

**The Arab Spring****The Role of ICTs**

## **The Egyptian Experience: Sense and Nonsense of the Internet Revolution**

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This article is a contribution to the debate about the role of the Internet in mobilizations for political and social change, drawing on interviews and observations during the Egyptian revolution. We propose distinguishing between the use of the Internet as a *tool* by those seeking to bring about change from below, and the Internet's role as a *space* where collective dissent can be articulated. We argue that it is important to go beyond three sets of polemics. First, we argue for transcending the debate between utopian and dystopian perspectives on the role of the Internet in political change. Second, we propose a shift away from perspectives that isolate the Internet from other media by examining the powerful synergy between social media and satellite broadcasters during the January 25 uprising. And finally, we call for an understanding of the dialectical relationship between online and offline political *action*.

The revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt have renewed and repolarized debates over the role of the Internet in mobilizations for political and social change. While Morozov's (2011) contention that, faced with the threat of revolution, an embattled government would simply try and pull the plug on the Internet proved to be correct,<sup>1</sup> the communications shutdown in Egypt neither stopped the protests, nor prevented the protesters from communicating with the outside world. In fact, despite the media hype about "Facebook Revolutions," the Egyptian activists we interviewed rightly reject simplistic claims that technology somehow *caused* the 2011 uprisings, and they say it undermines the agency of the millions of people who participated in the movement that brought down Hosni Mubarak.

Our analysis here attempts to go beyond three sets of counterposed polemics. First, we reject the false polarization of utopian/dystopian views of the Internet and recognize that the Internet is both a product of imperialist and capitalist logics *and* something that is simultaneously used by millions in the struggle to resist those logics. As we shall explain, it is unsatisfactory to counterpose assertions that the Internet and other forms of new media either have no effect on the dynamic of revolution with assertions

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<sup>1</sup> Details of the Internet shutdown and restoration can be found on the Renesys blog, J. Cowie, (January 27, 2011; February 2, 2011).

that these technologies do have a determining effect on the dynamic of revolution. Second, we propose a shift away from perspectives that isolate "the Internet" from other media by examining the shift in media architecture exposed by the powerful synergy between social media and satellite broadcasters during the January 25 uprising. Finally, following from the previous two arguments, we call for an understanding of the dialectical relationship between online and offline political action. We argue that without one, the other cannot have meaning. To a large extent, Internet spaces and tools were the choice of young revolutionaries in Egypt because they were already the spaces and tools that people of their generation had chosen for communication in daily life.

The approach outlined here will be informative only in a particular way, for there are numerous angles to deconstruct this immense topic. However, the political turmoil and ongoing revolutions in the Arab world provide an unprecedented opportunity to finally test theoretical assumptions about the Internet. Lessons can be drawn already since, as Lenin is reported to have famously said, "There are *decades* where *nothing* happens; and there are *weeks* where *decades* happen." The revolutions have become a social laboratory, offering us the kind of material understanding that has debunked a number of key postmodernist claims, most obviously the contention that revolution itself is a relic of the past.<sup>2</sup>

### Deconstructing the Internet: Spaces and Tools

We are aware of the fact that this debate is very topical and hence susceptible to attention. It seduces one to make big or polemical claims so as to carve out a little bit of space in the journalist or academic field. What is in principle important critique eventually loses its effect because it exaggerates the utopian fantasy and ironically becomes the mirror of its opponent: representing the fatalist dystopians. To overcome this problem, we propose to start by differentiating the role of Internet *spaces* from Internet *tools* in the actual practice of Egyptian politics. We will argue that for an important layer of activists and participants in the January 25 uprising, Internet spaces served a crucial function as *spheres of dissidence* where collective critiques of the existing political and social order were articulated in the immediate pre-revolutionary period. However, we also propose that a feature of the uprising was the way in which the Internet, especially Web 2.0 (user-generated and social network applications) became *tools* of revolution.

