

## Freedom and the Internet

By Miklos Sarvary

**The Jasmine Revolution that has affected many of the Arab countries showed how big a role the Internet in general and social networks in particular can play in promoting political freedom.**

Social networks promoted the free flow of information and also helped people organize spontaneous demonstrations against oppressive regimes.

Yet, on second thought, it is not entirely clear that the Internet automatically guarantees free speech. The fact that user-generated content is recorded on Internet servers makes it easier for authorities to track contributors and punish them if the promoted information and ideas are not supporting the regime. The Chinese government, for example, has just introduced regulation that requires people to setup their accounts on microblogging sites and social networks with their true identities. Foreign sites (e.g. Twitter) are banned and local sites (SinaWeibo, Tencent Weibo, Renren, etc.) are constrained by such regulation. Enforcing the law is not a trivial task (the trade of bogus IDs is very liquid) but still the recorded information makes it easier for authorities to track down individuals who disseminate undesirable information.

But the government can be more subtle in the control of information by actually influencing it. In a recent Economist article (“The power of microblogs”, March 17, 2012, p.55) it is reported that “... [Chinese] government agencies, party organs and individual officials have set up more than 50,000 weibo accounts” to influence the public debate about current issues and controversies that are massively affected by the rumors circulating on the Internet. This environment is particularly interesting and it is not clear who – the uncoordinated individual citizens or their coordinated government counterparts – are at a disadvantage in building consensus from the noisy cacophony humming on the Web. Maybe, with a sophisticated

government the Internet is a more dangerous threat for freedom than traditional media....

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