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Chattering Classes/Twittering Revolutionaries: Social Media and the Arab Spring

Abstract I: In *Culture and Imperialism* Edward Said discusses internationality and cosmopolitanism against the backdrop of the Gulf War, and Rée's view that the "nation-form is a kind of false consciousness", as if it were "an expression of popular subjective will" (Said, 1993: 10). But the monopolization of power by central national authorities results in a kind of façade, whereby "processes which are actually the effect of internationality are experienced as an expression of the natures of different nations and their individual members" (Said, 1993: 10, emphasis added). Yet nationalism sits uncomfortably in countries that, some might say, were in some cases artificial by-products of colonialism and social media are, arguably, providing broad access to a reclamation of citizen agency and self-determination.

Abstract II: In *Culture and Imperialism* Edward Said analizza internazionalità e cosmopolitismo sullo sfondo della Guerra del Golfo e dell'opinione di Rée secondo cui la "nation-form is a kind of false consciousness", come se questa fosse "an expression of popular subjective will" (Said, 1993: 10). Ma il monopolio del potere da parte di autorità nazionali centrali produce rappresentazioni in cui "processes which are actually the effect of internationality are experienced as an expression of the natures of different nations and their individual members" (Said, 1993: 10, mio corsivo). Tuttavia il nazionalismo è problematico nei paesi che furono, per così dire, prodotti artificialmente dal colonialismo, e i social media stanno verosimilmente fornendo largo accesso ad una riappropriazione dell'intervento civile e dell'auto-determinazione.

If you can take pictures, take pictures...if you can use Twitter, send tweets ... if you can blog, blog from the street. There are people demonstrating for our cause in Tunisia and Jordan, and I just found out that there are people demonstrating in Paris too. All of these people have faith in us (Nawara Negm, qtd. in Eltantawy & Wiest 1214).

In *Culture and Imperialism* Edward Said alludes to Jonathan Rée's discussion of internationality and Tim Brennan's of cosmopolitanism and sets them against the backdrop of the Gulf War. Rée notes that nationhood is a device that "cajoles us into participating in global systems of antagonism and tells us that we are only expressing ourselves when we do so" whereas "the task of a history of internationality should be the exposure of this delusion" (Rée 1992: 11). He writes that "the logic of internationality precedes the formation of nations" because "in the same way that individual texts can function only within a field of general intertextuality, so individual nations arise only within a field of general internationality" (Rée 1992: 9). For those who agree with Rée, the "nation-form is a kind of false consciousness", a faux "expression of popular subjective will" (Rée 1992: 10). The consequent monopolization of power by national authorities hides behind a façade, whereby "processes which are actually the effect of internationality are experienced as an expression of the natures of different nations and their individual members" (Rée 1992: 10, emphasis added). The comfort of "patriotism" and affiliation with the nation equates, then, to a militarism posing as "an expression of natural and prepolitical popular feeling" (Rée 1992: 10).

In a world subsequent to the historic extension of European nations into colonies that, following independence, now must reclaim some sense of antecedent nativist pride, is there a 'nation' to replace the western artifice, or are these postcolonial entities equally enslaved to the faux tribal identities that

politicians constantly reinforce with calls to this or that allegiance or patriotism? In the West, calls for the retrieval of the caliphate (and is this an example of internationalism or a borderless nationalism?) that many interpreted as the motivation for the destruction of the World Trade Center in New York are regularly looked upon with not only suspicion, but also derision, fear, disbelief, and pity (1). This was true before the attack in 2001 (and the less successful one of 1993), and as recently as 2013 with the concerns about the composition of the opposition against Bashar al-Assad in Syria. Romantic yearning for a resurgence of the glory days of yesteryear's caliphate, however ridiculous it may be in today's world, seems to instantiate a post-national view of commonality that cuts across the narrower borders of the nation-state – and brings with it a threat to the extant Arab nations. Now no longer a Saudi Arabia and an Indonesia, but one multi-ethnic Islamic nation, the imagined caliphate is arguably its own false consciousness, another nation-state that has gobbled up its children as any empire of the past has done.

