



**Awakening Witness and Empowering
Engagement: Leveraging New Media for Human
Connections**

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No new technology can engineer positive change on its own. Peace, defined by inclusivity, representation, cooperation, and respect, is built through human connections. New media [\[i\]](#) are revolutionary in their ability to forge these connections, allowing individuals across all strata of society to spread messages to each other and become participating members in a digital community. [\[ii\]](#) Recognizing their potential for spurring political and social change, civil society organizations have harnessed new media to reach formerly excluded or underserved communities in campaigns targeting issues ranging from development and health to violence. [\[iii\]](#)

Equally important, new media can provide a platform where ordinary citizens can create new movements; when these movements successfully translate digital momentum into real-world action, new media genuinely catalyze peace. The "Twitter Revolutions" of the last few years have sparked debate over extent to which new media alter the dynamics of change. [\[iv\]](#) New media can create a space for sharing independent information and voicing dissent and lower the entry costs of participation; however, new media also can be used to monitor and persecute activists and disseminate messages of hate. [\[v\]](#) They are not a solution to conflict, but can facilitate cooperation and expand participation. New media are best leveraged for peace when they empower ordinary individuals who might otherwise be excluded, silenced, or reduced to the condition of bystander to participate in dialogue and action that affirms their dignity and voice. This potential, as well as some of new media's risks and limitations, can be seen in two case studies: the events leading to the fall of the Mubarak regime in Egypt in 2011 and the post-election crisis in Kenya in 2008.

In January 2011, millions of Egyptians protested President Hosnei Mubarak's long history of civil and human rights abuses, ousting the strongman's 30-year-old regime in just three weeks. New media played a significant role in priming Egyptian society for a revolution. Prior to the revolution, the Mubarak regime heavily censored traditional media but not the Internet (Ali 204; Megenta 49). As a result, Egyptian youth, urbanites, established movements and opposition parties went online to disseminate independent information, engage in debate, and organize. [\[vi\]](#) Several bloggers gained national and international prominence offline, allowing them to publicize human rights issues that the mainstream establishment had previously suppressed. [\[vii\]](#) Activists also used Facebook and other new media sites to rally young people around human rights and justice causes. Two of the organizations that lent crucial momentum to the January 2011 revolution - the April 6th Youth Movement and "We Are All Khaled Said" - began as Facebook campaigns, whose pages documented abuses and connected followers to important news. [\[viii\]](#)

In effect, "technology acted as a 'magnet' for activists," creating an alternative sort of civil society (Meier 172).

The successful revolution in Tunisia inspired the Egyptian community of activists coalesced by new media to launch their own revolution. "85,000 Egyptians pledged on Facebook to attend 'Revolution Day,'" (Ali 185) which activists had set for January 25th. On that day, the protest moved from cyberspace to Tahrir Square. As hundreds of thousands of Egyptians poured into the streets and images of violence went viral, the Mubarak regime shut off the Internet and restricted mobile phone service (Cowie). Momentum continued to grow as the leadership of online movements joined opposition political groups in using traditional organizing tactics, including megaphones, posters, and leaflets (Dreyfuss). Mass protests continued through early February. On February 11th, Mubarak resigned.

In Egypt, new media empowered citizens to express dissent and gave birth to a community of citizen-activists who led change. They transformed thousands of frustrated and suppressed Egyptian youth into engaged citizens. New media fostered a *culture* of activism, as shared grievances became legitimized grievances and political dialogue helped give rise to the *expectation* of a fair and just society. They facilitated solidarity across different strata of society.[ix] They created a cadre of digital activists who also spearheaded real-world campaigns.[x] New media did not, however, *cause* Egypt's revolution. They did spur some citizens onto the streets, but "a lot of people who [had] never touched keyboards in their lives came out [to protest]" (Nadine Wahab, administrator of "We Are All Khaled Said" Facebook page, cited in Sutter). For new media to have the greatest effect for peace, access must spread beyond the urban and elite populations and online activism must be paired with real world organizing.[xi] Nothing can circumvent the need for serious work on the ground to shape Egypt's future towards peace; the mere involvement of new media in precipitating change does not ensure a particular political outcome. While new media can foster, broaden, and empower a movement, as they did in Egypt, the movement must translate its energy into ongoing political and social action.

