FREEDOM TECHNOLOGISTS AND THE FUTURE OF GLOBAL JUSTICE

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Summary

In the wake of early 2010s upheavals such as the Arab Spring, Spain's indignados, or the global Occupy movement, many commentators were quick to either invoke the presumed tech-savvy of 'digital natives' or the purported 'cyber-utopianism' of net freedom advocates who supported the protests. But what role have internet freedom activists – or 'freedom technologists' – played in ongoing struggles for progressive political change around the world and how can the pursuit of liberty be combined with the struggle for social justice?

ILLUSTRATION NOTE

Tawakkol Abdel-Salam Karman, featured at the front, is a Yemeni journalist, politician and human rights activist who led a group "Women Journalists Without Chains that was part of the 'Arab Spring' uprisings.

The past five or six years have seen an explosion of political initiatives around the globe in which tech-minded actors of various kinds (including geeks, hackers, bloggers, tech journalists, digital rights lawyers, and Pirate politicians) have played leading parts. From whistleblowing to online protests, from occupied squares to anti-establishment parties, their political actions can no longer be ignored, particularly following Edward Snowden's revelations about the mass digital surveillance capabilities of the US National Security Agency (NSA) and allied agencies.[1]

In my writings, I use the term *freedom technologists* to refer to those political actors – both individual and collective – who combine technological know-how with political acumen to pursue greater digital and democratic freedoms. Indeed, freedom technologists regard the fate of the internet and of human freedom as being inextricably entwined. Far from being the techno-utopian dreamers or ineffectual "slacktivists" of a certain strand of internet punditry, my anthropological research shows that most of them are, in fact, techno-pragmatists; that is, they take a highly practical view of the limits and possibilities of new technologies for political change.

In the wake of popular uprisings such as the Arab Spring, Spain's *indignados*, or the global Occupy movement, many commentators were quick to either invoke the presumed tech-savvy of "digital natives" or the purported "cyber-utopianism" of net freedom advocates who supported the protests. Yet not enough serious attention has been paid to the contribution of freedom technologists to ongoing struggles for progressive political change around the world. To address this neglect, in this essay I review some of the recent political successes and setbacks of freedom technologists of various kinds (geeks, hackers, online journalists, digital rights lawyers, Pirate politicians, etc.) in three countries that experienced mass protests following the global financial crisis of 2008: Iceland, Tunisia and Spain. I conclude by drawing attention to an unresolved issue in most freedom technologists' projects – namely how to reconcile the pursuit of liberty with that of social justice – with Spain as a curious exception worthy of closer inspection.

From WikiLeaks to media freedom laws

A good place to start our enquiry into the contribution, if any, of freedom technologists to progressive political change is Iceland.

One October morning in 2008 Icelanders awoke to the shattering reality that their seemingly prosperous country was bankrupt. In other words, Iceland could no longer pay back its external debts and its currency, the *krona*, had become valueless.[2] It soon emerged that Icelandic banks had been making staggeringly large loans to their own shareholders. As a result of this "huge scam", over 50,000 people – or one sixth of Iceland's population of 320,000 – lost their savings. It also transpired that a financial clique of about 30 people controlled the country's economy through a "revolving door between finance, politics and the media". Not surprisingly, a deep crisis of legitimacy ensued after long decades of citizens' faith in a political system customarily hailed as being among the most transparent and advanced in the world. As the information freedom activist Heather Brooke aptly put it, Iceland was "ripe for reform".

Iceland needed to change, and it would only take a few committed activists, particularly when they had technological skill and political currency, to change society in a profound way.

A key turning point came on 1 August 2009. The then unknown WikiLeaks had obtained documentation that exposed the tight grip of cronyism on the country's financial system. When the bankers realised that this documentation had been posted online, they forced the Icelandic judiciary to impose an unprecedented gagging order on the news media. Undeterred, the state TV news anchor, Bogi Ágústson, circumvented this order by simply directing viewers to the WikiLeaks website. This incident made WikiLeaks an instant phenomenon in Iceland. Shortly thereafter its spokespersons, Julian Assange and Daniel Domscheit-Berg, were welcomed to Iceland as heroes. Interviewed on the nation's most popular TV chat show, a cheerful Assange proposed that Iceland become an information freedom haven: "A crisis is a terrible thing

to waste and Iceland has a lot of opportunity to redefine its standards and its legislation", argued Assange. The message from WikiLeaks was that

> Iceland needed to change, and it would only take a few committed activists, particularly when they had technological skill and political currency, to change society in a profound way.

