

Disaffection, Anger, and Sarcasm: Exploring the Postrevolutionary Digital Public Sphere in Egypt

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This article explores the digital public sphere in Egypt through a 3-pronged investigation. First, we examine the media sphere from an institutional point of view. Second, we undertake a qualitative analysis of comments left on popular news pages on Facebook. Third, we discuss the findings of 30 semistructured interviews with young people in Cairo. Our results indicate that the media system is characterized by increasing control that has now extended online, whereas the social media space is dominated by religious personalities and entertainment. Turning to the public, we found that most comments mobilized anger and insults or were ironic and sarcastic. Finally, the interviews point to a disillusionment with both the political sphere and the role of social media. Disaffection is therefore taken to represent the specific structure of feeling found in the postrevolutionary Egyptian mainstream digital public sphere, with publics appearing alienated and unwilling to engage politically.

Keywords: digital public sphere, Egypt, social media, hybrid media system, hypermedia space, affective publics

The historical events of January 2011 in Egypt were pivotal in leading to a broader rethinking of the Arab world, its media, and its public sphere. However, recent developments have been contentious. The rise of the Muslim Brotherhood has been meteoric, and its fall swift: After being voted in as the first democratically elected president of Egypt in 2012, Mohammed Morsi's short and controversial presidency ended a year later, in 2013, after a series of protests and the intervention of the army. In 2014, the former commander of the Egyptian army, Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, was elected as president and reelected in March 2018, with 97% of the vote. Al-Sisi's presidency is steeped in controversy, with reports of human rights abuses (HRW, 2017).

This article explores a part of the post-2011 digital public sphere to understand the current state of affairs. In addressing this question theoretically, we make use of Kraidy's (2006) concept of hypermedia space alongside Chadwick's (2013) notion of hybrid media; through these, we understand the media ecosystem as a complex and contested space, characterized by control, tensions, relative unpredictability,

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and creative remediation. The broader question that animates this research is, how is this hybrid media space reconfigured in the post-Arab Spring Egypt? This is broken down into two questions: first, what is the current institutional and regulatory framework within which media operate in Egypt? Second, how are ordinary, nonactivist, but digitally literate users positioned within the current media environment?

In examining this question, we rely on a three-pronged investigation. In a first step, we contextualize the research through a discussion of the media sphere in Egypt from an institutional and structural point of view. Second, we undertake a study of Facebook and YouTube comments, through a qualitative content analysis. Third, we discuss the findings of 30 semistructured interviews with digitally literate urban media users in Cairo.

Theoretically, we develop an approach to the digital public sphere that views it as supported by a hybrid media system and as a continuously recreated hypermedia space. We assume this theoretical approach as a direct result of the limits of the applicability of Western concepts, such as the public sphere and hybrid media, in understanding the current situation in Egypt.

The article begins with a theoretical discussion of the digital public sphere in Egypt, followed by a detailed discussion of the current state of the media sphere. We then move on to discuss the ways in which we operationalized the digital public sphere to research it, followed by a detailed discussion of our findings.

The (Digital) Public Sphere in Egypt: A Hybrid System

The construct of the public sphere, as formulated by Habermas (1962/1989), has become a key category used to understand democratic politics. From a normative perspective, the public sphere entails the possibility of emancipation, through participating in processes whereby a notion of the common good is articulated and coconstructed by all participants. This section will begin with a brief consideration of the relevance of the public sphere theory in the present context, setting the background for the formulation of the current theoretical approach that draws on Kraidy's (2006) notion of hypermedia space and Chadwick's (2013) hybrid media system. We understand the digital public sphere as comprising all these manifestations of public participation that coconstruct contested notions of the common good, ranging from journalistic articles to comments on YouTube videos to photos of street graffiti posted on Facebook pages. These manifestations are not equivalent; rather, as Chadwick argues, they are asymmetrically related. In contrast, however, to the extraordinary and rebellious acts that Chadwick and Kraidy studied, we are looking at the routinized, everyday ordinary media acts of posting, commenting, and sharing. We consider that these actively shape the contours and sustain the digital public sphere while inflecting it with a certain flavor that captures what Papacharissi (2015), following Williams (1961), refers to as structures of feeling among affective publics.

While there have been important critiques of the theory of the public sphere there is still value in the concept, as it succeeds in bringing together media structures, political participation and normative theory (Fuchs, 2014). However, the current media landscape has become much more complex and this presents its own challenges to the public sphere. While the (mass) media have been described as the "principle institutions of the public sphere" (Curran, 1991, p. 29), the rise of the Internet and the increasingly

important role of social media platforms have changed the landscape dramatically. Chadwick (2013) refers to the changed landscape as a hybrid media system, in which older and newer forms of media have merged to create a new system, characterized by the emergence of hybrid norms, logics and cultures. Chadwick defines a media system as 'simply all relevant media' but expands it to the various interactions among the many media actors, including professional communicators and citizens.

Chadwick's (2013) contribution is crucial in recognizing the plurality and complexity of the institutions of the current public sphere. However, his theory was developed to capture the media within a very specific Western media system, the Anglo-American liberal one. As such, it may not be applicable in the context of Egypt. To address this, we make use of Kraidy's analyses of the hypermedia space which include a broad range of media and types of communication, ranging from street graffiti to soap operas and from satellite television to Facebook pages and YouTube channels. Kraidy's focus is the Arab and Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, in which media systems are often tightly controlled and regulated, differing substantially from the liberal media systems studied by Chadwick. The political context significantly alters the relationships among the various media actors. Kraidy (2006) showed that hypermedia space can be an alternative to the tightly controlled and monitored social space while in their analysis of Lebanon and Iran, Kraidy and Mourad (2010) argue that activists gain "visibility for their cause through a hypermedia space that is less controllable than social space and therefore potentially subversive of the prevalent mode of governance" (Kraidy & Mourad, 2010, p. 11).

