The Arab Spring
The Role of ICTs

Connecting the National and the Virtual:
Can Facebook Activism Remain Relevant After Egypt's
January 25 Uprising?

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The objective of this article is to ground the debate about the connection between social media and popular uprisings in the specific context of recent social and political trends in Egypt. This is crucial when attempting to draw conclusions about the factors and mechanisms that produced Egypt's January 25, 2011, revolution and, more importantly, whether social media can contribute to building a new political culture to support the revolution. Although it took just 18 days of protests to force the resignation of President Mubarak, constructing a new political culture will be a slower and more challenging process. If social media are to provide a real channel for political debate and activism, they must connect with traditional forms of media and civil society. This will ensure that the dialogue about Egypt's future remains national rather than retreating to the virtual.

Introduction

The various forms of uprisings and protests that erupted across the Middle East in early 2011 mean that conventional wisdom about the region and its inability to move away from autocracy to democracy needs to be reconsidered. One of the key debates that has emerged from these events concerns the extent to which social media can be said to have contributed to the form, timing, and outcomes of the uprisings. There has been a Facebook boom in the wake of the resignation on February 11, 2011. According to the Facebook statistics portal Socialbakers, the number of Facebook users in Egypt increased by around one million between December 28, 2010, and March 8, 2011 (Socialbakers, 2011b). Numerous groups have sprung up seeking to ensure that the ideas and demands of the "Tahrir Youth" are not overlooked by the established political organizations. This is perhaps the main challenge for those who used social media to call for freedom. Long before January 25, social media had become the main channel for the growing young educated Egyptians to discuss their aspirations, precisely because Egyptian life was so polarized between the old guard of Mubarak's National Democratic Party (NDP) and Islamist groups.

This article seeks to set out an overview of the questions being posed about how and why social media are believed to have contributed in the case of Egypt. In order to do this, it is necessary to unpack the social media effect. What is significantly different about social media? It is also crucial to place events into their political context within Egypt. This will indicate how the political climate intersected with developments in the social media scene prior to, during, and after the January 25 revolution. With a lack of representative politics or independent media, new media were the only channel available to young people (approximately two-thirds of the population are thought to be under 30), who did not feel represented by the existing and very limited political options available. Endemic corruption and cronyism in the political system mean that those with political experience are neither representative nor credible. This was the reason why the protests continued after Mubarak's resignation to secure the cabinet that had been appointed by him during the crisis. For the protesters, the government of Ahmed Shafiq did not represent a change of the old order and did not have the trust of the people.

This article provides a rapid reaction to events as they have been unfolding since January 2011. It will survey the developments in the media and political scene prior to January 25 and in the use of Facebook during and since the protests using participant-observation methods. It will also draw on my previous research on Egyptian media, which is based on interviews, questionnaires, and media discourse analyses carried out between 2005 and 2010. Finally, the article will refer to my interviews with Egyptian Facebook users conducted after Mubarak's resignation to illuminate their view of social media and how they could be used to shape Egypt's political future.

Evidently there are questions regarding how the momentum for political reform online manifested itself in such public action and whether the growth of online activities can consistently interact with realities on the ground in Egypt. Realistically, the same difficulties that necessitated the use of social media as an alternative communicative space need time and considerable effort to solve. As this article argues, although social media provide an essential sphere for dialogue, its users must engage strongly and consistently with traditional forms of media and political organization in order to avoid limiting their audience to Internet users alone and therefore limiting the ability of those activists who have relied on social media to have an impact on Egypt's political transition.

The "Socialness" of Social Media

January 25, 2011, was not the first time that political activists using social media have planned national protests. Although these previous attempts failed to effect such dramatic and obvious change, they were not without impact. They also indicated a growing trend of political activism. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that social media helped activists find each other and enabled their discussions and activities to become more visible. In fact, the Internet emerges as social space only through the actions of its users (Saunders, 2006, p. 51). This interaction was highlighted in Miller and Slater's (2000) ethnography of the Internet in Trinidad. They found that the Internet is not necessarily a separate virtual world but, rather, that it is often embedded in other social spaces.

