IJoC Arab Revolutions: Breaking Fear

Blogging Against Violations of Human Rights in Egypt:
An Analysis of Five Political Blogs

MOHAMMED EL-NAWAWY
Queens University of Charlotte, USA

SAHAR KHAMIS
University of Maryland, USA[1]

Violations of human rights were among the most serious problems under the rule of ousted Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak. Egyptian political bloggers played a critical role in reporting about the regime's infringements on human rights and freedom of expression. This study analyzes a number of threads selected from five prominent Egyptian blogs that deal with human rights violations. The analysis is divided into three main categories based on the functions the blogs attempted to perform: public mobilization, documentation, or deliberation. The analysis highlights the significant intersection between these three functions, which augmented one another and contributed to the democratization in Egypt in a manner that paved the way for the Egyptian revolution of January 2011.

Keywords: civic engagement, cyberactivism, blogging, citizen journalism, civil society, public mobilization, documentation, deliberation, human rights

Introduction

Beginning in 2004, political blogs and other forms of media in Egypt paved the way for the eruption of the revolution of January 25, 2011, that toppled the regime of President Hosni Mubarak. Blogs have allowed for the wide sharing of an antigovernmental discourse that revealed the former Egyptian

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Mohammed el-Nawawy: mohammedn99@hotmail.com
Sahar Khamis: skhamis@umd.edu

regime's dysfunctions and offenses, such as violations of human rights and limitations on freedom and democratic practice.

The focus on the Egyptian blogosphere in particular in this study stems from the fact that Egyptian bloggers represent "the largest structural cluster in the Arabic blogosphere, undoubtedly in part because Egypt has a large online population, and the largest population of any Arab country" (Etling et al., 2009, p. 15). Moreover, Egypt has been considered a pioneering political player and a strategic heavyweight in the Arab world throughout the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century. "For these, and for many other reasons, what happens in Egypt matters throughout the region" (Jones, 2007, p. 11).

Through analyzing the discourses in five of the most popular Egyptian political blogs, we highlight the role played by political blogs in encouraging civic engagement and public participation through (1) acting as effective tools for supporting the capabilities of democratic activists by allowing forums for free speech and political networking opportunities and (2) providing a virtual space for assembly, which allows for the exchange of civic discourse, deliberation, and articulation that goes beyond simply supporting the capability of the protestors to plan, organize, and execute peaceful protests on the ground.

This study utilized qualitative analysis and in-depth interviews with Egyptian political bloggers to analyze the content of five prominent Egyptian political blogs that deal with human rights violations and limitations on freedom in an attempt to assess the role of these blogs in enhancing democratization and contributing to popular participation in Egyptian civil society. The analyzed threads of discourse were divided into three main categories based on the function they attempted to perform: public mobilization, documentation, or deliberation.

Conceptual Framework:
Cyberactivism, Civic Engagement, and Citizen Journalism

The role of social media before, during, and after the Egyptian revolution was especially important in three intertwined ways: enabling cyberactivism, which was a major trigger for street activism; encouraging civic engagement through aiding the mobilization and organization of protests and other forms of political expression; and promoting a new form of citizen journalism, which provides a platform for ordinary citizens to express themselves and document their own versions of reality. Therefore, it is crucial to provide definitions for these terms to better understand their relevance and applicability in the context of the Egyptian revolution.

Howard (2011) defined cyberactivism as "the act of using the internet to advance a political cause that is difficult to advance offline," adding that "the goal of such activism is often to create intellectually and emotionally compelling digital artifacts that tell stories of injustice, interpret history, and advocate for particular political outcomes" (p. 145). Cyberactivism differs from mobilization because of the latter's focus on planning, execution, and facilitation of actions. However, the two concepts are interrelated, since cyberactivism can foster and promote civic engagement, which, in turn, gives rise to various forms of mobilization.

There are two forms of civic engagement: cooperative and expressive. The cooperative, or collaborative, type of civic engagement includes "broader public interests, whereas expressive forms are more individualistic and correspond to more narrowly defined interests" (Putnam, 2000, p. 45). The cooperative form of civic engagement has been on the decline, and this has led to the weakening of the "civility of contemporary political discourse" (Putnam, 2000, p. 46).

A better understanding of the term *civic engagement* requires a deeper comprehension of a closely related term: *civil society*. Edwards (2004) defined civil society as "a reservoir of caring, cultural life and intellectual innovation, teaching people . . . the skills of citizenship and nurturing a collection of positive social norms that foster stability, loosely connected under the rubric of 'social capital'" (p. 14).

