The written word has long been a revolutionary agent. Manifestos, treatises, even novels, have started riots, changed the course of history, and toppled governments. When the rebels take to the streets, they head first to the newspapers, only later to the presidential palace. In the sixteenth century, reformers nailed their handwritten complaints to the church door. In my day dissidents cranked out their discontent on basement mimeograph machines. Today they use Twitter to destabilize the world, 140 characters at a time.

Or at least that’s what the mythology of technological innovation would have us believe as it generates terms like #twitterrevolution to describe the Arab Spring and other uprisings. That’s because we imbue the internet with the transformative power to banish ignorance, foster democracy, and bring about world peace.

We’ve said as much about earlier communication technologies too: the printing press was certain to promote universal understanding. Then radio would educate us. Writing itself has been viewed as the recipe for peace: according to the United Nations, world peace will be achieved once we spread literacy around the globe. But while we wait, it may be more realistic to look at literacy, at writing and its technologies, as vehicles for both free speech and for censorship, for oppression as well as liberation.

The internet, the latest in our communication technologies, creates opportunities for unfettered, widespread, even revolutionary expression. But like its predecessors, it offers the opposite as well: surveillance and censorship—both government and private—on a scale never before imagined. The computer is our window on the world. But what we do on our desktop gives that world a fairly detailed look at who we are, where we are,
and what we’re up to. Based on that information, people try to sell us things we may not need, or they try to stop us from doing what they don’t like.

One popular feature of the ’net, social networking, has particular revolutionary potential: it lets dissidents connect with one another and coordinate their efforts to overthrow the regime, as well as signal their discontent to the outside world. That’s how it seemed to work during the Arab Spring of 2011. But communication works two ways, and countries like Turkmenistan, Brunei and Bahrain are repurposing off-the-shelf software designed for catching crooks in order to conduct domestic surveillance of their online political dissidents instead.

And it’s not only autocratic régimes that monitor the Facebook accounts of the rebels. The U.S. government watches for terrorist threats online, and the United Kingdom, which already makes widespread use of CCTV monitoring, is authorizing surveillance of all British online traffic in the interests of national security.

An earlier writing technology, the typewriter, was billed as revolutionary as well, as we see in this 1875 ad for the Remington “type-writer” that ran in the Nation. The text being typed is from Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar: “There is a tide in the affairs of men which, taken at the flood leads on to fortune.” That’s a line spoken by Brutus, the political dissident who assassinated the tyrannical Caesar during that earlier, Roman, spring, a couple of thousand years ago, and it’s used in the ad to underscore the transformative power of the newly-invented writing machine.
But there’s a difference: the fortune being touted by Remington is financial, not political. Typewriters, we learn from the advertising copy, aren’t rabble rousers, they’re job creators: “No invention has opened to women so broad and easy an avenue to profitable and suitable employment as the Type-Writer,” and Remington’s pitch closes with a call, not for a revolution of the working classes, but for regional sales reps to sell the new machines, a job, we’re told, that’s certain to be “safe, sure, and profitable.”

Similarly, whatever role today’s revolutionary technology, the internet, may have in supporting political revolutions, it’s clear that with the ever-increasing corporate emphasis on protecting intellectual property in cyberspace, and targeting both the revolutionaries and their oppressors with context-sensitive ads, it’s possible that the ultimate impact of the #twitterrevolution, like that of the typewriter, may prove to be commercial, not political.

The printing press as an agent of change

A working Austrian replica of Gutenberg’s press—modeled on the wooden wine press, the hand-operated press was faster than copying by hand, but not fast enough for a large print run. The screw-based press remained the basic press technology until the 19th century.

The digital revolution is often called the biggest thing since the invention of the printing press. Elizabeth Eisenstein (1979) characterized the press, invented around 1450, as an
“agent of change,” and Johannes Gutenberg’s invention, according to many, was the biggest thing since the invention of writing some 5,000 years earlier.

But Gutenberg was no Steve Jobs: though his bibles now fetch small fortunes, Gutenberg made little from the trade he revolutionized and he died unknown. And though the computer has made great strides in the thirty years since *Time* magazine named it “Machine of the Year in 1983, it took writing thousands of years to really catch on: according to UNESCO, even now some 775 million people around the world—20% of its population—remain illiterate.

