

POLITICAL TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL OF CIVIL SOCIETY WITH SOCIAL MEDIA IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

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ABSTRACT

India is known for its frugal innovations and ground-up development models. Through their work, the partners of FES have been pioneering social innovations in their respective fields of interventions. Finding creative and effective solutions for common social, political, and economic problems is a challenging task. Innovations for societal issues or social innovations are the ideas that create exemplary changes in a society and add value to existing solutions. Usually, social innovations are seen to be more effective than policy intervention as they are participatory and created from the bottom up, ensuring preservation of grassroots wisdom and knowledge. However, most grassroots social innovations remain local success stories. Their potential to get scaled up for facilitating societal transformation is mostly underutilized. Through their work, the partners of FES India have been pioneering social innovations in their respective fields of interventions. FES India organized its first flagship conference on [India Innovating](#) in August 2018 in Mumbai. At the conference, FES India wanted to celebrate successful ideas of social transformations innovated by its partners over the years.

KEYWORDS: I-Innovation, G-Grassroot, T-Transformative, P-Pioneering, C-Celebrate

INTRODUCTION

The best way to showcase all this unique work was to prepare an exhibition of the social innovations. The exhibition was called Social Shots! Basically, an innovation *mela*, which would capture this one-of-its-kind journey of paradigm shifts. When you look at the numbers, the growth of civil society has been remarkable: 3.3 million charities in India and 1.5 million across the United States; NGOs like the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee that work with *hundreds of millions* of people; 81,000 international NGOs and networks, 90 per cent of them launched since 1975. That's not counting all the street protests, social movements and informal community groups that are often omitted from the data. In the UK, for example, these latter outnumber registered charities by more than four to one. These statistics are mightily impressive - except when compared to the problems that civil societies want to solve. You could argue that things would be worse without the involvement of these groups. There's also evidence to show that they're making inroads around the edges of poverty and injustice. But there's no sign that the underlying structures of social, political and economic violence and oppression are being shaken to their roots. As a result, fewer people in the world are dying young, and basic indicators of health and education, income and employment are getting slightly better - at least for most people in most countries. However, economic inequality is rising, democracies are being hollowed out, climate change is worsening, and discrimination based on race, gender, ability and sexual orientation remains endemic.

Social movements have helped to challenge these underlying problems, and they've successfully unseated dictators in many parts of the world. But they haven't been able to secure lasting gains in democracy, equality and freedom. Expecting civil society groups to achieve these gains by themselves would be foolish. However, given the rapid growth of all these organizations, shouldn't they be having at least some impact on the deep transformation of self and society? What is going wrong? I think there are two main reasons for this mismatch. The first is that civil society groups are increasingly divorced from the forces that drive deeper social change. When one looks at the few times in history when civil society has functioned as a powerful and lasting moral and political lever - like the civil rights and women's movements of the 1960s and 1970s - large numbers of people became active in translating ethical action into power structures at every level, from the family to the courts and corporations. In this sense, civil society is like an iceberg, with the peaks of protest rising above the waterline and the great mass of everyday citizen action hidden underneath. When the two are connected - when street protests are backed up by long-term action in every community, bank, business, local government, church or mosque, temporary gains in equality and diversity have more chance of becoming permanent shifts in power and public norms. In that respect it's not the Arab or any other 'Spring' that really makes the difference, but what happens in every other season, of every other year, across every generation.

Unfortunately these episodes of large-scale, joined-up action are quite rare, and the long-term trend has been the opposite, at least in Europe and North America. Traditional forms of participation - like voting and membership in labor unions and other mass organizations - have declined alarmingly over the last 50 years. Other forms of participation have emerged in their stead, but they haven't had the same effect in pulling large

numbers of people into face-to-face, ongoing, and potentially transformative activities. These new forms of participation are largely social media-based, but they also include social enterprises and professional advocacy groups which have strong messages but much weaker memberships. They may well attract large numbers of people to donate money, sign petitions, and consume less harmful products, but none of these actions have the same amount of purchase in the heartlands of politics and economics. They are too thin to have much effect on the transformation of society.