Most importantly, contemporary democratic theorists have argued that civil society represents the cornerstone of efficient democratic governance, as reflected in mainstream political discourse (Browers, 2006). Therefore,

> The most noticeable change has been a distinct shift of focus in discussions of democratization from the state to society—that is, from theories that view the state as the locus of political change to theories that see the impetus for change as arising in a non-governmental realm. (Browers, 2006, p. 19)

An equally significant concept worth defining is citizen journalism, which provides ordinary citizens with the opportunity to document their own version of reality and to tell their own side of the story. It is distinguished from professional journalism in that ordinary citizens use digital media tools to report on events on the ground, upload text and videos directly to the Internet, and feed the information and videos to media outlets. Therefore, we can contend that citizen journalism "is a promising new breed of news-making that has been championed by various scholars . . . [for] granting ordinary citizens a novel, hands-on role" (Reich, 2008, p. 739). Citizen journalism "gives people a voice and therefore power. The people's participation itself and what they produce are regarded with the hope to contribute to an informed citizenry and democracy" (Nip, 2006, p. 212). Citizen journalism assumes that "average citizens are capable of intelligent judgment, mature understanding, and rational choice if offered the opportunity; in other words, that democracy as 'self-government' is not a dream but a practical premise" (Rosen, 1994, p. 18).

The alternative, antihegemonic nature of the Internet and its related applications, such as blogging, has allowed politically marginalized groups to "use [it] as a means for the formation of counter-publics, the articulation of identities and oppositional discourses, and the contestation of the discursive boundaries of the mainstream public sphere" (Dahlberg, 2007, p. 60). Some of the optimists who support the role of blogging in energizing online democracy and creating virtual public spheres, such as Coleman (2005), have referred to blogs as "sophisticated listening posts of modern democracy" (p. 274).

Blogs also are believed to provide a venue through which individual participants can express their political views away from the constraints set by political systems and the restrictions set by traditional media.

> That is why blogs have become a key source of information and analysis for people who prefer to trust their own judgment rather than depend upon the spin, censorship and narrow agenda of the usual sources" (Coleman, 2005, p. 276). The bottom-up nature of blogs allows for expanding the public sphere through providing the opportunity to "enter into an 'authentic two-way conversation,' enabling people to provide feedback in an open manner—and more easily than before. (Kreutz, 2009, p. 31).

The expansion of civic engagement through blogging was clearly manifested in the role played by cyberactivism in mobilizing, energizing, and improvising the Egyptian revolution on January 25, 2011. In this context, Ahmed Badawy, an Egyptian blogger and cyberactivist who was camping out in Tahrir Square in Cairo during the Egyptian revolution, spoke in the immediate aftermath of the revolution about how blogs and other forms of social media were the catalyst for the revolution.

> Bloggers played a big role in disseminating information about the intention to launch the revolution. Most of the work of those bloggers and of online activists, in general, has been on the Internet in the prelude to the revolution. Once the revolution started on January 25, all bloggers and online activists started to shift their efforts from their computer screens to the streets. When you are blogging, you don't see all the immediate reactions to what you post, but when you talk to people face-to-face on the streets, you get immediate and direct feedback, which is amazing. (A. Badawy, personal communication, January 13, 2011)

Echoing the same thought, Israa Abdel Fattah, a young Egyptian cyberactivist, stated:

> Since 2008, new media have been playing an important role as a tool that young Egyptians and online activists used for preparing, coordinating, organizing and paving the way for their activities on the street. Recently, young activists started printing some of their online posts in the form of brochures and pamphlets that have been distributed among average people on the streets. We have recently printed more than 50,000 pamphlets for people before the revolution. That way, we made sure that our messages reach everybody, even the ones who do not have access to the Internet. This was a way of connecting the virtual world and the real world. It also helped us to get an immediate sense of the average Egyptians' feedback on the ground to what we were calling for on the Internet. (I. Abdel Fattah, personal communication, January 13, 2011)

Qualitative Analysis of Five Egyptian Political Blogs

This study offers a qualitative analysis of five of the most popular Egyptian political blogs, which were founded by five pioneering and prominent bloggers and political activists: Wael Abbas

(http://misrdigital.blogspirit.com); Abdel Monem Mahmoud (http://www.ana-ikhwan.blogspot.com); Nawara Negm (http://tahyyes.blogspot.com), Maikel Nabil (www.maikelnabil.com), who was the only blogger arrested after the revolution; and Mahmoud Salem (www.sandmonkey.org), who uses the pseudonym "Sandmonkey" on his blog. All five blogs, except for Sandmonkey, are in Arabic. Sandmonkey is an English blog.

Our analysis of these five blogs consistently revolved around three categories: public mobilization, documentation, and deliberation. These categories emerged from in-depth, personal interviews with the five bloggers. All five bloggers argued that the functions of their respective blogs were to mobilize the public to take action, document the incidents of human rights violations committed by the government, and engage the public in insightful debates through online deliberations. Although the bloggers alluded to other functions that were carried out through their blogs, these three were the main ones.

Wael Abbas founded his blog in 2004. Abbas started his career as a journalist with *Al-Dostour* newspaper and the German news agency (dpa) and did some freelancing for various foreign publications, such as *The Washington Post* and *Slate* magazine. He often received and posted on his blog videos of torture inside prisons, violence on the streets, and other types of human rights violations, and his blog was characterized by its bold and aggressive attacks on the Mubarak regime.