It is this reconfiguration of the media space that some theorists prioritized in discussions on the Arab Spring and the 2011 Egyptian revolution. Etling, Kelly, Faris, and Palfrey (2010) analysis found that Egypt had one of the most active political blogospheres in the Arab world, while Al Jazeera was one of the top-linked sites across the Arab blogosphere. From this point of view, the revolution did not occur in a (media) vacuum, but rather succeeded in mobilizing and connecting media activism with the streets while also bypassing the government's attempts to control the information infrastructure (Howard & Hussain, 2013). In a similar vein, Aouragh and Alexander (2011) argued that online media had the dual function of hosting dissident voices and organizing street protests, but these were complemented by offline activism and agitation, refuting simplistic views that attribute the revolution to social media platforms. For Salvatore (2013), a key factor in the Egyptian revolution was the combination of a technological push with local creative adaptations which succeeded in creating a new vernacular language that was very different from the stiff language of state actors. These arguments find resonance in more recent work such as that of Zayani (2015) who points to the incremental role of ongoing digital contention over a number of years in the case of the Tunisian uprising.

This kind of creative reappropriation and remediation is at the heart of Kraidy's (2016) recent work on creative insurgency. Kraidy distinguishes among radical acts, such as the self-immolation of Mohammed al-Bouazizi, and gradual, latent acts, such as the use of jokes to ridicule political figures. He points to the crucial role of radical acts in generating new political identities and in attacking dictators. Notwithstanding the importance of such acts, we wish to emphasize here the more routine aspects of the public sphere, since these, as pointed out by Zayani (2015), form the groundwork for any insurgencies that emerge.

Routine, everyday publishing, commenting on, and using (digital) media constitute the public sphere both as process and space (Fuchs, 2014) but they do so alongside institutional practices, for example regulatory policies, that formally circumscribe and structure this sphere. We therefore mobilize a kind of theoretical division of labor that looks to Chadwick's (2013) hybrid media for the role of the formal institutions of the public sphere, examining the contours within which various media actors are allowed to participate. On the other hand, we recognize that these contours can be stretched through bottom up actions, radical, gradual or combining both, and here is where we locate the contribution of Kraidy's hypermedia space. To these we add the important role of accumulated routine, ordinary practices of posting, commenting and sharing that contribute to maintaining or altering the contours of this space. We contend that these ordinary media acts can complement studies of radical and activist acts, and taken together, ordinary and radical acts can provide a comprehensive diagnostic of the overall 'temperature' of the public sphere.

Habermas (1996) makes a distinction between the public sphere at rest and in periods of mobilization. During the former, the public sphere may be dominated by commercial and political interests. In periods of mobilization, however, "the structures that actually support the authority of a critically engaged public begin to vibrate" (Habermas 1996, p. 379). Habermas does not explain how the two are connected, and how one gives way to the other; yet there must be some transitional period in which ordinary communication begins to shift toward mobilizing communication calling for action, and vice versa, a period where mobilization dies down giving way to normality and ordinariness. Studying "ordinary" communication can therefore offer important information about the state of the public sphere and identify any signs for any mobilization or conversely for demobilization. Additionally, ordinary communication may offer a means of gauging a kind of a general spirit of the age, which Raymond Williams (1961) has apprehended as a structure of feeling, or a general predisposition that has yet to consolidate in something more concrete. Papacharissi (2015) has taken this into the digital domain by linking it to the notion of affective publics: networked formations that are connected through storytelling. Affective publics both reflect and (re)organize structures of feeling: the culture, mood, and feel of given historical moments.

In the post-2011 Egypt and in an increasingly restrictive political context, the digital public sphere, in terms of structure, substance, and feeling, are expected to be significantly different. Research suggests that while repression is ongoing, there are still possibilities to intervene in public debates. In her analysis of constitutional debates, Badr (2016) recognizes the role for social media in contributing to the pluralization of voices in the public sphere by allowing social movements to articulate their competing visions, though for the most part her work focuses on the period before 2013. Shehata (2017) reports that, in the two years following the revolution, newspapers and mainstream media were controlled by antirevolutionary forces, while social media sites became increasingly available to them, thereby leading to the current situation. Supporting Shehata's findings on social media, El-Khalili (2013) found that the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), which took over after Mubarak's fall, systematically used social media for propaganda. On the other hand, Ayish's (2018) research on the broader MENA region shows that the digital work of a younger generation of bloggers holds important promise for incremental social change through the promotion of a civic culture. This body of work successfully challenges simplistic assumptions of a technologically driven democratization or conversely wholesale repression and authoritarian surveillance, pointing to a more complex dynamic at play (Al-Ghazzi, 2017; Mahloulou, 2015). However, the focus of this

work is for the most part on political actors, such as politicians, journalists, and activists, and not on broader publics and ordinary everyday users.

Taking the above into consideration, we are looking to examine the current state of affairs in the Egyptian digital public sphere, at a time when the public sphere is at rest. We view this digital public sphere as composed of a multitude of communicative practices, coming from both institutional media actors and everyday people, which taken as a whole might reveal the "structure of feeling" that is particular to Egypt at the present historical juncture. This expanded understanding means that it is very difficult to empirically capture the digital public sphere in its entirety.

