TECHNOSOCIALITY:
WHEN TECHNOLOGY MEETS
SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

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THE 2010/2011 REVOLUTIONS in Tunisia and Egypt were largely organised, supported and driven through the use of social media-based tools like Facebook, Twitter and mobile phone technology which allowed for extensive political expression against government corruption both on- and offline. Calls for socio-political transformation heard on the streets of Tunis and Cairo were echoed around the globe, gaining much sympathetic support internationally. The recent events in North Africa may be a sign of things to come for the rest of the continent as technology continues to reach more Africans. Narnia Bohler-Muller and Charl van der Merwe argue that the use of social media tools has high potential for bringing about political and social change throughout the continent as their use enhances opportunities for political participation and opens new spaces for active citizenship.

"The day of the revolution against torture, poverty, corruption and unemployment" was the name given to an online event created on the social networking site Facebook, and scheduled for 25 January 2011, to express solidarity with the emerging socio-political protests in Egypt.

The uprising against Hosni Mubarak, the Egyptian ruler of 30 years' standing, and his government manifested in large-scale public demonstrations in Egypt's two largest cities, Cairo and Alexandria, that actively lasted for 18 days. As result of these prolonged but largely peaceful public demonstrations, Hosni Mubarak officially resigned as president of Egypt on 11 February 2011.

What was remarkable about this protest – following the trends established in Tunisia's "Jasmine Revolution" – was that it was organised and supported to a large extent by the use of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter as communication tools: more than 80 000 people online joined the Facebook "event" in support of the Egyptian revolution.

Another example of social media-based action that contributed to public awareness in Egypt about dissatisfaction with the Mubarak regime was a Facebook page, titled "We are all Khaled Said". The page was dedicated to the memory of Said who was beaten to death by police in the city of Alexandria for wanting to expose government corruption. Using dramatic photographs of unrest in the city, posters were also created online to advertise the planned protests of Friday 28 January 2011,

Another interesting dimension of the North African socio-political activism is the role played by mobile phone and internet usage via mobile phones. On the African continent, mobile phone usage is expanding rapidly. According to the United Nations' *Africa Renewal* magazine, Africa today has more than 400 million mobile phone subscribers.

According to Essoungou (2010) there is massive interest in the use of mobile phones and social media in Africa. Facebook is the most visited website by internet users on the African continent, and 17 million people on the continent currently use Facebook. This may appear to be a small percentage, considering that the population of Africa stands at just over one billion, but it depicts an increase of seven million from 2009.

There are, however, still many constraints and challenges in Africa regarding access to

mobile phone technology and internet connectivity. Africa remains the continent with the lowest internet penetration rate with about 100 million users, or one out of every 10 on the continent being connected to and using the internet.

Erik Hersman, prominent social media blogger and an entrepreneur who has helped to drive the development of an internet platform called *Ushahidi*, notes that: "…with mobile phone penetration already high across the continent, and as we get to critical mass with Internet usage in some of Africa's leading countries (Kenya, South Africa, Ghana, Nigeria, Egypt) … a seismic shift will happen with services, products and information" (quoted by Essoungou).

The first revolution of this century began in Tunisia, North Africa. Alex Howard, a technology reporter, writes about the reflections of Rim Nour, a young Tunisian online activist (or "hacktivist") who participated in the Jasmine Revolution that began in earnest when a fruit vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, set himself ablaze in response to police cruelty.

Although the role of Wikileaks has been speculated upon (the protests in Tunisia began shortly after the release of the "Palestine Papers" by Al Jazeera), according to Nour, the 2010 Tunisian revolution was not a Wikileaks or Facebook or Twitter revolution but an uprising fundamentally powered by people and the socio-political and economic conditions of their lives.

The people of Tunisia chose to protest against government corruption and unemployment with communication tools that were mostly web-based or mobile phone related. Consequently, the online and offline worlds interacted with one another in unprecedented ways (many expert observers have commented on the decline of the distinctions between "cyberspace" and the material world, see Howard 2011).

The online world played an active role in fuelling the struggle, and camera phones and other mobile devices kept communication open and accessible. As Bryce Roberts has observed, "mobile devices are the Gutenberg presses of our generation" (quoted by Howard 2011).

Besides the internet and mobile revolutions, Nour also emphasises the role of Al Jazeera, which has played a galvanising role in most of the Arab protests. The livestream AlJazeera.net creates awareness and allows a global audience to experience to some extent what is happening far from their own homes.

Nour highlights four roles that social media played in the Tunisian revolution: grassroots mobilisation, the role of organising the rise of civil society and active citizenship, the role of being a counter-rumour of propaganda tool, and the role of helping people to analyse statements released by government (in Howard 2011).

Nour concludes that the Tunisian revolution would have happened without social media intervention, but "it wouldn't have happened as fast".

The Tahrir Square protests: a marriage of technology and social behaviour

Regarding events in Cairo that were instigated by the Tunisian uprising, once again it was access to social media and mobile technology, as well as the coverage and interventions of Al Jazeera, that assisted in fuelling public protests against Mubarak and his government.

In an interview, journalism professor Claudette Artwick, who conducts ongoing research on the impact of social media, discusses the recent events in Egypt. According to Artwick it was the marriage of technology and social behaviour that played a big role in the revolution. She has named this phenomenon "technosociality" (in Howard 2011).

This relationship could be seen at many levels, including people organising protests, media coverage of the story, and government reacting to the uprising with attempts at controlling traditional and social media.

Google executive Wael Ghonim has been credited for initiating the Egyptian revolution on Facebook. He started a page in June 2010 mourning Khaled Said's death. Said was reportedly pulled out of an internet café by plainclothes police and beaten to death because he had obtained evidence of police corruption. People were outraged, and Ghonim's Facebook page, as well as several others, provided a community space or platform where people could call attention to government abuses.