In any case, despite paranoia from some quarters, a majority of those at the barricades is not seeking such a cross-border caliphate, and instead seeks a more broadly representative version of the nation-state with which they identify. They seek states that will now be more responsive, more democratically framed, etc. Internationality as a type of strategic essentialism (we in Tunisia have much in common with you in Lebanon, etc.) encourages the Arab Spring (2) as an expression of an identity that is too simply equated with Islam (as in Egypt, where Christians were in the majority until the mid-10th century, and still make up 10% of the population), and uses the master's tools against the master's 'products', the faux patriotism that keeps autocrats in power. But internationality ultimately frustrates the new individual expression of identity as the participants in these local movements use the tools of globalization and find the clarity of their national identity compromised by characteristics of social media beyond local control.

Global communications and the tools of social media provide the milieu in which this resurgence of agency throughout the Arab world has become conceivable in ways that have surprised much of the world. The ready-to-hand iPhone is apparently much more available than the computers that heretofore had been a prerequisite for access to the internet; there has been a steady burgeoning of applications that facilitate transgression of authoritarian national-statist controls; there continues to be a consequent presentation of self through the tropes embedded in Facebook and Twitter; these technologies result in rising generationally-confrontational expectations of gender-free communications and broad transgression of social classifications. One might say that the tools of 'cyberactivism' provide a catalyst for new discourse communities.

In a 2011 article in *The Journal of Democracy*, Philip Howard and Muzammil Hussain detail how the process evolved, and they conclude that

The first days of protest in each country were organized by a core group of literate, middle-class young people who had no particular affinities with any existing political parties or any ideologies stressing class struggle, religious fundamentalism, or pan-Arab nationalism. This communication, moreover, itself had a strong distributed or lateral character and did not consist of one or a few relatively simple ideological messages beamed by an elite at a less-educated mass public, but had more the character of a many-sided conversation among more or less equal individuals (Howard & Hussain 2011: 48).

Nahed Eltantawy and Julie B. Wiest, in fact, have used the occasion of the use of social media in Egypt to call for a reconsideration of resource mobilization theory, noting that social media "introduced speed and interactivity that were lacking in the traditional mobilization techniques, which generally include the use of leaflets, posters, and faxes", and "enabled domestic and international Egyptian activists to follow events in Egypt, join social-networking groups, and

engage in discussions” (Eltantawy & Wiest 2011: 1213). Eltantawy and Wiest argue that these technologies are effective in “promoting a sense of community and collective identity among marginalized group members, creating less-confined political spaces, establishing connections with other social movements, and publicizing causes to gain support from the global community” (Eltantawy & Wiest 2011: 1207). They note that this had been especially helpful in fostering communication among Islamic women (Eltantawy & Wiest 2011: 1208; see also Khamis 2012).

In rehearsing the recent history of the Arab Spring and the evolving use of social media, Eltantawy and Wiest record milestones in its impact on social activism:

- the formation of the Facebook group called “We are all Khalid Said” in the summer of 2010, referring to the young man brutally beaten to death by Egyptian police;
- Mohamed El Baradei’s Facebook and twitter accounts, and the pro-Baradei Facebook pages started by the National Association for Change;
- Omar Afifi’s YouTube videos on how to conduct an Egyptian revolution while evading the police (he was a former police officer before moving to Virginia for his own safety, once he wrote such material);
- Egyptian female activist Nawara Negm’s video message on 17 January 2011 offering encouragement to the Tunisians and four days later (the epitaph for this essay) posting a YouTube video of a young activist and pointing out how ordinary the act of protest could be in Egyptian society, once people got over their intimidation by a police state (3).

This sort of encouragement (incitement, the government would call it), coupled with “guidance on everything from using technology to escape government surveillance to facing rubber bullets and setting up barricades” (Eltantawy & Wiest 2011: 1213) fed the movement as it educated its potential participants.

The same was going on in Tunisia, where protesters on social media “advised their Egyptian counterparts to protest at nighttime for safety, to avoid suicide operations, to use media to convey their message for outside pressure, to spray-paint security forces’ armored vehicles black to cover the windshield, and to wash their faces with Coca-Cola to reduce the impact of tear gas” (Eltantawy & Wiest 2011: 1215). The researchers make the point that social media allowed common individuals to become “citizen journalists” (Eltantawy & Wiest 2011: 1215) and in the process circumvent restrictions that, in earlier protests, had effectively stifled international alerts and evidence of the atrocities being committed. During the earlier uprising when the Mubarak regime cut off internet and cellular phones, activists quickly adapted and used Facebook, etc., to continue getting their message out to the world. The immediacy of the transfer of knowledge, and its broader audience, made this a startling new tool and offered a suggestion of a possible realignment of power – but only up to a point, as the army subsequently demonstrated in overthrowing Morsi and outlawing the Muslim Brotherhood.

