

OCCASIONAL PUBLICATION 42

# IIC

## Freedom of Expression and Communications Challenges in the Age of the Internet

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# Freedom of Expression and Communications Challenges in the Age of the Internet

I should start with a brief word about my own deeply-rooted belief in freedom of expression and press freedom. I think of freedom of expression as a fundamental human right—one that helps guarantee all my other rights. Indeed Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that people have the right to ‘seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers’.

As a writer and a politician, I am conscious how fortunate we are to live in a country that guarantees us that right. Writers in some developing countries have to contend with the argument that development and freedom of expression are incompatible—that the media, for instance, must serve the ends of development as defined by the government, or operate only within the boundaries of what the social and religious authorities define as permissible. The developing world is full of writers, artists and journalists who have to function in societies which do not grant them this freedom. For them freedom of expression is the oxygen of their own survival, and that of their society, but they are stifled. In countries where truth is what the government or the religious establishment says is true, freedom of expression is essential to depict alternative truths which the society needs to accommodate in order to survive.

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And yet it is all too often absent, because in many countries, there are those who question the value of freedom of speech in their societies; those who argue that it threatens stability and endangers progress; those who still consider freedom of speech a Western import, an imposition from abroad and not the indigenous expression of every people's demand for freedom. What has always struck me about this argument is that it is never made by the people, but by governments; never by the powerless but by the powerful; never by the voiceless, but by those whose voices are all that can be heard. Let us put this argument once and for all to the only test that matters: the choice of every people, to know more or know less, to be heard or be silenced, to stand up or kneel down. Only freedom of expression will allow the world's oppressed and underprivileged a way out of the darkness that shrouds their voices, and their hopes. The Internet has been giving them this choice as never before.

But before turning to the Internet, let me first talk about traditional media. Media freedom is a vital aspect of the freedom of expression. A free press often marks the difference between a society that is able to protect itself from abuses of human rights and one that falls victim to oppression and injustice. The media must always use its freedom to raise the awkward question, to probe beyond the evident reality, to awaken the dormant consciousness, and therefore, yes, sometimes to subvert the established order. Freedom of the press is ultimately the best guarantee of liberty, of change and of progress. It is the mortar that binds together the bricks of freedom—and it is also the open window embedded in those bricks, which would, in Mahatma Gandhi's famous metaphor, allow the winds of the world to blow freely through the house. As Indians we know that there is no development without democracy, and no democracy without freedom of speech.

There is widespread recognition today that restraints on the flow of information directly undermine development and progress in the 21st century. In this era of globalization, global interdependence means that those who receive and disseminate information have an edge over those who curtail it.

In the age of the Internet, there can be little argument that information and freedom go together. The information revolution is inconceivable without political democracy, and vice versa. Already, the spread of information has had a direct impact on the degree of accountability and transparency of governments around the world.

The Internet has been made possible by advances in technology that have also transformed the traditional media. Technology that is lighter to carry, simpler to use, and comes at a fraction of the cost, has already changed television reporting. Not so long ago, a ton of equipment was flown into a trouble-spot; a satellite dish the size of a house was set up; a story was born. And where that satellite dish was, the journalists stayed. So that's where the story stayed, until the dish moved on. But now, digital technology is producing cameras at a tenth of the cost of yesterday's, simple enough to be operated by a non-technician, the reporter himself, with pictures that can be sent down the telephone line.

The simpler to use, more affordable technology has truly democratized television news. Smaller, less well-financed news-gathering organizations and independent operations in developing countries have all benefited from this revolution. But so has the story in itself; because no story will be too remote to reach, too hard to get to, too expensive to cover, or too difficult to transmit. One reporter and a telephone line will often be enough. And this kind of technological innovation has also made the Internet a vital source of news and analysis without any of the limitations of reach that television has.

Television is of course still evolving, as is the Internet, and there is increasing talk of the convergence of the two. But if I may be facetious, technological change does offer all of us grounds for hope. Have you heard, for instance, about the latest model of TV? Whenever the words 'Baba Ramdev' are uttered, it automatically changes channels.

