The Power of Social Media in Coordinating and Organizing Protests

In November of 2013, Ukraine erupted with furious protests in response to President Viktor Yanukovych’s decision to not sign an association agreement with the European Union. Protesters quickly gathered in Independence Square, flanked by lofty symbols of Ukraine: the city’s historic protector, the Archangel Michael, and the hearth-mother Bereginia. The EuroMaidan protests swelled, and have reached numbers not seen since the 2004 Orange Revolution.

How has EuroMaidan achieved such a large and coordinated protest effort? Through the power of social media and social networks.

Social media and social networks have been the crucial tools in disseminating information to protesters, constantly providing updates on the situation, and telling protesters where to go and when to be there. The protesters are able to quickly interact with organizers and other protesters via social media and mobile phones, allowing information to be quickly and effectively disseminated. Horizontal communication in the context of organic protest is essential to maintaining a protest movement, as opposed to vertical communication, where no interaction is possible.

Olga Onuch and the Ukrainian Protest Project conducted an in-depth survey of Ukrainians participating in the protests. According to their research, Facebook, VKontakte, internet news sites, text messages, and emails were instrumental in a participant’s decision to engage in protest. For first-time protesters, all of them “reported receiving text-messages, emails, and telephone calls directly from friends and family pushing them to join-in and telling them where to go.”

The NYU Social Media and Political Participation laboratory has also extensively researched the use of social media in the Ukrainian protests. They have gathered data on Twitter (collecting hash tags relevant to Ukraine) and Facebook (collecting popular posts on Ukraine). Facebook tends to be geared toward Ukrainians (the vast majority of the EuroMaidan pages are in Ukrainian), and provides information for non-protesters and logistical information for those participating in the protests. There is an extensive amount of interaction on these Facebook pages.

Twitter posts, on the other hand, have been mostly in English. The NYU researchers conclude that Twitter is being used as a format to spread information internationally.

Government Forces, (namely Berkut) have also been utilizing social media. However, their use has been ineffective or has backfired against them. Notably, a video showing a naked protester being beaten by Berkut quickly went viral. Obviously recorded by a Berkut officer, this video has shown the world the violent and brutal nature of the protests, and strengthened the position of the protesters.

As the situation in Ukraine continues to evolve, social media continues to play an instrumental role in organizing the protests, and to share and spread information throughout the international community.
Here are some useful links:

- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B802FWm6uyk
- http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2013/12/10/world/europe/ukraine-timeline.html?_r=1#/time296_8301
- https://www.facebook.com/EuroMaydan
- http://hromadske.tv/
- http://olgaonuch.com/

Sources:

- http://smapp.nyu.edu/

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