Transcript

Beyond Borders: Digital Activism in a Globalized World

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23 February 2012

Dave Clemente:

We've got three fantastic speakers for you. First of all will be Heather Brooke, a freelance journalist, freedom of information campaigner, and author of *The Revolution Will Be Digitised.* As well, Heather was also quite instrumental in the MPs' expenses scandal story, and bringing that about. Next up we'll have Tom Cheshire, who is associate editor at Wired UK. He edits the culture section as well for Wired. And last but not least, Ben Hammersley, editor at large of Wired UK and more recently the prime minister's ambassador to TechCity, and you can tell us about that.

So we've got three excellent speakers, and tonight they will be looking at the face of digital activism, particularly looking at what may happen in 2012, perhaps a brief recap of the year behind us, but really very forward looking, where things are going and how might these tools, these systems, these networks that are developing change the face of activism and protest in 2012. So first, I'd like to start off and give the floor to Heather. Each speaker will go for about 10 minutes, and then we'll have Q&A. I expect we'll get some excellent questions. Before that, though, I'll turn it over to Heather.

Heather Brooke:

Thanks very much. Can you all hear me? Well I'm going to keep it quite short and I hope that you ask a lot of questions at the end and I can expand on different things. When I wrote this book, *The Revolution Will Be Digitised* – this came out in September, but it was a book I'd been working on for a while, thinking about the way that information, once it's digitised, was revolutionary. And the reason I say that is because once information is digitised it loses its mass and it becomes much more difficult for people in power to control it and constrain it. It goes beyond boundaries, both geographic and socio-economic, and legal as well. So that, I thought – it had all stemmed out from actually doing this MPs' expenses investigation where I'd worked on that for quite a long time.

But what really changed the whole scenario in that investigation was the fact that all of the information, after I'd ended up going to the High Court, and I won, and it mandated that parliament had to scan in every single piece of paper related to MPs' expense amounts, receipts, etc. It was on a database. And once it was digitised, it then became incredibly difficult for parliament to control it in the same way that it had when it was just paper-based documents. What ended up happening is that somebody made a copy of the entire database and it was leaked onto Fleet Street. So this kind of was my

own personal experience about how we were moving into a different age around power and around the way information travels, that it was going to be a lot more difficult in future for authorities to control what the public knew in the same way. The old ways of doing, of controlling information were no longer going to be effective.

So the premise of this book, *The Revolution Will Be Digitised*, was me kind of laying out what I thought was going to happen in the future, which was that through the digitisation of information and the global network of the Internet, we had the tools to create the greatest democracy we'd ever seen. That was my idealistic part of the argument. But equally what I was starting to see is that the same tools were being used by governments to create a giant panopticon, and by that I mean it was being used as a giant storehouse of information. Increasingly as we lived online, all of our information was sitting there in a centralised place ready for any government or powerful person to tap into it for whatever their needs to do so were.

This is where I really thought last year was the kind of culmination of this sort of battle being fought. I called it the 'information war'. I think we saw an example in the Arab Spring of the kind of democratizing effect of digitising information and the internet. But I think what we're going to see in the future is the backlash from authoritarians, and I don't just mean in autocratic states or tyrannies, I also mean in democracies, the more authoritarian parts of government – so states, police, the military, and particularly the security services. I think we're going to see a real tectonic shift in the way that security services around the world unite around the idea of controlling the internet.

I think previously the internet used to be very content-neutral in that it didn't matter, you could send whatever you wanted and people didn't filter, it was very much sort of an uncensored place. That's what made it so incredibly powerful. That's what made, what created the space for so many people to put forward and publish counter-narratives. So it wasn't just the mainstream media, it wasn't just official news sources that could broadcast around the world, or even to their own people. It was just a blogger, just a citizen on the street armed with a smartphone. And they could upload, and it could be seen by thousands or millions of people. So this sort of revolutionary aspect of the internet is what has frightened not just authoritarians but people who are trying to control security in their own democratic states. We can see the first reaction of our prime minister in Britain after the riots was to blame social media and think we need to control it; we need to be able to control and monitor and survey social networks, as if that's the role of the state, to survey everyone's communication.

And so, to me, I'm quite worried about it. I don't know what the rest of you will think about it, but I feel like we have to reconnect with old values. What I mean by that is Enlightenment values about what is the role of the state in a democratic society and what are the rights of citizens in society. For me, I think the whole point of being in a democracy is the right of a free citizen to communicate freely and that the state can't interfere with that unless they have probable cause. But the battle will be that the state will increasingly try to say they don't need probable cause, they can, in order to keep us safe they have the right to look at all communication without probable cause. And the technology allows them to do that.