If we might recur to Edward Said's discussion of internationality, the apparently sudden coordination of a more democratic communication infrasystem demonstrates a liberatory identity politics for its participants and for those outside their nations whom they drew into their circle. Eltantawy and Wiest suggest that “Written messages and images circulating on Facebook, Twitter, and blogs appeared to strengthen the collective identity of Egyptians worldwide”, as did “the Facebook-organized February 1 event inviting users to a virtual ‘March of Millions’ in solidarity with Egyptian protesters” (Eltantawy & Wiest 2011: 1217).

The focus for Eltantawy and Wiest is on aspects of the Arab Spring, but they point out that the germination of cyberactivism was seen in the 1999 World Trade Organization protest in Seattle, and in the creation of the World Social Forum and its activities in Brazil in 2003 and Mumbai in 2004 (4). Thus, as a movement, it inherently calls internationalism into play, whether or not it consciously works against the enlightenment notion of the nation-state to promote some post-statist society – however creatively that might be envisioned by some younger members of the societies in question. While noting that the Arab Spring was the most impressively widespread use of social media for a new kind of revolution, Rita Safranek cites other impressive examples: Moldova in 2009, the impeachment trial of Philippine President Joseph Estrada in January 2011. These suggest that giving publicity to governmental actions can help transform local politics. But she also notes the failures, such as Belarus in March of 2006, the June 2009 uprising of the Green Movement in Iran, the Red Shirt uprising in Thailand in 2010 – these last two were violently suppressed following a broad use of social media in support of the protests. Safranek concludes that “social media has limited impact at best on an important factor affecting nascent revolutions – a regime's willingness to use force to squelch protests”: the Egyptian army did not turn against the citizens and protests consequently grew; the Iranian army, on the other hand, turned against its citizens and protests “petered out” (Safranek 2012: 11) (5). So, the rather depressing conclusion seems to be that the success of the new social media remains largely dependent upon whether or not the aims of the protest coincide with those of the wielders of traditional power. One looks in awe at the overthrow of Mubarak; some months later one looks back and wonders if his surrogates ever actually lost control. Nonetheless, the public display of personal involvement in politics was internationally impressive and promises the establishment of new power centers in Egypt and elsewhere in the Arab world.

Virtual transgression of borders supplements actual migration in the transformation of contemporary states. As Said writes in *Culture and Imperialism*, "it is not only tired, harassed, and dispossessed refugees who cross borders and try to become acculturated in new environments; it is also the whole gigantic system of the mass media that is ubiquitous, slipping by most barriers and settling in nearly everywhere" (Said 1993: 374). That was certainly true in 1993, and one sees now the increasingly resonant relevance of Marshall McLuhan's 1964 dictum, "the medium is the message" (McLuhan 1964: 7): social media are overtaking even the border-crossing power of the mass media of Said's day, with Twitter, facebook, Youtube and the others helping spark and maintain revolutions that heretofore would have withered on the vine. Reading Edward Said through the lens of the Arab Spring, one might conclude that Benedict Anderson's notion of imagined communities is thus both bolstered by nationalism, and supersedes it – with immigrants identifying in varying degrees both with the land of their ancestors and their adopted homeland.

At the time that Said was writing, the fear had been that "all departments of culture, not just news broadcasting, ha[d] been invaded by or enclosed within an ever-expanding circle of privately held corporations". If that was the fear at the time, might we not consider that this fear has by now taken firm root in the common consciousness of those ensconced in academia? Has the individual found ways to circumvent control by such corporate imperialism? This would seem unlikely, but still remains to be seen. One notes, with Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism*, that revolutionaries can re-impose the very strictures they had opposed. They sink back into "a world system of barriers, maps, frontiers, police forces, customs and exchange controls" (Said 1993: 372).

