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The Impact of Social Media in Modern Societies: Highlighting New Ideological Barriers, Geostrategic Divisions and Future Prospects

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Abstract - Social media development worldwide is contributing in spreading information among people but it is even creating tensions between States. This research paper will analyse the current status of social media in three countries: Russia, China and Iran. The choice of analysing these countries is due to the creation of national social media in order to supply population's demand of being netizens. In some cases, as in Russia, national social have the ambition to be used among the neighbour countries.

Abstract - *Lo sviluppo dei social media in scala globale gioca un duplice ruolo; è sia un importante strumento per diffondere l'informazione che fonte di tensione tra i diversi paesi. Questo research paper analizzerà lo stato dei social media in tre paesi: Russia, Cina ed Iran. La scelta di analizzare questi tre paesi è dovuta alla creazione di social media nazionali in modo tale da rispondere alla richiesta dei propri cittadini di essere netizens. In alcuni casi, come in Russia, il social media nazionale avrà anche l'ambizione di essere utilizzato dai paesi limitrofi.*

Introduction

During the Women of the World (WOW) festival at the Southbank Centre, *Malala Yousafzai* said: “my message to every teenager that it (*social network*) is a great way for you to raise the issues that children are facing, of child trafficking [...] Don't use it just to post pictures and then comment on it and get likes or followers. [...] Teenagers should use these resources in a good way as a source of highlighting the problems that women are facing” (Sanghani 2014).

Furthermore, according to the United Nations, Internet use is a right known as the *right to broadband*. The *right to broadband* gives to people the possibility to exercise their rights to *Freedom of expression and opinion* and several other fundamental rights. Therefore, following this definition, it is possible to introduce the point of view of Prof. Sayed Khatab and Prof. Gary Bouma; "*International Law in the United Nations' International Law, [...] has been claimed, by many, as a product of only Western democracy*" (Khatab 2007). Probably, in this sentence is rooted the explanation to state the different approaches and ways to manage social media by *Western* and *Eastern* countries.

Online communities are playing an increasingly important role, giving birth to new expressions to define people networking: netizens, cyber-citizens (Hauben et al. 2007). Communication, links and information sharing are rooted on a third dimension that is shaping people's everyday life. And, according to a vast study in literature, netizens and their habits are reshaping social, political, economic and legal aspects of human life and human organization. In fact, through social media, netizens "inform, mobilize, entertain, create communities, increase transparency, and seek to hold governments accountable" (Ghannam 2011). Nonetheless, the sociologist Guido Martinotti, even if he was optimistic concerning the impact that social networks have on socialization processes, remarked that the possibility of "creating communities" occurs where a "physical" community already exists (Martinotti 2011). Martinotti describes social networks as a double-edged sword, being social networks a sort of "society without a body" and not a "virtual community".

Furthermore, in order to better understand this study, it is important to take into account also that these "societies without a body" are very heterogeneous because of endogenous and exogenous elements. In fact, it is important to highlight how social media have a different role in every part of the world because of several

factors, as cultural and political reasons, (Internet) literacy or Internet access. It seems that social networking is a main factor in reshaping daily aspects throughout the world; to demonstrate the new barriers 2.0, it is important to have an overview on social media worldwide. In fact, by definition, Internet should “breaks down barriers” (Berinsky 2016); however, some countries worldwide do not guarantee to their citizens a complete freedom of broadcasting. In particular, China, Iran and Russia, will be the samples of this research and their relation with the Western social media will be the key factor to establish how they are addressing internal and external policies. FilterNet, an expression indicating all the different types of censorship applied to Internet by dictatorial governments, has central role in limiting freedom of expression and information. The choice to have a focus on China, Iran and Russia is due to the fact that several virtual messages calling for democracy and rule of law are addressed to these countries from bloggers, civil society and human rights’ activists (Bremmer 2010), and also to the fact that these countries have an increasing important role in geopolitics and economics, with a powerful sphere of influence on the neighbor countries.

For these reasons, the relation between these three countries – and their influence on the international scenario – and social network is a key element to imagine how they could develop their importance on the media sector as well. Social networking is contributing in shifting power from governments to the civil society, to netizens, to journalists, and activists. Therefore, it is clear that this historical phase in reshaping information and communication channels creates several problems to autocratic regimes.

1. China: The Great Firewall

Today, Western public opinion speaks about the “Great Firewall of China” (Steimle

2015): China has a strict control on Internet usage, blocking several accesses to many Western social media. On the model of Western countries, even China has a formal statement done to preserve rights and responsibilities of Internet users. Legitimization is a typical characteristic of autocratic regimes to justify and to make their own policies respectable. If rights and freedom of information are *de facto* strongly limited in China, *de jure* there is a formal document opened to free flows of ideas through the network.

The statute “guarantees the citizens' freedom of speech on the Internet as well as the public's right to know, to participate, to be heard, and to oversee [the government] in accordance with the law [...] within Chinese territory, the Internet is under the jurisdiction of Chinese sovereignty”.

It is easy to deduce how *de facto* things work differently: the expression “Internet is under the jurisdiction of Chinese sovereignty” legitimizes the Chinese government to legislate and to regulate Internet without limits and with more political criteria than the legal one.

There are 618 million Internet users in China but they cannot use, according to the law, the most famous American-Western social media.

Social networks like *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Instagram*, platforms such as *Google+*, *Youtube* or *Snapchat*, are banned by Chinese government. According to the journal *Foreign Affairs*, Internet liberalization in China could even produce externalities on Chinese people's concept of democracy. For example, through social networks, Chinese people reading about “freedoms” of others, could start demanding the same freedom for themselves. The outcome is that Chinese citizens could start realizing the democracy and political freedom they do not yet have (Bremmer 2015), and start demanding political systems similar to the democratic one.

Furthermore, in the economic transition from communism to capitalism, because of the emerging role of new and stronger autocrats/capitalists, social media market could be dominated by people having links with the regime. In fact, to oppose Western social media's market – even due to the increasing important role of market competition in a globalized economy - China developed its own one. This dangerous scenario is analogous with what is happening in the countries where Western social media play an increasing important role in facing the “right of information” issue. In fact - during an interview with the authors of this research paper - Prof. Pascal Guenée, Director of the *Institut Pratique du Journalisme Paris-Dauphine*, highlighted how the private sector is getting always more involved in deciding which contents should be visible on social media and which not, creating a new challenge in assuring the freedom of information that, in the past, was one of the prerogatives of the public sphere. This point will be better explained in this same research through the case of the moderation policy adopted by *Facebook*.

