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THE HUMAN NETWORK: SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE LIMIT OF POLITICS

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ABSTRACT

Internet-based social media sites have been increasingly used to organize political activism across the globe. Given recent events in Egypt where Wael Ghonim's role as social networker, Google executive, and activist coalesced at the center of an information-based revolution, or the much publicized use of BlackBerry Messenger to organize protests, riots, and looting in England, it is difficult to ignore the effect social networks have had on major political events. Beginning with a review of some of the key historical and conceptual accounts of the political implications of the Internet and social media over the last ten years, this article provides an analysis of how the political use of social media in recent events in Egypt and England has been represented by the mainstream western media.

KEYWORDS

Critical Internet studies, critical theory of social media, political activism, class politics, Egyptian Revolution, London Riots, economic inequality

NOTE

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INTRODUCTION

The first time Internet-based social media sites like Twitter or Facebook were linked to a political movement was in the spring of 2009 when activists in Moldova used Twitter to organize large protests against the governing Communist party. Later that year officials in the U.S. State Department asked Twitter to put off scheduled maintenance because they feared that a break in service would disrupt the activity of anti-government activists in Iran.[1] Since then it has become clear that social media can be a powerful tool for both political struggle and geopolitical strategy. Given recent events in Egypt where Wael Ghonim's role as social networker, Google executive, and activist coalesced at the center of an information-based revolution, or the much publicized use of BlackBerry Messenger to organize protests, riots, and looting in England, it is increasingly difficult to ignore the effect social networks have had on major political events. While the goals of recent mass mobilizations in Tehran, Tel Aviv, London, and San Francisco are radically different, each has been reported as both a political event and a media event, and each, incidentally, has been triggered by (some combination of) three points of conflict: the perception of political corruption, police violence, and the broadening inequality in the distribution of wealth.[2]

Internet pundits and social media scholars have weighed in for years on the potential of the Internet to spread democracy through the free flow of information, and in this way the Internet has been linked to the expansion of the free market, the development of local political uprisings, and even to events as large as the election of Barack Obama. Recently, lines have been drawn between "cyber-utopians"—those who see social media as a primary cause of recent political, economic, and social events—and "cyber-realists", who argue that social media is simply one in a long series of communication technologies which operate in a subservient role to larger political forces. Typical of these debates is the discussion surrounding a blog post by Andrew Sullivan in June 2009. After receiving reports that twitter was being used by protesters in Tehran, Sullivan declared that the "revolution will be twittered." In his post, he linked to a Tehran-based Twitter

[1] As reported by Reuters in June, 2009: Sue Pleming, "U.S. State Department speaks to Twitter over Iran," *Reuters.com* (June 16, 2009) // http://www.reuters.com/article/2009/06/16/us-iran-election-twitter-usa-idUSWBT01137420090616 (accessed August 1, 2011).

[2] The four locations listed here represent a small sampling of recent political actions which have deployed social media to organize or publicize events. I refer to recent protests in Tel Aviv and San Francisco in particular to briefly highlight the global spread of social media as a political tool. In Tel Aviv protesters occupied public areas in October 2011 in order to bring attention to homelessness and income inequality, while in San Francisco transit officials cut off internet service in order to disrupt protests after a fatal shooting by a police officer working for the Bay Area Rapit Transit System (BART). We could add to this list many of the protests linked to the Occupy Wall Street movement beginning in the fall of 2011. I will discuss the events of Tehran and London below.

account that said "ALL Internet & mobile networks are cut. We ask everyone in Tehran to go onto their rooftops and shout ALAHO AKBAR in protest #IranElection."[3] While many celebrated Twitter's role in organizing the roof protest, the question of how Twitter could have spread this information after the government disabled all mobile and Internet networks did not immediately affect how the event was reported. Further, it was only after the western media had spread the story of Twitter's role in the Iranian protests that the dominant use of English in the tweets also raised questions about social media's role in the events. The reality of Twitter's impact on the ground in Iran has been analyzed by Evegeny Morozov and other "cyber-realists" who have persuasively argued that in most of these cases social media has been much more successful in publicizing political events than it has been in organizing those events.[4]

What is often lost in the claims surrounding the utopian potential of the Internet is the fact that what we today call social media was first developed for business and that it closely resembles the type of communication which developed, and developed alongside of, the Internet economy over the last two decades. The history of social media, the particular qualities of its evolving forms, and access to the technology all play a role in how social media has been used in political struggles and in how it has been represented in the mainstream media. Rather than intervening in arguments concerning what actually happened in Moldova, Iran, Egypt, or London, this article discusses how the use of social media has affected the representation of political struggle in mainstream western media, and what those representations may tell us about the potential and limitations of political action in a world mediated by social media.