This does not mean that we believe that either Internet spaces or Internet tools are predisposed to being used for revolutionary or counterrevolutionary ends, but is based on our observations of how activists employed the resources available to them. Although there is no space to develop this argument in detail here, an important fact is that the Internet is becoming "domesticated," not just in the way human beings communicate with each other or receive information, but also in the way the economy of modern developed/developing countries is structured. These tools were often appropriated by activists *despite* the intent of their creators and in the face of determined attempts by the state to use them for counterrevolutionary purposes.

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<sup>2</sup> The price was and is high, which is why we dedicate this small but hopefully meaningful contribution to those from Sidi Bouzid via Cairo to Benghazi, Sana'a, and Dera'a who gave their lives to improve those of many others.

Nor do we argue that activists only (or even mainly) relied on Internet tools and spaces to organize and engage in debate. As we will outline, it is important to understand the dialectical relationship between online and offline political action, and that activists shifted between digital and nondigital communication tools according to the circumstances in which they found themselves.

This article is a preliminary contribution to these discussions, since the revolutions are ongoing. However, our conclusions are rooted in fieldwork during January–March 2011 which includes interviews with Egyptian activists, observations of Facebook groups, blogs, social media on the Internet, other media outlets, and personal observations in Tahrir Square and elsewhere in Cairo. Beside semi-structured interviews by phone and face-to-face, this analysis is further informed by open discussions during the fieldwork visits with activists from a range of political tendencies. Three research visits were made to Cairo during the period this article was written and revised: February 5–7, 2011, March 17–21, and April 28–May 2. Discussions were held particularly with activists from the left and the Muslim Brotherhood, but also with members of the Real Estate Tax Authority Union, the Egyptian Health Technologists Syndicate, the Manshiyet al-Bakri Hospital Workers' Union, and the Cairo Public Transport Authority Independent Union. The days spent in and around Tahrir Square in February, at the height of the uprising against Mubarak, provided firsthand observation of the synchronization of media structures we analyze above, both as witness to the demonstrations in the square and through observation of how protesters engaged with online and satellite media in their homes.

#### **Egypt's "Moment of Change"**

Most of our respondents and the online commentators cited the lack of context as a major problem in the analyses that led to attributing magical powers to Internet technology. By repeatedly putting the Internet corporations—Facebook, Twitter, and the like—at the center, it seemed as if particular Western characteristics were artificially being inserted into a genuine popular Arab revolution. Such an approach also ignores the decades-long history of social and political protest in Egypt, starting with the mobilizations in solidarity with the Second Intifada and the U.S. (and British) invasion of Iraq, which led to huge protests expressing anger at leaders seen as the local lackeys of the U.S. and Israel. The years 2004–2005 saw an explosion of demonstrations calling for constitutional reform, a call taken up by judges who marched in 2006 demanding an end to state interference in their role as election monitors. Later that same year, large strikes in the textile sector opened the door to a rising curve of workers' protests, which continued during and after the uprising against Mubarak (Alexander, 2010; Marfleet & El Mahdi, 2009). The use of torture by the police triggered a number of large protests, the biggest being in June 2010 following the murder of Khalid Said, a young Egyptian Internet user.

A perceptible shift in state tactics toward more blatant forms of vote-rigging and intimidation in the 2010 parliamentary elections probably also played an important role in creating the conditions for revolution by closing down the narrow legitimate channels through which Egyptians could express dissent (Saleh, 2010). The final push came with the brave uprising in Tunisia, showing that it is possible to topple a dictator.

It is outside the scope of this essay to offer a comprehensive review of the political, economic, and historical trajectories leading to the revolution. But in the face of the overwhelming amount of anecdotal evidence amidst the massive spur of articles, we wish to emphasize the most basic facts that must be considered. First of all, demographic developments are critical because it is the young generation through which the Internet is domesticating at high speed.