Under a provocative perspective, the best way to win this “media battle” and to preserve the Chinese social media market from Western media infiltrations is to dominate the domestic market with a product made by China itself. This action could be interpreted as the intention to dominate the internal market – and to maintain a stronger control on the internal flux of information/communications -, but also as the ambition to expand Chinese influence abroad.

According to the *Encyclopedia of Social Media and Politics*, the decision to censor Western social media in China is also a security issue: reducing the contacts between autochthonous and other people, it is also easier to discourage virtual anonymous conversations in order to minimize the possibility of importing weapons or dangerous materials into the country. Furthermore, according to other studies, 90% of terrorist activity on Internet today takes place on social networks, where –

thanks to the possibility of safeguarding their identities -, international criminals can share any kind of information among them (Weimann 2012).

At this point, it is interesting to investigate the emergence of social media users in China. In fact, China benefits from two important inputs stimulating netizens' emergence: Chinese migration from rural to urban area; people have the need to continue to be linked; one-child generation is synonymous of loneliness; this input stimulates people to look for virtual relations (Crampton 2011).

According to the *Chinese Business Review*, the usage in China of Social Media is one of the most intense in the world; even higher than countries as the United States or Japan.

For each Western social network, in China there is an equivalent one. In this way, Chinese government could eradicate from population the curiosity to explore another media, reducing competition with a foreign social media to minimum levels. It is interesting to compare Western and Chinese social media to understand censorship pursued by the Chinese government, based exclusively on contents.

Youtube is really similar to *Youku*, or *Tudou*. On these platforms it is possible to upload, share or watch videos. Often, these kinds of medias are substitutes for television. It is possible to follow or to watch every kind of video. Through this action, promoting internal customs and gossip, Chinese people could avoid to be influenced by Western customs. *Twitter* meets its equivalent on *Sina Weibo*; they both share the emerging interest for micro-blogging. Users can follow friends, share messages or type messages no longer than 140-character. *Facebook* is substituted by *RenRen*, *QZone*, *Kaixin001* or *Douban*.

Another issue linked to the social media listed above, concerns a further presence of contents with the governmental print: the "50 Cents Party". The "50 Cents Party"

(Cook 2011) is a group of users paid by the Chinese Communist Party (the dominating party in China) to support governmental topics online. This group of users manipulates the public opinion through propagandistic messages. On *Youtube* circulates a video (entitled: 「五毛」開會視頻曝光 (官方视频)) showing officials in the Province of Hubei training commentators to support the government online. In 2008, David Bandurski of Hong Kong University highlighted the presence of 280.000 paid web commentators; this data shows a lack of freedom of expression, because, with the governmental intervention even on the discussion online, netizens could damage their ability to elaborate a critical opinion.

Therefore, even with all the limits imposed by the Chinese government, the Asian giant is still an interesting market for Western companies operating on the 2.0. market. It is important to state that “West” is not necessary synonymous of democracy or fundamental rights; as history teaches, “Western” is also synonymous of ambition, capitalism, desire to enlarge countries’ spheres of influence and the art of finding compromises. The following example answers a provocative question: what happens when the Western Social Network follows the “Eastern regime”?

According to the *Washington Times*, Liao Yiwu, “one of the most prominent Chinese dissidents” - actually exiled in Germany - had an issue with *Facebook* and the Chinese government (Yu 2015).

Liao Yiwu’s posted on *Facebook* a picture representing Chinese dissidents protesting in Stockholm against Mo Yan, 2012 Nobel Literature Prize laureate famous for supporting the Chinese government.

In a satirical way, Liao Yiwu covered the faces of the protesters with a little portrait of Mao Zedong, defined by the *Washington Times* as the former dictator of China.

Most of all the Western social media accepted the photo published by Liao Yiwu defining it as in line with the Internet decency standards.

Non-mainstream, *Facebook* has been the only social network deciding to ban Mr. Lao's picture, inviting the Chinese dissident to respect *Facebook* standards in the future.

Mr.Lao reports that this is not the first time that *Facebook* censored information that could be helpful in condemning the Chinese Government's actions; the most evident example concerns the censorship of clips showing the immolation of a Tibetan Buddhist monk.

Tsering Woesser, Tibetan activist and blogger, denounced *Facebook*, saying that it is becoming like a "Chinese website" (Francis 2014). If it is true that some images could be really cruel, disturbing a part of users, it is also true that under a social point of view it is possible to denounce and spread information related to abuses and lack in democracies, because information and people's reactions are the only way to change things.

According to Mr.Lao, this moderation policy adopted by *Facebook* (and its CEO, Mark Zuckerberg), is a strategy to penetrate the Chinese market; a strategy to be seen as "in line with the requirements of the regime". Matteo Mecacci, from the International Campaign for Tibet's President, declared: "the existence of freedom of expression on any media can be fully assessed only when social and political activism is taken into account."

Remarking the exhortation of Malala Yousafzai, social media usage could be a really efficient way to highlight important political issues: the Tibetan repressions from the Chinese government are a perfect example.

Concerning the role of *Facebook* in censoring the immolation clips, it is possible to discuss another point: currently is information shaped and addressed by social networks? In this case, it could be dangerous to suggest a “right of information” regulated by private enterprises and their moderation policies. If today colossuses such as *Facebook* and *Twitter* decide which information to spread and which information to censor and to discourage, it is possible to foresee another scenario: a scenario where the limits of information are decided by private enterprises.

Another big international issue concerns the increasing power of social media in deciding who can speak and who cannot. Jeffrey Rosen, one of the most prominent legal commentators, affirms that *Facebook* has more power in determining who can speak than any Supreme Court justice, any king or any president (Heins 2014). Therefore, it is possible to deduce how dangerous it could be if powerful social media cooperates with authoritarian regimes.

It is crucial to highlight that this issue does not concern exclusively to authoritarian regimes. In fact, a new challenge for the freedom of speech and information is related to the intensification of the historical binomial “public sector – private sector”. In fact, concerning the moderation policies of social media, which is the criteria to follow in deciding which is a “violent content” with the goal of promoting social awareness (as Mr. Lao said about the Tibetan immolation case) and which is violence for its own sake? Furthermore, can a Facebook employee decide which a hate speech is – i.e. with racist/dangerous contents -, assuming the prerogative of refereeing that is typical of an inquisitorial system? And at which point public authorities should intervene/interfere and in which way?