1. POLITICS, SOCIAL MEDIA, AND THE MARKET

Political claims about the democratizing potential of the Internet emerged in the 1990s with the popularization of the technology. In an early essay on the topic, Tiziana Terranova adeptly analyzed the political potential of the Internet with its relationship to contemporary capitalism, the emergent "knowledge class," and the communication and technology-based forms of labor developing. Terranova writes, "in spite of the numerous, more or less disingenuous endorsements of the

[3] Andrew Sullivan, "The Revolution Will be Twittered," *theatlantic.com* (July 13, 2009) // http://www.theatlantic.com/daily-dish/archive/2009/06/the-revolution-will-be-twittered/200478/ (accessed August 1, 2011).
[4] Evgeny Morozov, "Facebook and Twitter are just places revolutionaries go," *Guardian.co.uk* (March 7, 2011) // http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/mar/07/facebook-twitter-revolutionaries-cyber-utopians (accessed August 1, 2011).

democratic potential of the Internet, the links between it and capitalism looks a bit too tight for comfort to concerned political minds." She continues,

> It has been very tempting to counteract the naïve technological utopianism by pointing out how computer networks are the material and ideological heart of informated capital. The Internet advertised on television and portrayed by print media seems not just the latest incarnation of capital's inexhaustible search for new markets, but also a full consensus-creating machine, which socializes the mass of proletarianized knowledge workers into the economy of continuous innovation.[5]

Terranova brings up three important problems in the discourse surrounding the political potential of the Internet that have not been resolved by contemporary commentators on social media. First, she notes that any definition of politics in this context must be understood in relation to the fact that the Internet is inextricably tied to contemporary forms of capitalism. Second, as a communicative tool the Internet is the next step in a long history of innovative tools for marketing and advertising which primarily work to open up new markets. And third, that the forms of capitalism, communication, and labor are structurally interconnected to the formation and reproduction of "consensus," or politics.

What we call social media today was first developed as a tool for the efficient flow of information within corporate organizations. In the 1990s companies like Cisco Systems and Sun Microsystems developed routing hardware and network software which allowed companies to link their workforce in efficient, "social" networks. With the availability of inexpensive Internet and mobile phone service, this form of communication also helped to extend the scope of the "work day" outside of its temporal and spatial limitations. The social media platform that has been most successfully realized through Facebook and Twitter operates on a blurry line between the traditionally distinct spheres of work and "free time." Cisco Systems, in particular, has played with the dynamic tensions surrounding the conflation of these historically distinct spheres in a series of advertising campaigns which started in the early 2000s. Working with the artistic advertising agency Ogilvy & Mather, Cisco highlighted areas of life which were not traditionally connected to communications technology or to work, and then revealed a shared intersection between these supposedly disparate spheres. For example, in 2005 Cisco ran an advertisement which pictured several houses in a typical upper-middle class suburban neighborhood with the title "Office Park," while another ad in the

[5] Tiziana Terranova, "Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy," *Social Text, 63* [Duke University Press] 18, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 39.

series featured a mother and a new baby in a hospital bed with the title "8lbs., 3oz." Each advertisement then led its copy with the term "powered by Cisco."[6]

Prior to the explosive rise in the use of social media, Cisco Systems and other business communications companies clearly understood the potential benefits of breaking down the distinct spheres of personal and work life. If every neighborhood could potentially serve as an office, and every human birth is dependent on a communications technology, the basic definition of the market and how and where markets could be expanded seems limitless. The fact that these ads circulated in the popular press and not in trade journals also shows that by 2005 Americans could imagine their home as a seamless extension of the office without feeling that conflation as intrusive or threatening. Like every other communication technology before it, social media has served to expand markets geographically, especially given the recent geopolitical events which overturned governments and opened new countries to Internet and mobile communication networks; it has also, and more effectively, created new forms of the market altogether. If spatial expansion of markets can be called extensive, then the expansion of markets into previously untapped areas of our lives (the home, the weekend, the birthing room) could be called intensive. Today Cisco Systems calls the result of these intensive innovations *The Human Network*.

Clearly, the relationship between social media and the evolving form of the capitalist marketplace will necessarily affect social media's potential as a political tool. This dynamic has often been overlooked by political science and media studies scholars. The complex interaction between the market and social media is often simplified by commentators who offer an uncomplicated concept of politics. If by politics one means the election of a president of the United States from one of the two major parties, there can be no question that the use of social media platforms to access previously untapped demographics for fund raising (as happened in 2008) effected a political event, but the way in which it influenced that event is often left unexamined. Through the use of social media the Obama campaign was able to open up new and demographically specific markets that could be targeted for political contributions. These contributions operated in the form of a commodity purchase within the framework of Internet marketing and advertising. In this case the "purchase" takes the form of a political donation, but the exchange more closely follows the traditional form of commodity consumption whereby the consumer's actions are linked to the construction of an identity, i.e., the experience or belief that the types of commodities we purchase reflect our identity. The

[6] "Office Park," Cisco Systems Company: OGILVY & MATHER, USA, Culver City; Creative Director: Dan Burrier (CCO)/Gavin Milner (ECD); Copywriter: Bob Strickland; Art Director: Matt Coonrod; Photographer: David Harriman (Jan 2005).

identification with the commodity in this case seems to be prior to the act of buying/supporting the political campaign, but, as with commodity consumption more generally, the identification actually emerges as a result of the purchase rather than as something which exists prior to the purchase. Put differently, the act of "buying in" to a political position as the result of an on-line marketing campaign serves primarily to produce identification with the politician/product and secondarily to bring in money to the campaign. This is why Terranova connects the construction of "consensus" to the expansion of markets and commodity consumption as one of the primary functions of the Internet. In this example, rather than a political intervention, the Internet simply streamlined and extended an ongoing process in which political affiliation is formally connected to commodity consumption and brand loyalty.

In the case of Obama's fundraising strategy, the Internet fulfilled its function as a tool for expanding a market for a certain political identity into diverse demographic niches in a way that influenced the mainstream political process. But the definition of politics which Terranova offers when she compares the expansion of these new markets to "utopian" claims about the Internet refers to a very different standpoint. The more radical potential of the Internet would include political acts which are positioned against—rather than as an extension of—the contemporary capitalist market and thus also against the dominant forms of political subjectivity. Following Terranova, then, we could ask a question about each of the recently celebrated (or derided) mass actions which have been linked to the use of social media; namely, are these revolutionary events or the extension of capitalist markets brought about through political means?

