

# Internet use promotes democracy best in countries that are already partially free

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Although use of the internet has been credited with helping spur democratic revolutions in the Arab world and elsewhere, a new multinational study suggests the internet is most likely to play a role only in specific situations.

Researchers at Ohio State University found that the internet spurs pro-democratic attitudes most in countries that already have introduced some reforms in that direction.

"Instead of the internet promoting fundamental political change, it seems to reinforce political change in countries that already have at least some level of democratic freedoms," said Erik Nisbet, lead author of the study and assistant professor of communication at Ohio State University.

"[Internet use](#) is a less effective means to mobilize citizens for democracy in extremely authoritarian countries."

In addition, demand for democracy is highest in a country when more people are connected to the internet and, most importantly, when they spend more time online.

"[Internet penetration](#) in a country matters in terms of how much people want democratic reforms, but it is even more important that people are spending greater amounts of time on the internet and that they are connected to other people in their community," said Elizabeth Stoycheff, a co-author of the study and doctoral student in communication at Ohio

State.

Nisbet and Stoycheff conducted the study with Katy Pearce of the University of Washington. Their study appears in the April 2012 issue of the *Journal of Communication*, a special issue dedicated to social media and political change.

The researchers analyzed previously collected data on 28 countries in sub-Saharan Africa and Asia. This included surveys of 37,549 people who participated in the 2008 Afrobarometer and 2006-2008 Asian Barometer surveys. Included were questions that evaluated how much the citizens in each country demanded democracy and their frequency of internet use.

In addition, the researchers looked at country-level data that measured how democratic each country was, and their levels of internet penetration, international bandwidth per internet user and other sociodemographic factors.

The results suggest that the internet is most likely to play a role in democratization in countries that have a moderate to high internet penetration and that have at least a partly democratic political regime.

In countries ruled by authoritarian regimes, people may have access to the internet, but the rulers may control the content available, how users may interact with each other, and whether they may get information from outside their own country, Stoycheff said.

"The internet's effect on citizen demand for democracy is somewhat contingent on both the technological context and the political context," Stoycheff said.

Based on the results of the study, Nisbet said there are some countries

that currently appear to have the right political and technological mix for the internet to play a role in social and political change. Those countries include Kenya, Senegal, Uganda, Singapore and Zambia.

But countries in the survey that are run by highly authoritarian regimes, such as Vietnam and Zimbabwe, are not likely to see democracy flourishing anytime soon, regardless of use of the internet, the findings suggest.

Other countries, like Mozambique and Tanzania, are partly free but have a low citizen demand for democracy and little internet penetration, Nisbet said. But if internet use grows in these [countries](#), it has the potential to encourage people there to challenge their autocratic regimes.

"Our results suggest that the internet can't plant the seed of democracy in a country," Nisbet said. "However, the internet may help [democracy](#) flourish if it has already started to grow."

Provided by The Ohio State University

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