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# DO SOCIAL MEDIA UNDERMINE STRUCTURES? RETHINKING THE STRUCTURE-AGENCY DEBATE

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## ABSTRACT

The study reconsiders the structure-agency debate in a world dominated by internetisation and social media. To answer the question of whether social media weaken the structures embedded in societies, four phenomena are analysed: Dissemination and control of information are the main areas of conflict between actors and structures. The cyber public sphere has emerged as social media has become an important medium for shaping public opinion. Cyber activism, which has made important strides in moving political networks into the virtual world, has become an alternative to activism in the physical world. As individuals engage in human relations in virtual world just as in physical world, cyber identity has entered our lives. The study's main finding is that although structures have developed new strategies and instruments to monitor, control and regulate the cyber world; social media continues to be a ground that increases the capacity of agencies for actors against structures.

**Keywords**: International politics, Political philosophy, Structure, Agency, Social media, Cyber identity.

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# INTRODUCTION

A prominent feature of the human experience in the twenty-first century is the technologisation and internetisation of everyday life. Human beings have been experiencing a dramatic change and being highly affected by smart technologies, ranging from tangible smart devices to intangible digital mechanisms such as applications, platforms and the cloud (Hassani et al., 2021: 2). It is evident that the technologisation and internetisation of political struggle and the dissemination of political discourse are of greater significance in the context of our topic. Social media is at the centre of this debate in terms of bringing political discourse into the cyber world and radically changing the nature of political struggle. It can be argued that the advent of social media represents a pivotal moment in the economic, social and political evolution of societies.

The examination of the extent to which agencies are able to challenge deeply rooted structures through social media provides a framework for understanding the impact of technological and digital developments on political struggles around the world. Therefore, the structure-agency debate is worthy of reconsideration in the context of social media. The advent of social media has introduced a novel form of discourse dissemination, severing the link between discourse and time and physical environment. Furthermore, social media has augmented the organisational capacity of agencies *vis-à-vis* structures. Finally, social media has diminished the advantage of hegemons in terms of ownership of means of communication.

The main research question is: "Do social media undermine structures given the changing nature of political struggle by agencies?" This research question leads to two further sub-questions: "How do social media change the nature of agentic power *vis-à-vis* structures?" and "How do social media affect structures *vis-à-vis* agencies?" In seeking answers to these questions, the research situates political struggle at its core, examining the tactics employed by agents to secure new positions within the context of political struggles and the counter-tactics deployed by the structures in response to the exercise of agential capacities within those struggles.

In order to address the objective of gaining insight into the impact of the rise of social media on the structures and agencies as well as on the relationship between them, the study will commence with an introduction to the historical structure-agency debate. This will be followed by discussions on the dissemination and control of information, the changing nature of the public sphere, the impact of social networks on structures, and the autonomisation of social identities from structures.

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## METHOD

This paper employs a two-pronged methodology, comprising an inductive analysis based on disparate cases from various countries and a conceptual analysis. In the method of inductive reasoning, people generalise from a particular example or category to another, usually more inclusive one (Coley et al., 1999: 207). In the current study, the resistance capacity of agencies *vis-à-vis* deeper structures as well as authoritarian regimes is exemplified in a generalizable manner. Through the use of cases from different contexts, a more accurate answer to the question of whether or not structures are in decline will be sought.

Concepts, on the other hand, are cognitive tools that facilitate comprehension and interpretation of phenomena in the world. They provide a conceptual framework for thought and are contingent upon the processes of thought (Myburgh and Tammaro, 2013). By means of conceptual analysis, this study aims to draw a framework of thought to reason in depth about the concepts of structure and agency, which involve a deep philosophical debate. The objective of such philosophical debate is to present a projection of both present and future effects resulting from the utilisation of social media, based on an examination of its historical applications and outcomes.

## UNDERSTANDING STRUCTURE-AGENCY DEBATE

The structure-agency issue has been the basic element of several deeply rooted and still unsolved discussions from the medieval confrontation between state and individual to current meta-theoretical disputes in political philosophy, epistemology and science (Carlsnaes, 1992: 245). Basically, issues such as the capacity of political actors to design their fate, the power of the structure to control the actor's life and the determination of an actor's destiny by external elements are the main concerns of the structure-agency debate (McAnulla, 2002: 271).

