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Editorial

As we continue to reflect upon the chain of political upheavals of 2011, it may be interesting to consider a particular shift in the status of information technology, now that it has been deployed as such a powerful force in facilitating the rise of a new popular voice.

But first, how did this happen? How did a form of communication – developed in the late 1950s with a well-funded US Defense Department initiative in response to the Sputnik threat, then blossoming in the hands of engineer-entrepreneurs in the Silicon Valley of the 1970s into the center of accelerated hyper-capitalism in the 1990s – evolve to become a strange hybrid of a free press, judiciary, and public market?

After all, it was not long ago that information technology seemed to stabilize as a mere outgrowth of capitalism with side benefits for those who could afford the hardware necessary to access it. Its major scruples concerned copyright violators and the contradictions of using a system of distribution in which everything could be duplicated at zero cost. Perhaps the Motion Picture Association of America even looked past its fear of piracy to a further endpoint where people would simply begin to produce their own films themselves. But anyhow, we no longer care what the MPAA thinks, because the scale has shifted significantly – it seems that the internet not only moves songs, movies, documents, and transactions, but a form of consensus and organization that can mobilize civic life itself.

We can say, as if at the end of a Hollywood film, that it was you all along, The Internet, watching over us for the last half-century or so, accelerating global financial trade, presiding over economic deregulation, abstracting borders, shutting down factories and opening cafés and restaurants, making everyone a freelancer in some way – whether a roadside fruit vendor or an engineer. And its early stages accompanied a wave of deregulation that extended from Bretton Woods to Sadat's *Infitah*, to Reagan and Thatcher, and onward.

It is often said that the information age was heavily pushed in the 1970s as a means of revitalizing a stagnant economy. Information systems would create an entirely new trade sector that would work in tandem with a lagging industrial base to smooth communication between disparate locations, but also produce new commodity forms made up entirely of information. Factories could now be run by remote control, new factories could be built to produce these remote controls, and programmers would develop and refine the language transmitted by them.

But what now seems clear, as

commentators such as Manuel Castells and Franco Berardi have suggested, is that the information economy is not simply the next logical step following an industrial economy, comparable to the shift from agriculture to industry. The internet is as unpredictable as popular opinion, and powerful enough to exceed its own economic imperatives. Who could have expected that, beyond the tiresome celebration of social networks as tools for revolutionaries, 2011 would also witness access to information joining water, electricity, roads, and so forth as a basic necessity of civic life, even a human entitlement. Strange times indeed!