Reshaping protests and empowerment using social media technologies

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Abstract

The present article discusses an exploratory analysis into one of the many "super-powers" attributed to social networks: the ability to empower marginalized or disadvantaged groups into political mobilization. Specifically, it will examine the social unrest occurred immediately after the 2009 Moldovan Parliamentary Elections. Using snowball sampling, an online survey was sent to contacts that were thought to have a greater impact over the targeted population. The existing study subjects recruited future subjects from among their contacts. A total number of 68 surveys filled out by subjects were collected. The average protester respondent seemed to be of either of Romanian or Moldovan ethnicity, unemployed, middle classed and with pro-Western political views. Education did not seem to have a large influence on the respondents. Phone calls were the most used technology, while second and third were SMS services and Facebook. As indicated by our results, the main reasons for using specific applications were speed of information, coverage, reduced costs, lack of censorship and freshness of information. However, given the small size of the research and also the reduced number of data collected – only 68 completed surveys, the major limitation of this research is that it makes it impossible to assess any statistically significant correlations between the variables tested. Our results suggest that protesters put a greater emphasis on other qualities of the applications used, such as speed, coverage or cost. Another finding is that the newly created means of communication proved to be harder to control and this could explain their popularity amongst protesters and respondents. Also, social and political characteristics influence protesters and are likely to determine the extent of their actions and it is also true that those who had a strong offline involvement were also active online. The importance of this paper, though reduced by the limitations of the study resources, lays in the fact that it provides one of the few empirical starting points for more comprehensive research trials.

Keywords: Social media; empowerment; Twitter revolution; protests; Moldova

Introduction

In today's Web 2.0, social networks are arguably the most hyped and the most discussed things out there, with its users often describing them as having various characteristics, ranging from the most basic, to the most outrageous. Present online social networks are credited with starting flash mobs, boycotts, protests, revolutions, even and are also used to express hopes to find a cure for cancer or AIDS, to help suffering regions and countries or to promote happiness. The problem with this kind of omniscient, omnipotent design is that, sometimes, more is less. By trying to define so much, almost everything, this phrase can end up meaning nothing.

The present paper will try to analyze at least one of the many "super-powers" attributed to social networks: the ability to empower marginalized or disadvantaged groups into political mobilization. More specifically, we will examine the 2009 social unrest that happened in Moldova, immediately after the spring of 2009 Parliamentary Elections. However, due to the limited resources and also due to the relative lack of empirical data on this topic, this paper presents merely an exploratory research, which does not try to give definite answers to the questions raised. It simply tries to open a new dimension of the discussions that surrounded the 2009 events. Subsequently, the research questions raised by this paper are:

RQ1. What exactly is a Twitter (or Facebook, for that matter) revolution?

- In trying to give an answer to this question we will use mostly knowledge provided by the literature review. However, this paper will try to formulate a revised definition for a Twitter revolution, one that will take into account also the empirical data retrieved during this study.

RQ2. What is so peculiar in the nature of new social networks that makes them a strong tool in today's political climate?

- Using the questionnaire developed specifically for this research an answer to this question will be sought, keeping in mind the strong limitations entailed by the exploratory characteristics of the present research.

RQ3. In what way did technology served the April 2009 riots in Moldova?

- It is yet unclear if technology was an accelerant, the means of propagation, or the medium of creation for the protests. Processing data from media outlets, from the descriptive literature focusing on the Moldovan protests and also considering the results of our inquiry, the influence that information communication technology had over the April 2009 riots will be analyzed, and we will try to label its influence.

A detailed explanation of the Moldovan Twitter protests will be of great help in better understanding and also in drawing more relevant predictions regarding other instances of protest movements where new social media was used in facilitating and spreading the „revolutionary flame''.

Throughout this study, we will deal with concepts regarding:

a) the Internet, IT and types of media (*IT and Internet applications usage rates, type of Internet application, type of channel used for communicating*);

b) relationship between government and media *(government control over media)*;

c) actual activities carried both online and offline *(type of activity and degree of involvement)*;

d) types of participants, characteristics and opinions *(social characteristics, political views)*.

Background

The case presented in this paper is not the only one so far, but it was the first one to have attached to it the phrase „Twitter revolution". Since then, this phrase was used also in other similar events, such as the 2009–2010 Iranian election protests, also known as Green Revolution and Facebook Revolution, following the 2009 Iranian presidential election, or more broadly, in the Arab Spring.

Twitter is today one of the fastest growing (Shiels, 2011), most popular and most used social networks in existence. With a total user database of over 200 million users in March 2011 (Shiels, 2011), Twitter has even been nicknamed „the SMS of the Internet" (D'Monte, 2009). Being a large online network of users, it's no wonder that Twitter was cited as having some of the most interesting effects on human lives. These effects of course vary in intensity and coverage, and they range from impacting the love life (Lewandowski, 2011) to the political life. Twitter's novel functionality is its capability to bring about revolutions in authoritarian nations like Iran and Moldova (Ems, 2009), or as we recently saw, protests in already democratic countries, like those who shook London in the summer of 2011. Ems (2009) observes that this capability is ensured by the fact that Twitter acts as an information sieve for news media outlets and provides links to the most relevant information in other media, thus amplifying the distribution of important facts from a variety of sources. The Twitter revolution concept is somewhat still vague. One of the goals of this paper will be to shed more light on this matter, trying to find a reasonable, workable definition that can be applied to past instances, but also to future cases.