2. THE POLITICS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

In October 2010 Malcolm Gladwell wrote a polarizing analysis of the relation between social media and politics. A best-selling author known for popularizing academic sociology, Gladwell took a strong stand against the role of social media in recent political events. Not only had Twitter not had an actual effect on events inside Iran, he argues, but "social media can't provide what social change has always required."[7] What social change requires, according to Gladwell, is a "strong-tie" between participants engaged in high-risk activism which cannot be replicated in the cyber-world. Put simply, his claim is that close, personal ties between participants are essential for "real" political activism and that social media cannot

[7] Malcolm Gladwell, "Small Change: Why the Revolution will not be Tweeted," *Newyorker.com* (October 4, 2010) // http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/10/04/101004fa_fact_gladwell (accessed August 1, 2011). Unless otherwise noted all quotations from Gladwell are taken from this article.

replace this form of direct engagement between participants. To support this claim, Gladwell cites a sociological study of activists in the Mississippi Freedom Summer Project of 1964 which attempted to determine why, in a group of similarly passionate and committed volunteers, some stayed and some left after three of the volunteers were kidnapped and killed. The result of the study shows that those who stayed had closer personal ties with others in the group and, conversely, those who left tended to have fewer direct connections to others in the civil rights movement. Gladwell goes on to claim that high-risk activism is a "strong-tie" phenomenon by referring to several other revolutionary events, such as the demonstrations in East Germany prior to the fall of the Berlin Wall. While these events looked spontaneous from the outside, according to Gladwell they were each the result of well-planned, hierarchical organizations which were made up of small groups with a significant, if decentered system of communication. For Gladwell, "real" political actions occur as the result of direct, face-to-face interactions that are combined with emotional, interpersonal investment. In order to stand up and put oneself at risk, this argument goes, one needs to be in a system of reciprocal responsibility.

Thus, it is not surprising that Gladwell argues that the formal quality of social media itself necessarily limits its potential for "real" or "high-risk" activism. As a form of communication, he argues, social media can only facilitate relationships based on "weak-ties." We can see this clearly, since the two major social media platforms are designed to facilitate, or more accurately, manage relationships either with people you do not personally know (Twitter) or with a number of "friends" who are in most cases distant acquaintances (Facebook). Gladwell acknowledges that this type of social interaction can be powerful and effective, but argues that the "strength in weak ties" occurs primarily in situations where access to new information is essential, as in fashion and the "diffusion of innovation, interdisciplinary collaboration, […] matching up buyers and sellers," and "the logistical functions of the dating world." Social media, then, is capable of expanding markets by facilitating those areas of our ever-more-economically-oriented social and personal live; however, when it counts, when one's life is on the line, Gladwell insists that the direct material connections we have with *actual* friends and family will determine our level of political engagements with "real" events.[8]

While coming from different perspectives, both Gladwell and Terranova are suspicious of the potential for social media to have a significant impact on political

[8] Gladwell's argument is referring to a classic sociology essay from the 1970s by Mark Granovetter which analyzed social and political movements using the theory of networks. It is significant that Granovetter's theory is not a critique of "weak-ties" in political movements as Gladwell's argument implies. Instead, Granovetter argues that there is "strength in weak ties" for grass roots political activism. For a summary of his argument and the development of his theory *see* Mark Granovetter, "The Strength of Weak Ties; A Network Theory Revisited," *Sociological Theory* 1 (1983).

events. Gladwell refuses to acknowledge that a constitutive social or political system could be made up of the immaterial connections which stem from network-based relationships. Simply put, he holds to the traditional position of social activists who define politics as well-organized collective action that is grounded in shared identity (most often race or class) and that has a clear oppositional standpoint against a dominant position of power. The civil rights struggles, labor movements, and anti-war efforts that occurred in the twentieth century in the U.S. provide the model of politics for Gladwell and, according to him, each required direct personal, identificatory relationships, a clear goal, and a leader. Gladwell credits networks with doing many things well, for example, "car companies sensibly use a network to organize their hundreds of suppliers." But, "because networks don't have a centralized leadership structure and clear lines of authority, they have real difficulty reaching consensus and setting goals. They can't think strategically; they are chronically prone to conflict and error."[9] They are, in short, good for markets but not good for humans.

Gladwell goes on to define two distinct types of political action, the first is modeled on real relationships and is capable of systemic change; as he says, "[I]f you're taking on a powerful and organized establishment you have to be a hierarchy." While network-based political organizations are limited to actions which can only "frighten or humiliate or make a splash."[10] The implications of this argument are clear from the examples he goes on to use, while the Montgomery bus boycott succeeded because of the "military precision" of its organizational structure, the Palestine Liberation Organization's network structure has made it ineffective because it is "vulnerable to outside manipulation and internal strife."[11] In the end, Gladwell holds to a traditional definition of politics.

