



HACKNEY.

we dreamt of utopia and woke up screaming.

g.k.smith

It is undeniable that the advent of the Internet, and the subsequent forms of new social media, have had a profound impact on global politics. The real question is though: how much impact, and in what ways?

Practically as soon as the uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East began last spring, political and media commentators alike were trying to assess how social media was influencing the outcomes; in January 2011 the American foreign policy magazine *Foreign Affairs* devoted an entire issue to these questions. The answers generally proposed were that while social media isn't always the answer (or solution) to totalitarianism, it is nonetheless a powerful way to unite otherwise dissident voices and (perhaps more importantly) radicalise them into action.

While this vague assertion may be true, it negates the obvious point that is prevalent in every collectivised action that has been orchestrated using digital media: that its participants have only been united in the pursuit of a highly particular goal.

This does not create, as has been suggested, a continued and long-lasting unity, but succeeds only in bringing together normally oppositional groups for the short-term realisation of their shared aim. This is as true for the movements in the Philippines in 2001 as it is for the uprisings associated with the Arab Spring. Furthermore, there are two direct and detrimental implications to this: firstly, because the goals are decidedly short-term it creates a reactionary culture that negates long-term development; and secondly, because of the haste of the reaction, precipitated by the immediacy of social media, it allows for the inclusion of dangerous, and malicious sects within the pursuit for change.

Revolutionary wars, however justified, now leave in their wake the perpet-

uation of short-term solutions, where public discourse and public reaction is based solely on the immediate. Yes, oppressive governments should not be allowed to exist in the 21st century, and the collectivising force of the Internet has helped this, but the reactionary precedent that it leaves behind is a malignant one. Sidelined are the long-term, proven, measures for development; namely the education and sexual freedom (in regards to contraception) for women. Education and birth rates are two factors that take a long time to yield results, and they have and will continue to be sidelined in favour of the immediacy of the solutions offered by the Internet.

Likewise the haste of reaction, allows for the inclusion of monstrous groups within the umbrella of a justified opposition. This is especially present in the Middle East, where theocratic fascist sects joined progressive movements whose sole purpose was the removal of a dictator.

The transitional council in Libya, for example contains members that advocate global Jihad and a return to the Caliphate. What is different now, from previous armed coups, is the promotion of an inclusion of sects that advocate the most heinous crimes. It now threatens every political movement in whose rise is due in part to social media.

The aftermath of this is still unfolding: the ongoing protests in Syria, Iran and Bahrain have not yet succeeded in toppling their strongman governments; the Occupy movement is struggling against descending back into the darkness from which it came.

The year after the "year of the Protestor" will be a heart wrenching one. Where they have succeeded, they will again fail. Where they haven't succeeded yet, regimes will be merciless. The hope lies in the fact that in a world where social media has helped to orchestrate protests in impossible situations, it may equally find new and surprising ways of rebuilding nations where the wounds of revolution are still fresh.

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DALSTON.

historical actors.

j.self

Social media can be thought of as distinct from traditional media (radio, newspapers, television) by fact of its reciprocity – the absence of information exchange hierarchy. If you shout at a television, the presenter rarely shouts back. Not so with social media: online arguments on Twitter and Facebook (amongst others) have a nasty habit of rapidly escalating to Hitlerian rhetoric.

As Graham Smith rightly points out, social media have recently acted as catalysts for popular action. However the contexts in which social media result in popular action differ so wildly (from London looting to Arab uprisings) there is really only one thing that can confidently be said about them. Social media facilitate unregulated communications. That is all.

They have no political agenda; they don't create extreme elements in society (although they do sometimes reveal otherwise invisible factions and prejudices); they don't win elections; they are not the cause of revolutions.

Since the Egyptian uprising, existing laws against female castration have been increasingly hard to uphold, especially in provincial villages. Given that 90% of Egyptian women have had their genitals mutilated it seems hard to believe the statistics are rising, but this is the case. This practise dates back several centuries, and came about from a critical misinterpretation of the Koran. The cause of its increase is partly tied to the weakness of post-revolutionary institutions, and therefore to the revolution. But to infer this is due to social media would be very wrong – just like laws about women's freedom and education, it is a deeply embedded cultural phenomenon and has no relation to digital technologies.

If we are tempted to project ideas about radicalisation, criminality, ideological oppression, etc, onto the use of social media it is because for us in the West there is a subliminal assumption that the aims of people who use them are not really social, but personal.

Implicit in what I call the "Joe likes popcorn" status update (one which could have no possible significance or interest for anyone except Joe) is perhaps the most fundamental Western value: individualism (manifest here as an overinflated sense of self importance and egoism). In this respect its not even fair to call them "social" media, as "society" plays no valuable role in their operation. In certain cases, like Facebook, the social aspect is only an agent for the most sophisticated marketing tool ever invented, which plays on the myth that a product recommended by a friend is somehow more trustworthy than one advertised by a company. In societies like Egypt or Syria, which are neither Westernised, individualistic, "democratic", or neoliberal, the power of social media is as a tool of liberation. If that liberation doesn't go how Western countries might like, we can hardly blame social media. We cannot advocate democracy and then be upset when its not secular and progressive.

If in the West we are sceptical about the power of social media to transform societies, it is because we are unable to believe in social change any longer. We can't imagine ourselves as actors in history because we don't believe in history. We are convinced the current economic-political-military model of society is *inevitable*, (what all human societies are drifting towards) and cannot conceive of an alternative. This is the product, and the real cause, of neoliberal ideology.

In the 1960s the median UK age was 25.6 years – a large, young segment of society was arguing for the extension of democratic rights on grounds of race, gender and sexuality. We idolise this generation because their dream of fairer and more human models of society was aspirational. Theirs was the last dream, and it ended with the '73 oil shock, with Reaganomics, and with Thatcherism.

Since then, factors like deregulation (the myth of the "free-market"), the substitution of wage growth for rising debt, and an ageing population, have played central roles in ensuring the impossibility of radical social change. The possibility of any social unity, even as fleeting as in Libya, seems for us now quite remote.

Jack Self edits Fulcrum.

**“I told them the
wealth would
trickle down.”**