In an autocratic and stagnant political system such as that in Egypt, where politics is exclusive and traditional media have limited freedom of speech, there is a severe democratic deficit. The result is

that the majority must choose to remain passive rather than participate in a system without credibility (Soliman, 2006), or it must create parallel spaces for participation (Iskander, 2010). A growing generation of computer-literate young people who had known only one president during their lifetime has been forced outside the traditional avenues of participation in the public sphere to construct a networked online society (El Gamal, 2010, p. 21). New media enable individuals to bypass the traditional gatekeepers to, and sources of, information.

But the effect goes further still. New media do not consist simply of information being delivered to an audience as in the traditional mass media model. The Internet, and in particular social media, generate discussion and interaction on a many-to-many basis (Curran & Gurevitch, 2005, p. 12), which support the creation of networked communities. The Internet is a tool for conversation and organization that affords the opportunity for interaction, and social media can connect people into networks around various nodes (cf. Castells, 2004). This potential differentiates social media even from other Internet genres such as blogs (Faris, 2008). During the 2011 protests, information snowballed via Facebook and Twitter as information was spread not only from person to person but from one person's network to another's, with people within each network forwarding to their networks, and so on.

Pivotal to the continued momentum of these protests was the exchange of information, not only within social media networks but between online and offline networks via multiple means of communication. In discussions with Egyptians living outside Egypt at the time, it is easy to build up a picture of this multilayered information exchange. One interviewee (Facebook activist M. M., personal communication, March 12, 2011) described watching al-Jazeera via satellite television with his computer on his lap and both mobile and landline telephones beside him. Throughout the 18 days of protest, particularly while Internet access inside Egypt was shut down, he posted updates on his Facebook profile from al-Jazeera and called landline numbers in Egypt to pass news from the Internet and satellite television on to family and friends. In turn, he gleaned eyewitness accounts from inside Egypt from these calls and then relayed them to his network among the Egyptian diaspora via Facebook and Twitter and to a wider audience via English-language media websites and blogs.

In this way, information was relayed back and forth and across various networks inside and outside Egypt. This enabled Egyptians watching from outside to participate and ensure that all concerned parties were well informed and supported so that a community physically fragmented by location was able to connect around a common concern. This was important especially on the first Friday of the protests, January 28, when the state media inside Egypt, such as satellite channels Nile News TV and al-Masreya, were focusing their broadcasts on the rumors of looting and violence. This spread panic and fear among people because alternative sources of information were limited and some were convinced that the protests should end. By keeping the information flowing, people were able to judge the situation more clearly, and this helped to maintain the momentum of the protests.

Preparing the Ground for January 25

Egypt's uprising did demonstrate some of the ways in which social media are different and the ways they can be used. However, this does not mean that they produced this uprising or that their new-

found prominence will lead to a more democratic polity. The political impact of all forms of media is complex, and the relationship is always shaped by the interaction of a number of localized variables (Gunther & Mughan, 2000). The previous failed attempts by activists to use social media to organize substantial protests show that momentum is required at the national level for social media to amplify and support. Social media could not organize a movement or supply momentum to a protest that was not there. In the case of Egypt, there has been a process of growing political awareness and activism of which social media have been a part and for which they have contributed to carving out a space. The use of social media represents a phase in the development of Egyptian political and social activism that is firmly embedded in a long-term process and ebb and flow of opposition organization on the one hand, and the response to it on the part of the autocratic governmental system on the other.

An important prerequisite was the ability of the political opposition to organize around specific issues. Initially these were foreign policy issues, such as the outbreak of the second Palestinian Intifada in 2001 and the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Opposition blocs could unify around these foreign policy issues in a way in which they could not around domestic issues, first because of state repression and secondly because of ideological divisions. Egypt's opposition under Mubarak was fragmented and polarized. Moreover, within the various blocs, such as the Islamists, the Nasserists, and the liberals, internal divisions weakened their ability to organize and to attract support (Shehata, 2010). Ideological differences—the struggles between the aging leadership and the new guard within parties and divisions over the best way to challenge, or indeed cooperate, with the regime—actually helped to ensure the continuation of the autocratic regime.