Inspired by this message, a team of Icelandic and foreign freedom technologists – predominantly hackers, geeks, lawyers, journalists and politicians – launched the Icelandic Modern Media Initiative (IMMI). The aim of IMMI was to strengthen information freedom both in Iceland and globally, particularly "the rights of journalists, publishers and bloggers".

The team's techno-pragmatism was in evidence from the outset. Thus one of its leaders, the self-defined computer "nerd", poet, and MP Birgitta Jónsdóttir explained how **"**we went on a scouting mission looking for the best [information freedom] laws, not just laws that looked good on paper, but that actually worked in reality".[3]

To their delight, on 16 June 2010 the Icelandic parliament unanimously passed IMMI as a resolution. However, the process of translating the resolution into legislation is proving to be long and tortuous. While some provisions are now law (e.g. source protection), others are currently pending, and still others are on hold. An added hurdle is IMMI's realisation since Edward Snowden's NSA revelations that legal innovations may not be sufficient to protect whistle-blowers and other sources from the digital prying of powerful states and corporations. This led to calls for greater support for privacy technologies in view of the fact that "legalistic schemes are never going to work" as powerful governments can always "flaunt [sic] international law".

In 2013 Birgitta Jónsdóttir became the leader of Iceland's Pirate Party, which holds only three seats of the national parliament's 63 but currently leads the polls in voting intentions for 2017. Instead of a populist revolution, she calls for a gradual "rEvolution" while advocating for greater digital freedoms and direct democracy tools, describing herself

as a "pragmatic anarchist", Jónsdóttir believes her mixed background as a geeky poet gives her a different perspective on democratic reform to that of mainstream politicians. For people like her, all systems, including political systems, are there to be continually tinkered with – i.e. hacked – so that they can be improved.[4]

Framing the revolution

In contrast to Iceland's slow process of techno-political reform, in late 2010 Tunisia experienced a swift uprising that put an end to the autocratic regime of Ben Ali, ushering in a new constitution and parliamentary democracy. Tunisia's revolution was counterintuitive, for it took place in a hitherto stable country governed by lifelong presidents.

The revolution can be divided into two main phases: before and after the Kasserine massacre of 8-12 January 2011 – with freedom technologists playing a particularly important role during the first phase. Let us begin, then, with the pre-Kasserine events. The December 2010 uprising resulted from two separate histories of struggle converging for the first time, namely the labour struggles of impoverished "inland Tunisians" (*Nuzuh*) and the internet activism of the urban middle classes living in the capital, Tunis, and other affluent areas at home and abroad. Online bloggers and activists had long contended with one the world's harshest internet censorship regimes and felt closer to global outfits such as WikiLeaks, Reporters without Borders or Global Voices than to the plight of Tunisia's working classes.

As in the Spanish protests reviewed below, WikiLeaks' release of US diplomatic cables helped to prepare the protest ground. On 28 November 2010, within hours of the original WikiLeaks release, a first batch of 17 cables undermining the Tunisian government was published by Nawaat.org, a site set up in 2004 by the constitutional lawyer and blogger Riadh Guerfali. The leaks, amplified by Al Jazeera TV, gave many Tunisian activists the false – yet consequential – impression that the international community, and particularly the USA, now supported their struggle.

The trigger for the protests was the self-immolation of a young street vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, in the town of Sidi Bouzid after being reportedly humiliated by a female government official. Unlike previous self-immolations, this one was filmed. The veteran activist Ali Bouazizi, a distant cousin of the victim, recorded it on his Samsung mobile, edited it with technical help from a friend, and shared it via Facebook where it was discovered by journalists from Al Jazeera – banned from entering Tunisia – and broadcast to the nation. Al Jazeera journalists relied on information shared on social media by Tunisian activists and other citizens to bypass the official restrictions and report on the fast-moving events on the ground. When the government censored Facebook, the online group Anonymous launched Operation Tunisia, carrying attacks against government websites via dial-up connections provided by Tunisian citizens.

