Chapter XX

Social Media and Social Justice Activism

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In December 2010 a 26-year old unemployed Tunisian university graduate named Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in protest after the fruits he was selling in the town of Sidi Bouzid were confiscated by government officials who alleged he was operating his stand without a license. Three weeks later he died in hospital, sparking massive street revolts by Tunisian citizens frustrated by government corruption and widespread unemployment. Tunisia’s repressive government intervened, imposing curfews, closing schools and universities, arresting citizens and violently setting the police onto the thousands of citizens who had taken to the street. Tunisia is infamous for its authoritarian media and internet system, decried by the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) and its affiliate, the Syndicat national des journalistes tunisiens (SNJT) in their campaign for journalistic independence.

Initially Western mainstream media ignored the Tunisian protests, partly because of a lack of official information from the government, but citizens, using various social media, were able to spread timely information about the protests to the world, and mobilize Tunisian citizens and the Tunisian diaspora, including a large community in Montreal. Information was disseminated via Facebook (even after the government deleted pages critical of the government), WikiLeaks, the Tunisian blog *Nawaat* which posted amateur videos online, proxy servers that could bypass government monitoring, and Twitter – which was also able to more easily circumvent government censorship (Al Jazeera English 2011). After 23 years of autocratic rule, President Ben Ali fled the country, and the country is now undergoing a shift in governance, which Tunisians hope will usher in a reign of democratic transparency.

Many Western commentators dubbed the actions in Tunisia “The Twitter Revolution,” celebrating the use of social media for mobilizing Tunisians and toppling the Ben Ali government. But others were more cautious, attributing the actions of Tunisians to “decades of frustration, not in reaction to a WikiLeaks cable, a denial-of-service attack, or a Facebook update” (Zuckerman 2011). Jillian York, also hesitant to ascribe power to networked technologies, remarked that “I am glad that Tunisians were able to utilize social media to bring attention to their plight.  But I will not dishonor the memory of Mohamed Bouazizi–or the 65 others that died on the streets for their cause–by dubbing this anything but a human revolution” (York 2011).

There is considerable debate over the power and influence of social media in political discourse and for activism. Technologies can embody power, and technological design can conceal vested interests and goals, values and world-views; policy, politics and technology are thus intrinsically and inherently linked. Vested interests can run the political gamut, from social media companies that are unabashedly corporatist and oriented towards market profitability, often to the detriment of citizen’s privacy rights (Facebook), to those that are communitarian in spirit, allowing users to own their own information and control their privacy (Diaspora\*). Facebook exemplifies the dramatic reconfiguration of personal privacy online, with CEO Mark Zuckerberg’s evangelical belief in ‘radical transparency’–the company’s credo that creating more open and transparent identities creates a healthier society (Kirkpatrick 2010). Diaspora\*, the “open-source” social network site with its origins in the “free culture movement”, now in beta mode (under development) is championed as the “anti-Facebook” for its principles of user control (Nussbaum 2010).

While the use of social media as a vehicle to spark democratic reform in the Arab region has been widely discussed (several weeks after the Tunisian uproar, Egyptians took to the streets demanding reform under Hosni Mubarak’s leadership and in response the government ordered all telecommunications providers to shut down, thus “taking the country’s citizens and institutions off the digital map” (El Akkad 2011)), the use of social media for Canadian activism has not been as fraught. It is, however, contested terrain.

Social media for activism is contested because corporate-owned social media sites such as Facebook dictate the terms of user’s participation on their platforms related to privacy, intellectual property, and freedom of speech. These terms can be contrary and even antithetical to the public interest. Privacy is one such terrain, wherein user’s personal data can be tracked, targeted, mined and then sold to third-party companies who in turn use this information to selectively target the same surveilled users with personalized ads for products. This “commodification” of users on social media is skilfully adopted from the marketing sector, and is a practice that has grown in stature and stealth as companies increasingly seek to develop and deepen new and more lucrative revenue streams.

Social media for activism is also contested because as social justice activists increasingly use social media for human rights activities, their activities may go against the corporate-owned terms of service. For instance, Facebook, Flickr and YouTube require that users use their real names to create a profile, but human rights activists who are fearful of reprisal and punishment by authoritarian regimes and have signed up using pseudonyms have found their content removed because they violated the community norms of the sites (Preston 2011: February, Preston 2011: March). Social media companies must grapple with these tensions if their platforms are to be used as an effective tool for social justice.

In this chapter, several controversial Canadian case studies of social media activism are examined: the Toronto G20 protests in the summer of 2010 where social media tools proliferated news, organizational tactics and accounts of police brutality; the Robert Dziekanski case, where a citizen journalist videoed the RCMP mercilessly tasering the Polish immigrant in the Vancouver International Airport; and the use of social media by homeless activists to document their lives and advocate for recognition. The chapter will also reflect upon whether social media is an effective tool for social justice activism, or if it has rather contributed towards a culture of complacent couch potato politics, or ‘slacktivism’.

What is the Social Media?

Social media refer to a range of internet technologies that allow for participative communicative practices; they are tools that empower users to contribute to developing, collaborating, customizing, rating and distributing internet content. Also commonly referred to as “Web 2.0” technologies, user practices are called “user-created content–UCC,” or “user-generated content–UGC”. In 2007 the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) released a study on the social, economic, and policy implications of the “participative web”. Characteristics of UCC include content made publicly available over the internet, reflecting some creative component, whether original or adapted. Implicit for UCC is that content is created outside of professional, paid labour, with no industry or institutional affiliation and little to no financial remuneration – hence UCC is “pro-am” labour (referring to the blurriness between professional and amateur labour).

Predicated on access to good “broadband” connections and often, but not always, comprised of younger users, the motivations for those producing UCC can be many: creative and fun expression, establishing and extending communities of interest, seeking fame and notoriety, or civic participation. Models for recompense include voluntary contributions, charging viewers for services, selling goods and services to the community, establishing advertising-based models, and licensing of content and technologies to third parties. The social impacts of UCC are multifarious: a promise of increased democratization of media production, a valorization of amateurs, a potential for increased participation, collaboration and sharing, and the facilitation of open platforms for political debate. But alongside these many opportunities are challenges, in particular privacy (“identitytheft”, a disregard for the protection of personal information, “third-party marketing”); copyright (determining what can be considered “fairdealing” with regard to the ownership of content); informational integrity (protecting against illegal and inappropriate content, promoting and preserving freedom of expression) and security and safety.