It is essential to clarify that the transition of some socialization and interaction’s spheres to non-physical platforms and through private channels – as Facebook – is

creating several issues and challenges that concern all social media users and governments, without any geographical discrimination.

2. Iran

2.1. Social Networks as a way to enlarge communication and develop international relations

The nature and forms of Iranian's censorship have changed over time, further becoming repressive and entrenched in the Iranian social and political life. Deibert and Rohozinski's model of multigenerational censorship (Carrieri et al. 2013), which they first applied to the Russian case, can also be used to describe this evolution of the information content controls in cyberspace in Iran. Indeed, there are three generations of control, which can exist simultaneously:

- first-generation controls which are limited to restricting access to specific websites and are part of the pervasive regime of national Internet filtering in Iran. Sometimes, they can also recur to physical monitoring by the state security, for example when the Iranian Internet cafés are put under surveillance by the police;
- second-generation controls which aim to create such normative environment to legalize the information controls. In order to do so, the approaches can be very open, for example when the Iranian regime has enforced the Press Law to make strict controls over online activities and to stifle dissent when needed. Or, on the contrary, they can be subtler, for example when the Iranian State allowed "just-in-time" blocking of Secure Socket Layer (SSL) traffic in February 2012;
- third-generation controls which differentiate themselves from the two previous layers of control in their aim of "changing minds" and promoting the

national ideology in cyberspace. While Iran's National Information Network was created as a national isolated "cyber-zone" to safeguard the Iranian values, the government has also aggressively promoted those same values on the Web through the actions of the so-called "Internet brigades". These hacking collectives, active in Iran since 2000, promote national narrative and attack dissenting ideologies through their online campaigns in order to deny any web-based mobilization of the opposition. In particular, the Iranian Cyber Army (ICA), has successfully defaced sites like Twitter marking its page with the ICA's logo and leaving pro-government messages (Carrieri et al 2013).

However, there is still little information about ICA's origins, structure and its relationship with the government: whether the latter tacitly supports it or instead directly created it.

What is certain nowadays is the fact that the current President of Iran, Mr. Hasan Rouhani is very active on social networks, following the examples of several Western leaders, who frequently publish contents online concerning their own works: Obama, Renzi, Hollande, Merkel. All of them have a Facebook account where they reduce distances with their own electors and followers. Furthermore, international leaders could use social media to communicate with their peers.

Since his election, Rouhani had two Twitter accounts; one in English and the other one in Farsi. Having an English account could be considered as the desire to communicate with Western leaders, where English is the most used language for number of native speakers and for international relations. Even Javad Zarif, the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, has a Facebook account.

According to Melissa Etehad, Rouhani's administration uses these platforms to break up barriers which make Iran an isolated country. As highlighted during an interview with the authors of this research paper, Melissa Etehad emphasizes that this political strategy of using social media by Iranian ruling class is a way to communicate with the international community: therefore, it is easy to deduce the increasing important role of social network even on the political debate.

The most interesting contradiction concerning the fact that the Iranian ruling class uses Western social media, is that Facebook and Twitter are considered illegal platforms. It is important to remark that this form of social media censorship is typical to several authoritarian countries, where the access to these platforms is intermittent – with censorships *ad hoc*, as in the case of Egypt during the 2011 Egyptian protests (Duthel 2015) - or permanently interdicted.

2.2. Banning social networks and long-term outcomes: an unsustainable prospective

The Islamic Guidance Minister Ali Jannati said that it will be impossible to ban Western social media forever.

Why is Iran trying to obstruct Facebook diffusion? After the presidential elections in 2009, several Iranians protested and organized manifestations through *Twitter*. It became a way to communicate to the entire world Iran's lack of democracy. Furthermore, as stated by Brynnar Swenson, "Internet-based social media sites have been increasingly used to organize political activism across the globe" (Swenson 2012). Moreover, through *Facebook*, Iranian people could absorb Western customs, not always in line with the Islamic ones. In the globalization era, social media are playing an increasingly important role in homogenizing cultures. According to a study made by Gallup, interviewing samples of people in 143

different countries, Iran is one of the countries with the highest percentage of religious people in the world. 83% of the Iranian population declares that religion has an important role in their daily life (Crabtree et al. 2009). Therefore, it is possible to presume a direct correlation between the desire of preserving this percentage of religiosity and the censorship through the legal system of the Western social media, where the percentage of religious people is in the average in the lower part of the list.

This correlation has been studied by a group of researchers of the Department of Family Medicine of the University of California. The study focuses especially on women because they are more sensitive to the Iranian social norms and restrictions (Young 2014). The researchers analyzed 253 Iranian women, selecting them “through snowball nongovernmental organizations in November 2011”. After the selection, these women had to answer to a survey concerning their *Facebook* usage. The outcome highlights how women habitually using *Facebook* had fewer inhibitions in having *Facebook* pictures not wearing a veil compared to the women with fewer interests in social networking. Other parameters analyzed were age and education; results also show that older people are more religious and veil wearing. Therefore, the conclusion of the researchers concerns how “social networking technologies can affect attitudes and behaviors internationally”. Thanks to this research of the University of California, it is possible to deduce that if the young population in Iran starts to be more sensitive to Western media, Iran has a further reason to be afraid; in the future more Iranian netizens will want to network free and without censorship. Anyway, this process reminds to the unveiled decades, particularly to the 60s and the 70s, when Iranian customs were much less conservative than today and more “Westernized” (Minai 1981). Part of the older generation of Iranians who participated in the research of the University of California experienced that particular period of the Iranian history, highlighting a

sort of diffidence to the possibility of coming back to those less conservative decades.

An example comes from the viral video of Pharrel Williams, "Happy". People all around the world recorded themselves dancing to "Happy" by Williams and uploaded the video on social networks. Soleimani, Taravati, Neda Motameni, Afshin Sohrabi, Bardia Moradi, Roham Shamekhi, Sepideh: these are the names of seven people who recorded their "Happy" video and shared it online. The group was arrested in May 2014, guilty of importing in Iran the decadence and vulgarity of the Western customs. These people were also forced to confess their remorse for the video through the State television, a media channel easier to manipulate for the regime. In fact, the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting is a central tool for propaganda and repression in Iran.

Netizens replied through another *Twitter* campaign, #freehappyiranians, asking to release the group. Also the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran highlights the importance of improving freedom of expression, condemning the repression of a group of young men and women that were just enjoying their youth.