Mohamed Bouazizi no longer represented the uneducated poor who struggle to provide food on the table, but represented all young people of Tunisia whose rights and freedom were denied.

Much has been made of how the video of Mohamad Bouazizi's death "went viral", triggering numerous "multi-channel" protests across the country that the Tunisian government was unable to stifle. Far less well known, however, is the fact that his cousin Ali Bouazizi added two "white lies" to the story that accompanied the video, namely the notion that Mohamed was a university graduate (in fact, he never completed high school) and the scene in which a woman slapped him in the face (we now know that this humiliating event never took place). As the internet scholar Merlyna Lim explains:

> By adding these two ingredients – a university graduate and a slap – to the story, Ali rendered Mohamed's burning body political, affixing to it the political body of a citizen whose rights were denied. Mohamed Bouazizi no longer represented the uneducated poor who struggle to provide food on the table, but represented all young people of Tunisia whose rights and freedom were denied.

For Lim, this compelling story functioned as a "bridging frame" that appealed to all Tunisians, becoming the endlessly rehearsed "master frame" of the uprising both domestically and internationally. Also important in this connection were the framing activities of the country's lawyers. Thus the Association of Tunisian Lawyers backed the protests from an early stage, as did many lawyers in a personal capacity. For instance, the "lawyer-turned-activist" Leila Den Debba portrayed the events as "a revolution where the young people did not rally for food but for a dignified life".

The turning point came on 8–12 January 2011 with the massacring of protesters in Kassarine, in central Tunisia. This slaughter led to mass protests in the capital, with the national workers' union (UGTT) and the urban middle classes now conspicuously present, and the military exerting pressure on Ben Ali to step down. In his final speech of 13 January, the tyrant declared an end to the firing of "real bullets". But it was too late to save his regime and he was forced to flee to Saudi Arabia with his family.

Standard journalistic accounts of the Tunisian uprising have it that the country's youth forced a regime change. In fact, as the above sketch suggests, the reality is far more complex, and it involves journalists themselves. While young street protesters were indeed a powerful force, we should not neglect the contribution of less visible protest agents. Thus, during the pre-Kasserine phase three familiar types of freedom technologist (hackers/geeks, lawyers, and journalists) from WikiLeaks, Anonymous, Al Jazeera, Nawaat.org and other sundry outlets played crucial roles in framing the issue, aided by a broad band of other specialists and a sizeable portion of the population led by impoverished youths. This ad-hoc coalition dramatically expanded after the Kasserine massacre when two powerful non-netizen forces, namely the trade unions and the military, entered the fray, along with the vast majority of the Tunisian population. This spelled the end of Ben Ali's regime.

Five years on, Tunisia is unique in the Arab world for having a working democracy, a new constitution based on human rights, a national unity government made up of secularists and Islamists, and a truth and

reconciliation process. Yet despite these advances, Tunisia remains a deeply divided country, with the urban "digerati" enjoying unprecedented freedoms while the rural population still suffers from economic deprivation as violent jihadist cells seek to fill the void.[5]

From "Yes we camp!" to "Yes we can!"

Meanwhile, in nearby Spain, local and foreign commentators concur that the *indignados* (15M) protests of 2011 were long overdue. Spain's housing market "bubble" had burst in 2008, leaving almost half of the country's young people unemployed and millions more citizens in a precarious situation. In addition, a series of high-profile corruption scandals had discredited its political class, as had an electoral law seen as perpetuating a two-party system. The vast pool of qualified young (and not so young) middle-class Spaniards unable to find jobs or further their careers enjoyed a surplus of free time while still living "at home". Many were therefore in an ideal position to join the fledgling movement. This was also a period of rapid growth in the uptake of social and mobile media in Spain, with a dramatic increase (65%) in mobile internet usage between 2010 and 2011. With the precedent of popular revolts in Tunisia and Egypt fresh in people's minds, the scene was set for a Spring of discontent. Lastly, Spain had a proud history of internet activism whose personnel, ideals and practices were not dissimilar to those that had been used in North Africa to great effect.