Koenig’s steam press, London, 1814, could print 1100 pages per hour; the *Times* of London was the first paper to use this rotary press.
And it took the printing press a few centuries to have a significant impact. Although presses turned out books faster and cheaper than copying by hand, book production remained labor intensive and the book audience remained small. Hand-operated presses at their height of their development, in the nineteenth century, could print about 480 pages per hour. The real print explosion had to wait until the rotary steam press, invented in the early 1800s: its output was almost three times as fast. That new technology enabled the rise of daily newspapers, not to mention an economy based on paper money instead of coins: for the first time thousands of copies could be printed rapidly, instead of hundreds. The Victorian-era newspaper revolution enabled by the steam press was hailed at the time as “transformative,” furthering “the march of reason, liberty and progress” (Curran 2012, 34). But even with this explosion of reading matter, literacy rates did not pass 80% in England until 1870 (Cressy, 1980, 170). And high literacy rates and large print runs don’t guarantee that newspapers are always sources of “reason, liberty and progress.”

On March 30, 2006, the New York Times ran page one stories on such major topics as the capture of Liberian warlord Charles Taylor, growing post-Katrina crime rates as residents returned to New Orleans, and senate approval of new limits on lobbying. In contrast, the Boston Herald featured a cover photo of Justice Antonin Scalia making what some thought to be a rude gesture at a church several days earlier. The photographer, who worked for a church newspaper, was fired after taking the shot, which was enough to prompt the Herald to lead with it.

And yet the printing press did for literacy what manuscripts had also done: it created new means of textual transmission; it both reinforced and threatened established ways of meaning; and it stimulated disruptions in the social, political, educational, and economic realms. The expansion of print also brought censorship to the fore: increasing the amount of information available to readers was useful, empowering, and liberating, but because text could also be dangerous, subversive, and corrupting, secular and religious authorities stepped in to control access to the printed word. Again, today, the “authorities” face the same issues of regulating online texts: how to keep children safe from pornography or predators; how to keep students from downloading assignments; how to keep employees focused on spreadsheets instead of shopping sites; how to keep the faithful safe from heresy; how to insulate the citizen from politically dangerous ideas.
Earlier writing revolutions spread access to literacy slowly and selectivity: even when public policy encouraged reading, the masses were not expected to write, unless that writing involved copying text, not creating it. But the personal computer makes everyone a writer, instantly. All you need is a laptop, a wifi card, and a place to sit at Starbucks. Sounds like a good thing, democratizing access to publication. But many answer the question, “Should everybody write?” with a resounding “No,” and that doesn’t make live-tweeting the revolution any easier.

the #twitterrevolution and the march of reason, liberty, and progress

With the whole world going digital, it’s easy to get carried away and call the success of the Arab Spring the #twitterrevolution, complete with hashtag. After all, Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube seemed to foment the unrest in North Africa and the Middle East which started in December, 2010, and eventually saw leaders ousted in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Yemen, together with unrest in Bahrain, and in Syria, where the fall of the regime is expected any day now.

Manuel Castells (2012: 2), the well-respected scholar of today’s interconnectivity, has argued that the green revolution “began on the Internet social networks, as these are spaces of autonomy largely beyond the control of governments and corporations.” And former U. S. National Security Advisor Mark Pfeifle said, “Without Twitter the people of Iran would not have felt empowered and confident to stand up for freedom and democracy” (quoted by Gladwell, 2010).

But that seems much too optimistic. As Castells himself reminds us, historically, governments and corporations “monopolized the channels of communication as the foundation of their power.” Unfortunately, that’s still going on: business and government continue to clamp down on internet communications, social networking in particular.

Malcolm Gladwell is particularly skeptical about Twitter’s revolutionary power. For one thing, he tells us, most of the tweets about the Iran election came from outside the country and were in English, not Farsi. In addition, Gladwell observes, social media require little in the way of commitment: it’s easier to “like” the revolution online than to actually take to the streets. And even if social media do connect us, Ethan Zuckerman
Baron, #twitterrevolution, 7

(2012) warns, that won’t “automatically lead to increased understanding.” Zuckerman points to the words of Guglielmo Marconi, inventor of the first kind of wireless, who predicted in 1912 that radio “will make war impossible, because it will make war ridiculous”—and two years later World War I broke out.

