

Social media for revolution?

New forms of popular protest require a new digital response.



We need to find a new language to describe the current widespread uprisings against corrupt governments and vested interest. What is happening in Hong Kong, Algeria, Beirut, Baghdad, Iran, and elsewhere, reveal the depth of civic dissatisfaction with political leaders. More significantly, these uprisings defy historical patterns of revolutionary activity.

Post-war revolutions were generally led by charismatic leaders whose oratory or example attracted thousands of followers – enough to topple existing regimes. From Castro to Mandela, the emotions they stirred and the sense of injustice into which they tapped, proved too much for well-armed and entrenched regimes to resist. In the face of the number of people who were prepared to risk supporting such revolutionaries, political change became inevitable.

When the Arab Spring erupted in 2011 on a digital wave that crested on the likes of Facebook and Twitter, it seemed that social media was going to make mass protest easy to organise and much harder to resist, because so many people could come together spontaneously, to voice their discontent against dictatorship and military rule.

The enormous crowds which swept through Cairo and spawned similar uprisings in Port of Suez appeared to be irresistible, but the military proved to be more resilient than the demonstrators

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anticipated. While opposition politicians attempted to take advantage of the opportunity to remove the military from power, it was only a matter of time before the generals reasserted their authority. Leaders of the uprising were identified. Bloggers and people who became spokespersons for the uprising were identified and arrested. To this day, individuals who have the potential to follow in the footsteps of the successful revolutionaries of the 20th century, are easily rounded up and [silenced](#).

But the recent events in Beirut, Hong Kong, Chile, and Baghdad are driven by a different phenomenon. Where are the leaders of these uprisings? Where are their spokespeople? Where are the posters declaiming the person who is offering themselves as an alternative to the authoritarian rule, that they all so despise?

The new uprisings are apparently leaderless. You cannot arrest or 'disappear' an individual you cannot identify. Indeed, they may not exist at all. In the absence of being able to cut off the head of the revolution, what do you do? You cannot arrest or kill everyone on the street. That's not a realistic option when every one of them is live on social media, filming, streaming, recording everything that happens around them.

Demonstrations appear to be organised by different combinations of people, often on anonymous social media groups, behind encryption, beyond the reach of the authorities. The people on the streets do not need to know each other. They do not need to know their leaders. The force that drives them is not a person. It is an idea, a common view of what they want to change. It is an idea, or set of ideas articulated on social media. One [Institute for War and Peace Reporting](#) staffer recently called this the Third Power. Before, we had the political status quo and political opposition to it. Now there is a third force, which is leaderless and not identifiable by traditional means.

It's a powerful force. People coalescing around an idea or set of principles; people who do not know each other but share an attitude, which is proving more powerful than any traditional loyalty to family or status quo. If there is one common feature, it is that they are mostly young and idealistic.

They are getting their information from their own social media networks – not from mainstream media, which is largely distrusted because it is often in the hands of the very political leadership they despise. However, even free, western media outlets are finding that traditional methods of reporting are inadequate to describe what is really happening.

In Hong Kong, western journalists report live on satellite TV, always in front of protesters on the street, often caught up in the adrenaline of the moment, and all too often appearing to endorse the exuberance and daring of the youngsters behind them. They risk inadvertently urging on these champions of change, somehow implying that "the west" supports them. In reality, western governments will do nothing to protect them.

More difficult still, is that the leaderless nature of these uprisings means there is nobody with whom

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to negotiate a peaceful settlement. It becomes an all or nothing tournament which will end badly for everyone, unless there emerges from it a group that can represent the desires of the young. Somehow, some form of digital mediation is needed, so that both sides can find a way forward that does not end in deadlock or bloodshed.

A new language, a new way of engagement, a new digital dialogue may be about to arise.

However, our current political leadership shows little sign of embracing it. The extravagant, divisive language of many politicians, sets a dangerous example for those on the street and hardly offers a lifeline in the current situation. Current political discourse escalates tensions.

Sadly, traditional media does not fare much better. TV and most newspaper journalism flounder behind the curve, using language that is not nuanced enough to provide an accurate picture of what is happening. Only in the thick of social media can conversations begin to address the complexities of what is unfolding on the streets. Media needs to engage with the dialogue on social media in a much more dynamic way and make that visible to all.

Out in the new world, critical thinkers and social media champions live in the ether and are immersed in the digital dialogue that swirls around recent events. Here, a new language is evolving, and new solutions are there to be found. This is a world of aspiration, as well as a world where some dark forces lurk. But there is no doubt that ideas on the web across all geographical and cultural boundaries. They cut through nationality and sect. They appeal to young people who want a future where they can think and speak and explore, free from oppression and the chains that all too often bound their parents and grandparents.

To remain relevant and useful the so-called mainstream media must become more effective at tapping into the evolving language of the digital revolution which is at the heart of the unrest erupting in so many cities around the world. They must become active in these discussions, part of the dynamic of debate and not sit aloof from it on platforms that are used less and less by the young.

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