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## Deliberation Technology

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## **Abstract**

In this Introduction to the Symposium, we articulate a reframing of Larry Diamond's (2010) program of "liberation technology" around the idea of "deliberation technology." Although the liberation technology program has been useful in supplying dissidents with a basic communication infrastructure during the various revolutions of the 2011 Arab Spring, we briefly examine the cases of Tunisia and Egypt in order to show how deliberative vacuums have arisen after regime change. We then introduce each of the four Symposium submissions with the hopes that a program of deliberation technology might contribute to the strengthening of democratic practice around the world.

## **Keywords**

liberation technology, deliberation technology, Arab Spring, democracy, digital media

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We would like to credit inspiration for this Symposium to Carly S. Woods, who, in response to a newspaper article on the use of "liberation technology" in the Arab Spring quipped that the newly democratic societies would likely soon need "deliberation technology." We thank Tim Steffensmeier for editorial feedback and the opportunity to publish this Symposium.

## Deliberation Technology

Technology and human liberation have a complicated history. Citizens have always used new communication tools to persuade toward different ends. The invention of writing, the earliest media technology, circulated political conversation beyond elite circles in Ancient Greece and thus involved the *demos* more actively in democratic governance. About two thousand years later, the spread of the printing press played a role in freeing Western Europe from the stranglehold of Church doctrine, helping to inaugurate the modern age of reason. More contemporarily, a host of internetworked digital media technologies promise to empower individuals at the expense of institutions, reshaping every facet of human interdependence. While technology can be used to help the cause of human liberation, so can it be used to control populations and thus constrain freedom. The extension of censorship—both by private corporations and autocratic states—into internetworked environments indicates that there is no inevitable relationship between technology and liberation.

Despite this complicated history, it is certainly possible to bend technology toward emancipatory ends. Larry Diamond's conception of "liberation technology" captures the capacity of internetworked technologies to expand political, social, and economic freedom (2010). The internet, more decentralized and with a lower cost of entry than the mass media, supports the kind of lateral, many-to-many communication often theorized as the basis for democratic practice. Liberation technology, according to Diamond, "enables citizens to report news, expose wrongdoing, express opinions, mobilize protest, monitor elections, scrutinize government, deepen participation, and expand the horizons of freedom" (p. 70). Citizen journalism fueled by online newspapers, blogs, and video sharing portals has had a demonstrable effect in holding officials accountable in places like Malaysia and China. More recently, the events of what is widely referred to as the Arab Spring of 2011 signal the power of networked media to function as a liberation technology. Citizens in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and across the Middle East and North Africa used a combination of Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and native websites to disseminate information, mobilize protests, publicize state brutality, and envision alternative political futures.

To be clear, technology did not "cause" these uprisings. A complex and nationally unique brew of economic, political, and social factors produced sustained efforts by citizens to militate for alternative arrangements. However, internetworked technology was certainly a tool that helped effectuate change. Much of the focus of the liberation technology movement, as it has come to be known, has emphasized empowering dissidents in highly autocratic countries to circumvent state censors. For example, the State Department has invested heavily in developing an "internet in a suitcase" that uses satellite uplinks to allow dissidents to set up their own wireless communication network. Similarly, \$50 million has been invested in building mobile phone towers on U.S. military bases in Afghanistan to create a communication network that Taliban fighters cannot disrupt (Glanz and Markoff, 2011). These programs seem to hone in on a very precise connotation of liberation: the freeing of a people from the control of authoritarian governments. By encouraging the freer circulation of information and strategy, these liberation technologies can aid the forces of democratization.

This Symposium turns attention to another dimension in the struggle for democratic governance. After an oppressive government has been overthrown with the aid of liberation technologies, as in Tunisia and Egypt, what then? It is all too easy to see the overthrow of a dictator as the hard work of a revolution; indeed, the violence that accompanied the Arab Spring is a testament to just how difficult this task remains. But the larger ongoing task of building a robust civil society capable of sustaining this hard-fought freedom is, in many ways, a harder and longer slog. A modest reframing of the conversation surrounding “liberation technology” might help the intensive project of building more democratic societies. In short, we need a “*deliberation technology*” movement. Deliberation technologies facilitate not just information circulation, but discussion and debate. Deliberation technologies focus not just on the hardware of communication, but on the software and the practices that support a broad-based conversation amongst affected citizens. Deliberation technologies do not serve specific and episodic goals, but focus on cultivating sites of sustained communication. These sites of sustained conversation are crucial to countering the deliberative vacuums that often occur in states with atrophied civil societies, like Tunisia and Egypt.

