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Is Facebook a non-state actor?

Is Facebook a non-state actor? This is a question necessary for the present moment. After the 2016 US election cycle and in light of the growing trends in social media, and populism, it is clear that social media in general and specifically Facebook, impact the global state system in similar ways that non-state actors do. If this is true, it stands to reason that greater partnerships between social media transnational companies and states are necessary. Social media provides a new global communication network where a developing global civil society is growing. This new communication space is vast, robust and powerful, free from policy and legislation at the moment, protected under freedom of speech laws by most states. Yet, as noticed through the 2016 US national election, this communication space has impact on civil society and an ultimate impact on the course of the election. It is important therefore to consider the influence of transnational companies like Facebook, studying their behaviors looking for ways to interface between state governments and these non-state actors.

Identifying non-state actors

There are numerous designations for non-state actors presently engaged in global affairs. Since the end of WWII, non-state actors have had an increasing impact on global governance. As the global state system has become more complex, non-state actors have made a significant contribution to global governance. Most often non-state actors are found either in international organizations (IOs) such as the United Nations (UN), World Trade Organization (WTO), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which influence and interact with global state governments. Other examples are non-government organizations, which often focus on specific social justice issues at various levels whether local or transnational. These NGOs, like Amnesty International, the International Red Cross/Red Crescent Society's or Exodus Cry International seek to influence legislation and policy of state governments regarding their issues of focus. Still further, multinational corporations or transnational companies are companies with a global reach, inserting foreign direct investment through their corporate operations. These MNCs or TNCs create jobs often elevating the national and local economies of the international states they partner with. These TNCs are, "...companies and organizations the activities of which meet with full approval and support from one or more national governments" (Josselin and Wallace 2001, 2). These various designations for non-state actors are considered legitimate by the global community operating within global and state rule of law.

Illegitimate and illegal non-state actors are also having an increasing influence on state governments and global governance. Transnational organized crime groups, international terrorist organizations and cells, are a growing common place in global affairs. Often legit-

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imate trade routes between states become the means of moving illicit cargo (whether human or otherwise) between those states (Friman and Andreas 1999, vii). The global nation state system seems to be in retreat from legal legitimate transnational actors and the rapid increase in globalization, and illegitimate illegal actors are taking advantage of this perceived retreat (Ibid. 1999, 3). Though the focus of this article is primarily on Facebook as a non-state actor, it would be naïve of states and civil society to think that legal and legitimate means of communication were not being used in illegitimate illegal ways. The main point in mentioning illegal non-state actors is simply to bring to light the reality of both positive and negative non-state actors, which impact state policy-making.

Multinational corporations or transnational corporations partner with states, impact economies and advance global trade in dramatic ways. “These actors are primarily transnational in organization and objectives: that is to say that they operate on a crossborder basis, pursue the same set of goals everywhere, and address a global audience” (Josselin and Wallace 2001, 3). These non-state actors (MNCs, TNCs, NGOs, etc) ‘...flourish within a relatively peaceful and stable international system, with an underlying consensus about the rules of international interaction and the legitimacy of the state units’ (Ibid. 2001, 4). Any company that engages in transnational economic activities (i.e. imports and exports) is not considered a TNC, ‘...until they have branches or subsidiaries outside their home country’ (Baylis et.al. 2011, 330). Therefore, a more complete definition of non-state actors is warranted for this analysis.

Our definition of non-state actors...includes organizations: largely or entirely autonomous from central government funding and control: emanating from the market economy, or from political impulses beyond state control and direction; operating as or participating in networks which extend across the boundaries of two or more states thus engaging in ‘transnational’ relations, linking political systems, economies, societies; acting in ways which affect political outcomes, either within one or more states or within international institutions either purposefully or semi-purposefully, either as their primary objective or as one aspect of their activities (Josselin and Wallace 2001, 3-4).

Using this definition, and considering our question, it is hard to disqualify the social media giant from this designation as a transnational corporation (TNC) and therefore a non-state actor.