The new hallmarks of freedom of expression today are the ability to receive, download and send information through electronic networks, and the capacity to share information—whether in a newspaper, on a TV screen, or an on-line website—without censorship or restrictions. The information society of the 21st century can thrive only if citizens are provided with full information to allow democratic participation at all levels in determining their destiny. New

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digital technology offers great possibilities for enhancing traditional media and combining them with new media. Moreover, traditional media, and especially radio and television, remain the sole form of access to the information society for much of the world's population, including the very poor and the illiterate. Technology has become the biggest asset for those who seek to promote and protect freedom of expression around the world.

The reach of social media has been facilitated by rapid technological developments as well. When we speak of social media we do not mean only media running on a desktop computer or a mainframe server

This brings me to the era in which we are living today—the era of the information revolution, the Internet, the world-wide web—and the extraordinary transformation in the reach and range of our freedom of expression made possible by social media. Just the day after he was sworn in as our 13th President recently, Pranab Mukherjee announced that he would be opening a Facebook account to receive and respond to comments and queries from the public. In fact his fellow Bengali, Paschimbanga Chief Minister, Mamata Banerjee, has beaten him to it, with a popular and widely-read website that the media mines daily for news stories about her views. Just three years ago, when I first went on social media, it was fashionable for Indian politicians to sneer at the use of Twitter and Facebook. Today, our new President has made it clear that these are essential tools for credible and accountable political leaders.

This is all the more striking because I once asked a distinguished senior politician what he thought about the emergence of these social media tools. Wouldn't they help get our message across, I asked; why weren't they more widely used—was it ignorance or was it apathy? He replied: 'I don't know, and I don't care'. Which rather explains what we're up against!

The reach of social media has been facilitated by rapid technological developments as well. When we speak of social media we do not mean only media running on a desktop computer or a mainframe server. In a famous study, my good friend Nik Gowing of the BBC highlights how in a moment of major, unexpected crisis the institutions of power—whether political, governmental, military or corporate—face a new, acute vulnerability of both their influence and effectiveness thanks to new media technologies. In the 21st century, it is impossible to ignore the issue of the

uncontrolled impact of instant news on the workings of society and more generally on the impact of new media technologies on political affairs.

As Gowing points out, 'It was a chance video taken by a New York investment banker that dramatically swung public perceptions of police handling of the G20 protests [in the UK]. Those 41 seconds swiftly exposed apparently incomplete police explanations of how and why a particular protestor, Ian Tomlinson, died. They alone forced a level of instant accountability from the police about their orders, behaviour and operation.'

When US-led NATO warplanes bombed villages in Afghanistan's Azizabad village a couple of years ago, US forces initially claimed only seven people died; NGOs said the bombing killed up to 90 people. Only after a mobile phone video emerged two weeks later did US commanders accept they had to re-examine evidence. In a re-investigation, the US had to revise the death toll up to 55. As Gowing argues, 'Such examples confirm how new information technologies and dynamics are together driving a wave of democratisation and accountability. It shifts and redefines the nature of power in such moments. It also creates a new policy vulnerability and brittleness for institutions, who then struggle even harder to maintain public confidence.'

Globally, it's true that most major institutions of power still do not appreciate the full scale and implications of the dramatic new real-time media trend and its profound impact on their credibility. Increasingly, a cheap camera or mobile phone that is easily portable in a pocket can undermine the credibility of a government despite the latter's massive human and financial resources. The new lightweight technologies available to almost anyone mean that they enjoy a new capacity for instant scrutiny and accountability that is way beyond the narrower, assumed power and influence of the traditional media.

The world is full of examples of what Gowing calls 'non-professional information doers': hundreds of millions of amateurs with an electronic eye who can now be found anywhere. As many as 5 billion people worldwide—including 84 per cent of Americans, more than 70 per cent of Chinese, and perhaps 60 per cent of all Indians today—now use mobile phones. They all get messages out. And they do so more rapidly than the official mechanisms can. Their strength is that they enable

people to issue and disseminate material, including raw footage and compellingly authentic images, before the mainstream media or, for that matter, governments can. Inevitably, this means they shed light where officialdom would prefer darkness, as China learned when video footage of a shootout involving Uighur separatists in 2008 made it to the world media despite Beijing's denials.