Structure is often associated with boundaries in a positive or negative sense. It is possible to trace the history of the term 'structure' back to the beginning of social analysis. It has always accompanied other terms of 'institution', 'organisation', 'function', 'value', 'norm', which are frequently used by sociologists in order to denominate the social -non-individualistic- features of human life (Glucksmann, 1974: 1). According to a definition put forward by Hay (2002: 94), the term 'structure' should mainly be understood "as the 'context' and corresponds to the setting within which social, political and economic events occur and acquire meaning". The social world arises from various relations and structures, which are political, economic, social, communicative, etc. Those social structures

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possess a comparatively enduring nature and are not reducible to the practises that they promote or to the actions that they lead. However, social practises and human activity become possible by those social structures (Joseph, 2002: 4). Berger's (1963: 92) following expressions emphasise builder/determiner features of society as a type of structure and underline the limits of human action:

*'Finally, we are located in society not only in space but in time. Our society is a historical entity that extends temporally beyond any individual biography. Society antedates us and it will survive us. It was there before we were born and it will be there after we are dead. Our lives are but episodes in its majestic march through time. In sum, society is the walls of our imprisonment in history.'*

The structure-centric perspective of Berger placed a greater emphasis on structures than on human reason and action. As Berger (1963: 121) purported, "the walls of our imprisonment were there before we appeared on the scene, but they are ever rebuilt by ourselves. We are betrayed into captivity with our own cooperation." Charon (2011: 42) further developed this structure-centric perspective by highlighting that as society penetrates humans by means of socialisation process, humans give consent for such an imprisonment and become what society desires. In essence, individuals are socialised to accept limitations imposed by society.

Social institutions, such as religion, patriarchy, family, and education, which shape social context, contribute to the constitution of a social structure that encourages or restrains individual agents. The positive role of Protestant ethics on the rise of capitalism provides a typical example of the facilitator roles of structures on agential capacity. Weber (1968: 630) posited that the asceticism espoused by Protestantism initially gave rise to a capitalist ethic, albeit inadvertently, as it opened the door to a career in business, particularly for those who were most devout and ethically rigorous. He further contended that Protestantism served as a significant motivator for individuals who sought salvation through their worldly endeavours. Consequently, the Protestant ethic posited that success in business was the logical consequence of a rational approach to life.

Political culture has also been accepted as a deeply rooted structure that determines the manner in which voters engage in political behaviour. Within this scope, Inglehart (1988: 1203) proposed that each society has a distinctive political culture, which is enduring but not fixed. He argued that each political culture exerts an influence on political outcomes, which in turn affect the survival of political institutions. As Almond and Verba (1989: 3) proposed, the formal elements of democracy, such as elected assemblies, political parties and universal suffrage, are not sufficient for the development of a democratic and participatory political system. In addition, a political culture that is compatible

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with this targeted democratic political system is necessary for the sustainability of this system.

Various structures draw boundaries for human behaviour and action within different contexts. Each of these structures considerably differs in terms of resources, and thusly the power that they actuate. The effect of a military structure, for instance, is perceived differently from the effect of linguistic structures (Sewell, 1992: 22). Moreover, the power of structures over humans also varies spatially and temporally. A human living in a Central African state feels the effect of global capitalism differently than a human living within the borders of European Union. On the other hand, overlooking the structures that are not historically human-made can lead to an incomplete understanding of the structure-agency relationship. Institutional rules are not the only factors that determine the structural characteristics of societies. For millions of years, humans survived in societies that did not have institutional rules. In parallel with human evolution, the agentic capacity of humans to shape their environment has gradually evolved. Thus, when seeking to understand how social structure and human agency have been shaped over time, the emphasis should be on the larger environment where people survive and evolve (Zhao, 2022: 5).

The other side of the equation is that of the agent. In the Cambridge English Dictionary, the word ‘agency’ refers to “the ability to take action or to choose what action to take” and the word ‘agent’ refers to “a person or thing that produces a particular effect or change.” The influence capacity of a person or group becomes the core issue in this context. (McAnulla, 2002: 271). Power directly hinges on the idea that *agent* or *subject* gains a victory over its other – *object* or *structure*. Power is about agency. It is about having an effect on or influencing the structures that determine the possible options of others and shape contexts (Hay, 1995: 191). Thus, possessing power is tantamount to possessing the capacity of agency. On the other hand, Joseph (2008: 116) underlined that structures also possess “prior casual power over agents”. That is, the very conditions that define and limit the acts of agents are provided by structures. What differs the power of agencies from the power of structures is the consciousness and intentionality of agencies.