The most popular social media include social network sites (SNS), blogs/microblogs, wikis, and video-sharing sites. Intrinsic to these technologies are their facility for users to upload their own content, reconfigure, remix and comment on content; and for activist purposes, mediated mobilization, which fosters collaboration and participation. Such mobilization, writes Leah Lievrouw (2011), “is not merely the collection and allocation of resources (people, time, funding, technology, space), it also creates a sense of belonging, solidarity, and collective identity among participants that is expressed through their collaborative activities” (174).

*Social network sites* link together individuals, associations or groups sharing common interests, shared histories, backgrounds and affiliations, kinship, similar tastes or ideas. Users can post personal or institutional status, update profiles, and publish information, news, pictures, links or videos. Information provided by users can either be made publicly available or restricted to areas the user deems “private”. With more than 500 million users, Facebook.com, for example, claims supremacy as the world’s most popular social network website. Flickr.com currently remains the biggest photo sharing social network platform.

*Blogs* are relatively simple websites that can be operated, modified and updated by users without the need of extensive programming or technical skills. They are typically interactive in the sense that they frequently call for comments and participation from readers. They contain text, picture, sound and video files and archive past events and activities. While previously generally associated with personal journals and websites, blogs have been professionalized and are now used by corporations, journalists, free- lancers, political entrepreneurs and analysts for publicity, advertising and branding activities. Wordpress.com and Blogger.com are amongst the biggest pre-hosted blog services currently available.

*Microblogs* are registered accounts hosted by a particular social network site linking together individuals, groups and communities. Microblog accounts allow users to publish in real-time small and concise posts made of short sentences and hypertexts –links to other websites. These posts are accessible through the social network site, smartphones and in some countries, by SMS. With more than 175 million registered users, Twitter is the definitive goliath of the microblogosphere.

*Wikis* are collaborative websites that can be updated and edited by their users. Content is provided and monitored by users: web pages are created, published, edited and revised by a community of users willingly participating and investing time in a commons knowledge project. Wikis often rely on “open-sourcesoftware” and are often associated with non-profit endeavours, projects and activities. The multilingual, web-based online encyclopaedia Wikipedia might just be the most successful, widespread and well-known wiki available on the web.

*Video-sharing sites* provide a forum for viewing videos – amateur and professional – on the internet and increasingly on mobile phones. By far the most popular video-sharing site is YouTube, owned by giant Google. In 2010 the daily viewing of videos on YouTube reached 2 billion (Stross 2010). While they will not reveal the size of its video library, the company estimates that 20 hours of video are uploaded to the site every minute, with the average user spending 15 minutes a day on the site (Helft 2009).

Social Media and Activism: A Primer

Technologies are designed, produced and distributed with an understanding of who its potential users are and their imagined interactions. Some of these uses are sanctioned, desired and anticipated by the technological designers and manufacturers; others are restricted, forbidden and opposed with rigor by either the proprietor of the technology or public authorities. Users can surprise technological entrepreneurs by developing innovative, original and unforeseen ways to interact and mobilize technology, but often these unintended uses are harshly resisted and clamped down by the owners of these technologies, often in the guise of morality, national security, or public order.

Social media, the latest (and for the time being) the hippest infant of communication technologies, is currently at the forefront of a global struggle to shape the many ways that citizens are appropriating and using technologies to expand their boundaries of freedom. Many of these social media, some of which were mythically developed with much passion and pluck in the San Francisco Bay Area garages by university students, are now intrinsically enveloped within the capitalist structures of commerce and entertainment, and worth billions of dollars in revenue. And in many instances the blurring between these powerful platform producers and distributors and the users and their content can be vexing, particularly as content is increasingly monetized and terms of service for use is cavalier towards personal privacy protection (favoring third party marketing) and the intellectual property of user content owned by the corporate owners.

History tells us that citizens and activists are quick to discover and exploit the unexplored potential of communication technology (Curran 2002; Shaw 2005; Jong, Shaw and Stammers 2005; Raley 2009). The subversion of technological consumer products by activists relies on a refusal to be constrained by prescribed uses and a desire to both build on technological opportunities and bypass technological constraints. The open-source movement is the perfect example of this. Reacting against the closed proprietary nature of most commercial software, open-source activists refuse the lockdown imposed by major corporations on software and instead develop their own competitive tools and applications. The Apache HTTP server, the web browser Firefox, the GNU/Linux operating system, and the content management system Drupal are commonly used open source tools. Users also commonly “jailbreak” mobile devices such as the iPhone in order to install third party applications that are not under the sole ownership and control of the parent company – in this case the Apple Corporation. Hackers, pirates, programmers and file-sharers are also keen to write and share software that meets their needs, goals and desires without bending to the requirements of copyright holders.

Corporations are keen to impose lockdowns on the technological products they manufacture in order to limit and control the uses that can be made of them by their users. Apple, who exercises close control over the software applications that can be run on its products, lost a major battle in July 2010 when U.S. regulators declared that jailbreaking an iPhone was legal in the country, stating that there was “no basis for copyright law to assist Apple in protecting its restrictive business model” (Kravets 2010). Nonetheless, 21- year old hacker George Francis Hotz (also known as GeoHot), famous for being allegedly the first person to have jailbreaked an iPhone, was sued early in 2011 by Sony Corporation after providing the Playstation 3 (PS3) game console’s master key and divulging the steps to jailbreak the popular device. Sony and Hotz reached a settlement a few months after the start of the proceedings. According to the hacker, the issue behind the case was “the freedom to use the device that you paid for in any ways you see fit” (Hammad 2011). These examples are indicative of an emerging larger power struggle between users and intellectual property holders around the control and regulation of their access and use, and whether users can be punished for unsanctioned applications.