The core implications are striking. We have all heard about the so-called 24/7 news and information cycle, but with social media the pressure of the news cycle can build up not just over a few hours but often in no more than a few minutes. As images, facts and allegations emanating from cellphones and digital cameras go viral, they undermine and discredit official versions, present an alternative reality in the face of government denials and, fuelled by dissenters and expatriates, rebound onto the evolution of the situation itself. Twitter and digital cameras had a huge impact on the

Twitter and digital cameras had a huge impact on the Iranian protests after the disputed re-election of President Mohammed Ahmedinejad

Iranian protests after the disputed re-election of President Mohammed Ahmedinejad. Despite Tehran's attempts to manage the crisis, social media kept the protests alive for far longer, and with prolonged intensity, than they could have without that digital fuel.

With such instant scrutiny, governmental power is rendered more vulnerable. The Wikileaks saga demonstrated this too, since the publication of classified material on the Internet circumvented both government control and the restraints that are normally observed by traditional media. In the old days, governments assumed they could command the information high ground in a crisis. That is simply no longer true.

This brings us, inevitably, to the Arab Spring. The role of social media websites—such as Facebook, Twitter, Google, YouTube and Skype—in the political revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, with ripples elsewhere in the Middle East, notably Syria, has given new impetus to the discussion of social media on world politics. The eminent American journal *Foreign Affairs* debated the issue last year. One analyst, Clay Shirky, argued eloquently that 'these tools alter the dynamics of the public sphere. Where the state prevails, it is only reacting to citizens' ability to be more publicly vocal and to coordinate more rapidly and on a larger scale than before these tools existed.' On the other hand, author Malcolm Gladwell responded that, for

Shirky's 'argument to be anything close to persuasive, [he] has to convince readers that in the absence of social media, those uprisings would not have been possible'.

My own position is somewhere between them. Of course uprisings can occur (and have occurred) without Twitter or even Google, but media always has an impact on the reach and spread of the word about an uprising, and therefore has an impact on its intensity and sustainability. In this case, I would argue that satellite television—notably *Al Jazeera* and its imitators—as well as mobile phones and SMSs', had probably more of an impact on the unrest across these North African Arab countries than Facebook or Twitter. But impact is undeniable. As the American commentator Peter Osnos puts it, 'It is pointless to dispute that digital advances have played an enormous role in recent years in the speed of communications, and, in some situations, Egypt and Tunisia certainly among them, these technologies have played a meaningful part in the rallying of crowds and in garnering international recognition. A global generation of mainly young people will continue to refine and use the capacity to reach out to each other. Turmoil reflects the conditions of the era in which it occurs, and social media are very much a factor of our age.'

This is why China has paid particular attention to censoring the Internet, employing 40,000 cyber-police to monitor blogging sites, shutting down any sites that get out of line and banning Twitter. When a US-based, Chinese-language site called for a Jasmine Revolution in China, the Great Firewall of China blocked all searches for the word 'Jasmine', even if you were merely looking for jasmine tea! Clearly the authoritarians in Beijing are quite aware of the enormous potential of social media to disrupt even their politics.

Of course, there can be a more positive and non-confrontational use of social media in a crisis, as we saw with the catastrophe of the tsunami, earthquake and nuclear accident in Japan. Within days of the Japanese earthquake and tsunami, 64 per cent of blog links, 32 per cent of Twitter news links, and the top 20 YouTube videos carried news and information about the crisis in Japan. Nine days after Japan's catastrophic earthquake, two urgent pleas for help appeared on the Twitter stream of US Ambassador John Roos:

'Kameda hospital in Chiba needs to transfer 80 patients from Kyoritsu hospital in Iwaki city, just outside of 30km [*sic*] range.' Said the first 'Some of them

are seriously ill and they need air transport. If US military can help, pls contact (so-and-so) at Kameda.'

