

Review: Paul Mason, *Why It's Kicking Off Everywhere: The New Global Revolutions*, Verso, London 2012.

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‘Social Mediaism’

In September 2011, Pakinam Amer of the Egypt Today Magazine reported that ‘Before the revolution, Twitter had around 100,000 subscribers from Egypt. Shortly after, the figure jumped to 1.1 million, according to rough estimates released by internet experts in Egypt. Compared to 80 million [total population]....’¹.

It is not easy to have an exact figure on this since people can set their location information as any country they wish but this compares to 70 Million mobile phone users in Egypt. While reading Paul Mason’s book *Why It’s Kicking Off Everywhere The New Global Revolutions*, I could not stop asking why did Mason - by his own logic - not appraise the role of mobile phones, which have been widely used for over a decade, instead of the social media.

Paul Mason is a journalist working for the BBC - indeed he is one of the most radical journalists around - and his new book is comprised of reports on revolts and uprisings round the world - Egypt, Spain, Israel, USA and so on. It is well written and has undoubtedly been very influential but it shares a key weakness of all but the very best journalism, namely it tends to be superficial and impressionistic in its analysis. It picks up on and elaborates on two of the most common ‘journalistic’ explanations of the wave of revolt: 1) that it is a generational thing; 2) that its other main driver is the use of social media.

In reality *all* revolutions tend to be led by the young - it’s a great advantage in

street fighting - but the young of a definite social class, and their rebellion is a symptom of much wider class struggle. Also all revolutions use the communications technology of the day: the French Revolution used Marat’s newspaper, the Russian Revolution used Lenin’s ‘Pravda’ and the telephone and the cinema of Eisenstein. This doesn’t mean these revolutions are caused or driven by that technology.

Throughout his book, Mason mentions a number of ‘influential’ Twitter users from Egypt and elsewhere. One of the best known names from Egypt is Gigi Ibrahim. Mason comments on her meeting in London that ‘There was no noticeable difference between her clothes, language and culture and theirs [the audience]...’. The ‘iconic figure’ of the 25 January revolution - in Mason’s words - clearly explains the dynamics of building the struggle in Egypt, as reported in an article by Jonny Jones in the *International Socialism Journal* 130.

The idea that social media played a significant role in coordinating protests has been greatly exaggerated, according to the Egyptian activist Gigi Ibrahim. She points out that coordination between organisations tended to happen in face to face meetings. Facebook and emails had been used to call demonstrations in Egypt for a number of years - these protests were small. The incomparably larger mobilisations which followed 25

¹<http://egypttoday.com/news/display/article/artId:316/Twitter-Nation/secId:3>

January were not because of some qualitative shift in the level of the Egyptian people's engagement with social media. Rather the confidence people gained from the events in Tunisia combined with the systematic work activists put into leafleting and raising slogans in areas where few people would even have access to the Internet. This was dangerous work, with activists being arrested and beaten. But it was integral to the mass mobilisations in Tahrir Square and elsewhere².

The statement above probably summarises the relationship between revolutionary struggle and social networks, and clearly shows the clever use of technology by people during the process of building a revolution. Like the radio, mobile phones, email and ordinary letter by post, the modern social networking software is not the core engine of any movement but just the communication mechanism of the day. One could argue that, in the neighbourhoods of Cairo, the truth did not always travel faster than the lies. It was most likely slow, painful yet effective without the speedy, 140 characters of Twitter.

The message had to be longer, deeper and with more context at times. Unlike what @littlemisswilde found unbelievable, articles and leaflets were distributed and read.

On the United Nations News & Commentary Forum Website, Mark Leon Goldberg listed '[One Year Later:] The 12 Twitter Users Who Shaped Our Experi-

ence of the Egyptian Uprising'. Interestingly in his review of the Twitter users, Hossam el-Hamalawy (@3arabawy) was number six on the list with a note from the author saying 'I do not know much about Hossam, except that for the past two days he has been a great source for information on the protests from an Egyptian perspective'³.

Two things are noticeable in this paragraph above. Firstly, all the author had to do was to check out Hossam to find out that he was not just a 'just in time' news source on twitter but one of the very active campaigners on the ground and a revolutionary socialist. Secondly, the title of the article probably puts social media in its right place in the case of Egyptian revolution: It was about shaping our experience, rather than shaping the direction, form or the level of struggle in Tahrir Square or elsewhere. Contrary to Paul Mason's arguments, we could sit back, with our mobile phones in our hands and get a digital experience of what is going on in distant Egypt. And it wasn't our Twitter nicknames that went to Egyptian Embassies around the world to protest in solidarity with people of Egypt, it was our placards and physical bodies. People in Tahrir Square did not have this luxury to just to get their experience shaped by Hossam. And someone had to physically make the placard and hold it up so that people in Wisconsin could see the slogan 'Egypt Supports Wisconsin Workers'. The significance wasn't the fact that twitter could relay this message there and then. It was just a convenience to share. The networking wasn't about social media, it was about a shared class consciousness from Tahrir to Wisconsin.

²http://www.isj.org.uk/?id=722#130jones_42

³<http://www.undispatch.com/jan25-one-year-later-the-12-twitter-users-shaped-our-experience-of-the-egyptian-uprising>