# You Can't Stop the Signal

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CAIRO, Egypt—As a child of the 1980s, I grew up watching science fiction television shows and movies—all set in the "not-so-distant future." Holographic communication, teleportation, and flying cars were central tenets of that universe. And while I marveled at the prospect of these technologies, I was most fascinated by the "magical technological device"—that could be used to complete any task, from basic communication to dissemination of news to national security. Though I later learned that this device was nothing more than a plot twist used to advance these stories, I gained something quite special from this twist—a belief in the promise of the future.

Not surprisingly, when the 21st century arrived, I was among those severely disappointed. Terrorism and conflict, a weak economy, and a compromised environment littered the landscape. Worse yet, there were no flying cars. We still couldn't teleport—the dream of anyone who suffered through Cairo traffic or had to apply for a visa to visit a foreign country. But amid these disappointments was a silver lining. The "magical technological device" had arrived, and I owned one. You might know it more colloquially as the smartphone.

My smartphone allows me to connect in a number of ways that increase exponentially by the day, provides me with real-time information on any question I might ask, and now can be used to pay for my purchases, arrange for my pick up, play any media I wish, and in the case of an emergency, can come to my aid. It even includes artificial intelligence that reminds me of my flight, alerts me to best routes, and lets me know when exciting events are planned, without instruction or input from my side. Like many of my generation, I had become so jaded with technology and its ease of use, that I completely missed the magic I now own and mistreat. My phone fulfills every

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function and promise held by the "magical technological device," except perhaps serving as a weapon that can vanquish villains.

Then the January 25 revolution happened. We brought down Egypt's dictator Hosni Mubarak, and I stood corrected once again because my phone also did have that power. It simply wasn't advertised on the label.

REVOLUTIONARY CONNECTIVITY
Growing up under Mubarak's rule meant living in the 1980s indefinitely. Our movie stars rarely changed, our singers offered generic pop music fixated on love, abandonment, or both, and our government revolved around the same faces, policies, and modes of operation—with hardly an improvement in quality or methodology. Even Mubarak's achievements had been those achieved by other countries in the 1980s: the creation of new cities and suburbs, growth in the private and industrial sectors of the economy, and the introduction of a globalization-fueled consumerist culture from McDonald's to Victoria's Secret. And all this grafted onto Egyptian society. But until the advent of the Internet, we weren't fully aware that we were lagging behind.

With that awareness, the revolution was born. The Internet generation recognized that Egypt was stuck in a particular brand of 1980s cultural, political, and economic stagnation. While other countries had advanced exponentially in the 21st century, Egypt remained a relic of the past. In an effort to advance a stalled state, these individuals organized one revolutionary leap. The problem, however, is that they tried to leap without the full support of the country behind them. Many consider this prematurity a source of the bloody struggle that soon followed. Regardless of the outcome,

it is certain that the unstoppable force of a connected and informed youth met the immoveable force of an archaic set of institutions fighting to preserve the status quo. And despite the many hurdles since, the battle continues, in large part due to the marriage of historical inevitability and new communication technologies.

HOW IT ALL BEGAN
As an early adopter of social media (back when it was called the "blogosphere"), I witnessed its influence spread rapidly. Blogs become a means for mass protest. Facebook fuelled further organization, and with the advent of Twitter in 2007, protesters could communicate and document their often-tumultuous journeys in 140-characters or less. In short, by January 2011 there was a well-established network of tools for revolutionaries to employ in their struggle to modernize Egypt.

The January 25 uprising began with "We are all Khaled Said," a Facebook group named for the victim of deadly police brutality in Alexandria. The group's administrators, including Wael Ghonim, met at the Mohamed El-Baradei-for-President campaign in 2010 to create a public Facebook group for political activist recruitment. The activists they selected were then added to secret Facebook groups so they could meet and organize localized protests.

The group experimented with various forms of localized protests, all the while adhering to the principles of civil disobedience and constant communication. After a series of test-run protests and the success of the Tunisian revolution, the activists sprang to action.

The older techno-activists, to which I belonged, had an advantage that the Facebook group did not have—name recognition and a Twitter following (I have

142,000 today, though I am still not recognized as "verified"). As January 25 approached, we divided into multiple camps, each covering a different protest point and providing information to protect protestors from threatening situations. Those who followed us on Twitter either joined the revolution or stayed at home and relayed the information through Blackberry Messenger and WhatsApp. Suddenly, everyone became hyper-aware of the protests playing out in real-time. Many Egyptians soon joined Twitter, thousands within the first 24 hours of the protest. Though some were fearful of the repercussions of participating in social media, all were fascinated by its power to effect political change.