Technologies from the printing press to the internet, while they’re never strictly neutral, can be counter-revolutionary as well as revolutionary. The anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1961, 290-92) has even argued that writing itself functions as an agent of bureaucracy and empire, arranging a society into a hierarchy of castes and classes. For Lévi-Strauss, himself a writer, writing is more a tool of enslavement than enlightenment. That’s an extreme position, but it’s clear that although writing can inspire reform and lead to democracy, it can also advance government agendas, suppress controversy, quash revolution, and punish unbelievers.

Looking back at the events of the Green Revolution, it’s clear that although Twitter and Facebook may have played a role, digital technology didn’t cause the unrest. And it’s also clear that governments used the same digital tools to push back against insurgents, tracking locations, capturing images, taking names.

That doesn’t mean technology’s not a game changer. Egypt saw the ouster of long-time strongman Hosni Mubarak, and a local Google employee, imprisoned for rallying the opposition on Facebook, even became for a time a hero of the Tahrir Square insurgency. The Twitter Revolution was similarly credited with ousting Tunisia’s long-time President Zine al-Abedine Ben Ali. Social media supported Iran’s green protests, and they have been instrumental in other outbreaks of resistance in a variety of totalitarian states elsewhere as well.

As futurologists like Castells readily embrace social media as a force for revolution and liberation, nostalgic red-diaper babies look back and wonder, What if Che Guevara had a Blackberry in Bolivia? What if Rosa Luxemburg had 20,000 Facebook friends? What if the Tank Man of Tiananmen Square had a Twitter account?

What if Tiananmen Square’s “Tank Man” had a Twitter account? What if Che Guevara had a Blackberry in Bolivia? What if Rosa Luxemburg had 20,000 Facebook friends?
How many clicks does it take to topple a régime?

But more objective observers might well ask, “How many clicks does it take to topple a régime?” The statistics indicate that clicks alone won’t do it. Skeptics point out that only 11.4% of Egyptians use Facebook, and that the crowds in Cairo’s Tahrir Square continued to grow during the five days that the Mubarak government shut down the internet. Other figures also suggest that it took more than a wireless connection to effect political change. Tunisia ousted its leader though only nineteen percent of Tunisians have online access, compared to more than 46% in Iran, where the #twitterrevolution fizzled. Because even in Iran, whose futile protests may have been tweeted “round the world, there were few tweeters actually in-country, not enough to counter government forces and the religious oligarchs who run things.

And of the 450 million Twitter users worldwide, only 0.027% of them live in Egypt, Yemen, and Tunisia (Curran et al, 2012). The Middle East, the current hotbed of protest, has an internet penetration of 35.6%, low compared to 61.3% in Europe and 78.6% in North America, where revolution seems unlikely. And finally, it’s far from clear that the Arab Spring will lead to democratic reform.

Although Americans can’t seem to survive without the constant stimulus of digital multitasking, much of the rest of the world barely notices when the cable is down, being preoccupied instead with raising literacy rates—the internet is useless if you can’t read—as well as fighting famine and disease, and finding clean water, not to mention a source of electricity that works for more than an hour every day or two.

In contrast, the “radical” internet belongs to the well-educated, economically comfortable middle classes with the resources, and the leisure, to click a link or complain when things don’t go their way. And even then, it takes more than a “like” or a retweet to get the bourgeoisie running in the streets.
We used to think that the internet was uncontrollable, making it the ideal tool for everything from creativity and social action to fraud, deception, and crime. But what brings us together can also be a means of isolating us: as Zuckerman (2012) demonstrates, people connect in cyberspace with others who are like-minded, and they’re more likely to read posts they agree with than seek out ideas that challenge their beliefs.

In addition, although technologies like social media that link us can be used to break the chains of tyranny, they can also be tools for controlling us. New means of communication bring with them an excitement as they expand literacy and open up new knowledge, but in certain quarters they also spark fear and distrust.

For every revolutionary manifesto there’s a volley of government propaganda. For every eye-opening book there’s an index librorum prohibitorum, an official do-not-read list, or worse yet, a bonfire. For every phone tree organizing a protest rally, there’s a warrantless wiretap waiting to throw the rally-goers in jail.