Consumer products such as the personal computer, the ‘smart’ mobile phone, the iPod, and the video camera have become, in the hands of activists, tools of subversion and resistance. They are instruments of political information, ideological affirmation and debate, publicity, coordination, knowledge sharing, and political action. The stories told through these devices are ones of passion and despair, of hope and change, of anger and injustice. A global network of friends, allies and supporters now fits in one’s pocket. Examples of this are numerous. Cameras found on mobile phones can be used by activists to hold public authorities responsible for their actions, to record abuses and human rights violations (especially those that occur during public demonstrations), and to rectify, correct, or challenge information provided by the mainstream media. The case of the Tunisian revolution is illustrative of this use. Other global examples include Amnesty International UK’s “Break the Silence” campaign, which distributes pocket radios to allow the Burmese to bypass state censorship and to educate and inform the population about their human rights.[[1]](#endnote-0) WITNESS provides training, support and video cameras to activists and local groups in many countries so they can record abuses and exactions.2 The social and political uses of these technological devices derive from the creativity and the tactical choice made by activists.

Social media has come to play a central role in the spontaneous coordination of upscale protests and demonstrations. Since the 1999 anti-globalization protests in Seattle which effectively shut down a World Trade Organization (WTO) meeting, protesters have increasingly relied on a decentralized, nebulous, hard to shutdown communication architecture used for coordination, intelligence and publication (Karatzogianni 2006). The explosion of social media over the first decade of the 21st century has played an important part in the building of movements and protest activities. These media exemplify the potential that communication technology holds for social resistance and mobilization.

Social media build communities of interest: they link together individuals who share similar interests in issues and people. They are community-driven and community-fuelled technologically-mediated social spaces that expand, reassert and reinforce often weaksocial ties. As such, they are highly relevant tools of social mobilization. They contribute to the organization of movements, protest activities and information distribution on a contagion model. They help to get the word out in ways previously unthinkable. Like a virus, politically-charged information passes around people who meet online, sometime infecting them and spreading amongst networks, mutating in new strains, scattering in unsuspected hubs and locations. This has major impact for recruitment activities.

For one, social media contributes to the establishment of relevant distribution channels amongst various publics, activists and sympathizers. These channels are then able to constitute the backbone of networks constituted by dormant agents, adherents and potential supporters to be called upon when needed (Carty 2011). Secondly, social media and protest activities are linked by a process of activation. Previously established networks of friends, allies, and colleagues are activated in precise, often punctual, settings: a demonstration, an online protest, a boycott. And thirdly, immediacy – another essential attribute of social media – has a major impact in the recruitment process preceding protest activities. “Flash-mobs” (or smart-mobs), spontaneous demonstrations and public protests can be organized in a matter of hours, making them unpredictable, harder to monitor or to anticipate by public authorities.

Communication technologies have come to be seen both as tool and a mode for organizing protest and dissent. As a tool for organization, communication technology has been used for movement building as well as for tactical interventions; as a mode of organization, it refocuses contentious politics – and social mobilization – around the production and distribution of alternative cultural codes, narratives and symbols. Social media provide the platforms to ease and facilitate such processes and are thus used to deploy, construct and organize epistemic communities of shared identity and meaning.

Bennett (2003) argued years ago that new communication tools change the very conduct of contentious politics. Communication technology does not merely reduce the costs or increase the efficiencies of social mobilization, but rather, “*the nature of social transactions, themselves*, *is changing* due to the capacity of distributed communication networks to ease personal engagement with others” (Bennett 2003: 149, emphasis in original). The internet and social media have fostered the widespread adoption of the SPIN organizational model among activist communities; social mobilization now has to be seen as segmented, polycentric, integrated, and networked.3

The tactical relevance of social media for activism is considerable. Best practices guides on how to use social media for social marketing and social change are proliferating (see Kanter and Fine 2010; Aaker, Smith and Adler 2010). Tactical Tech, an international NGO linking progressive social activism with digital communication technology, trains people to see and use social media in order to mobilize, witness and record testimonies and events, visualize communications and messages, amplify personal stories, add humour to (sometime tragic or grim) communications, manage contacts, use complex data, deploy the collective intelligence of the communities, allow feedback and questions, and investigate and expose abuses. They have produced a video documentary highlighting “10 Tactics to Turn Information Into Action” using social media and have produced tool-kits on using mobile phones for development, understanding the security and privacy concerns for human rights activism, and visualizing information for advocacy.4

This tactical relevance of social media, however, is not confined to online activities and community-building activities. It is also found in the increasing influence of “swarming” as a confrontational doctrine applied by activists of the information age during protests and demonstrations. Swarming, which relies on “the deployment of myriad, small, dispersed, networked manoeuvre units”, is defined as “a deliberately structured, coordinated, strategic way to strike from all directions, by means of a sustainable pulsing of force and/or fire, close-in as well as from stand-off positions” (Arquilla and Ronfeldt 2000: vii). As a tactical doctrine, swarming is used both by the military and protesters to overflow adversaries’ defenses and coordinate action.

Swarming is especially relevant for hackers and pirates, who are inclined to build “botnets” – networks of thousands of personal computers infested by malicious software called “zombie computers”– literally swarming (or flooding) targeted websites, addresses or portals with hundreds of thousands of requests per second. The result is a distributed “denial-of-serviceattack” (DDoS). Michael Calce, a 15-year old Montreal youth better known as Mafiaboy, attracted global media attention early in 2000 by launching a series of DDoS against major global corporations such as Amazon.com, Yahoo!, Ebay, CNN.com and Dell, Inc. These attacks panicked both public authorities and the corporate world and revealed the vulnerability of vital commercial computer architectures to hackers and pirates. Calce was hunted down by the FBI and the RCMP and quickly arrested. He later repented and published his story (Calce, with Silverman 2008).

