'WORD OF MOUTH' IS A MEDIA WHICH IS EASIER TO CONTROL

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Moldavia, Iran, Italy, Great Britain, Russia, Tunisia, Egypt. Bloggers, journalists and experts hail a new phenomenon: the organisation of riots and even revolutions using social media as a tool. Global hysteria is growing. Experts are willingly talking about a new social role of network technology and even about its impact on the changing social reality, about the 'smart crowd', and about revolutions without leaders and organisations to stir them up. *Twitter* and, to a lesser extent, *Facebook* go great gun in this respect.

Why Twitter?

For many reasons. First of all it is accessible without a PC and Internet: one can blog and read it via mobile SMS service, which essentially expands geographical and social space using technology.

Second, the minimalistic format of communication, which combines simplicity (only text and links) and brevity (140 symbols) ensures the very high efficiency of this kind of communication. Third, *Twitter*'s 'ecosphere' is a variety of supplementary services. Fourth, hashtags (a set of symbols with # in the beginning) facilitate marking messages and allow them to refer to a particular topic.

Finally, it is *Twitter* together with *Facebook* that are the most social of social media. Whatever topic you take, the so-called 'involvement indicator' per unit time (the number of messages or activities per one user) is indeed the highest in these two networks.

Where does such a conglomeration of features take us? Is it an organisational tool? Is it a form of public will and collective intellect? No, this is only a 'word-of-mouth media on steroids' so to speak. Eyewitness accounts are available at once and everywhere. It gives us circulation by word of mouth in a click and with the opportunity not to pervert the initial content. It offers the possibility of discussing a subject with the tenants of distant kitchens. But it is not a means of inducement and it surely does not guarantee any interest by the tenants of these kitchens towards the topic under discussion.

From media practice and theory

Every year there are numerous conferences held in order to discuss *Twitter* and *Facebook*. One of the subjects to speculate on at such conferences is the formation of societies in support of a brand or a product; the 'promotion' of something in social media terms. In fact, efficient societies prove to converge around matters of public importance (brand units are important as such); people write about things that are interesting and significant for them. Instead, social media are a perfect indicator of consumer interest and consumer wants, as well as a place to meet public demand if it can be identified.

This also totally refers to the public political sphere. **Social media are indicators of the state of society. Their content is a result of the processes taking place within society, but it is by no means their constructor**. The novelty is in their technological effectiveness, in the diversity of forms of socially-replicated content (as distinct from the patently verbal, textual 'word of mouth'), but not necessarily in terms of drawing up an agenda. 'Web 2.0' speeds up the task of finding the 'six degrees of separation', and makes the social network (in the original, pre-online sense of the word) more passable. However the possibility of finding such a way through complex social bonds was proved nearly fifty years ago. Facebook & Co. have added a touch of technological efficiency to the process but they have, by no means, enhanced interest in finding this chain. Social media do not create either consumer or civil wants; therefore, they cannot be considered a 'driver of revolution'.

So what's there in Egypt?

Contemporary mythology is busy proclaiming that the Egyptian riot was inspired by *Facebook*, that the 'January 25' meme somehow stirred up and organised people, and called them to streets. There are many pages

named after January 25th on *Facebook*, but most of them are rarely visited. No significant activity whatsoever was observed until the beginning of open street clashes. Take, for example, one of major pages of this kind - 'Day of Anger'. It has eight and a half thousand 'supporters', regular real-time updates, as well as dozens and hundreds of comments. However the first log was made in the afternoon of January 25, when the protest was in its mass street phase. The description of the group — if anyone bothers to auto-translate it from Arabian - speaks for itself: 'this is a page for all Egyptians created with the purpose of maintaining the history of evidence up to the present day'.

The same story applies to *Twitter*. Let's leave aside the avalanche of entries with the hashtag #egypt and refer to comments actually made in Egypt. What do we see? Their peak falls on January 25 (it is a bit too late for preparations). This means that the discussion of events that have already taken place — though incredibly quick — prevails over the anticipation or preparation for such events.

We cannot say that the preparations for the Egyptian riot were carried out completely without the use of social media. The same *Facebook* offers a very popular page on the '6 April' youth movement. It has 32 thousand support-

of the protest action that took place on January 25th. By the way, there are also albums filled with pictures of similar propaganda materials. However, we should clarify that here we are talking about the activity of an old established organisation, but not a spontaneous self-organisation of the 'smart crowd'.

Another thing here is important: they act openly. The Egyptian authorities are not that ignorant with respect to new technologies. In 2008, young people tried to muster support for rebellious manufacturing employees via *Facebook*, so police simply cut off the activists internet access quietly without deploying the 'master-switch' so to speak. This example allows us to draw two conclusions: **social tension was so high in Egypt by the end of January that young people overcame their fear and acted overtly, whereas the government felt this fear on the third day of the protests,** having found a legendary 'exit from the internet' for its people. In other words, social media were only an indicator of public and governmental moods, but were not their constructor.