Egypt has 23 million broadband Internet users and 9 million (albeit partly an overlap of the former) mobile-phone Internet users. Approximately 80% of households have mobile phones; 30% of households have access to the Internet (Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, 2010). After Facebook launched an Arabic version in March 2009, the number of users more than tripled in two years, reaching more than 5 million Facebook users (as of February 2011). To get an idea of the extensive growth of Internet usage, we need to look at the overwhelmingly young demographic (thus an ever-increasing Internet domestication) status. If we combine both sets of statistical prognoses, the expectation is that in less than 10 years, a majority of the population will be Internet users.

The other side of the contextual coin is the geopolitical relevance of Egypt. Egypt is the second-biggest recipient of U.S. military aid and (hence) a key ally of Israel. Egypt yearly receives \$2 billion, the biggest recipient of American military aid after Israel, money predominantly used to support the army and police apparatus that is widely condemned for its perpetration of human rights abuses (Human Rights Watch, 2004). Egypt's importance to the United States lies in its role in policing Palestinian compliance with the "peace process," historically by withdrawing from the leadership of Arab resistance to Israel, and more recently by maintaining the siege on the Gaza Strip (Alexander, 2009).

This, too, is a crucial part of the basic context because it not only informs us about the overall weight of the Internet when matched against other tools: It tells us what was at stake to topple Mubarak. Finally, and related to this point, we think it is important to differentiate between the importance of penetration rates for shaping public opinion to convince a critical mass, and for organizing certain political efforts.

### **Spaces of Dissent**

Ismail (2000) argues that the physical and social organization of the "new quarters" of Cairo played a crucial role in fostering the development of Islamist movements in Egypt during the 1990s, arguing that these areas were transformed by Islamist activists into "spheres of dissidence" that were politically, socially, and even to some extent, physically impenetrable to the state and its agents. Alexander (2007) has extended this concept to Egyptian national movements of the 1940s and 1950s, arguing that the creation of these spaces allowed for alternative visions of society to be articulated and debated, and collective action organized in greater freedom than in wider society. The architecture of these "spheres of dissidence" was physical and social, and encompassed places such as coffeehouses, bookshops, and meeting halls, along with social gatherings including picnics and funerals, as well as factories, workplaces and workers' encampments during street protests. However, it was also ideological: These are spheres of *dissidence* because they are spaces in which it is possible to articulate an intellectual challenge to dominant ideas about the social and political order.

For an important layer of Egyptian opposition activists, we argue that the Internet similarly became a sphere of dissidence. As one of the interviewees, Noha Atef, explains, it was a place where people could and did meet others who shared their opposition to the Mubarak regime and exchange information about protests:

To have a space, an online space, to write and talk [to] people, to give them messages which will increase their anger, this is my favorite way of online activism. This is the way online activism contributed to the revolution. When you asked people to go and demonstrate against the police, they were ready because you had already provided them with materials which made them angry. (Interviewee Atef, 2011)

In the context of Internet politics, *space* refers to offering a dynamic ability to shape opinion and contribute to the “tipping point.” In general term of offering content to the masses, the Arab news network Al-Jazeera was superior by all means.<sup>3</sup> As Hillary Clinton put it: “Al-Jazeera has been the leader in that [it is] literally changing people’s minds and attitudes. And like it or hate it, it is really effective.”<sup>4</sup> Thus here we specifically mean a *cyberspace* that mediates content (aesthetics and factual information) and allows the formation of public political spheres through the Internet.<sup>5</sup>

A relevant observation is that the online spaces—like offline spaces of political manifestations—show overlaps and much duplication. As a public political sphere in which to debate, refute, mobilize, etc., the Internet made a revolutionary contribution. Social networking sites in particular formed an online public space for political discussion where opinions were shaped and at times decision were taken. The collective nature of dissent was highly visible in online environments such as Facebook, which also provided tools to facilitate interaction, allowing individuals to get responses to questions they would find difficult to answer offline, and also to gauge support for particular lines of argument or causes. It had the effect of a widening ripple in the water. Facebook became something one had to have. Egypt gained more than 600,000 new Facebook users between January and February 2011 alone. On the day the Internet switched back on (February 2), 100,000 users joined this social networking space and it became the most-accessed website in the country (followed by YouTube and Google), and aljazeera.net saw an incredible increase in page views and search attempts, according to Alexa.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Besides the common way—via televisions in households—Al Jazeera English can be watched streaming live online at [www.livestation.com](http://www.livestation.com). It is the most watched news channel on YouTube, receiving 2.5 million views monthly.