Nevertheless, at times the opposition was able to force some liberalizing gestures. From 2004 onward, there was some opening-up of the political scene. This was due to the combination of a period of tolerance by the regime and this new wave of opposition alliances and campaigns. Part of this was a more tolerant attitude toward the media. Though no practical changes were made to the restrictive press laws, as Mubarak had promised in 2004, the rules were applied less strictly. The Egyptian press has long been dominated by state-owned or -affiliated newspapers, but the founding of the independent newspaper *al-Masry al-Youm* in 2004 was a turning point in providing alternative media coverage (Black, 2008). An increase in independent newspapers and satellite television channels at this time, along with the growth of Internet and mobile technologies, all combined to create a more vibrant and open media climate.

Using the momentum and tactics that grew out of the protests against the Iraq war in 2003, this period also witnessed new alliances and movements among the opposition. One indicator was the establishment of *Kefaya* and Ayman Nour's *al-Ghad* party in 2004. The latter became a new forum for the liberal secularists to gather around, but the attention attracted by Nour pushed the regime to react by arresting him. Unlike al-Ghad, Kefaya was conceived of as an all-inclusive protest movement. The founders recognized the need for an inclusive platform that left ideology to one side to focus on the central aim of challenging the regime. It also recognized the need to open up new spaces for dialogue and activism to avoid the restrictions placed on the media by the state. Although Kefaya did not fully succeed, it did present an attempt to remedy the deep-rooted difficulty of undertaking inclusive political activism in the autocratic Egyptian system and among the heavily polarized opposition groups. New media were also

among the tools employed by Kefaya to overcome the restrictions on freedom of speech and the fragmentation of the political scene.

It was also at this time that the impact of blogs began to emerge (Radsch, 2008). The relative freedom of speech offered by blogs enabled individuals to discuss issues considered taboo and to air their "virtual dissent" publicly (Koukal, 2010, p. 122). Bloggers were able to disseminate footage of antigovernment protests, such as those held by Kefaya, in a state in which protests were illegal. It was also bloggers who were the first to speak openly and explicitly about police torture. Bloggers posted testimonies, pictures, and videos on the Internet that exposed police brutality (3arabawy, February 2007; The Arabist, 2006). This began to break the boundaries of what could be discussed in the media as the state's monopoly was challenged (Hany Labib, journalist, personal communication, 2008; Mariz Tadros, Egyptian academic, personal communication, 2008; Kamal Zakher, journalist and activist, personal communication, 2008).

Political movements and the tools of a more accessible and open media made dissent more obvious by opening up channels for its expression. Increased visibility of the expression of dissent enabled activists to find each other and to connect around a cause. So, when workers in Egypt's large industrial city al-Mahalla al-Kubra planned a strike on April 6, 2008, there was a kind of infrastructure in place to react. Bloggers recorded events and posted pictures and eyewitness accounts (3arabawy, April 2008). This enabled people to bypass state media by accessing citizen journalism disseminated online. While the state press portrayed the protests as minor and isolated (Reese, 2009), electronic media told a different story, and so attitudes of people toward protests and the sense of their ability to criticize the government slowly began to change.

April 6, 2008, was also the first major step of social media into political protests. In March 2008, an Egyptian woman named Esraa Abdel Fattah created a group on Facebook calling for solidarity with the protests planned for April in al-Mahalla al-Kubra. The group quickly attracted massive support, as the al-Mahalla strikes began to symbolize a broader protest against national social, economic, and political grievances. This meant that an industrial strike by workers calling for higher wages was transformed into a call for a day of national strikes. As Faris (2008) argues,

> it was only with the bridging and amplifying capabilities of Web 2.0 that a textile strike turned into a national event. In other words, April 6th was the day when organizing tool met political reality to create elements that were strong enough to form storm clouds on the regime's horizon. (p. 2)

The government clearly felt threatened, and Abdel Fattah was arrested and held for approximately two weeks. Despite the putting down of the strikes by the police, the seeds of change had been sown, and social media emerged as a potential tool for political engagement. Small-scale protests continued after this event, and an "April 6 Movement" emerged as part of the political scene.