The connections and overlaps between Spain's digital freedom scene and its *indignados* (or 15M) movement are numerous. Indeed, free culture activists played a crucial role in the movement's conception, gestation, birth and growth. Spain has boasted an active netizen (in Spanish, *internauta*) scene since the 1990s. In December 2009, a manifesto in defence of fundamental digital rights was published in opposition to the so-called *Ley Sinde*, a proposed bill aimed at curtailing "internet piracy". Other protest methods included DDoS attacks, Twitter hashtags and offline actions. In December 2010, a group of tech lawyers and other freedom technologists launched a successful online mobilisation against the bill, now renamed *Ley Biden-Sinde* in honour of the US Vice President Joe

Biden. This renaming came after WikiLeaks confirmed that the bill was drafted under pressure from the US government and its culture industry lobby. The mobilisation was supported by Anonymous, Hacktivistas.net and other hacker formations, and widely covered by both mainstream and alternative news media. For hacktivists like Margarita Padilla, the *Ley Sinde* struggle brought together networked "swarms" such as Anonymous and traditional movements, forging "monstrous alliances" that presaged the *indignados* movement.

Although the role played by hackers and other computer experts in lending the indignados (15M) movement its strong free culture character is crucial, it is important not to overlook the part played by both amateur and professional journalists.

Disregarding the netizen outcry, on 15 February 2011 Spain's ruling socialist (PSOE) government, backed by Spain's other major parties, went ahead and passed the anti-piracy bill under US pressure. Very shortly thereafter, the internet lawyer Sánchez Almeida with fellow freedom technologists created *No Les Votes*, an online formation that called on Spaniards to respond to this betrayal by not voting for any of the major parties in the coming municipal and regional elections. *No Les Votes* marked a radical break, a schism, between Spain's netizens and its political class that would shape subsequent events. It soon joined forces with Anonymous, *Juventud Sin Futuro* (Youth Without a Future), *Democracia Real Ya* (DRY) (Real Democracy Now) and other platforms to call for mass demonstrations across Spain on 15 May 2011 under the slogan "Real democracy now! We are not commodities in the hands of politicians and bankers".

The marches were well attended but they failed to achieve the media visibility protesters had hoped for. However, a small group of protesters in Madrid decided to spend the night at Puerta del Sol, the city's main square. Freedom technologists were well represented among these "first 40" campers, including an "Anon" who had broken into the Goya award ceremony, a copyleft lawyer formerly employed by a leading law firm, and a member of the hacktivist group, Isaac Hacksimov, who described the occupation as "a gesture that broke the collective mental block".

By 17 May the number of occupiers had grown to 200 and by 20 May nearly 30,000 people had taken the square in full view of the national and international media, with dozens of squares across Spain following suit in rapid succession.

Although the role played by hackers and other computer experts in lending the *indignados* (15M) movement its strong free culture character is crucial, it is important not to overlook the part played by both amateur and professional journalists. In the 15M discourse the mainstream news media were often portrayed as an integral part of a monolithic "system" hostile to the protesters, while "citizen journalism" and other form of "horizontal" and "networked" communication were celebrated. In fact, without the support of sympathetic journalists and editors from major news organisations, it is unlikely that the campers would have reached such wide publics during the month-long occupation of Spain's squares and their aftermath. For instance, Joseba Elola, a journalist with the centre-left daily *El País*, could barely contain his emotion when reporting from the Sol encampments, portraying the occupiers as "young people conscious of their civil liberties who have risen to head a protest in search of a great change". It is telling that it was precisely Elola who secured the participation of *El País* in the global release of WikiLeaks' US diplomatic cables in November 2010, following a secret meeting with Assange in London. This experience changed Elola's professional outlook. He came to realise that the news media had been "a little bit asleep" and that WikiLeaks had "brought something really good for journalism and for society".

Let us fast-forward to early 2014, when a number of new political parties in Spain announced their intention to campaign in the European elections of 25 May 2014. The pioneer was *Partido X*, a "citizen network" (*red ciudadana*) created in early 2013 by the same group of Barcelona freedom technologists behind DRY. *Partido X* is no ordinary party, for it draws on hacker/free culture principles and practices and regards itself as a "methodology" for political change that can be freely borrowed and remixed by other parties – as long as the borrowing is publicly acknowledged. Indeed, soon after the new political party *Podemos*

("We Can") was founded in early 2014, its leaders announced that they would borrow some of *Partido X*'s techno-political methods. *Podemos* was one the biggest surprises in the European elections, obtaining 8 per cent of the vote in Spain and five seats in the European Parliament.

