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# Web Solutions Applied to the Problem of Toppling Autocrats

By CHRYSTIA FREELAND | REUTERS

NEW YORK — They are being called the [Facebook](#) revolutions, but a better term for the uprisings sweeping through the Middle East might be the [Groupon](#) effect. That is because one of the most powerful consequences satellite television and the Internet have had for the protest movements is to help them overcome the problem of collective action, in the same way that Groupon has harnessed the Web for retailers.

“It is a question of coordinating people’s beliefs,” said Daron Acemoglu, a professor of economics at the [Massachusetts Institute of Technology](#), who, with Matthew Jackson of [Stanford University](#) in California, is working on a paper about the effect of social networks on collective action problems.

Protesting against an authoritarian regime is a prime example of this issue, Mr. Acemoglu said, because opponents of a dictator need to know that their views are widely shared and that a sufficient number of their fellow citizens are willing to join them to make opposition worthwhile.

“I need to know if other people agree with me and are willing to act,” Mr. Acemoglu said. “What really stops people who are oppressed by a regime from protesting is the fear that they will be part of an unsuccessful protest. When you are living in these regimes, you have to be extremely afraid of what happens if you participate and the regime doesn’t change.”

That makes publicly protesting an oppressive regime a classic collective action problem: If everyone who wants regime change takes to the streets, the group will achieve its shared goal. But if too few protest, they will fail and be punished. Even if an overwhelming majority wants change, it is smart for individuals to speak out only if enough compatriots do, too.

As protests have spread from Tunisia to Egypt and now to Bahrain, Libya and other parts of the Middle East, the power of television, particularly [Al Jazeera](#), and the Internet to spread information and to help with the practicalities of organizing demonstrations has become readily apparent. Taken together, television, Facebook and [Twitter](#) may have been even more powerful in helping to solve the problem of collective action, by giving people unhappy with their governments the confidence that their views are widely shared.

This potential for technology to overcome collective action problems has been taken to the next level in the consumer space by Groupon. The swiftly growing electronic coupon company is built around the retailer's version of the collective action problem: Offering deep discounts is worthwhile if it attracts enough extra customers so that the retailer can make up in the scale of his sales what he loses because of the lower price.

Groupon has solved that problem by creating sales that only occur if a sufficient number of people sign on. The Groupon technique is particularly powerful because once the tipping point is reached, all the interested shoppers are locked in to participating — your investment in the Groupon coupon is irrevocable from that moment on.

Political activists have not yet figured out an equivalent way of ensuring participation once a sufficient mass of supporters is identified: Even if we all watch television coverage of demonstrations together and express our enthusiasm for the movement online, we have no guarantee our neighbors will take the physical risk of going out in the streets until they actually do so.

Even so, the combination of satellite television and social networking has made it dramatically easier for the disaffected to overcome one of the central obstacles to organizing regime change — letting each individual know what views are shared by enough people to make protesting worthwhile, and relatively safe.

This new power is transformative. As Mr. Acemoglu said, “there have always been many regimes that are unpopular, but it has taken a well-organized civil society to allow that pent-up frustration to find a voice.” Technology is making it much easier for frustrated societies to express their collective anger.

Once that collective action problem is overcome, the act of physically coming together to express a deeply felt emotion can be — as we have seen in Egypt and Tunisia — very powerful. We are social animals who take pleasure in intense, mass experiences: hence the continued popularity, in this digital age, of sports events and music concerts.

But even though the Groupon effect makes it easier to bring people together to oppose unpopular regimes, it may be harder for new technologies to overcome the “day after” problem. Regime change is a classic matter of collective action and of a tipping point — if enough of us do not like the government, and if we can find a way to coordinate our protests (and, crucially, if the regime lacks the means or the will to fight back), we can topple our oppressive rulers.

Installing a new and better regime is a much tougher project, and one which may not be as easily facilitated by new technologies. Social networks are good ways to discover whether our beliefs are shared and even to lock us in to specific, self-contained acts.

We haven't yet figured out how to use them to facilitate more complicated, longer-term collective actions that require significant commitment and negotiation.

That is the next challenge for activists: using the Internet to facilitate social transformation that is more complicated than getting a sufficient mass of people to come out to the streets.

*Chrystia Freeland is global editor at large at Reuters.*