Nawara Negm started her blog in 2006. She is an editor and translator at the Egyptian Radio and Television Union. Negm was born to a father who is a famous poet and a mother who is a renowned writer, both of whom are well known for their political activism and opposition to successive governments in Egypt, which led to their multiple imprisonments. Therefore, Negm is a political activist and an opponent of the ruling regime almost by default.

Abdel Monem Mahmoud started his blog in 2006. The name of his blog in Arabic, "Ana Ikhwan," translates as "I am of the Muslim Brotherhood," which makes a brave statement about his ideological position, in a rather rare and unusual fashion, taking into account the fact that the Muslim Brotherhood had been an outlawed group in Egypt until after the January 25 revolution. Mahmoud officially canceled his membership in the Brotherhood to avoid what he referred to as "a possible conflict of interest with being a journalist." However, he still believes in the Brotherhood's ideologies and embraces its values. He decided to stop blogging after the revolution to devote more time to his journalistic career.

Maikel Nabil started his blog in 2006. His blog is harshly critical of the Egyptian regime and its policies. He includes video posts and links to other relevant articles to support his posts. Nabil's blog deals with a wide range of topics, including politics, religion, and Egyptology. It could be considered the most controversial of the five blogs analyzed due to the unconventional nature of Nabil's postings, which include his objection to mandatory military service, his outspoken support for Israel, and his declared agnostic position. After the revolution, in April 2011, a military court sentenced Nabil to three years in prison on charges of "insulting the military and publishing false information" due to his blog posts, which criticized the army's role during the revolution.

Mahmoud Salem started his blog in 2004. His blog is characterized by its bold and somewhat sarcastic tone in criticizing the political status quo. He stated that his blog "presents a very secularized, anti-Islamist perspective" (M. Salem, personal communication, June 15, 2010). He added that he is trying to advocate the point of view that "not everybody who lives in an Islamic country such as Egypt is for terrorism." He indicated that he targets "an international audience." He added, "I also target highly educated people inside Egypt. This is because I believe that if there is ever going to be change in Egypt, it is going to come from the more educated social class who can read and write [in] English." Most interestingly, this blogger used the pseudonym "Sandmonkey" on his blog since starting the blog in 2004. It was not until he was arrested and beaten by the police while delivering medical supplies to Tahrir Square during the Egyptian revolution in early February 2011 that he decided to reveal his identity and to declare his role in posting dozens of graphic videos showing police officers beating and torturing citizens.

Public Mobilization

"How Can You Help Bloggers?"

This thread urging public mobilization was selected from Maikel Nabil's blog. It was posted in Arabic on July 26, 2008—two and half years before the January 25, 2011, revolution erupted. In this thread, Nabil proposed some "practical steps" that ordinary citizens could take if they wish to create their own blogs or to support other bloggers. He wrote:

> If you access a blog that you like and you want other people to benefit from its content, here is what you need to do: 1) Post a comment expressing your opinion about what you read, whether you agree with it or not; 2) Send the link to your friends and to all the groups and discussion forums that you are a part of; 3) Click on the ads in that particular blog since most bloggers are in need of financial support and advertising is a viable source of revenue that will help them sustain their blogging efforts; 4) Create your own blog. Currently, bloggers are subject to so much harassment by the state, and having more bloggers would help create a critical mass of bloggers that can initiate change; 5) If you have your own blog, include in it links to all the other blogs you like; 6) Join the online groups and the mailing lists of the bloggers whose blogs you like, as this helps widen their circles of supporters; 7) Make your favorite blog the homepage on your computer; 8) Bookmark your favorite blogs on your computer; 9) If you happen to be fluent in foreign languages, particularly English or French, make sure to translate the contents of the blogs you like. This helps spread the message of those bloggers to a worldwide audience; 10) If you notice any mistakes made by the bloggers in the way they reported the news or the sources that they used, you can politely highlight these mistakes to them so that they can avoid making them in the future.

Nabil's steps prompted some comments, mainly praising him.

For example, Farouk wrote:

I will take this opportunity and publish these steps in a bloggers' magazine that is distributed through regular mail.

Mounira wrote:
Thank you for your proactive approach Maikel. Imagine if there are 30 million proactive people like you. Definitely Egypt would be much better."

Ahmed wrote:
This is excellent Maikel. Believe it or not, this is the first time that I ever posted in a blog. The topic that you raised has motivated me.

Vera wrote:
Your steps are marvelous Maikel. I have my own blog, which I use to express my views as you mentioned. I will wait for you to be released [from prison] to tell me your opinion about it . . . As per your advise [*sic*], I will include a link to your blog on mine.

