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# DAILY MAVERICK

Opinionista Jay Naidoo

## Technology can wipe out the cancer of corruption

- Jay Naidoo



Jay Naidoo

Jay Naidoo is founding General Secretary of Cosatu, former Minister in Mandela Government and Chair of a GAIN a Global Foundation Fighting malnutrition in the World. You can also visit his [Facebook Page](#) or [www.jaynaidoo.org](http://www.jaynaidoo.org).

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Living in the information era, we are often swept out to sea by the tidal wave of data. It is often incomprehensible. It needs an actuarial or mathematics degree to decipher. But help is on the way. And it comes in all sizes and shapes, cultures and colours. These are young digital warriors. They are connected. Their weapon is the internet. Their enemy is corruption. And they are here to bring a revolution of ethics into the 21st century.

I was at a global conference of the Open Knowledge Foundation in Geneva a few days ago with hundreds of young technical geeks. There were thousands more connecting from around the world through web stream. I sensed a new digital revolution hovering on the horizon.

My message for them was very simple: My generation has betrayed you. Look at the financial and economic crisis that brought the global economy to its knees in 2008. Tens of millions of your parents lost their jobs, their pensions and their homes. Trillions of US\$ of taxpayers' money was pumped into saving the banks. Were those who were responsible for these crimes ever brought to justice? The answer is no. They have returned to their same ways of doing business with their obscene bonuses reinstated.

In the next hour I spend with you, I said, I know that 300 children will die of causes linked to under-nutrition. We have the solutions, we have the money and we have the science to stop this happening. But we do not have the political will. Inequality rises in the world.

These young people are idealistic. They remind me of what we were in 1976 when we defied our parents and confronted the brutality of Apartheid. They embrace an impossible dream that they can unleash a tsunami of hope in the world that will put information and power in the hands of ordinary people to hold their leaders to account.

This is their revolution, to bring justice and fairness into the core of our new global narrative. They are unstoppable, because they will make every citizen a journalist and whistleblower. There will be no dark corner where the spotlight of transparency will not reach.

In my time as Minister of Communications in the Mandela Cabinet, there were fewer phones in sub-Saharan Africa than the city of New York or Tokyo. Today we are the fastest-growing market in the world with over 700 million mobile phones. And this pervasive technological platform is cutting-edge and digital, and with it comes the death of geography, and the death of the veil of secrecy that has oppressed us in the past.

The next generation has the power to redefine our growth path, our governance and global dynamic. They have the skills. Technology is already re-organising the way we think of work, the way we organise our societies, how we access services, educate our children and mobilise our communities around their rights and entitlements. But we must not become obsessed. Technology is a tool.

Scientists today confirm that if we do not change our current growth and consumption trajectory, we will see a 3-4 degree rise in temperature this century. That means that between 60-80% of coal, oil and gas reserves of publicly listed companies are unburnable. But technology is the catalyst of entrepreneurial opportunities of the 21st century; one that will set us down the path to sustainable livelihoods that does not exceed our planetary boundaries.

Political wisdom says that each generation has to discover its struggle. I have a sense that these represent a new generation of struggle. They are keen to unite with communities, social movements, the men and women of integrity in governments, business or civil society. Fusing online and offline will bring a revolution of ethics into the cold steel of technology and strengthen our fight for the survival of the human species and our planet.

Mapping our money is a critical plank of that transparency and accountability. According to the organisation, [Open Spending](#), the aim is to track every government financial transaction across the world and present it in useful and engaging forms for everyone from a school child to a data geek.

The site is offered as a free service. All code, content and data are shared and openly licensed. As data literacy improves, applications will empower citizens to compare performance between schools in order to decide where

to enroll their children or see the medical records of individual doctors to know their track record. It will ensure our children would receive vaccinations, disease will be eradicated, there would be an increase in yield on crops and entrepreneurs would have “direct access” to funds.

As Justin Arenstein, the digital strategist from the African Media Initiative, explains, “In Kenya, many citizens were totally confused on the voter registration process. An [application](#) on their phones was able to tell them where the polling booths were, where to register and what identification was needed on the voting day. It cost \$250 to develop.”

Laura James, CEO of the Open Knowledge Foundation, [said](#), “Making government, scientific and other data accessible and usable drives positive change across the spectrum: from health to transport, education to entrepreneurship and culture to community. This project will give citizens in developing countries the knowledge they need to campaign for change, and empower them to hold their governments to account.”

In South Africa, scandals of maladministration and corruption dominate headlines. No amount of “sunshine journalism” or the heavy hand of the “Secrecy Laws” can liquidate the truth. Six million people dependent on public health services in the Eastern Cape understand the devastating consequences of the R800m stolen by public officials. They know that babies have died because vaccines, needles, medicines and incubators have not been bought.

In Gauteng, the Star newspaper reported that the health department couldn’t account for more than R12 billion, nearly half its budget. The Auditor General has found that the department’s accounting Officer, Ndoda Biyela, failed to effectively prevent irregular spending of more than R5.7 billion and wasteful spending of more than R408 million.

Departmental maladministration was rife and the treasury found unauthorised expenditure amounted to a staggering R2.2 billion. According to journalist Baldwin Ndaba, this could have bought two years’ worth of treatments for the 1.9 million public sector patients on ARVs; a year of kidney dialysis treatments for 60,000 people; about 340,000 ICU beds; or 3,000 Lodox full-body X-ray machines.

As we reconfigure democracy and build the phalanx of countervailing checks and balances, I am confident that technology will drive public innovation and citizens will again become driving force of our democratic transformation as they were in our freedom struggle. **DM**

*This column is based on an edited excerpt of [speech](#) made to the Open Knowledge Foundation Conference in Geneva on 18.09.2013*



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