It is possible to identify instances of women in highly patriarchal societies who have made significant contributions to world history. These include Jeannette Rankin from the USA, Benazir Bhutto from Pakistan, Indira Gandhi from India, Margaret Thatcher from the UK, Khaleda Zia from Bangladesh, Tansu Ciller from Türkiye, Angela Merkel from Germany and Claudia Sheinbaum from Mexico. These women were able to gain a reputation as charismatic political leaders in male-dominated political environments and to survive in those patriarchal political cultures. The achievements of these women demonstrate the capacity for ‘agency’ in a significant manner.

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The question of why some individuals possess greater agency than others becomes a significant point when comparing the agential power of different individuals in the same structural conditions. At this juncture, Sewell (1992: 20) posited that all humans are innately endowed with the capacity for agency, encompassing the faculties of intention, preference formation, and creative activity. However, she also underscored that this capacity is not merely a potentiality, but rather a highly generalized capacity that is bestowed upon them at birth. This capacity is analogous to the capacity of humans to use language. Agency is analogous to the capacity to speak a language, such as Urdu, Swahili, Arabic or French. It is determined by the resources and cultural schemas that emerge within a particular social environment. The manner in which agency is formed differs fundamentally and is shaped historically and culturally.

The difficulty in determining the boundaries of agencies is a key factor in the complexity of the structure-agency debate. The nature of an agency can vary considerably depending on the scale of the analysis. At the macro level, a nation-state can be regarded as an agency in relation to the global system. However, at the micro level, the same nation-state can be perceived as a structure with its vast organisational dimension and normative power *vis-à-vis* its citizens. From this perspective, as Hindess (1986: 115) emphasised, collectivities such as political parties, public agencies, private enterprises and religious organisations must be regarded as social actors, since they are all capable of formulating and reaching decisions. The distinguishing factor is that they can act as conscious actors. However, when their conscious behaviour comes together, an unconscious but spontaneous structure emerges. This structure is more than the sum of the individual actors.

## AGENCIES VERSUS STRUCTURES IN THE AGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

A notable reflection of the structure-agency debate in the context of the digital age can be observed in the discourse surrounding the influence and reach of technological globalisation. This phenomenon is a consequence of technological advancement, internetisation and the growth of social media. The phenomenon of globalisation has been significantly advanced by the introduction of new technologies since the second quarter of the twentieth century. Furthermore, the advent of the Internet has been a pervasive phenomenon in the daily lives of individuals since the 1990s. However, its genesis can be traced back to a much earlier period (Gurak and Logie, 2003: 25).

**Table 1.** *A summary of agencies and structures in the age of social media.*

| | **Agency** | **Structure** |
|---|---|---|
| **Information** | Cheaper access to information.<br>Easier access to information.<br>Liberation of individuals from the influence of those (editors, regime media...) who reproduce embedded structural discourses. | Contingency upon the infrastructural and economical facilities provided by structures.<br>Algorithms.<br>Low-quality content. |
| **Public Sphere** | Easier and cheaper participation in the formation of public opinion.<br>Public debate without temporal or spatial limitations.<br>Making discursive impact over a wider area and over a longer period of time. | Censorship.<br>Controlling behaviour targeting individuals on social media.<br>Troll armies. |
| **Political Networks** | Easier organisational capacity.<br>Political organisations independent from temporal or spatial limitations. | Illegalisation of political networks.<br>Illegalisation of cyberactivism. |
| **Cyber Identity** | Independence from national identities.<br>Breaking out of the structural barriers enclosed by national borders. | Authoritarian regimes monitoring and restricting cyber identities.<br>Norm circles monitoring and restricting cyber identities.<br>Society monitoring and restricting cyber identities. |

Source: The author's elaboration

A study conducted by the International Telecommunication Union revealed that in 2019, 72% of households in urban areas and 37% in rural areas worldwide had access to the internet at home (ITU, 2020: 6). The transfer of information across the globe has become possible through the use of telephones, televisions,

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computers, satellites and aeroplanes. The modern world is being shaped on a daily basis by the intensity and speed with which knowledge is disseminated. As the transfer and diffusion of knowledge increase with the development of new technologies, the world becomes more akin to a 'global village' (Archibugi and Iammarino, 2002: 99). The consequence of this technologically advanced globalisation has been a profound alteration in the relationship between structures and agencies with the changing nature of political struggles and the dissemination of political discourse.

