

*PARADOXICALLY ADVANCING INTO THE PAST*  
KERNEL, Athens 2011

Almost a month ago, on Thursday the 27th of January 2011, at 22:34 UTC, Renesys, an international organisation that tracks global Internet access, detected a critical collapse in Internet traffic in and out of Egypt. But, the observation of the simultaneous withdrawal of all routes to Egyptian networks, merely confirmed what many had been reporting in the previous hours. Ordering the local Internet Service Providers to switch off their services, the Egyptian government carried out an unprecedented in Internet's history "shutdown", only hours before one of the major planned protests of the recent Egyptian Uprising.

Since that day much has been written and said about the role that Internet technology, and especially social media, played in the protests that led up to the 2011 Egyptian Revolution and the subsequent resignation of former president Hosni Mubarak. International mainstream media could easily be accused of treating the Internet as a new kind of revolution "celebrity", or even of deliberately promoting online services and platforms of clearly private interests. Nevertheless, governmental Internet censorship itself says a lot about the extensive use of electronic communication and the way it facilitated, or even accelerated, the anti-governmental efforts.

There are intriguing observations that can be made about the abundance of digital communications and coverage of the Egyptian



and its neighbouring uprisings. An elemental fact that characterized the representation of the Egyptian revolution through media streams was that the number of circulated images depicting the events was overwhelmed by the excess of words which were used to communicate and describe the protests developments. Even if images were once again not hard to find—considering their effortless production through cheap mobile technologies—television channels chose to broadcast over and over the same few images of violence, leaving words in the form of written or spoken commentary to dominate the public discourse and the documentation of the events. What is more, text-based microblogging media became platforms for production of an extensive, real-time dialogue of written exchange between the protesters and the international audience of observers who had turned their attention towards North Africa.

In his book *Orality and Literacy*, first published in 1982, Jesuit priest, cultural and religious historian and professor of English literature Walter J. Ong reflected on the re-emergence of an oral type of discourse within literate cultures. By articulating the contrasts between what he calls “primary” and “secondary orality”, he delineated a new oral culture of the electronic age. Manifesting itself through a mixture of literate and oral media, this secondary orality is defined and sustained by electronic technologies, which are accordingly depended on the existence and proliferation of writing and print.

If, as Ong debated, primary orality is that of a culture totally untouched by any knowledge of writing or print, then today such a culture can hardly exist. The contemporary oral discourse is



fundamentally mediated by technology. While it exists as sound, it does not only assume and imply forms of thought and expression within the literate tradition, but also uses written material and script as the basis of its production and performance. But, even if electronic technologies created the conditions for an instantaneous mode of communication and a more reciprocal and communal sharing and ownership of information, Ong saw this secondary orality being originally not as copious, vigorous and agonistically toned as its primary counterpart. Still, while cultures thriving of secondary orality are not necessarily similar to primarily oral ones, Ong agreed that to varying degrees many cultures and sub-cultures, even in a high-technology ambiance, preserve much of the mind-set of primary orality.

It seems that online media, both the professionally authored and the user-generated ones, won't stop using Paul Klee's 1922 painting *Twittering Machine* as a reference—or wordplay—in articles, posts and comments associated with the popular social networking service Twitter. Historically, it is said that *Twittering Machine* was based on the ink drawing *Concert on the Twig* that Klee had made a year before, depicting four birds singing their song on a branch. In *Twittering Machine*, the four birds are sitting on their roost, connected to a hand crank, against a misty background of infinite space. Klee composed a scenario both playful and uncomfortable, a blend of nature and machine in the spirit of the Futurist tradition. However, the *Twittering Machine* neither asserts nor negates openly the utopian over-excitement, or the anxieties associated with the rapid advancement of technology and industrialization. Klee created a ghostly mechanism designed to imitate the sound of birds, a



simultaneous mockery of our faith in the machine and our sentimental appreciation of the bird's song. Seen today in all its glory of multiple digital representations in a Google image-search results webpage, the *Twittering Machine* could easily remind someone of the Web 2.0-mediated participative polyphony. Or cacophony.

When Ong wrote *Orality and Literacy*, he was surrounded by pre-Internet technology. However, the absent, invisible audience of an era that radio and television dominated Western media, would finally become the 2006 "Time's Person of the Year". Both asynchronous and synchronous digital communication tools went far beyond the capabilities of recorded or real-time, technologically-mediated speech. And in the largely "written" World Wide Web, electronic text is the medium that primarily functions as speech, as a new kind of oral content that is commonly distributed in a conversational tone, defined through an ever-changing set of linguistic norms and behaviours.