So I think I will leave my comments there, and I'm certainly happy to address more detail about any of that in the questions.

Dave Clemente:

Thanks very much. I'll turn it over to Tom.

Tom Cheshire:

Yeah, hi, I'm Tom. I was expecting to grandstand from a podium but I'll rock the armchair instead. I want to talk about the cultural, sort of creative side of digital protest, because these guys are much better at the important stuff. But I think this is important too. So about two or three times a week I get an email from David Babbs or sometimes Johnny Chatterton. David and Johnny work for 38 Degrees, which is a political pressure group, and the emails begin with a personal touch: 'Dear Tom'. Hi David! I don't actually know David, but the subjects cover a range of topics like RBS bonuses, Rupert Murdoch, today it was about power. And they usually contain a link to a petition you can go and sign up for. 38 Degrees claims over 950,000 people are involved in its activities, and it has had some really good success. Notably, it helped save public forests from sale. Avaaz.org, which is a similar organization with a more global outlook, claims 13 million members, and has thanks to one campaign saved all the bumblebees in Europe, and that is good. Pesticides.

So 38 Degrees and Avaaz are both extremely ambitious and extremely unimaginative. Their aim is mass mobilization but their method of protest is as old as handing out flyers and posting newsletters. What's new is that like many web businesses, they leverage the instant distribution of the internet. But they are the Amazon.com of activism. The danger is that now, 950,000 people, or even 13 million people, aren't very many people at all, especially

when all those people are doing is clicking a link. So-called 'clicktivism' cheapens everything. It requires little effort, thought, or anything of oneself. Moreso, petitions, even if they are online and from the digital whiz, are fundamentally, inescapably boring.

My point is that a culture of protest is not a culture, and any protest unaccompanied by culture is worse for it. We can think of the great protest movements of the past. They've always been creative too, whether it's a folk ballad like in seventeenth century Britain with the Diggers' Song, or Woodie Guthrie, or the Syrian poet Qabbani, what he's writing now, or even a novel like *Les Miserables*. I think I didn't say that right, but *Les Mis*. Digital activism, though, over the last 15 years it's lacked this creativity. Protesters tended to only use the scale and the distribution offered by the internet. But I think it may be changing.

So one evening in August last year, Chris, a 28-year-old New Yorker, he created a Tumblr account. If you don't know what Tumblr is, it launched in February 2007. It's a blogging platform; the tagline is 'Blogging made easy'. The accounts tend to focus on the arts, media, and pornography. Some popular Tumbrs would include 'Look at this fucking hipster' and 'Nick Clegg Looking Sad'. It's very trendy.

Chris wanted to raise awareness of the Occupy Wall Street movement, and he had a very simple idea: he asked users to take a photo of themselves holding a sign which described their economic circumstances and send it in. Chris called the page 'We Are The 99 Percent'. He put the blog up, and promptly forgot about it. So four days later, when Chris returns from Zuccotti Park after feeding people there, he checks the inbox and he finds hundreds and hundreds of submissions, and he spends all night doing them. Some of them are really short. There's one which reads, 'I served in the US Army. I served 16 months in Iraq. Now I deliver pizza. I am the 99 percent.' Others were longer, from the jobless woman prevented from donating a kidney to her friend because she didn't have healthcare, to the 19-year-old single mother who says she went without food for days so she could buy formula milk for her son. But they all kept the same format, signs obscuring faces, and they all ended, 'I am the 99 percent'. So the blog posted, Chris posted about a hundred photos. And then it went really, really big. The *New York Times* and the *Huffington Post* covered it, the blog became a meme, and the meme went viral. So far, the 99 percent Tumblr has posted more than 3,000 photos and still gets about 150 submissions a day, according to Chris.

So 'the 99 percent' wasn't a well-known phrase until the Tumblr account, and since then it's become a cultural touchstone – we all know what it means. But why was the Tumblr so effective? Priscilla Grim, who helps run it now, she says, well she calls Tumblr 'the perfect organizing tool of the day because of how easily it enables creativity'. Each person who submitted a photo was engaging in a creative act of protest. Joining a Facebook group isn't a creative act. Twitter is useful, but mainly as a reporting and relaying tool. Tumblr, with its photos of real people describing real circumstances – or what they said were real circumstances – struck an emotional chord in a way a Facebook group or a 38 Degrees email can't. It was creative. People did offer something of themselves, they did think, they did put effort in, they didn't sign a petition. And because the 99 percent blog was creative, it needed only 100 photos, not 13 million members, before it went really big.