In order to find an appropriate answer for the question whether structures are declining or not, the first step becomes focusing on the situation of individuals (and/or organised individuals) *vis-à-vis* deeper structures with the rise of social media. The discussion will address the dissemination and control of information, the changing nature of the public sphere, the challenge to established structures posed by political networks and cyberactivism, and the independence of cyber identities from structures.

**Dissemination and Control of Information**

The changing nature of dissemination and control of information determines the position of actors *vis-à-vis* structures. Prior to the current prevalence of social media, the prevailing assumption was that it would provide unlimited access to information and remove all barriers to the dissemination of information. Indeed, it is important to acknowledge that the past three decades have witnessed a profound transformation in the accessibility of information. Today, as the globe becomes more digitalised and connected to each other, people tend to rely on search engines in order to find answers for their questions (Hassani et al., 2021: 3). It has become possible for the general public to communicate directly with experts on a wide range of subjects through the medium of social media. However, this process is not as easy and flawless as expected.

There is a disparity in the extent of internet usage across different socioeconomic groups. It can be argued that not everyone has an equal opportunity to access social media, and that the opportunity to access information on social media sites is not unlimited (Kruse et al., 2018: 64). This is attributable to the inadequacy of the infrastructure investments required to access social media, as well as the cost of utilising this infrastructure even if the internet infrastructure is sufficient. This results in the individuals' access to the social media being entirely contingent upon the infrastructural and economical facilities provided by structures.

As the number of individuals who connect to the internet to access news, information, entertainment, or conversation continues to grow, the influence of libraries, bookshops, traditional media including newspapers, television channels, and film industry, is gradually declining in society. On the one hand,

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this shift can potentially liberate individuals from the control of cultural elites, such as editors, publishers, professional commentators, and critics, who previously exercised significant influence over what people read and thought. However, the deluge of user-generated content unleashed by the new internet order may impede the production of quality journalism, sophisticated literature, music and film of artistic merit. Furthermore, the economic foundations of the organisations that train and employ these information professionals are also being eroded (Leadbeater, 2008: 2-3). Furthermore, the information sources of individuals on social media are not always objective. Highly influential profiles on social media frequently engage in partisan discourse, often resorting to innuendo and rumour (Jenkins, 2006: 217). Consequently, the impact of traditional sources of information, which can be structurally controlled through financial means and censorship, is waning, yet being supplanted by an inflation of low-quality or manipulated content. The prevalence of low-quality and manipulated content impedes the masses from attaining an advantageous state of consciousness with regard to the structures in question.

The dissemination of manipulated information and the propagation of false narratives constituted a pivotal aspect of Russia's actions during its aggression in Crimea and eastern Ukraine. Russia's propaganda efforts were not limited to influencing the information environment in Ukraine; they also targeted the information environments of other countries (Kornieiev et al., 2022: 187). In certain instances, such as those pertaining to the conflicts in Georgia or Ukraine, it can be argued that the dissemination of accurate information outstrips that of misinformation or disinformation in terms of quantity. It becomes an imperative for individuals to exercise discernment when evaluating the veracity of information circulated on social media.

Algorithms, which can be defined as "the automated systems that social media platforms use to suggest content for users by making assumptions based on the groups, friends, topics and headlines a user has clicked on in the past" (Klepper, 2023), are surveillance, control and direction mechanisms that negate the arguments that social media will provide an environment of unlimited freedom. This ideological control is usually in the favouring of authoritarian, populist, right-wing governments or political organisations. The combination of algorithmic control mechanisms with legal censorship by authoritarian governments results in the creation of a digital environment in which alternative ideas are suppressed and gradually become invisible.

The longer users engage with YouTube's recommendations, the more they are exposed to content that is moderately conservative and increasingly narrow in its ideological scope. This phenomenon is observed across the full spectrum of users, regardless of their ideological orientation. (Brown et al., 2022). Similarly, a recent study about X (previously Twitter) has revealed that, in six out of the

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seven countries examined, the mainstream political right is amplified to a greater extent than the mainstream political left by algorithms used in social media. This finding is consistent with the trend observed in the United States, where algorithmic amplification has been shown to favour news sources that possess right-wing tendencies (Huszár et al., 2022). A content analysis of Facebook's news ecosystem revealed that sources favoured by conservative audiences were more prevalent than those favoured by liberal-leaning users (González-Bailón et al., 2023). Thus, it can be argued that the dominant discourse encountered in everyday life is characterised by authoritarian right-wing and populist approaches.