In Kenya, disputed elections in December 2007 triggered a three-month crisis in which new media were used both to promote and prevent violence. Hours before Kikuyu President Mwai Kibaki claimed victory, election coverage had shown Luo opponent Raila Odinga leading by a million votes (Goldstein 4). Ethnic violence exploded in response to the apparent fraud. Text-messages inciting ethnic violence circulated.[xii] Kenya's most popular online message-board, Mashada, was so overrun with hate speech that administrators took the site offline.[xiii] Violent mobs of both Luo and Kikuyu men and boys were organized and often paid by local political and tribal leaders.[xiv] Some of these gangs were organized by new media, but many were formed in community meetings (Rawlence 45). In response to the violence, an online community of peacebuilders mobilized to spread messages of humanity and peace.[xv] The most significant innovation was the creation of an online map documenting instances of violence based on citizen reports.[xvi] That

platform, *Ushahidi*, accepted reports via email, Twitter, online form, and text message, allowing any Kenyan with access to a mobile phone [xvii] to share their experience. [xviii] After 1,100 deaths and 300,000 displacements (Simons), the crisis ended in April with the formation of a unity government including Kibaki and Odinga's parties.

In Kenya, the same new media that purveyed messages of violence also spread messages of peace. The extent to which it defused the crisis remains unclear, but *Ushahidi* exemplifies how new media can create a community of peacebuilders that otherwise would not exist; aggregating individuals' reports of conflict allows a diverse network of advocates for peace to pool their goodwill and knowledge. [xix] Any person with access to Internet or mobile phone service can contribute information to save lives: new media transform the average citizen from bystander into witness. [xx] *Ushahidi's* application of new media promotes a sense of agency, giving each of its participants the recognition that his or her experience matters. Putting oneself on a map can be the first step to demanding recognition from society, just as participating in online political debate can lead to demanding political enfranchisement. [xxi] Some risk is inherent in crisis-mapping, because malicious actors can contribute deliberately provocative or misleading information, but this risk is minimized the greater the size of the crowd, and the better connected each member is (Meier).

In both Egypt and Kenya, new media played a notable role in empowering participation among citizens who may otherwise have been silenced in the face of repression and violence. In networked societies, new media can convene a community of activists and bolster capacity for dissent. New media are vulnerable to manipulation by promoters of violence, but this danger cannot be forestalled without suppressing the same qualities that make the technology such a powerful peacebuilding tool. New media can be a force for peace only so long as the platforms themselves remain transparent. To that end, private companies like Facebook, Twitter, and Skype, which may prioritize profit over peace, must be made to disclose any interaction or collaboration with any government, whose agendas may be driven by "security" or repression more than by peace, so that activists can make informed choices as to which technologies to trust. Governments need to confront how to approach new media in the context of existing domestic and international laws and civil rights protections.

More broadly, while there is much discussion about technological fixes to the issues of government surveillance and persecution of peacebuilders through new media, focusing on technological fixes threatens to distract from the broader political and social reforms necessary to build lasting peace. [xxii] The presence of new media does not supplant the need for progressive governments and NGOs to train and support activists and civil society. Efforts to promote new media must be seen as one component in a larger agenda to bolster human rights and justice with resources, training of advocates, and political diplomacy. Literacy, access to basic resources, and lack of dire physical want are prerequisites for the use of new media

that are unmet for many humans in most desperate need of peace: a freedom agenda is only relevant in concert with a development and human rights agenda. New media will be a force for peace so long as they promote human connection, as it is human, not technological, connections that form the foundation of peace.

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End Notes

[i] "New media" include the Internet, blogs, microblogs like Twitter, social networks like Facebook, and cell phone and SMS technology.

[ii] New media for the first time promote communication that is "many to many" (Shirky Ted Talk), democratizing dialogue and collective organization. While new media broaden participation, however, there remains a significant digital divide between those with access to new media and those without, usually the very poor, rural, and illiterate.

[iii] For example, the anti-gang violence organization CeaseFire sends text messages promoting nonviolence and seeking community input to high-risk youth in Chicago multiple times a week (PeaceTxt). Plan International piloted a program in Benin using mobile technology to report child abuse; the Eastern Congo Initiative is developing a system utilizing mobile phones to report and gather evidence and prosecute cases of sexual assault (Plan International; Eastern Congo Initiative).

[iv] The term "Twitter Revolution" was coined in 2009 to describe the post-election protests in Moldova and later applied more generally to any display of dissent or revolution in which social networking played a role (Morozov).

[v] See Aday *et al*, Etling *et al*, Heaven, Megenta, Shirky Ted Talk, and Morozov for a more complete discussion of new media's pros and cons in facilitating political and social change.

[vi] For example, the Kefaya, or "Enough" movement, which began offline in 2004 to call for real, competitive elections, rapidly moved online and prompted the birth of many liberal blogs. In 2006, Egypt's most prominent opposition group, the Muslim Brotherhood, also took to the web (Megenta 51).

[vii] For example, Mahmoud Salem, Wael Abbas, Malek Mustafa, Nawara Negm, and Mona Eltahawy were tapped by traditional media sources like Al Jazeera, which reaches an audience vastly larger than online media in most of the Arab world (Megenta 53; Sutter; Couric).

