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Internet & Ideology

Against the Nationalist Fragmentation of
Cyberspace & Against “Astroturf Activism”

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and the “technology of freedom” – but he warned that social media can’t be automatically assumed to be a democratic space as it was “a profit-driven project,” vulnerable to hostile data-mining, and owned by digital elites: “We need to look at how activists can creatively appropriate this technology. Cut-and-paste models can’t be applied; we need to adapt to local contexts.”

“There has also been a rise of Astroturf activism. The original social media was linked through networks of trust, but governments and political parties started creating Astroturf groups and started calling actions, but people soon realised these groups were fake, which had the effect that mistrust started bleeding into the real groups.”

I need to add that the failure of South African political activist groups to understand the necessity to prepare the groundwork by organising within poor communities for years – as the Zabalaza Anarchist Communist Front (ZACF) of South Africa has done – rather than relying on ersatz internet mobilisations was what led to the embarrassing displays of Astroturf activism in attempts to mimic (without real grassroots organising) the Northern “Occupy” movements at the Johannesburg Stock Exchange and in Cape Town.

As in Russia, before the Arab Spring in Africa, statist repression was offline only; even if bloggers were targeted, they were targeted by physical assault, rather than by cyberwar. Earlier last year, I met young Egyptian blogger-dissident Kareem Amer and his girlfriend, Egyptian nude blogger-dissident Aliaa Maghda El-Mahdy. Amer said that it was ironic that, having been jailed for four years for blogging against the Mubarak regime, it was only after the regime was toppled that he and Aliaa had had been forced to flee into exile by the insecure conditions of the Arab Spring itself. So even within the Arab Spring countries, repression had merely shifted form.

Admire Mare, an activist, researcher and the director of the Zimbabwe Youth Empowerment and Information Dissemination Trust, who blogs at “Scribbles from the House of Stones,” also asked whether social media could be used for change in southern Africa as it had in Moldova, the Philippines, Indonesia, Iran and Spain – as well as North Africa and Syria: “Is such a revolution possible here?”

He said the battle-lines had been clearly drawn between the partisans of the “technology of surveillance and repression”

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has transformed us into “communications exhibitionists, standing naked at the window, exposing ourselves without knowing who is looking.”

The Arab Spring & “Astroturf Activism”

Of course, on the rare occasion that it goes down to the wire, as it has in Syria, one wants the whole world to be watching as the sheer deluge of publicity offers some degree of protection or at least of validation of one’s war against the parasitic elite (not that class war is the entire Syrian story).

But, sub-Saharan African activists warned, that cut-and-paste social media solutions, even from the Arab Spring, might not work in other contexts. Abiye Teklemariam, a Reuters institute fellow from Ethiopia, said an oft-repeated question of why there had been no echo of the Arab Spring in sub-Saharan Africa usually ignored the fact that all the North African regimes had been complacent before a Tunisian vegetable-seller set himself on fire, so similar uprisings could perhaps occur in the south; objective conditions in several southern dictatorships made it possible.

But, he warned, sub-Saharan political activists had often totally misunderstood the use of social media in North Africa as a tool to organise, quietly and for perhaps at least a decade before the uprisings – rather than as a tool to merely mobilise demonstrations in the short-term. In Egypt, for example, facebook was only used to mobilise the first Tahrir Square protest; the authorities shut it down the next day; from then on, the people organised the protests on the ground.

“There was a perception of facebook as a magic tool to create revolutions; [sub-Saharan African] activists started over-promising on this basis, and this led to a decline in the public’s trust in activists when they failed to deliver,” Taklemariam said.

Nationalist fragmentation in China

Where there is a will, there is a way, and journalists and activists in China have laboured in Kafkaesque conditions to work around the hermetic status of their cyber-island – where internet penetration stands at a population-proportionately whopping 38% (compared to 13% in Africa).

Professor Yuen Ying Chan, director of the Journalism and Media Studies Centre at the University of Hong Kong, sketched a similar picture of digital ascendancy as in Russia, with some online writers having more followers than the multi-million readership of the largest Chinese daily newspapers.

The authorities, apart from creating their own policed versions of Western social media such as Weibo (the “Chinese twitter”), had both human and mechanical censors which trawled Weibo and other internet content for outlawed content.

Ironically, this data-mining was now being used by journalists and activists themselves. For example, Yuen said though the state had outlawed political reportage on rising “communist” leader Bo Xilai who was axed from his post, journalists used data-mining to map his business relationships in Hong Kong and further afield – because there is a loophole in the legislation on business reportage (and in “communist” China, the convergence between party power and business interests is intense, with the media sector being the third-largest tax revenue earner for the regime).