Therefore, it could be reductive to limit Iranian government diffidence to social media just analyzing the effect that free networking could have on religion and cultural behaviors. Iran had several security problems, like other Middle Eastern States, due to the so called "Twitter Uprising". The "Twitter Uprising" took place in Iran in June 2009, during the Presidential elections (El-Nawawy et al. 2012). According to Philip Howards, this cyber-activism phenomenon is "the act to using the Internet to advance a political cause that is difficult to advance offline".

During the presidential elections, in which Mohamoud Ahmadinejad beat the ex-Prime Minister Hossein Mousavi, people started protesting, highlighting the gap

between the government supporters and the reformists. The reformists, led by Mousavi, started being brutally repressed by the military. The Iranian government, after the results announcing Ahmadinejad's victory, imposed a media blackout to avoid the diffusion of a scandal concerning the bloody riots between reformists and government supporters.

However, the government did not have the possibility to avoid networking; people, through *Youtube* and *Twitter*, uploaded images, video, showing the civil massacre. A video showing Neda Sultan, an activist brutally killed by soldiers, became the symbol of the regime's repression (Milani 2009), giving birth to slogans such as "We are all Neda".

To show the increasingly important role of social networking in determining information, it is important to reflect on the Iranian government reaction; the regime uploaded a message declaring that Neda was killed by other activists. The fact that Iran replied to the tweet posting another message on the social, shows how they, implicitly, recognized the importance in communication of the Western media. In the book "The New Censorship", Joel Simon describes how Iran used Internet to fight protesters. Iranian military created *Facebook* accounts, with fake identities, to keep in contact with activists and to imprison them (Naim et al. 2015)

Fatemeh Keshavarz, an Iranian professor, said that "social media made the Iranian citizens feel empowered and in some way in control of their lives. It also helped the western world, particularly the United States, to see that the Iranian society was far from the machines of ideology blinded by faith and ready to blow up the world."

In 2012, the Iranian government established many bodies to filter Internet contents; the Supreme Council of Cyberspace, the Cyber Army and the Cyber Police are just some examples of Iran's fight against Western social media. Therefore, the

hypocrisy of the Iranian ruling class, which publicizes themselves through social networks but interdicts Iranian people's right to free information on Internet, is more clear and worsens over time.

In 2015, the Iranian institutions working for censorship worked a lot to censor images and messages coming from Australia. Australia has been the host country of the Asian Cup 2015. Several women of Iranian origin living in Australia went to see the hottest match, Iran vs. Iraq. In Iran, women are not allowed to attend football matches because they are not allowed to be in the same place with a group of men. Gissou Nia, Director for The International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, declared that "mixed attendance at sport events is un-Islamic and that it threatens public order". In fact, the Iran regime tried to ban all the images of women at the stadium. Of course, they could not ban all the images of women at the stadium passing through social media. Iranian women, thanks to social media, can now which is the situation of peers living in Australia. Through the hashtag #TeamMelli, the name of the Iranian football team, it is possible to see expatriated Iranian women supporting the national team with flags painted on chests, faces, arms. Thanks to social media, it is possible to show how these women found gender equality in another country.

2.3. How is it possible to avoid censorship?

Twitter and *Facebook* are used by nearly 20 million of Iranians. Typing "buy VPN" on Google it is possible to obtain two million results. VPN is the acronym of "virtual private networking", a service giving the possibility to have a free access on Internet. It is strategically adopted also in China and Russia.

According to the country government, 7 out of 10 young Iranians have access to Internet thanks to VPN (O' Neill 2015).

According to the BBC Persian journalist Hadi Nili, even the Iranian government uses VPNs to broadcast without interferences. Nariman Gharib, researcher and activists, tells that Iran owns more than 70 percent of VPNs in Iran.

On the other side, the government constantly develops new strategies to block VPNs. "Tor" (another anti-censor system) was an example of how sophisticated the technological repressions of the Great Persian Firewall is. In January 2011, in only 48 hours, the government started banning and blocking Tor and other systems to avoid censorship. Even the computers sold in Iran have cracked versions of Windows and anti-virus programs developed to avoid the steep costs of VPN or Tor; in this way, the Iranian censorship system can easily penetrate the system, blocking free navigation.

Another issue concerns the cost of VPNs; those systems are quite expensive. Therefore, it is possible to state that a division exists between people who can buy the anti-censor programs and poorer people that will decide to broadcast within the limits imposed by the government. This situation creates a negative gap between population; on one side there is a richer part of the society, with a larger possibility of buying anti-censorship programs and, therefore, with the possibility of benefiting from a higher plurality of information and contests. On the other side, there is the poor part of the society, with less capacity to buy VPNs and, consequently, following implicitly the diktats of the regime. The issue of having a society splits in two parts, with a group which is educated and more free and the other group more vulnerable to propaganda and therefore more distant from a modern concept of freedom of expression, does not respect the fundamental human right of freedom of speech.

Anyway, in a society where there is a massive control on citizens' online activities, (a supposed) freedom of speech and information could also be a potential double edged sword. In fact, through the monitoring of such simple social media activities as the "re-twit" function on Twitter, public authorities could have a quick database of users sharing non-mainstream ideas and contents that could be defined as "suspicious" by the regime. In fact, if Western social media are contrasted in several authoritarian regimes, probably they are also very well monitored by public authorities in order to have a general overview of which the dominant ideas are and which actors are involved in.

As said at the beginning of this article, freedom of information is an extension of freedom of expression and it is disciplined by international law. If just one part of the society has the benefits of this freedom thanks to its own richness, there are aggravating circumstances that need to be solved in order to avoid an alienation of the most vulnerable part of the society.

2.4. The development of Halai social media

According to the Wall Street Journal, Iran is developing a local internet network to restrict the influence of non-Islamic culture. A social networking determined by *Halai* – religious customs – is not a utopia and it will restrict the access to Iranian people to a massive number of foreign sites. *SalamWorld*, *Muslimsocial.com*, *Muxlim.com*, are an attempt to supply the population's need of broadcasting in a sustainable, Muslim way. Salafi scholars (religious puritans) and Saudi Arabians offered a clear endorsement of the *SalamWorld* development. *SalamWorld* filters pornography, terrorist activity, and human right violations, in order to respect Islamic values.

Social networks following *halai* rules are a big resource for the Islamic world; in

fact, a problem of the Islamic world was the possibility to find new ways for the Muslim communities' cohesion. The *ummah*, the spiritual concept reassuming the entire Muslim community, experienced geographical divisions, and linguistic barriers. Social media could cross those limits giving the possibility to the members of the *ummah* to interact continuously among themselves, allowing the entire Muslim community to be more unified and linked.