And I think this is why we need more creative protest: it can be far more effective than traditional digital activism. But the good news is we're starting to see it emerge. Tumblr is an example. You just have to look in the right places. Video games are one of the new platforms for protest. One of my favorite protests from last year was an iPhone app called 'Phone Story'. It contained four mini-games including one about cheap labour in China in which pixelated factory workers leapt to their death from buildings. It lasted precisely 11 hours, 35 minutes on the Apple app store. In a similar vein, Sweatshop, I think I've got that right, a Flash game released last year, encouraged users to sort of ignore human rights in the aim of pushing out as many clothes as possible. And we all saw the SOPA blackouts last year by Reddit, Tumblr, Wikipedia, the places that are the home of internet culture. Another site called [inaudible] which is a video game site, which challenged its users to make a game. In 24 hours, 59 entirely new games for protesting SOPA had been created. The reason that's successful is because [inaudible] didn't ask people to sign up, they asked them to make something instead.

There's a similar trend called 'craftivism' which is a word first coined in 2003 by Betsy Greer, so it's been around a bit, but she describes it as – here we go, this is what happens when you get ahead of your notes – she has this definition which I like. She describes it as 'a way of looking at life, where voicing your opinions through creativity makes your voice stronger, your compassion deeper, and your quest for justice more infinite'.

But it is through Etsy, a popular online marketplace for homemade items, that the meme has become a mini-movement. Craftivism goes hand-in-hand with the growth in maker culture, which takes a sort of DIY approach to technology, people hacking things for themselves, and is itself a quiet protest

against consumer culture. 3D printing, which is being pioneered by the makers, just in the same way as personal computers were pioneered by hobbyist hackers back in the day – that will let anyone turn a digital file into a cultural artefact. 3D printing is the beginning of infinite creativity. If you can think it, you can make it.

So if you couple that with platforms to disseminate these creative works, whether it's Tumblr, crowd-funding site Kickstarter, or Etsy, or the Pirate Bay, which has added a digital, a physical bit where you can print out trainers, maybe, in the future, I think we're going to see a real explosion in truly imaginative protest. And it is early days, but we're moving beyond a narrow protest culture to a wider, more exciting, and crucially, more effective, creative protest: imaginative digital activism. And we won't just sign up to it, we won't just click a link, we'll make it ourselves, I think.

Dave Clemente:

Excellent, thank you very much. Ben, we'll turn it over to you.

Ben Hammersley:

Good evening everybody. As with Heather I'm going to be fairly short because I prefer the question and answers.

I think it's very important when you're looking at digital protests and especially in February in 2012, you know, a year on from the Arab Spring and a couple of years on from the Iranian student protests and the first famous use of Twitter, for example, and in the year of an American presidential election, a presidential election, it's very important to look at the myths and the stories that are told about digital activism. It's very important to examine those rather than take them as true and then pontificate on top of them.

We have seen over the past couple of years, certainly, and perhaps even four or five years, many political movements that have been very, very successful, whether it's the overthrow of Mubarak or the election of Barack Obama, which have been mediated through the digital realm, that have been created by – at least in popular myth – have been created by movements online. In fact, probably the most famous online movement was MoveOn.org, which happened during the last few years of the Clinton presidency. This is not necessarily new stuff. But over the past 24 months or so it has become the dominant legend that Twitter and Facebook and social media brought down Mubarak, won the civil war in Libya, etc.

And it's very interesting to look at why this might be a very interesting myth for people to tell each other. To examine why it's a compelling story in the first place. And I would posit that it's a very compelling story in the first place because everybody wins if they tell this particular story. Everybody in the West, politically active and interested people like yourselves, or senior politicians, or even just random, regular pundits online win through telling these stories because even subconsciously you can attribute for yourself a tiny amount of the credit: you changed your Twitter icon, you tweeted about it, you signed on to a Facebook group, you crafted some stuff and sold it on Etsy in the name of whatever political movement. It's very compelling to say that social networks and digital activism can bring down bad regimes because it means that the thing that you do all the time at your desk when you should be doing real work, or whatever, is actually changing the world. It's a very nice story for us to tell ourselves.