Facebook is a transnational corporation and a global influencer in the social media cosmos. Facebook’s political influence was most recently debated during the 2016 US national electoral campaign. In a recent Pew Research study, ‘2/3rds of social media users, “say they’ve modified their stance on a social or political issue because of material they saw on social media,” and that ‘17% said social media changed their view of a specific candidate (in the recent US national election); suggesting that, ‘...65% of US adults get their news from social media’ (Roberts 2016). As later stated by election analyzers, ‘Trump’s campaign has utterly trounced Hillary Clinton’s at utilizing Facebook, and especially video on Facebook’ (Roberts 2016). The 2016 US National election cycle created a major shift in policy debate and candidate perception. It appears that Clinton’s unwillingness to vet policy via Facebook and Twitter significantly hindered her campaign. And in the words of ‘...Ed Wasserman, the dean of UC Berkeley’s Graduate School of Journalism, “You had a



whole set of media having influence without really having authority. And the media that spoke with authority ... didn't really have the influence" (Condliffe 2016). Media authority shifted this electoral cycle. And the unintended consequence of staying with mainstream conventional media outlets undermined Clinton's campaign with those still indecisive votes that were so precious election night. In essence Clinton assumed that the American public wouldn't take serious Trump's banter on social media, and her inability to make the change cost her the election.

Recent Trends in Global Government and Governance

In the last 20+ years, global trends in government and governance have noted a significant shift in the authority of states and their relationships with non-state actors. As the complexity of the global state system has increased, managing the advancement of globalization, and the blurring of geopolitical spaces has developed into an unavoidable problem. "Transnational companies, global financial markets, private and public... networks are increasingly taking fundamental decisions and creating new authorities. As a consequence, many national governments only have to choose whether to adjust, or not..." (Telo 2001, 9). This perceived retreat of the global state system from its dominant place of authority is due to several factors. Two such causal factors are the rapid increase of technology and the '...accelerated mobility of capital' (Strange 1997, 367). As new technologies enable the rapid development of "global homogenization" connecting humans cross culturally, new beliefs, values, ideas and tastes are formed (Ibid. 1997, 365). Through this means geopolitical spaces are blurred, resources are shared, and suddenly new networks are formed that do not adhere to a state public but a regional or global civil society.

This global society is adapting to its new norms, ways and means. Facebook, for example, transfers currency via its own systems in just a few hours when national banks could take a couple of business days. Facebook also allows for the grouping of norms across national, state and ethnic boundaries. You can find a Facebook group for just about anything! As well, the rapid transfer of information via social media companies like Facebook and Twitter make one man's issue, a potential global issue. Consider the change in sharing broadcast information via trained cameramen/women by way of a satellite uplink, as reported by well-known journalists; compared today with the almost immediate Facebook Live or Twitter Live broadcasts by your average untrained citizen— this is a significant difference in journalism. This new communication space called social media is challenging the edited point of views offered by mainstream broadcast journalism. What is broadcast by the common citizen is raw unedited and perceived to be accurate or true. This new communication space has developed rapidly on a global scale but policy to regulate and give governance has not maintained this same pace in kind (Wolf 2001, 182). The question is why has policy not kept pace? Are state governments ignoring the developing issues? Do states see an issue at all? Or is it simply a case of states not knowing what to do or how to proceed—in other words, do they lack strategy? After all, international leaders and governments recognize the influence and power of Facebook, but the question is, do these leaders and states know what to do about FB and Mark Zuckerberg? "In short, the world badly needs *someone* to act as the "global conscience," to represent broad public interests that do not readily fall under the purview of individual territorial states or that states have



shown themselves wont to ignore” (Florini 2000, 4). These broad interest will not go away and therefore, new political and social policy and legislation but emerge.

