an independent variable and arguments against it have proceeded by treating the Internet as a dependent variable, treating both as sets of variables and on the same level (where neither is prior) leads to Howard's most aggressive claim with respect to democratization, that the spread of ICTs is not driven by technological or by economic factors but by civil society – in other words, by users specifically situated in different policy, infrastructural and informational environments.

What this means becomes clearer and more discriminating when turned into comparisons. Civil society, he argues, learns online – in authoritarian polities to use ICTs to attract international media attention and strengthen ties to diasporas, in "transition" states where civil disobedience is possible then to use ICTs to mobilize protest in addition to rallying foreign support, and in "entrenched" democracies to deepen democratic practices such as tracking corruption, publishing opinion pieces and position papers, addressing and widening local readership, proposing policy options. Key here is shifting comparison from one-off and modular (authoritarian vs. democratic, developing-to-developed, Western vs. Muslim) to a typology that includes all cases.

In the end, Howard affirms democratizing effects or association of emergent or partial democratic features of polities with Internet spread. His comparisons show the key intervening variable in transitional democraciesis "having

a comparatively active online civil society." Being a small country helps, but just "having a large civil society" does not. It is a "relatively large Internet and mobile phone user base – a wired civil society – that consistently serves as a causal condition across multiple democratization recipes" (p. 194). By comparison, "democratic entrenchment" is shown (again) associated with economies not dominated by oil exports regardless of other variables, while "having an active online civil society is both a necessary and a sufficient cause of transitions out of authoritarianism" (p. 197). So ICT diffusion has measurable democratizing effect in conjunction with how large and educated the population is, which also has an effect on democratic processes in which ICTs enter.

In this way – functional definitions, systematic comparison of infrastructures of politics and of ICTs, and rigid focus on "observed outcomes of political actors" – this work caps the first generation of analyses placing the Internet in Muslim societies, polities, and contemporary discourses of political Islam. The execution draws a line under use of aggregate statistics and gross comparisons of Muslim to other (or to degrees of approximating other) composite actors and of mere correlationsthat henceforth should belong to the past. A consistent concern throughout is to establish comparability. Along the way, he has redefined political Islam as a set of practices or functions describable information ally as a broader range of political actions than as essential types of action (i.e., as resistance, a movement, extremism).

Appendices on methodology, references, and a topical index comprise over a third of the book. The appendix explains the sample, how it is stratified, and key pieces of literature on the countries in the sample. The bibliography is fairly comprehensive as a guide to the literature the study uses, with one caveat: some names are reversed, some misspelled, and other errors are introduced into a significant number of entries, which can make them hard to find. Finally, it provides a link to databases that Howard and his associates constructed as downloadable Excel spreadsheets (www.pitpi.org; or in the data repository of the Inter-University Consortium for Political and

Social Research at the University of Michigan, http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/ICPSR/studies/23562/version/1 in SAS and SPSS datasets), so the curious may test their own hypotheses about relations of information technology and political Islam, regime change, or growth of civil society.