A fascinating and unique botnet experimentation took place in December 2010 when a nebulous group called Anonymous harnessed the power of social media to conduct a DDoS attack against firms who collaborated with public authorities in their attempt to cut off international whistleblower organization WikiLeaks from its financial revenue sources. Using Twitter, Facebook, online handbills and other social portals, Anonymous called for the voluntary insertion of personal computers in botnets targeting firms considered corporate accomplices of state censorship. PayPal, Visa and MasterCard were notably targeted. The venture, called Operation Payback, was meant to launch a global “cyberwar” against censorship. Operation Payback was unique because it relied on social media’s power and the keen cooperation of those who are usually the unwilling accomplices of hackers and pirates (Duncan 2010).

Microblogging further plays an increasingly important coordinating and informative role on the ground during public protests. Live, unfiltered feeds seeded by activists inform public demonstrators of the dangers lying ahead, the rapid sifting of adversaries’ forces, the identities of those arrested (or human-rights abusers) and of the locations where the arrests are taking place. Social media participates in the establishment of an enlarged sensory system relying on the constant communication of small, simple units able to ensure global coordination and efficiency without a centralized architecture. It has come to play a considerable role in producing real-time, citizen-oriented coverage of protests, social uprisings and political contestation.

Social media matter for activists at organizational, tactical, and political levels. However, activists must also be cognizant of the politics of these corporately owned social media platforms and their insinuation into user’s everyday activities. This is especially so when it comes to the privacy rights of users amidst the surreptitious surveillance possibilities wrought by digital technologies.

Surveilling Dissent

Concerns over privacy and surveillance from networked communication technologies are real and serious. Yet the massive adoption of social media by consumers has also led­­­­ to a certain degree to a reversal, and a turnaround, about surveillance issues. Public authorities, state agents and even (yet to a lesser degree) powerful individuals are more and more challenged over recordings produced and distributed on social media websites by private, often anonymous citizens. These recordings frequently challenge police assertions of facts and their denial of reckless brutality; they are testimonies of human rights abuses, violations of basic civil and social rights, wrongdoings, lies, propaganda and political flip-flops. They are meant to shame power by exposing the truth, but also to request justice – either in the face of public opinion or before a court of justice. No longer can public authorities discard witnesses or activist narratives as unreliable and erroneous: the public and authorities alike are called – or forced – to bear witness. The use of social media during the 2010 G20 Summit in Toronto and the Robert Dziekanski case in 2007 illustrate well the power of citizen-created social media to challenge official discourses–and to call for accountability in the judicial system.

TORONTO G-20

In June 2010 Toronto was the host city for the 4th meeting of the G20 international heads of state, an annual meeting for the discussion of global economic trade and cooperation. Anticipating coordinated and extensive protests (the planned march of over 25,000 people), an Integrated Security Unit (the RCMP, Toronto Police Service, the Ontario Provincial Police and the Canadian Forces) was established to manage a security apparatus. Notoriously, a fence was erected in the downtown corridor to contain citizens so they would not breach the protected governmental zone. Its cost–a staggering $5.5 million (Wallace 2010), outraged many, as did the “$2-million fake lake, a boat that won’t float and a $23-million media centre that the media won’t use” (Taber 2010). The combined costs for the pre-summit in the Muskoka 'cottage country' and Toronto came to $857 million (CBC News 2010).

Social media was widely used by journalists and activists before and during the summit. The Toronto Police Service (2010) also published a guide to social media, with links to their official updates on Twitter and Facebook. Twitter was widely used as a real-time communicative platform by activists for organizing, mobilizing, strategizing, and updating street tactics for sanctioned marches and spontaneous moves. It was also used by all the mainstream media to provide synchronous updates and live blogging of text and photographs by reporters and guest bloggers (*The Globe and Mail, National Post*, *Toronto Star*, and CBC were particularly active), and of course by alternative media (*The Dominion, Rabble,* The Real News Network, and the Alternative Media Centre). “‘Anybody who had a smart phone using Twitter had a real-time intelligence feed of everything that was going on’ says Internet strategist Jesse Hirsh, who describes the experience that night as ‘transcendent’” (Zerbisias 2010).

Journalist Steve Paiken of TVO tweeted live his witnessing of police roundups, intimidation and violence from police of peaceful protesters at the base of Spadina Avenue:

here come the cops again. weapons drawn.   
ppl sitting again. middle of esplanade  
police in full riot gear moving closer.

ppl still sitting in middle of street crowd surrounded.   
cops on both sides now don't mind saying it...this is scary.   
one dumb person on either side & this could get dangerous.

suddenly 20 cops is now 100 can't tell what kin[d] of weapons are being pointed.   
can't be live rounds, can it?   
new riot squad now here. why? this is peaceful (quoted from Silverman 2010).

His eyewitness account was widely re-tweeted and at one time rumours spread that he had been arrested. On his blog he condemned police actions, writing: “I have reported from war zones in Bosnia, Croatia, Serbia, Lebanon, and Israel. But last night's confrontation between peaceful demonstrators and riot squad police was the scariest situation I've ever been in, in almost 30 years of reporting” (Paiken 2010).

Alongside the security perimeter that was visibly evident, was a less discernible, but covertly omnipresent surveillance perimeter. Almost $1.2 million (Paperny 2010) was spent on 77 CCTV security cameras that covered the downtown core, with police stating that they would only be used for the event and would be taken down “when there’s no longer an issue of security” (Yang 2010). It was later revealed that post-Summit the Toronto Police purchased 52 of the cameras. The Surveillance Club TO photo-documented the cameras, creating a Flickr stream of images during and after the event. Critiquing their supposed security efficacy amidst an abuse of law enforcement power and abrogation of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms with respect to warrantless searches, arrest of peaceful citizens, and snatch-and-grab arrests, Milberry commented that “In this context of police violence, abuse of power and apparent lawlessness, the function of CCTV cameras, as part of the G20 security apparatus, shifted from that of crime prevention and public safety. It became, instead, forensic, with cameras upheld as investigative tools after the fact” (2010).

