

Technologies and freedom

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I write this sitting in a Tehran hotel room immersed in wall-to-wall rebellion on 18 channels of TV; sometimes just images, sometimes a Persian voice, occasionally English. Ghannouchi had just resigned as interim Prime Minister of Tunisia. Al Jazeera Arabic is showing the beginnings of another uprising, in Oman. The theocratic Sh'ia state has no sympathy with Sunni Emirs, especially those on the other side of the Gulf. But it was in 2009, not long ago, that this historic city was a battleground between the government's Basij militia and protesters very much like those on the screen.

Internet is available, at this regional meeting on telecom. But I find that certain blogs that I read regularly are blocked, though not my own, which does not sit on a service such as Blogger. I am told that Facebook too is blocked. But the raw rebellion against authority catalysed by these very technologies dominates all channels permitted by Ahmedjinad? Was it because the insertion of pictures of Obama and Mubarak among the torrent of video violence and Persian voiceover spin are possible on TV but not on new media?

Why can one watch BBC TV in Tehran but not visit the BBC website? Press TV, an Iranian government-sponsored English news channel, runs SMS messages on a ticker on the screen and invites viewers to contribute photos and videos to its website. But are these actions sanctioned for Iranian citizens at all times?

Iranian channels are reporting positively about the UN Security Council accusing Qaddafi of violating human rights, as though they were not violated here in the aftermath of the last election. Sri Lankans denounce the attacks on civilians by Qaddafi's forces, but block out the unresolved questions of how gently the Sri Lankan Army treated the civilians in Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu. Cameras are ubiquitous in Tripoli and Manama; images keep coming out, despite confiscations of cameras, SIMs, and whatever else. Is that the difference?

The United States was the leading proponent of openness. Its constitutional structure of checks and balances is built on information being available on what governments do. After all, it was a US Supreme Court Justice who said "sunlight is the best disinfectant" in relation to government procedures. Yet, it is the US that has been the government most embarrassed by WikiLeaks and which made the most belligerent responses.

It seems that all are facing hard choices. The rules are changing but no one knows quite what they are.

Critical mass

It was in 1983 that Ithiel de Sola Pool wrote 'Technologies of freedom'. He acclaimed direct broadcast satellites challenging the monopoly of the nation state on what its citizens could see and hear. He could not have dreamt that it would be Qatar-based Al Jazeera and not the Voice of America that would break the monopoly. He would not have been surprised Qaddafi's men would do the



The Iranian protest movement is using social media in innovative ways to organise and get their message across. In this June 9 photo, a supporter of Mir Hossein Mousavi films an election rally. jameswagner.com

jamming. Despite the phenomenon having been analysed more than 25 years ago, the tipping point has been reached only now.

So it seems the key is not technology per se, but how much they have diffused; whether they have reached the critical mass. Video cameras have existed for years, but they reached a degree of ubiquity high enough in 1991 to capture the images of the Los Angeles Police beating up of yet another big black man. Rodney King thus entered history. There weren't enough of them in the regions immiserated by the LTTE in Sri Lanka to make a difference. But in prosperous Bahrain, they tied the hands of the Emir.

General Jaruselzki shut down the national telecommunication system in Poland in 1981, old-style fixed phones only. No mobiles, no internet back then. King Gyanendra of Nepal shut down all telecom networks in 2005. They both lost power in the end, but bought some time.

Hosni Mubarak shut down the internet and mobile networks. Or tried. He could not shut them down completely. In the process, he seriously damaged the nascent business process outsourcing industry of Egypt, and may have put a crimp in the growth of BPO in the entire developing world. He was not able to buy more than a few days. His rule is now limited to a rather large

residence in Sharm-el-Shiekh.

To his credit, he made no moves on the concentration of undersea cables transiting Egypt because of the Suez Canal. This would have been the equivalent of Saddam setting fire to Kuwait's oil wells. But the Egyptian Army was a brake on the cornered tyrant. What of territories where such constraints do not exist? If Qaddafi was sitting on most of the fiber cables connecting Asia and Europe would he not be tempted to take an axe to them?

Qaddafi is shutting down everything: internet, Al Jazeera, even making attempts on the UAE-based satellite phone service, Thuraya. How much time will he buy? Will the price be paid more in blood of innocents than in opportunity costs of communication foregone.

Gyanendra's Law

From the above, I proposed a new law, named after once-King Gyanendra. Gyanendra's Law states that a regime that shuts down communication systems will not last.