Podemos is a leftist formation rooted in the *indignados* (15M) movement and led by the charismatic political scientist Pablo Iglesias, aged 37. For its European campaign it carried out a successful hybrid media (or transmedia) strategy right across the establishment vs. civic media divide by banking on its telegenic leader. In contrast, *Partido X* relied heavily on social media and opted for not playing the charismatic leader game, paying dearly for it at the ballot box, for they did not win any European seats. Iglesias became a masterful practitioner of Spain's *tertulia* genre. *Tertulias* are popular TV and radio panel shows devoted to discussing current affairs. These media sites would often become arenas in which Iglesias often emerged victorious.

Exactly a year later, on 24 May 2015, local elections were held across Spain. In Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia and other major cities, new anti-establishment candidates either won or came very close to winning, signalling a major change in the country's political landscape. In Barcelona, a new municipalist platform named *Barcelona en Comú* ('Barcelona in Common'), derived from the anti-eviction group PAH, gained power. Like Pablo Iglesias before her, its popular leader, Ada Colau, opted for a low-budget but highly effective transmedia strategy. Their electoral programme, drafted by over 5,000 people, was based on input from both online platforms and open assemblies.[6] The new platform also gave birth to *SomComuns*, a network of internet activists campaigning on social media, as well as a collective of designers and artists calling for the "graphic liberation" of Barcelona. *SomComuns* volunteers were free to experiment with language and media formats. As one of its initiators put it, "If a message works, we promote it, regardless of who created it. In fact, some of our top virals were made by anonymous people". An example of this "new electoral narrative" is the video *"El run run*" ("The buzz"), featuring a joyful Ada Colau. Not only did "El run run" strike a chord with Colau's supporters, it also found its way into the mainstream media.

For Carlos Delclós, the success of *Barcelona en Comú* and similar platforms marks the rise of a "new municipal agenda" in Spain. This agenda echoes the ideas of the founding father of libertarian municipalism, Murray Bookchin, who identified its four main features: "a revival of the citizens' assembly, the need for confederation with other municipalities, grassroots politics as a school of genuine citizenship and the municipalisation of the economy". Underlying this programme, argues Delclós, is "a recovery of a new participatory politics structured around free, self-empowered and active citizens".[7]

It is the coming together of everyday people, technology nerds and other political actors via social media, mainstream media and in physical settings such as streets and squares that drives processes of change.

In late October 2015, *Barcelona en Comú* announced it would join *Podemos* to stand in Spain's general elections on the coming 20 December[8]. As expected, their joint campaign displayed a rare admixture of techno-political savvy and neo-leftist/social justice ideals. Together, they came first in Catalonia, securing almost 25% of the vote and 12 MPs from Catalonia's share of the Spanish parliament. Nationally, *Podemos* became the third political force in Spain with over five million votes, surging to 20.66% of the total vote, which gave the new political party 69 MPs and put an end to the country's two-party system, in place throughout the post-Franco era.

Digital rights are social rights

Beyond the specificities of each national context, success in the application of techno-political ideals and practices to democratic transformation consists of three main elements: a deep economic crisis, interdisciplinary expertise, and grassroots populism. First, it is no coincidence that countries that managed to weather the post-2008 economic storm (such as Germany, Norway, Singapore or Indonesia) did not experience mass protest movements in which freedom technologists could play an important role. By the same token, it was countries like Iceland, Tunisia, Egypt, Spain or the USA – i.e. those worst hit by the global financial crisis – that saw a spectacular growth of political contention. Second, no

techno-political project can have societal impact if it is founded solely on the IT expertise of hackers and geeks – it must be an interdisciplinary endeavour. To succeed politically, these specialists have to join forces with other technology experts (such as digital rights lawyers, online journalists, geeky politicians) as well as non-technological experts (for instance, artists, intellectuals, social scientists) and ordinary citizens with no specialist knowledge through inclusive initiatives where all can make a contribution. It is the coming together of everyday people, technology nerds and other political actors via social media, mainstream media and in physical settings such as streets and squares that drives processes of change. To achieve this convergence, would-be democratic reformers (and revolutionaries) must find innovative ways of bridging the chasm between the frames and interests of the middle and lower classes through grassroots populism. We saw this most dramatically in the martyrdom story of Mohamad Bouazizi, which served as a "bridging frame" that appealed to both working- and middle-class Tunisians, in the Occupy movement's "We are the 99%" slogan, and in Spain's "We are not commodities in the hands of politicians and bankers".