In April 2009, protests sparked on the streets of Moldavian capital Chişinău, after the results of the 2009 parliamentary elections were published. Election results showed that the Communist Party (PCRM) won close to 50% of the votes and was to be granted 60 of the 101 seats in the parliament. The problem with these results was that they contradicted previous polls (Mungiu-Pippidi and Munteanu, 2009). In Moldova, Twitter played a role (though still unclear what that actually was) during the April 2009 civil unrests, which, although crushed, gave birth to a new political majority that managed to circumvent the communists' hold on the Moldovan electorate, and finally took power in the Moldovan government. Giving some details about the role played by Twitter might help better understand what a „Twitter Revolution" really is. Ems (2009) shows that in Moldova Twitter was predominantly used to organize the protests as the social networking technology's ability to organize a mass protest was considered most noteworthy by the media. In the same paper, some of the characteristics that made Twitter so useful for protesters are hinted: it encouraged the free flow of information from the streets to news media outlets; it aided in the organization and coordination of large numbers of individuals through dynamic real-time communications (Ems, 2009). Twitter use is also cited (Ems, 2009) in the expression of dissent which presents a variety of new challenges to governments and a variety of new possibilities to those seeking to express political dissent. Morozov (2009) gives another piece of the „Twitter Revolution" puzzle, by assessing that a Twitter revolution is only possible in a regime where the state apparatus is completely ignorant of the Internet and has no virtual presence of its own (Morozov, 2009: p.12).

With these elements to the mix, the problem exploded by Monday morning, April 6, right after the suspected elections, when local NGOs started calling for protests in the Moldovan capital. The numbers of the protesters soon surpassed 10,000 people reaching a maximum of 30,000 demonstrators (Mungiu-Pippidi and Munteanu, 2009). Mungiu-Pippidi and Munteanu, (2009) also attribute the rapid growth in numbers to new social networks, noting that „*word had been spreading rapidly via Twitter and other online networking* services*"* doubled by the absence of coverage in official media. The Moldovan youth started manifesting their disapproval towards the elections, at first merely during online discussion platforms and social networks. The key group actor of this events, the Moldovan youth is characterised as strongly urbanised, having a strong wish for democracy, with very strong western (and Romanian) political views and attitudes, manifesting as a strongly anti-communist group, with a strong online presence. The ruling party was completely antagonistic, it appealed to the rural, poorer and older population of Moldova, having very Russophile political views, coupled with a communist ideology.

In response to the parliamentary elections, a strong wave of disapproval, at first merely expressed online, spilled over into the real world, generating flash-mobs and public protests. Calls to protest were relayed (similar to P2P services) using the Twitter hashtags *#pman* and *#FREEMOLDOVA* and also using SMS

message services. Responding to this situation and trying to contain it as much as possible, the communist government blocked several internet domains, including Twitter and Facebook in Moldova while in some areas of the capital the cellular coverage was suspended. Serbanuta, Chao and Takazawa (2009) note, discussing the role of Twitter during the 2009 protest in Moldova that the response showed: a new and potential application for the development of a civic society, which could be managed by recognizing community memory and identity, and the impact they have on social participation and democracy. In their article, Serbanuta et al. show the importance of Twitter in its capability to document informal exchanges from a worldwide network of participants on a variety of social, political and cultural issues and events as they occur and unfold (Serbanuta, Chao and Takazawa, 2009).

Theory

After briefly assessing the background of the events entailed in this paper, we move on to analyse from a theoretical perspective some key concepts dealt with in this research. The concepts of *social empowerment* and online activism will be given a larger space, while other concepts, like social networks and Internet activism will be briefly defined and presented. According to Boyd and Ellison (2007), a social network can be defined as a *web-based service* whose main attributes are that it that allows individuals to *construct a profile* within a system, to *articulate a list of other users* with whom they share characteristics, and finally, to *view and traverse their list of connections* and those made by others within the system.