The Facebook-Cambridge Analytica scandal provides a salient example of the potential for algorithmic manipulation. In this incident, the personal information of 87 million Facebook users was used without permission by the Cambridge Analytica company. This data was subsequently employed to influence the 2016 US elections in favour of Donald Trump and the UK's EU referendum in favour of leaving the EU (Ozdemir, 2022: 25). In response to the growing concern over the potential for algorithmic manipulation by social media giants, numerous countries have enacted legislation to regulate and prevent such practices. For instance, in order to regulate the use of algorithms, China initiated the Regulations on the Administration of Internet Information Service Recommendation Algorithms on 1 March 2022 (FES, 2023). This regulatory framework compelled algorithmic recommendation services to enhance the transparency and interpretability of their algorithms (Kharitonova et al., 2023: 158). India has enacted comparable legislation, the Information Technology Rules 2021, with the objective of regulating the content filtering systems of social media companies (Kharitonova et al., 2023: 161).

**Cyber Public Sphere**

In the context of an evolving communication landscape characterised by increased density, complexity and participation, the collective action potential of networked individuals is enhanced by the expansion of access to information and heightened participation in public discourse (Shirky, 2011: 29). Public debates, as the expression of ideas on issues that are within the public concern involving diverging or opposing viewpoints that are voiced by people in the debate (Overland, 2018: 12), are significant activities of agents that possess the potential to construct the ideological basis for agential challenge against deeper structures embedded within societies.

Public debate takes place on the site of 'public sphere', which is defined as a space "made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state" (Habermas, 1991 [1962]: 176). It is a domain of social interaction wherein a collective opinion can be formed. All citizens are

entitled to access this sphere. When individuals engage in unrestricted dialogue, they act as a collective public body, protected by guarantees of freedom of assembly, association, and expression. These rights enable citizens to engage in deliberations about issues of general interest. The public sphere was previously constituted by various media platforms, including newspapers, magazines, radio, and television (Habermas, 1964, cited from Habermas et al., 1974 [1964]: 49). Today, on the other hand, it has undergone a significant expansion with the proliferation of the internet and social media in everyday life. People who have integrated social media to their daily life are no longer passive subjects of the propaganda of governments, political parties and mass media. They now possess the capacity to express alternative thought, challenge mainstream discourses, and disseminate their own perspectives (Loader and Mercea, 2011: 759). Furthermore, this public space is not constrained by temporal or spatial limitations. This independence precludes individuals from being constrained to a specific temporal and spatial framework, thereby enabling them to generate discourse that persists over an extended period and has a broader impact. As a result, the influence of social pressure on the individual may also be less likely to be the case.

Structures, on the other hand, regulate the online public sphere, either by limiting the scope of free public debate or by exerting strict control over it. The question of whether the structure in question performs this function consciously or unconsciously depends on the specific structure in question. Authoritarian/totalitarian regimes as conscious structures often strengthen structural hegemony[1] by limiting the boundaries of discourse on social media. Global capitalism as a more unconscious structure determine the mainstream agenda on social media by means of algorithms that prioritise the internalisation of consumer culture and sustainability of market economy.

It is possible to refute the determinist idea that social media are inherently democratic and that politics is dead. An individual's possession of an iPhone or access to a social networking site does not guarantee his/her participation in the process of public opinion formation. The first generation of digital democracy experiments have shown that a complex set of socio-cultural factors significantly influence the use of new media for public deliberation (Loader and Mercea, 2011: 760). Gender-based controlling behaviour towards women, for instance, limits women's participation in public debates and strengthens deeper structure of patriarchal society. The phenomenon of exposure to controlling behaviour may be observed in individuals who are perceived as marginal within their familial context, those engaged in the process of seeking employment, or those

[1] For a more detailed explanation about the term 'structural hegemony', refer to Joseph (2002; 2008).