But like most "social" laws, Gyanendra's Law has exceptions. Shutting down parts of networks does not count. The Rajapaksa government of Sri Lanka shut down networks in conflict areas and lives to tell the tale. But almost by definition, there weren't that many phones or internet connec-

tions in those parts then. When a country has almost no phones and internet connections, the government can get away with shut downs (the Than Shwe Exception).

It does not apply to Burma/Myanmar, North Korea, Burundi -- critical mass again.

Let us be clear. Governments are not toppled by technology. Democracy is not delivered over the internet. People make these changes. Food prices, demographic structures, perception of corruption and marginalisation constitute the necessary conditions. Incidents of torture, unjust imprisonment and self-immolation serve as triggers. But communication technologies catalyze, support, and reinforce the courageous actions of citizens who decide they have had enough. The effects of the communication technologies are powerful and difficult to counter after they have reached the critical mass.

Where exactly is the tipping point that we are trying to figure out from the ongoing natural experiments? Is Gyanendra's Law real? What are the conditions for the Than Shwe Exception? What are the boundaries of openness of information? When does spin cease to be effective? When does Facebook trump television?

The writer is the founding chair and CEO of LIRNEasia.

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Window-shopping in the future at giant tech fair

AFP, Hanover, Germany

Always window-shopping but never stopping to buy? In the future you can do both with new technology allowing you to point through the window at items and buy them with a swish of your hand.

The technology, already making a splash at the CeBIT, the world's biggest high-tech fair, uses a series of infrared cameras that register the movements of your hand and instantly transmit them to a large screen in the shop window.

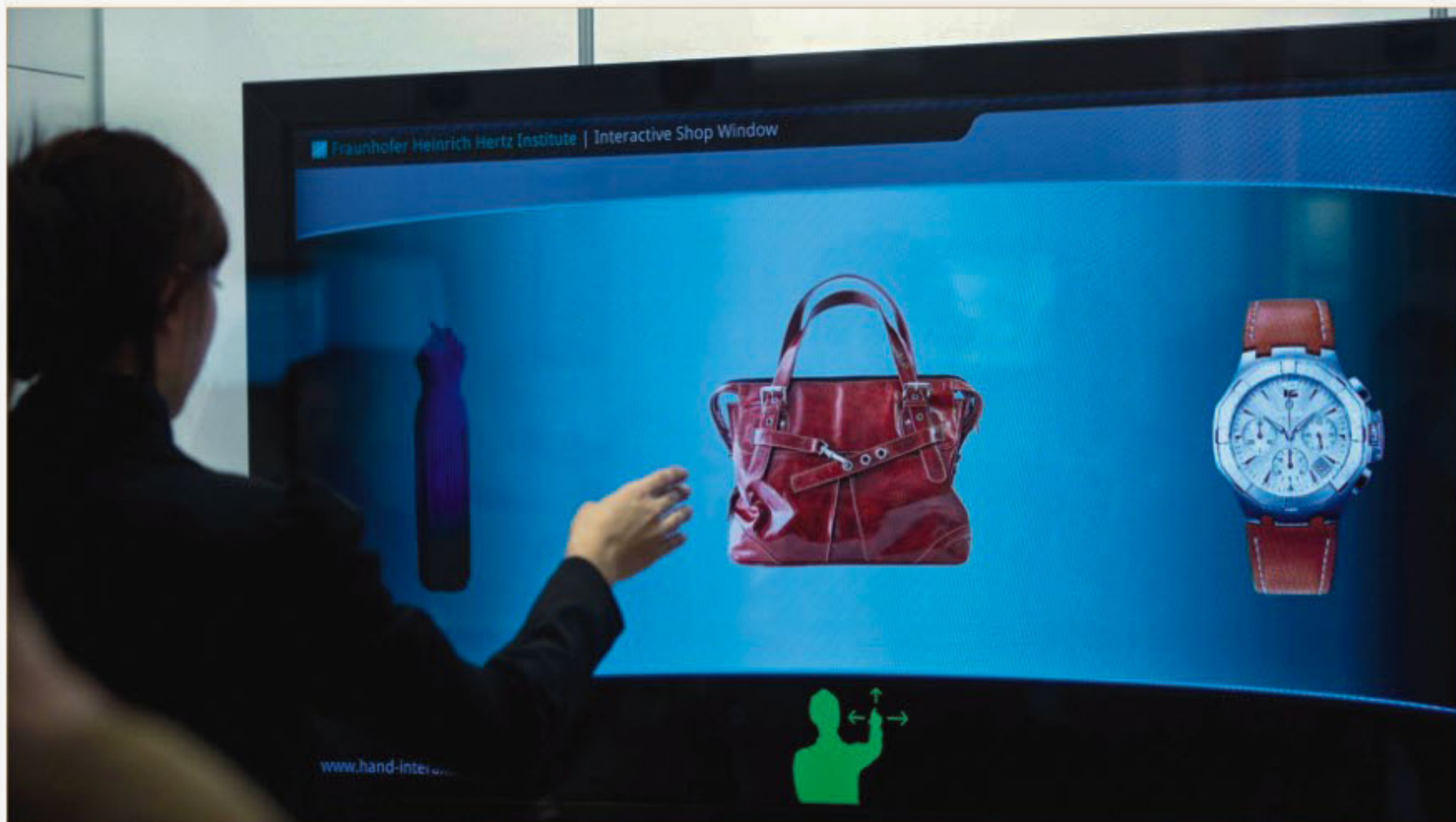
The shopper stands about a metre (yard) away from the glass and simply points to the desired dress, hat, bag or shoes.

