NEW MEDIA

BY IVAN SIGAL

MEDIA

Challenging the Establishment

Facebook against every unjust

انتهى عصر الخوف

Protesters in Cairo's Tahrir Square, February 2011.

Alexey Dymovsky had had enough. A police major in the small Russian city of Novorossyisk, Dymovsky was fed up with the shakedowns and theft within his police force. In November 2009, he did something about it: he posted a video on YouTube, identifying and condemning police corruption, and appealing to the Russian federal government to respond. Dymovsky's appeal struck a chord with the Russian online community. His video was viewed millions of times, and spawned a copycat phenomenon of video appeals across Russia as the only recourse to endemic corruption.

THE GOVERNMENT RESPONDED to Dymovsky's appeal, but not as he had hoped. He was arrested and briefly jailed for fraud, lost his job, and endured a smear campaign by his former colleagues.[1]

COSTS AND BENEFITS...

A FEW MONTHS LATER, in Egypt, a young rights activist named Khaled Said posted a video online of police officers allegedly sharing profits from a drug deal. Shortly thereafter, he was beaten to death in the street by police. Official reports stated that he'd choked to death on a bag of marijuana; however a witness captured the beating on his cell phone camera, and that image circulated widely in social media networks in Egypt and globally. Within months, Facebook groups protesting Said's death had hundreds of thousands of fans, leading to a popular protest movement for personal rights and to end official corruption in Egypt.[2]

...AND RESULTS

WHILE THESE STORIES are similar, the outcomes, over time, have varied significantly. Dymovsky today runs anti-corruption campaigns, but up to now the Russian government's tolerance for institutional corruption has changed little. In Egypt, by contrast, the movement to support Khaled Said became a major force for social protest, linking people all across Egypt in a collective demand for justice and accountability. This movement played an important role in the protests that led to the overthrow of President Hosni Mubarak and

his political party at the beginning of 2011.

These cases, and many others like them, attest to the potential of networked media and mobile communications to advance civic engagement, collective action, and the formation of more open participatory political and social movements.

Both Dymovsky's and Said's stories started as social media phenomena—as memes that first gained attention through participatory media networks, and then amplified globally through the mass media. Both used common online tools, relying on video-sharing platforms, blogs, and commercially owned social networks to spread their messages, and took advantage of the network effects of the Internet. Both messages gained attention because they produced images that became symbols for a greater cause as they resonated through the social media.

Dymovsky's and Said's stories demonstrate that individual citizens can effect social change through mediated action. They point to a paradigmatic shift in how social networks coalesce online for collective action. Before the Internet, coordinating network action generally required organizational infrastructure such as leadership, hierarchies of authority, and administrative bodies for sharing resources and coordinating information. The Internet, and especially the creation of open and accessible social media networks, has facilitated and significantly accelerated the generation and mass awareness of social categories, such as people with grievances about government corruption. It has also provided the means to create and share an abundance of content—images, videos, and stories—that feed the narratives around which networks for action coalesce.

THE MEDIUM, THE MESSAGE, AND MORE

THIS SHIFT in the effects of participatory media points to the enormous potential for open and more participatory economic, social, and political development, but does not guarantee positive results. The difference in outcomes between the Russian and Egyptian cases demonstrates a simple idea: local contexts and conditions will strongly affect the results of a given campaign or project. Successful change requires the convergence of an activated network, appropriate media tools for a given situation, and the political will to effect change. This idea has led to a profusion of online media platforms, tools, and communities that have been locally designed to respond to specific needs. These include everything from mapping programs, to geolocation and tracking; networks of subject specialists who contribute their skills to a common cause; or mobile communications solutions for sharing social, economic, or medical data between communities, markets, or patients.

TRANSPARENCY THROUGH TECHNOLOGY

OVER THE PAST YEAR, Global Voices has conducted a research project called the Technology for Transparency Network (transparency.globalvoicesonline. org) to highlight interesting examples of emergent information technologies, platforms, and communities that were created in the developing world and the countries of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. The research features over 60 cases, such as:

- Mzalendo (www.mzalendo.com), a volunteer project created to "keep an eye on the Kenyan Parliament" by profiling parliamentarians' actions, statements, and voting records,
- Vota Inteligente (www.votainteligente.cl), a Chilean project that uses information technology to inform citizens about elected officials,
- the Ujima Project (ujima-project. org), which makes governmental and NGO budgetary data available online to encourage spending transparency, and
- Pera Natin 'To!, an initiative of the Philippine Public Transparency Reporting Project (www.transparencyreporting.net), that enables users to report incidents of bribery among public officials.

Other increasingly well-known platforms that started as responses to local development problems have proven valuable for a wide range of applications. These include:

- Frontline SMS (www.frontlinesms. com), an SMS messaging management tool designed for development projects, and
- Ushahidi (www.ushahidi.com), an incident mapping and verification platform with some 10,000 installations to date.