3.1. Social empowerment

According to Katz (1984) empowerment is a process through which people gain mastery or control over their lives, improve strengths and competences and develop proactive behaviours to manage their social affairs. Empowerment at the individual level can be called psychological empowerment (Zimmerman et al. 1992). On the other hand, disempowerment occurs when citizens and/or communities lose significant control over their affairs (Leung, 2009). Various researchers (Zimmerman et al. 1992; Leung, 2009; Mehra, Merkel and Bishop, 2004) have pointed out that the Internet can be a tool helping minorities or marginalized groups in a society to promote their empowerment in the political, social, educational and cultural domains. But social empowerment is not something brought by the Internet. Marginalized groups of society felt empowered even by less advanced techniques, like the Xerox machines or SMS (Ems, 2009). Moreover, Ems notes, even the printing press, radio and cable television were seen as democratizing technologies (Ems, 2009). Although previous research focused on the ability of the Internet to promote empowerment for ethnic, sexual or gender minorities in democratic countries, we can draw a parallel to political minorities (or opposition movements) in authoritarian regimes. On the offset, Lunt (2005) has pointed out that „technology can empower or exclude people by determining their access to knowledge". Social empowerment can be further broken down into smaller analytical units. In the case of political empowerment, technology is important because it enables „an empowerment of citizens through the 'bottom-up setting of the agenda' and the 'formulation and dissemination of public opinion'" (Chang, 2005:927). The most important aspect of online interaction for the politics of democratic communication is that multiple actors are actively engaged in horizontal communication.

The Internet and its savvy use by the online media can lead to profound changes in what Howard Rheingold calls 'the ecology system of culture' (Healy, 1997: 65 *apud* Chang, 2005:927) by generating public counter-opinions that oppose the existing social order. By stimulating exchange among people who share similar interests and political opinions, online media can help create group identity and induce active participation. Such support is attractive to the young, who are used to online culture, and to citizens, who are fully aware of the political potential of the online media (Chang, 2005:927). According to Chang, online world is defined as „a near-physical and symbolic space in which public opinion can be formulated and disseminated". The space can function as a new centre of public opinion and lead to an empowerment of citizens through the 'bottom-up setting of the agenda' and the 'formulation and dissemination of public opinion' (Chang, 2005:927). Various authors give strong support, both theoretical

and empirical to the fact that psychological empowerment and civic engagement are linked (Leung, 2009; Chang, 2005; Zimmerman and Rappaport, 1988). In the same line of thought, other authors (Kellner, 2004; Langman, 2005), although with slightly more utopian views, claim that the Internet can enhance political mobilization and increase awareness of important social issues outside the control of the dominant media corporations, or that the Internet is democratizing processes of collective action and political organizing by flattening bureaucratic structures and making boundaries more porous (Bimber, 2003). On the same topic of dominant versus alternative (activist) media, Van Laer and Van Aelst (2010:1158) observe that the Internet provides „space to publish and disseminate alternative points of view about political and cultural struggles".

On a different note to empowerment, Carty believes that new ICTs and novel repertoires of grassroots mobilization are helping to decolonize public opinion by expanding public discourse (Carty, 2010:156), thus enlarging the potential base of people to be empowered. Carty develops her paper by putting an extra emphasis on the link on the politics between new information communication technologies (ICTs) and new social movements, which she abbreviates as NSM. According to Carty, participants in NSMs are not necessarily motivated by material gain, but predominantly attempt to challenge the diffuse notions of politics and of society by themselves (Carty, 2010:157). Further on, she states that „NSMs challenge the boundaries of institutional politics by dismantling the traditional dichotomies between private and public life, institutional and non-institutional action, and political and civil society. In doing so, actors politicize civil society through practices that belong to an intermediate sphere between private pursuits and institutional state-sanctioned modes of politics" (Carty, 2010:157). Drawing from Castells, she observes how new collective identities are formed, identities who acknowledge pluralistic forms of activism based on articulations among various, flexible and shifting sources of identity. The role played by these new ICTs, in accordance with functions observed by other authors is that it enables collective and individual actors to reconstruct the public sphere (Carty, 2010:159). An important conclusion of Carty's study is that the new ICTs are important because their novelty can translate into interest and participation in political offline and online events (Carty, 2010:169).

Fisher and Boekkooi (2010) note one more quality of the Internet: its relatively cheap costs. The low costs of the Internet and new information technologies allow a message to be carried further and faster, while helping reducing barriers to political participation (Fisher and Boekkooi, 2010:194, see also Earl, 2010:210). An expanded view of this matter is provided by Bennett (2003), who believes that „in the new global activism far beyond reducing the costs of communication, or transcending the geographical and temporal barriers found in other communication media. Various uses of the Internet and other digital media facilitate the loosely structured networks, the weak identity ties, and the issue and demonstration campaign organizing that define a new global politics" (Bennett, 2003:164). The results of Fisher and Boekkooi's study (2010) show that the Internet tends to mobilize people who are less locally connected, who come to the event alone and fewer participants will come to events with members of their social networks and also individuals who are mostly isolated and not personally connected to a wider circle of people with whom they engage in social movement activity (Fisher and Boekkooi, 2010:204). The Internet is also seen as having one other major potential: reducing transaction costs for multiple groups and activists who are organizing, mobilizing or participating in collective action (Bonchek 1995; Naughton 2001, Van Laer and Van Aelst, 2010). In Van Laer and Van Aelst's words, „the internet allows for collaboration and participation beyond time and space constraints" because it stimulates like never before the diffusion of ideas and issues, taking them to another, untouched before, point, while in the same time reducing the mobilization costs for actors of social movements (Van Laer and Van Aelst, 2010:1151). Van Laer and Van Aelst go on showing exactly in what ways the Internet can be used during protests as it allows organizations to provide and spread information on place, time, how to organize a protest and even to inform people about their rights and how to protect themselves (Van Laer and Van Aelst, 2010:1153). In the two authors' opinion, another characteristic of the Internet age is that it is also changing the way in which anarchistic groups are engaged in more confrontational protest actions. This is accomplished by providing access to schedules of meetings and marshal training sessions, information about protection against tear gas as well as legal information about rights of assembly (Van Laer and Van

Aelst, 2010:1155). However, not all authors agree about the positive role played by the Internet regarding this kind of political communication.