Theoretically, we are looking to complement approaches that understand the digital public sphere as a complex, hybrid, quasiformal structure on the one hand, and as a set of diverse processes, including creative, radical acts, rational critical debate, and everyday commentary and affective expressions on the other. In this manner, we are looking to understand the contours of the digital public sphere as set up by media institutions, social media platforms, and regulatory bodies, as well as the extent to which these are stretched and reshaped by users. In these terms, the emerging question is, how is the Egyptian digital public sphere reconfigured in the current historical juncture? This overarching question is addressed here through taking a brief snapshot—delimiting the expansive digital public sphere by focusing on specific elements that can offer some insights into the larger whole of which they are part. In the current article, we focus on the ways in which ordinary users are positioned within the digital media, as expressed in their comments on social media and through semistructured interviews. We begin this discussion with an analysis of the structural institutional context within which the digital public sphere operates in contemporary Egypt.

Understanding the Egyptian Public Sphere: The Institutional Context

In her overview of the media sphere in Egypt, Khamis (2011) points to a long history of repression, censorship, and government control that divided the media into "national" and "oppositional," punctuated by the arrival of the independent press, often dismissed as the "yellow press" in the 1990s (Sakr, 2015). However, technological developments, and specifically the rise of satellite television and the Internet, changed the media landscape dramatically (Sakr, 2001). Khamis (2011) describes a pre-2011 media landscape in which the broadcast and print media were tightly controlled either directly or indirectly. It is in this context that the rise of the blogosphere took place, with Sakr (2015) reporting that by 2008, when Facebook took off in Egypt, there were 160,000 blogs. This parallel existence of blogs operated by the public and institutional media led to a situation that Iskandar (2006) describes as "media schizophrenia" (p. 20), because of the disconnect between the contents of mainstream broadcast and print media and citizen-activist blogs.

Conditions since the revolution have changed to the extent that we can describe the current situation as a full regression and reversal. Despite the hopes generated by the revolution for a more democratic media system, reality turned out differently. In 2011, Khamis wrote that "the assumption that media liberalization in Arab societies will not happen 'unless and until the underlying political system becomes a more liberal and democratic one' (Rugh, 2004, p. 161) has turned out to be inapplicable in Egypt" (p. 1169). However, both Morsi and the Al-Sisi government created an environment of media intimidation,

proscriptions, and prosecutions that is more than reminiscent of the media under Mubarak, thereby supporting Rugh's contention. Under Morsi's government, in 2012, Freedom House ranked Egypt as "partially free," while Article 215 of the 2012 Constitution instituted the National Media Council, tasked with setting regulations that ensure adherence to ethical and professional standards as well as observance of social values and traditions (Elkamel, 2013). Notwithstanding such attempts to liberalize, Morsi's attitude to the media was ambivalent, with notable arrests, such as that of Bassem Youssef, whose show criticized the president. Under Morsi, the editors of the three state-owned newspapers—*Al Ahrām*, *Al Akhbar*, and *Al Gomhoreya*—were replaced with editors friendly to his presidency, and in November 2012, the satellite network Dream TV, where Amr Adeeb had a show criticizing Morsi and the Brotherhood, was taken off the air (Elkamel, 2013). In addition to government control, Halabi (2015) notes that in any case the commercialized structure of the Egyptian media prohibited any serious discussion of how the social justice demands of the Tahrir publics could be translated into social and economic policy.

The election of Al-Sisi in 2014, and reelection in 2018, signaled another deterioration in the media system, which by 2019 Freedom House listed as "not free." In 2015, Egypt had the dubious distinction of having jailed the second largest number of journalists in the world (Aboulenein, 2016). In 2016, Al-Sisi created the Supreme Council for the Administration of the Media. This body has the power to suspend or fine publications and broadcasters and issue or revoke licenses for foreign media (Aboulenein, 2016). Its members are directly appointed by the president, following nominations by various bodies, including the judiciary and the parliament. The Supreme Council subsumed the National Press Council and the National Media Council, and together these are tasked with developing a code of ethics and overseeing its implementation. The specifics of this code remain unclear, but one of its priorities is said to be the question of security and stability (El Fekki, 2017). In May 2017, access to several news websites was blocked, ostensibly for "terrorism" and "fake news" (El Elein, 2017). The ban included several high-profile websites with no links to Islamists, such as the site of *Daily News Egypt*, and *Mada Masr*. By September 2017, and while the legal basis for the decision to block has not been revealed, there were reports of 429 blocked sites, including not only news sites but also blogs and VPN service providers ("*Mada Masr* Court Case," 2017). In addition, there were reports of blockages of VoIP apps, such as Skype and Viber, as well as Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp (Farid, 2017).¹ In another escalation, the Committee for the Protection of Journalists reported indications that journalists and activists were targeted by state supported hackers, who use the two-step verification process to steal passwords (CPJ, 2017). It appears that Egypt has taken steps to control the use of Facebook and other social media apps, with Reyad Abdel Sattar of the liberal Free Egyptians Party proposing legislation that would "facilitate state surveillance over social networks in Egypt by making users enroll in a government-run electronic system that will grant them permission to access Facebook" (quoted in Monks, 2017, para. 3). Although there are currently no such laws in operation, it is clear that taken together, such developments have contributed to a climate of fear, intimidation, and suspicion. The crackdown on online media intensified during the election period in the spring of 2018. The Supreme Council for Media Regulation fined al-Masry al-Youm 150,000 Egyptian pounds (US\$8,479) for reporting on election irregularities while there are further reports of arbitrary detentions of journalists (CPJ, 2018). Adel Sabry, the chief editor of the online news site *Masr al-Arabia*, was arrested in April 2018 allegedly for spreading fake news and was given a 15-day detention order in July 2018 ("*Masr al-Arabia*

¹ For a full list of blocked websites, see <https://afteegypt.org/blocked-websites-list?lang=en>

Chief," 2018). Further, the recent Anti-Cyber and Information Technology Crimes legislation allows the government not only to block any site they consider as spreading fake news but also to detain its editors and to fine or even jail its users (Mansour, 2018). It is in this context, which has been described as the "Sisification" of the media (Reporters Without Borders, quoted in BBC, 2016), that citizens participate in the digital public sphere.