The back-to-back tweets, sending a digital SOS, popped up on Roos' mobile phone, marked to @AmbassadorRoos, his Twitter address, and so reaching him instantly. A year earlier, before Roos opened his Twitter account, getting the US Ambassador's attention in such a direct and immediate way would not have been possible. Roos activated the US military in response to the tweets, they in turn contacted the Japanese Self-Defense Forces, and the patients were transported to safety. In other words, this time, troops were mobilized by Twitter.

Japan's disaster has spotlighted the critical role that social media websites such as Twitter are increasingly playing in responses to crises around the world. They may have been designed largely for online socializing and just for having fun, but such sites and others have empowered people caught up in crises. Their strength is that they enable people to share vivid, real-time unfiltered images and text reports before any other source, including governments or traditional media, can do. There is no doubting the potential of social media to create information, whether video or text, and communicate it immediately, without the delays necessarily wrought by editorial controls, cross-checking or even the synthesizing that occurs in a humanitarian operation's situation room. In Japan, the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) took to YouTube to get its messages out. In the week following the earthquake and tsunami, people viewed more than 40 million disaster-related items.

The US Federal Emergency Management Administration, or FEMA, has even become a leading proponent of social media. 'Nobody invented Twitter to be an emergency messaging or disaster tool', its Director, William Craig Fugate, has acknowledged. 'It was developed for an entirely different purpose'. But volunteers using social media sites have played pivotal roles in responses to various types of global crises, from the BP Horizon oil spill to the unrest in the Middle East to the earthquakes in Haiti, Chile, New Zealand and Japan. There were 70 million tweets on the Haiti earthquake alone, and social media proved indispensable in providing information to draw crisis response maps and dispense assistance. Within an hour of the Japanese earthquake, Google's crisis response team—launched after the disaster in Haiti—had posted a 'Person Finder' website that quickly grew to include 450,000 records, says Jamie

Yood of Google. 'If you're looking for someone, you can post,' 'Hey, my cousin is a teacher in Sendai, we're looking for him.' Someone else will post, 'I've seen him in a shelter; he's fine.'" As FEMA administrator Fugate says, 'We've got to stop looking at the public as a liability and start looking at them as a resource'. What makes social media so different from other emergency response tools, he says, is that it 'allows a two-way conversation in the impact zone, so that we can link people with information, resources and ideas.'

Google engineers also developed a software program that enables people to take snapshots of the lists of names posted on the walls of Japanese homeless shelters and scan them into a programme called Person Finder, thus entering thousands of survivors' names into a searchable database. Person Finder also incorporates names that were once scattered through many other missing-persons databases. YouTube, which is owned by Google, created its own video person finder. More people than ever access the videos on mobile phones, says a Google spokeswoman. Now about 200 million people a day watch videos on their mobile phones, triple the number of a year ago.

So social media is going to be inescapable in all future international crises and disasters. On any given day, people are sending 140 million Twitter messages, nearly a billion tweets every week. There are two ways to look at this: that it's symptomatic of information overload, or that it represents a huge audience of information-generators and consumers that people in positions of public responsibility ignore at their peril. My own sympathies are very much towards the latter view.

In India, the case for social media has been gaining ground. We are already one of the world's leading countries in the use of Twitter, and social media is bound to gain as the prospects for e-government improve by the day. Though the Department of Information Technology's new rules on Internet intermediaries have created a firestorm in cyberspace, in parallel, the first draft of the Electronic Delivery of Services Bill, 2011, has proposed that all ministries and government departments will have to deliver services electronically, whether through the Internet or mobile phones. So India is not just on the right track, but bids fair to become a model of e-governance in the developing world.

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Freedom of speech is fundamental to any democracy, and many of the most valuable developments in India would not have been possible without it

And yet the recent controversy over the government's alleged desire to censor Facebook, Twitter and other leading lights of the social media has obscured our progress in this area and also raised some genuine and urgent questions we need to address about free speech in our society.