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already employed. Those individuals monitored may perceive limitations on their freedom to utilise social media for the purpose of meaningful and unfettered exchange of ideas. Consequently, they may be disinclined to express their political proclivities candidly, apprehending the potential for online harassment and its ramifications for their employment status or familial and social relationships (Kruse et al., 2018: 65). It is not uncommon for a person to avoid offending his or her employer and to practice self-censorship when expressing opinions on social media.

Additionally, the prevalence of political echo-chambers constrains the range of discourse available to individuals in their daily lives. Those echo-chambers function to reinforce existing beliefs and preclude the consideration of contradictory perspectives within an individual. Indeed, individuals repeatedly encounter the same political opinions, leading to the belief that opposing viewpoints are erroneous without the consideration of their rationale. (Lutz et al., 2021: 1). Facebook is one of the social media platforms that is most conducive to the formation of echo chambers. As the study of Jiang et al. (2021) revealed, the phenomenon of political echo chambers is most prevalent in right-leaning communities, where users are subjected to a constant stream of information that is largely in alignment with their pre-existing views.

Facebook scans the content of each user's friends' posts, the content of the pages liked by the user, the content of the groups to which the user belongs, and the content of the user's own posts. This information is then used to create a news feed algorithm, which is based on an ever-changing and closely guarded formula. This algorithm ranks each post according to the likelihood that the user will find it valuable. As a result, each user will only see certain content (Oremus, 2016). Although WhatsApp is primarily a messaging/communication application, it can also be considered a social media tool due to the opportunities for followers to share posts and express opinions in large groups. Consequently, it is also an efficacious site for the construction of eco-chambers among disparate ideological groups, as it allows for the straightforward dissemination of texts, visuals, and audio files to individuals within a mobile-phone-based network.

One of the most significant challenges to the productive use of social media as a public sphere is the phenomenon of troll armies. These are characterised by the presence of fake users, who are often specifically recruited for the purpose of disrupting the news flow of social media. As a result, the formation of unreal or artificial public opinion on a range of topics is facilitated by those who employ trolls. The planned social media operations of these troll armies also render the authentic opinions and reactions of the general public invisible.

Troll networks and bot accounts, which impede the formation of an efficacious public sphere within the digital realm, are arguably most effectively deployed by

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Putin's Russia on a global scale. The 2016 US presidential election was a prime example of how Putin's troll network, as part of a sophisticated Russian-led information operation, created false public opinion and manipulated the cyber public sphere (Swed et al., 2024). Furthermore, the findings of an empirical study conducted by Geissler Bär et al. (2023: 7) indicate that pro-Russian propaganda on Twitter employed a specific set of hashtags, including #IStandWithPutin, #isupportrussia, *#Putin*, *#standforrussia*, *#StandWithPutin* and *#IndiaWithRussia* during the Russia-Ukraine war. This research also revealed that 20.28% of the accounts identified as using manipulative hashtags and propagating Russian narratives were automated bots.

**Political Networks and Cyberactivism against Structures**

The emergence of the Internet has facilitated the formation of networks, enabling individuals to establish connections and collaborate in novel ways. In addition to facilitating the formation of networks based on physical hubs and wires, it also enables the creation of networks between people and thusly, provides a valuable platform for the expression and advancement of diverse forms of social activism (Gurak and Logie, 2003: 25). The extremely open nature of the Internet, which allows for the connection of any individual with almost any other individual, presents innumerable possibilities for the facilitation of interpersonal collaboration (Leadbeater, 2008: 3-4). Over the past two decades, within this scope, a multitude of internet-organised protests, including those in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, have led to changes in authoritarian/totalitarian regimes and had a profound impact on global affairs.

The concept of 'cyberactivism' defined as "political activism on the Internet" (McCaughey and Ayers, 2003: 1), has become a pervasive phenomenon in contemporary society, representing a novel approach to raising awareness and expressing political opposition to established structures through the use of social media. Cyberactivism enables individuals to identify global, regional and local issues that require activist action and to develop a stance on them by acquiring information. Furthermore, the utilisation of cyber activism is of significance in facilitating the identification of individuals who share a similar sensitivity towards a particular issue, thereby enabling them to collaborate and organise collectively. Therefore, it is not necessary for a social movement to be physically unified in order to be organised. Thus, authoritarian regimes were confronted with an agential power that they could not contain within the borders of the country and could not control its physical environment.