But who exactly can participate? Although Internet access has grown over the past few years, it is 48.7% (Internet World Stats, 2019), meaning more than half of the population of Egypt still does not have access. Of the 49 million who are online, 35 million are Facebook users, revealing the stronghold of the social media platform in Egypt. Almost 23% of all Arab Facebook users are located in Egypt (Salem, 2017). Most Facebook users are men (65.8%), a common trend across the MENA region (Salem, 2017). Table 1 shows the 10 most popular pages on Facebook in 2019.

Table 1. Ten Most Liked Facebook Pages in Egypt. Source: SocialBakers.

Name	Description	Likes
Mustafa Hosny	Islamic preacher and the host of the show <i>Rehlet El Hayah (Life's Journey)</i>	33,265,601
Amr Khaled	Islamic preacher	30,003,398
<i>Habibty Magazine</i>	Dubai-based women's magazine	26,496,701
<i>Nessa El Ganna (Women of Heaven)</i>	Luxury lifestyle magazine for Muslim and Arab women	23,927,703
MBC Masr (MBC Egypt)	Television channel	21,153,079
Tamer Hosny	Singer	18,860,800
Amr Diab	Singer	16,805,803
Everyday Medical Tips (Kol Youm Maalouma Tebeya)	Health and wellness website	16,356,599
Sherine Abdel-Wahab	Singer	15,322,507
Asa7be Sarcasm Society Humour and sarcasm	Facebook page	14,841,840

Popular Facebook pages are dominated by religious, generic, and entertainment content, pointing to a largely depoliticized space. A similar picture emerges in YouTube. Table 2 presents the 10 most subscribed YouTube channels in Egypt.

Table 2. Ten Most Subscribed YouTube Channels in Egypt. Source: Vidstatsx.

Name	Description	Subscribers
Rotana	Channel for Arabic music and films	4,945,461
<i>Albernameg</i>	Satirical show pulled off the air in 2014	2,552,311
Shady Srour	Egyptian actor and comedian.	2,350,873
ONtv	Egyptian "free-to-air" broadcasting channel	2,052,355
Mazzika—مزيكا	Music and entertainment channel	2,046,161
<i>Joe Tube</i> —جو تيوب	Egyptian comedy show based on political satire	1,771,778
Tamer Hosny	Egyptian singer	1,672,727
Melody TV group	Music channel	1,504,925
Al Hayah TV Network	Egyptian TV channel	1,503,606
Amr Diab	Egyptian singer	1,492,041

This analysis points to two main characteristics of the institutional part of the digital public sphere in Egypt: the first is escalating control and repression of the media. Although this is in continuity with the pre-2011 media history of Egypt, an important difference is that such control and censorship have now expanded to the digital domain. This points to the second characteristic identified: the dominance of religious and entertainment contents on social media, which shows what most people tend to be interested in, or feel safe to use, on Facebook and YouTube, possibly also pushed by the algorithmic structure of social media platforms (Smyrnaios, 2018). This is not surprising, as most media use across the world tends to be for entertainment, but taken together, these two characteristics show that political participation in the digital public sphere is heavily circumscribed.

It is within this context of state repression and corporate control that digital and social media usage in Egypt takes place. However, the kind of use that ordinary Egyptians make of such media is still an empirical question. The next section outlines the research design and methodology we applied to gain an insight into this aspect of the digital public sphere.

Research Design and Methodology

Given that the target of our analysis is complex and dynamic, the research design includes the use of multiple methods. Analytically, we rely on Chadwick's (2013) template for researching the hybrid media system: this includes an analysis of audience media use, an analysis of the structure of broadcasting, print and online media, and an analysis of the various forms of mediality—for example, how stories evolve and change across media and their remediation by users. We have here adapted and operationalized this template in the following manner: To approach the institutional backdrop, we rely on secondary data and statistics available for Egypt as presented in the previous section. To analyze audience use and patterns of consumption, we rely on 30 semi-structured interviews. Finally, we operationalize forms of mediality in terms of a content analysis of the comments left on Facebook pages of news organizations. Below, we explain the sampling and methodological procedures followed.

Sample

We have focused here on a hybrid print–broadcast–digital media by looking at the Facebook pages of five news outlets and the YouTube channels of two talk shows. Notwithstanding the importance and popularity of social media, broadcast and print media are still relevant, bringing together and connecting publics. In the digital public sphere, journalism is met with direct responses by readers in the form of comments that add to or remediate the initial stories. Whereas social media are said to fragment the public sphere and users are caught up in individualized networks (Raine & Wellman, 2012), pages of news outlets in social media can bring publics together. We therefore focus on the pages of five news outlets, covering state supported and progovernment, commercialized, as well as oppositional news pages, selected because of their popularity and wide appeal; we also included the English language *Daily News Egypt* which captures the middle class, cosmopolitan users. Table 3 presents the news outlets, their page likes, and identity.

Table 3. News Outlets.