<sup>4</sup> The complete statement during a Q&A session before the U.S. Foreign Policy Priorities Committee can be found at 01:45 at <http://www.mediaite.com/tv/hillary-clinton-claims-al-jazeera-is-winning-an-information-war-that-america-is-losing>

<sup>5</sup> This is the case even if we take into consideration indirectly connected sections; viewing high-impact videos and posts on the screens and mobile phones of friends and family members is a common practice.

<sup>6</sup> Online viewership of Al-Jazeera English reached record growth rates during the demonstrations in Egypt (2,500%). For specific data on Egypt, see <http://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/EG> and for its overall growth rates, see <http://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/aljazeera.net>

Whereas this dynamic can create *echo chambers* as in the political blogospheres (O'Neil, 2009), in highly intense moments, either when people are more susceptible to recruitment or when professionals from the media and academia are quoting from these sources (hence *hegemonizing* these viewpoints), the impact of these sub-scenes can reach far beyond their usual networks. Within Facebook, the April 6 Youth and the Kolona Khaled Said groups' pages, as well as pages of high-profile individuals (such as Mohamed al-Baradei, Aida Seif-al-Dawla, or Hossam el-Hamalawy), were not only *meeting* points and as such instrumental in mobilizing youth, but also the *source* of much of the forwarded SMS's and e-mails, Tweets and shared Facebook posts. Besides *challenging* rumors such as protests being infiltrated and organized by foreign elements, repetition is important to *consolidate* general political analysis and demand, such as the need to stay in Tahrir Square rather than "go back to their homes and jobs," as some upper-middle-class Egyptians began to say after the uprising's first setbacks.

### Tools of the Revolution

Often, relatively low total Internet penetration rates are mistakenly understood to explain the impact on political change. A misunderstanding about the political effectiveness of the Internet is caused when taking the absolute penetration numbers (rather than proportionally, namely the *activists* instead of the *people*) as a lead (Aouragh, 2008), and by conflating the different stages of political activism and how each stage relates differently to Internet access (Aouragh, 2011). As implied at the outset of this essay, the best approach for understanding direct action through Internet usage is to regard the Internet as a *tool*, an approach that takes the materiality of the Internet seriously. And we applied this by using a *grounded* methodology and by asking the following questions: *How* do the activists in question use the Internet? When does what technique work? When not?

Many activists are highly conscious of available Internet tools, using different ones to reach different audiences and for different purposes. Amr Gharbeia, another activist we interviewed, sees his primary audience online as his own social network:

This is how content propagates. How content is seeded and virally spread. You talk to the people you know, and the people you know talk to the people they know, and this is how the word gets round. On Facebook, I'm talking to personal contacts, people I actually know, because this is how I build my social network. On Twitter, it's a bit more like a mini-cast, so I'm more like making statements to strangers, with some people I know in between. (Interviewee Gharbeia, 2011)

Hossam El-Hamalawy notes during the interview that there was a conscious division of labor between those activists with high levels of fluency in English and well-established networks of contacts abroad, and those who could reach local audiences and networks in Arabic:

Even after the government banned Twitter, I was logging in via a proxy in order to disseminate the news about the protests to mainly people abroad. And that is part also of the division of labor; I mean we have allies abroad . . . trade unionists, human rights

activists, foreign journalists, all of these people we need to get the word out to.  
(Interviewee El-Hamalawy, 2011)

For the highly connected Egyptian diaspora and solidarity activists, Twitter was a relevant tool. The statistics speak for themselves: 1.5 million Egypt-related tweets in the first week of the January 25 uprising alone. Noha Atef, whom we interviewed while she was actually outside Egypt during the 18-day uprising, performed similar tasks to her network of press contacts and wider audiences via Twitter. She would follow tweets from within Egypt, translate and retweet to reach non-Arabic speakers. At other times she would intervene to offer online comments and critiques of coverage of events in Egypt in the global media, correcting what she felt were misrepresentations and adding missing contextual information.