It's a very nice story for people in power to tell, because it means that there is this thing out there that nobody really understands, and that's the reason why this revolution happened. And that's the same story for whether you're at one side of the revolution or the other. If you're Mubarak, you can blame the internet because nobody really understands the internet and so it must have been this thing, this foreign thing, and there's no way that he would have been kicked out of power if it hadn't been for this foreign thing. So he gets a beautiful psychological excuse. And the same thing for Western – or for people in other countries – because they can say, 'Yeah, sure, the dude was in power for 30 years, 40 years, when we supported him, Gadhafi, he was our best mate, but we couldn't do anything about it, it wasn't practical, until we had the internet. And did we mention who invented the internet? It was us, aren't we wicked, we brought about the downfall of Gadhafi.'

The social networks themselves, of course, are really, really into the idea that they brought revolution to the Middle East or North Africa. Twitter will never outright claim that they brought down the Egyptian regime, but they're never going to deny it either. Wael Ghonim, the guy who ran the Facebook page, is credited with starting some of the protests in Egypt, was a product manager for Google. It's damn good branding for the internet.

Even the bad guys next door, the dictators in the other countries in the region, they will also welcome the idea, spreading the meme that the internet brought about this revolution, because it gives them something to fight. Because they can stick boxes on the end of their internet connections, they can censor stuff, and they can be seen to be doing things.

Everybody benefits from this story being pushed forward, especially in the West. Especially in the West. Because the truth of a major revolution, a major social revolution, is that people have to go and kick doors down. The truth of any revolution anywhere is that people are going to get shot. And if you really want to bring down a horrible regime you have to be in Tahrir Square. You have to be part of the crowd kicking the door down. But if instead you can do 'craftivism', then you can get a little bit of the glamour and not very much of the bullets, and make felt things and cupcakes and shit like that. Super brilliant.

The same thing – my colleague Tom, who I adore to pieces – but the idea that the future of digital activism is inherently embedded in artists' creativity and Tumblr accounts is the height of middle-class white privilege in the West. In that like, 'Yeah, we're going to make a blog, right, and like, it's going to be amazing, we're going to have all these satirical things and all the bankers are going to go home and cry. And it's going to be, like, amazing'. Um, no. Revolutions are really hard work and they do, really, really hard work. Heather skipped over her MPs' expenses story, but she was on that for what, five years? And a lot of effort, and a lot of pain. And that's paperwork, that's not being in Tahrir Square, or being in Homs and being shelled this morning, right now.

The other thing you have to look at is even in these non-violent situations, in the non-sort of regime overthrow situations, things like the election of Obama – the last presidential election in the US, it was considered that Obama was elected by the internet. No he wasn't. He raised a lot of money via the internet. But his election was done by very bog-standard, Saul Alinsky-following 1960s-style community organizing that is now three or four or five generations in. He learned it from the people who were with Martin Luther King and they learned it from Gandhi, and so on and so on, back and back and back. Currently the people in Egypt and so on are learning it from [inaudible] who learned it from...and so on. It's hard on the ground getting people to do stuff that's really important.

But of course, having said that, these things are mediated by the internet. If you want to create a community, if you want to mobilize a group, you have to use the Internet. And the reason you have to use the internet is because it is the platform on which we live our lives in the twenty-first century. The idea that digital activism is weird and unusual and actually worthy of comment is part of a false story. Because if you think about it, everybody in this room has probably been online for more than, you know, half your lives. It's deeply embedded with everything you do. So of course all the organizing stuff is

going to be online, is going to be made through social networks, because that's how we get stuff done. It's also how you organize a dinner party, or the picnic you're going to have at the weekend, because it's going to be really nice weather. 17 degrees. Seriously.

There are, there is a fundamentally new thing that we have seen over the past 20 years, new in the terms of long history: the growth of the internet and the growth of digital technologies. And they've become so embedded with the way we live our lives that it's not unusual that various bits of the revolution are organized via them in the same way as they were once organized through the telephone or through the photocopier or through the carrier pigeon or through the man with a stick running down the street. But the technology itself isn't responsible. What's really responsible for these sorts of revolutions is people getting out on the pavement and kicking in doors or knocking on them politely and asking for a vote, pick one or both. And so when we talk about digital activism I think it's very important that we actually sort of back off from the digital stuff and we stop elevating it to a pedestal. Because the elevating it to a pedestal serves a lot of other people's stories, and they're not necessarily the stories that we want to be telling. Thank you.