When the Mubarak regime shut down the Internet and all forms of communication on January 28, 2011, it did not silence the revolution. Instead, it inspired thousands of supporters to take to the streets. That day soon became known as the "Day of Rage," when overwhelming numbers of protestors poured into Tahrir Square to demand a different—if not better—tomorrow.

Despite the government's attempts to silence the Internet, Twitter and Facebook remained the main conduit of information effectively combatting state propaganda. When Internet was restored, Twitter became an even more critical tool for mobilization. Whatever needs the protestors had—food, supplies, or otherwise—we would Tweet out to the myriad of followers tracking our every move. After 18 days of somewhat violent protest, Egyptian techno-activists, such as myself, had become the symbols of a revolution we did not lead or control. We were, quite simply, its switchboard.

GOOD, BAD, AND VERY UGLY
In the days that followed, we further explored the limits of social media. Post-

Mubarak, safety became a major issue, as rumors of crime spread fast and furiously. In order to verify crime stories, we asked residents to tweet photo confirmations. Meanwhile, Bey2ollak, a Twitter-based app that crowd-sources information on the state of Cairo's traffic, became a tool to check for the safest route home.

Twitter also helped with logistics and supplies for our activities. When we had clashes or sit-ins, a Twitter account called Tahrir Supplies—created by two girls forbidden by their parents from attending the protests—would tweet lists of medical and food supplies that protesters and field hospitals needed. During the clashes that followed the sniper killing of *Al-Taawun* reporter Mohamed Mahmoud in February 2011, it is estimated that Tahrir Supplies moved some $700,000 worth of medical supplies in one day. The possibilities of a connectivity tool combined with a passionate following seemed limitless.

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Still, while it had its benefits, social media began to exhibit its shortcomings quite early. Its overwhelming flaw was that it was powered by people. While an excellent medium for crowd-sourcing information and urging followers into collective action, it's not a broadcasting network. Rather, it's a two-way conversation between a single person on one side, and thousands on the other. That itself has proved most challenging—especially when only a few of us were on the receiving end.

## ACTION STEPS

• Internet monitoring by the state makes its citizens view it as their enemy. Governments must stop spying on their own citizens or risk the consequences.

• Access to the Internet must be viewed as the universal human right that it is—the best tool to advance less developed countries—and should be treated as such.

• Net neutrality must be protected and maintained by those in power; the people's access to knowledge should not be at the mercy of their ISPs.

• Discussions over how democracies should use the Internet must be replaced by discussions over how the Internet can be used to transform the democratic process itself—long overdue for an update.

*-Mahmoud Salem*

At any given point I could have anywhere from 300 to 600 contacts in an hour, each seeking a response or wanting to embark on a conversation. Each felt slighted if I failed to answer promptly or missed a single mention. Those we couldn't answer took it personally and began railing against "those egotistical twiteratti" who didn't have time to answer the common people anymore. Resentment slowly bred contempt, which eventually turned into antagonism. Our private timeline took on the outlines of an ominous landscape where hundreds, if not thousands, silently waited for a mistake to burn those they once idolized. And then it got worse.

REVOLUTION OF INDIVIDUALS

A revolution organized by social media is by definition a revolution made up of disparate individuals who share similar but general goals. When it came to details, however, the devil lay there smiling. Ideological disagreements reared their ugly heads. Political divisions cracked the collective. Shrillness and extremism quickly replaced rational discourse among even the most renowned activists, who had been al-lies for years. And given their standing, their divisions set the tone for all those who followed. With time, retaining revolutionary legitimacy meant maintaining extreme and emotional positions that offered little in the way of compromise.

Those who in principle fought for freedom of expression and diversity in opinion then silenced opposing points of views. Many activists realized that if they wanted to climb the social hierarchy, they needed to claim to be the only individuals not to have sold out, and build their legitimacy by targeting everyone else's integrity. In return, they would gain the adoration of thousands of new Twitter followers. This means of mediated ascension was nothing short of disastrous.

A unified political decision became impossible. Joining political parties meant you betrayed the revolution for the sake of playing politics. Running for office meant you were a power-hungry sell-out. Voting meant you were participating in a charade and betraying the blood of those who had died protesting. Meanwhile, the dead were immortalized and turned into social media avatars before they were even buried. In

turn, many were used to score policy points or advance political arguments. Protesting became an end to itself, without leading to the creation of anything resembling a concrete or organized structure.