As an indicator of changing fashions, the number of Google searches for “civil society” fell by 70 per cent between 2004 and 2012. During the same period, searches for “social media” and “social entrepreneurs” rose by 90 per cent and 40 per cent respectively.

It isn't that these new trends are bad in themselves - successful social movements have always made use of innovations in marketing, revenue-generation and communications. The problems arrive when they *displace* other forms of civil society action that remain essential. In that respect, it's significant that today's most transformative civil society groups incorporate both online and offline activism around a strong ethos of democratic participation and accountability. “Making Change at Wal-Mart,” for example, uses Facebook to help employees identify which of their “friends” works for the company, to supply them with information about their rights, and then to connect them to ongoing campaigns and demonstrations on the ground.

This discussion paper looks at the current historical momentum and potential future development of civil society and youth leadership for a systemic transformation to a sustainable new civilization. It identifies emerging challenges, obstacles, and some of the innovative new leadership strategies that have been developed to overcome them. Civil society is central in the process of transformation in a dual sense: As the target of transformation— it is civil society at large together with governments and the private sector that must shift to sustainable practices in our daily lives,—and as an instigator of change—individuals, informal networks or organized groups of citizens specifically dedicated to promoting this transformation. This boundary between recipients and agents in society is fluid, as more and more people take action or join organized efforts to elicit a purposeful transformation.¹

Civil Society and Youth Leadership for Transformational Change

New Leadership Strategies: From Discourse to Practice

Our collective failure to effectively address today's unprecedented social and ecological challenges raises the prospect of a catastrophic collapse.² This failure is not surprising, however. Transforming the entire way of life of whole populations, at a time when we are only just beginning to experience the dire consequences of our unsustainable practices directly, requires extraordinary awareness, foresight and courage, especially

from those who would lead the transformation. Transformative leaders thus require a capacity to effectively communicate the need for change to the public, and sensitivity in dealing with the realities and aspirations especially of people in developing countries.

Civil Society and Youth (CS&Y) organisations³ have spearheaded efforts to raise consciousness of today's systemic challenges among the general public, and they are now voicing their concern with ever-increasing urgency. An example is the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists'* recent decision to move the so-called Doomsday Clock to just 100 (metaphorical) seconds before midnight, the worst assessment of global security in the clock's 75-year history (Kluger 2020). This begs the question: How much impact do such civil society actions have?⁴

The consciousness-raising efforts of CS&Y leaders have reached many global citizens, and certainly are noticed by those already convinced that the time for action is now. Success has been limited by the effect of a crisis-denying or crisis-ignoring counter-discourse, however, promulgated by vested interests and partisan forces with control of traditional mass media and substantial influence also over newer, digital and social media. This counter-discourse has found fertile soil in public sentiments of fear, distrust, unconscious change resistance, and justified resentments arising from growing inequality. A significant number of people in many countries thus continue to cling to an attitude of stubborn denial and prefer to put their faith in isolationist (anti-migration) and reactionary nationalism rather than in global cooperation and the UN's SDGs (Reuter 2018). Thus civil society initiatives to promote a transformation to sustainability generally find themselves operating in public spaces ever more challenged by a deluge of data, information, advertisement and entertainment.

Individual level

On the individual level, advocates of regulating social media as a public utility believe that [Internet](#) presence using social media websites is imperative in order to adequately take part in the 21st century as an individual, and consequently, these sites are public utilities and need to be regulated to ensure that [constitutional rights](#) of the users are protected. For example, regulation may be needed to protect [freedom of speech](#) against risks such as [Internet censorship](#) and [deplatforming](#).