But if we take off our single-minded Internet glasses, other forms of organizing appear that are crucial and more important. The value of Facebook as an organizer is lower where one can meet face-to-face, but it is perhaps more important to state that those physical meetings are also *better* for political planning and organizing and building trust and conscripting sacrifice, what is generally referred to as “strong ties”—even if Internet communication is faster and allows for (relative) anonymity. Most of the organizing was done offline, but this was rarely noted. A fascinating exception in the journalistic outpouring of articles was a piece in *The Wall Street Journal* documenting the on-the-ground strategy and tactics that led to the occupation of Tahrir Square and that had very little to do with Facebook. The activists—including representatives from various youth movements, workers’ rights groups and the Muslim Brotherhood—met daily for weeks in a cramped living room. They chose protest sites usually connected to mosques in densely populated working-class neighborhoods, hoping that such a large number of scattered rallies would strain security forces and enable them to link up in Tahrir Square (Levinson & Coker, 2011).

Furthermore, when authorities shut down the Internet, it severely disabled the activists on the level of citizen journalism and coordinating the protests, but it did not have dramatic consequences in terms of mobilization. Shutting down the Internet on January 27 actually had two effects that had a mobilizing input: It infuriated many who felt it was time to take a stand or forced some who had so far at most been involved in cyberspace but now were prompted to join the street protests, adding to the growing numbers of protesters. And as most activists mentioned, it sent an important signal about the balance of power: namely that the regime was threatened. Unexpected opportunities were also noticed, as being offline allowed one to *focus*, or as the blogger Haisam Abu-Samra documented:

But cutting us out from the rest of the world, from ourselves even, didn’t dismantle the revolt. If anything, it removed distraction and gave us a singular mission to accomplish. It was also seen as a desperate measure, one that could only be committed by a withering regime, and it empowered us. . . . Never mind the vacant symbolism of “Twitter revolutions” and YouTube activism: Losing the Internet at the hand of our own government simply offers us a powerful reminder of why we actually want the Internet to begin with, and why we’re doing any of this. (Abu-Samra, 2011)

Amr Gharbeia made a similar argument during our interview:

What we call a social network is not actually a social network; these are social tools. Twitter and Facebook are not the social network; *we* are the social network. And we have personal relations with each other. And to prove that, when the social networks were gone, they were filtered or blocked, during the high days of the revolution in Egypt a couple of weeks ago, we still operated. . . . The social network is us. We use whatever tools we have. They may be Internet tools, they may be phone lines, they may be paper-based communications. Turning off the technology doesn't turn off the social network, because it is about people, not about technology. (Interviewee Gharbeia, 2011)

### Thinking Beyond the Satellite-Internet Divide

Deconstructing the role of the Internet by splitting tool from space allows us to separate the value of media in terms of shaping public opinion and as an organizing force. In the former, Al-Jazeera is by far superior; in the latter, the Internet and SMS are superior to television for obvious reasons. This does not mean the Internet *as such* is not present: We argue that the Arab revolutions have reconfigured the very division of the media architecture. It has reached the point where we need to think beyond the satellite-Internet divide and try to understand how it emerges as a single powerful disseminator that includes traditional and new forms of mediation. We propose to consider this revolutionary stage as consolidating a synchronization of new social media and satellite media. When the Al-Jazeera office in Cairo was attacked, when its reporters were arrested and abused and press cards revoked, and the reporting on the ground made immensely difficult, it had to rely heavily on Facebook, YouTube and local bloggers. And Al-Jazeera could not have aired the Tunisian revolution without taking interactive Internet sources seriously, which added tremendously to reaching the tipping point.