News outlet	Facebook page likes	Identity
Al Masry Al Youm	10,471,355	Independent (privately owned)
Al Youm Al 7	13,723,789	Independent (privately owned)
Rassd News Network (RNN)	12,121,117	Online only news and media website (launched on Facebook on January 25, 2011)
Al Ahram	3,469,915	Progovernment/state owned
<i>Daily News</i>	139,382	Independent

In addition to the news sites' Facebook pages, we collected and analyzed comments from two main talk show hosts, Lamis El Hadidi and Amr Adeeb. Lamis El Hadidi was a TV presenter on CBC (Capital Broadcasting Center), an independent privately owned channel where she hosted her show *Hona Al Asema (Here is the Capital)*. Lamis El Hadidi is known for her interviews with high-profile politicians and public figures. However, she stopped presenting the show after the summer of 2018 and has now moved to Al-Arabiya A-Hadath presenting her new show, *Cairo Now*. Her husband, Amr Adeeb, is one of the most popular Egyptian presenters. He hosted his show *Kol Youm (Everyday)* on ON TV, which was broadcasted on radio as well. The show covered various topics ranging from news and politics to entertainment. After some time off, Amr Adeeb started his new show on MBC Masr. The show is called *Al-hekaya (The Story) with Amr Adeeb*, launched in September 2018. In his new show, Amr Adeeb shares information about current events in the form of stories, hence the name of the show. The stories shared cover various topics ranging from politics and entertainment to domestic affairs. Amr Adeeb was a vocal critic of the Morsi presidency and broadly supports the current government.

Content Analysis

To download the posts and comments from Facebook, we used Netvizz (Rieder, 2013). For the content analysis, we developed a sampling strategy that reflected the varied popularity of the pages, but which also captured the diversity of the comments and their distribution across the various pages. After reading and rereading the posts and comments, we found that the most active Facebook pages in terms of reactions (likes, shares, comments etc.) were those of Al Masry Al Youm and Al Youm Al 7. We therefore selected 1,657 comments from Al Masry al Youm corresponding to the top eight posts in terms of comments/reactions. The number of comments coded represents a saturation point, after which there were no more new categories emerging. Similarly, we coded 1,662 comments from Al Youm Al 7 representing the most commented on eight posts, and 1,589 comments from Rassd News Network corresponding to 13 posts. Rassd News Network is an online news and media website that was launched on Facebook on January 25, 2011. The progovernment Al Ahram posts did not lead to as much engagement, and we therefore selected 580 comments for coding corresponding to 10 posts that elicited the most comments. Finally, *Daily News* was chosen to analyze the activity of the English-speaking part of the community. Given the low levels of comments on the page, we coded 206 comments corresponding to 60 posts. The time line for the chosen comments on Facebook ranged from November 2016 to June 2017 and from January 15 to 18, 2019, for Rassd News Network. In total, we coded 5,694 comments.

Additionally, we analyzed comments from the YouTube uploads by talk show hosts and television personalities Lamis El Hadidi and Amr Adeeb. After going through the different videos, we found that comments on YouTube for talk show hosts were not very frequent. We therefore selected the uploads on the basis of the comments they received. The two uploads for which we coded were the July 12 and 22, 2017, ones for Amr Adeeb, and the December 11, 2016, and July 2, 2017, ones for El Hadidi. Amr Adeeb touches on various topics in the video posted on July 12, and the December 2016 upload by Lamis El Hadidi concerned a harassment episode against her outside a church. The remaining two uploads were related to the Qatar crisis. In total, we coded 1,011 comments.

This part of the analysis is oriented toward understanding the reactions of people to political and other developments in Egyptian society as they are reported in the media under study. To do so, we employed an inductive approach based on grounded theory that requires immersion into the data (Siapera, 2014; Strauss, 1987). This required that comments are read several times, and the initial categories developed are refined. On reading and rereading, we reached a saturation point, with the same categories emerging. The focus here is to identify how people participate in the digital public sphere rather than the actual political or moral positions they take. Table 4 summarizes the categories and offers examples of comments. About 10% of the comments were double coded to ensure the reliability of the coding. The overall intercoder agreement was 85%.

Table 4. Classification Categories and Example.³

News outlet	Post	Comment	Coding category
<i>Daily News Egypt</i>	amazon.com will look into implementation procedures with the government within two weeks and meet top exporters says Hany Kesis former chairperson of Egyptian-American Business Council	It's not for Egyptian customers I guess, just logistics to distribute to any other place on the planet. Workforce is cheap	Criticism: comments that are critical of events/developments/news posted
<i>Daily News Egypt</i>	The support will come in the form of grants and concessional funds: Reuters #Egypt #Germany	Until when will Egypt continue to beg for hand-outs from other countries? Would Israel be next?! What did Germany accomplish that Egypt organically can't? Let's have some pride in ourselves, culture and religion. Disheartening!	Political anger/insult: comments that express anger or use insults in order to make a political point
<i>Al Youm Al 7</i>	# اليوم_السابع #تميم يضغط على #المانيا باستثماراته لتهدئة قادة الخليج . . التفاصيل على الرابط http://m.youm7.com/3273891 #تمويل_قطر_لِلارهاب Al Youm_ Al 7 #Tamim# pressures #Germany with investments to calm down Gulf leaders. Details on the following link. http://m.youm7.com/3273891 #Qatar_funding_Terrorism	انتم كذابين اوي ومنافقين اوي وكلاب فلوس اوي وتجار دين اوي You are true liars, double faced, dogs for money, and religion traders.	Anger/insult: comments that express anger or use insults but without making a political point

³ The classification scheme included a final category, labeled "Other," which contained comments deemed irrelevant to the analysis. These included insults toward other commenters, religious comments, tags, removed pictures, and spam.

Rassd News Network

بسام راضي المتحدث باسم #السياسي، قال إن ما تحقق في #مصر من الإنجازات خلال الأربعة سنوات الماضية، غير مسبوق في العالم بأكمله، وهذه الإنجازات كان يجب أن تتم خلال 25 عاما ما تعليقك؟

Bassam Rady the presidential spokesman for #Al Sisi said, that the accomplishments that have been achieved in #Egypt during the past four years, have not happened anywhere else in the world and that these achievements should have been accomplished over 25 years, what is your comment?