"If your government shuts down the Internet, shut down your government." Internet memes as this phrase are viral concepts that spread via the Internet, constituting a significant element of the online folklore. Referring to a term first used by Richard Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene*, the idea of the meme functions as an analogy to the model of the gene, the unit of heredity in a living organism. Instead of transmitting biological data, the meme is a carrier of cultural information, a basic cultural unit that spreads itself through evolutionary behavioural patterns.





In one of the variants of the “If your government...” meme that proliferated during the Egyptian Uprising, the popularized phrase was circulated as the caption of an e-flyer that featured an image depicting an Egyptian sarcophagus, the face of which had been replaced with a Guy Fawkes mask. Guy Fawkes, one of the thirteen conspirators who planned the failed Gunpowder Plot of 1605 against King James I of England, was introduced in popular culture after the film adaptation of Alan Moore’s comic *V for Vendetta*. Soon, the Guy Fawkes mask, which the main character ‘V’ wears in this dystopian story of a near future, became eventually an Internet meme. Being applied repeatedly over other popular images and redistributed in a spam-like rate through mainstream and subcultural websites, the mask acted like a virus that transforms everything into itself.

As it happens with urban legends, it would be a hopeless operation to track back the origin of many Internet memes. Memes exist because of their constant circulation and dispersion; they are the evidence of a restless activity of transmission and transformation. The Internet meme is a meme in itself. But, in the networked topology of the Internet, one could spot places where memes grow and evolve. Imageboards, such as the infamous 4chan, have been facilitating the development of image-memes like the Guy Fawkes-sarcophagus mash-up. Through such platforms the give-and-take of images acquires a dialogic quality: images become statements and responses, voices in conversation. And it is this immediate and ephemeral character of such web technologies that restore the potential of images to function as agonistic speech, to act like urban or pre-historic graffiti.



Looking back at a history of thousand years of oral tradition and the emerging second-second oral culture introduced by the Internet, literate culture could be in the end considered more the anomaly, than the rule. This proposition of a “Gutenbergian Parenthesis” would suggest then a history of media that has been interrupted by the age of printing and the concept of the individually authored work enclosed in isolated containers: books.

*Soc: I cannot help feeling, Phaedrus, that writing is unfortunately like painting; for the creations of the painter have the attitude of life, and yet if you ask them a question they preserve a solemn silence. And the same may be said of speeches. You would imagine that they had intelligence, but if you want to know anything and put a question to one of them, the speaker always gives one unvarying answer. And when they have been once written down they are tumbled about anywhere among those who may or may not understand them, and know not to whom they should reply, to whom not: and, if they are maltreated or abused, they have no parent to protect them; and they cannot protect or defend themselves.*

*Phaedr: That again is most true.*

In Plato’s *Phaedrus*, Socrates states that writing is inhuman. Written words turn living thoughts into mere “objects”. Writing weakens human memory. Written words can’t respond to questions or participate in a debate. Almost ironically, Plato’s written dialogues of Socrates is the most representative case of the critical shift from oral



culture to literate habits of communication that would become synonymous with Western culture. Preserving and transmitting knowledge began to change as the “wholly oral” Greek culture started to become alphabetized, after nearly three hundred years of practically resisting the invention of the alphabet.

In *The Storyteller, Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov*, Walter Benjamin debates the end of the art of storytelling and sees the rise of the novel as the earliest symptom of a long process towards this ending. Depended on the discrete container of the book, the novel differentiates itself from all other forms of prose literature such as the fairy tale, the legend, even the novella, in that it neither comes from oral tradition nor goes into it. But, Benjamin moves soon beyond the critique of the technology and the medium of writing and publishing, speculating on their broader implications that have been defining literate culture since Gutenberg.

