

Authors

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RCTs (Randomized Controlled Tweets)

A couple of articles have got me thinking lately; a recent USIP report "[Blogs and Bullets: New Media in Contentious Politics](#)" (authored by Sean Aday, Henry Farrel, Marc Lynch, John Sides, John Kelly and Ethan Zuckerman), and a New Yorker article by Malcolm Gladwell, "[Small Change - Why the Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted](#)." I've been having some nerdy fun thinking about what kind of study could examine the effects of the ever-proliferating social media tools on political and economic attitudes, behavior and outcomes.

Both pieces take on popular portrayals of web-based tools like Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and Blogs as powerful mechanisms for social/political change, the catalyst behind the recent Iranian or Moldovan protests.

Gladwell's take is that these purported impacts are overblown and rather than transforming/empowering activism, social media:

"...shift our energies from organizations that promote strategic and disciplined activity and toward those which promote resilience and adaptability. It makes it easier for activists to express themselves, and harder for that expression to have any impact."

The USIP team is less pessimistic about social media's potential but does write that there is, admittedly, a lack of evidence of what the impacts have been:

"The sobering answer is that, fundamentally, no one knows. To this point, little research has sought to estimate the causal effects of new media in a methodologically rigorous fashion, or to gather the rich data needed to establish causal influence. Without rigorous research designs or rich data, partisans of all viewpoints turn to anecdotal evidence and intuition. It seems improbable that such a massive change in political communication would not matter, even if the data to demonstrate the effects are lacking and older forms of political communication and mass media continue to shape political outcomes."

This seems to be a perfect segue to a discussion about the types of field experiments one could use to measure social media's impact.

Any ideas (in 140 characters or less :) ?)

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