فين دي في اعماق البحار ولاجزيرة الاحلام وعندمقام السيسي

Where is that? At the bottom of the sea or on an island of dreams and from AL- Sisi's point of view.

Sarcasm political/non-political: comments that express sarcasm which may be making a political point or just being sarcastic

Interviews

Finally, we conducted 30 interviews with young Egyptians in the 20–40-year age range. The interviewees were chosen through a snowballing method, with the main criterion being that they were using digital media. Twenty of the interviews were carried out through the phone or Skype, and 10 were done face-to-face. In terms of gender balance, 17 of the interviewees were men and 13 were women. All interviewees lived in Cairo and were either employed or students. Each interviewee was prompted to respond to the following themes: sources of information and media use, trust, critical position, and Internet/social media access. This analysis is an exploratory probe into how a specific part the Egyptian public—urban, educated, social media users—is positioned in the digital public sphere in the post-2011 Egypt. The interviews were transcribed, translated into English, and the text was imported into QDA Miner Lite, a software program that allows the coding and analysis of text. As with the analysis of the comments, we adopted an inductive approach, reading and rereading the text, looking for emerging patterns around the key themes of Internet access and media use, trust, and critical position.

Findings: Explorations of the Egyptian Digital Public Sphere

This section reports on the analysis of the comments and interviews with a view to addressing the question of how a particular part of Egyptian society, namely digitally literate Facebook and YouTube users, are positioned in the digital public sphere and in response to news and current affairs reporting and broadcasting.

Public Participation: Comments

This section presents the findings of the content analysis of comments left in the Facebook pages and YouTube videos, seeking to capture the reactions and positions of the publics under study.

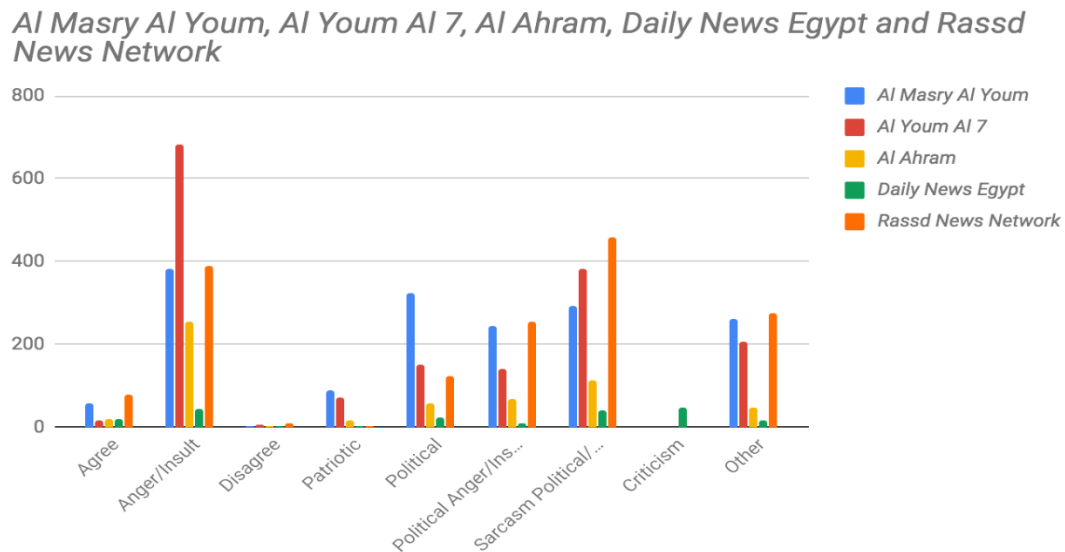


Figure 1. Results of content analysis—Facebook comments.

As can be seen in Figure 1, the most striking finding is the high volume of angry posts that use insults. We made a distinction between generalized angry/insulting posts and “political anger” to understand and clarify the direction of this anger. Although there were comments that politicized anger and directed insults toward a political target (the government, other politicians, or toward politicians and political developments outside Egypt), the majority of angry and insulting comments were directionless and broad, expressing anger, but without making any political points. This may be taken to indicate a widespread frustration that becomes translated into anger and resentment, but without finding a political outlet. In Dollard, Miller, Doob, Mowrer, and Sears’ (1939) theory of frustration–aggression, frustrated desires are linked to anger and aggression. Extrapolating, we may argue that the observed anger in the comments can be connected to the frustrated desire of Egyptian people for democracy.