However, the belief that social media provides unlimited access and equal participation for all means not recognising the social and political realities of contemporary society. A significant proportion of the global population lacks access to the Internet. Although many social media sites are free to join, the cost

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of a device and/or an Internet subscription can be prohibitive for individuals who wish to benefit from those social media sites. Although Facebook is the most popular social media site, only 43.3% of the world population can participate in it (Kruse et al., 2018: 64). In addition to individuals' economic competence being structurally determined, individuals who manage to overcome this economic competence barrier encounter the structural limits of organising on social media. Restrictions on access to certain social media platforms during times of public outcry, band throttling, censorship targeting activist discourse and authoritarian intervention in online organising are structural obstacles to agentic organising power. Thus, although the power and means of individuals to form oppositional blocs against deep structures has increased, structures develop new methods to suppress this agential organisational power.

China, which already has the largest online population in the world, achieved its first full internet connection in 1994 and established a highly sophisticated system of internet censorship from the 2000s onwards. The scope of censorship was not limited to news content, but extended to entertainment sites, which may not appear to be political in nature but provide opportunities for political humour, and to leisure sites, which allow people to meet each other and thus provide opportunities for political activism (Taneja, 2014: 298). The highly sophisticated mechanisms of censorship and prohibition of political action on the Internet have transformed China into what MacKinnon (2011) calls 'networked authoritarianism'. It can thus be argued that China represents a poor model for other authoritarian states in terms of the freedom of expression and political action permitted in cyberspace. Similarly, the Islamic Republic of exercised close supervision and imposed restrictions on online gatherings and networking opportunities, on the grounds that they might be perceived as anti-regime in nature (USDOS, 2017).

## Independence of Cyber Identities from Structures

The traditional structure-agency debate concerned the relationship between the real-world identities of actors and structures. However, the advent of the internet created a new cyberspace that offered an alternative to physical space and gave rise to new types of identities, namely cyber identities. The term "cyber identity" is used to describe the totality of the meanings that are employed to represent our existence to others in the digital realm, as well as the ways in which these meanings are used to define our identity (Sancar, 2023). In this digital realm, a meticulous presentation of the self becomes crucial for us in order to achieve cyber-public acclaim. The 'self-presentation', accordingly, describes the manner in which an individual attempts to convey information about himself/herself or an image of himself/herself to other people (Baumeister and Hutton, 1987: 71).

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Cyber identity is usually a carefully designed and idealised identity that does not carry the defects of the real-world identity. These defects may be the disadvantages of the socio-economic class in which the person lives, or they may be the defects of the society or country in which the person lives. The cyber identity gradually becomes a universal identity that interacts with other cyber identities, transcending spatial and temporal constraints. This will undoubtedly result in the person moving away from the influence of the structures in which he/she participates with his/her real identity. A significant outcome of this is that the capacity of structures to dominate discourse in relation to individuals is diminished. Individuals in the cyber world can be fed from sources that transcend the borders of the country in terms of discourse, can act in partnership with social/political movements that cannot be intervened by the legal rules of the country, and can have a power of influence beyond the borders of the country.

Nevertheless, the emancipation of cyber identities from the structural constraints within national boundaries does not imply that they are entirely at liberty to act as they please. Firstly, the cyber identities are constrained by norm circles, which are social entities that possess normative power as well as casual power by means of which these circles create practices that affect their members. That is to say, members of a norm circle have a shared intention to uphold the norm. Each individual tends to endorse the norm to a greater extent when they are aware of the shared intention than they would otherwise (Elder-Vass, 2010: 123). In order to be accepted by the norm circle in which he/she seeks to participate, a cyber-identity must demonstrate a greater degree of adherence to the norms of this circle, or at the very least, provide evidence that he/she adheres to them more closely.

Moreover, society as a structure and the traditions of that society can also play a constraining role on cyber identities. The internet facilitates the monitoring of individuals by entities other than the state or corporations. This monitoring can occur not only from external sources, but also from one’s own social network. Any indiscretion committed during one’s youth could potentially be discovered and used against the individual in the future. This is due to the fact that social networking sites allow users to monitor each other’s activities, creating a system of user-generated surveillance (Leadbeater, 2008: 2). This results in the practice of self-monitoring, whereby individuals are aware that each cyber identity they create leaves a digital footprint on the internet.