For this reason, social media could be a richness to explore for Iran, as a way to intensify an "e-ummah"; this strategy adds more credibility to the efforts to stop the penetration of Western social media, which, on the other hand, would contribute to spread other customs and values, such as European or Americans ones.

As in the West, social media contributes in spreading icons and symbols to follow, so does the Islamic social media; the Islamic social media helps to spread icons and symbols of the Muslim Diaspora to other continents (Harvey 2014).

3. Russia

3.1. Russian Model for Internet Control

Russia's internal regime is evolving, and evolving dramatically. The Russian government has turned to Internet policy as a means of supporting this evolution and "sell" its autocratic model of governance to the Russian public while stifling internal and external sources of dissent. The Russian regime is using new tools and mechanisms of control, sometimes harsh and repressive. Thus, it provides a useful policy model for semi-authoritarian states attempting to restrict Internet freedoms throughout Central Asia and beyond (Niabet 2015).

In a report published by *Freedom House, Karlekar and Cook* (2009) the authors outline three broad categories of Internet control mechanisms:

- “Obstacles to access (including blocking applications or technologies, infrastructural and economic barriers, etc.)
- Limits on content (including filtering software, blocking of websites, censorship and self-censorship, online propaganda, etc.)
- Violations of user rights (including legal restrictions, surveillance, legal prosecution, harassment, etc.)”
- In Russia today there is no evidence of specific efforts on the part of the authorities to keep citizens offline (first category: obstacles to access). Russian control practices fall into the last two categories including
- “Censorship and self-censorship prompted by the information culture and political traditions of the country
- Control over mainstream media leading to restrictions of the available content and a negative framing of the Internet
- Threats and intimidation of individuals by the authorities” (Ognyanova 2010).

Later on in our research, examples and discussion of each of these three important points will be provided. Russia presents an important case study in part precisely because the state is so successful in establishing its influence on the Web without resorting to extensive content filtering techniques.

3.2. Russian Public Opinion Responses

Several researchers have suggested that cultural practices regarding information should be taken into account while talking about media control. In their analysis of Russia and censorship on the media, Simons and Strovsky (2006) state that

content in Russian media has always been affected by cultural traditions – and censorship and self-censorship are “an embodiment of these traditions”.

The work of another researcher, De Smaele (2007), goes in the same direction. While investigating the media climate in post-communist Russia, it defines two dimensions of information culture strictly linked to government control over online media. The first one deals with the gap between universalistic claims and particularistic reality; the second with the tension between individualism and collectivism. Focusing on the latter dimension we can remark that Russian culture is oriented towards the collectivistic ideal. Collectivistic values are thus invoked in Putin’s speeches through the ideal of a “Strong Russia” and the stress on patriotism and social solidarity. This has an effect on the freedom of information and the perceived role of the media: while individualistic cultures demand to be fully informed by objective, independent journalism, collectivistic societies value loyalty above all else. Media are viewed as instrumental: they are tools in the hands of the current government. Individuals are conditioned to see information as necessarily shaped to serve a social purpose. Selective filtering of the news that reaches the people is not only tolerated, it is expected. A survey conducted in February 2015 by the *Center for Global Communication* along with the *Russian Public Opinion Research Center* shows that almost half (49%) of all Russians believe that information on the Internet needs to be censored, even though this percentage varies substantially by Internet use. 57% of Internet non-users believe information online needs to be censored by the government as compared to a significantly lower 43% of heavy Internet users.

Russians were also asked two questions about what types of online content specifically should be censored or blocked by the Russian government. Firstly, the top three most cited types of content were copyrighted material (59%), followed distantly by foreign news media websites (45%), other foreign websites (38%) and

materials promoting ethnic or racist hatred (37%). Secondly, the choice were to be made among: 1) the video by Pussy Riot, 2) a blogger that calls for regime change in Russia, (3) a social network group that is used for organization of protests against the government, 4) a pornographic website with homosexual content, 5) the website for the group that exposed the blacklist of blocked websites. There is large majority support for the government to censor a website with homosexual content (59%). A plurality of Russians agree that a social network group that is used for organizing anti-government protests (46%) should be censored, following by the video by the anti-government female punk rock collective Pussy Riot (45%), the website that exposed the government's blacklist of blocked websites (44%) and the bloggers that call for regime change (43%).

3.3 Understanding Russian Social Media: VKontakte and Odnoklassniki

Russia's social networking boom began in 2008. In 2012 Russia was estimated as having the 5th largest social networking population globally (Harvey 2014). In terms of time per user, Russians are the heaviest social networkers worldwide: in fact, social networking occupies 40% of Russians' online time. The average public is young (75% between the ages of 18 and 24), educated (57% are university graduates) and enjoy a stable income.

In Russia, native social networks exceed Facebook and Twitter (with their mere 8 million and 3 million Russian users, respectively) for total amount of users. Two social networking sites in particular, *VKontakte* and *Odnoklassniki* have the largest population of Russian Internet users. Before discussing the characteristics of the different actors in the social media landscape, one thing to bear in mind is that the ultimate control of many of them is in the hands of the business magnate *Alisher Usmanov*. He is one of Vladimir Putin's "oligarchs," as businessmen in Moscow with deep ties to the Kremlin are called. According to the January 2015 *Forbes*

website data, the oligarch is Russia's richest man and the world's 58th richest person. He is the main investor of Digital Sky Technologies, an investment company which holds a big share of *vKontakte*, the majority of *Mail.ru* (*Odnoklassniki* and *MoiMir*) and significant minority interests in *Facebook* and *Twitter*. Therefore, it is important to state the dangers caused by a media tool strongly influenced by the relationship between politics and business. Similarly to the other autocratic regimes, the quality of the information and the freedom of expression could be strongly influenced by the regime.

Launched in 2007 by its founder *Pavel Durov*, *VK* is now the largest Russian social network in Europe and the second most visited website in Russia, after the search engine *Yandex*. It is the 8th most popular social networking site in the world. As of January 2015, *VK* has an average of 60 million daily users (Smith 2015). This social network works much like *Facebook* or other Western social networks: it allows users to message each other publicly or privately, to create groups, publish pages and events, share and tag images, audio and video. It is available in several languages, but it is especially popular among Russian-speaking users, particularly in Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. In the context of our research it can be interesting to acknowledge that *VK* has also a particular function: the synchronization with other social networks, which means that any news published on the *VK* wall will appear on *Facebook* or *Twitter*. Moreover, removing news in the *VK* will remove it from other social networks. Not vice versa: it is like a metaphor, the mirror of the long history of conflicts between Russia and the US, where one culture tries to influence the other one, looking for a solitary dominion.

