



# Staten Island Advance

Wednesday, August 10, 2011

## Staten Islanders are finding that mob rule reigns in cyberspace

By DEBORAH E. YOUNG

STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. — No need to ask Neal J. Curcio about the power of social networking.

The former Staten Islander who posted an ugly comment on Facebook last week about the borough — prompting more than 6,000 angry screeds to appear in response and the creation of a new page dedicated just to hating him — may now fully understand the power of social media: A technology which helped topple governments during the Arab Spring, is said to have contributed to the suicides of marginalized teens; and, last weekend brought out angry, rioting mobs in the streets of London, and also recently, in Philadelphia.

“Social media is an amplifying force, it’s what we’ve always had, the difference being that it’s much more powerful,” said Amerika Grewal, a coordinator of student development in campus life at Wagner College, Grymes Hill, who lectures to students and faculty on social media.

### **CYBERSPACE JUDGMENTS**

Group psychology in cyberspace is similar, at its root, to the social organizing principles in existence since early humans sat around a fire, when people were judged in terms of how well they complied with collective expectations or by their transgressions against the norm, she said.

“A lot of what we see, especially when things go viral, are things that happened to our primal storytelling: This is what you need to be safe. This is what our group considers acceptable. This is what our group considers not acceptable,” said Ms. Grewal. “A lot of times something goes viral because, ‘Awww it makes you feel good’ or you have seen something or done something in such a way that is not acceptable to the group.

But rather than resulting in a sharp rebuke from a tribal elder, a mistake in cyberspace can bring out the mob to act as judge and jury, she said.

For Curcio, the cyber story continues to evolve, with accusations from Facebook that Curcio himself is fueling the threatening angry discourse, and in fact, seems to relish the notoriety.

His initial accusation that Staten Islanders are “inbred” have been followed by his posts comparing borough residents to primates, including veiled threats.

With his cellphone out of service and a new out-of-state address, he has become a virtual presence as much as an actual breathing, human being, and inasmuch, a prime target for scurrilous posts.

Meanwhile, thanks to social networks like Twitter and Facebook, more and more so-called flash mobs are moving from the virtual world to the physical — materializing across the globe, leaving police scrambling to keep tabs on the spontaneous assemblies.

In London, recent rioting and looting has been blamed in part on groups of youths using Twitter, mobile phone text messages and instant messaging on BlackBerry to organize and keep

a step ahead of police. And Sunday in Philadelphia, Mayor Michael Nutter condemned the behavior of teenagers involved in flash mobs that have left several people injured in recent weeks.

Flash mobs started off in 2003 as peaceful and often humorous acts of public performance, such as mass dance routines or street pillow fights. But in recent years, the term has taken a darker twist as criminals exploit the anonymity of crowds, using social networking to coordinate everything from robberies to fights to general chaos.

Couple the rage of disenfranchised youth with the instant organizing power of social networking, and it is not hard to conjure a dystopian future, especially one of scarce resources, where bands of thugs, communicating via social media networks, pop up to loot, riot and create mayhem.

But sometimes the media can affect a positive change. A Facebook page dubbed “Day of Aggravation” created yesterday rails against the proposed new tolls on Island bridges.

Waxing on the use of the technology to foment dissent, Jonathan Taplin, director of the innovation lab at the University of Southern California’s Annenberg School for Communication, said: “You are essentially having a world where you have 25 million people who are underemployed and 2 percent of the population doing better than they ever have. Why wouldn’t that lead to some sort of social unrest? Why wouldn’t people use the latest technologies to effect that?”