Hossam el-Hamalawy argues that the [real] strength of the Internet lies in the fact that traditional media themselves now use it as a source of information. Thus, when well-known and respectable online journalists post something that is read by thousands of others, it is almost certain that Al-Jazeera, the BBC, and the Guardian will mention it, as happened with the live feeds from Egypt in January and February.

For Amr Gharbeia, the interaction between social media and the satellite broadcasters operated in different ways at different phases of the uprising. During the early stages, Twitter in particular provided a mechanism by which contacts could be made between activists and journalists:

During the sit-in in Tahrir, people from the international media often looked for our hashtags [grouped messages], and got in touch with us through Twitter. This was how we got to speak on their shows. So some communication with the mainstream media internationally started on the social networks. (Interviewee Gharbeia, 2011)

With the government shutdown of the Internet and mobile phone networks, Amr became involved in an organized effort to provide content for the global media from activists and citizen journalists:



The network I belong to includes a lot of bloggers, activists and journalists and we organized an operation to collect media throughout the blackout, when there was very little information coming out of Egypt. We collected it physically and transmitted it physically or electronically so that the word can get out, and lots of videos were shown on BBC World and Al-Jazeera internationally from this kind of work. (Interviewee Gharbeia, 2011)

The ubiquity of camera phones provided a rich source of content on the protests that activists such as Ramy Raouf discovered. After the Internet was restored, he helped to collect camera-phone footage recorded during the communications blackout, which was posted online and used by the satellite broadcasters:

We built a media camp in Tahrir Square. It was two tents, and we were around five or six technical friends with their laptops, memory-readers, hard disks. We had all physical means with us and we hung a sign in Arabic and English on the tent itself saying, "Focal point to gather videos and pictures from people in the street." And we received a huge amount of videos and pictures and then we go back online and keep posting them online. In the first few hours, I gathered 75 gigabytes of pictures and videos from people in the streets. (Interviewee Raouf, 2011)

In fact, redissemination by big and highly respected mediums such as Al-Jazeera added to the fame of these tools.<sup>7</sup> Thus, when a parent names its first-born daughter "Facebook" in gratitude, as reported in the *Al Ahrām* newspaper, then the role of the Internet has surely been of historic value. The heroism attributed to [the uprising] speaks for itself, but two notes need to be made: Facebook has become synonym for independent user-generated Internet; lumped in it is YouTube, Twitter, and mobile phone dissemination. The parents will probably change their daughter's name when the dust has settled and the volume of the Internet hype fades.

### **Reconceptualizing "Online Activism"**

In the wake of the protests in Iran in 2009, the Internet as an object of study became a trend and binary views about the Internet filled many pages. It is valid to ask how the current revolutions could have spread and organized if Internet tools had not been available. Activists we interviewed testified to the difficulties they encountered when their normal communication platforms were cut off. Ramy Raouf explained how activists from the Front to Defend Egyptian Protesters, a coalition of human rights organizations and lawyers, struggled to cope with the shutdown of the mobile phone networks during the uprising:

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<sup>7</sup> Further research will undoubtedly lead to discussions about new implications in terms of authenticity and professionalism.

SMS is the main communication platform among us. We receive complaints by SMS on our hotline and then we send it back to the lawyers and the lawyers send it back to us by SMS. So it is all about SMS. When the SMS was shut down, we had to distribute ourselves geographically, in Cairo and Alexandria and Suez and Tanta. People traveled to different cities to gather information. I think we were successful in doing that. In some areas, for example, in Suez, it was almost impossible to get any information in or out. Even on the ground, it was very difficult to go to the city itself by car or train. Everything was shut down. There were police everywhere. (Interviewee Raouf, 2011)