On the other hand, *Odnoklassniki* ranks at the second most popular Russian social media after *VK*. Its monthly audience is 39.7 million people. It is a website which focuses on sharing photographs with your "odnoklassniki" (schoolmates). Founded in 2006, it preexists *vKontakte* and the Russian version of *Facebook* and is part of

the *Mail.ru* platform. It is quite like *VK* in its features, but the average age of the users clearly shifts toward the over-30 segment, as opposed to the younger target of its rival. Active users have been trending downwards as people migrate to other platforms such as *Facebook* and *vKontakte*, despite its attempts to retain them by adding features which are popular in other Russian social media sites (games, streaming media and video hosting). It is possible to see how difficult it is to contrast the primacy on the market of a Western social media such as *Facebook*; therefore, as a positive point, it is important to state that this competition is like an engine for innovation. *Odnoklassniki* is a sample symbolizing the importance of pluralism; if on one side there is the attempt of the regime to control its own population, on the other side, it avoids a sort of new “media neocolonialism” ruled by the American social networks.

3.4. Recent legislation and censorship

“*You’d better watch out, Internet. Vladimir Putin is coming for you.*” warns Terrence McCoy (2014) from the *WashingtonPost*.

At a meeting with media executives in St. Petersburg on April 24th 2014 Vladimir Putin said his government will impose greater control over information on the Internet warning that it is “CIA project, which is still developing as such.” To better face this threat, Putin added that Russia must “fight for its interests” online. This comment, however, represents just one of the latest moves that Putin has taken against the Web since he was reelected Russia’s president in 2012. In fact, communication, information and media, have the power of canalizing ideas and ideologies that can have unpredictable effects on the internal and external relations of a country. For example, during the Sochi Olympic Games, several activists from civil society and governments highlighted Putin’s anti-gay policies through social media (Peccia 2014). Moreover, the fact that LGBT activism is very present on

Western social media is perceived as a threat by Putin administration. In fact, on June 30, 2013, the lower house of the Parliament passed a measure into law that “ban[ned] the promotion of homosexual propaganda and mandate[d] stiff fines and jail terms for violators”, labeling as “illegal” even the distribution of gay rights-materials (even on social media) (Glasionov et al. 2013). This example gives the idea of a sort of “indirect cybernetic battle” among ideologies, where social media and information are not just the “weapons” to fight the conflict but also the final prize.

In 2012, the Russian State *Duma* passed a bill that became known as “the Internet blacklist law”. The legislation, allegedly meant to protect minors from harm, allows Russian authorities to block websites containing extremist materials, child pornography, information related to illegal drug use, suicide techniques, and other sensitive subjects. The law came under international criticism from organizations that saw it as a major threat to online freedom of expression (according to *Reporters Without Borders*). Notably what is objected it is the lack of transparency with regard to the blacklisted sites and the procedures used to identify them, as well as the vague definition of “harmful content”. According to the law, taking down a website does not require a court ruling, the decision being made by unnamed “experts”. *Reporters Without Borders* (2012) declares that “the law’s vagueness and inconsistencies render its repressive provisions even more threatening and are encouraging journalists to censor themselves”. Since it is usually difficult to block individual web pages, on several occasions the Internet users in the country lost access to the entire domains of large online platforms. For example, *YouTube* was temporarily inaccessible because of a single antiIslam video blacklisted by the authorities. Therefore, it is possible to argue that sometimes censorship is just a pretext to broadly interpret the law. In the example concerning *YouTube*, using the “Islamic” video as a scapegoat, the regime turned off the entire information flux coming from the rest of the world. Soon after the blacklist law came into effect, the

government started using it to suppress criticism from opposition leaders. During the 2014 Crimea crisis, *Roskomnadzor* blocked a number of websites condemning the state's actions in Ukraine. Among the blacklisted sites were the blogs of prominent critics, including the activist *Alexei Navalny*. At the same time, the authorities also closed several Ukrainian groups on the Russian social network platform *VKontakte*.

Facebook often gets requests from governments all over the world to block content, usually on the basis that it violates local laws. The company publishes semiannual reports recording government requests either for users' data or content restriction. In the first six months of 2014, Facebook said it granted 29 blocking requests in Russia. By comparison, according to *The Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media*, none in the United States.

In the February 2015 survey cited above, Russian public opinion was also asked about the government's primary motivations for adopting the law creating a "blacklist" of international websites and Internet content censored in Russia. Overall, 51% of Russians believe the main motivation of the government is the maintenance of political stability, as opposed to 13% of Russians, who believe the primary motivation is to limit democratic freedoms. A little over one-third of Russians (35%) has never heard or is unaware of "the blacklist law", showing the distance between policies and people, a typical characteristic of autocratic regimes. These percentages change significantly based on frequency of Internet use. For instance, heavy Internet users are more than twice as likely as non-users (18% vs. 8%) to believe that the primary motivation is to limit democratic freedoms. Therefore, it is possible to assume that there is a strong relationship between broadcasting and developing critical thinking.

Moreover, in the last few years, the Federal Assembly passed a number of changes in what we can generally refer to as Russia's Mass Media Law.

Firstly, on October 2014, Putin signed into law amendments limiting foreign ownership of Russian media to 20 percent. The law will enter into effect as of January 1st 2016 and will affect several print and online media outlets as well as television and radio stations. *Vadim Dengin* (2014), one of the authors of the draft law, said in a media interview that the law was due to "events on the Russian border (with Ukraine) and an information assault on the country's leadership."

"The Russian government's obsession to control what is being said about the current crisis in Ukraine and Russia's role in it is spilling into much broader areas," Tanya Cooper said. "But the millions of Russians who will be denied the fundamental right to information from a source of their choice is a huge price to pay. "Russia is a party to both the "European Convention on Human Rights" and the "International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights" (ICCPR), which guarantee freedom of expression. An essential feature of freedom of expression in a democratic society is pluralism, here meaning media pluralism, which is dangerously threatened by this kind of measure.