There is a vast literature citing ways in which the Internet can limit social connections (Putnam, 2000; see also Shapiro, 1999; Wilhelm & Ebrary Inc., 2000; Kamarck & Nye, 2002).

3.2. Internet activism (hacktivism / slacktivism)

Discussing the Internet's role in today's different forms of activism, Castells argue that the Internet may be the most persuasive and effective form of communication technology in diffusing social ideas and actions in history (Castells 2001). Civic engagement is defined as „a process in which individuals take part in decision making in the institutions, programs and environments that affect them" (Heller, 1984: 339) Cyber activism can be a way to empower people living under less than democratic governments around the world. It can be defined as being the involvement in current heated debates in the political, social or cultural realms of life, using IT as a platform for replication and propagation. Poorly planned online activism can backfire, but harmless activism isn't very productive either. Slacktivism is a catchy new word that describes a kind of feel-good but useless Internet activism. Twitter is cited as capable of bringing about revolutions in authoritarian nations, providing a breeding ground for online activism, which can spill in the real world.

The new ICTs also change activism, which is far less time expensive and may not require biographical availability (Earl, 2010:216). By adding a medium, the Internet, social and political activism had to be redefined and re-assessed as they are model changing because the fundamental dynamics of movement participation are probably modified when actions do not take very long to participate in (Earl, 2010:216). Earl claims that due to this new phenomenon, protest (in its many forms) as a strategy for gaining redress is spreading to newly politically active individuals and to individuals concerned about non-political issues (2010:210). In Earl's opinion, the Internet enables protest planners to amplify their outreach efforts dramatically, but also to quickly and cheaply mobilize a wider audience. This leads to broader and faster activism, although it doesn't necessarily change how protests work (Earl, 2010:213). Bennett and Fielding (1999) have referred to participation in online forms of engagement as 'five-minute activism'. They correspond to a model of collective action built around quick but massive participation levels, and dubbed 'flash activism'- such that sudden and massive participation levels quickly create political impacts only to have participation levels just as suddenly recede (Bennett & Fielding 1999). Flash activism can be effective in creating or influencing change. (Earl, 2010:215). But not only have the actions changed, but also the actors themselves as new participants and leaders are being drawn in the existing protest arena. Drawing on the case of the Zapatista Revolution, Earl observes that many leaders of the movement had little prior political experience and were virtually as likely to have shared a degree or career related to computer science than any prior activist experiences (Earl, 2010:217). With regards to activism, Twitter can end up playing quite an important role, as it quickly, dynamically and succinctly enables the communication of protesters with one another and, at the same time, it broadcasts these communications to anyone who will listen (Ems, 2009).

Van Laer and Van Aelst point out that the Internet has created a new space for confrontational activities. Furthermore, these activities touch the boundary of what is legal and what as illegal. Depending on who is analyzing them, they can be called „electronic civil disobedience", „hacktivism" or as „cyberterrorism" (Van Laer and Van Aelst, 2010:1159). In the view of the two authors, hacktivism is defined as referring to „unpopular actions as for instance the violation of the privacy of a celebrity by exposing his or her email traffic. But also many of the pure political actions of hacktivists are contested within the broader hacktivist community" (cf. Jordan & Taylor 2004 *apud* Van Laer and Van Aelst, 2010:1159).

Although in the context of the our small sized – research it may be difficult to talk about conventional hypotheses , for the sake of having a helping tool that is able to steer this effort in the right way, we have created three hypotheses fuelling the present research:

H1: The use of IT grew as the Government's hold on traditional media strengthened.

- *H1a: The newer the means of communication was, the less was it controlled by the Government, permitting more dissident opinions to be expressed.*

H2: Social characteristics (such as class, age, and income) *and political views* (such as position toward the Government) *influenced and determined online activity.*

H3: A stronger offline activity leads to a more active online presence.

Method and data

The present research starts from the social empowerment theory. Based on findings from the literature review, we argue that empowerment stimuli have a positive, causal effect on political involvement, helping it trigger and materialise. We have also observed a diffuse relationship between social empowerment and the effects ICTs. To be more precise, once social empowerment is filtered through the ICTs, it can have either a positive (enabling) or a negative (disabling) effect on the political involvement of different societal groups. The political involvement born this way develops into concrete actions which can be integrated into a bi-dimensional matrix. The actions thus resulted can vary on two planes: online vs. offline and passive vs. proactive.