The inevitable conclusion was simple, yet tragic. The revolutionary movement contracted into a strange cultish religion, with its own prophets, saints, martyrs, religious practices, enemies of the faith, and apostates worthy of death. This not only alienated thousands of people who believed in the revolution, it also made it reactionary, open to manipulation, and easy to vilify and destroy. It was group-think on steroids—an abomination of a monster with thousands of arms and no brain.

## A WORLD WITHOUT LEADERS

The Egyptian revolution and its aftermath demonstrated what happens to societies when they gain broad access to technology and connectivity. These capabilities can create a space for new political voices to be heard, while simultaneously killing the democratic political process. Though Egyptian youth participation peaked in the weeks following the revolution, it has been in steady decline despite the rising number of elections over the past four years. While this may be attributed to special conditions in Egypt, it is more likely part of a broader, global trend.

A foreign journalist once asked me if I thought that the weakness inherent in January 25 was that the movement had no leader. I countered that it was impossible to have a leader because such a leader would have had to be supported by the Islamists, the liberals, the centrists, the leftists, and the anarchists. If that person existed, he would have been the next president of Egypt. That said, I ventured that the real problem is that the world is suffering from a leadership crisis at the moment. There are no leaders. I asked her if she considered the president of her country to be her leader, and she recoiled in disgust and vehemently denied it. I asked her who she thought was her leader, and she could not articulate an answer. I asked her if she knew any Americans who viewed Obama as their leader, or any Brits who viewed Cameron as theirs? Not one. And the reason for this crisis in leadership is simple: social media has effectively killed the politician.

Imagine the perfect political leader—with the ideal professional and personal history, look, gravitas, and skills. Now imagine that same leader in today's world of social media—every move under the watchful eye of millions, every statement instantly scrutinized. Imagine that leader sneezing during a video interview, and then sit back and watch how the Internet responds. A video viewed millions of times of the sneeze will be on YouTube and Vine within

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minutes, a hashtag titled #thesneeze will immediately trend, memes of the sneezing face will flood Facebook, and the customary hip-hop remix/mashup featuring the sneeze will appear the next day. Sounds far-fetched? Remember Howard Dean's scream? That happened before Twitter and Facebook. Imagine the response in 2014. Social media has grown most adept at de-

stroying figures because the Internet's various online groups seem to have one trait in common—a spirit for destruction.

This appetite and capacity for destruction is a curious beast because it's very hard to define, though immediately recognizable. Let's visualize cyber-libertarianism mixed with a dash of social responsibility, then add a touch of anti-corporatist sentiment, social liberal secular values, anti-war beliefs, hatred of authority, and you have a tasty stew. Now imagine millions of young people who embrace this spirit with a collective consciousness that drives and fuels it.

While, in theory, participation in the political process is one of the civic duties of citizens of democracies, practice has shown that it has a very low return on investment for most citizens. Many have found governmental and legal structures so entrenched over time as to have made real change all but impossible and improvements little more than incremental. Indeed, even in long-established western democracies, participation in public life, in local democracy, and in civic affairs has been in a serious decline over the past decade. But this trend is particularly disturbing among the youth population, who believe that political participation does nothing more than sustain old and bloated institutions. To make matters worse, there are few politicians left to lead—all thanks to the Internet that young people have grown to embrace and engage.

But who could blame young people, especially those of the developing world, for their disenchantment? For post-millennials, the world offers little in the way of hope. And our priorities do not mitigate this grave reality. These days we emphasize long hours for less pay, and greater efficiency and growth despite rapidly dwindling resources. In addition, thanks to many of our technological developments, there are fewer jobs on the market, and our privacy has been entirely compromised thanks to Apple, Google, and the NSA. All in all, the world seems to be doing little more than re-arranging the deck chairs on the Titanic, while configuring a growing economic class with no access to lifeboats. All this should help explain the growing anger, especially among young people, in Egypt and far beyond.

Connectivity is frightening—offering anyone the power to create discord and conflict amid the population of an Arctic village or from an apartment in Cairo. And while that may make headlines, it really shouldn't be what defines connectivity, for its benefits greatly outweigh its drawbacks. Connectivity enables growth and vitality. Its utility gives power to causes by allowing people to forge temporary ties that create density in action and move toward tangible change online and offline. Like a laser, at the beginning, it was seen primarily as a vehicle for destruction, and now its beneficial applications are innumerable, ranging from communication to construction to medicine. Connectivity gives societies that have very little—whose rulers keep its members in the dark—inclusive access to knowledge and the tools to help determine and improve their future even if they misuse it. If we can only embrace its opportunities, rather than fear the challenges it poses, imagine what it will give them tomorrow. ●