And for every revolutionary internet site there’s a barrier, like the Great Firewall of China, blocking sites and tracking users considered dangerous by the authorities. In the case of Egypt, there was a simple switch that shut it all down. In Cuba, a country well-known for blocking digital access, only 23% of the island’s 11.2 million residents have permission to use the government-controlled intranet, not from home but at licensed computer clubs, and the Castro régime still prohibits mobile internet, though only 22% of Cubans have any sort of telephone at all. (Tourists are apparently exempt from mobile phone controls in Cuba, but according to TripAdvisor they will have trouble finding a mobile data connection and will pay heavily for their mobile use).

The index of prohibited books begun under Pope Paul IV in 1559 was discontinued in 1966 under Pope Paul VI.
Tweet level orange

But it’s not only dictatorships that block, restrict, or monitor social media traffic. A division of the U. S. Department of Homeland Security scans Twitter and other internet sites, looking for words from a watch list of about 500 terms popular with terrorists (see pages 20-23 of this link).

Tweeting one of these words could jump your threat level up from green to red in 140 characters or less. But you can be busted for using other words as well. That’s what happened to two British tourists, Leigh Bryan and Emily Bunting, who were denied entry to the United States for inappropriate tweeting. Bryan and Bunting were interrogated by Customs and Border Protection agents for five hours at the Los Angeles Airport, handcuffed, locked up overnight with scary tattooed drug dealers, and sent back to England in the morning. All this because, before their visit, Bryan tweeted to a friend using words that attracted the attention of Federal terror watchers.

Above: Bryan deleted his Twitter account, but that proved no obstacle to the crack investigative journalists at The Sun, who quickly found the tweets. Below, an excerpt from the DHS “denial of entry” form, as printed in the Daily Mail, showing Bryan’s stipulation that he had posted the offending tweets.
The offending tweets read, “3 weeks today, we’re totally in LA p***** people off on Hollywood Blvd and diggin’ Marilyn Monroe up!” and “free this week for a quick gossip/prep before I go and destroy America?” Bryan explained to his interrogators that he was only joking, that *destroy* is British slang for partying and getting drunk, and digging up Marilyn Monroe is a line from the American TV show, *Family Guy*. The humorless border agents actually searched the suspects’ luggage looking for the shovels the suspects planned to use to exhume Monroe.

According to the “denial of entry” form,

Mr. BRYAN confirmed … that he was coming to the United States to dig up the grave of Marilyn Monroe. Also on his tweeter account Mr. BRYAN posted that he was coming to destroy America.

Bryan and Bunting were detained, interrogated, and stamped “return to sender” because the American federal government diligently scans social media in an effort to stop terrorist activity before it starts. *Destroy* isn’t on the watch list of the MMC—the Media Monitoring Capability group tasked with alerting their superiors to IOI’s (Items of Interest) that they find when reading social media. The list has nothing about Marilyn Monroe, either. But some Twitter-reading algorithm, or possibly a snitch, tipped off the feds to Bryan’s vacation plans, and agents were able to intercept the couple at LAX—agents suspected his companion would act as the lookout for the Marilyn Monroe exhumation—before they could do any serious damage. Needless to say, Bryan didn’t get to do any serious partying either.

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<tr>
<th>Domestic Security</th>
<th>Emergency management</th>
<th>Gangs</th>
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<tr>
<td>Assassination</td>
<td>Emergency response</td>
<td>National security</td>
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<td>Attack</td>
<td>First responder</td>
<td>State of emergency</td>
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<td>Domestic security</td>
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<td>Drill</td>
<td>Maritime domain awareness</td>
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<td>Exercise</td>
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<td>Cops</td>
<td>National preparedness</td>
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<td>Authorities</td>
<td>Militia</td>
<td>Screening</td>
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<td>Disaster assistance</td>
<td>Shooting</td>
<td>Lockdown</td>
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<tr>
<td>Disaster management</td>
<td>Shots fired</td>
<td>Bomb (squad or threat)</td>
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<td>DNDO (Domestic Nuclear Detection Office)</td>
<td>Evacuation</td>
<td>Crash</td>
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<td>National preparedness</td>
<td>Deaths</td>
<td>Looting</td>
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<td>Mitigation</td>
<td>Hostage</td>
<td>Riot</td>
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<td>Prevention</td>
<td>Explosion (explosive)</td>
<td>Emergency Landing</td>
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<td>Response</td>
<td>Police</td>
<td>Pipe bomb</td>
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<td>Recovery</td>
<td>Disaster medical assistance</td>
<td>Incident</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dirty bomb</td>
<td>team (DMAT)</td>
<td>Facility</td>
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<td>Domestic nuclear detection</td>
<td>Organized crime</td>
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The DHS watchlist has about 500 words on it, including these under the heading “Domestic Security.”

