Book Review: Political Turbulence: How Social Media Shape Collective Action by Helen Margetts, Peter John, Scott Hale, and Taha Yasseri....

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1 author:
Kioko Ireri
United States International University-Africa
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Book Reviews


**Reviewed by:** Kioko Ireri, United States International University–Africa, Nairobi, Kenya
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“Social media inject turbulence into political life. They facilitate a non-normal distribution of mobilizations, where most fail and a few succeed dramatically, oiled by social information and visibility and propelled forward by individual thresholds and tipping points” write Helen Margetts, Peter John, Scott Hale, and Taha Yasseri in *Political Turbulence: How Social Media Shape Collective Action*, a statement that encapsulates the book’s theme—the relationship between social media and contemporary collective action. The authors strongly demonstrate how Internet-based social media reshape the context within which citizens operate and influence their decisions on political engagements.

Margetts is professor of Society and the Internet and director of the Oxford Internet Institute at the University of Oxford, where Hale and Yasseri are a data scientist and a research fellow in computational science, respectively. John is professor of political science and public policy at University College London. Their work is founded on Mancur Olson’s *The Logic of Collective Action* (1965) and Russell Hardin’s *Collective Action* (1982). Big data mining and experiments were used to collect data related to the association between social media and collective action.

Margetts et al. offer three reasons why their work is important: (a) political movements based on digital coordination are rapidly gathering momentum; (b) in the digital age environment, the relationship between social media and collective action is the most significant challenge facing political science, and (c) from the dawn of the present century, the Internet has become a potentially important influence on collective action, because its widespread use affects political participation.

A critical question is mirrored in the book’s title and Chapter 3: How do social media cause “political turbulence” or what the authors call “chaotic pluralism”? From the book, one could identify three major reasons that shed more light on the nexus between social media and political turbulence. First, through social media participation in politics, people are exposed to social influences, in the form of knowledge of what other people are doing, or the awareness that what they do will be visible to others. So their own actions are interdependent with those of large numbers of other people—causing
Chain reactions that can scale up to large mobilizations, as witnessed in Brazil, United States, United Kingdom, Spain, Turkey, and the Arab world in recent times. Second, Margetts et al. use the analogy of the butterfly effect theory to explain chaotic pluralism. The theory, coined by Philip Merilees, assumes that a flap of a butterfly’s wings in Brazil could set off a tornado in Texas. From collective action perspective, it means that a tiny perturbation in one system parameter, as small as a flap of a butterfly wings, could usher in a huge difference in the long-term trajectory of a non-linear chaotic system, similar to the global weather system. Third, the Internet and social media may embody some pluralist ideas in their ability to rebalance power relationships, blur organizational boundaries, enable bottom-up dynamism, and reclaim politics by society.

The book carries eight chapters, with Chapter 1 demonstrating how collective action has gone digital. Chapter 2 examines the closer relationship among collective action, the Internet, and social media—arguing that social media are a permanent feature of the “political weather.” The hypothesis that social media cause political instability is tested in Chapter 3. In Chapter 4, the authors report on a quasi-field experiment, conducted remotely via a custom-built interface that tests the influence of varying levels of social information on people’s willingness to take part in collective action. Chapter 5 compares how the effects of visibility affect people’s willingness to contribute to collective goods, beyond the role of social information. In Chapter 6, they explore the relationship between personality and susceptibility to social influence. Differential reactions to social influence could help to explain why some mobilizations succeed and others fail, an idea captured in Chapter 7. Finally, in Chapter 8, Margetts and colleagues pull together the arguments and evidence in the book, to establish how new forms of collective action generally impact on the practice of politics.

Obviously, through the use of big data mining and experiments, the researchers have shown that social media have a bearing when it comes to collective actions in politics. As such, Political Turbulence provides useful information about the role of social media in shaping political agendas. In other words, researchers of political engagements via the Internet will find the book useful to advance knowledge in this field. The book’s central theme, which revolves around “political turbulence”—or perhaps we could say, political disruption—during an era of digital explosion is well-supported throughout the chapters, especially Chapter 3 and those focusing on data-collection methods.

The only downside of the book is that data from experimental research has limited external validity, something which calls for the use of other data-collection techniques such as survey, in future research. Thus, buttressing their findings with other data-collection methods would take us even closer to the truth about the relationship between social media and political participation.