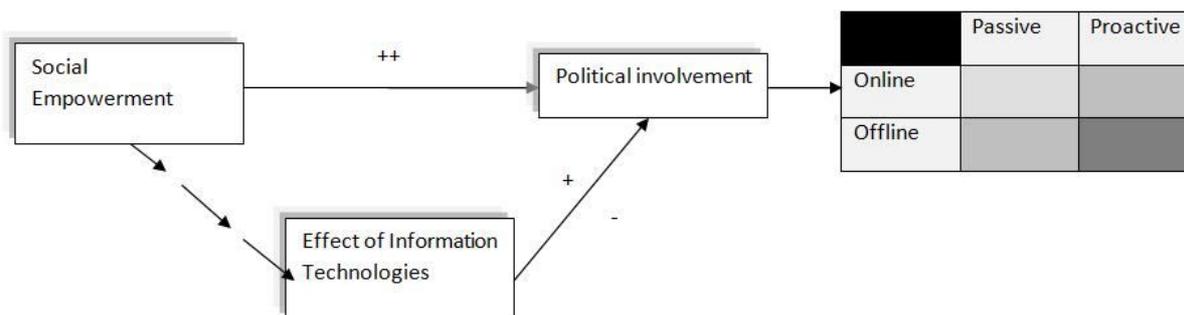The theoretical model applied for this research can be exemplified by the graphic scheme in Figure 1:

*Figure 1. Theoretical research model*

4.1. Sampling

Although probabilistic sampling would have served our purposes better, the exploratory character of the research and the limited resources enabled only snowball sampling. Another important reason taken into consideration when it was opted for snowball sampling was the fact that the subject population was a hidden one. Furthermore, there is no statistical record, no registry and no single list that could provide a detailed account of the subject population, its numbers and means of contacting them and thus the subject population proved to be difficult for researchers to access. An online survey (consisting of 23 questions grouped in three parts) was sent, in two stages, to selected contacts that were thought to have a greater impact over the targeted population. The existing study subjects recruited future subjects from their acquaintances. After about a week of collecting data, enough responses were gathered to give a useful insight on the topic researched. During the first stage of sampling, a number of three contacts, the ones with the highest estimated influence, were selected and given the questionnaire to distribute to their large base of Moldovan contacts, but also to fill it out themselves.

4.2. Data

After retrieving 68 completed surveys, we can move on now and discuss the data retrieved in this process. Given the small size of the research and also the reduced number of data collected, it is impossible to assess any statistically significant correlations between the variables tested. However, by the use of simple statistical tools, such as means and cross-tabulation and by presenting the data in a graphical format, we can observe certain tendencies developing and also the existence of interesting clusters among our responses. Before proceeding analysing the data, we must re-state the obvious statistical insignificance of our effort. However, though it may not predict future developments and though it does not allow us to observe strong correlations between variables nor does it allow us to create any regression patterns, the data collected is still useful in helping us to formulate future significant research efforts.

Regarding the demographic characteristics of our respondents, they were 41/68 females, 36/68 of self-declared Moldovan ethnicity, (with 31/68 Romanians and 1/68 Russians), 21/68 of them were bachelor students, (with 11/68 BA graduates, 10/68 high-school students, 8/68 high-school graduates, 9/68 graduate students and 5/68 masters or PhD graduates). As is frequently the case among Moldovan youth, many of them (38/68) were living abroad at that time, 30 of these 38 living in Romania. Going further, 23/68 were employed at that time, out of which 6 were working in the private sector. The mean age of our respondents, at the time of the protests, was 21.56 years. Predominantly, many respondents engaged heavily in online activities, such as starting and signing online petitions and also starting and participating in online discussion threads, while real life actions account for less than the online ones, with the notable exception of gathering in public meetings. One of the first surprising distributions we noticed was that during the events, only a small number of our respondents actually used Twitter.

Figure 2. What type of social networks did you use during the 2009 protests?
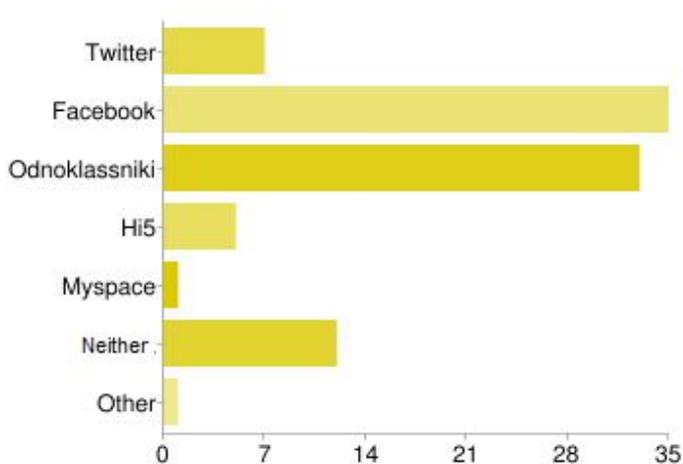
Twitter	7	10%
Facebook	35	51%
Odnoklassniki	33	49%
Hi5	5	7%
MySpace	1	1%
None	12	18%
Other	1	1%

People may select more than one checkbox, so percentages may add up to more than 100%.