This thread is a good example of civic engagement, because it tries to get people to *act* and *do* something to make their voices heard and to spread their opinions through blogs. It captures several of the civil society functions, such as "stimulating political participation"; enhancing "education for democracy"; and "structuring multiple channels . . . for articulating, aggregating, and representing interests" (Diamond, 1999, pp. 242–244). By helping achieve these functions, this thread reflects what Diamond described as "the ideological marketplace," through which creative ideas and autonomous information are formulated and circulated by civic groups, away from the hegemony of the state. Bloggers can be an integral component of those civic groups that "seek (in a nonpartisan fashion) to improve the political system and make it more democratic (for example, working for human rights, voter education and mobilization, election monitoring, and exposure and reform of corrupt practices)" (Diamond, 1997, pp. 7–8).

In this context, Maikel Nabil stated in an interview in Cairo:

I think that based on the feedback from the posters on my blog, I have affected many of them. I provide different perspectives, and I have the ability to write in a way that attracts readers' attention. Whenever I write about how the regime is suppressing people's rights, this contributes to improving civil society because it enhances people's awareness about the rights that are taken from them and that they need to fight to get back from the regime. (M. Nabil, personal communication, June 10, 2010)

"They Reconnected the Internet, but Not Facebook or Twitter: Please Spread Widely"

This thread was taken from Nawara Negm's blog and was posted in Arabic on February 2, 2011, a few days before former president Mubarak announced that he would step down. This thread included a call

for action made by the blogger herself, asking the posters to take action by spreading the word about the disruption of online forms of communication. She wrote:

> Despite Mubarak's promises for reform and his claim of lack of interest in power, his regime is still cutting off Twitter and Facebook. Only the Internet service was restored to make sure it serves the interests of the business people who support the regime . . . We have to remain united and persistent in our efforts to bring down the regime. If this regime is able to suppress us once more and to convince us to leave the streets and go back to our homes, it would never go away, and it would make us pay a dear price for what we did so far. We are going through our last fight against this suppressive regime. Freedom is knocking on our doors, and our only weapon now is to stay out on the streets in the millions until we see this regime go. We warn the regime and all its supporters that we will prevail and we will hold them accountable for their actions.

Some comments were very critical of, and even insulting to, Negm.

> For example, Hamed wrote:
> Please stop. You got what you wanted. You weren't dreaming of 0.01 percent of this [achievement] a week ago. Let's not let our greed push us to ruin our country. We must be rational and seize this now.

> Hoffman wrote:
> I am not with you. We have to wait. Anybody with a political project should not seek to achieve it by force, but through negotiations. We should not be opportunists, and we should give this regime another chance.

However, other comments were supportive of Negm's post. There was a call for action by many posters, from both inside and outside Egypt, in both English and Arabic. For example, one poster sent Negm a link that could be used to overcome blocking of websites. Another poster, named Sorrayya, wrote: "I am writing to you from Syria. If I can be of any help, please let me know. You can contact me through my Twitter account or through email, both of which are listed below."

> Amgad, an Egyptian living in Denmark, wrote:

> I'm an Egyptian living abroad. My heart is with you, and I do all that I can by writing to newspapers and talking on the radio, asking people to support the Egyptian revolution and asking governments to stop supporting Mubarak. I urge you to continue until he is out. I would like to suggest to you, the youth who started this magnificent movement, forming a committee or even the nucleus of a political party, for example you can call it "the youth party for change", and appointing from among you those who can participate in negotiations and the formation of a transitional government after Mubarak leaves office. This will give you more international and national weight and will help you to

better organize yourselves. You can start collecting names for those who could be members. Your political program will be developed in the process.

Om Hagar wrote:

I live in England. My sister and I have organized several protests in Manchester against the Mubarak regime, and we were joined by hundreds of Egyptian and British citizens. This has given us hope for change, and has provided us with a sense of pride and confidence in our cause.

Shaker wrote:

I am an Egyptian living in the UK. We support you [the youth behind this revolution] as much as we can. You are in a very critical situation. We feel like you are targeted by a very wicked plan to divide you. Please stand strong. The thugs of the government will never be able to defeat you. DON'T BE FOOLED BY MUBARAK'S PROMISES. How can we support you?

Noha wrote:

Dear Nawara,
I will post your message on my Facebook page. This is all I can do, but my heart is aching for this great nation and for the lives that were lost in this revolution.

Gouda wrote:

My friend Nawara: Please let me know if there is anything that we, the Jordanian bloggers, can do to help you and your people in your fight against the regime. We feel helpless and ashamed that we are not able to do anything for you. May God support your cause.

Samy wrote:

I am a Syrian citizen living in the United Arab Emirates. Since the beginning of the Egyptian revolution, I haven't been able to do anything other than follow the details of what has been going on in Egypt and praying for the Egyptians to achieve their noble cause.

Amira wrote:

This is a plea to all the Egyptians. Be courageous and leave your homes to join your fellow Egyptians in Tahrir Square. Join the fight against the horrible Mubarak regime.

Hussein wrote:

The police are trying to save the head of the Egyptian regime by using their thugs and by bribing people to leave the streets and go back home. But this is not going to work. Mubarak will have to leave before we leave.