Terranova, in contrast, embraces the structural contradictions embodied in the development of the Internet and contemporary, information-based capitalism—and, specifically, the forms of labor it requires—in order to challenge the definition of political action in a world where the personal, political, and economicnot only overlap, but are in many instances indistinct from one another. The question she asks is not whether the Internet can affect political events but "whether the Internet embodies a continuation of capital or a break with it."[12] At the very least, the activities that make up social media mimic the activities and skills required by emergent forms of contemporary labor, and for Terranova the result of this is an Internet which serves to expand the capitalist market extensively (by

[9] Malcolm Gladwell, *supra* note 7.
[10] *Ibid*.
[11] *Ibid*.
[12] Tiziana Terranova, *supra* note 5: 38.

geographically connecting new markets to the Internet) and intensively (by accessing more and more time from those who are already connected). At the same time she argues that if it is the case that capitalism is operating today in a way that is closer to a network than a hierarchy, then the form of political resistance will necessarily have to meet capital/politics on this emergent organizational terrain. Terranova is suspicious of the idea that the Internet could facilitate a political movement which threatened the market from which it emerged, but she is simultaneously capable of seeing how that fact could also inform emergent political theory.

In 2000, the problem for Terranova was grounded in the political implications surrounding the types of labor which were rapidly developing as a consequence of the Internet. She asks, "if this population of Internet users is largely made up of 'knowledge workers,' then it matters whether these are seen as the owners of elitist cultural and economic power or the avant-garde of new configurations of labor that do not automatically guarantee elite status."[13] The question of who is involved in the business of the Internet, or who is included or excluded from the emergent digital economy, is still an important one for questions surrounding the democratic potentials of the Internet, and, clearly, access is still primarily limited to the middle classes and those of the first world. But, Terranova argues, traditional questions about class are potentially misleading in this context because they tend to imply that the class status of Internet workers will determine the political potential of the Internet. If class is the determining factor, "if we can prove that knowledge workers are the avant-garde of labor, then the Net becomes a site of resistance; if we can prove that knowledge workers wield the power in informated societies, then the Net is an extended gated community for the middle class."[14] In either case, historically valid definitions of class and politics (along with the personal relationships, organizational discipline, hierarchical structure, and strong leadership endorsed by Gladwell) are misleading when applied to a postindustrial economy and society, where the definition of class and its relation to politics has changed as dramatically as the forms of communication. Gladwell and Terranova represent the (historical and conceptual) range of the arguments surrounding the political implications of the Internet and social media over the last ten years, but neither sufficiently accounts for how issues of class and income inequality affect the dynamic relationship between new communication technologies and political action.

[13] *Ibid.*: 40.
[14] *Ibid*.

3. KIDS WITH KEYBOARDS

On February 13, 2011, *Newsweek* and *60 Minutes* revealed that the Internet activist who had been held by Egyptian authorities for two weeks was Wael Ghonim.[15] At that time the Facebook page he set up had been widely credited in the West as the organizing force behind the protests in Tahrir Square that eventually brought down Mubarak's thirty-year presidency. In addition to organizing social media, Ghonim's appearance on a popular television program the day after his release energized the movement and brought a final wave of protesters to the streets. *Newsweek* declared him the "Facebook Freedom Fighter" and *60 Minutes* presented him as the head of "Egypt's New Age Revolution", while both media outlets told a story in which, with the help of the right tools, the Egyptian people's desire for democracy emerged through these events as an unstoppable force.

60 Minutes opened its segment by explaining that two-thirds of Egyptians are thirty years-old or younger, and that these "educated but unemployed" youth were frustrated and ready to act. Armed with "Twitter and satellite television broadcasts" rather than "terrorism and tanks," these "kids with keyboards" brought down an "aging autocratic Pharaoh" with the "weapons of the young."[16] *Newsweek*'s depiction of the events was more of a cloak and dagger story. Opening with a description of the final contact between Ghonim and his associate in Washington D.C. minutes before he was picked up by police, the story unfolds, as they say, "like a shadowy cyber thriller."[17] In both versions, social media emerged as the medium through which a savvy public relations and marketing campaign was deployed against an ancient, uninformed, and unconnected, regime. In the final analysis the power and potential inherent in anonymously organized, network-based mass political action was adeptly managed by those who, like Wael Ghonim, were mediating the protests through the tools of social media.

As the subtitle of the *Newsweek* article puts it, "Wael Ghonim's day job was at Google. But at night he was organizing a revolution." At the time of the events in Egypt, Ghonim was Google's Regional Marketing Manager for the Middle East and he lived with his wife and two kids in an affluent suburb of Dubai. He started working with politics and social media when, a year before, he took over managing

[15] The weekly print magazine *Newsweek* and the televised "news magazine" *60 Minutes* (CBS) are two of the most recognizable and respected mainstream news publications in the United States.
[16] Tom Anderson, Andy Court, Harry A. Radliffe II, Jeff Newton, and Amjad Tadros, "Wael Ghonim and Egypt's New Age Revolution," *Cbsnews.com* (February 13, 2011) // http://www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=7346812n (accessed August 1, 2011).
[17] Mike Giglio, "The Facebook Freedom Fighter," *Thedailybeast.com [in Newsweek Magazine]* (February 13, 2011) // http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2011/02/13/the-facebook-freedom-fighter.html (accessed August 1, 2011).

the Facebook fan page of Mohammed ElBaradei, the Nobel Prize winner who then stood against the Mubarak regime and who ended up in a strong political position after the revolution. *Newsweek* explains that while Ghonim had extensive technical experience because of having founded "several successful Web ventures, […] it was his marketing skills that would fuel his transformation into Egypt's most important cyberactivist."[18] While Ghonim claims that "without Facebook, without Twitter, without Google, without YouTube this would never have happened," the primary role of marketing and public relations in this story is clear.[19] The blurring of the lines between Ghonim's job at Google and his political life is further complicated by his claim that the movement was not "political" in a traditional way—as he says, "we were going to win because we don't understand politics."[20]

