

# HOPE IS A SOCIAL REVOLUTION

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CHAPTER NINE

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*Mobile technology, on its  
own, can't cure social ills. But  
people who find new ways of  
putting mobile technology to  
work can make a difference.  
A story from the Cape Flats.*

**B**RIDGETOWN lies on the shoulder of the N2, a few minutes' drive from the airport, in the corridor of conquered dunes and scrubland that they call the Cape Flats. Up ahead, the land rises to greet the bulwark of rock that watches over the waterfront and the wild Atlantic.

This is Cape Town, where Africa ends or begins, depending on your point of view. Here at the back of RLabs, a converted suburban home in Tarentaal Street, you can see the slab of Table Mountain and the bump of Lion's Head, if you stand tall enough at the pre-cast wall with its crown of razor wire.

Step back a little, and the wall becomes a canvas of blazing colour, a spray-painted mural of two floating hands clasped in solidarity and friendship.

To the right, the scorched red-brick chimneys of the Athlone Power Station, where the twin cooling towers, weakened by age and stress, came crashing to the ground in a controlled implosion a couple of years ago.

Not far away are the housing projects of Manenberg, the township that inspired the curlicues of sax and the shuffling

snare-brush rhythms of the bittersweet jazz symphony by Abdullah Ibrahim.

There is Athlone Stadium, with its rainbow arcs, the home of the People's Team, Santos FC. And outside the technical college in Athlone, there is a flat metal sculpture of three silhouetted figures wielding rifles, a memorial to the victims of the 'Trojan Horse Massacre', in which members of the security forces sprang from the back of a truck and opened fire on anti-government protesters in 1985.

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This is a scarred land, marked by memories of displacement and division, plagued by high levels of crime, poverty, joblessness, gangsterism and drug addiction. But hope rises in the heart of the Flats, on a bedrock of faith and a springboard of new technologies.

Bridgetown is the home of the Reconstructed Living Laboratory, or RLabs, the epicentre of an experiment in teaching, healing and sharing through social networks.

Beyond the student community of Stellenbosch, where Mxit was born, scholars on the Cape Flats were among the earliest and most enthusiastic adopters of the technology, which has evolved in this laboratory into a platform for counselling people in crisis and incubating entrepreneurship.

The founder of RLabs is Marlon Parker, tall, quietly-spoken and reflective, a deep thinker driven to make a difference. Now

in his 30s, he grew up in a broken home, an alcoholic by the time he was in his teens, fatherless, rebellious, with no ambition and ‘no longing to live’. After school, he drifted, finally landing a job pushing trolleys at the airport.

In the quiet flow of data on a screen, he saw something else: a reflection of the possibility of transformation, of a way out of circumstance, a way to alter the path of destiny.

One day, he saw an ad for a data capturer, and it stirred in him a vision of a young man striding across an open field, wearing a jacket and tie, so that everyone who saw him would know that this was a

man with a good and proper job. He applied, and didn’t get it.

Someone said he would have stood a better chance if he had done a course in IT. What’s that? ‘Information technology.’ Ah! He thought he knew what that meant, from watching TV and seeing FBI agents sitting in the back of their unmarked vans, using high-tech computer gadgets to gather information and foil the plans of bank robbers and drug dealers.

As it turned out, IT was the vehicle that would turn his life around, driving him to a diploma and a master’s and a lectureship at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology.

He found peace of mind in the inner workings of the machines, and comfort in the predictable logic of code. In the quiet flow of data on a screen, responding to the flight of his fingers on the keys, he saw something else: a reflection of the possibility of transformation, of a way out of circumstance, a way to alter the path of destiny.

He knew that computers were capable of connecting to

other computers, but he wondered to what extent they could help people to connect with their better selves.

He still felt the weight of blame for not doing enough to look after his younger brother, who had fallen in with the gangs and was serving a long-term sentence for drug possession and dealing.

And so, in 2001, in a spare classroom at the university, Marlon ran his first Saturday-morning workshop for a small group of volunteers from his home turf. He opened by asking whether anyone in the class knew anything at all about computers. One man tentatively raised his hand. 'Yes,' he said. 'I know how to steal them.' The class erupted in laughter.

