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Facebook 2, Arab Leaders 0

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By Susan Nunziata

I won't pretend to comprehend the long-term global implications of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's departure after weeks of public protest in what's become known as the January 25 Revolution. We'll leave the great geopolitical thinkers to ponder those questions.

But, as I view the reports of jubilation in Egypt's Tahrir Square, I can't help but marvel at the message on a sign held up by one young woman: Facebook 2, Arab Leaders.

The sign -- described in an article in today's New York Times -- refers to the role the social networking site played in popular uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt that ultimately drove out each country's leader and will indelibly reshape Middle Eastern politics.

With all due respect to [Gil Scott-Heron](#), it appears the revolution will, in fact, be televised -- and streamed, shared, Tweeted, and texted around the world. [Wael Ghonim](#), a Google executive in Egypt, is widely credited with giving the uprising a voice as administrator of the We Are All Khaled Said Facebook page, created in honor of a blogger who was reportedly beaten to death by plainclothes police in Egypt in summer 2010.

Of course, as Rebecca MacKinnon points out in a CNN Op Ed post, the [Internet isn't the real hero of Egypt](#). "The Internet, mobile phones and social networking platforms were the tools of a smaller, tech-savvy vanguard," writes MacKinnon. "The revolutionaries used these tools skillfully -- as successful revolutionaries always manage to do with the most disruptive technologies of their day."

Indeed, one can't help but wonder what would have happened in South Africa in 1977 if the same tools were available to honor anti-apartheid activist [Stephen Biko](#). Or, in the United States, if they were available to civil rights leader Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Or, in Berlin in 1989.

One [Egyptian protestor](#), quoted on CBS News, said of Facebook and Twitter: "It's a very good way for communication. It has no power or control from anyone."

Er, hold the phone. Facebook and Twitter and Internet access and wireless networks are, in fact, powered and controlled -- by corporations (and, sometimes, governments). Even as we celebrate how social media and mobile tools can serve a popular cause, we must remember how quickly these can be shut down to stifle information.

And there is our conundrum. After all, our ability to communicate through social networks, mobile devices and the Internet itself is dependent upon the decisions of corporations -- each of

which has its own vested interests in whether or not to keep the connections open.

If you have any doubts about how corporations might use that power, all you have to do is look at the [cyberwar that rages around WikiLeaks](#) after corporations such as Amazon, MasterCard, PayPal and Visa terminated their services to the whistle-blowing site.

Even in Egypt, Vodafone initially acquiesced to government demands in the early days of the revolution and shut down its wireless networks. Notes MacKennon: "After complying without challenging government orders to switch off service at the height of the protests, and relaying government instructions to attend pro-Mubarak rallies after service was re-established, Vodafone is now working hard to build up trust with the revolutionaries who will shape Egypt's future."

When we talk day-to-day about the impact social media and mobility are having on Corporate America, our concerns tend to be far more prosaic: How can CIOs and other IT leaders [protect sensitive data](#) while encouraging the powers of collaboration and communication that these tools unleash?

But, as we consider the profound change being fostered around the world by social media and mobility, let's think about the big picture -- and our place in it. For inspiration, we can look not only to Google's Ghonim, but also to the work of Atefeh Riazi, executive director and founder of [CIOs Without Borders](#). Or, the work done by these technologists in the [aftermath of the 2010 earthquake in Haiti](#).

At the end of the day, true heroism lies in how we use technology in the service of our inalienable human rights.

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