The climate of increasing dissent and public calls for political reform was clear when Mohammed ElBaradei returned to Egypt in February 2010 and launched the Association for Change. ElBaradei, former

head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, tapped into this climate and used the tools of social media to collect signatures supporting his demands for constitutional reforms that would ensure free and fair presidential elections that were due in late 2011. ElBaradei used Twitter and Facebook to address his supporters and circumvent Egyptian state media, which had launched a strong campaign of propaganda against him. Despite this, prior to the January 25 uprising, ElBaradei had failed to achieve practical progress and was not in Egypt when the protests started. This points again to the continued importance of traditional media. While new media increase the space available for certain sections of the audience, they can increase the exclusion of that section of the audience, which in Egypt is the majority that does not have regular Internet access. The campaign against ElBaradei also indicate that, despite the offer of some gestures of liberalization around 2004 that temporarily afforded increased tolerance to political opposition and the media, the government soon returned to coercion and repression. So the brief gains made by the media and activists in carving out a limited space to challenge the government were met with increased conflict and attempts to clamp down on freedom of expression. This was particularly evident after the success of the Muslim Brotherhood in the 2005 parliamentary elections and as the question of the potential succession of Gamal Mubarak to the presidency after his father became more fraught.

However, the relative freedoms the state had afforded opposition movements and media proved difficult to curtail entirely. In this regard, new media certainly played a role. Satellite television and the Internet posed an ever more complex challenge for a government used to being able to control access to information. This change in the political climate in Egypt collided with the bedrock of frustrations that had become deep-rooted as a result of government's efforts to maintain its power through coercion and corruption. These factors combined in a single incident, which was the killing of Khalid Mohamed Said at the hands of the police in June 2010. On June 6, Said was arrested at a cybercafé in Alexandria. Witnesses reported seeing police officers violently beating Said to death outside the café, and pictures of his disfigured body were posted all over the Internet. Despite this evidence, the police report blamed Said's death on attempting to swallow a packet of cannabis, causing popular outrage across Egyptian society.

One major outcome of this incident was a further breaking-down of taboos of public criticism of the government and the police. It also led to the creation of the Facebook group "We Are All Khalid Said," which became perhaps the central group in the lead-up to January 25. This group gave a focus to the frustrations, stemming from a variety of reasons ranging from social to economic, held among the population. The group also illustrated how social media could be used in Egypt to create solidarity among an oppressed population. Beyond ideology, location, or socioeconomic circumstances, thousands of Egyptians were able to bond through a shared sense of outrage at the death of a young Egyptian man and through the shared sense of anger against a police brutally exploiting emergency laws to reinforce Mubarak's hold on power.

Choosing January 25 as the "Day of Rage" that began the protests was therefore symbolic because this is National Police Day in Egypt. The police represent repression by the state, the problem of torture and arbitrary arrest symbolizing the corruption and sense of a loss of dignity that cast a shadow over Egyptian society throughout Mubarak's presidency (Bradley, 2009). The coinciding of specific local issues with the tools to organize and express them enabled the protests to be relatively inclusive,

representing a cross-section of socioeconomic groups. This inclusiveness, which also overcame (at least temporarily) the rising sectarian tensions that had been evident prior to January 25, confirms that there was a convergence of factors that enabled events to develop as they did. Crucially, there was the creation of momentum online that interacted with the general public. This linked the national and the virtual behind the shared goal of bringing about Mubarak's resignation.

Challenges for Social Media

Drawing on the same shared frustrations that emerged in the Khalid Said incident, social media were able to amplify and direct the resonance of this symbolism into national protests. Social media cannot create such resonance, but, like the traditional media, they can tap into and amplify it and elicit an emotive response (Entman, 2004). Using the momentum that events in Tunisia had created across Egypt through television reports and images, social media connected with this resonance growing in the Egyptian public space. These events point to the crucial issue. Social media have shown their ability to connect people online and to act as a tool for political debate and organization, but as long as this remained only online, the Web 2.0 activists, although they were talking more, were still largely talking only to each other.