As it turns out, the movement was many different things to many different groups. The role of social media and of the educated, Internet-savvy youth in the events has subsequently been revealed to have been much smaller than reported in the U.S. media. Ramesh Srinivasan recently presented his research into how information flowed through the protests in Egypt. Not surprisingly for a country where out of 85 million people only 135,000 are users of social media, he found that traditional models of social interaction were the primary way that information spread about the protests. Further, Srinivasan found that while there were many different grievances, the price of food, and especially a recent hike in the price of tomatoes, acted as the final straw for many of those who had suffered economically for three decades. Rather than a "primal yearning for democracy" as was reported in the U.S., the majority of protesters were acting out of frustration over corruption and the continual expansion of income inequality.[21]

For Ghonim and the western media the Egyptian revolution was the result of a desire for human rights. Events were triggered when police officers killed an Internet activist who tried to expose police corruption. Ghonim explains that the pictures of Khalid Sayid's body "made all of us [cry], you know, because he's coming from the middle class."[22] Ghonim explains that police violence was a symptom of the lack of rights in Egypt and it was this realization that inspired him to create the Facebook page that was later credited with starting the revolution. That a half-million people were in some way politicized by the death of Khalid Sayid is a meaningful and powerful part of this narrative.

[18] *Ibid.*
[19] Tom Anderson, Andy Court, Harry A. Radliffe II, Jeff Newton, and Amjad Tadros, *supra* note 16.
[20] *Ibid*. [my transcription].
[21] Cynthia Lee, "Putting Social media in their Place," *UCLA Today: faculty and Staff News* (August 24, 2011) // http://today.ucla.edu/portal/ut/putting-social-media-in-its-place-214010.aspx (accessed September 1, 2011).
[22] Tom Anderson, Andy Court, Harry A. Radliffe II, Jeff Newton, and Amjad Tadros, *supra* note 16.

Any protest this large would obviously have to be about many things to many different people, and while the question of economic inequality is not directly raised in the interviews with Ghonim, class nevertheless emerges as a strong undercurrent in his story. Sayid is from the middle class and Ghonim is from an emergent class of global entrepreneurs, but the majority of protesters and soldiers occupy a diverse lower class that has been represented as almost a peasant class or *lumpenproletariat* by the western media. When asked if he was beaten or tortured while in captivity, Ghonim gives a very specific answer: "Yeah, but it was not systematic. Like, it was individual based, and it was not from the officers. It was actually from the soldiers." He goes on to explain that the soldiers "are simple people, not educated" and says that he "cannot carry [on] a conversation with them."[23] The significance of the class difference between the officers and the soldiers for Ghonim is clear. For the violence he endured to have been "systematic," or politically significant, it would have had to have come from an officer, or someone else who was capable of a self-reflexive political position. Ghonim explains that he forgives the soldiers who beat him because "they were convinced that I was harming the country … so when he hits me, he doesn't hit me because, you know, he's a bad guy. He's hitting because he thinks he's a good guy."[24] Uneducated and poor, the soldiers are incapable of communicating with the middle class. Ghonim implies that their lack of education makes them easily manipulated by the government and thus not capable of occupying a constitutive political position. The dynamic between communicative agency and political coercion reveals a distinct definition of political subjectivity in which only the educated, professional class has voice.

It is clear that Ghonim's account is only one part of a complicated story, but the question we are left with is not whether his story is *the story* that makes sense of these events; rather, it is why his story is the *only* story told in the West. Ghonim is intensely invested in not only telling his story, as the story of the middle class, but in suppressing the idea that the revolution was about food prices or income inequality or, further, that the uneducated poor were a factor in its success. For example, in a break from the formal *60 Minutes* interview Ghonim introduces the correspondent Harry Smith to his family and at one point excitedly shows Smith a YouTube video of a protest song. He sings along with the song, repeating the lyrics in English: "We went down to the streets, We held our heads up to the sky," the song begins, but after the third line, "hunger does not matter to us anymore,"

[23] *Ibid.* [quotes taken from a partial transcript at: http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2011/02/13/60minutes/main20031701.shtml?tag=currentVideoInfo;videoMetaInfo (accessed September 1, 2011)]
[24] *Ibid*. [transcript].

Ghonim breaks from singing to say "It's not about the food [anymore], you know? The most important thing is our rights." He says this to Smith and to the camera in a clear reference to a prior conversation. But there is no mention of food prices in the interview, or of the idea that there might have been a moment when the protest changed from being about food to being about rights, if in fact it ever did.

My point here is not to critique Ghonim, or to reveal a "truth" behind the reporting of these events, but to ask how the use of, or more specifically *the representation of the use of* social media as a political tool can help us understand the definition of politics today. *60 Minutes* and *Newsweek* are invested in the idea that social media was the cause of the Egyptian revolution and that, in some way, social media is both the medium and the cause of the emergence of a recognizable form of a democratic subject in Egypt. It is only through this narrative that Tahrir Square gains a political voice in the West, and this is why *60 Minutes* quotes a minority of Internet entrepreneurs over those on the streets protesting the cost of tomatoes. But as long as the narrative is framed as an example of the natural emergence of democracy then the use of social media adds nothing new to the equation. The use of social media simply updates a very old story in which the West sees these events as positive and acceptable if, at their core, it can say that by employing 'our' tools 'they' aspire to become 'us'.[25]

The insistence that these events be read through a narrative that justifies the form of western liberal political subjectivity by pointing to its emergence in "other" parts of the world also reveals an anxiety about the role of social media in these events. While Ghonim was able to successfully control the perception of what happened in Tahrir Square by using social media to emphasize the ideals of the middle class over those who he considered unable to hold or communicate a political position, the necessity to do so challenges the democratic ideals of social media. What if those who were in Tahrir Square because of food prices, and not necessarily human rights, had access to social media? What would the political position of those who "cannot carry on a conversation with" the middle class sound like?