The problem arose when the *New York Times* reported that our Telecoms Minister, Kapil Sibal, had called in senior social media executives from Facebook, Microsoft, Google and Yahoo and allegedly asked them 'to prescreen user content from India and to remove before it goes online'. Such a request inevitably sparked off a firestorm of Internet protest against the Minister, without waiting to hear his side of the story. Facebook pages sprang up to denounce him; web-boards overflowed with nasty comments against the Minister, the ruling party and the government, suggesting they were trying to protect a political leader; and the hashtag '#IdiotKapilSibal' started 'trending' on Twitter. All a bit over the top.

As a frequent recipient of disparaging, inflammatory or defamatory content myself, I'm no great fan of unpleasantness on any media, social or otherwise, but I'm strongly opposed to censorship. As I have said, freedom of speech is fundamental to any democracy, and many of the most valuable developments in India would not have been possible without it. Free speech keeps our government accountable, and helps political leaders know what people are thinking. Censorship is a disservice to both rulers and ruled.

But—and free speech advocates hate that 'but'!—every society recognizes some sensible restraints on how free speech is exercised. Those restraints almost always relate to the collectivity; they arise when the freedom of the individual to say what he wants causes more harm to more people in society than restricting his freedom would. Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, in the US, put it memorably when he said that freedom of speech does not extend to the right to falsely shout 'fire!' in a crowded theatre. (After all, that could cause a stampede, in which people could get trampled upon, injured and even killed, and the theatre's property destroyed—all consequences that outweigh the individual's right to say what he likes.)

Since societies vary in their cultural and political traditions, the boundaries vary from place to place. Free speech absolutists tend to say that freedom is a universal right that must not be abridged in the name of culture. But in practice such abridgement often takes place, if not by law then by convention. No American editor would allow the 'n' word to be used to describe Black Americans, not because it's against the law, but because it would cause such offence as to be unacceptable to use. Just as the commonplace practice of women taking off their bikini tops at St Tropez, Copacabana or Bondi Beach could not be replicated on the beaches of Goa, Dubai or Karachi without risking assault or arrest, so also things might be said in the former set of places that would not pass muster in the latter. It's no use pretending such differences (of culture, politics and sensitivity) don't exist. They do, and they're the reason why free speech in, say, Sweden isn't the same as free speech in Singapore.

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The problem is particularly acute on social media because it's a public forum for the expression of private thoughts. The fact is that social media's biggest asset is also its biggest problem. Its strength is that social media enables ordinary people (not just trained journalists) to share vivid, real-time unfiltered images and text reports before any other source can. Even more, any individual with the basic literacy needed to operate a keyboard can express his or her opinion, create information, whether video or text, and communicate it immediately, without the delays necessarily wrought by editorial controls, cross-checking or even the synthesizing that occurs in a 'mainstream' media newsroom.

That gives social media an advantage over regular media as a disseminator of public opinion. If you wanted to express your views in, say, a newspaper, you would have to write something well enough to pass editorial muster; your facts and opinions would be checked, vetted and challenged; your prose might be cut for space reasons (or mere editorial whim); and you might have to wait days, if not weeks, to see your words in print. None of that applies to social media. You can write all you want, as you want, in the words you want, on a blog or a Facebook page, put it up with a Twitter link, click a mouse and instantly watch it all go viral. It's a 21st century freedom that no democratic political leader would wish to confront.

And yet this very freedom is its own biggest threat. It means anyone can say literally anything, and inevitably, many do. Lies, distortions and calumny go into cyberspace unchallenged; hatred, pornography and slander are routinely aired. There is no fact-checking, no institutional reputation for reliability to defend. The anonymity permitted by social media encourages even more irresponsibility: people hidden behind pseudonyms feel free to hurl abuses they would never dare to utter to the recipients' faces. The borderline between legitimate creative expression and 'disparaging, inflammatory or defamatory content' becomes more difficult to draw.