Although Hofheinz (2007, p. 62) indicates that Egypt has the fastest growing and largest number of Internet users in the Arab world, according to the Program of Governance in the Arab Region (POGAR) the population penetration of the Internet in Egypt in 2007 was 6.90%. The average for the Middle East was 7.38%. Penetration of the Internet is uneven because of the economic and social gap between urban centers such as Cairo and Alexandria and the Egyptian countryside, which is comparatively undeveloped. There is clearly a digital divide that limits the reach of social media (Awad Baseet, editor of *al-Katiba al-Tibia*, personal communication, 2008; Mariz Tadros. Egyptian academic, personal communication, 2008).

Norris (2001) found that the factors affecting access to electronic media include occupation, education, gender, and generation. According to the website Socialbakers (2011a), which gathers statistics on Facebook usage, in Egypt 63% of Facebook users are male and 37% female. This reflects patterns found in my surveys of Egyptian Coptic Christian usage of the Internet. The surveys carried out online in 2008–2009 showed that 63.4% of the respondents were male and 32.7% were female, with the remainder not responding (Iskander, 2010). This finding indicates that the gender gap in Internet usage and engagement is broad and not limited only to Facebook. Consequently, it does present a problem for the claims of social media to be representative.

This suggests that new media influence is severely limited, but this is not the whole story. Traditional national media still have a role in reaching those whom the Internet does not and in driving public debate, and so it was the relationship and interaction between social media and traditional media that was pivotal to creating the environment for renewed political activism. In the example of the bloggers' coverage of police torture mentioned earlier, although it became an issue online through these blogs, it had an impact at the national level only when traditional media began to discuss it and NGOs promoted it as an issue. Similarly, a video posted on YouTube (engihaddad, 2007) of an Egyptian woman being harassed in central Cairo led to a significant public debate of this previously taboo social problem.

Later the press and civil society took up this issue, and in October 2008, this combined movement resulted in the first conviction of a man for harassment. At the same time, this example shows that traditional media needed social media to forge a larger and less restrictive space to be able to have an impact on the political scene.

The Social Media Role During the January 25 Events

Some observers point to the fact that the Internet was largely shut down for part of the main 18-day period of protests as proof that social media were not important in how events unfolded, but, as the foregoing discussion argues, social media were part of the buildup to January 25 and were among the factors that made it possible. The Internet was shut down, but not until after the first two days of protests, by which time organization had been put in place and the first events, particularly news of the violence in Suez, had been disseminated and created enough momentum to demonstrations to continue without the tool of the Internet (Facebook activist S. M., personal communication, March 11, 2011). Before the net was shut down, social media were used to spread advice on how to react, what to do if placed under arrest or attacked with tear gas. Information about how to use proxies to try to overcome Internet restrictions was quickly spread through people's social media networks.

The Internet was restored after less than a week, and from then on the interaction between social media and other channels of communication took a step forward. The "Tahrir Youth" used social media and their foreign language skills to ensure their visibility and to promote their objectives, although for the majority, it is likely that television did act as a more important source of information (Facebook activist M. G., personal communication, March 11, 2011). But what was interesting was the close relationship between the two. In one example of the crossover between forms of communication that emerged according to the requirements on the ground to get information out, news channels, particularly al-Jazeera, began to use social media such as Twitter as sources of information. This is why the fast establishment of the Voice-to-Twitter technology was so crucial while the Internet was still restricted. The importance of this interaction led to the phenomenon of protesters in Tahrir Square holding up placards in front of TV cameras with Twitter usernames and hash tags for people watching to access. One young Egyptian protester explained to me how she would follow Tweets from the square, translate them to English, and forward them to news agencies (Facebook activist R. N., personal communication, March 13, 2011). Key hash tags included #jan25, #tahrir, #amneldawla, and #elbardie, and, in concert with satellite television, they enabled protesters in a leaderless movement to unite, organize, and speak to the world and each other.