Today RLabs is as much a landmark of the Cape Flats as the football stadium, the chimneys of Athlone and the music of Manenberg. It is a place of sanctuary, revival and outreach, a rallying point for what Marlon calls the Social Revolution.

It is part of a much broader network of community projects run by an NGO called Impact Direct Ministries, an eager embracer of social media as tools for witnessing, testifying and spreading the word. Or, as we like to call it these days, blogging.

Marlon believes that the simple act of expressing thoughts and telling stories on a publicly accessible website can be a powerful form of catharsis for 'reconstructed individuals', the recovering addicts and lapsed gang members who come to Impact for counselling, and RLabs for computer training.

The Reconstructed blogspot, a communal chronicle of 'lives reconstructed from drugs and gang activities', is a bustle of news, musings, shout-outs, dedications, confessions, homilies and observations. In between the tales of wasted years and betrayal, the testimonies of highs and lows and redemption, we see the

signs of lives shifting gear into a cosy suburban domesticity.

The photographs of cheerful toddlers, the family wedding portraits, the Christmas trees, the picnics in the park. And then, like ghosts in the mirror, a gallery of bright-red poppies, their seeds being harvested for heroin, and neat lines of white powder, sliced and diced by a credit card, and crystal rocks sealed in Jiffy bags and marked as evidence.

A blogger by the name of Brent Williams posts a series of photographs of uniformed police conducting a stop-and-search of a car outside a shopping mall in Athlone.

In his previous life, addicted to mandrax, Ecstasy, crack cocaine, crystal methamphetamine and alcohol, Brent would have fled as swiftly as possible in the opposite direction. Now he stands and observes, snapping pictures, mulling over the brief report that he will type on a PC at RLabs and send to his home on the blogspot:

*This is a scene all too familiar to me. I can remember the days that the cops used to pull us over after we went out to go and buy our drugs.*

*In this incident the guys in the car were drinking in a public area. Because they were drunk, they were giving the cops a hard time.*

*The cops called for reinforcement and did a search of the car. They also checked if the car was stolen.*

*Thank you Lord that you have delivered me from all those foolish things. Where would I be without God? Things could have been so different.*

In a separate blog, Mom 2.0, for ‘women passionate about reconstructing their communities’, we see a snapshot of a big, burly man with close-cropped hair, sitting next to a lady in

grey, her hands hovering over the keys of a laptop, her gold-rimmed spectacles perched at the top of her nose. Brent Williams, the recovering addict, the lapsed gangster, is teaching his mother, Alida, how to blog.

Blogging, Marlon discovered, could be a way for people in troubled communities to channel their emotions and experiences, using the computer as a private confessional and a platform for public connection.

As part of his research into the transformative power of social networks, Marlon would ask his pilot group of bloggers at RLabs how they felt about being able to use this new medium of communication to tell their stories. 'Relieved and happy' was the recurring response.

The bloggers felt they could express their deepest feelings without being judged or feeling guilty, in spaces that belonged uniquely to them, and yet were open to anyone who wanted to wander in and look around. One addict-turned-blogger told Marlon he enjoyed blogging so much that it had almost become an addiction. But a good one.

Inside RLabs, light floods from a skylight onto an arrangement of workstations, each topped by a laptop or PC. It's warm as sunshine in here, and the quiet of concentration is broken only by the sharp, sudden tapping of keys, then silence, then a burst of tapping again.

It's the call-and-response of multiple conversations, conducted at a distance, from one screen to another, cutting straight to the point, no small talk, no chit-chat, no tiptoeing around the subject at hand.

*i need support*

*how can i help*

*im using tik and desperately need help coz I have a 9 month*

*old baby*

well we are here to help. how long have u been using?

*6 years nd im only 18 nw*

well are you willing to come and see someone in person?

*yes i am. where*

we are based in Bridgetown. 66 Tarentaal Rd. u free during  
the day?

*yes thanx i'll come in next week*

Sitting at his laptop, Angelo King deftly clicks across to another conversation, one of more than 20 open in a series of mini-windows on his screen. A single word, from someone, somewhere, sending a message on a mobile phone. 'Hello.'

Angelo hits shift and taps a key.

?

A few seconds pass, and the answer flows.