Social media affects people's behavior. For instance, it plays an important role in shaping its users' decisions and actions pertaining to health. This is demonstrated in a [Pew Research Center](#) research, which showed that 72 percent of American adults turned to social media for health information in 2011. Around 70 percent of people with chronic illnesses also use the platform to find cure, diagnoses, and other health answers. This development becomes a public issue as social media are likely to provide wrong medical information. Additionally, social media sites can also facilitate deleterious health behavior such as smoking, drug use, and harmful sexual behavior.

Business level

Advocates of *social media as a public utility* maintain that social media services dominate the Internet and are mainly owned by three or four companies that have unparalleled power to shape user interaction, and because of this power such businesses need to be regulated as public utilities. Zeynep Tufekci, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, claims that services on the Internet such as Google, eBay, Facebook, Amazon.com, are all **natural monopolies**. She has stated that these services "benefit greatly from **network externalities**, which means that the more people on the service, the more useful it is for everyone," and thus it is difficult to replace the **market leader**.

Government level

Advocates of *social media as a public utility* believe that the **government** should impose restrictions on **social media** websites, such as Google, that are designed to benefit its rivals. Due to the recent substantial growth of social media websites such as Google, advocates claim that such a website "might need search neutrality regulation modeled after net neutrality regulation and that a Federal Search Commission might be needed to enforce such a regime." **danah boyd** expresses a future issue which the government may have to deal with in her research: Facebook is becoming an international social media website, specifically prevalent in Canada and Europe which are "two regions that love to regulate their utilities." Furthermore, recent books by New America Foundation Senior Fellow Rebecca MacKinnon and law professor Lori Andrews advise society to start considering Facebook and Google as nation-states or the "sovereigns of cyberspace." Overall, advocates of *social media as a public utility* believe that due to the immense popularity and necessity of social media websites, it is imperative that the Government imposes **regulations** in the same manner they do for electricity, water, and natural gas.

Counterarguments

Opponents of this theory say that social media websites should not be treated as **public utilities** because these platforms are changing every year, and because they are not essential services for survival as common public utilities are, such as water, natural gas, and **electricity**. Furthermore, opponents fear that imposing "utility" status on a **social network** site, and forcing regulation might lock such a site in as a real **monopoly**, which consequently, will stop **innovation**, and counteract **competition**. Opponents point out that because social media are constantly evolving, innovation and competition are necessary for its growth.

Role in conflict

There are four ways social media plays a significant role in conflict:

- Social media platforms allow information to be framed in mainstream platforms which limits communication.


- Social media enables news stories to quickly go viral and later can lead to misinterpretations that can cause conflict.
- Strategies and the adaption of social media has caused a change in focus amongst leaders from administrative dynamics to new media technology.
- Technological advancements in communication can increase the power of persuasion leading to corruption, scandals, and violence on social media platforms.

The role of technological communication and social media in the world can lead to political, economic, and social conflict due to its unmonitored system, cheap interface, and accessibility.

Non-state actors and militant groups

Social media platforms have been [weaponized](#) by state-sponsored cyber groups to attack governments in the United States, the European Union, and the Middle East. Although [phishing attacks](#) via email are the most commonly used tactic to breach government networks, phishing attacks on social media rose 500% in 2016. As with email-based phishing attacks, the majority of phishing attacks on social media are financially motivated cyber crimes that install [malware](#). However, cyber groups associated with Russia, Iran, and China have used social media to conduct [cyberattacks](#) and undermine democratic processes in the West. During the 2017 French presidential election, for example, Facebook detected and removed fake accounts linked to the Russian cyber group [Fancy Bear](#), who were posing as "friends of friends" of [Emmanuel Macron](#) associates to steal information from them. Cyber groups associated with Iran, China, and Russia have used [LinkedIn](#) to steal trade secrets, gain access to critical infrastructure, or recruit spies. These [social engineering](#) attacks can be multi-platform, with threat actors initiating contact on one platform but continuing communication on more private channel. The Iranian-backed cyber group COBALT GYPSY created a fake persona across multiple social media platforms and initiated contact on LinkedIn before moving to Facebook and email.

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