
When Freedom Goes Global: Are We All Equally Safe On Social Media?

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Abstract

This interdisciplinary research project draws attention to a growing concern for the geopolitical and cultural tensions now being exploited due to the internationalization of the Web. Building on previous research on the dangers of online mobilization in the Arab World, this project wants to show that the internationalization of the Web creates new challenges for Web platform providers that have to deal with national laws and local values. We argue that encoded within these technologies are westernized values that test and complicate our understanding of a truly global society. To illustrate this state of facts, our project looks in two directions: a quantitative approach on sentiment exposure following a Twitter scandal in France and a close reading of recent privacy strategies employed by Twitter and Google to present a transparent answer to inquiries by governments.

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General Terms

Human Factors; Web Science

Introduction

As a global, large-scale, socio-technical phenomenon, the Web impacts more than 2 billion human beings. Sir Tim Berners-Lee described the Web's future to be all-inclusive, yet it is only within the last decade that we have truly seen service providers make a concerted effort towards the internalization of users accounts. For web sites designers and programmers, internationalization of the Web was mostly a question of languages, symbols or colors in user interfaces design (UID) and interactive processes. Cultural dimensions, values, beliefs were taken into account by e-marketers and web developers to improve strategic efficiency or build better interactive scenarios. Works by Marcus et al. [7] (on metaphors, mental models, navigation and interaction) and Stengers et al. [10] (on intercultural design) showed that the Web, by promoting the emergence of a cosmopolitan and hybrid online culture, overrode traditional cultural differences. The development of online participation and collaboration platforms, combined with world-wide access to the Internet especially on mobile devices, and large capacity cloud data storage, changed the rules: now, users produce content, share content and broadcast homemade information to every corner of the world. Each of these small bricks of information carries technical metadata, but also millions of pieces of contextual information, such as the origin, time, and context that links them to the social nature of the true intention of their creators.

Our research aims at exposing how the internationalization of online social spaces has become not just its greatest strength, but its greatest challenge for future development. First, we examine several incidents to illustrate our hypothesis. We consider that

despite its ability to transform societies over the World, the Web has not removed cultural or social borders as seen by the events happening in the Arab world. Instead, we consider the tensions created by the implicit influence of Western philosophical values embodied in these technologies, such as Freedom of Speech. Then, we provide empirical evidence pertaining to one specific situation where these tensions clearly manifest both online and offline. Specifically, we explore sentiments surrounding the events unfolding in France related to the controversial "A Good Jew" hashtag.

Is the Web a safe place?

The "Arab Spring" is, after the "Twitter Revolution" in Iran (2009), a new example of "distortions" caused by intercultural clashes between values shared by social media platform users and the commercial reaction of the Web companies. If researchers sung the web's ability to transform society, education, politics, and commerce despite physical boundaries and historic cultural norms, unanswered problems of privacy, individual security, and the protection of children, make the Web a dangerous place for its users worldwide. Misunderstandings, intercultural clashes and uncontrolled flow of unverified information are undermining trust in the positive economic and political power of the Web in many areas of the World. This counter-reaction was described in a recent article by Maher (2013), entitled the "Westphalian Web" where he writes:

"Naturally, systems of power have finally taken notice; In response, governments around the world have begun to assert control, seeking to carve up the global Internet, manage it within national

borders, and impose *Westphalian* sovereignty on the wild World Wide Web". [6]

Values

We also explore rising notions of values embedded into recent technologies. As Wolff (2010) notes:

"The truth is that the Web has always had two faces. On the one hand, the Internet has meant the breakdown of incumbent businesses and traditional power structures. On the other, it's been a constant power struggle, with many companies banking their strategy on controlling all or large chunks of the TCP/IP-fueled universe". [11]

Platforms, like Facebook, provide their users with detailed terms and conditions documents; but these documents are contextualized under Western law, rights and privacy ideals. Facebook's Statement of Rights and Responsibilities contains culturally ambiguous language, which refers to westernized perceptions of modernity: it clearly states that Facebook "distinguishes between serious and humorous speech" [3].

For those that live in nations where such ideals – like freedom of speech (or *humour*) - are not recognized or explicitly written into law, the Web becomes a dangerous trap. What then happens if and when you post a status update that undermines your government? Or speaks ill of the royal family? In countries like Thailand or Belarus, the consequences are dire. Morozov (2011) sums it up best writing:

"the West excels at building and supporting effective tools to pierce through the firewalls of

authoritarian governments, but it is also skilled at letting many of its corporations disregard the privacy of their users, often with disastrous implications for those who live in oppressive societies" [8].

Casualties of the Syrian InfoWar

Furthermore, Western exuberance for the Web's potential as a harbinger of democracy has captivated not just basic users, but academics, journalists, politicians, economists etc., around the globe. Take for example the events surrounding the civil war in Syria, which began in February 2011. The Syrian government decided to open access to social media platforms in order to reduce protesters' anger by providing them with more freedom of speech. Many Syrians started to create blogs, Facebook, and YouTube accounts to share with the world what was happening on the Syrian streets. But after two years, their experience with online mobilization is bitter: the war still rages on and the regime in Damascus is still strong. Even worse, the regime, in an unprecedented move in history, started an online civil war: backed by hackers recruited all over the World under the "Syrian Electronic Army" banner. The Syrian regime then launched a fierce battle on social media platforms to identify opponents and arrest them (this was documented in 2012 paper by Saad and Al. [9] and Bazan and Al. [1]).

