

Thomas Jefferson

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From the President

At the Thomas Jefferson Foundation, our vision is to engage a global audience in a dialogue with Jefferson's ideas. Whether we're talking about democracy, freedom, liberty or education, Jefferson's influence and vision are as applicable today as they were during his time.

On April 24, 1816, Jefferson wrote to French nobleman Pierre Samuel du Pont de Nemours, "Enlighten the people generally, and tyranny and oppressions of body and mind will vanish like evil spirits at the dawn of day ... I believe it [human condition] susceptible of much improvement, and most of all, in matters of government and religion; and that the diffusion of knowledge among the people is to be the instrument by which it is effected."

It's amazing how relevant and timely Jefferson's ideas are in 2011. Earlier this year, the Middle East erupted in a series of revolutions, from Egypt to Tunisia. Citizens called for freedom and change in power. Protesters found a new method for diffusion of knowledge among the people, and their instruments were Facebook and Twitter. A new contributing factor to revolutionary change had entered the scene: social media.

As journalist Jeffrey Ghannam reflected in an op-ed for the *Washington Post*, "During the protests, social media aggregated, disseminated and accelerated vital news and information. But in the end, Facebook and YouTube are tools—and tools alone cannot bring about the changes the world has witnessed in recent weeks." But as Ghannam notes, few could deny the significant role social media have played in the events that sparked significant government change.

Social media provided a means of informing citizens about different ideas and revolutions in neighboring countries. As some governments limited access to Facebook and the Internet, world leaders took notice. In February 2011, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called free access to the Internet a "fundamental human right." Revolutionaries demanded access to social media. Could these revolutions have sowed seeds of liberty and democracy?

Susannah Griffee, a journalist for New York University's daily student newspaper, *Washington Square News*, wrote, "The will of the people shouldn't be curtailed by limited communication or information. Governments shouldn't exercise authoritarian control over the media. Soon, they simply won't be able to. As governments can no longer effectively control the media, more revolutions will, and should, occur. Glasnost will become a



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worldwide policy."

As Thomas Jefferson wrote to Tench Coxe in June 1795, "[T]his ball of liberty,

I believe most piously, is now so well in motion that it will roll around the globe.[sic] at least the enlightened part of it, for light and liberty go together." Jefferson believed an educated and informed public was critical to a free society.

While no one can forecast how these revolutions will evolve and shape countries in the Middle East, one can hope that with more informed citizens, democracy will emerge as an end result.

I leave you with this reflection from President Ronald Reagan. In 1984, Reagan called upon Jefferson's ideas in a speech about education: "Thomas Jefferson noted ... 'If you expect the people to be ignorant and free, you expect what never was and never will be.' The ongoing experiment called democracy, the longest continuing experiment in human history, cannot exist without an informed citizenry, and cannot exist, therefore, without you."

Sincerely,

Leslie Greene Bowman, President and CEO