

# Google Big Tent

In conjunction with [Privacy International](#) and [Index on Censorship](#), Google invited a range of media scholars, business people, journalists, NGOs, politicians, and digital enthusiasts, to discuss issues relating to freedom of expression in online spaces and the role of new media in global activism at its inaugural Big Tent UK (an event literally held under a big tent in Watford on 18th May). We were invited to attend the event due to our department's involvement in the Google Forum, an academic networking event that was hosted twice by Google in 2010 with plans for further meetings in 2011.

## Privacy and innovation

'Privacy and Innovation' was the first topic of the day and it touched upon issues ranging from the transparency of user data to the use of social media to breached super-injunctions. Google's Director of Privacy Product and Engineering, Alma Whitten, stressed the importance of a framework that grants the users control over their own data, such as Google Dashboard, but conceded that it would be impossible to delete every trace left by an individual user in online spaces. While, Peter Bazalgette (MirriAd) made the point that online privacy must not stifle innovation, Simon Davies (Privacy International) suggested that by securing privacy for online users was a prerequisite for their innovative use of new media.

Privacy was also a prominent theme in the keynote speech made by Eric Schmidt, Google's former CEO. Against strict privacy regulations, he claimed that individual user data could be used to enhance their experiences online by delivering more personalised content right to the specific users. However, it was acknowledged that this could lead to problems of spam. Schmidt also suggested that Google wouldn't develop a database to recognise individual users as it might compromise their privacy, although he did think that such a system was now possible given recent technological developments. He hoped that governments that were trying to pass 'foolish' bills designed to protect privacy would stop doing so (he indirectly referred to France's 2010 law on unencrypted passwords). The recently reported [news](#) that Facebook, Twitter and Google were set to oppose law that would protect users's privacy led to a heated discussion between audience members and Schmidt.

## Social media and protest

An interview with Google Marketing Director for the Middle East [Wael Ghonim](#) (currently on a sabbatical leave) followed the keynote address. Ghonim spent 11 days in jail after his [Facebook page](#) "We Are All Khaled Said" attracted people to occupy Tahrir Square in Cairo, Egypt. He took the opportunity to clarify his own statements in the media about the role of technology in the 'Egyptian revolution', that the Internet was only one of the tools used to achieve the goal, and he stressed that he didn't want to undermine the people's struggle by giving all the credit to technology. Google, Facebook, or Twitter were said to have nothing to do with spreading democracy in the Middle East. Rather, he emphasised how social media was a very effective tool for organising the protests, and gave it credit for exactly that, nothing more. He also said that it was the first revolution that was pre-announced, referring to the fact that the protest on the 25<sup>th</sup> of January was published on

Facebook weeks in advance. Eric Schmidt praised Ghonim as a 'hero' for his exploits in Egypt and his integration of technology and activism.

### **Internet policy**

The final keynote speaker was Jeremy Hunt MP, Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport. He admitted that legislation could no longer keep up with the rapid development of technology. However, after reflecting on the role of technology during the Arab Spring, Mr Hunt promised progressive policies concerning the use of Internet in the United Kingdom.

The Secretary of State repeatedly asserted that 'speed' and 'mobile' are two important keywords for future Internet developments in the country. Hunt, therefore, outlined the most significant problem facing Internet users in the UK: the lack of speed. The UK was currently the 26th in terms of fast broadband connection in the world according to his statistics, and he believed that super-fast connection was the answer. Though he admitted the future lies in Mobile Internet, he argued that high capacity broadband, with the possibility for future expansion, was needed in every household to ensure it would be enough to host the [Internet of Things](#) - just as the sewage system in London was 'over dimensioned' when it was built.

Hunt also made brief comments on illegal online content such as child pornography and illegal material (ranging from Wikileaks to copyright infringement), and promised to do his best to remove them permanently from the Internet (this discussion was later linked to the implementation of the [Digital Economy Act](#)). On the recent media frenzy over the use of Twitter to break super-injunctions, Hunt commented, "technology has made a bit of an ass of the law." Interpretation of the Human Rights law, he said, should also be revisited so that it's not prone to abuse.

### **Free speech online**

The next two panel discussions on were free speech and the role of technology in conflicts. David Drummond, Google's senior vice president and chief legal officer, stated that we should be very wary of limiting free speech online as enforcing bad regulatory behaviour in the West would set a dangerous precedent for other regimes. Obviously in tune with Evgeny Morozov's (2011) recent work on authoritarian regimes and the Internet (whose essay was included in the *Journal Index on Censorship* handed out to the audience before the event), Drummond feared the lessons that authoritarian regimes have learned from the recent events in the North Africa and Middle East is that they have to crack down even more on free speech online.

Jared Cohen, who previously served as a close advisor to the US Secretary of State and now works for Google, emphasized the rapid technological development and its impact all over the world, and he explained how Osama Bin Laden was given away by living in a house in Pakistan without Internet, illustrating the world wide penetration of Internet. Other speakers including Jon Gossier (Ushahidi) and Lars Bromsley (UNITAR) spoke about the respective experiences in the Middle East and North Africa, highlighting the use of technology to prevent conflict.

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Peter Barron closed the event briefly on stage. It was definitely worth while travelling all the way to Watford, London for attending the big tent. This was a very well organized event with topical panel debates and keynote speeches that addressed current developments within the field of technology and society. The audience was both well-informed and enthusiastic as could be seen from the number of questions raised and the Twitter streams generated by the event.

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