Still, the lesson is obvious: not only is a “hermetic island” very tough terrain for social, economic and political activists to operate in, but the exact same data-mining processes used by activists can and will be turned on activists themselves by the authorities to gather information sometimes deemed treasonable and punishable by death.

As Niels ten Oever, a fiery Dutch freedom of expression activist who has worked on projects in some very tough regions – Ethiopia, ex-Somalia, and Afghanistan – warned, social media

The Arab Spring redrew the battle-lines between over the control of information between the statist/capitalist elites and the popular classes – raising questions of increased restriction and surveillance, and of the limits of cyber-activism. In some ways this battle is often mischaracterised as being a narrow debate between cool intellectual property technocrats and wild-eyed free-use pirates, or as being a political dispute between authoritarian regimes and free speech activists, with no wider relevance to society. But it is clear that what is at stake is the global ideology (and exploitative practice) of corporatist enclosure versus that of the creative commons; in other words, it is more even than a universalist human rights concern, but is rather an asymmetrical war between the parasitic and productive classes over a terrain of power/wealth-generation known as the knowledge economy.

A gathering of journalists, media development experts, and online activists (among others) at the Highway Africa media and technology conference in Grahamstown, South Africa, in September 2012 grappled with the paranoid responses of many states to the supposedly social media-driven Arab Spring, but failed to grasp the nettle of the class nature of the statist/capitalist threat.

Nationalist fragmentation in Russia?

One of the keynote speakers was young Alexey Sidorenko of Russian website Teplitsa www.te-st.ru and author of “New Media Tools for Digital Activists” who spoke about the sea-change that had taken place in Russian cyberspace before the Arab Spring. Before 2011, he said, the old state-controlled legacy media was being bypassed as an information source by the “free blogosphere,” citing the fact that the audience of the www.yandex.ru website had outgrown that of the leading TV station, Channel 1.

This reflected a shift in trust from the legacy media to the internet, especially among 12 to 34-year-olds, 96% of whom were connected today, making Russia the second-most connected European nation after Germany.

Before the Arab Spring, the Russian authorities, whether re-tread “communists,” robber barons, or neo-liberals, had viewed the internet with suspicion, but had largely restricted their assaults to the harassment of bloggers (largely by the hacking of their sites, or by swamping the sites with requests in order to stall them – DDoS attacks).

Worryingly, however, they had not only been covertly running “deep-packet inspection” (DPI) surveillance of online content, but had also begun overt prosecutions of internet “extremism” which, Sidorenko said, outlawed the dissemination of some 1,500 prohibited works, including classic 19th Century texts on Islam, or radical thinkers of socialism (including anarchists of course), or nationalism – “but which includes literary and oppositional works”.

In the Arab Spring era, although electoral fraud to the Russian national parliament, the Duma, had continued at similar levels to the 2008/9 period, internet-based evidence of this fraud had rocketed, with the result that sites such as Karta Narusheniy (Map of Violations) and 23 other anti-corruption sites became so popular that they were frozen by DDoS attacks, presumably originating from the state.

Internet activists responded, however, by mirroring the websites’ content and in December 2011, a 23-year-old activist managed to mobilise demonstrations of tens of thousands of protestors against the cyber-attacks, protests which lasted well into May this year.

The state in turn responded with a three-pronged counter-attack: firstly, they put criminal libel – only decriminalised in 2011 – back on the statute books; secondly, they introduced the blacklisting of internet service-providers (ISPs) whose users posted content the censors found unacceptable; and lastly, they

cynically foregrounded child protection as a major issue to be addressed online, creating the possibility that state agents by planting a single item of child porn on an oppositional site could threaten to shut down the entire ISP – and so forcing many ISPs to protect themselves by actively censoring user content.

Sidorenko said there were worrying signs at the international level too, where there were several proposals by the likes of Iran to create and police “national sovereignty in national internet sectors” – which, he feared, could “create isolated, hermetic net islands,” in other words, the replication across the world of the amputated model employed in Belarus or China currently.

“This will lead to an erosion of internet integrity and global interconnectedness, the result of a push by authoritarian regimes who will suppress free speech online as they do in traditional media. My question is how we as media activists can prevent this colonisation, this fragmentation, of the internet.”

Sanctions against authoritarian regimes who embarked on online and mobile truncation would not work, however, he said, citing the case of the Belarus dictatorship, an ossified Stalinist regime, which had purchased surveillance software through a third party despite sanctions: “Sanctions can’t keep up with technological innovation.”

Sidorenko predicted that the big internet companies would readily kowtow to such proposals: we presumably all know about the “Google Wall of China,” whereby the internet giant struck a deal with the red corporatist state to restrict the socio-political functionality of the internet. But what are conditions like in China currently?