Indeed, the Canadian Civil Liberties Association (CCLA) condemned the arrest of over 1,000 people and the violation of the civil and constitutional rights of many citizens that were participating in a legitimate protest. They called for an independent public inquiry to ascertain the scope of police actions and the infringement of rights under the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the *Public Works Protection Act*. The CCLA stressed the importance of the right of peaceful assembly and the right to be heard for all citizens, arguing that:

Freedom of peaceful assembly is as important as the right to vote in a democracy. It should be treated with the same respect. Democracy is governance for the people by the people and politicians are expected to hear, consult, and engage with the people in between elections to govern effectively.  But access to politicians is unequally distributed: rich people have their lobbyists and poor people have their feet.  Marching in favour of or against a proposed policy is often the only way to be heard for people whose op-ed will not be published in the Toronto Star and whom the Minister will not meet at a cocktail party or a fundraising event (CCLA 2010).

Over 5,000 amateur videos and mainstream media coverage documenting the march, police actions, eye-witness accounts, and testimonials were posted on YouTube.

“Officer Bubbles,” as an over-zealous police officer has come to be known, was the object of intense mockery and teasing on social media websites and blogs when a video of him threatening to arrest for assault a young female protester blowing soap bubbles in his direction went viral. The video footage was a hot topic in the North American media, including the right-wing Fox News, and several animations spoofing the incident circulated on YouTube (Gillis 2010). “Bubbles,” whose real name is Constable Adam Josephs, filed a $1.2 million lawsuit against YouTube, alleging that the animations, which show a policeman physically similar to Josephs arresting an array of people, including Santa Claus and President Barack Obama, subjected him to ridicule and threats against his family. Said his attorney, “This level of ridicule goes beyond what is reasonable....the reason we brought the lawsuit is that people have the right to protect themselves against this kind of harassment” (CBC News October 2010). The lawsuit also requested that YouTube reveal the identity of the animator.

Six months after the summit, access to information documents obtained by *The Globe and Mail* revealed that the government was monitoring the online websites, internet chats and feeds, and Twitter communications of activist organizers, individuals, unions, and universities leading up to the June meeting (Chase 2011). Such surveillance is an everyday and even mundane component of security regimes, which consists of a global surveillance apparatus linking together international organizations and countries in interconnected circuits of communication, often without adequate public oversight.

Let Me Show You a Bunch Of Liars: The Dziekanki Case

The Robert Dziekanski case is a heart-rending case study of how communication technology can support challenges made to official discourses and assertions of fact and illustrates poignantly the role played by social media in building international protest and opposition. It is a demonstration that technological consumer devices can, if and when used for social justice, hold public authorities accountable for their egregious actions.

On October 14, 2007, Robert Dziekanski died tragically at the Vancouver International Airport after being stunned multiple times with a conducted energy weapon (or Taser gun, manufactured by Taser International) by a Royal Canadian Mounted Police officer (RCMP). Dziekanski, a 40 year-old Polish immigrant, was found confused and agitated by police officers responding to 911 calls made by people who witnessed his condition and behaviour.

Dziekanski was tasered within 25 seconds of the police officers’ arrival on site and was shocked four more times after being aggressively taken to the ground (CBC News 2007, November). He was declared dead when medical help arrived on site. Police officers justified the prompt use of such force as a requirement of self-defense and protective action in face of an unpredictable, agitated and combative man. The officer who used the conducted energy weapon on Dziekanski later testified in a following investigation that the victim was approaching the four police officers “in a combative stance” and that he believed Dziekanski had the intention to attack them with a stapler he grabbed (CBC News 2009). This assertion of facts did not hold for long.

Paul Pritchard, then a 23-year old eyewitness traveler, stood nearby to the scene and captured Dziekanski’s Taser death on digital camera. Pritchard was disturbed by what he saw and filmed; it appeared to him that the police officers precipitated the use of their weapons. At the police’s request, Pritchard handed over the video recording on the understanding it would be returned to him within 48 hours. He was later told that we would not get the footage back – his camera was returned to him with a new memory stick, the RCMP keeping his for the investigation. The police argued that public release of the video could “compromise the investigation” (CBC 2007: October).

Fearing a police cover up, Pritchard engaged an attorney, held a press conference and went to court to get the recording back. The RCMP eventually complied and returned the footage. Pritchard went to the media with the recording where it became national and international news. The footage quickly found its way online on numerous blogs, YouTube, citizens’ news and social networks websites. It sparked international citizen outage and infuriated the Polish government. Dziekanski’s death led to numerous investigations and became a matter of political concern both in British Columbia and the rest of the country.

The final inquiry report on the death of Robert Dziekanski was released on June 18, 2010. It severely blamed the police officers for their use of conducted energy weapons and for deliberately misrepresenting their actions to investigators. These misrepresentations, the commissioner of the report wrote, were “deliberate” and were “made for the purpose of justifying their actions” (Braidwood Commission 2010). The report further denounced the “RCMP’s regrettable media response” to Dziekanski's death and its refusal to correct factually inaccurate information. According to the Braidwood inquiry’s final report, “The inaccuracies include the following: that Mr. Dziekanski was combative and violent, that chairs were flying, that violence was escalating, that the conducted energy weapon was deployed against him only twice, and that he continued to be combative, kicking and screaming after being handcuffed. Based on what the investigation subsequently determined, these descriptions were inaccurate and without question they portrayed Mr. Dziekanski’s behaviours as more threatening and dangerous than we now know them to have been” (Braidwood 2010: 260). On April 1st, 2010, Dziekanski's mother received a public apology from the RCMP and announced she accepted an out-of-court settlement with the RCMP, the Vancouver Airport Authority and the Canadian Border Services Agency.

Pritchard’s video footage played a great part in publicly exposing these inaccuracies. Two years after the horrific incident in the Vancouver airport, he was awarded the first-ever Citizen Journalism Award from Canadian Journalists for Free Expression (CJFE) who hailed him for having “the courage to bear witness and do the right thing” (CJFE 2009).

Giving Voices to the Streets: Homeless Nation

The mainstream attractiveness of social media relies on three interrelated elements: its flexibility (people can interact with them in various ways in order to achieve numerous and often quite personal goals), its networking power (its relevance and importance grow with the number of its users or contributors), and – perhaps foremost – its ease of use. Blogs, wikis and social networking tools and websites are made to be as simple to use as possible. Their very nature is to provide considerable publishing power to non-expert users. As such, they can become powerful tools to be used by those who have much to say but cannot have their stories told in mainstream media; by marginalized communities who face issues of enduring poverty, exclusion and criminalization; and by individuals and groups who are systemically excluded from telling their very own stories. The stories told through these media are often ones of passion and despair, of hope and change, of anger and injustice; they express the social histories of their makers.