As these comments show, there was a deep polarization among the posters who commented on this thread. Some were supportive of Negm's position, while others had reservations about it. Whereas some observers may consider this polarization to be a negative phenomenon that may curtail civic engagement and harm citizens' efforts to achieve unity behind a national cause, others may see it as a natural and healthy occurrence that is better than political apathy or indifference, particularly during times of political crises.

We contend that it is important to acknowledge both the pros and cons, or the opportunities and threats, posed by such polarization. This is in line with Diamond's (1997, pp. 11–12) argument that:

When organizations in civil society become intensely and enduringly politicized along partisan lines of division, society may polarize, as the cross-cutting bonds of solidarity and civility dissolve. Such polarization may be creative and advantageous for social justice and democracy at moments of political crisis, bringing the downfall of an authoritarian regime . . . But democracy cannot function indefinitely on the basis of crisis, polarization, and pervasive civic and political mobilization by every type of organization imaginable.

Interestingly, the polarization that was reflected in this thread did not stand in the way of having some sort of citizen journalism. This was reflected in Negm's post as well as in the posters' comments. Most posters in this thread felt that they had a voice, and they were mobilized further by Negm's words. In this thread, the posters generally adopted the citizen journalist role, and they felt that they could topple the Mubarak regime on their own by sticking to their places on the streets and in the squares; finding ways to circumvent the regime's blocking of online social media outlets, such as Twitter and Facebook; and spreading the word about the revolution and mobilizing support for it nationally and internationally.

Negm acknowledged the mainstream and ordinary nature of her blog's visitors:

I am very happy that it is not the elite who like my blog. I know that from the comments I get. It is ordinary young individuals. They are university graduates, but they are ordinary; they are not involved in any political party or stream. They are not very elitist in their thinking. (N. Negm, personal communication, June 5, 2009)

According to Negm, it is not the bloggers' job to solve problems as much as it is to provide ordinary citizens with a venue to express and exchange ideas.

I think that blogging is like a stage of "mind training." Right now, we are thinking about our lives. Everybody is angry and they don't know what the real solution is. Bloggers also don't have the solution, but we brainstorm and exchange ideas with our readers. We have to figure out our route together. (Negm, personal communication, June 5, 2009)

Addressing the meaning of citizen journalism and how it has been practiced and exemplified through Egyptian blogs, Amira Howeidy, a political editor at *Al-Ahram Weekly* newspaper in Egypt said:

Citizen journalism means that you don't have to be a professional journalist. You can just write your random thoughts on a blog. Or you can report on what happens around you in your life with a certain political perspective or view. It is citizen journalism in the sense that it doesn't have to meet deadlines. You go to the blogger, and the blogger doesn't come to you. Newspaper editors dictate what the readers get, but the blogger dictates what his followers receive. And you go to the blog knowing that this the specific view of x or y, and they are not censored or regulated. And that is citizen journalism; it is the freedom to express your thoughts regardless of any pressures. (A. Howeidy, personal communication, June 20, 2009)

Documenting Brutality and Violations of Human Rights

"The Martyr of Suez"

This thread was taken from the blog of Wael Abbas and was posted in Arabic on January 26, 2011, a day after the launch of the January 25 revolution. The post included a video shot from inside the morgue in the city of Suez in Egypt. The video showed a young man who was shot to death by the police forces. The voice-over was by one of the nurses who was asking for help in handling the body of this man. Abbas wrote that he received the video through the mail and that it was accompanied by a message asking him to upload it on his blog. The video elicited several comments by posters inside and outside Egypt, expressing their disdain with the Mubarak regime. Some of the comments included rhetoric and poetry attacking the regime and asking Mubarak to leave.

Shawkat wrote:

I would like to share with your visitors the following telephone numbers to call in cases of robbery, theft or any kind of emergency. I am a member of the Life Makers Youth Committee.

Roberto wrote:

Hi Wael. This is Roberto. I work for *O Globo* newspaper, the largest daily paper in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. I co-edit a magazine for youngsters that *O Globo* issues every week and

I'm looking for young (16 to 23 year old) bloggers who are in Egypt and could talk to us about what's going on in the country from their own points of view.

Haroon wrote:

Dear Wael: I think it could be very powerful if you and others could lead a charter for non-violence—across all sects, parties, ages, male and female—and encourage its adoption by all protestors—like Martin Luther King did—only according to Egyptian values, principles and words. This could serve to unify people when opposition leadership is blocked or elusive.

Faiza wrote:

Hi dear Wael: I would like to ask you to publish your posts in English because, as I know, your blog has too many international visitors. Your friend from IRAN.

Ismael wrote:

We need to communicate the following information to the Egyptian youth who are protesting in Tahrir Square as soon as possible: 1) They need to select a group of eloquent speakers who can appear on the Arab media channels and try to draw the "silent majority" to their cause; 2) Try to reach out to some prominent personalities and famous people to ask them to speak on their behalf.