The watch list contains words clearly associated with terrorism, like *white powder, Ricin, Al Qaeda, Hamas,* and *jihad*. However, much of the list consists of words likely to be harmless: *interstate, ice, dock, smart, subway, electric, vaccine, wave,* and *cloud.* *Cuba, China,* and *Iran* are on the list, but so is *San Diego.* There are cyber words on the watch list: *hacker, worm,* and *conficker,* for example. But Facebook founder Mark
Zuckerberg might be surprised to learn that the phrase social media itself is on the social media watch list. Using it in a post could definitely trigger an Item of Interest.

It goes without saying that the Department of Homeland Security must do its best to keep America safe, and DHS invades no one’s privacy when it scans the web, because anyone posting to a public site has no reasonable expectation of privacy. No one doubts that online posters who make demonstrable threats, stalk or otherwise harass victims online, or conspire on the internet to commit crimes, should be stopped and punished.

But now ordinary web users, who aren’t terrorists or cybercriminals, must not only worry how many words they can fit into Twitter’s 140-character straightjacket, they must also consider whether their words will bring a knock on the door in the middle of the night.

Here’s an innocuous enough tweet:

Agent: film screening a disaster. New organization, closure would aid plot. Send edits to cloud, target social media to help explain delays.

It contains 140 characters forming 22 words, 59% of them on the DHS terror-word watch list. I’ve marked them in red to indicate their threat level. Nevertheless, even if someone tweeted this, there’s not much chance that a computer would flag them at the border. That’s because, unless we’re thinking this is some super-secret spy code, a human reader would probably find no contexts in which that watch-list-heavy tweet would raise an alarm.

The real problem with terror word lists comes not from jokes that fizzle, but from the fact that although English is still the most commonly-used language on the internet, it may not be the official language of international terrorism.

Leigh Bryan wasn’t in an airport or anywhere near L.A. when he tweeted his vacation plans in terms that alarmed American border guards. There was plenty of time for security analysts to figure out whether he posed a credible threat to the Hollywood hills. Plus the absence of shovels in the travelers’ luggage might have furnished a clue. But as Bryan found out, in the digital age, getting there isn’t half the fun. Might as well stay home and get on Facebook—he can’t get back on Twitter: that account is closed.

The cure for going viral

With cell phones everywhere, everyone can be a videographer as well as a writer. It’s a snap to upload videos of a stand-up comic spewing racial epithets; a campus cop tasering a student; another one pepper-spraying peaceful protestors—all of these have gone viral on YouTube in the last few years. The global reach of internet video means virtually instant transmission of news, some of which can provoke a violent reaction, as we saw in the Fall of 2012 when a film mocking Islam sparked anti-American demonstrations in Libya that led to the death of Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens and three other consular officials.

Although the embassy killings, which occurred on September 11, may have been the work of organized terrorists, not spontaneous protestors objecting to the video, the video caused global outrages—even Salman Rushdie, whose novel The Satanic Verses led to a fatwa that forced him into hiding for twenty years, showed no sympathy for the
maker of the anti-Islam video during a Today show interview, because Rushdie felt the movie was a malicious act, not an artistic one.

To avoid further violence, YouTube voluntarily blocked the video in Libya and Egypt. But the Electronic Frontier Foundation warned that YouTube’s paternalistic act of self-censorship would chill free speech on the internet:

> Given the freedoms that Egyptians and Libyans risked their lives for during the uprisings of 2011, it is a shame that a Western company would serve as arbiter of what they are and are not capable of viewing online.