Conversely, can populist involvement in street politics be manipulated by the facile application of words like 'terrorist' or some version of 'great satan'? The fear one hears expressed by many in western democratic states is that Islamic countries will, as promised, conduct a vote – but will only do so once. This

is the criticism at the heart of the silence in much of the west when the army overthrew Morsi: that reactionary Islamic enthusiasts, having attained legitimate power through election, would now take blunt measures to ensure the maintenance of their hold on that position. The power of the populace has traditionally been easy to manipulate by authoritarian governments that play to an uninformed populism that is couched in the country's carefully nurtured jingoism – but is that still the case in a twittering and blogging younger generation of citizens? In *Culture and Imperialism* Said points out that

during the exhilarating heyday of decolonization [...] Fanon was one of the few to remark on the dangers posed to a great socio-political movement like decolonization by an untutored national consciousness. Much the same could be said about the dangers of an untutored religious consciousness. Thus the appearance of various mullahs, colonels, and one-party regimes who pleaded national security risks and the need to protect the founding revolutionary state as their platform, foisted a new set of problems onto the already considerably onerous heritage of imperialism (Said 1993: 371).

An optimist might be tempted to ask whether the re-enclosure of populist expression has somehow broken forth from its chains in the various local movements dubbed controversially as the Arab Spring (cf. Massad, Toumi, sourcewatch).

However the various revolutions may be eventually assessed, it seemed notable to many observers in 2011 that social media were being used as surprisingly effective tools by the masses, often apparently countering the long-established media powers of the state. In its Global Attitudes Project, in December of 2012 the Pew Research Center concluded that “social media users in Lebanon, Tunisia, Egypt and Jordan still take to social media to discuss politics at nearly twice the rate of their Western counterparts” (Wike 2012); of

every 10 users in these countries, six post about religion, whereas in the United States it is one in three, and in Western Europe that number is one in 10. In all countries surveyed, “the users skew young and educated” and they are a higher percentage of the population in the West than in the Middle East. One significant Pew finding has to do with the purpose to which these social media are put, with Americans casual and jokey, and Middle Eastern users engaging on critical issues “like politics and community”. The Dubai School of Government report on social media in 2012 concluded that “from merely being used as a tool for social networking and entertainment, social media now infiltrates almost every aspect of the daily lives of millions of Arabs, affecting the way they interact socially, do business, deal with government, or engage in civil society movements” (Salem & Mourtada 2012: 2). According to the Dubai study,

during the protests in Egypt and Tunisia, the vast majority of 200-plus people surveyed over three weeks in March said they were getting their information from social media sites (88 percent in Egypt and 94 percent in Tunisia). This outnumbered those who turned to non-governmental local media (63 percent in Egypt and 86 percent in Tunisia) and to foreign media (57 percent in Egypt and 48 percent in Tunisia) (Huang 2011: 2).

Word of mouth, which otherwise might be sidelined as mere gossip, here takes on a more significant role as a trusted (at least, easily and quickly disputed or validated) source of information. The authorities’ efforts to block out information, the report said, ended up “spurring people to be more active, decisive and to find ways to be more creative about communicating and organizing” (Huang, 2). The level of personal involvement in serving as reporters-on-the-ground is notable, and indicative of a level of commitment to changing class structures – for some indeterminate length of time – that is interesting.

The following year, in June of 2013, a report from the same Dubai School of Government did not focus on social media and revolution, but rather on the

uses of social media in breaking through barriers for education; pertinent to our discussion here are their findings that “facebook registered an increase of 10 million users between June 2012 and May 2013”, Twitter users in the Arab world has jumped “from just over 2 million to 3.7 million in the past year,” and “LinkedIn users in select Arab countries stands now close to 5 million” (Salem, Mourtada & Alshaer 2013: 2).

What might these recent events tell us about communication theory and its role in “nation building”? For McLuhan “the personal and social consequences of any medium – that is, of any extension of ourselves–result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology” (McLuhan 1964: 7). Thus, the content of the tweets and other communications between those involved in the ongoing revolutions are significant, but so too is the form in which that content is being transferred – the “new scale” of communication patterns. Structures are slowly being changed by the “social media” aspect of these media: there are social implications of these media more obviously than in earlier forms of communication. The revolutionary functionality of social media exemplifies structural changes arguably countered by the quick imposition of a new constitution by the Muslim Brotherhood that forecloses ongoing revolution by institutionalizing a particularly harsh alternative hegemony.