These projects are the result of emerging communities of practice that are searching for their own solutions to social, economic, and political development challenges using locally designed information technology tools and locally run communities. Some may have access to international development organizations and resources, but they are just as likely to be local responses to local needs, with no ties to development institutions.
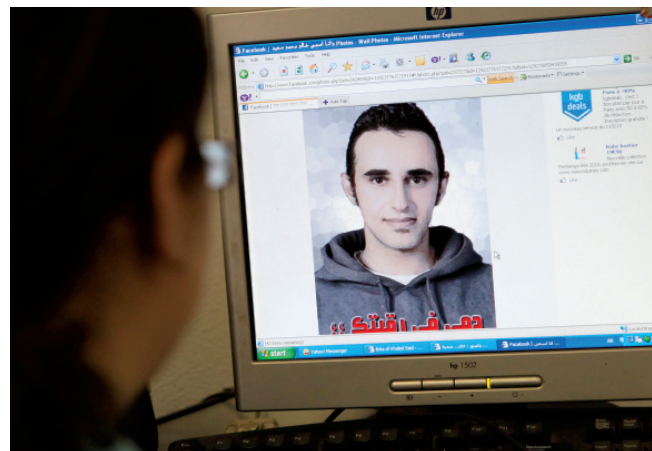
The Facebook picture of alleged torture victim, Khaled Said, quickly went viral and helped inspire a June 2010 demonstration calling for an end to emergency rule in Egypt.

Such initiatives can bring about both incremental and systemic change, ranging from improving the ability of citizens to understand the actions of their elected leaders, to coordinating protesters for the reform or overthrow of corrupt regimes.

IT'S ABOUT THE PEOPLE

IT IS IMPORTANT to remember that ultimately, people rather than the tools bring about change, matching the appropriate tool to a network in the right context. Of the many experiments with information technology platforms, many will not succeed; likewise, many social media campaigns will not achieve structural change. A lack of success in the conventional sense—policies changed, governments reformed—is not a reason to disregard or underestimate their potential effects. Every failure is also a learning experience.

One challenge for analysts is to define appropriate measures of success in efforts to spur political and social reform. The spread of symbols and ideas through networks may not lead immediately to change, but may open possibilities for reform through protest, or other means not even considered before the creative act. Dymovsky in Russia may not have been successful in eliminating police corruption, but he helped create a language of protest. That language now lives and is being passed on through social media networks around Russia and the world. Whether change will eventually result is a contest: whether activists—supporting the target of reform in question with the right organizational tools, the right networks, and the right tactics—can succeed in their goals. □

Ivan Sigal is Executive Director of Global Voices, a community of more than 300 bloggers and translators who seek to aggregate, curate, and amplify the global conversation from blogs and citizen media worldwide.

Endnotes

[1] Global Voices at http://globalvoicesonline.org/2009/11/09/officer-exposes-police-corruption-using-the-web.

[2] Global Voices at http://globalvoicesonline.org/2010/06/15/egypt-my-name-was-khaled-and-i-was-not-a-terrorist.

Left: About 1,000 people gathered in the Belarussian capital of Minsk to take part in a flashmob called a "Revolution Via Social Networks," to show their desire for economic and political change.

environment for *transparency* through appropriate policies and disclosure rules for making information available, and if it creates the kinds of processes that enable citizens to *participate* in policy making.

Right to Information (RTI) laws that give citizens the formal right to demand information, and make mandatory the disclosure of a range of information, are a useful regulatory mechanism to discourage the culture of secrecy that has characterized many governments. They also provide a useful tool for regulating the balance between the right of citizens to know, and concerns about security, privacy, and the protection of the deliberative process. A host of other policies and regulations—budget laws, administrative codes, procurement laws—can also integrate disclosure provisions, to create transparency across government functions. But, as evolution in technology makes the traditional limits to transparency harder to enforce—as Wikileaks, for instance, shows—countries adopting RTI and other disclosure laws will also need to consider how to address these new realities, and how to balance the concerns of security with the concerns of openness.

The challenges cannot be underestimated. Many countries, especially at the lower end of the income spectrum, have enormous capacity constraints that make transparency difficult. Records management systems, for instance, might be outdated and chaotic, making disclosures difficult. Administrative practices, hierarchical structures, and political considerations could militate against the pull toward openness.

Regulatory and policy instruments in such situations can only be effective if incentive systems and capacity constraints are both addressed, and if they are accompanied by sustained efforts to improve skills, provide resources, and monitor impacts. Open government is a principle, not a prototype, and specific contexts and country realities will undoubtedly condition the pace, the form, the sequencing, and priorities for each country. □

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Endnotes

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