In Tunisia, the self-immolation of a street vendor named Mohamed Bouazizi crystallized discontent with the autocrat Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali. Inflation in food prices, high unemployment rates, and revelations through WikiLeaks about high-level political corruption had set the stage for mass protests. In response to widespread protests, Ben Ali hoped to appease the protestors in a speech to the nation on January 13, 2011 by removing restrictions on internet sites. Rather than quell dissent, this move unleashed a torrent of communicative activity. Further protests were coordinated by “a steady stream of anonymous text messages, Twitter and Facebook updates,” facilitating a cascade of outrage throughout the country (Walt, 2011). The government’s brutal response to these subsequent protests was documented by mobile phones, which further diminished the legitimacy of the Tunisian state. Ben Ali was ultimately compelled to resign, leaving behind a great deal of uncertainty about Tunisia’s political future. Decades of authoritarian rule had weakened political parties and civic associations in Tunisia (Maddy-Weitzman, 2011). The post-Ben Ali openness shocked the dormant organs of civil society, along with new networks of bloggers and other digital intermediaries, into action and Tunisians successfully held elections for a democratic government. Yet, concerns persist about how some thorny issues will be addressed: emergency laws, the status of women, press freedom, and so on (Billingsly, 2011). Disturbingly, self-immolations have continued in response to political and economic frustrations (Goodman, 2012). Persistent differences of opinion familiar to established democracies, often stemming from generational and class differences, call for more sustained deliberation.

Egypt, too, benefited from liberation technology early in the revolution but has since faced more serious impediments to democratic deliberation. For years before 2011, a network of digitally connected citizens created a community to stimulate discussion about the injustices perpetrated by the Egyptian state. The police killing of Khalid Said, a blogger, created a flashpoint around which citizen outrage coalesced. The Facebook group “We Are All Khalid Said,” working with a youth group and members of the political opposition, organized a day of action on January 25, 2011 that was the beginning of the end for Hosni Mubarak’s administration (Kirkpatrick and Sanger, 2011). The

revolution in Egypt demonstrates how the historical divide between “online” and “offline” protest no longer obtains, as networked media were tightly integrated with embodied direct action. Despite the efforts of protestors to maintain the more radically democratic goals of the revolution, the heady days of Tahrir Square seem to have faded, even after rounds of successful elections. The military council that has ruled since Mubarak has been accused of perpetuating many of the same abuses, including delaying elections, quashing dissent, engaging in torture, and rhetorically invoking the “mantra of stability” to forestall change (Shadid, 2011). Military leaders, in a move reminiscent of Nixon’s invocation of the “Silent Majority” in the United States, have claimed support from what is colloquially known in Egypt as “the Party of the Couch”—a presumably large number of Egyptians who have declined to participate in the protests and simply want renewed growth and stability. That this colloquialism has emerged signals a kind of deliberative deficit in parts of contemporary Egypt. If any future government is to have democratic legitimacy, citizens will have to be moved from the couch to more deliberative sites.

The cases of Tunisia and Egypt demonstrate the need for more sophisticated deliberation technologies. Without a doubt, technology alone will not solve the deliberative ailments of these states or any society. We cannot simply “add technology and stir,” hoping that we might hit upon a recipe for deliberative culture; but in some cases, more dedicated tools might improve methods of debate and discussion and thus strengthen civil society. Any successful deliberation technology must resist one-size-fits-all prescriptions in favor of collaboratively generated arrangements that can be responsive to cultural differences. Deliberation technology necessitates a turn away from the conventional hard power/soft power dichotomy that structures much public conversation about influence in foreign affairs. Instead of aiming to influence other states through military hard power or cultural soft power, a politics centering on deliberation values “communicative power” generated from citizens themselves (Arendt, 1958; Habermas, 1996). Such a move risks the chance that citizens will democratically decide upon courses of action that veer away from what some domestic and international elites interpret as desirable. But this is a risk that democratic deliberation always entails, and it is also the only hope that the emergent and established democracies around the globe develop the legitimacy necessary to guide citizens through a tumultuous 21<sup>st</sup> century.