The second most frequent category was that of sarcasm used to make a political point. Sarcasm is a kind of situated satire and can be seen as a specific kind of critical communication (Räwel, 2007). In linguistic theory, irony is self-referential, concerning an inversion between words and their actual meaning, thereby exposing a new relationship, while sarcasm is externally directed toward ridiculing a particular target (Räwel, 2007). Research suggests that sarcasm can have political value. For example, Knoblock (2016) showed the important role played by sarcasm in the context of the Ukrainian protests; she notes that sarcastic messages can be more effective compared with more straightforward communication, whereas they also contribute to strengthening in-group bonds. Van het Hof (2015) links sarcasm to feelings of political impotence, noting that when citizens feel entrapped, they are often led to creative and nonconformist ways out. The relatively large number of such comments in our sample points to the creative ways in which users are trying to make sense of their situation, which can then be seen as a form of gradual activism in Kraidy's (2016) sense. Sarcasm can also be viewed as a kind of humorous reappropriation of meaning which, as Halabi (2017) has shown in the case of Syria, may contribute to widening the discursive space and contesting political authority. On the other hand, in our case, there is no evidence that sarcastic comments are reclaiming lost political efficacy or that they feed into any concerted effort to connect people and their experiences into forming a coherent narrative. To the extent that these sarcastic comments are not part of any concerted efforts to develop a critical voice, their political contribution remains unclear. Moreover, to the extent that these sarcastic comments represent an instance of cynical reason (Sloterdijk, 1984), they are ambivalent toward the political order. As Wedeen (2013) notes, humor in dark times can unsettle the established order and allow for political openings, but it can also induce complacency and resignation. For Sloterdijk (1984), cynicism denotes a "detached negativity which scarcely allows itself any hope, at most a little irony and self-pity" (p. 194). As such, it cannot lead to any further political action, but can only accept the status quo as being inevitable. Rather than reflecting a pluralization of forms of expression in the public sphere, we take this sarcasm here to denote, at least in part, a cynical attitude toward the current state of affairs in Egypt, accompanied by resignation and fatalism.

The remaining comments fall into the categories of agreement, disagreement, and political argumentation, as well as the category of criticism, uniquely encountered in the English-language *Daily News Egypt*, indicating the existence of some degree of deliberation. Comments classified as patriotic constitute a small but sizeable minority, pointing to the continued relevance of patriotism in Egypt.

The findings of the content analysis of the comments on YouTube are presented in Figure 2.

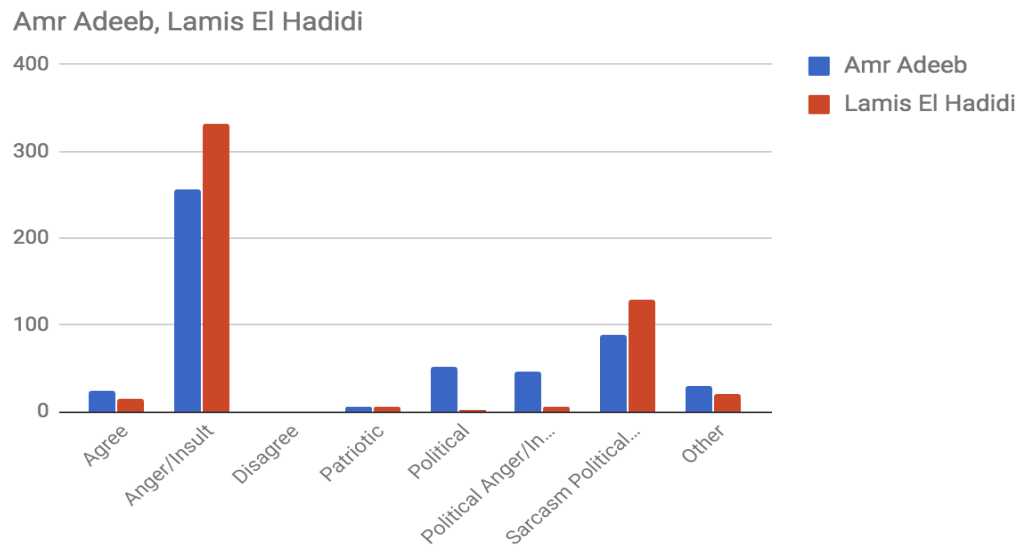


Figure 2. Results of content analysis—YouTube comments.

The comments here are taken to correspond to the positions adopted by some of the publics of these shows and as such they may capture a different dynamic of the Egyptian public sphere, one more attuned to the oral culture of the talk show and the visual culture of television. As Khamis (2011) observed, the high level of illiteracy in Egypt prioritizes broadcast media. On YouTube, we have a convergence between broadcast and social media, with comments left on YouTube uploads of popular talk shows offering an entry point to the positions taken by publics who may not necessarily consume or follow the news in print and online. The findings of the content analysis are similar to the analysis of the Facebook comments, pointing to an emerging pattern. Generalized anger and insults predominate, followed by sarcastic comments; both, as we saw above, are politically ambiguous.

Overall, the findings of the content analysis indicate two main issues: first, that the dominant sentiments are mainly negative, and second, that their political contribution is ambiguous. Anger and indignation constituted a major mobilizing force in both the Arab Spring and the Occupy/Indignados movements (Gerbaudo, 2012). However, in our study, these sentiments appear disjointed and too ad hoc to lead to any kind of concerted action and to any coherent narrative. Additionally, they appear associated with a cynical attitude in the sense of pointing to a disconnect among knowledge, feelings, and action (Sloterdijk, 1984). Adding to these the broader depoliticization of the public sphere that we observed earlier, there is little room for optimism. A similar depoliticization is found in the interviews we conducted with young people in Cairo. These are reported next.

Interviews: Disinterest and Disaffection

How do people talk about the media, social media, and politics? As mentioned earlier, the interviews revolved around these key themes: access to the Internet and (social) media use, trust, and critical position. In terms of Internet access and media use, the majority of our respondents cited Facebook as their main entry point to the Internet, and especially when it comes to news and information. At the same time, they are aware that some people may not have an Internet subscription and believe that because of this, television is still a very powerful medium. All of them come across news in their feeds because they are shared by others in their networks. In this, Egyptian publics follow the same pattern reported in other studies that show that more than 26% of Facebook users come across news without looking for it (Newman et al., 2017). For the majority of our respondents, Facebook is primarily seen as a medium for personal connection.