In Malaysia, the Islamic term 'fitnah' has been employed to justify digital authoritarianism and the curtailment of individuals' actions in cyberspace. The term 'fitnah', which has an Islamic connotation of sinfulness, is not only illegal but also considered wrong in the eyes of God (Shukri, 2023: 8). Consequently, individuals are prohibited from engaging in discourse on social media that is contrary to Malaysia's religious structure. They are also obliged to refrain from

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creating a cyber identity that is contrary to Malaysia's mainstream values, effectively practising self-censorship.

The Islamic Republic of Iran serves as another prototypical illustration of the reasons why individuals feel unease and engage in self-censorship when utilizing social media. In Iran, the online space is subject to rigorous state monitoring. For instance, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards have initiated a military exercise, designated “Eghtedare Sarallah”, which encompasses the surveillance of social media activities. Concurrently, the Iranian Cyber Police (FATA) has established a specialized unit to regulate computer games. All social media platforms in Iran are regularly requested by various Iranian authorities to provide users' information. Local social media counterparts offer no protection for users. Indeed, a survey of 904 Iranian internet users conducted in August 2015 revealed that users feel uncomfortable when using local social networks of Iran (Freedom House, 2016). Furthermore, Iranian authorities even oversee the online activities of Iranian nationals residing outside of Iran (Canada: Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2014). In light of the potential for collaboration with the regime among certain individuals, it is likely that Iranians will resort to the use of pseudonyms on social media, refrain from engaging in activities that might reveal personal information, and avoid participating in extensive political discussions. Thus, it becomes difficult for cyber identities to exist freely in cyberspace independently of structures.

## CONCLUSION

The objective of this study is to re-examine the structure-agency debate in the context of the process of technologicalisation, internetisation and the rise of social media. This debate, which traditionally occurs within a unified space and time, has been conducted in a cyber-universe that is independent of both space and time. On the one hand, actors have devised novel opposition strategies to circumvent the constraining influence of structures, while on the other hand, structures have implemented new strategies and instruments to monitor, control and regulate the cyberspace. It is not asserted here that structures, like actors, take conscious measures in all cases. However, the collective and cumulative actions of the constituent pillars constitute the conscious or unconscious behaviour of the structures.

One of the key advantages of social media for actors is that the rules and practices of structures regulating the flow of information become less effective in terms of access to information. Actors who have greater ease of access to information, at a faster and cheaper rate, can more easily reach the intellectual accumulation that will challenge the structures. Conversely, the excessive

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increase in the volume of information and the emergence of poor quality/false information cause the ease of access to information not to proceed in a linear line. In particular, the censorship employed by authoritarian regimes and the algorithms utilised by social media behemoths serve to render access to information more challenging.

The creation of a public sphere that is independent of time and space by social media enables actors to gain the capacity to form public opinion that will be valid in a much wider time and in a much wider area. This public sphere also provides a much freer environment that cannot be compared to the physical public sphere. In the process of creating social discourse, individuals have the ability to influence and be influenced not only by people physically close to them, but also by people from all over the world. Thus, the public sphere that necessitates monitoring and control for structures is considerably more extensive. Conversely, structures attempt to impede the cyber public sphere by limiting Internet access or imposing censorship, while simultaneously influencing the formation of public opinion within the cyber public sphere through the deployment of troll armies.

The advent of social media has presented a unique opportunity for political networks. On the one hand, the intellectual resources required for cyber activism have become more accessible, while on the other hand, it has become easier to identify individuals with similar sensitivities on shared issues. Furthermore, the ability to organise in cyberspace has become much more straightforward, as the Internet has made organisations less dependent on physical spaces. The recent Arab Spring is one of the most successful examples of organising through social media. Nevertheless, particularly authoritarian regimes are developing novel technical measures to regulate the use of social media for organising purposes. In certain countries, certain social media platforms are even prohibited.

Through their cyber identities, finally, individuals can engage in an array of political actions within the digital domain, transcending national borders. Nevertheless, structures and regimes possess technological means for the surveillance of cyber identities. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the nature of cyber identities differs from that of real-world identities in that they are less susceptible to the influence of authoritarian regimes and deeper structures within societies. Social media has created an environment in which actors can act, manufacture discourse, engage in political action, and be organised more autonomously than in the past. Although the structures are attempting to establish new control mechanisms, this will not be sustainable. It can be argued that with each passing day we will see an increase in the power of the agents against the structures.

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