This thread exemplified the concept of citizen journalism through the posting of the video by the blogger in an attempt to document police brutality as well as civic engagement through involving both local and global audiences.

In this context, Abbas said:

I often get participation from ordinary people. In fact, many people send me videos and pictures of things that they have seen and did not like and they wanted me to post on my blog to draw the public's attention to such crimes. (W. Abbas, personal communication, May 30, 2009)

The posters in this thread adopted a proactive approach and came up with some concrete solutions to reduce the pain of the Egyptian protestors and to publicize their case regionally as well as internationally. Some posters tried to mobilize the general public by providing several concrete steps to stand firm in the face of the regime and to spread the word about the noble cause of the protestors.

Abbas commented on the value of providing information and spreading awareness through his blog:

Through my blog, I address issues that haven't been discussed publicly before, such as political change and torture by the police. I don't claim that blogs have caused a big difference, but at least they have drawn people's attention to issues that have gone uncovered for a long time. People have become more aware of their political rights thanks to my blog and to other blogs. People are ready for political change anytime, but it all depends on the level of their awareness. That is why there has to be a higher margin of freedom in a way that allows different political factions to express their views and help the average person form a sound political opinion. And that freedom was made possible by blogs. (W. Abbas, personal communication, May 30, 2009)

"I Am Prohibited From Covering Obama's Visit by the President's Office"

This thread was posted in Arabic on June 4, 2009, and it was taken from the blog of Abdel Monem Mahmoud. In his post, Mahmoud wrote:

The Egyptian newspaper, *Al-Dostour*, has sent the names of five of its reporters, including myself, to the government press office to get clearance for covering the speech that the U.S. President Barak Obama will give at Cairo University. The clearance was provided to my four other colleagues, but not for me. When I inquired at the press office, I was told that I was only allowed to cover the speech from the press center that faces the auditorium where Obama will give his speech. I was hoping to know what risk do I represent as a reporter in this context. Is this the democracy that this country has to offer its citizens?

All posters were sympathetic to Mahmoud's situation. They tried to console him, provided him with moral support, and shared his bewilderment as to why he was not allowed to attend Obama's speech.

Maged wrote:

It is a big problem if you still believe that there is true freedom or democracy in our Arab countries.

Gaafar wrote:

I can share your pain, but you have to remember that God has a reason for everything.

Mamdouh wrote:

You are not the first citizen to be stripped from their rights and freedoms. Anybody with a noble cause and true intentions has suffered in this country. Since you love your

country, you were imprisoned and banned from travel. But people with a strong faith like you and me should never give up.

Farag wrote:

You are blacklisted since you belong to the Brotherhood. You have to be patient.

This thread, despite its brevity and the few posters who participated in it, strongly reflected collective commitment to the cause of freedom, but without any proactive or concrete steps to achieve it. The posters were kindhearted in their support of Mahmoud's situation, but none of them provided any specific plans or strategies to enhance freedom in the Egyptian civil society.

In this context, Diamond argued that it is easier for an active civil society to strengthen an already existing democratic environment rather than create it. Diamond, as cited in Encarnacion (2000), noted that "A vibrant civil society is probably more essential for consolidating and maintaining democracy than for initiating it" (p. 10). According to Diamond, civil society facilitates a democratic environment by "stimulating political participation and stimulating the efficacy and skill of democratic citizens, and by aiding citizens in the collective pursuit and defense of their interests and values" (Encarnacion, 2000, p. 10).

Social media have been the main driving force behind civil society's ability to stimulate political participation. This has been particularly the case in a country like Egypt, where blogging has allowed political activists such as Abdel Monem Mahmoud to express their views and frustrations with the regime's infringement on human rights. Mahmoud, whose Brotherhood ideologies limited his opportunities for freedom of expression under the Mubarak regime, used his blog to share his ideas with others and to generate collective interest. The thread described above is a case in point.

Mahmoud commented on the impact of his blog:

What we have in Egypt is not democracy, but it is a margin of freedom that we, the bloggers, were able to take by force from the regime. Blogs, in general, have helped increase the general political awareness of the young people. Before 2005, most political activists in Egypt were in their fifties and sixties; today, we are seeing young people in their twenties interested in pursuing political activism. I think the blogs have played a big role in that regard. My blog has caused some difference. It has encouraged some other young members of the Muslim Brotherhood to express themselves more openly online. It has also encouraged other Brotherhood members to try to humanize and personalize their identities as members of the Brotherhood. (A. M. Mahmoud, personal communication, June 5, 2009)

Despite their lack of proactive ideas, the posters in this thread were provided a venue, through Mahmoud's blog, to share their frustrations with the lack of personal freedoms and the violations of human rights that were epitomized by denying a reporter the right to cover an important event without

providing any reason or explanation. Their ability to express their views about such situations was, in and of itself, a form of political engagement that was made possible thanks to social media in general and blogging in particular.