What would the situation have been if Mubarak had shut down the Internet on January 24, when the social-networking sites were still centers of political mobilization and some activists were still relying on connectivity to prepare the protests? One answer is perhaps supplied by the experience of Tunisia, where the state pursued a much more vigorous policy of directly censoring online content—so much so that bloggers named the invisible Internet censor “Ammar 404” after the error message (Ben Mhenni, 2008, 2009). Higher levels of censorship neither prevented the spread of protests after Mohamed Bouazizi’s self-immolation, nor saved Ben Ali’s regime. It is entirely possible that the uprising could have erupted from a different starting point, out of the escalation or suppression of a strike, for example. As outlined above, the revolution of 2011 did not emerge from a vacuum but was the result (and a distillation) of a decade of social and political unrest. While the Internet was *a crucial sphere* of dissidence in the pre-revolutionary period, it was not the only one. The workers’ movement since 2006 created another, particularly the many factory occupations and street sit-ins that characterized workers’ protests. When it came to the dynamics of the January 25 uprising itself, the eruption of workers’ strikes in the final week before Mubarak fell was arguably a decisive moment in convincing the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces to remove him from power.

If our objective is to challenge power, then platitudes do not help us understand the dual character of the Internet: It empowers *and* disempowers. What seems to be a paradox is actually the normal contradiction of capitalist society, precisely because the Internet is not a subject with independent characteristics but an object shaped by the social environment in which it is *embedded*.

The answer to what the effect of the Internet was in reaching the so-called *tipping point*, often hailed as the standard algorithm of mass uprisings, is that the main task for activists had been, long before January 25, to translate online political awareness to offline action. Several years before January 25, 2011, Egyptian activists had demonstrated many times the potential of Internet platforms such as Facebook to act as aggregators of collective dissent, as illustrated by the mushrooming of Facebook groups and pages such as those created to support the call for a general strike on April 6, 2008, and the April 6th Youth Movement group that was created in its wake. In fact, some activists we interviewed said they were initially skeptical that the protests planned for January 25 would be any different to the experience of the previous few years, when large online mobilizations had failed to translate into significant numbers of protesters on the streets. Noha Atef recalls:

After the Tunisian revolution, people were saying, “Ah, Egyptians, why don't you revolt?” Egyptian people were saying, “Egyptians, why don't you revolt? You can see the

Tunisians, what they did." I didn't like these comments. Then I found an event calling people to revolt on the 25<sup>th</sup> of January, which was for me a joke, a provocative joke, because a revolution should not be scheduled. So I was like, I didn't expect the revolution. I just expected protests, maybe a mass protest, but I never expected a revolution. (Interviewee Atef, 2011)

According to the Jordanian newspaper *Al-Arab al-Yawm*, jokes circulating in Egypt in the immediate aftermath of the fall of Tunisia's Ben Ali claimed that rather than empowering Egyptians to take offline action, online mobilizations would direct their anger into the safe spaces of the Internet: "One of the most repeated jokes by Egyptians these days is one that goes: 'Why do the Tunisian youth demonstrate in the streets? Don't they have Facebook?' " The January 19 report added that the circulation of such jokes demonstrated that some Egyptians "are satisfied with an electronic version of freedom" (BBC, 2011).

But this time, the cynicism was proved wrong. The ratio between those prepared to make their dissent visible online and those prepared to go into the streets and physically take on the security apparatus certainly shifted, and can be considered one crucial tipping point in the process of revolution. However, it is important to understand that this was not just about a higher proportion of online dissenters being willing to join the vanguard of activists who were prepared to expose their physical selves to arrest, beatings, even torture and death in order to confront the regime. As outlined above, the next tipping point was reached when enough of the activists who did organize online found a mechanism to reach and mobilize sufficient numbers of Cairo's urban masses (largely from the majority of Egyptians who are not online and for whom the Internet *was not* their primary sphere of dissidence) in order to shift the balance of forces in street confrontations with the police. A third threshold dividing mass protest from popular urban insurrection was decisively breached on January 28, with the sacking of hundreds of police stations and the defeat of Interior Ministry forces in the epic battles for Cairo's city centers.

