

Wael Ghonim: the accidental revolutionary (Google #bigtentuk debate)

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2011-5-18

Wael Ghonim (Google exec and Egyptian Internet activist) made an interesting point about his role in Egypt's revolution at Google's [#bigtentuk conference](#). It was accidental.

The networked effect may have become a deliberate campaign but it started as an emotional personal act. As one Google exec told me, he's wonderful but Google doesn't go around planning to provoke uprisings around the world.

The paradox is that this is why his campaign was effective – especially online, but also when it fed into the real offline acts and demonstrations that removed the Mubarrak regime.

Yes, links online may be 'weak' but they have the strength of flexibility, interactivity, and amplification.

As Ghonim says there was a plan that emerged from the initial explosion of anger, fed in part by his Facebook page. It was to have a revolution on January 25th. It was pre-announced in a 'brilliant marketing campaign' that had its own hashtag. The fact that people were on Facebook and Twitter from Tahrir Square connected the real protest into the online support and beyond, says Ghonim.

'I don't claim to be a leader' said Ghonim. And he accepts that there is now a more difficult argument about what happens next and the pace of reform. There is now an online campaign attacking him, for example.

'It was not a Twitter revolution. Tunisia was the spark.' said Ghonim. 'Internet was the tool of mobilising and educating people with huge reach – you can target a million people with a message that can go viral. Internet was critical around the 25th but it got less important afterwards. Internet job was to reveal what was happening – as was [mainstream] media.'

How did the Internet blackout change things? [Ghonim was of course in jail at that point] Ghonim says that the act of hiding things brought people's attention.

Interestingly, Ghonim does not want to draw lessons beyond Egypt, which reminds us, I guess that a) he works for Google but b) that all politics is local. Even with global communications, people must 'change from within' says Ghonim.

So what's the role of corporates? 'Stay away from this game' says Ghonim, 'provide the tools but let the people decide what they want to do. Once companies take political stands things turn out ugly and manipulation happens. Those companies that take sides will be attacked for what they have done.'

'Western governments need to understand the wake-up call that people want to decide their own destiny. People get pissed off in Egypt if US tells them this is how democracy should be even if they mean well.' says Ghonim. 'If you want to help, start doing what you are calling for. More values, less self-interest. In the past we looked like dollar signs or oil barrels [to the west].'

'The real challenge is to drive the whole nation towards a wave of optimism. I want to see my country as one of the world's top ten countries in the world' said Ghonim.

[this was written as a live blog – so apologies for even more spelling mistakes and incoherence than usual]

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