Table 1. Distribution and usage of IT application at the moment of the protests

As we can observe in Table 1, only a mere 7 out of 68 respondents (less than 10%) were Twitter users two years ago. At that time, Twitter managed to gather only a number of users five times as low compared to Facebook and Odnoklassniki. When compared to global results (Cheng, 2009), where we see that usage of Twitter among the 15-19 and the 20-24 age groups is above 30%, we clearly observe that, although we cannot replicate the results for the entire country, the percentage of Twitter users among our group is quite low. However, when properly used (5 of the 7 respondents used Twitter daily), even such a low percentage can have an impact on social events, so we shouldn't hurry in questioning the Twitter Revolution label coined in April 2009. Not yet, at least. Of course, if we were to consider only general usage rates, then the events should have been dubbed the Facebook revolution. Further developing this matter, out of the 7 Twitter users at that time, only 3 actually participated in the protests. Another feature observed was that respondents use social networks frequently, 50/68 declaring they use them once a day or more. This is in accordance with what we know about the use of social networks today. Continuing the

presentation of our results it will be interesting to describe the profile of the protesters, based on the available data. Out of the 68 respondents, 44 have admitted participating in various ways to the protests, 14 only in the real life dimension, 8 only in the online dimension, while 22 have acted in both dimensions. While trying to profile protesters may be very interesting and useful, our small answer pool will not allow us to extend this profile to the entire protester population. Tables 2 through 4 will highlight some of the characteristic common to those who took part in the protests. The average protester respondent seems to have either a Romanian or a Moldovan self-perceived ethnicity, with ethnic Romanians having an increased participatory tendency.

		Q14. In April 2009 did you participate in the protests against the results of the Parliamentary Elections?		Total
		no	yes	
Q3. To what ethnic group do you belong?	Moldovan	20	16	36
	Russian	0	1	1
	Romanian	9	22	31
	Total	**29**	**39**	**68**

Table 2. Participation in the riots and ethnicity

This may be explained by the fact that there is an increased chance for ethnic Romanians to feel dissent towards the communist government than ethnic Moldovans, due mostly to the fact that the incumbent communist government tried to cut historical and cultural ties with Romania and create a new Moldovan identity and even a language, even if both Romanians and Moldovans people speak the same Romanian language. As showed by Table 3, education does not seem to have a large influence on the respondents' decision to take part or not in the riots. The same basic distribution observed on the entire 68 respondents' population can be noticed on the participants' subgroup.

		Q14. In April 2009 did you participate in the protests against the results of the Parliamentary Elections?		Total
		no	yes	
	High-school student	4	6	10
	High-school graduate	2	6	8
Q4. At the time of the riots, April 2009, what was your educational status?	Bachelor student	8	13	21
	Bachelor graduate	5	6	11
	Masters or PhD student	4	5	9
	Masters or PhD graduate	3	2	5
	Other	3	1	4
	Total	**29**	**39**	**68**

Table 3. Participation in the riots and education

Variance in results can be observed in Table 4, which crosstabs participation and employment status. Thus, we see that while those employed at that time were split evenly between protesting and refraining, the respondents without a job were much more inclined towards protesting. This situation can be explained by the fact that those employed at that time faced time limitations, while having an incentive not to skip work in order to protest, as they would probably not want to lose their job.

		Q14. In April 2009 did you participate in the protests against the results of the Parliamentary Elections?		Total
		no	**yes**	
Q6. Were you employed at that time?	No	15	28	43
	Yes	12	11	23
	Missing	2	0	2
	Total	**29**	**39**	**68**

Table 4. Participation in the riots and employment

Social class affiliation seems to have a small influence over the decision to participate or not in protests. Members of the three lowest classes (lower middle, blue collar/working and lower class) tend to be more predisposed towards participation (possibly because they have bigger disappointments towards the incumbent communist government) than members of the other classes. However, for now it is hard to predict if such a result would be seen during a nationwide study.

Moving on from this section, it will be interesting to see how big of a role Twitter actually played in the „Twitter Revolution". Therefore, we will go on presenting some of the results concerning the use of Twitter during the protests. Usage percentages during the 2009 riots for some of the most common social networks and communication applications available and popular in Moldova make us think that we might want to change the „Twitter Revolution" label to the „Phone Call Revolution". Phone calls were the most used technology from our list by protesters, with 30 respondents using it. In a somewhat distant second and third place come SMS services – with 21 answers (used, obviously, in strong connection with phone calls) and Facebook, the leading social network used for protests by respondents, with 20 answers accounting for 38%. When we try to expand this issue, looking further down the road to how respondents were mobilized to protest we find more evidence of low-tech social structures replacing the high-tech ones we were expecting or hoping. Table 5, instead of being a showcase for the use of Twitter, or at least some other emerging virtual social networks, proves that in a low-tech countries, one of the poorest in Europe[1], low tech methods still work best.