Homeless Nation, a Canadian multimedia web portal “by and for the homeless,” provides just that. Launched in 2003 by documentary filmmaker Daniel Cross, the portal is part of a larger project aimed at providing homeless communities with the tools and training to tell their stories, reconnect with friends and families, and exchange information. It is a place where marginalized communities can publish videos, sounds, pictures and text and break the circle of isolation and solitude. Homeless Nation outreach workers connect with the homeless on the streets, at community events, at shelters and at protests; “we meet Canada's homeless individuals where they are, and collaborate to add as many voices to the chorus as we can.”Volunteers work to place donated computers into drop-in centres and shelters for access by the homeless and they provide computer and internet training for the homeless so they can create and share their stories. The website further describes Homeless Nation as “a place for people to share their experiences and to learn about others... a place to look for lost friends...a place to connect to resources in Canada where one can find shelter, food, health care, harm reduction and legal assistance.” 5

Homeless Nation is part of a larger category of “citizens' media,” a set of media productions bringing what Clemencia Rodriguez (2004) calls a “metamorphic transformation of alternative media participants (or community media, or participatory media, or radical media, or alternative media) into active citizens.” Rodriguez argues that:

Citizens’ media is a concept that accounts for the processes of empowerment, conscientisation, [a process of ‘consciousness raising’] and fragmentation of power that result when men, women, and youth gain access to and re-claim their own media. As they use media to re-constitute their own cultural codes to name the world in their own terms, citizens’ media participants disrupt power relationships, exercise their own agency, and re-constitute their own lives, futures, and cultures. (n.p.).

The flexibility, networking power and ease of use of social media can provide marginalized communities with the tools to contest social codes and legitimized identities that often criminalize or victimize them, and also to empower individual and groups to transform their very lives by providing a positive and rewarding learning and communication experience. Homeless Nation is one example amongst many others progressive initiatives built on social media technology. Another vibrant example is Mapping Memories: Experiences of Refugee Youth, an initiative from Concordia University and the Montreal refugee community, where youth were trained in creative media-making to tell their own stories about their refugee experiences.6

Am I Talking to Myself? Critiques of Online Activism

Social activism is, at its core, a communicative phenomenon. It is built upon, and organizes change through communication processes: ideas, values and information need to be shared, supporters and adherents have to be recruited, antagonistic arguments and discourses need to be discarded and replied to. The role of technology and of the regulatory framework under which it operates are consequently central to the very life and dynamics of collective mobilization. As Jong, Shaw and Stammers argue: “It should be obvious that we cannot understand activism without seeing how it communicates politically, or contemporary media without looking at how activists are both using and transforming political communication” (2005: 2).

Yet some argue that onlineactivism – the use of digital communication technology in general, and of social media in particular to foster social change – is of limited potential at best, or a mere illusion at worst. Online activism, such sceptics say, might just be ‘slacktivism’ – lazy and lousy activism that makes people feel good about themselves but does not provide any real challenge to the power-holders one aims to influence. As one example, facing an unprecedented level of unpopularity, Quebec’s Prime Minister, Jean Charest, was confronted early in 2011 by an online petition signed by nearly 250,000 people requesting his resignation. Launched a few months before as a citizen initiative, the petition found support amongst provincial opposition parties and was hosted on the National Assembly website. While the numbers of signatories was impressive, Quebec’s civil society and political class failed to build on the momentum and to provide any meaningful political action that would have more that a symbolic and ephemeral impact.

Malcolm Gladwell, a New Yorker columnist, is one skeptic. He argues that the use of social media by activists ought to be considered as “a small change” (2010). Quoting the work of social movement expert Doug McAdam, Gladwell argues that high-risk activism is very much a “strong-tie” thing – something social media, which relies on the reinforcements and maintenance of weak social ties, can never claim to build. “Social networks”, he writes, “are effective at increasing participation – by lessening the level of motivation that participation requires.” When protest activities require high-levels of motivation – when there is high personal involvement, risk or danger – social media become incapable of providing the fundamental strategic and motivational requirements of efficient social action. The very architectural principle of social media – the network – is further judged incompatible with significant social activism, which requires hierarchical decision-making structures.

Gladwell’s comments echo those of activist and academic Angela Davis, who rose to prominence during the American struggles for civil rights and African American freedom:

Organizing is not synonymous with mobilizing. Now that many of us have access to new technologies of communication like the Internet and cell phones, we need to give serious thought to how they might best be used. The Internet is an incredible tool but it may also encourage us to think that we can produce instantaneous movements, movements modeled after fast food delivery (Davis 2005: 129-130).

Evgeny Morozov, a Visiting Scholar at Stanford University and a former fellow of the Open Society Institute, is another critic. His assessment of net activism, *The Net Delusion,* was published on the eve of the Tunisian unrest, and his critique about the hype of social media in fomenting popular protest in repressive regimes generated much debate in the media and in online forums.

Morozov offers a trenchant analysis of cyber-utopianism, “the idea that the internet favors the oppressed rather than the oppressor” (xiii) and blames it on the “starry-eyed digital fervor of the 1990s” (ibid) led by what he claims are former hippies now ensconced in elite universities intent on resurrecting the democratic impulses of the 1960s. Morozov also blames the “Google Doctrine,” “the enthusiastic belief in the liberating power of technology accompanied by the irresistible urge to enlist Silicon Valley start-ups in the global fight for freedom” (ibid). He further argues that the prevalence of “Internet-centrism” has seeped into discourses on democratic reform, thus obscuring a consideration of other contextual factors that can foster such reforms.