During this phase, which coincided with the shutdown of the Internet and mobile phone networks, the primary channels of mobilization were not mediated at all. Our interviewees who were physically located in Cairo during these events emphasized their complete lack of knowledge of what was happening elsewhere in the city until they returned home in the evening to watch coverage of the protests on Al-Jazeera. In each area, therefore, there was another tipping point when activists in the streets there were able to persuade enough local people to join them (which appears to have been done in many cases by attracting them to join the marches through chanting and by intervening through face-to-face discussions at Friday prayers to issue a call for a march) in order to overwhelm the local police forces (Amr Gharbeia, interview; Sayed Abd-al-Rahman, interview). El-Hamalawy recalls precisely this process in Nasr City on January 28: "It was like an advancing army, you know, we were taking one square after the other, clashing with the police. It was like war, basically, to be in the streets." In some areas, the arithmetic of mass protest did not function in the activists' favor and all that happened on January 28 was localized, small-scale clashes with the police, and the crucial breakthrough to Tahrir was not achieved (Amr Gharbeia, interview; Sayed Abd-al-Rahman, interview).

Analyzing these interviews and fieldwork observations brought us to the conclusion that the awareness of this techno-social dialectic is important *in itself*. Particularly, the potential harm of the Internet is political *knowledge* derived from embodied *experience*, which is further combined with a pragmatic understanding of the offline balance of power. This social capital has “real” offline repercussions for activists and shapes the direction of political change at large. For instance, if some of the activist groups had focused on Internet mobilization and not put enormous effort into street-level organizing—spending hours talking with and persuading locals, posting fliers and testing out different locations and routes for the planned sit-ins and marches—then January 25, 2011, would have been little more than a footnote in the history books.

From the narratives of the protesters documented online and from our interviews, we understand that the organizers were actually not surprised by the setbacks and thus were better prepared. For instance, the possibility of being shut down was discussed by the activists on several occasions. Thus the political Internet networks do not confirm the view of leaderless swarms, as often remarked when “new” Internet structures for political activism are discussed. The fact that there was little clear political direction or decision-making online does not mean that they did not exist. Rather, it means that they are kept outside the scope of authoritarian surveillance, as well as having a tactical strength: not letting ideological stigmas demobilize the public. It is precisely because it *looked* like it was a new, youth-oriented, non-ideological, online, horizontal movement that it gained attention and, perhaps, for many disillusioned with mainstream politics to give it the benefit of the doubt. We think there is also a general problem among journalists and researchers: projecting their own experience with the Internet on other phenomena, and their inability to understand what is discussed between the lines in Arabic. This double bias contributes to sketching a deformed image of the role of the Internet.

Finally, we have demonstrated that the often-mentioned *tipping point* is not a simple question. In contexts where the stakes are very high (arrest, torture, death, military intervention), it takes multiple tipping points to reach multiple crucial moments of significance. This shows enormous endurance on the part of the people. The other side is that many lives were lost and many more people injured. In these dramatic events, the online was merely a tool for the offline, although in specific stages of the events, an extraordinary tool.



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#### **Facebook groups observed**

*Dubhat min agil al-Thawra* (Officers for the Revolution)

<http://www.facebook.com/pages/%D8%B6%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B7-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A3%D8%AC%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AB%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%A9/168595796526020>

*Sawt al-Ummal* (Workers' Voice)

<http://www.facebook.com/pages/%D8%B5%D9%88%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84/200680013291464>

*Al-Ligan al-Sha'abiyya lil-Difa'a 'an al-Thawra al-Masriyya* (The Popular Committees to Defend the Egyptian Revolution)

<http://www.facebook.com/legansh3bia>

*Kulina Khalid Sa'id* (We are all Khalid Sa'id)

<http://www.facebook.com/EIShaheed>