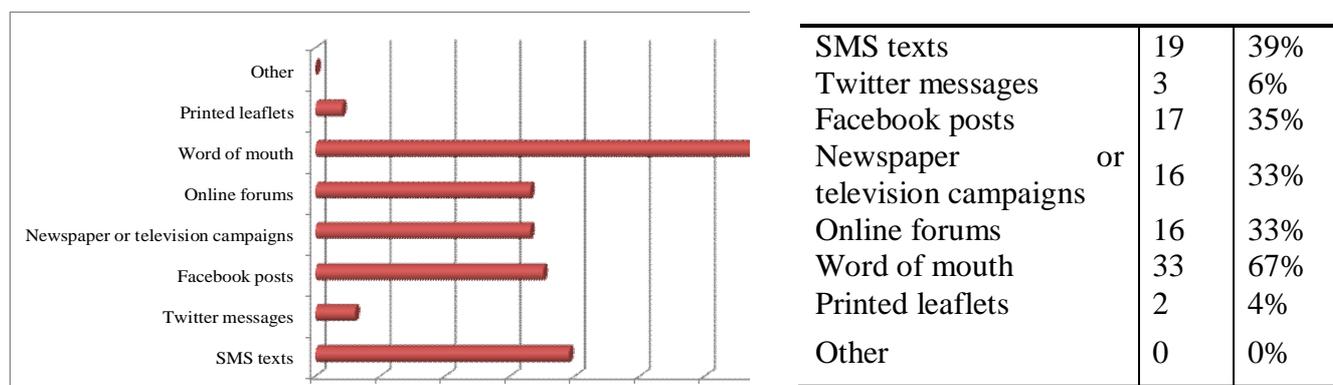| SMS texts	19	39%
Twitter messages	3	6%
Facebook posts	17	35%
Newspaper or television campaigns	16	33%
Online forums	16	33%
Word of mouth	33	67%
Printed leaflets	2	4%
Other	0	0%

Table 5. Medium of mobilization during protests

Should we be surprised that, given the economical context of the region in general and of Moldova in particular, it is still „word of mouth" that proved most successful in attracting protesters? The answer is No. Besides „word of mouth" we also notice good scores for text messages, Facebook posts, online forums and traditional media campaigns. It is remarkably low however Twitter's score in these tables. In Table 5, Twitter's score is only comparable, in an age of technology and in an event dubbed „the Twitter Revolution", with printed leaflets, hardly ever used anymore. Out of all the elements discussed so far, political views seem to be a more reliable predictor on behaviour among the respondents of our

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[1] According to data referring to the year 2010: World Economic Outlook Database-April 2011, International Monetary Fund, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_Monetary_Fund.

questionnaire. To this situation surely contributes the highly polarised political arena in Moldova, where there is a fierce battle between the incumbent, at that time, Communist Party and the liberal opposition parties. Supporters of these two major forces are very different one from the other. As previously described, the Moldovan youth, the major collective actor of the protests, is characterised by everything the Communist party lacks. Thus, it should not surprise anyone if the political views are a good predictor for action in this case, seeing how, on top of everything, the protests started following an electoral process. Useful for understanding the data in Table 6 is the remembering that in Moldova, people associate a preference for Russian politics with communist views and a preference for European integration with a closer relationship with Romania.

| | | Q2. Political views | | | Total |
		Russia	EU	NS/NR	
Q14. In April 2009 did you participate (either physically or virtually) in the protests against the results of the Parliamentary Elections?	no	7	22	0	29
	yes	1	36	2	39
	Total	**8**	**58**	**2**	**68**

Table 6. Participation and political views

As it would be expected in such dramatic situation, the main reason for which people chose a particular application was the speed at which information was relayed from one user to the other. 36/68 people argued their preference using this indicator. The second most popular argument was that of spread coverage amongst friends, with a score of 22/36 and tied on third place, with 17/36 are: reduced cost (normal in such a poor polity), freedom from government control and freshness of information. The fact that there were more important factors then lack of censorship may also explain why respondents still used extensively traditional media, although in Moldova it is strictly regulated.

Table 7 below shows the results of the logistical regression computed using the SPSS software. For this table, the participation, ethnicity and use of social media were transformed into dichotomous variables with „0" indicating absence of and „1" indicating presence of. The ethnicity in question is self-assumed Moldovan, SM refers to the use of social media, while participation is the dependant variable. The Politics variable investigates the political attitudes of the subjects in question. Politics is not a dichotomous variable, as it is the original 5 points variable, with the value 1 being the most leftist and 5 the most rightist. Results show that among our group members, those who's perceived ethnicity is Moldovan will be 2.84 times more likely to engage in protest participation during the revolts. Strangely, for the Politics variable, results are pretty close, contradicting previous results that showed that political attitudes were important in determining participation. This may be because the distribution of political attitudes was highly tilted towards rightist options, ignoring almost completely the left side of the spectrum, thus lacking in variance. Finally, we see from these results that those who used social networks were 7.69 times more inclined to participate in protests than those who did not use them. One important clarification has to be made with respect to these results. Although they seem so strikingly powerful, one explanation might be in the fact that the subjects of our study were gathered via the Internet, thus being obvious that they are avid or at least occasional users of social networks.