This first example raises the following question: "What kind of civic responsibility does social media platforms have in the Syrian situation; particularly in preserving its users' autonomy and privacy"? Facebook states in its community standards that:

"Safety is Facebook's top priority. We remove content and may escalate to law enforcement when we perceive a genuine risk of physical harm, or a direct threat to public safety. You may not credibly threaten others, or organize acts of real-world violence. Organizations with a record of terrorist or violent criminal activity are not allowed to maintain a presence on our site". [3]

Groups like The Syrian Electronic Army, officially supported and recognized by the Syrian regime, is still ostensibly present on the social network even after several attempts by Facebook to remove their account [4].

#unbonjuif

Another example is the recent issue of anti-Semitic hashtags on Twitter. On October 14, 2012, the #unbonjuif hashtag began trending at number six in the French language tweets with content being mostly insults, bad jokes, racist and anti-Semitic comments. Alerted by users, the Union of Jewish Students in France asked for a meeting with the representative of Twitter in France and asked them to remove the tweets, to set up a new "moderation" system, and to take responsibility for what was published on the platform (More than 1600 accounts used this hashtag). Twitter, an American company, stores the IP addresses of the owners of the social network accounts.

On January 24, 2013, the 17th Criminal Chamber of the Paris Court issued an injunction in the case between the Union of Jewish Students in France and Twitter [2]. The court recommended Twitter consider and communicate the following to its French users: "the data in its possession likely to enable the identification

of anyone who has contributed to the creation of clearly unlawful tweets" and also "set up under the French Twitter platform an easily accessible and visible system to allow any person to bring to its attention any unlawful, including falling within the scope of the apology of crimes against humanity and incitement to racial hatred."

But is Twitter considered a public or private space? In France, it all depends on how the message is shared. For example, if a single racial slur is shared on a Facebook "fan page", which is open to viewing by all users, the post is considered to be shared in a public space. The same applies to posts shared on Twitter where most tweets unless otherwise noted can be seen by the general public. This private versus public distinction is important because the penalties are not the same. According to the law of "freedom of the press" (1981), the example of a racist insult in a public space may result in up to six months in jail and a fine of 22,500 euros. However, if it is a racial slur in a private space, you may be fined up to 750 euros under article 624-4 of the Criminal Code R, which is a much lesser penalty.



Figure 1. Twitter #unbonjuif hashtag.

The problem is neither Facebook nor Twitter have been deemed private or public legislatively or by the

judiciary. And, in instances where the line has been drawn (such as it has in some U.S. District Courts), the legal definitions are ambiguous or inconsistent.

EXPOSING SENTIMENT

The events unfolding in France serve as a unique real-time example of the cultural, political and value-oriented tensions we've thus highlighted. We have established that while the Web presents us with limitless positive connections, it is not immune to the traditional negative pressures that complicate our societies (e.g. power struggles, gender differences, access etc.). Moreover, we emphasize that the web, which was once an open space of language and protocols, has evolved into a set of private technologies owned predominately by American companies driven by profit interests. As Flanagan et al., (2008) would argue, it is in recognizing that these American values are embodied within the design of the technology that will we be able to fully understand the magnitude of its effect on us [5].

To accomplish this, we take the events in France to explore the value of "freedom of speech". Already, news media outlets and blogs tracking the events have couched the stand-off between Twitter and the French government as such. By mining for tweets associated with the #unbonjuif hashtag (beginning in October to present day) combined with content published online, we intend to investigate the timing, the scale, and the sentiments of reactions. Specifically, using location-based information, we look to analyze the public discourse surrounding the events. We hypothesize that American users, media outlets and content will strongly reinforce the value of "freedom of speech" in their arguments; while, non-American based commentary

will not. Moreover, we intend to analyze the frequency of tweets throughout this time period to help identify key changes in discourse, which we suspect will correspond to offline events such as Twitter's eventual response to France's legal demands.

Understanding response

What is the actual legal response given by web platforms companies to these new challenges? In a recent display of transparency, Twitter (<https://transparency.twitter.com/>) and Google (<http://www.google.com/transparencyreport/>) have developed new sites where users and activists can monitor content control and accounts. On its "Transparency Report" website, Twitter states that between July 1, 2013, and December 31, 2013, 42 requests were received; including 16 related to foreign governments. One account and 44 tweets have been withheld during the same period, in accordance with Twitter's Country Withheld Content policy.



Figure 2. Twitter Transparency report.

In the same period of time, Google reports around 20,000 government made requests for enquiries on users of which 66 percent were effectively executed.

Concluding remarks

Our research hopes to demonstrate - both empirically and through a close examination of literature - that the internationalization of the Web is its next great challenge, specifically for US-owned web platforms companies. It's obviously a legal challenge where local

laws may contradict westernized values. But, it's also an economic challenge that the Web is facing in its entirety: recent discussion about "National Internet Segments" at Qatar's WCIT 2012 could lead to national fragmentation of the Internet and the Web. Social platforms for instance are not public services. Instead, they're operated by private US companies that could easily decide to withdraw or refuse to enter a hostile online territory. Users could also leave in large numbers following growing numbers of scandals or direct violations of privacy. More concerning, collaboration between Web platforms and governments could lead to more sovereign control and less individual autonomy; escalating the threat of cyber-attacks on economic entities all over the World. Interdisciplinary and mixed methods are essential to understand the social impact of these challenges and the properties of the structures on which this impact happens. By providing empirical data on these issues and analyzing them with social theories, our research hopes to provide a clear picture of these new realities.

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