Still, the pendulum continues to swing, and a comfortable balance may still be found in the wild confrontation between the sacred and the secular. Time will tell whether social media will be effective not only in challenging new orthodoxies, but also in actually putting into practice the “ongoing revolution” that is so easily proclaimed by so many post-revolutionary dictators. One thinks of the optimistic call for an “ecclesia semper reformanda”, as proclaimed by Reformed Protestant theologians in 1674 and by ecclesiastical reformers of the Roman Catholic Church in the 1960s, acknowledgments that all orthodoxies (religious or political) need to be vigilant against the enticements of ossification

and the comforts of excluding other voices. Said writes in *Culture and Imperialism* that

Truly this has been the age of Ayatollahs, in which a phalanx of guardians (Khomeini, the Pope, Margaret Thatcher) simplify and protect one or another creed, essence, primordial faith. One fundamentalism invidiously attacks the others in the name of sanity, freedom, and goodness. A curious paradox is that religious fervor seems almost always to obscure notions of the sacred or divine, as if those could not survive in the overheated, largely secular atmosphere of fundamentalist combat (Said 1993: 397).

A prophet who recognized the human failings of those in the Middle East as well as those in the west, he also observed that Americans – so proud of their exceptionalism and their self-proclaimed role as a city on a hill for those around the world laboring under authoritarian regimes – nonetheless largely maintained strong support for their government’s policy of supporting dictators in the hope of maintaining the status quo in their own lives, as well as their apparent support ‘for a scale of violence out of all proportion to the violence of native insurgency against American allies’ (Said 1993: 391); he notes, too, their embrace of hostility to legitimate claims to native nationalism kept in place “with an almost perfect correspondence between prevailing government policy and the ideology ruling news presentation and selection” (Said 1993: 390). This begs the question of the comparable role of social media in the west, and the role it might play in destabilizing the hegemonic control of world news and worldviews that Said decries in news corporations.

It remains to be seen how long a revolution can continue that has, as its sinews, mobile phones. Egypt is the laboratory here, more so than, for example, Syria with over 100,000 dead – but in both cases the conversation between culture and imperialism is crucial. While asserting that “the job facing the cultural

intellectual is therefore not to accept the politics of identity as given, but to show how all representations are constructed, for what purpose, by whom, and with what components" (Said 1993: 380). Said also worried that "our critical efforts are small and primitive, for the media are not only a fully integrated practical network, but a very efficient *mode of articulation* [his emphasis] knitting the world together" (Said 1993: 374).

Facebook and Twitter may not withstand the larger focus and cultural imperialism of CNN, Fox News, Al Jazeera, let alone the CIZ, al Qaeda, and even mass inertia in the western world, but Said also notes that hybridity must be preceded by awkward misplacements of self. He writes that

contrapuntal analysis should be modeled [...] on an atonal ensemble; we must take into account all sorts of spatial or geographical and rhetorical practices – inflections, limits, constraints, intrusions, inclusions, prohibitions – all of them tending to elucidate a complex and uneven topography (Said 1993: 386).

Democracies can be loud, boorish, confrontational, and inefficient, and in the case of state evolutions the twittering echoes an engagement with something unfamiliar and therefore threatening.

The military coup in Egypt in July 2013 appears to many observers as a rough erasure of burgeoning self-expression. Many who have sought a way to defend the army's actions point out that the elected president of the country was advancing an Islamist agenda and cutting out major portions of the electorate in his policies, and that the military was, in fact, (re)asserting the will of a majority of Egyptians. Whatever the view that history will take of that ongoing revolution, which will surely have several other chapters before a meaningful and democratic stability materializes, the commonly accepted expectations of social media so evident in Mubarak's overthrow continue now

in Morsi's. On July 5 2013 the stream.aljazeera.com blog broadcast the following exchanges:

- from Mahtab Hossain Siddiqui at the Institute of Business Administration in Dhaka, Bangladesh: "Egyptians will regret this day. The same thing was done by Turkish Army against Necmatin Erbakan. But all of those Generals are in jail now and AKP is in power for 11 years".
- Michael D. Stocker at Northampton Community College responds: "Egyptians won't regret this, obviously you are not following twitter/facebook/vine and just about every other social media that the youth (being 19 to 24) are using. They are the ones that are done with Islam, and the ones that do NOT want a country run by an Islamic preacher and his aides".
- To which Ahmad el Masri at the University of Western Sydney responds: "Michael D. Stocker you are wrong they are not done with Islam, they are done with MB [Muslim Brotherhood], please distinguish between the two".
- And Amran Hafiz (location not given) joins in: "Right on Ahmad [...] Islam will prevail till the end of time".
- Shaheen K. Moidunny at the Indian High School writes: "elected President and elected Members of Parliament have been imprisoned – no liberal/secular/left condemnation [...] all media outlets critical of the military intervention and presumed to be MB has been forcibly shutdown – no liberal/secular/left condemnation, etc".
- Ahmad el Masri returns to the conversation, supporting Moidunny and saying "shame on that mob in Tahrir square for supporting a military coup whilst at the same breath saying that they are 'liberals'".

- But Abdul Hafeel, at Al Azhar Muslim College Hemmathagama answers, delphically: "This what Egyptians want let them enjoy [...]"
- And Eugene Denson, described as a self-employed critical defense lawyer (country unstated), answers that "One of the greatest advances in human governance is the separation of church and state. Religious governments become tyrannical governments, and need to be overthrown at the first signs of moving in the direction of imposing their views on people of differing beliefs".
- Ahmad el Masri is not giving up, responding that "Islam ruled for thousands of years successfully without tyranny, please study the golden age of Islam".
- Muideen Luqman at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria argues that "It's no doubt that the WEST has input in this and of course, this is their desire. The truth will surely prevail".
- From India, Mohamed Omer, a yoga therapist, writes: "In the name of rebellion the Egyptian people once again gone into the hands of the military regime and Mubarak hands foolish peoples" [sic];
- Amran Hafiz rejoins the conversation with "Only fools are bitten twice...may Allah have mercy on them",
- and Tanvir Ahmed Nabil, the "lead guitarist at Fallen", writes: "constitution was suspended by the military last night to defeat a democratically elected president. As a result the Egyptians who were protesting against Morsi in many parts are celebrating and chanting 'victory to democracy'. What a joke!"

Among the interesting characteristics that might be observed in this exchange (which, of course, continued beyond these extracts) is Ahmad el Masri's apparent nostalgia for the caliphate. More importantly for the topic of this essay, the bloggers represent the international quality of the Arab Spring, even if much of that participation is vicarious. Some contributors are Egyptian, some

are apparently not Muslim, etc., and all are entering in to a real-time conversation. All that is missing is the skype camera – though most of the entries are accompanied with a little snapshot of the 'speaker'. In *Culture and Imperialism* Said wrote that

It is not possible to name many states or regimes that are exempt from active intellectual and historical participation in the new postcolonial international configuration...[but] what had once been the imaginative liberation of a people – Aimé Césaire's "inventions of new soul" – and the audacious metaphoric charting of spiritual territory usurped by colonial masters were quickly translated into and accommodated by a world system of barriers, maps, frontiers, police forces, customs and exchange controls (Said 1993: 372).

It is perhaps utopian, and is certainly premature, to imagine that the use of social media in the Arab Spring is working to counter these retrograde forces described by Said – but one can but wait and see; better said, one can but wait and listen.

NOTES

1. See, for example, right-wing former one-term congressman Alan West (Republican, Florida) (<http://crooksandliars.com/kenneth-quinnell/allen-west-r-fl-says-arab-spring->), Israeli Home Front Defense Minister Avi Dichter (<http://www.jpost.com/Diplomacy-and-Politics/Muslim-Brothers-co-opting-Arab-Spring-to-make-caliphate>), and Uthman Badar, Mohammed Jeelani, Halim Rane and Haytham Yonus (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GEllGxB9Vhs>).
2. On the contentious nature of the term "Arab Spring", see the September 12, 2012 anonymous article "Arab Spring" in Sourcewatch, the anonymous July 4 2013 article, "Morsis' overthrow sets Egypt's Twitter alight", in

Stream.aljazeera, Joseph Massad's 2012 essay, and Habib Toumi's essay from December 17, 2011.

3. See also: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eE2itEB_v8&feature=related.
4. See Hawley 2008.
5. See Clay Shirky 2011.

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