Secondly, Russian Parliament has approved a law similar to China's that would require Internet operators to store Russian user data in centers within the country. Once data is stored on Russian servers, it will be subject to Russian laws. According to the Kremlin, this law is aimed at "improving the management of personal data of Russian citizens on computer networks" *Agence France-Presse* reported, and those companies which do not comply with the legislation would be blocked from the web. "The ultimate goal is to shut mouths, enforce censorship in the country and shape a situation where Internet business would not be able to exist and function properly," Internet expert and blogger Anton Nossik (2014) told

the Moscow Times of the “data storage” law. This measure could have a chilling effect on a variety of websites, including *Facebook* and *Twitter*, which do not have Russian data centers. In fact, “analysts say the new law will isolate Russians as foreign websites will be required either to store users’ data in Russia, or cease operations in the country,” *The Moscow Times* reported. Moreover, for these foreign companies, relocating servers to Russia may not be worth the investment, says *Karen Kazaryan*, an analyst at the “Russian Association for Electronic Communications”. For example, building data centers could cost companies as large as *Google* and *Facebook* as much as \$200 million, *Kazaryan* estimates, and maintaining six months of data on every user might add \$10 million more a year. Under a pessimistic perspective it is possible to interpret this economic strategy as a way to inhibit the penetration in Russia of these social networks.

An example drawn from recent events could be the fact that the Russian agency has pressured Internet companies for data on Ukrainians who supported the February 2014 ouster of the country’s Kremlin-backed president, Viktor Yanukovich, as reported by *VKontakte* founder Pavel Durov. On April 16th 2014, *Durov* was forced to step down as CEO rather than complying with demands to turn over users’ data (Rothrock 2016). “I no longer have a stake, but I have something more important—a clean conscience and ideals that I’m willing to defend,” Durov wrote on his *VKontakte* page (Khrennikov et al. 2014) soon after leaving.

Thirdly, this new legislation classifies the roughly 30,000 Russian bloggers who have 3,000 or more readers as media outlets, making them and the companies that host them subject to regulation. According to its supporters, the modified law would impose higher quality standards on the information published on the Internet. Russian bloggers and activists, however, have expressed deep concerns about the increasingly strong government control over online content.

Roskomnadzor has notified Western social media platforms *Facebook*, *Gmail* and *Twitter* of the need to register as “information distribution organizers,” citing the Regulator’s Deputy Chief *Maxim Ksenzov*.

Do these regulations concern only Russian citizens, or citizens of any country, who happen to be on Russian territory when accessing the Web? The bare truth is that the answer is not actually written in the federal law. There was no effort to limit the jurisdiction of the *Duma*’s laws and the legitimate sphere of interest of Russia’s FSB (Federal Security Service) neither by the criterion of citizenship, nor by language, nor by geography. If we read *Federal Law 97* as it was actually written and passed, we will notice that it concerns the reception and transmission of anyone’s data without any kind of restrictions. Furthermore, the law’s definition of a blog is also quite broad.

“The owner of a site and (or) particular page of a site on the Internet, on which there is publicly accessible information and which attracts more than 3,000 daily visits from users of the Internet, (henceforth referred to as a “blogger”) is obligated to observe the laws of the Russian Federation, when distributing and using this information, including the distribution of said information on the website or website’s page by other users of the Internet” (Nossik 2014).

3.5 Freedom of Speech & Censorship: Some Relevant Cases

After listing the main changes in Internet legislation over the past few years, we can now consider Russian public opinion’s responses to them.

First of all, we can ask to what extent do Russians think that Internet regulation affects their personal freedom. Thanks to the survey we are using as a reference in this study, we note that a majority of Russian Internet users (59%) feel that they

are not personally impacted by Internet regulation, while 41% believe that they are impacted.

Feeling affected by strong control, are they ready to engage themselves in defense of Internet freedom by means of mass citizen mobilization and protest? In an Internet survey, Russian Internet users were asked to select up to three types of Russian government censorship that may motivate them to action. 40 percent of them overwhelmingly cited as a primary reason a complete ban on the use of the Internet such as exists in North Korea. Unfortunately, at the same time, about one quarter (27%) of all Russian Internet users could not cite any type of Internet censorship or restrictions that would lead them to protest or mobilize in defense of Internet freedom. More interesting for us is the fact that four specific types of Internet restrictions were all mentioned by 7% of Internet users: a) the government being allowed to remove any type of content from the Internet, b) the banning of personal blogs or social media sites of opinion, culture, or opposition, c) the prohibition of nicknames and mandatory registration in online social networks, and d) temporarily shutting off of the Internet in the event of a protest.

Social media play an important role in facilitating protests and civic activism in Russia. These sites become the perfect medium for expression and organization of different marginalized groups, from minorities to political dissidents. Social media have transformed civic activism by allowing users to organize, mobilize, and communicate in real-time with other demonstrators, while generally raising awareness of their actions among other social media users.

For example, the Internet was the main vehicle for spreading the video “Virgin Mother of God, Banish Putin”, a profane public prayer performed by the feminist punk group *Pussy Riot* on the altar of Moscow’s biggest church in 2011. By August 2012, one *YouTube* version had been visited 1,162,007 times receiving 7,774

comments and 8,100 “likes” (Harvey 2014). After members were sentenced to two years in a penal colony, Internet activism helped mobilize international public opinion to show support. The *Twitter*-sphere lit up with pictures and messages of support from around the world using the hashtag *#PussyRiot*. On one hand famous celebrity supporters tweeted their dissent, calling for greater freedom of speech in the country. On the other the International organization Amnesty UK urged its *Twitter* followers to join the demonstrations, posting: “2 years in jail. *#PussyRiot* sentence is a bitter blow for freedom of expression in Russia.” Russian opposition leader *Gary Kasparov* was also arrested after attending pro-dissident demonstrations outside the court in Moscow. Photos of him supposedly being assaulted by police were quickly posted on *Twitter*. “He was not there to protest, simply to attend, and the police cornered him and dragged him into the police van” *Kasparov’s* assistants posted on his *Facebook* wall.

Despite all these efforts and worldwide mobilization, *Oleg Kozyrev*, a Moscow-based opposition blogger and media analyst, is strongly convinced that the *Pussy Riot* video will likely become harder to find online in Russia. “The power structures will try to ensure that these video clips do not appear on at least the main blog platforms and social networks,” *Kozyrev* said. “In all probability, if they find the clips displayed they will appeal to the owners of the social network. And to be honest, I think that these social networks will not refuse. The majority of them will meet them in the middle and will close the pages displaying these clips.” (Balmforth 2012).