When it comes to political news, several of our respondents appeared disinterested and fatigued. They point to the unpleasant and polarizing aspects of the news in the current context and take steps to avoid them. This is what one respondent said: "I know that most of the stuff going around Facebook in general for politics in Egypt is mainly people raging at each other, so I started ignoring them." And this from another respondent: "I ignore it completely because it depresses me and it is usually all negative stuff"; and yet another: "I don't keep myself updated. I hate news, I hate politics, I began getting depressed from all the news." For others, this is because they cannot do anything about it: "[following political news] won't change anything, so I ignore it straightaway." For some this appears to be a recent development: "During the revolution I used to always follow the news websites. I even used to access Twitter, but now I lost interest in current events."

This shift away from news may be connected to the relatively low levels of trust they reported. Most of our respondents said that they do not trust news they see on Facebook. Two main reasons were given for this: first, that the sources are unreliable—"Facebook is the source of rumors and exaggeration," as one of our respondents put it. Second, because the information is often contradictory or biased pointing to the sociopolitical polarization in current Egyptian society—"I stopped viewing news posts on Facebook because people tend to post news articles that align with their own thoughts." Some mentioned that this loss of trust is generalized: "I guess people are less tending to believe in news off social media as time goes by since 2011."

This skepticism toward the news feeds into the development of a critical position, but also to a return to more personalized forms of trust. Specifically, several respondents had developed a methodology for approaching the news. If they heard something from a number of sources in their social media feeds, they would then go online and search for more information across several sites, including national and oppositional in Egypt, as well as international news outlets. Several respondents pointed to their use of international media such as BBC World, CNN, France 24, and Al Jazeera English to verify news. This is what one of our informants said:

If I am looking to verify news, I look at multiple sources. I start with international outlets like *The New York Times* and *The Independent*, then I check Egyptian outlets like Masrawy and *Daily News Egypt*, and then I check the mainstream ones that I know are biased, like CNN.com and BBC.

For many of our informants, their personal, face-to-face networks constitute a trustworthy source of news, pointing to a further shift toward the private sphere. Several mentioned their parents and grandparents:

If I am interested, I begin checking many pages and going through the things people shared on Facebook. Afterwards, I ask my mother and grandmother because they are always following the news. . . . If it's something serious I won't believe Facebook straight away; I have to go back to someone more trustworthy.

This analysis revealed that, at least for some of our respondents, following the news and paying attention to political developments is not worthy because they get depressed or they cannot do anything about it. Personal media use is therefore prioritized over political use. Second, there is a lot of skepticism about the quality of news encountered in social media. Although this can lead to the assumption of a critical position and the development of lay strategies for news verification, ultimately, this lack of credibility appears to favor the mainstream media, whether in Egypt or abroad.

In her research on political activists in the aftermath of the revolution, Matthies-Boon (2017) found that the trauma of the post-revolutionary period, along with the negative outcomes, made them turn away from the political sphere and retreat into their private world. Although our respondents did not suffer the same traumatic situations, it is important to note, as Matthies-Boon argues, that the revolution and its aftermath constitute social traumas, and their effects are social. The disaffection and depoliticization we encountered among our interviewees, as well as the retreat to the private sphere and the immediate family, may be interpreted as at least partly the result of having experienced such a social trauma. Matthies-Boon (2017) argues that one of the reasons for this depoliticization among the young political activists she studied has been the outcome of the revolution. A positive outcome could enable people to reinterpret their experiences in more positive terms; in this situation, the trauma would have been seen as worth it. However, this was not possible in Egypt, because of political polarization and the disappointing post-revolutionary outcomes. We observe a similar dynamic among our interviewees, who express disinterest, apathy and even depression at the political situation, hence justifying their retreat to the private sphere and personal relations.

Conclusion

This article began with a discussion of the connections and relationships among the public sphere, digital media, and public participation in the context of post-2011 Egypt. We synthesized the approaches of Chadwick (2013) and Kraidy (2006) and made use of other studies in the post-2011 Egypt as we sought to develop a theoretical understanding of the current situation in Egypt that combines an analysis of the formal media system with the more bottom up, ordinary user participation.

Our results indicate that the media system is characterized by increasing control that constitutes a regression to the prerevolutionary Egypt, but with the added element of extending this control to online media. Secondly, the social media platforms of Facebook and YouTube are dominated by religious personalities and by entertainment. Turning to the publics themselves, we found that the majority of comments mobilized anger and insults or were ironic and sarcastic. Although both types may have a political role to play, we interpreted these as linked to a cynical attitude, in the sense of denoting a dissociation of knowledge and action: People seem to know what is going on, but are not acting, or willing to act, on this knowledge. Nevertheless, the role of irony and sarcasm in widening the space of what can be said should not be underestimated. Further research may examine the ways in which Egyptian humor unsettles dominant narratives. Finally, the interviews point to a disaffection and a disillusionment with both the political sphere and the role of social media, which are now seen as given to rumors, polarization, and lacking in credibility. These findings indicate that there is little appetite for stretching the contours of the hypermedia space and for any meaningful political participation.

Sakr (2013) found that restrictions on mainstream media pushed communication online, thereby validating Kraidy's (2006) arguments on the hypermedia space as facilitating contestation. However, this may have changed now, as our findings paint a different picture: Controls have spread online, and online publics have turned away from politics. The dominant affect we encountered here is anger, whereas contestation takes the form of irony and sarcasm linked to cynicism. While we did not look at other spaces, such as, for example, activist pages, our examination of a slice of the mainstream, ordinary public sphere reveals a shift away from political and public concerns. Disaffection is therefore taken to represent the specific structure of feeling found in the post-2011 Egyptian mainstream digital public sphere, with publics appearing alienated and unwilling to engage politically or to develop a momentum that may take the revolutionary project further. In this sense, the revolution really remains unfinished (Alexander & Aouragh, 2014), suspended until further notice.

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