Providing Platforms for Online Deliberation

"Lest You Forget"

This thread was posted in English on September 8, 2011, and was taken from Sandmonkey's blog, which was created by Mahmoud Salem. In this thread, the blogger tried to remind people who were disappointed or dismayed with the situation after the January 25, 2011, revolution about the gains that were accomplished in that revolution.

Sandmonkey wrote:

There is a general feeling of malaise and melancholy affecting the January 25 protestors, for they feel as if they have accomplished nothing: that the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces has halted the revolution, and that it was all for nothing. This kind of talk infuriates me, not because of its self-pitying whiney nature from otherwise strong people, but because it's categorically not true. Let me count the ways:

1. I've been in this since 2005, from the blogosphere old guard, and for six years, me, alongside the other bloggers I've worked with, were simply trying to get the people to get one idea into their heads: If we all, as people, get together in big numbers, and go to a public square protesting, we will bring down the president. The president is not the inevitable, immovable, God-like figure we made him up to be. And we accomplished that, pressuring Mubarak enough to bring him down. This is the first time in 7,000 years of continuous tyrannical rule that Egyptians managed to depose their ruler by their own hands.

2. Historically, Egyptians have always succumbed to the violent actions of whatever internal security force that runs Egypt, foreign or domestic. Up until the revolution, people were discounting the notion that Egyptians, even if they are out in numbers, would ever win a face-off with the police. The January 25 revolution has also reversed that trend forever, as the protestors were able to beat up the police every single time they have faced them, to the point that in order for the police forces to take back Tahrir Square from the protestors, they had to be there in the protection of the military.

3. Being under tyrannical rule for this long, Egyptians also grew apathetic to whatever it is that the government does, and got used to not being part of the decision-making process. Now, they are embedded with the idea of democracy, voting, and having their voice count. I don't think any of you realize how many people will head to the polls this election, with some estimates pointing towards up to 80% voter

turnout. This is unprecedented, and unlikely to go away. The days of voter apathy are over. We did that.

4. Also, in the history of this great nation, never was there an incident where Egyptians held their rulers accountable. Now, we have not only removed the president, we have also put him on trial. It doesn't matter if it's a Kangaroo court; the historical precedent is there, not just on a local, but on a regional level. This has NEVER happened before. We are now the people that removed their president and put him behind bars on trial. Think about what that means before you discount it. We not only created history, but we have changed the narrative of this country forever."

Sandmonkey's message instilled some energy and confidence in the posters to this thread. Thunderstorm wrote:

Good Sandmonkey. This world is changing—and all those who are living now have to change their part for the better. That takes persistence. When people become disheartened, and everything seems too complex or overwhelming—focus on your part in the whole goal. Preserve yourself for the long run. Learn what you can about how things work while not allowing yourself to be diverted from too many things.

Aisha wrote:

Thank you! I needed to hear exactly what you wrote! Ashamed of myself for letting negativity take over my beliefs.

Sandra wrote:

I agree, that's what I believe too. Thanks a lot! These words were needed. I'll spread them around. You are my confirmed favorite blogger.

Shamel wrote:

You always manage to make me feel more positive. WE changed history damn it!"

Alice wrote:
You Egypt have pulled out the foundations of your faulted government system and now start from scratch. You haven't lost steam; it's just phase two: a different process and procedure required and produced. Phase one was very physical and used a different part of your mental state to survive it. Phase two needs all your mental alertness for it will be filled with negotiations and manipulations. Phase three will be adaptation—The Revolution didn't fail. You won!

Salma wrote:

I agree with you, Sandmonkey, that so far some progress has been made. We dared to demand the ousting of a long-standing despot. But more importantly, we dared to do this in vast numbers, with peaceful determination and persistence and we have succeeded. This is unprecedented.

This thread provided a strong example of civic engagement, along with collective optimism and pride in the Egyptian revolution, even by non-Egyptian posters. The type of civic engagement that was showcased in this thread is "value-driven" and "provides the human resources necessary for a vibrant civil society . . . It emanates from the idea that citizens have rights to social participation and obligations" to enhance their society and improve its conditions (Ibrahim, 2005, p. 5). Moreover, the thread reflected an indigenous and foreign civic engagement, as exemplified by the Egyptian and non-Egyptian posters. One could feel the passion of the foreign posters and their willingness to share their conceptual resources with their Egyptian counterparts for the purpose of taking the Egyptian revolution to another level. The strong sense of optimism on the part of Sandmonkey instilled confidence in his followers and his blog visitors and drew their attention to the positive aspects and achievements of the Egyptian revolution. Sandmonkey's post had an emancipatory tone that elevated the spirits of his followers and overcame the barriers of culture and geography (Meyer, 1995).

Sandmonkey's message also touched on several aspects that empowered the Egyptian protestors in their collective pursuit of political demands. The information that he conveyed through his analysis of the situation gave them hope in the future. This was reflected in several of the posters' comments. Pertinent to this context, Diamond (1999) argued that, "While civil society groups may sometimes prevail temporarily through the raw political power of their numbers (e.g. in strikes and demonstrations), they generally cannot be effective in contesting government policies or defending their interests unless they are well informed" (p. 247). Sandmonkey's analysis of the revolution's achievements helped the protestors reach a new level of understanding about what they did. That is why his post is considered a good example of online deliberation.