Another example of the positive use of Social media as tools for expressing public dissent and promoting civic activism can be traced back to *Alexei Navalny’s* case. The most well-known figure in Russia’s opposition movement, former Yale University World Fellow, he blogged about corruption and corporate malfeasance among Russia’s state elite. His blog, which is fiercely critical of Putin political moves, is one of the most read on the Russian-language Internet. *Roskomnadzor*

blocked it last year because the anti-corruption campaigner was placed under house arrest and banned from using the Internet. In fact, in December 2014 a trial was held to judge him and his brother for an embezzling money case. In the end, the Court gave Alexei a suspended sentence but jailed his brother for three and a half years as part of a measure to repress dissent. Opposition figures say jailing Navalny risked a new wave of protests, so he was being punished through his brother instead. Soon after the ruling was announced it became one of the most hotly discussed issues on *Twitter*. The blogger himself made his opinion on the court's ruling clear: "Of all possible sentences, today's was the most shameful" (Scheib 2014) on the social network platform. Navalny's supporters didn't limit themselves by expressing their dissent through tweets, but they also used the Facebook platform to organize a pro-Navalny rally a few days after the trial. Within hours, the event page drew thousands of "attendances".

However, Russian Internet regulators asked Facebook to block access to it because it called for "an unauthorized mass event". The fact that the page was actually no longer visible to users inside Russia could be considered as a sign of new limits on Facebook's ability to serve as a platform for political opposition movements. "It's a rather unpleasant and surprising behavior by Russian Facebook. I thought they would at least demand a court order rather than rush to block pages as soon as crooks from the *Roskomnadzor* ask" Navalny wrote on his Facebook personal page (Bloom 2014). A former US ambassador to Moscow, Michael McFaul, wrote on his Twitter blog that the block set a "horrible precedent" and that Facebook should correct its "mistake" as soon as possible. Several similar unblocked pages were subsequently set up; it means that implicitly the Social Network tried to fix their previous action.

Moreover, political opponent Nemtsov's case can also serve as suitable example. Friday, February 27 2015, Boris Nemtsov, a Russian opposition leader and former

first deputy prime minister under Boris Yeltsin, went on a prominent Moscow radio station to exhort his fellow citizens to come out to protest President Putin's policies. After the radio emission, on the way back to his home, he was shot dead by an unknown murder. The range of reactions to his death on Social media platforms is wide: disbelief, sadness, glee but also conspiracy theories are circulating. On *Twitter* alone, *#Nemtsov* and *Немцов* soon blast to the top of the list of "trending topics". According to the *Topsy* Social Media data analysis site, almost 5,000 tweets about the politician's death were posted within a single hour on the morning after. On *Vkontakte*, various groups created in memory of *Nemtsov* are attracting more and more followers. Among them, one called on protesters to honor him at an opposition march in St. Petersburg on Sunday, March 1 2015.

In conclusion, the Russian use of new social media (especially social networks) can be viewed as a form of political action "aimed to liberate subjugated knowledge from the repressive grip of the dominant ideology and challenge the traditional understanding of politics in terms of the activities of elected politicians and their administrative advisers". Due to the proliferation of new mass media, it is no longer the Kremlin that formulates Russia's political agenda (Bode et al. 2012). Under these conditions, the power of new social networking lies in their "direct manifestation of social activism" and in opening up new social spaces "to facilitate spontaneous utterances and participation", a function that is in increasing demand in today's Russia.

Conclusion

If on one side there are authoritarian regimes as China, Iran, Russia, trying to develop their own local social media, on the other side there are the United States,

social media leader in the entire Western hemisphere, trying to spread its own influence on other countries.

According to “The Theory of the Globe Scrambled by Social Networks: A New Sphere of Influence 2.0”, the Cold War seems to continue in other ways, for example on social networks (Peccia 2014).

Under a human rights perspective, it is possible to state the problems caused by the lack of freedom to broadcast in the autocratic regimes. It is easier to control the population in this way, preserving the nation’s culture and stability. On the other hand, limiting their free access to online contexts is a limit to pluralism and to the development of critical thinking, which enables the individual to filter the propaganda or the censorship system made by the regime. In fact, if the Nobel laureate Malala Yousafzai highlighted the importance of civil society in focusing the attention on sensitive subjects through social networks, it is also true that it is difficult to live as a rebel in an autocratic country.

Having real democracy as a goal, as highlighted by the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, it means to allow Internet access, hoping in a concrete freedom of expression. Anyway, at this point it is necessary also to question what “a real democracy” is and who decides its definition. In fact, a Beijing Daily commentary said: “The human rights issue is being used by a handful of countries as a pretext and tool to pursue selfish interests, demonize the image of other countries and intervene in their internal affairs”.

Moreover, authoritarian regimes accuse the Western democracies’ leaders of committing to fight for Internet freedom abroad and, at the same time, for Internet surveillance in their own countries under security reasons (Andrejevic, 2009).

For example, the Foreign Ministry in Beijing condemned the British Prime Minister David Cameron's initiative to search and limit social media in London after the suburban unrests in 2011 (Halliday, 2011). Or, the Chinese government took advantage of the WikiLeaks's case, especially of the Snowden's revelations of NSA's information management and mass surveillance.

There are many differences between democracies and autocracies concerning censorship policies, however, the line is fine between them regarding Internet surveillance and its impact on trust and legitimacy.

Therefore, even if the risk of a world ruled by Western social media is not to be desired, possibly creating another autocracy and a new form of neocolonialism 2.0 ruled by Western customs, it is important to continue to focus attention on the censorship taking place in Iran, Russia, China, and other countries lacking in democracy. Moreover, if it is true that there is an ongoing conflict through social media and Internet control, as demonstrated also by the emerging role of international criminal organization operating on-line shows (Perešin et al. 2015), it is crucial to find sustainable solutions that are not a "win-lose" outcome. In fact, this article does not want to celebrate freedom of broadcasting as the only goal to achieve in this debate; beyond that, it wants to highlight the importance of making citizens and netizens worldwide aware of the power of social media and of transcending this "virtual conflict" in order to look at the roots of the debate.

In conclusion, it is necessary that civil society, netizens and the international community in general continue to work for Net Neutrality (Bowen 2016) and for implementing a wider knowledge on Social Media-related concerns, challenges and perverse effects; only in this way it is possible to hope in a world where pluralisms, rights and diversities could coexist as a source of wealth and not as ideological and political barriers.

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