The day Mubarak resigned, Ghonim tweeted, "Please don't make me the face of this revolution. It's not true as every Egyptian was the face of this revolution."

Analysing the use of social media in the Egyptian revolution, Artwick emphasises many of the same points as Nour does on Tunisia.

First, journalists used Twitter to report on the ground in Egypt by posting their direct observations in real time. They also uploaded links to their stories, photos, videos, or blogs. For instance, Nicholas D Kristof, a reporter for *The New York Times*, has a popular Facebook page and is currently posting and tweeting from Libya.

Second, Al Jazeera played a leading role by tweeting and posting links to photos and video that was then also used by other mainstream news sources.

Third, the Egyptian people themselves contributed to the news. Their tweets were picked up by journalists and bloggers and re-tweeted by them. This appears to have marked the emergence of a new form of reporting, referred to on CNN as "I-Reports", which is seen as a form of public or popular journalism.

This allows people to contribute to the news with pictures, videos and commentary from any breaking news stories around the globe. When Mubarak tried to control the open flow of online and mobile information by blocking Twitter and Facebook, people managed to access the services through their mobile phones and turned to third-party applications like Hootsuite and TweetDeck to tweet.

When the government seized video cameras, reporters and protesters used applications (apps) on their mobile phones to record audio and post it to Twitter. *The New York Times* transmitted video through satellite devices and Google created the Speak to Tweet service.

It was apparent that it was near impossible to stall the flow of information both in Egypt and beyond, although Mubarak did use national television as a propaganda tool. But the socio-political movement had gained too much momentum.

As the social, political and technological environment has developed, some have already begun to explore new opportunities for digital activism. Part of this activism is a trend of protecting freedoms on the internet by, for instance, the group Anonymous that have referred to their interventions as "new activism" in the sense that revolutions can now be broadcast and as such the protests will spread to other countries where government oppression and corruption has taken its toll.

Some have argued that this type of new activism will spread across the African continent, mentioning Mugabe's reign of 30 years and the volatile service protests in South Africa as candidates.

The scenarios sketched above are not based on a naive attitude of cyber-utopianism, where the internet equals democracy, but are examples used to illustrate the developing potential of technology to influence the socio-political climate across the continent.

"The political power of social media"

Clay Shirky, in an article with the above title that appeared in *Foreign Affairs,* refers to a number of countries and world regions where social mass media have been used in the past 10 years to trigger and initiate changes in the governments

and societies of those countries. These are all examples of the positive impact of social media on such events.

From an analysis of the events in North Africa over the past months, it is clear that social media here also had an important role to play. However, Shirky also raises two arguments against the idea that social media can make a difference in the national politics of a state.

The first is the fact that the tools themselves are actually ineffective, a critique which has been mostly used by Malcolm Gladwell in *The New Yorker* on the grounds that such actions cannot bring about any useful action when casual participants such as large-scale social protests seek social change through low-cost activities such as joining a particular Facebook group like the "Save Darfur" group.

Shirky says that even though this critique is correct, it is not central to the question of the power of social media. The fact that actors who are barely committed and who just join Facebook groups and make comments online does not mean that actors who are very committed cannot use social media affectively to influence socio-political change.

The second argument is that these tools can produce as much harm to any process of democratisation as they can produce good. This has to do with the fact that the state is gaining increasingly sophisticated and more technologically advanced means of monitoring and interdicting social media tools. Authoritarian states are increasingly shutting down communications networks and grids in their countries to deny dissidents the opportunity and resources to co-ordinate and broadcast documentation of any event in real time.

It is thus necessary to point out that social media tools can and will be used as tools of state oppression. However, the success of social networking in providing momentum and support to the popular uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt cannot be denied.

Conclusion: social media on the African continent

Historically, revolutionary movements began with people gathering together in the marketplace or town hall to discuss their common grievances. There have been spaces such as these in almost every society throughout history with the atmosphere at the market being politically effective, as in 18th century Paris. At the moment, social media partly play the role of this public space by facilitating social interaction, information sharing, and fast and easy communication.

The organisers of protests demanding democratisation and socio-economic change in the modern context play a similar role to those of French, Russian and Chinese activists who met publicly and in secret to organise protests against state oppression and corruption. It is significant that both Tunisia and Egypt have been referred to as "leaderless" revolutions. The success of the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt teaches us that the youth are globally connected and see democracy as part of their identity as people deserving a say in government. This is significant as it raises the potential for developing a more "direct" form of participative democracy, with many more voices joining in "real world" and online socio-political activism.

The African Union (AU) declared 2011 the year of "Shared Values". This is a discussion that needs to filter down to member states. Governments must engage their people on issues of good governance and democracy, or other African leaders may face the same fate as their compatriots in North Africa. The tide of popular expression is rising and resonating across the continent.

In South Africa, recent attempts at creating a government framework in the form of a tribunal to regulate the press and to ensure "ethical reporting" do not take into account the fact that a new form of journalism has emerged. Based on lessons we are learning as we write, the suppression of information, communication, knowledge-sharing and experience-sharing is becoming more difficult.

In fact, reactions against regulation and censorship

have become quite radical in nature. Every conventional newspaper and news broadcaster could be controlled or censored or shut down totally, and the internet could be interfered with, but online and mobile communications will continue to spread. Social media activists, bloggers, tweeters and speak-to-tweeters keep the world updated even if the television cameras have been switched off.

Through the use of internet technology, organisations such as Anonymous will continue to protect the freedom of those who speak out against oppression and corruption.

In essence, the over-regulation of the right to freedom of expression and association cannot achieve its ends in the context of connected societies where ordinary citizens – most of them young – cannot easily be manipulated or controlled.

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