[viii] The April 6th Youth Movement was started by a 27-year-old woman, Esraa Abdel Fattah Ahmed Rashid, who had little experience in social organizing (Ali 209). In 2008, she received a mass text message publicizing a planned textile workers' strike, and created a Facebook group to boost support for the strikers. The group garnered tens of thousands of likes and members debated what forms of protest they would adopt in solidarity with the strikers. On April 6th, 2008, thousands gathered in Tahrir Square and over a hundred people were arrested (Megenta 55), but the Facebook group remained active long after this protest, posting news, links, updates, and photos.

"We Are All Khaled Said" was created to protest the brutal police murder of Said after he posted online a video showing police divvying up confiscated drugs and cash (Heaven). The page continues to "document widespread fraud" (Giglio) and aggregate important news for its 350,000 followers, although it is worth noting that the page is entirely in English and it is unclear how many of its audience are of the 6.25 million Egyptians who have Facebook accounts (Mubarak).

[ix] Perhaps the most notable example is the April 6th Youth Movement, which led college students in Cairo to protest on behalf of striking textile-workers (Megenta 54).

[x] In many cases these achievements may be difficult to replicate if repressive regimes engage in more active or successful online surveillance or propagandizing. See Morozov, *The Net Delusion* for a more complete discussion.

[xi] This feature is clear from the current parliamentary elections in Egypt, where technologically savvy liberals are losing to Islamists in part because the Islamists have a much stronger campaign presence in poor rural areas beyond new media's reach. In addition to the digital divide, important factors include the Muslim Brotherhood's decades of organization and the ideological appeal of the Brotherhood and other conservative Islamist parties to broad swaths of society. Additionally, many digital activists themselves characterize their role as watchdogs and critics, not as politicians (Owen).

[xii] These messages encouraged "dominat[ion]" and "slaughter" and invited recipients to text names of members of targeted ethnicities to given numbers (Goldstein 4).

[xiii] Both platforms have been compared to Radio *Milles Collines*, which played a significant role in inciting the Rwandan genocide (Greenwald).

[xiv] Leaders of some groups used inflammatory rhetoric calling for violence if the results were not to their liking even before the elections took place (Rawlence 45).

[xv] For example, the website *Mashada* was rerouted to a website called "I Have No Tribe" where Kenyans were encouraged to post messages of unity and peace and hate-speech was deleted by administrators. Bloggers took on the role of

investigative journalists after Kibaki imposed a broadcast blackout on the topic of the elections, reporting political developments and incidents of violence as well as highlighting reconciliation efforts (Goldstein 8; Were). The mobile service provider Safaricom sent out messages encouraging peace and calm to all 9 million of its Kenyan customers (Quist-Acton). Thus the difference between these platforms and Radio *Milles Collines* was that they allowed for moderating voices to challenge the call for violence.

[xvi] Prominent Kenyan blogger Ori Okolloh proposed the idea of melding GoogleMaps technology with participatory media inputs on her blog, and other Kenyan techies across the globe collaborated to get the system up and running; the birth of the website itself illustrates the unprecedented level of collaboration new media permits between geographically remote people who share a common goal (Sattotuwa).

[xvii] 42% of Kenyans had mobile phone access in 2008 (AudienceScapes); the number would be 60% today (CIA World Factbook).

[xviii] *Ushahidi* means "testimony" in Swahili.

[xix] *Ushahidi* now describes itself as a platform for "democratizing information, increasing transparency and lowering the barriers for individuals to share their stories" (*Ushahidi* App for iPhone). Since the formation of the *Ushahidi* company in 2008, which turned the software from a "mashup" into a freely available and customizable open-source platform (Ushahidi.com), this form of crowdsourced crisis-mapping has been used in over 130 countries to map everything from earthquake damage to instances of election fraud.

[xx] Authors Jessica Heinzelman *et al* have proposed the idea of a single "Peace Map" as a way of connecting individuals and organizations dedicated to peace across the globe who would actively mobilize for peace in their own communities while drawing from the strength of the global peace community: "More than creating a sense of active peace, the Peace Map gives non-violent actors access to equivalent, if not better, resources, information, and collective support than is provided by violent networks... it has the vision to promote peace, analyzing and celebrating triggers of cooperation and community rather than conflict (Heinzelman *et al* 52).

[xxi] In the instance of MapKibera, a project undertaken to chart out the homes of people in the largest slum in Africa, "social media gave the people of Kibera a way of insisting they not just be serviced by their government but recognized by the country as a whole" (Hopkins). Egyptian women who text reports of sexual harassment to HarassMap are then provided with information about counseling and legal recourse, and HarassMap volunteers use the reports to identify high-risk areas where they engage in dialogue with the community (Scialom).

[xxii] Evgeney Morozov coins the term "internet-centrism" to describe the tendency to focus on the technology rather than the principles.

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