He warns of the dangers of repressive regimes surveilling the new spaces of social media dissent more assiduously than they do anti-government gatherings in public spaces, and is wary of the American dominance of social media infrastructures, themselves also potentially part of a larger military-industrial-security and surveillance regime. These technologies are not inherently apolitical, Morozov comments, and are instead ensconced in regimes of power operating under an often libertarian mantra of ‘Internet freedom’. This tension has been highlighted in more recent events, discussed earlier in this chapter, wherein human rights activists in China and the Middle East have found their effective use of social media compromised by arduous terms of service exercised by American corporate social media platform companies.

Will the revolution be tweeted? Of course it will – as it will be broadcasted, blogged, painted, danced and screened. Social media, as all media appropriated by activists (whether they are referred to as citizens’ media, alternative media, radical media or community media, see Rodríguez 2001; Downing 2001; Couldry and Curran 2003) are fundamental tools used by activists deeply immersed in cultural struggles – struggles where the meaning, importance, and articulation of a society’s values and beliefs are waged. As Keane argues “a healthy democratic regime is one in which various types of public spheres are thriving, with no single one of them actually enjoying monopoly in public disputes about the distribution of power” (2004: 376).

Movement-controlled media are fundamental tools of political information, ideological affirmation and debate, publicity, coordination, knowledge-sharing, internal cohesion and identity reinforcement, planning, and political action. They can provide challenges to what Thompson (1995) defines as the “symbolic power” of authorities, referringto the “capacity to intervene in the course of events, to influence the actions of others and indeed to create events, by means of production and diffusion of symbolic forms” (Thompson 1995: 17) and are at the center of a “delivery system for consciousness raising, political education, and training” (Barney 2004: 126). They matter.

It is a Contested Terrain

Mainstream social media sites are not natural allies of activists. Social media are comprised of software products owned by capitalistic interests and invested in the reproduction of capitalistic relationships. They are deeply inserted in the global political economy of communication that marginalizes – and often criminalizes – those who resist the social, economic and political order that nurtured their development.

These media are further selling a very precise product: their users’ private data and information. Facebook especially has been heavily criticized for its infringement of its users’ privacy rights. An investigation into Facebook’s privacy policies was conducted by the Privacy Commissioner of Canada in 2009, following a complaint instigated by University of Ottawa students and the Canadian Internet Policy and Public Interest Clinic. The Privacy Commissioner was, among other things, concerned with the sharing of personal information with third-party developers publishing games and quizzes on the social networking site, the confusing distinction between deactivation and deletion of accounts, the privacy of non-users invited to join the site, and the management of accounts of deceased users (Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada, 2009). Facing significant political and legal pressure, Facebook agreed in August 2009 to proceed with the establishment of new privacy safeguards. Concern about adherence to the Commission’s recommendations, however, remains. Facebook CEO and founder, Mark Zuckerberg argued in 2010 that privacy is no longer “a social norm,” sparking international debates about user’s privacy rights (*The Telegraph*: January 2010). Facebook has further repeatedly outraged privacy groups and civil liberties organizations over the last few years by introducing privacy settings that diminish privacy while increasing the level of personal information available online to third-party marketers.

Facebook is also a tool for surveillance and monitoring owned and used by capitalist interests. This, in itself, is a matter of concern for both activist communities and ordinary citizens. Mainstream social media derive considerable, actually monumental, revenues from the selling of users’ personal information to the actual customer of the social media – marketers, advertising companies, corporations and third-party companies. How they do it, following which guidelines, and with what degree of transparency and accountability is a matter of deep democratic concern. Facebook’s half a billion users’ habits and activities are tracked, monitored, stored and sold. This company has never intended to promote or support progressive social movements. It is a formidable and highly attractive profit-oriented entry point into the personal lives of its users throughout the world – who are reconfigured as consumers rather than citizens (Sarikakis 2010).

Like any other technological consumer product however, the very features of mainstream social media can be used in subversive ways by dedicated activists. It is a matter of creativity, imagination and of resistance – attributes that have much more to do with ingenuity than with technology. And, despite painstaking and deliberate care, technology, with the assistance of diverse social actors, often detours from its original ‘intentionality’ track. “Technology leads a double life,” wrote the late York University professor David Noble, “...one which conforms to the intentions of designers and interests of power and another which contradicts them-proceeding behind the backs of their architects to reveal unintended consequences and unanticipated possibilities” (Noble 1984: 324-5). The highly creative and imaginative uses of Twitter and Facebook made by activists and concerned citizens in the recent uprisings in the Arab world is a striking example of this double use.

Those who refuse to be monitored and confined are called to develop their own social media tools (wikis, blogs, social networking sites).7 And while these won’t have the same outreach appeal as the tools garnering huge financial offerings from initial public offerings and venture capitalists, they ought to be considered as micro-social media aimed at reinforcing social ties between activists and highly relevant for social organization and information-sharing. Indymedia, built in 1999 from the rioting streets of Seattle, might be the most famous movement oriented, citizen-operated network of wikis publishing news and information (see Lievrouw, 2011, for an overview of its origins and pioneering uses of participatory journalism through their open publishing platform).

The spread of new, high quality and affordable communication technologies amongst citizens and activist communities also ought to be understood as a greater opportunity for the ordinary citizen to produce and distribute meaning, information, values and beliefs that can be highly critical of the official discourses of economic and political power-holders. Over the last few years, social media have been seized by activists as an entry point to impact the mediasphere – either by generating significant online traffic on precise content or through providing mainstream media with stories, pictures, sound bites and recording that enriches the needs of these resource-strapped media organizations.

Furthermore, in a world where control over the production and distribution of information flows is an essential attribute of power, the confinement of individuals and groups to positions of passive receptivity is equated with subordination (Melucci 1996: 180). Escaping from a status of mere media consumer is a qualitative shift from being the *object* of communication to the communicative *subject*. This transformation has deep political ramifications. Speaking out is always political; it represents a refusal of noiselessness, submission, passivity and conformity. Social media can provide the platforms to ease and facilitate such processes and are thus used to deploy, construct and organize epistemic communities of shared identity and meaning.