After Mubarak's Resignation

In the immediate aftermath of the resignation, congratulations rebounded across Facebook and Twitter. This was followed by the emergence of humor and in-jokes as social media users began to come to terms with what had happened and to discourse what they felt about their revolution. The humor and the sharing of pictures, music, and videos reflecting on the protests represented a celebration of Egypt and what had been achieved (Beckett, 2011). Many users adopted patriotic profile pictures, such as pictures of their participation in the protests or images of the Egyptian flag, to reflect their involvement

and engagement with events. One man even paid tribute to Facebook by naming his newborn daughter after the social networking site, which demonstrates that social media are part of the discourse of the January 25 revolution for some Egyptians. But if social media were a factor in preparing the ground before the protests and an important element interacting with other forms of communications technology during them, is there a role for social media to play after Mubarak's resignation? The main question now is whether social media can continue to support the aims of those who protested and afford them a voice in Egypt's transitional period.

Even while the sense of euphoria and celebration continued, there was also a noticeable increase in Facebook groups discussing the serious side of the revolution, particularly groups to gather in the various youth organizations, who were determined that the revolution should not be taken over by political forces, including the Muslim Brotherhood and other political figures who, they felt, do not represent them or their revolution. There was a clear determination for those who were using social media before January 25 to organize to hold on to their demands and achievements. Although this determination is clear, the emphasis must still be on transferring this energy and organization to the public sphere.

That transfer seems to have happened to some extent. An acknowledgment of, and a new-found respect for, the impact of social media has emerged. One example is the announcement of al-Jazeera's plans to create a show with its content centered on social networking. As well as broadcast media, the Egyptian government has been forced to acknowledge the importance of social media. The Supreme Military Council that took power in the wake of Mubarak's resignation established a Facebook page on which all its statements have been published. Less than 24 hours after being created, the page had 89,627 fans. By March 15, 2011, it had 818,107 fans. *Al-Dostour* newspaper (March 10, 2011) also reported that the government is considering using electronic voting so that Egyptians abroad can participate in elections. This represents a significant departure from previous government policies toward both elections and electronic media technology.

One of the major concerns that has emerged concerning social media is the question of the constitutional amendments. There was a concerted campaign on Facebook and Twitter calling people to vote no in the referendum on the amendments. In the two weeks prior to the referendum on the amendments, many users changed their profile pictures to an image reading "No" in Arabic. Other users highlighted the fact that only the Muslim Brotherhood among the political opposition supports the amendments. These users demonstrated this by posting links to articles, video clips and images that had been uploaded to the Internet. Despite these efforts, the vote passed with 77% voting yes. This underlined the fact that, although the social media campaigners are organized and active, they are a minority facing significant challenges in translating their activism into change in the Egyptian street. It is when these campaigns physically go to the street that there is more of an impact. Another of the key issues championed by social media activists since February 11, is the demand to bring Mubarak and his family to trial. Although these demands were circulated via Facebook and Twitter and formed a core issue for the Tahrir Youth Coalition, it was only after renewed protests were held in Tahrir Square on April 8, leading to a violent clash between the army and demonstrators, that Mubarak was finally arrested on April 13.

Clearly, then, social media remain a tool for activists rather than being activism in and of themselves. In the wake of Mubarak's resignation, they have been more instrumental in maintaining demands for transparency rather than in directly effecting political change. Freer and more transparent media are often considered essential in supporting democratic practices, and social media do appear to be acting as a check on government through the determination of the social media users to stay well informed and combat corruption through freedom of information. Countless video clips have been circulated of interviews given by figures who are now struggling to emerge as leaders in the post–January 25 Egypt. Amr Moussa had emerged during the protests as a potential transitional leader or candidate for president. However, when Twitter and Facebook users circulated an interview in which he express his faith in Mubarak and his policies, it undermined his credibility. At the same time, interviews with Mohamed ElBaradei were posted in which he accused Mubarak's government of tyranny. According to one Facebook activist, these revelations are having an effect on the levels of support for these two figures (Facebook activist R. N., personal communication, March 13, 2011). But the question is whether this impact is being felt outside the demographic that makes up a large proportion of Facebook activists, or whether it is also having an impact in the national public sphere.