Instantly a new menu appears showing the item in 3D, along with crucial retail information such as the sizes available, colours -- and of course, price.

With another brief wave of the hand, the user can rotate the item in 3D, change the colour and scroll through similar products.

If the punter decides to take the plunge, he or she points at the "checkout" icon and pays by placing a smartphone against the glass.

"It's secure, easy and of course 24/7," said Paul Chojeci, project manager at Germany's Fraun-



A woman demonstrates the "Interactive shop window" on a screen presented by the Fraunhofer Institute at the CeBIT IT fair on its opening day on March 1, 2011 in Hanover, central Germany.

hofer Institute, which developed the technology.

One of the main advantages over touch screen technology is that the user does not need to input personal data that could be visible to passers-by, he said, predicting it would soon become everyday practice.

"It's the same as with touch screens," he said. "At first, everyone thought it was strange, now

everyone does it."

Another advantage of this system over touch screen technology is that it is much more hygienic as there is no contact with the glass.

Chojeci said you could be buying things with your finger sooner than you might think. "I would say in two years, this technology will be fairly widespread. A few big stores have already

expressed an interest.

The first prototypes will likely be coming to a store near you this year, he added.

"It's really a revolution for window-shopping."

More than 4,200 exhibitors are showcasing their latest technologies at the CeBIT in Hanover, Germany, which runs until March 5 and hopes to attract some 350,000 visitors.

US women beat men at college, not in paycheques

AFP, Washington

American women have trumped the country's men in educational prowess but still lag behind in pay, the White House said Tuesday in the first federal report into women in society in nearly 50 years.

The report focuses on five key areas: people, families and income, education and employment, health and crime and violence, and coincides with Women's History Month.

The White House said that the statistical study not only charted how far women have come in terms of equality, but would serve as a guide for framing future policy.

"Today's report not only serves as a look back on American women's lives, but serves as a guidepost to help us move forward," said Valerie Jarrett, who chairs the White House Council on Women and Girls.

The survey finds that women have not only matched men in college attendance, and attainment but have in some cases passed them.

According to the study, women, aged 25-34 are now more likely than men of the same age group to have a college degree, in a reversal of the position 40 years ago.

Women earned about 57 percent of all college degrees in 2007-2008,

and the percentage of women aged 25-34 with at least a college degree has more than tripled since 1968.

But the leaps forward in education have not yet translated to work place equality, and women are still generally pulling in smaller paycheques than their male counterparts.

In 2009, women earned only about 75 percent of what their male counterparts brought home.

Because of their smaller salaries and the fact that unmarried and divorced women are more likely to have responsibility for raising and supporting children, women are more likely to be poor than men.

The report also found that women live longer than men, but are more prone to health problems such as impaired mobility, arthritis, asthma, depression and obesity -- but are less likely to get heart disease or diabetes.

Women are less likely than in the past to be the target of violent crimes, including homicide. But women are victims of certain crimes, such as intimate partner violence and stalking, at higher rates than men.

The report, "Women in America: Indicators of Social and Economic Well-Being" is the first federal report in the area since 1963 during president John F. Kennedy's administration.