This Symposium responds to several questions regarding the potential shape and role of deliberation technology: How can new information technologies be more constructively bent toward aiding deliberative processes? What kinds of formal and informal deliberation technologies could be developed to strengthen global civil society? Are there methods to improve the spontaneous and inchoate communication occurring through the unstructured architecture of networked media? Are there specific software platforms for deliberation that could strengthen deliberative processes? Who—states, corporations, or NGOs—should take the lead on developing technologies? How might it address some of the pressing issues facing transitioning—and even non-transitioning—states? How can citizens be encouraged to use networked media technologies for deliberative ends? The four contributions to the Symposium are organized in a sequence that identifies a range of deliberation technology options, focusing in turn, on informal deliberation technologies, formal software programs, state-based efforts, and deliberative technology pedagogies.

Marcin Lewiński and Dina Mohammed begin by considering how networked media hosted informal argumentation during the Arab Spring. They note that communication tools intentionally designed to do one thing are often repurposed for other ends. Thus, during the upheaval in Egypt, the intended commercial and social functions of YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter were used instead for deliberative argumentation and social mobilization. Lewiński and Mohammed suggest, in a deft reversal of Habermas' colonization thesis, that this is a "colonization of the colonizers" which has considerable potential for extending deliberation. Their analysis of the conversation surrounding one Facebook user's status updates illustrates the potential for informal deliberation technologies.

Tim van Gelder takes a different direction, arguing that deliberation technologies should be conceived as specific software platforms capable of facilitating—and even improving—deliberation. Yet, he cautions, the history of such formal deliberation technologies does not inspire much optimism, caught as they are in a core tension between structure and participation. Van Gelder documents his efforts to generate a deliberation technology, *YourView*, which uses sophisticated datamining and gameification techniques to reward the epistemic virtues associated with good deliberative practice. Drawing lessons from his past involvement in building software, van Gelder identifies one fertile field of technology capable of cultivating a stronger culture of critical discussion.

Shawn Powers and Will Youmans suggest in their contribution that focusing on deliberation technology would give international broadcasters, like the Voice of America (VOA), renewed purpose. International broadcasters played a crucial role in circulating information during the Cold War, when censorship in Communist countries constrained the flow of news. This mission appears less crucial in an era of information abundance. What is necessary now, as Powers and Youmans argue, are creative efforts on the part of international broadcasters to stimulate public deliberation. They document two instances—the VOA's "Middle East Voices" and the Al Jazeera network's "Somalia Speaks"—of international broadcasters using their resources to craft proto-deliberation technologies and call on international broadcasters to focus their efforts on expanding similar efforts.

Finally, Alessandra Beasley Von Burg, Ron Von Burg, Gordon R. Mitchell, and Allan Loudon explain how the opportunities that deliberation technologies provide can be actualized through sustained pedagogical efforts to develop citizens as competent deliberators familiar with internetworked tools. Drawing on their multi-year experience with the Ben Franklin Transatlantic Fellows (BFTF) Summer Institute, which draws students from Eurasia and the United States to the campus of Wake Forest University for an intensive summer workshop, they argue that students benefit from a curriculum oriented around citizenship practices in a networked age. Von Burg et al identify how BFTF students learn to think of networked media not just as a site for socialization but a site for deliberation, a lesson that ripples outwards when students returned to their home countries. This contribution serves as a stark reminder that the conversation about deliberation technology must involve discussions beyond the hard(ware) and soft(ware) digital divide, for deliberation is a rhetorical art that must be learned.

Conversations about deliberation and technology span many centuries and many disciplines. We hope that the framing of "deliberation technology" provides a new rubric

to further stimulate interventions capable of strengthening democratic practice. These four contributions offer unique directions for the future of deliberation technology, but there are surely many other avenues worth pursuing and we look forward to the continuing conversation about them.

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