In any case, these interviews are an example of how television speeches, articles, images, and documents are constantly being recorded and placed online to create an accessible archive of information. This has cathartic effect for a society that has operated under oppression and censorship. For example, the release of documents from the feared National Security (Amn al-Dawla) service in early March 2011 created a mini-WikiLeaks phenomenon. The dissemination of information has also become a tool that pressures politicians and state media to be more open. Although some journalists from state publications and channels have resigned or changed their speech since Mubarak's resignation, there are still concerns about the objectivity of the media. The editor-in-chief of the state's biggest newspaper, al-Ahram, was not removed, and the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces appointed an army figure, Tarek al-Mehdi, as minister for media. This places challenges ahead of increasing the flow of information and discourse between the various forms of communication and poses a challenge for the ability of social media users to have an impact on developments, unless there is concerted focus to use social media to organize events and discussion "offline." To do so, traditional media must be made use of and engaged with.

Conclusion

Social media were central to the way the January 25 uprising was experienced for the section of society that uses Facebook and Twitter. They were also central to the way the uprising was "mediated" and explained to the outside world. It is clear that those who use social media believe that these media had a role in preparing the debates and networks that facilitated the organization of the protests that began on January 25. Shortly after Mubarak resigned, Wael Ghoneim appeared on CNN and thanked Facebook. In this interview he explicitly said that he believed this was a revolution that started online in June 2010, when he created the "We Are All Khalid Said" Facebook group (Smith, 2011). This article has argued that the lead-up to January's events was longer in the making than that, but the momentum certainly picked up after the death of Khalid Said, because that incident acted as a tangible focus for solidarity. Social media were then able to provide the medium and the tools *for some* to express their reactions to the incident and its causes. Although social media enabled a particular group of people to

narrate the revolution and its demands, the views and discourses that dominate Egyptian Facebook spaces do not necessarily represent the political voice of the majority of Egyptians. The referendum campaign and its result pointed to this reality.

The protests themselves were inclusive, and the participants rejected any attempts to label the protests to any particular, group or ideology. In hindsight the creation of broad-based movements such as Kefaya can be seen as having a transformative effect, which was a crucial step in breaking out of the exclusive and polarized political scene. As Shorbagy (2007) convincingly argues, Egypt was in need of "a new form of politics that pulls together diverse forces from across the political spectrum to forge a new national project." It was inclusiveness that was a necessary ingredient to the January 25 protests and ensured their success, and a focus on social media should not disguise the reality in the Egyptian street. The Egyptian political scene still suffers from fragmentation but it is now more open, opposition is more visible, and opportunities are broader. This may in fact lead to further fragmentation as political blocs, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, no longer face an existential threat from the regime, forcing internal differences to remain in the background. The problem of the generational gap between the old leadership of political groups and the young generation of activists has also become more visible, and the debates that have dominated Egyptian politics, such as whether Egypt is a secular state or an Islamic state, still remain unanswered.

These realities should be borne in mind in assessing the role of social media in a post–January 25 Egypt. If social media are to continue to play a role other than acting as a separate communicative space, the flow of communication between different forms of media and between the different "audiences" within Egypt is crucial. Social media must capitalize on the newly acknowledged ability of the Internet to affect events inside Egypt by facilitating the free flow of information. But Egyptians must ensure that this information flow is connected, via civil society organizations, political activism, and traditional media, to the national public sphere. The key role of social media is perhaps not to replace traditional media or to act as an alternative political sphere but rather to focus on ensuring that traditional media are transparent and do not continue to be dominated by state propaganda. Shehata (2010) identified a cyclical pattern of liberalization measures followed by increased coercion under Mubarak's government, and use of social media could be crucial to ensure that the sudden surge toward democratization since January 25 will not lead to a new era of repression.

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