Kapil Sibal's main concern was not with politics, but with scurrilous material about certain religions that could have incited retaliatory violence by their adherents. People say or depict things on social media that might be bad enough in their living rooms, but are positively dangerous in a public space. The challenge of regulating social media is that the person writing or drawing such things does so in the privacy of his home but releases them into the global commons. My own yardstick is very clear: I reject censorship. Art, literature and political opinion are to me sacrosanct. But publishing or circulating inflammatory material to incite communal feelings is akin to dropping a lighted match at a petrol pump. No society can afford to tolerate it, and no responsible government of India would allow it.

Personally, I'd rather snuff out that match than close down the petrol pump. But I'm far from sure that prosecuting Facebook or Google is the right way to go about it. After all, could you sue the phone companies for someone sending a defamatory or obscene SMS? The analogy to a newspaper is wrong—these social network sites are more like the postman carrying the newspaper to your door. You would prosecute the newspaper for publishing legally actionable material, but you would not prosecute the postal service. Our learned judges are now examining the matter but I hope they will take into account these realities of the Internet era.

That said, let me affirm how useful social media is in our society. Social media can be employed to create knowledge networks, disseminate information and keep track of the world around you well beyond what is available in our daily newspapers. The young Indian blogger Mahima Kaul writes: 'Personally, Twitter is a better source of news than any newspaper homepage can hope to be, and Facebook keeps me abreast of my friends in a way email or simple phone calls could not do. But that's not the point right now: in the context of social media, it allows strangers to

connect over a decidedly neutral platform and talk about issues. Sure, people get nasty, but there is a distance of a computer screen (mobile) to save you from any unnecessary facetime.'

I suppose I was the first government official in India who engaged with the general public online on Twitter, though in all fairness, L.K. Advani's web page had already created a lot of buzz during the last elections. More and more politicians are online today, including Sushma Swaraj and Narendra Modi of the BJP, and Digvijay Singh, Anil Shastri, Naveen Jindal, Manish Tewari and Hamdullah Sayeed of the Congress, with politicians issuing their own bulletins and actually answering individual questions online. Sometimes this creates its own challenges: the Leader of the Opposition in the Indian Lower House, Sushma Swaraj, has already blamed Twitter's 140-character limit for an imprecisely-worded message about the Prime Minister that created political ripples within the BJP. Of course, there is the safety net that politicians can always type, delete and retype before pressing enter—but Ms Swaraj reportedly dictates her Twitter messages, so perhaps that is more difficult for her.

Indian bureaucrats are following suit, with the best known example probably being former Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao. She in turn may well have been inspired by the success of the Ministry of External Affairs' Public Diplomacy Division, whose officials, with my active encouragement, set up a Twitter page and have been pursuing social media strategies, including a Facebook page and a YouTube channel, to let people know what the ministry and diplomatic missions do. This has enabled them to promote India's soft power (even within the country) by creating goodwill among social media users in general, whether in India or abroad. To me the MEA's initiative was excellent: It put India on a par with the Western democracies which have already adopted social media sites as an instrument of outreach.

Of course we must examine the advantages—and possible pitfalls—of using social media as a tool for diplomacy. The advantages are clear. India acquires a new, young, literate and global audience for our foreign policy initiatives and positions. By being accessible to Internet searchers,

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we earn goodwill. By providing accurate and timely information, we eliminate the risks of misrepresentation or distortion of our position.

So social media has become a vital instrument of our public diplomacy, the framework of activities by which a government seeks to influence public attitudes with a view to ensuring that they become supportive of foreign policy and national interests. Public diplomacy differs from traditional diplomacy in that public diplomacy goes beyond governments and engages primarily with the general public. In India, at least the way the MEA uses the term, 'public diplomacy' embraces both external and domestic public, since it is clear that in today's world you cannot meaningfully confine your public diplomacy to foreign public alone; in the current media environment, whatever message any government puts out is also instantly available to its domestic audience on the Internet.