In this connection, it is worth noting that Spain – a country that is far from being a global technology leader – currently boasts what is arguably the world's most advanced techno-political field. Even more remarkable, Spain's civil society has achieved this leading position while pursuing agendas that are as much concerned with social justice as they are with liberty. In contrast, the techno-political scene in the rest of Europe is dominated by Pirate Parties with "pro-social" agendas (such as. guaranteeing citizens a basic income or free health and education) but who seem unwilling, to quote Bart Cammaerts, "to clarify the[ir] ideological position and the precise relationship between a libertarian freedom-related agenda and a social justice agenda".[9]

The problem is even more acute outside Europe, where freedom technologists rarely make the link between liberty and social justice. Take, for instance, the case of Southeast Asia. This is a pioneering region in the use of information technologies for political change following the 1997 Asian financial crisis, which led to the birth of new pro-democracy

movements across the region, most notably in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines.

A personal research experience will drive this point home. In March 2015 I was in the Philippine capital, Manila, to attend the fourth RightsCon meeting as a participant-observer. According to its organisers, this series of digital rights conferences, usually held in Silicon Valley, seeks "to advance solutions to human rights challenges by concentrating on the possibilities within the tech sector". All in all, RightsCon 2015 was a successful event. As its organisers noted during the closing ceremony, the Manila conference provided a safe, gender-balanced space for civil society and technology actors from numerous countries to meet and network.

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Yet something about this event kept nagging at me as the sessions passed by, namely its inattention to social inequality. This global issue is glaringly obvious as soon as one steps out of the comforts of an international hotel to walk the streets of Manila (or London, for that matter). By way of an experiment I attempted to enter a beautiful gated community aptly named "Arcadia", located across the road from the conference venue. Disappointingly, I was refused access by the security guards for not having a contact name and address inside the vast compound. "Sorry sir", one of them apologised, "it's SOP, Standard Operating Procedure". Meanwhile, Arcadia's army of workers streamed out on foot, while the occasional luxury vehicle was allowed entrance through the gates.

Economic inequality has been on the rise worldwide for decades, which have witnessed the concomitant emergence of a global plutocracy and the consolidation of corporate "illegitimate power".[10] In the opening ceremony, "structural inequality" was identified as one of the conference's main concerns, yet little was said about it in the remainder of the conference.

Arguably, the most urgent issue to tackle in these and other digital rights events is precisely how to use our collective techno-political and research savvy to address the present global system's grotesque inequalities. There is a crucial debate to be had between freedom technologists who argue for multi-stakeholder approaches to the future of the internet[11] and those like Aral Balkan who advocate a post-plutocratic world order in which the internet is a global public good, not a corporate and state battlefield. A case in point is the problematic sponsorship of these events by giant Silicon Valley corporations. As Balkan tweeted in connection to RightsCon 2015:

> Having #rightscon sponsored by Facebook, Google, & Microsoft is like having #healthcon sponsored by McDonald's, Coke, and Lucky Strike.

But how can the social justice impasse be overcome beyond these small internet freedom circles? First, academics, public intellectuals, mainstream journalists and others have a crucial part to play in exploring the relationship between freedom in its various forms – including its technological dimensions – and social justice. They should do this through evidence-based public discussions across a range of media and physical settings, taking care not to assume that Silicon Valley's venture capitalism is the only technological business model available to us. Second, we must start thinking of what a post-venture capitalism age of socio-technical innovation might look like, and how it could contribute to democratic renewal in different cultural contexts. Third, it is amply clear by now that the so-called digital divide cannot be bridged through technological means alone, as it must be understood within broader systems of entrenched social and economic exclusion. Digital rights are not only human rights, as we often hear in net freedom circles: *digital rights are social rights*.

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Endnotes

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