The internet is not the only communications medium that can spark violence. The Satanic Verses led to riots, as did the publication of Islam-mocking cartoons in a Danish newspaper, and the Dutch cinematographer Theo van Gogh was assassinated for making a film critical of the treatment of Muslim women. But on the day I wrote this paragraph, nineteen people were killed in riots in Pakistan over the anti-Islam video, even though the Pakistani government blocked mobile phone service in an effort to prevent rioting. The video incident raised the question of what role an internet company like YouTube should play in the transmission, or suppression, of inflammatory or otherwise objectionable material. Writing in the New Republic, Tim Wu proposed that YouTube appoint a board of volunteer censors on the model of Wikipedia, to vet potentially objectionable material, which sounds remarkably like calling for a digital version of the index of banned books.

It’s not clear that censorship would prevent any violence: most of the rioters won’t have seen the video either in its original English release, which went unnoticed on YouTube for a couple of months before rioting began, or the version dubbed in Arabic, which came out a week before the protests, just as they didn’t read The Satanic Verses or see the Danish newspaper cartoons or the film about Muslim women. As such, the technology used to transmit offensive material becomes incidental, not central, to the violence.

That’s not to say that the internet has no impact on protest or revolution. It’s no surprise that the uprising that led to régime change in Egypt took advantage of cutting-edge communications, and it is possible that without Facebook and Twitter, Hosni Mubarak might still be holed up in the Presidential Palace, planning free and fair elections. But it’s also likely that the Egyptian protestors, steeped in a civilization that brought us hieroglyphics, the riddle of the Sphinx, and the mummy’s curse, might have had a backup plan—after all, when the libraries are burning, the phone lines are cut, the newspaper is shuttered, tanks surround the television station, and the internet goes down, there’s always sneakernet to get the revolutionary message out.

**The paradox of openness**

The Egyptian revolution was up on Wikipedia faster than you could say Wolf Blitzer. But government surveillance and control of communication channels are only part of the problem facing internet users.

There’s tight commercial control of the internet as well. Companies like Google and Microsoft argue strongly for a free and open internet—one of Google’s basic business principles, its “ten things we know to be true,” is “the need for information
crosses all borders.” But paradoxically, this freedom of information is managed by means of top-secret formulas, from securely locked-down corporate headquarters and server facilities designed to survive a nuclear attack, not to mention the revolution of the proletariat. Add to this the growth of digital-rights-managed music, video, and now books, and the ever-tighter corporate control of hardware and software—those of you lamenting the loss of Google Maps on your iPhones know exactly what I mean—and we find that the information superhighway is fast becoming a limited-access toll road.

Oddly, although many of us are quick to complain about government surveillance of our internet or mobile phone use, because that’s an invasion of our privacy, we don’t seem to mind corporate intrusions as much. When Google records our key strokes and sells that data to advertisers, or warns us that we may be violating copyright, we’re less likely to complain, because that’s just capitalism working the way it’s supposed to work.

So to all you revolutionaries in the audience, the next time you have the urge to take your protest to the streets, stay home and send out an Evite instead. Then check Facebook and Twitter to see who’s coming.

Perhaps no modern revolution can occur without the communication and connectivity of the ‘net, but a concomitant of the corporatization of the #twitterrevolution is the limitation of liability that is at the heart of Twitter’s end user agreement:

[Twitter] make[s] no warranty and disclaim[s] all responsibility and liability for: the completeness, accuracy, availability, timeliness, security or reliability of the Services or any Content; [or] any … losses, resulting from (i) your access to or use of or inability to access or use the services; (ii) any conduct or content of any third party…including without limitation, any defamatory, offensive, or illegal conduct of other users or third parties; (iii) any content obtained from the services; or (iv) unauthorized access, use or alteration, of your transmissions or content.

Welcome to the digital revolution: click here to accept our terms of service.
Our corporate sponsors want to welcome you to the digital revolution. Click agree to accept their Terms of Service. But after we “agree,” we must accept the eventuality that, even if the government watchdogs don’t manage to intercept our network traffic, and Twitter doesn’t turn our account information over to the authorities, as they did recently with the Occupy Wall Street tweets, we may still have to put the revolution on pause because the server has gone down of its own accord when we needed it most. Oh, and Twitter has no phone number for customer service, so when that happens, good luck calling tech support.
Works cited