Public diplomacy is not just about communicating your point of view or putting out propaganda. It is also about listening. It rests on the recognition that the public is entitled to be informed about what a government is doing in international affairs, and is also entitled to responsiveness from those in authority to their concerns on foreign policy. Successful public diplomacy involves an active engagement with the public in a manner that builds, over a period of time, a relationship of trust and credibility. Effective public diplomacy is sometimes overtly conducted by governments but sometimes seemingly without direct government involvement, presenting, for instance, many differing views of private individuals and organizations in addition to official government positions.

Public diplomacy should also recognize that in our information-saturated world of today, the public also has access to information and insights from a wide and rapidly growing array of sources. This means that government information must be packaged and presented attractively and issued in a timely fashion if it is to stand up against competing streams of information, including from critics and rivals of the government. Your public diplomacy is no longer conducted in a vacuum; you are also up against the public diplomacy of other countries, sometimes on the very same issues.

This is all the more so in the era of the Internet. How does information reach people, particularly young people, today? In recent years, the emergence of Web 2.0 tools and social media sites like Facebook, Orkut, Twitter, YouTube and Flickr—to name

just a few of the more popular ones—offer governments a new possibility not only to disseminate information efficiently through these channels, but also to receive feedback and respond to concerns. Countries like the US, UK and Canada consider Web 2.0 a boon for their public diplomacy and have been quick to embrace and deploy a wide array of Internet tools. They also pro-actively encourage their diplomats to blog so that they can populate the discussion forums with sympathetic points of view. In doing so, they are acutely aware of the effectiveness with which terrorist groups like Al Qaeda and many other militant organizations have harnessed the full power of Web 2.0 tools to propagate *their* message.

The pitfalls of using social media are the ever-present risk that something said on a social network could itself be taken out of context or misused by our critics. Recently, well-wishers urged Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Omar Abdullah to delete a light-hearted remark that could have been maliciously distorted by his political enemies. He did so, with the curious result that the advice to delete can still be found on Twitter, but the potentially offending remark itself has disappeared!

Responses to questions are particularly vulnerable to being issued in haste and without the usual careful vetting that more formal statements undergo. The nature of the medium calls for speedy issuance of information and instant reaction, neither of which are government processes designed for!

Of course, the MEA is not alone in using social media to reach out to the public. The Delhi Police has a Facebook page, India Post helps people track parcels through Twitter, the Municipal Corporation of Delhi and the Pune city council provide information on garbage disposal, the Census authorities have an extensive Internet presence. For domestic ministries, the use of social media both provides useful public information (as the Twitter sites of the Delhi Police and the Indian Post Office attest) and adds to the sense of public accountability that is invaluable in a democracy.

The principal lesson of this experience is that it works, provided you are willing to make the effort required. And that means having a team in place to deal with all the questions/comments/complaints that come your way, because a non-responsive social media site could be seriously counter-productive. As Mahima Kaul wrote, 'if you are not in it, you are out of it'. This young lady puts it well when she says that the Indian government 'will have to trust its people, and it will have to trust its own ability to respond to the people'.

There is no good reason why an IT powerhouse like India should not be in the forefront of public diplomacy efforts using 21st century technologies and communications practices. Not to deploy social media tools effectively is to abdicate a channel of contact not only with the millions of young Indians who use Facebook, Twitter and Orkut, but also to the huge Indian diaspora that tends to have such an active presence on the net on Indian issues and in turn wields a disproportionate influence on international perceptions of India. To place matters in perspective, Facebook alone currently has over 500 million subscribers, 50 per cent of whom access the site on any given day, and a unique ability to disseminate information among its system and beyond through its networks of friends, fans and those who share their information. The average Facebook user has 130 friends, and each of those has 130 more, and so on. When President Obama delivered his famous Africa address in Ghana, the State Department deployed a full range of digital tools and some 250,000 Africans posed questions or made comments on the address—and most received responses from dedicated staff assigned to respond!