As Socrates saw a menace in the act of writing, Benjamin understood that what brought the decline and the anticipated death of storytelling was the new form of communication in the modern age: information. Yet, it seems that when Benjamin speaks about the idea of information, he refers to the actual act of informing and not to a technical definition of an ordered sequence of symbols that record or transmit a message. Information-as-informing, as reporting the news, is not only directly referential—it refers to specific events and facts—but it also has to be self-explanatory, it has to be understandable and efficient. Storytelling, the process and skill of conveying content and meaning of an event in a narrative, improvisational manner, is for Benjamin incompatible with the logic



and act of informing. While the prime requirement of information is to appear “understandable in itself”, telling a story is an event of its own, one that doesn’t allow for further explanation: the essential message lies within the story and its interactive, situational performance, which constitutes a prerequisite element of the storytelling.

Information dissemination is the key concept of our era. But, its dominance should be seen through this simple technical term of message transmission that Benjamin seems to be overlooking, rather than through the act of informing and distributing the news. Fundamentally, this basic concept of transmitting a message lies behind the very nature of oral tradition. Bards used to convey knowledge from place to place and from generation to generation by means of myth and oral poetry such as the epic. Their narration was determined by performative and compositional patterns, metrical formulas, empirical information-distribution protocols. Such elaborated, but still improvisational, modes of information transmission could seem unthinkable to a mind shaped within Western literate culture. Nevertheless, the formal structure of iconic works which kept the Western intellect preoccupied for centuries, like Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, demonstrates that the composition of the epics has been greatly depended on the prolonged process of their oral diffusion. Compositional characteristics such as regular and repeated phrases, the repetition of even entire verses or verse clusters, point out to the sophisticated, pre-literate mechanisms of knowledge dissemination and the distributed forces—and voices—that shaped the famous poems.





The Homeric question, the knotty problem of the *Iliad's* and *Odyssey's* origin, has its roots back in the Hellenistic period. Obscure facts on Homer's life, chronological inconsistencies concerning the historical context of the epics' creation, their fundamental reliance on oral reproduction: all these gave birth to the hypothesis of the epics' multiple authorship and the idea that Homer was in fact a constructed identity. Oral cultures are based on narration. Literate cultures are referential. Even if the postmodern deconstruction of the idea of the author did not change the legal and intellectual status of authorship, it did highlight the ideological pressure for the need of attributing ideas and content to the singular, individual subject. This demand, strongly attached to literate tradition, has been so profound that led to the fabrication of pseudo and semi-fictional authors that aggregated under their name a significant body of work of seemingly collective authorship.

“OpEgypt” has been the code name for a series of “distributed denial of service” attacks that the group Anonymous started launching against key Egyptian government websites in late January 2011, taking them offline until Mubarak finally stepped down. Anonymous is an Internet meme. It has been propagated through 4chan since the latter was launched in 2003 and it originates in the imageboard's very structure: users participating in the platform are not expected to post something by logging in or by submitting their name. Every post that is not assigned a name in the comment submission form is published under the same moniker: “Anonymous”. Here, the placeholder became a shared identity, the idea of a multiple-use name an unnamed collective, anonymity a means of mutual recognition. Of course, action and agenda could not be but fragmented and manifold:



insidious pranks, trolling and grotesque “raids” have been attributed to Anonymous, along with triumphant online activism in defence of WikiLeaks, or the technological emancipation of the Tunisian people against governmental censorship in the 2011 Arab Revolutions. Subcultural activity and the proliferation of banality aesthetics co-exist with radical modes of social and political action under the same no-name. The network as community, or vice versa.

Processes of formation of subjectivity are bound together with processes of knowledge production. The feeling of coming together through a network encourages the dispersion of authorship, the fluidity and communal ownership of knowledge. Years before the outright proliferation of network technologies, Ong studied the re-mediation of the self by examining the conditions under which media facilitate this deliberate re-integration of humans in groups. In this state of self-consciousness, knowledge would ideally be inseparable from the knower, it is experienced integrally and dramatically, communally performed.

In primary oral cultures community was limited—or even defined—by place. Communication technologies transcended definitions of time and space by suggesting instantaneous habits of interconnection, while rendering global-scale, real-time interaction a common-place reality. As it happens with revolutions, however, historical cultural shifts could not be simply attributed to media advancements, enhanced communication platforms and interface design. Yet, the synchronous witnessing of the universal torrent of events inevitably produced a new kind of consciousness. This global awareness imposed on the literate man the current conditions for



knowledge production, cultural operation and social praxis. Within such a condition, binary separations between the fragmented and the continuum, the abstract and the situational, between information and experience, cannot be easily offered any more. In the end, one could argue, it is only possible to advance into the future.