The best illustration is the fact

timely and useful in this regard. We should note that the climax of events in Tunisia also fell on Friday, January 14). In other words, the oldest social institution worked just as good as advanced technologies. And a *Twitter* cut-off is only a method of relieving consequences, as is the closure of the *Al Jazeera* TV channel in Egypt on January 30.

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What is going on in Russia?

December's 'surge in nationalism' (and then the terrorist act in Domodedovo) support arguments about the role of social media in political processes. This role involves the realisation of three functions: immediate witness accounts, post factum discussion of events and diagnostics of political (as well as civil and social) demand. The first one has been mistakenly interpreted as mass media surrender. The risk is high that the second and the third will be passed off as a driving force of popular unrest.

In fact it is important that there is mass media information placed between eyewitness reports and the discussions of events, and rumours are, to a large extent, a response to it. The social demand voiced in blogs and social media has to do with diagnostics of the state of society, but not with the mechanics of organising particular actions.

Upheaval in the Arab world and December events in Russia are akin in having a totem (Egor Sviridov in our case and self-immolators in the Arab countries) and vigorous discussions of events in the new media. The nationalistic constituent of the protest is also something that is shared between the different events.

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ers, a wealth of information, a discussion focusing on the protest action scheduled for January 25 well in advance, as well as relevant action items. Thus, for example, the media group of the '6 April' movement arranged advance legal and media training for participants

that a complete internet cut-off in the country on the eve of January 28 did not diminish the number of people in the streets and did not subdue their passions. The exchange of the latest updates and opinions shifted to mosques (the main Muslim Friday prayer was

There are also significant differences. In Russia, the protest came to its active phase only in terms of local groups. Further events have proven both the unwillingness of our citizens to engage in real mass actions capable of putting OMON at a stand and the exaggerated significance of social media: they have rather been turned into a basis for rumours, provocation and mass hysteria than serving as a means of consolidation, organisation or information. The situation after the terrorist act in Domodedovo has largely confirmed this tendency.

The bottom line

The world has changed — namely in the sense that rumours now get reported and eyewitness reports have become readily available. Hectographed manuals for those in the underground are replaced by links to instructions of how to use proxy servers and how to perform a cyber attack against government servers. Internet memes can play the role of slogans (as markers), and the tradition of demonstrations has been enriched by flash-mob culture. Public demand can be easily monitored and analysed (in the ideal case, it can be effectively worked with). These changes also affect social processes that precede revolutions, accompany them, and specifically the ones surrounding and following them (information distribution internationally and its discussion).

However **with respect to revolutions, these are infrastructural changes. The internet does not construct them; neither does it form social demand for changes or their absence**. Just as it helps communication in the process of social splashes, it also serves as a distraction from it by virtualising people's actions. It is much easier to push the 'like' button and join a group than to print a leaflet and take to streets, or, at the very least, to tie a ribbon on the car antenna. On the whole, a virtual protest is close to attributive actions: by its cheapness of participation and audience appeal. And the **'participation' of crowds of people, which has become the parent of the 2.0 myth, is also the realisation of the demand for demonstration, which is much more universal than any social protest**. By the way, Egypt was not in the top ten Twitter topics and Twitter tags last week. The highest positions were occupied by the dismissed football presenter Andy Gray, Lady Gaga and Justin Bieber with the new 3D film 'Never Say Never'. ∎

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CHEAP AND VERY ACCESSIBLE

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The key to the success of the new technologies amongst today's protesters is that they're very accessible, relatively cheap, and user-friendly. Even in countries like Egypt, where literacy rates and internet accessibility perhaps aren't that high, **just having a mobile phone and being able to take pictures or videos of what's happening during the day in real time is now very powerful for protesters**, a fact which has surely become problematic from the point of view of their political opponents. This is one of the first key differences between this technology and previous technologies. It is very mobile, very small, very easy to conceal, and very much integrated into the systems of commerce and systems of transnational organization. **The consumer value of the technologies meant they were open to use at the time of the protests by people who saw them for whatever reason they bought them.** There's that kind of relationship between massive proliferation and the consumer environment.

Protesters were obviously using digital technologies to coordinate, and to share and publicize information. And there were a lot of uses — a lot of social media were used to promote negative views of the president of Tunisia and then Egypt, to complain about corruption, and to detail issues that were causing public concern. These many uses of social media go hand in hand with the wider protest movements, and there is no doubt that people will continue to use the technologies and the materials available to them to protest and to organize protests.

The announcement of protest days or actions in Egypt appeared on Facebook and encouraged people to join the ongoing movement that quickly became very successful. **Twitter has also been used a lot to coordinate activities, much more on the day of protests and for mobilising people during the events**.

YouTube has also been a tremendous development for all sorts of protests, both long-term and short-term, especially since introducing the ability for users to upload films from their mobile phones almost instantaneously. **This has offered an invaluable opportunity for protesters to present a visual depiction of events before a global audience.** For example, the diffusion of the images of the street vendor who set himself on fire were extremely powerful for mobilizing public sentiment in Tunisia. We are now seeing this same mobilizing power of YouTube develop in Egypt and elsewhere in the world. ∎