On the one hand, the impact of social media on these events (especially considering their primary effect on the media's reception) tends to support a traditional definition of the western liberal political subject; but, on the other hand, it also raises questions about whether social media *could* organize people and information into other and unforeseen social and political formations. The events in

[25] See Benjamin H. Bratton's comments on Ramesh Srinivasan, "Social Media's Power: Where's the Net Delusion?": Ramesh Srinivasan, "Social Media's Power: Where's the Net Delusion," *Rameshsrinivasan.org* (January 28, 2011) // http://rameshsrinivasan.org/2011/01/28/social-medias-power-wheres-the-net-delusion/ (accessed August 1, 2011).

Egypt seem to support both Terranova and Gladwell's critiques of the potential of social media to effect real political change. The event was determined by "strong-ties" and where social media did have an effect it primarily served to enforce a preexisting western model of economic and political subjectivity. But something else also emerged from these events. The use of social media by a small minority to transform the events from a populist revolt to a democratic revolution revealed structural tensions about class, identity, and access to technology. In this case, social media is still only being used as a tool to amplify dominant political and economic positions, while the more radical potential of this technology would imply the creation of new forms of political association, community, and subjectivity. There is a long history of celebrating the utopian potential of the Internet, but the reality would require us to think of social media as an unstable political force that has the power to affect the form of collective subject positions which *may not* follow comfortable political narratives. Simply put, there is no guarantee that the use of social media will continue to produce or facilitate a form of political subjectivity which is palatable to dominant political standpoints.

4. READING THE RIOTS

In addition to his work on Egypt, Ramesh Srinivasan recently published a defense of the political use of social media in response to the riots which broke out across England in the summer of 2011. Srinivasan points out that the rioters used BlackBerry Messenger (BBM) rather than Twitter or Facebook to, as he puts it, "incite large groups to act on behalf of a cause." Srinivasan argues that the form of the technology used in a political event "could impact the shape of a protest or riot."[26] The fact that you need someone to accept your "friendship" to view their Facebook page, or that, inversely, every Twitter feed is accessible to anyone on the Internet, will influence the form of association that results from their use. BlackBerry Messenger is a private social network which sends out encrypted messages that are difficult or impossible to trace, while its "broadcast" function allows users to send a single message to multiple contacts in a way that can be replicated and thus one person can communicate with thousands of users very quickly. While posting on Facebook and Twitter leaves a digital trace, BBM works more like a text message which uses the mobile network to transmit its data. In the riots, messages were sent out on BBM and then "amplified" across other social networks in a way that proved too sophisticated for local police to follow in real

[26] Ramesh Srinivasan, "London, Egypt, and the Nature of Social Media," *Washingtonpost.com* (August 11, 2011) // http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/on-innovations/london-egypt-and-the-complex-role-of-social-media/2011/08/11/gIQAIoud8I_story.html (accessed September 1, 2011).

time and allowed for large groups to assemble and disperse without leaving a clear digital trace. Both the actions of the rioters on the street and their use of social media were seen as serious threats to basic social order and the social and legal consequences of these riots are still being felt.

The encrypted nature of the texts on BBM has been the focus of much of the analysis of the riots because, unlike Twitter or Facebook, these messages cannot be retrieved by authorities. In addition, while the use of BBM is limited to those who own a Blackberry handset, these handsets are the most popular phone among young people in England and there is a strong cultural expectation, even and especially in working class and poor neighborhoods, that a Blackberry is essential to social life.[27] Unlike Egypt, in England many of the poorest and economically disadvantaged people have access to social media, and the preferred mode of access is through a Blackberry handset with its "Social Feeds" feature that allows a user to access several platforms at once. The reason the police could not follow the young rioters on social media is not that they do not understand or did not have access to these technologies; rather, it was because urban youth in England use several social media platforms at once in a complicated way which is specific to their cultural experience.

The England riots revealed, in stark detail, the destructive potential of social media. According to *Reading the Riots*—a research project set up by *The Guardian* and supported by the London School of Economics, The Joseph Roundtree Foundation and The Open Society Foundation—by early September the cost to taxpayers of the riots in England was being estimated at £100 million.[28] In addition, five people died and over two thousand young people have been arrested, while many more have been identified through the analysis of video and archived social media. The three longest sentences handed down (as of September 2011) were for "inciting violence" by posting riot locations on Facebook. Facebook is accessible to police and Twitter has handed over 2.5 million Tweets related to the riots, and while BlackBerry's parent company has agreed to "cooperate", it has also stated that the encrypted messages sent over their system are impossible for them to retrieve.

The use of social media to organize, document, and eventually prosecute those involved in the riots reveals another aspect of the leveling effect network-based communication tools have had on political, social, and personal events.

[27] Mike Butcher, ""Absolute Explosion" -- How Blackberry BBM Fed the Riots, Says Contact," *Eu.techcrunch.com* (August 11, 2011) // http://eu.techcrunch.com/2011/08/11/absolute-explosion-%E2%80%94-how-blackberry-bbm-fed-the-riots-says-contact/ (accessed September 1, 2011).
[28] Alex Hawkes, Juliette Garside, and Julia Kollewe, "UK Riots Could Cost Taxpayer £100m," *Guardian.co.uk* (August 9, 2011) // http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/aug/09/uk-riots-cost-taxpayer-100-million (accessed September 1, 2011).

