

# Could growing Internet use inspire more democratic uprisings?

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While events like the Arab Spring brought hope that the internet could inspire the growth of democracy in authoritarian countries, a new study offers a reality check.

Researchers studying Russian and Ukrainian internet users found that their demand for democratic reforms in their [countries](#) depended on what they were doing when they connected to the web.

Those who were on the internet primarily to get news and share political opinions with others were most likely to demand more democracy in their countries.

Those who visited the web mostly for entertainment purposes - such as watching cat videos - were less likely to say they wanted more democracy in their countries and believed they had more democracy than they actually did.

While it's not surprising that people who use the internet mostly for entertainment aren't tuned into politics, this study shows something more than that, said Erik Nisbet, co-author of the study and associate professor of communication at The Ohio State University.

"In our study, people who used the internet for entertainment actually thought they had more democracy than they did. That means they actually showed more support for the authoritarian leaders in their country," Nisbet said.

That result should be sobering for those who believe use of the web will always be a power for good in non-democratic countries, said study co-author Elizabeth Stoycheff, a graduate of Ohio State who is now an assistant professor of communication at Wayne State University.

"Just like any other form of communication, the internet isn't inherently good or bad for democracy. It all depends on how people choose to use it," Stoycheff said.

Nisbet and Stoycheff conducted the study with Dmitry Epstein of the University of Illinois at Chicago. Their results were published recently in the journal *Communication Research*.

The researchers did an online survey of 593 Ukrainian and 506 Russian internet users in the spring of 2013. The two countries were chosen as case studies because they both have types of governance where the internet has the most potential to spur democratic attitudes: Russia has an authoritarian regime and Ukraine has a stalled transitioning democracy.

At the same time, the two countries share a common geography, culture and history.

Participants completed a variety of surveys. One examined how much they preferred a democratic government. They were also asked how democratic they thought their countries were, how satisfied they were with how democracy works in their countries and how favorably they felt toward their governments' leaders.

Internet use was measured by questions asking them how often they used the internet for entertainment and recreational purposes, such as playing video games and watching videos, movies and TV shows.

They were also asked how often they used the internet for more political purposes, such as viewing news media sites and, specifically, for paying attention to political issues.

The results show "the darker side of the internet," the authors wrote, where an increase in choices "allows citizens to further alienate themselves from political affairs."

Russian participants' use of the internet had both direct and indirect effects on how much they demanded democracy in their countries.

The direct effect was that people who went to the web for news and political information demanded more democracy than those who used the web for recreational purposes. The indirect effect was that the participants' use of the internet affected how much democracy they felt they already had, which then had an impact on how much democracy they wanted.

For example, people who went to the web mostly for recreation thought they already had higher levels of democracy in their country than others did, which meant they supported their current leaders more and expressed less demand for more democracy.

"Entertainment internet makes citizens less critical and more pacified with how their authoritarian governments are operating," Stoycheff said.

For the Ukrainian participants, only the indirect effects had an impact on demand for democracy.

Nisbet noted that the conflict between Russia and Ukraine over control of Crimea occurred about one year after the data for this study were collected. The conflict will have significant impacts on how the internet may be associated with democratization within the two countries in the

short-term.

But the overall conclusions of the research remain valid, he said. The researchers are looking to replicate the study in Turkey, Iran and other countries.

Nisbet said the findings would probably apply to other countries - people who go to the web mostly for recreation probably care less about politics and are more supportive of their countries' leadership.

The implications of the research are not limited to non-democratic contexts, Nisbet noted.

"Research shows that watching TV entertainment leads to more conservative, authoritarian attitudes in democratic countries like the United States, so the question is open on how the consequences for using the web mostly for fun may impact democratic beliefs and values in established democracies," he said.

"However, bottom line, the Internet is not a democratic cure all promoting democracy. If you want to mobilize people to support [democracy](#) in an autocratic country, you need more people who are using the internet to learn about what is going on and to discuss political issues," Nisbet said.

Provided by The Ohio State University

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