*can u help me. my sister is on drugs.*

Angelo flickers a smile. He's been doing this long enough to know that, sometimes, people seek help by proxy. They're asking for help for a brother, a sister, a cousin, a friend. It doesn't matter. He doesn't know their name, their location, their number. He just knows that they need the help. And he knows what that's like, because he's been there.

Angelo is an advisor on the Drug Advice Support programme at RLabs. He's 35, with a flash of orange in his spiky hair, and a slinky silver chain looped over his jersey. He's been free of drugs for two years, 'clean by the grace of God'. He was born on the Flats and grew up on the Flats, and he's made peace with the fact that you can't blame your environment for what you become. But you can change yourself.

*Helo!;)*

Hello how can i help u

*My cuz is gng through a problem n lukiing 4 a place to help  
him*

what is his problem?

*His on drugs for 4 years already his also been in out of  
prison for a while at 1st it was just tik but nw its worst*

how old is he?

*Im nt sure bt i thnk hs 26*

Tik. Tik-tik-tik. The drug is crystal methamphetamine, and it takes its name from the sound the rocks make when you heat them in a glass pipe, or a light bulb with the thread twisted off. The heat turns the rocks into a thick yellow vapour, which you inhale. It's a cheap and easy hit. It was Angelo's compulsion, and it turned him into a 'walking skeleton, physically, emotionally and spiritually shattered'.

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They listen, engage, inform, advise, and, where necessary, refer their clients to other organisations for professional help.

They're clients, or PSAs (persons seeking advice) – not victims or abusers or addicts. And wherever they are in the country, whatever their needs, there's one thing they tend to have in common. Access to a mobile phone, and Mxit.

Marlon was lecturing in the Faculty of Informatics and Computer Design at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology when he first saw Mxit in everyday use. His students showed him. He was struck not so much by the ease of instant chat, at next to no cost, as he was by the possibility that this could be a tool for teaching.

He helped to investigate and write a research paper on 'The usage of mobile instant messaging in tertiary education', us-

ing students aged between 18 and 23 as respondents.

'Being connected used to mean that you were reachable,' says Marlon. 'Now, being connected means that you want to share.'

The majority agreed or strongly agreed that Mxit could be useful for exchanging information, managing Q&A

sessions and communicating assessment results. But the broken link in the chain was the faculty itself because Mxit was 'never or almost never' being used by lecturers. Clearly, concluded Marlon, this was a field for further research.

What the study had confirmed was the almost universal adoption of mobile as a communications technology by young people, and the rapid evolution of that technology beyond the voice-to-voice call. Voice was only third on the bouquet of preferred communications tools in the study, below SMS and email, and just above Mxit.

‘Being connected used to mean that you were reachable,’ says Marlon. ‘Now, being connected means that you want to share.’

Marlon wanted to share. He went to see the principal of a high school on the Flats, and he said, ‘Give me your ten worst pupils.’ They would be the beta testers for a new model of peer-to-peer networking, connecting those who had learnt from their experiences with those who wanted to learn.

From that was born IDM Talk, a drug-advice-and-support service hosted by Impact Direct Ministries, and offering counselling by mobile chat for two hours after school every Tuesday and Thursday. It was a modest start, using the free Google Talk platform to connect advisors and their clients, with an administrator, or ‘runner’, managing the incoming requests and assigning them to advisors as they popped up on the screen.

That proved to be a messy proposition. With multiple advisors sharing a single GTalk account, and a moderator monitoring every conversation, the system was slow, insecure, prone to errors and confusion, and incapable of coping with more than a few dozen conversations a week.

But it led, as chaos often does, to a gathering of insightful minds, determined to apply a home-grown solution to a global problem. A Cape Flats solution.

It came out of RLabs, and today it is known as JamiiX, from the Swahili for ‘community’ and the ‘X’ for exchange – an elegant, scalable piece of software that allows many people to talk to many other people on social networks.

Technically, JamiiX is an aggregator and distributor of conversations, a single point of contact for managing multiple streams of information on the mobile internet and the Web. In practice, it is nothing more than a quiet, omnipresent facilitator that makes it easy for people to use technology

to connect and to share. Software is simple. Real life can get complicated.

*Hey*

hey there

*Hwu*

well and you?

*Nt gud*

so whats happening?

*I hv found out dat im 1mnth prgnt n its vry cmpctd*

hw is it complicated?