Following the model of governments in Iran, Egypt, China, and recently in San Francisco, in the days after the riots the English government raised the possibility that it be granted authority to shut down the Internet, or specific social media platforms, in times of crisis, but this position was quickly reversed. Instead of restricting access to the Internet, the potential inherent in social media for following, tracking, and later enforcing illegal activity quickly became apparent. In the wake of the riots, talk of when and how to shut down networks quickly transformed into a discussion about "measures the companies could take to help contain further disorder, including how law enforcement agencies can use the sites more effectively."[29] In short order the idea that a government would shut down social media platforms in times of crisis shifted to a consensus that the social media companies themselves should manage their services at these times and, in return, will consult with government on how to use its services to police, or later prosecute, citizens.

Beyond the complex relationships surrounding the use of social media in the riots and in the prosecution of rioters, there are difficult questions about how the events were defined by the media. This fact was made clear early in the crisis when, by the second day, correspondents on *The BBC* were ordered by management to stop using the term "protesters" and to start using the term "rioters." Later that day *The BBC* issued an apology for having used the term protesters at any point in their coverage of the events.[30] The political implications surrounding the two terms are clear: rioters are criminals who are simply out to steal and cause havoc, while protesters are acting together on behalf of a political cause. *The Guardian* not so subtly deploys a similar tactic in their use of an image depicting a threatening youth in a hoodie with his face covered by a bandana on the banner which appears on the top of every article in their "objective, scientifically-oriented study."[31] This image operates along the lines of a branding strategy in a marketing campaign, standing in as the symbolic referent for the riots. The youth is of indistinct race, and any color visible in the skin around his eyes could easily be attributed to the shadow cast by his hood. It is easy to see that his hoodie is made by Adidas. The figure has his face covered by a thick bandana and the straps of a messenger-type bag are visible across his chest. Each of these details—indistinct

[29] Paul Lewis, James Ball, and Josh Halliday, "Twitter Study Casts Doubt on Ministers' Post-Riot Claims," *Guardian.co.uk* (August 24, 2011) // http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/aug/24/twitter-study-post-riot-plans (accessed September 1, 2011).
[30] Josh Halliday, "London Rioters are not 'Protesters', Admits BBC," *Gaurdian.co.uk* (August 10, 2011) // http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2011/aug/10/london-rioters-not-protesters-bbc (accessed September 1, 2011).
[31] "Reading the Riots: Investigating England's Summer of Disorder," *Gaurdian.co.uk* (September 1, 2011) // http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/series/reading-the-riots (accessed September 1, 2011).

race, branded clothing, covered face, large bag—supports the typical image of the rioter.

Even though the riots first started after protests erupted over the police shooting of a black man in Tottenham, the race of the rioters has been determined to be unimportant and the government has continually rejected arguments that race or any form of political protest was a cause in these events.[32] The branded hoodie, the bandana, and the bag all support the idea that the rioters had thought ahead, organized their actions, and were acting principally out of a desire to steal consumer commodities. The Adidas brand emphasizes the idea that the rioter is materialistic, and further that he either has enough money to buy expensive clothes and thus is rioting for fun or he is already a criminal having accessed his expensive clothes illegally. Both possibilities clearly present him as immoral. This image serves as a threatening reminder that urban youth in England are selfish and out of control and thus itself carries a claim as to the cause of the protests. By highlighting the greed and immorality of the individuals involved, this image draws our attention away from the potential politics of race or economics.

Following the media's tendency to de-politicize these events, Justice Secretary Kenneth Clarke has publically blamed the riots on the "criminal classes." He claims that those involved in the rioting were "individuals and families familiar with the justice system" who make up "a feral underclass, cut off from the mainstream in everything but its materialism."[33] David Cameron has presented a similar, if more polite, story in which the riots were the result of a "slow motion moral collapse" that is in no way linked to economic or political conditions.[34] Cameron has repeated the claim that "these riots were not about poverty" on many occasions even after analysis of those arrested clearly shows that the vast majority were from very poor neighborhoods and that 66% also lived in areas that have seen a major decline in income and employment in the last ten years. The information emerging from the BBC's study clearly shows that a relationship between economic conditions, the lack of employment, and the continuation of policies in England that have steadily cut or eliminated social programs for the poor is the stark reality behind these events.[35]

As in the media accounts of the Egyptian revolution, the idea that economic inequality could lead to political action has been ignored or downplayed in the

[32] A recent poll showed that the majority of English people blamed the riots on minorities (Matthew Taylor, "British Public 'are more prejudiced against minorities after the riots'," *Guardian.co.uk* (September 5, 2011) // http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/sep/05/british-public-prejudiced-minorities-riots (accessed September 15, 2011)).
[33] Paul Lewis, Matthew Taylor, and James Hall, "Kenneth Clarke Blames English Riots on a 'Broken Penal System'," G*uardian.co.uk* (September 3, 2011) // http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/sep/05/kenneth-clarke-riots-penal-system (accessed September 3, 2011).
[34] *Ibid*.
[35] Simon Rogers, "England Riots: Was Poverty a Factor?" *Guardian.co.uk* (August 16, 2011) // http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/2011/aug/16/riots-poverty-map-suspects (accessed September 1, 2011).