My own experience with Twitter has had its positive and negatives, but in my view the positives outweigh the negatives. It is an extraordinary interactive broadcast medium—an interactive Akashvani. With one message today, I can reach 1.4 million people, and that number keeps expanding every day. As I discovered during my time in government, I can also use it to put out information the mainstream media may not be interested in. My visit to Liberia, for example, was the first ministerial visit in 38 years to that African country. It was ignored here in India by the media, but through my updates and a couple of links I posted, India's Africa diplomacy got more widely known because of Twitter. In another example, a girl from my constituency who was amputated in both legs after a railway accident is now getting offers of help from across the world because I tweeted about her.

I believe that during my ten months in government, I was able to use social media to demystify governance and sensitize people to the daily life of a minister. And after leaving office I have been able to expand my conversation with politically-engaged people around the globe. Of course, I have never shared any sensitive information from any political or government meetings on Twitter, but politicians all over the world are tweeting. President Obama has millions of 'followers' on Twitter and Hillary Clinton, or someone from her staff, was tweeting eight to ten times a day

when she was on an official visit to India. The UK government encourages frequent use of Twitter and even issues guidelines on effective tweeting; the new British High Commissioner told me that he had been instructed by London to start tweeting and was bracing himself to do so immediately after his summer holidays! The former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and Canada's former Leader of the Opposition Michael Ignatieff tweet regularly. A whole slew of Foreign Ministers—Rudd himself, Norway's Jonas Store, Bahrain's Khalid al-Khalifa, Sweden's Carl Bildt, the UK's William Hague and many others—are regular tweeters.

In my view, a democratic politician should not resist a new communications medium. The name Twitter initially put me off, and has led people to suggest that it is not a suitable medium for a serious politician—the BJP's Venkaiah Naidu even presciently warned me that 'too much tweeting can lead to quitting'. But I suppose his colleagues have, like me, come to realize that Google and Yahoo were also silly names that are now household terms. I am convinced that a large number of politicians in 21st century democracies—including India—will be tweeting within ten years from now. Those who are ahead of the curve are rarely appreciated.

Twitter is only a vehicle; the message is the issue, not the medium. I believe that many politicians increasingly understand that what I am doing brings into the party's ambit a large number of people who would otherwise be indifferent to politics and the Congress. I just need to take care to ensure that the message is not misunderstood. The idea has always been to inform and engage, rather than to indulge in repartee.

If we were to look at other positive uses of social media internationally, it has also proved critical for connecting the world's younger generation on a single platform, thus strengthening bonds between them across borders and cultures. Young people from different geographic and economic backgrounds can be brought together in a positive direction. Students who attended the India–Pakistan Youth Peace Conferences have started using digital media to stay connected and have even invited others from their campuses to join the conversations. Many Indians and Pakistanis, including several in official positions, exchange informal messages on social media. Pakistan's former Interior Minister Rehman Malik and former Ambassador in Washington, Husain Haqqani, are regular tweeters, as was the late

Salman Taseer, Governor of Pakistani Punjab, who was assassinated for expressing views with the kind of candour that made him so popular on Twitter.

The ultimate clinching argument might well come from the marketplace, in the dizzying valuations of social media sites which go way beyond their earnings or dividends. Every week, one of the new social media firms seems to attract a sky-high valuation. Profitless Twitter is said to be worth \$10bn. This was of course dwarfed when Facebook, the poster child of the new social media frenzy, went public earlier this year at \$106 billion, though recent news is that Facebook has lost \$34 billion in value since its debut in May. At its current stock market price, Facebook's value is still higher than that of real-world businesses like Ford (\$38 bn) and Mastercard (\$60 bn). But that's still less than a third of Google's value. The mind boggles at where both will be in the years to come.

In other words, in the era of the Internet, freedom of expression through social media is here to stay, and we need to live with it. Quite simply, we will not be able to live without it. Let's make the most of it!

Shashi Tharoor is the award-winning author of 13 books, fiction and non-fiction, and a widely published critic, commentator, columnist and human rights activist. In 2007 he concluded a 29-year-long career with the United Nations, culminating as Under Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information. A former minister of State for External Affairs, he is now an elected member of the Indian Parliament from the Thiruvananthapuram constituency in Kerala. Tharoor was awarded the Pravasi Bharatiya Samman, India's highest honour for overseas Indians in 2004.





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