*My bf ex she prgnt n im also prgnt n hs fam wnt hm 2 marry  
de ex*

ok so what happend with thorts of abortion?

*We tlkd me n my bf he sd if we kp de bby hs fam mst nvr  
knw dat im prgnt n dat dy wl knw in de near future*

bt hw do u feel abt keeping the baby?

*Im vry scrd i wnt de bby n i dnt wnt de bby*

are u scared of losing the boyfriend

*No im scrd wat wl my fam sy n im also scrd 4 hm as hs fam  
wnts hm 2 marry de ex*

hw old r u?

*22 turng 23*

During a typical two-hour session at RLabs, each advisor will have an average of 27 conversations to manage. Each conversation, on average, will consist of 29 messages. Each message, at the standard GPRS rate of two rand per megabyte of data, will cost the Mxit user approximately three cents, or 88 cents per counselling session.

A face-to-face session at a walk-in crisis or treatment centre, state or private, would cost about R200. But the advice

and support on Mxit is not meant to replace professional help, says Marlon. The advisors at RLabs are first responders; they're like paramedics, rushing to the scene, assessing, assisting, performing triage.

The big difference is that the advisors do not see or hear their clients. They are worlds apart, gazing into separate screens, tapping staccato strings of text, waiting for the question or response that will keep the conversation flowing. And yet, they can touch lives.

Technology is an enabler. It can uplift, empower, make a difference. It can give a glimmer of hope.

Technology is an enabler, says Marlon. It can uplift, empower, make a difference. It can give a glimmer of hope. This living laboratory in Bridgetown is a place of ideas and ideals, some of which, like JamiiX, become tangible products that can be exported across the world. Others, like Uusi, are works in progress.

Uusi. It's a Finnish word, meaning 'new'. As in new beginnings, new opportunities. It's a mobile social network, connecting job seekers and job placers. In its first few months, it attracted more than 100 000 registered users on Mxit. They uploaded some 60 000 mobile CVs and ran more than 2 million searches. It's based on an idea by Terence Hendricks, a counsellor and social media trainer at RLabs.

Terence also grew up on the Flats, in Manenberg. He dropped out of high school and struggled to find work. He remembers walking up and down streets, walking across empty lots, standing around, waiting, his hands idle and itching. There were

many like him: an army of the unemployed. He wanted to be a tradesman, a fitter and turner. The closest he came was a part-time job, offloading and stacking tyres for Firestone.

He found his way, through the church, to RLabs. 'I felt like my brain was switching on,' he says. 'A whole new world of phones and computers. I had this vision of a space where people could use their skills, and use the technology, to help other people find work.'

He shared his idea with Marlon. Within months, it was a start-up, seeking funding and partners. Then it was a research paper, presented to a conference: 'The use of mobile technologies to address unemployment in the Western Cape'. Then it was an application on Mxit. Uusi. Your New Beginning.

Once, in Manenberg, Terence saw his father, a retired factory worker, walking around at the back of a mall. Not going anywhere, just wandering. It was that familiar shuffle of hopelessness, of joblessness, of nothing to do. Then he found a job: mopping the floor at a doctor's office. 'Now he can't stop talking about it,' says Terence. 'It has changed his world. Work gives you a purpose in life.'

Terence has a mobile phone in his hand, and he is thumbing through the listings and categories of job opportunities on Uusi. Business, finance and management; engineering and technology; services; computers ...

He has a dream, too, of one day starting a business of his own. He is a little hesitant, a little shy, to say what it is. Then he shrugs. 'I do a little baking on the side,' he says. 'I haven't been taught how to bake, I just woke up one day and started baking. I baked bread. I baked muffins. I baked hot cross buns. I told my wife, bring me some recipes, man! I even made some chocolate mousse, although I don't eat it personally.'

He started taking orders from his wife's fellow workers at the university, and baked cakes and buns for special occasions. His dream, now, is to run his own coffee shop. In Simonstown, by the sea. He'll call it Toni's, after his little girl.

He remembers his biggest flop: a chocolate cake that somehow went wrong. He put it in the portable table-top oven at home, and it sank, a mess of sighing sponge and melted chocolate.

So he turned it all into a whole lot of cupcakes, and everyone was happy. He laughs at the memory. Here in the heart of the Flats, hope rises.