narrative surrounding the riots. Violence against police or businesses is, by definition, a criminal and not political act and the rioters acted in ways which easily support the government's narrative that these were crimes and not a form of political action. This narrative depicts the rioters as lazy, undisciplined youth, whose pleasure in destruction and violence is only surpassed by their desire to obtain expensive clothes and new electronics. Regardless of the cause of their actions, it is clear that the rioters do not fit into any acceptable form of political subjectivity. If they were protesting against the rich, why did they use violence on their own people and burn their own neighborhoods? If they were protesting against the government, why did they focus on looting stores? There was no central organization, no stated cause, no clear target, no clear oppositional standpoint that directed their actions, and, especially, no recognizable narrative through which these actions could be transformed into a pre-existing political narrative. If there was a political motive in these actions (against police violence, or against racism or economic inequality) it is easy to argue that the rioter's actions hopelessly undermined that message.

The images which dominated the reporting of the riots depicted youths breaking into stores, beating people, stealing from injured bystanders, and defiantly walking the streets with the merchandise they had stolen from local stores. These actions are obviously criminal and not political; they are self-motivated and they shock us primarily because they fly in the face of what can loosely be called the social contract. But for all the handwringing, blaming, and prosecution, there has been very little discussion of why generally law abiding young people would blatantly riot and destroy their own neighborhoods.

One of the most shocking bits of media that emerged from the riots was neither an image of a rioter in a hoodie nor evidence of violence or rage. It was a brief interview of two young women on the morning after a night of rioting in which they, excitedly and drunkenly, describe the events of the previous night and give an explanation as to why the riots were happening:

> --Everyone was just going to riot, just going mad. Like chucking things, chucking bottles. Breaking stuff.
>
> --It was good, though. It was madness. Good fun.
>
> -- Yea, good fun.
>
> [Interviewer]: So you're drinking a bottle of rose wine at half-nine in the morning?
>
> --Yea, free alcohol
>
> [Interviewer]: Have you been drinking all night?
>
> --Yea, yea. It was the government's fault. Conservatives.
>
> --It's not even a riot, we're just showing the police we do what we want.

--Yea, and now we have.

[Interviewer]: Do you think it will go on tonight?

--Hopefully!

[Interviewer]: But these are local people, why is it targeting local people?

--It's the rich people, the people that got businesses, and that's why all of this happened. Because of the rich people.

--So we're just showing the rich people we do what we want.[36]

What was scandalous about this short interview is not that they were young women, or that they had been stealing stuff and "drinking all night," or even how they justified their actions ("just showing the police/rich we do what we want"), but that the rioting was a source of pleasure. These girls were not angry, inhuman, or violent—they were having the time of their lives. This response raises several questions as to the potential political stakes of their actions. The emotions they express could be an effect of the pleasure of transgression and the thrill of being swept up in a mass of people, but two things stand out that point to a more complex cause. First, their pleasure is expressed both as excitement and as something commonplace. They both agree that rioting is "good fun," as if it were a regular activity or generally accepted behavior. Second, they quickly attempt to both downplay the events ("it's not even a riot") and to ascribe a political cause by blaming the conservatives, the police, or the rich. While it would be easy to dismiss these comments as meaningless, the logic which the girls use to express their actions makes a strong claim for an underlying political cause for these events. They say it is not a riot. Instead, they describe it as a collective expression of agency on the part ("we") of the young and dispossessed against those with property. First one blames the conservatives (those behind the cuts in social programs), then the other blames the police (the face of political repression), but when pushed by the interviewer to comment on how they could be destroying their own neighborhood the girls come to agreement that their goal is to stand up to the "rich." Far from feeling any obligation to or association with those in their own neighborhood, these girls clearly express a theory of class that is not about work, region, or identity, but simply the distinction between those who have something and those who have nothing. The pleasure these girls express is an effect of the political nature of their acts. It is the pleasure of taking what they are not allowed to have—the pleasure of partaking in a commodity culture which they are excluded from.

[36] "London rioters 'showing the rich we do what we want'," *BBC.co.uk* (August 9, 2011) // http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-14458424 (accessed August 9, 2011).

CONCLUSION

While the riots in England are not recognizable by any sanctioned political narrative (in standpoint, objectives, or actions), it is apparent that a mass of dispirited individuals used social media to organize a series of events which brought a group of people together from similar socioeconomic positions to express their discontent. In many ways the events in England are similar to the events in Egypt, or more specifically, the narrative that Ghonim weaves about the role of social media in Egypt (that it was the cause of a mass uprising) is closer to describing what happened in England than in Egypt. The question we are left with given the similar but inverted narratives deployed by the media about Egypt and England is: What if the riots in England were political actions? What does it mean that the events in England are in many ways similar to the mainstream narrative of the Egyptian revolution; that they were facilitated by an emergent form of social media and triggered by the combination of police violence, rising income inequality, and a desire for basic human rights?

If Egypt revealed that social media was not a significant political tool in the events on the ground, but, instead, that it had a profound effect on how those events were disseminated and interpreted (especially in the West), then what is clear from the riots in England is the inverse insight. In England, a specific form of social media does seem to have been instrumental in the constitution of a form of collective action and expressive of a form of 'political' subjectivity. But, unlike Egypt, the political subjectivity which emerged on the streets of Tottenham cannot be assimilated by the media and transformed into a palatable version of liberal democracy, and, therefore, confronts the limit of what can be defined as politics today. In England the poor did have a voice but, in the end, it seems that most people did not like what they had to say.

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