		B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Step 1ª	Ethnicity(Mld)	1.043	.568	3.377	1	.066	2.839
	Politics	-.026	.300	.007	1	.931	.974
	SM	2.040	.707	8.324	1	.004	7.691
	Constant	-.599	1.350	.197	1	.657	.549
	a. Variable(s) entered on step 1: Ethnicity, Politics, SM.						

Table 7. Logistical regression

Discussion

It is now time for the conclusive remarks, as well as for a final round-up of the questions that generated this research, although providing conclusive answers might prove extremely difficult if not outright impossible, given the context of this research.

H1: The use of *IT grows as the Government's hold on traditional media strengthenes.*

In Moldova, as in most other communist ruled countries, the government tries to apply a strong hold on the media, in order to achieve a greater deal of control over its people. However, it is possible that because Moldova is still, technically, a democracy, even though a struggling one, the protesters did not base their choice of application for political communication primarily on the degree of censorship applied by the government. This may suggest either that censorship is not a big issue in Moldova and traditional media is still basically independent, or the fact that protesters put a greater emphasis on other qualities manifested by the applications used, such as speed, high coverage or reduced cost. Therefore, given the data collected we cannot confirm this hypothesis, but we also cannot overrule it completely.

- *H1a: The newer the means of communication was, the less was it controlled by the Government, permitting more dissident opinions to be expressed.*

With the notable exception of phone calls (although, we could divide them into mobile or land line based and then differentiate between them, referring to mobile as new, while considering land line based as old), all the other preferred applications by the protesters are recent ones. The second most extensive used one, SMS text messages, although are not exactly brand new, are still a modern expression of communication technology. However, due to the fact that it has been used for several years, it was more easily controlled by the government during the protests (the GSM signal was jammed on purpose by the government in the main public square where the protesters gathered). The more recent means of communication, (Facebook, discussion forums and comments sections on online newspaper) proved to be harder to control and this could explain their popularity amongst protesters and respondents. Having these facts in mind, this hypothesis seems plausible, although further research still has to be carried out in order to be properly assessed.

H2: Social characteristics (such as class, age, and income) *and political views* (such as position toward the Government) *influenced and determined online activity.*

Within the confines of our study, this hypothesis seemed to be simpler to handle. Indeed we found that social and political characteristics influence protesters and is likely to determine the extent of their actions. However, with just 68 subjects analysed, it is not possible to determine at this moment if it implies a causal relationship, or it is just a false causality. To conclude, for our research, this hypothesis is confirmed, but we cannot extend these comments to a wider area.

H3: A stronger offline activity leads to a more active online presence.

The final hypothesis proves to be harder to confirm or deny with our limited empirical data. Yet, existing data shows us that in many cases, those who have a strong online presence, sometimes get „stuck" online as they do not explore their protest offline, in the physical world. Even so, in our data we found some indications that the other way a round there might be a connection (whether causal or not it is impossible to tell at this point): those who had a strong offline involvement in the protests were also active online. In this respect, this final hypothesis resembles the previous one: is confirmed, but we cannot extend these comments to a wider area, nor can we comment on the nature of the observed relationship.

5.1. The Twitter Revolution

There remains one issue to comment upon. Were the Moldovan 2009 protests a „Twitter Revolution"? For the sake of argument, let us try and give a definition of what a „Twitter Revolution" might just be. As already discussed, according to Ems (2009), a „Twitter Revolution" is one in which Twitter is used predominantly to organize a mass protest. But this is only a minimal definition which would allow us to

include even minor riots remotely connected with Twitter in this category. Developing on this definition, we argue that we can talk about a „Twitter Revolution" when a) calls to public protests are organised and relayed through Twitter; b) those calls are given significant attention by the public interested; c) the calls are materialized and real protests born on Twitter touch the streets and finally when d) Twitter is able to produce and recruit new protesters and constantly enlarge their numbers.

So, can we refer to the April 2009 protests in Moldova as a „Twitter Revolution"? Our data seem to contradict these claims. Twitter was not extensively enough to be determinant to the course of action. Twitter usage became more a symbol of dissent and a host to outspoken opinions combating the elections results than a camp for starting revolutions. Passing those events through the filter created by our newly created definition, they would fail to meet the four demands and thus, the Moldovan riots fail to be considered, in our opinion, as a genuine „Twitter Revolution". But the publicity related to this event certainly helped the protesters' cause regionally and globally and it was a great tool of gaining popular support, so positive effects were actually present.

Acknowledgements

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