The Role of Social Media in the Growing Global Civil Society

Social media has become the new communication space for a growing global civil society and its networks. Transatlantic or Transpacific communication that once took days or hours now happens in seconds to minutes. As companies like Facebook link individuals with issues globally, suddenly the leverage of united global public is a powerful influencer of state governments. This rapid means of connecting publics provides an avenue for the rise of social movements since communication is such a major key to social networks. These transnational communications systems, like Facebook, have an impact on, ‘...framing issues for collective debates, and proposing specific solutions’ (Karns and Mingst 2004, 221). These systems, and the leaders/business owners who drive them are influential actors, with no geopolitical burden. In this way, Facebook behaves like a non-state actor.

In addition, resources flow across the Internet and are often not susceptible to the common policies or constraints as other less fluid resources. For example, when downloading films, software or music, taxes become hard to calculate and collect (Wolf 2001, 187). Therefore global civil society is taking advantage of the online trading opportunity but state governments are left holding an empty bag unable to tax in appropriate ways. In other words, it may be time for states to reshape taxation on online purchases. Where is the policy and legislation for such opportunities?

Lastly, social media needs the infrastructure and stability states provide. It is the state that initially provides and identifies the space non-state actors can influence. The foundation of the global state system is the legitimate and legal geopolitical state. Nonstate actors cannot collect taxes to pay for infrastructure and provide a military for security. Thus, transnational companies like Facebook need the infrastructure and security provided by the state, it’s policies and legislation (Wolf 2001, 190). The influence Facebook wields as a non-state actor operates within the geopolitical space of the global state system. Facebook certainly wouldn’t want to bite the hand that feeds and stabilizes its opportunities.

Conclusion

In this research project it appears that we can affirm that Facebook does behave like a non-state actor. From Josselin and Wallace we clearly conclude that FB is autonomous from central government operating beyond state controls, originates from a strong market economy, networks beyond and across international geopolitical boundaries, and influences political outcomes (Josselin and Wallace 2001, 3-4). Under such a designation, state governments need to consider the overall impact of FB’s influence. Edward Snowden challenges the impact of social media networks especially as they, “...get more reckless [when] they establish dominance...[and] to have one company that has enough power to reshape the way we think – I don’t think I need to describe how dangerous that is” (Conger 2016).



States need to analyze the impact and influence of social media networks for several reasons. First, as Castell argues, social media networks are the new communication spaces for civil society. Debate over important social issues take place via social media and if governments do not join the discussion, they run risk of losing touch with their publics. As we've seen in this last US national election cycle, this social communication space can heavily impact the course of national electoral decisionmaking. In addition, this communication space may challenge the legitimacy or identity of actors. Public opinion heavily influenced by social media can cause society to question the legitimacy of a state government to represent their electorate or cause the society to question their identity as a whole. In either case, instability may result as publics question the legitimacy of government or identity of society (Castells 2005, 10). Secondly, states need to be aware of 'media politics'. Many key tactics deployed by non-state actors is to build support for their causes through media politics – i.e. garnering the support of public opinion and perception. In this way, governments are pressured not to lose voters or the support of NGOs, TNCs, or MNCs (Castells 2005, 13). Thirdly, states should research why social media has become the new authoritative forum for discussing social issues. States should be made aware of the possibility that public rational discourse is being challenged by social issues in global civil society. Publics are flexing their muscle and states must listen.

Fourthly, states should safeguard the Internet as an autonomous means of communication (Ibid. 2005, 15). To endanger over regulation of the Internet welcomes the disturbance of a legitimate and authoritative means of mass communication at present. As seen by the uprisings in the Arab Spring (2011), the regulation of cell phone use and access to social media escalated societal unrest.² Fifthly, states should partner to create constitutional rights protections for their publics. Freedom of communication and speech legislation should be expanded to protect citizens from the abuses of media power. And finally, states should be more transparent in online media space. Increasing the dialogue between states and their publics increases the security of societies with their leaders (Castells 2005, 15). Such transparency increases the confidence of citizens that their government is leading not just controlling.

Resources

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