In the end, the relevance of social media for activism relies on what it provides to its users: an access gate to open publication, admission to fully customizable and near-infinite series of networks, efficient distribution channels for content and information, and a collaborative space for meeting and exchanging with others. All of these can hardly be discarded as irrelevant. Yet critics of online activism are right about this: social media is a tool, not an end in itself. There is nothing inherently emancipatory about it. Social media will not create the revolution. But as many recent events demonstrate, social media have become an integral component in contemporary social and political struggles, as those who struggle harness these participatory tools to tell their stories about social justice in creative, passionate and imaginative ways.

NOTES

1.See [amnesty.org.uk/news\_details.asp?NewsID=18827](http://www.amnesty.org.uk/news_details.asp?NewsID=18827).

2. See [witness.org](http://www.witness.org).

3. *Segmentation* invokes the porous boundaries between groups and organizations sharing resources and coordinating action. *Polycentrism* refers to the multiple hubs and centers around which a movement is organized. *Integration* refers to ideological frameworks uniting activists, where inclusiveness has come to be fostered by new communication technologies. Finally, *networks* of activists are found in various settings; they are active in multiple groups and hold various commitments and identities. See Bennett 2003: 22.

4. See the Tactical Tech website at tacticaltech.org/.

5. Homeless Nation: [homelessnation.org/](http://www.homelessnation.org/)

6.Mapping Memories: storytelling.concordia.ca/refugeeyouth/

7. New York University students are currently developing an open-source, privacy responsible social network alternative to Facebook, Diaspora\*. See [wired.com/epicenter/2010/05/nyu-students-aim-to-invent-facebook-again-weve-got-your-back/](http://www.wired.com/epicenter/2010/05/nyu-students-aim-to-invent-facebook-again-weve-got-your-back/) For a brief critical account of Facebook see [wired.com/epicenter/2010/05/facebook-rogue/](http://www.wired.com/epicenter/2010/05/facebook-rogue/)

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Glossary

Botnet: network frequently made of thousands of personal computers infested by malicious software and placed under control of an individual referred to as a “bot herder”. Botnets are used by bot herders to launch denial-of-service attacks.

Broadband: high-speed telecommunication connectivity. Broadband connections provide greater speed than analog connections to users accessing the internet and telecommunication services. Broadband connectivity consumes a higher amount of bandwidth and requires a technological architecture able to deliver it.

Commodification: taking objects or often non-commercial products and services and transforming them into entities valued for their marketable function and use in exchange processes.

Cyberwar: the strategic use of digital technology and computer communications by states or politically-active groups in order to infiltrate designated targets or to disrupt communications, destroy property or cause damage to their adversaries.

Denial-of-service attack (DDoS): overflows a server with requests with the goal of interrupting, disrupting or stopping activities taking place on targeted websites. DDoS occur when botnets are activated by a “bot herder”.

Fair dealing: aims at providing space for fair critique, private study and public information on material protected by intellectual property law. Fair dealing, which requires acknowledgement of the author of creator of the protected material, is a limited exception to the exclusivity of intellectual property.

Flash-mobs: spontaneous, short-lived public events reuniting groups of people in the same location. Flash-mobs are frequently organized through the use of digital communications devices and social media technology. Though varying in scale, purposes and shape, flash-mobs rely in essence over a disruption of ordinariness and predictability.

Free culture movement: a social movement promoting the creation and distribution of content on the internet. It advocates for copyright reform that is least restrictive and that permits the free sharing of culture under various conditions such as under Creative Commons licenses.

Hackers: individuals who use their knowledge and computer skills to break into and infiltrate digital devices and networks. Hackers have different motivations and ethics. Fame, profit, political purposes, curiosity and personal satisfaction are amongst the most common incentives to hacking.

Identity theft: assuming someone else’s identity in order to access his or her private and personal accounts, access valuable information, or steal the financial resources of the victim.

Libertarian: individual whose political philosophy emphasize an individualistic conception of liberty, freedom and responsibility. Libertarians typically show hostility towards state regulation, involvement or participation in private or public life.

Open-source software: allow users to access, modify and reprogram their source code in order to improve or personalize them to their needs and interests. As with closed-source software (such as Windows), open-source software (such as Linux) are protected by license agreements providing rules and regulation of uses and distribution.

Pirates: individuals or groups who illegally modify, share or distribute privately owned information, content or data. File-sharing and website hacking are often associated with piracy by both public authorities and representative of intellectual property rights organizations.

Slacktivism: public demonstrations of support in regard to a particular social issue or cause that requires little or no direct commitment, participation or involvement from supporters. Slacktivism is depicted by critics as useless or personal public relations activities.

Social media: internet technologies that allow for participative communicative practices. Social media are tools that empower users to contribute to developing, collaborating, customizing, rating and distributing internet content. Their design aims at facilitating the constitution of networks amongst users.

Swarming: offensive strategy and military doctrine aimed at overrunning the adversary’s defenses through coordinated attacks coming from numerous directions and locations simultaneously.

Third-party marketing: the use of social media, internet technology and websites by companies and entrepreneurs to interact with, gather information from, and obtain feedback from targeted customers, groups and individuals.

WikiLeaks: non-profit organization whose primary activity rests in the online publication of classified, leaked and secret information. Officially launched in 2007 as a project of the Sunshine Press, WikiLeaks relies mostly on anonymous sources and whistleblowers for obtaining sensitive information. The organization is currently headed by controversial public figure Julian Assange.

Websites

Electronic Frontier Foundation - Social Network Monitoring

eff.org/foia/social-network-monitoring

Independent Media Center  
indymedia.org/en/index.shtml

International Free and Open Source Science Foundation  
[ifossf.org/](http://www.ifossf.org/)

OpenMedia.ca  
openmedia.ca

Privacy International  
privacyinternational.org/

Rabble.ca: Social Justice Resources  
[rabble.ca/podcasts/channel/social-justice](http://rabble.ca/podcasts/channel/social-justice)

Surveillance Studies Centre – Queen’s University  
[sscqueens.org/](http://www.sscqueens.org/)

Tactical Technology Collective  
tacticaltech.org/

Witness  
witness.org/

World Association for Christian Communication  
waccglobal.org/

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