Through his post, Sandmonkey suggested ways to put the Egyptian revolution back on track and to revive the revolutionary spirit that had started to fade. He used an optimistic, mobilizational approach to revitalize the Egyptian youth who took to the streets and the squares, demanding the overthrow of the regime. Sandmonkey's message and the posters' positive interactions were a testament to how a blog can reenergize a civil society.

Sandmonkey, or Mahmoud Salem, explained the role of his blog in this context:

Bloggers create awareness but change has to come from the people. Our problem in Egypt is that we give up too easily. I believe that the bloggers' main job should be to provoke people. I will promote certain points of view and fight for them, so I can provoke people to get a debate going and get people to think. (M. Salem, personal communication, June 17, 2010)

Concluding Remarks

Egyptian political blogs played an effective role in paving the way for the January 25 revolution through raising public awareness about severe governmental violations of human rights and restrictions on various forms of freedom as well as encouraging effective action and organization during the revolution itself to rally public support and orchestrate the mass movement against the regime in power.

However, although the threads of discourse analyzed here reflect an overarching concern for the issues of human rights violations and limitations on freedom, the bloggers' approaches to tackling the issues at hand and figuring out what to do about them differed based on whether their main focus was public mobilization, documentation of governmental violations, or online deliberation and brainstorming.

Public mobilization was the first approach adopted by political bloggers in some of the threads analyzed here. This approach encouraged taking some concrete action, such as figuring out the practical steps needed to start one's own blog or to help other bloggers; the best places to target or to avoid at the time of heightened political tensions; or the need to gather in certain locations at a certain time to support an important cause and make a statement about it. These examples show how the phenomenon of cyberactivism can aid the process of mobilization on the ground through helping political activists to organize themselves, escape from danger, coordinate their actions, and ensure that their voices are heard. This call-for-action approach goes beyond engaging the posters intellectually in online discussions to involving them practically in effective action in the real world.

In discussing this phenomenon, however, we should not overestimate the role of new media technologies and their potential to bring about actual change at the expense of the human efforts or agency behind it or the underlying contexts shaping it. This is in line with Peter Shane's (2004, p. xii) comment that:

> the evolution of any technology depends on its interaction with human agency in specific economic, social, political, and cultural circumstances. What [this technology] can accomplish for any particular political system will have very much to do with what members of particular communities, individually and collectively, determine to do with such technologies in particular contexts.

Another approach adopted by some of the bloggers in this study was the documentation of governmental violations of human rights and restrictions on freedom. This was accomplished through providing forums for enabling both the bloggers and the ordinary citizens who were posting on their blogs to document governmental brutality and violations of human rights and to disseminate these recorded words and images not only to each other but, most importantly, to the outside world through reaching out to a transnational, global audience. In doing so, they were, in fact, providing forums for the exercise of citizen journalism locally, regionally, and internationally.

A third important aspect of cyberactivism revealed in this study was the process of online deliberation, or the exercise of electronic debate and virtual democracy, which was made possible through the cross-fertilization of ideas and the intellectual stimulation that took place when the bloggers and their posters exchanged useful ideas and engaged in fruitful discussions related to the issue of violations of human rights and the limitations imposed on different forms of freedom.

The purposes of such online discussions and deliberations were to provide a forum to evaluate the political changes taking place in the country; assess the transition toward democratization and political reform that is happening on the ground; highlight some of the positive gains of the revolution; and come up with an enlightening comparison between the model of activism taking place in Tahrir Square and the transitional stage that is prevailing in Egypt as a whole. This shows how cyberactivism can provide a platform for a different form of civic engagement exemplified through intellectual engagement, brainstorming, and exchange of ideas.

We can reach the conclusion that even the threads that focused only on political discussions, deliberations, and debates, without direct calls for action on the ground, could be performing an indirect, yet important, role in terms of promoting civic engagement by providing the public with needed information, necessary knowledge, and suitable platforms for expressing and exchanging views and opinions, which were then translated into effective action on the ground, as witnessed in the Egyptian revolution of January 2011.

This article highlights the interconnected and complementary functions of public mobilization, documentation, and online deliberation in paving the way for the transition to democratization in Egypt through providing platforms for strengthening civic engagement and exercising citizen journalism. This leads us to conclude that the five blogs analyzed in this study played a critical role, along with other forms of media, in changing the map of Egyptian politics. However, we are very careful not to overestimate this role or to frame it as a cause–effect relationship between blogging and political change. At the end of the day, any political change that has taken place in Egypt since the January 25 revolution has been the culmination of various factors and players, and political blogs were among the catalysts that ignited the popular revolution and paved the way for its eruption, but their role has to be properly contextualized within myriad factors, both online and offline, that contributed to this historical sociopolitical transformation.

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