Chapter 5

ICT, Media, and the Egyptian Revolution: Building Networks of Democracy

Ahmed El Gody
Örebro University, Sweden

ABSTRACT

The utilization of information and communication technologies (ICT) in Egypt has irrevocably changed the nature of the traditional Egyptian public sphere. The Egyptian online society can be viewed as a multiplicity of networks. These networks have developed, transformed and expanded over time, operating across all areas of life. Nonetheless, in essence they are socio-political and cultural in origin. Network communication changed the way audiences consumed news, with traditional media—especially independent and opposition—starting to utilize ICTs to access online information to develop their media content, in order to escape government control. Several media organizations also started to expand their presence online so that, as well as providing news content, they also provided readers with a ‘space’ to interact amongst themselves and with media organizations. Audiences started to provide detailed descriptions of Egyptian street politics, posting multimedia material, generating public interest, and reinforcing citizen power – and, hence, democratic capacity.

INTRODUCTION

In the first months of 2011, the world witnessed a series of tumultuous events in Egypt that soon led to the toppling of President Hosni Mubarak’s 30-year regime. The Egyptian Revolution was the most media-exposed event in the Arab world (Cottle, 2012), not only because of Egypt’s position as a main political hub in the Middle East/ North Africa, but also because it saw citizens use different forms of media – especially Facebook, Twitter, and mobile telephones – to voice Egyptian opposition across the world (Abdel Fattah, 2012; Faris, 2013). Even though the Egyptian government shut Internet lines, cut off mobile communications, confiscated newspapers, imprisoned protestors, blocked media websites,
ICT, Media, and the Egyptian Revolution

and scrambled satellite signals to limit coverage of the events (El Gody, 2012; Martens-Edwards, 2014; Webb, 2014), Egyptian activists and journalists withstood government pressure and gave voice to their cause online. This has led many to label the Egyptian Revolution a ‘Facebook’ or ‘Twitter’ revolution.

Internet service reached Egypt in 1993. The introduction and utilization of ICT irrevocably changed the nature of communication and news consumption in the country. Egyptians became active and indeed interactive online citizens (and sometimes journalists), providing detailed descriptions of Egyptian street politics (Castells, 2012). This trend changed the way audiences consumed news, with traditional media – especially independent and opposition media – starting to utilize ICT to access online information in order to develop their media content and to escape government control. Several media organizations and news portals, like Al Masry Al Youm, Al Dostor, and Al Youm7, started to expand their presence online so that, as well as providing news content, they also provided a ‘space’ for online political deliberations by online activists and movements like the 6 April youth movement for change (among others), where they could post multimedia material, generate public interest and reinforce citizen power and democracy (Castells, 2012; Faris, 2014). Indeed, after the 2011 Revolution these social networks have developed, transformed and expanded over time. They now operate across all areas of life (Castells, 2012; El Gody, 2012). Nonetheless, in essence these networks are socio-political and cultural in origin.

Howard (2011) has stated that countries where citizens and journalism actively use ICT subsequently “experience a radical democratic transition” (p. 200). In that sense, ICT creates a network space where citizens interact, discussing issues of a common concern, and the role of journalists is to facilitate discussion among different networks. This chapter aims to understand the role played by ICT in creating an Egyptian network and public sphere, which audiences utilize to develop a new experience of democratization. Furthermore, the chapter aims to discuss the convergence of ICT in Egyptian media, emphasizing the role this media played in paving the road to the 2011 Revolution and beyond.

BACKGROUND: ICT AND THE CREATION OF EGYPT’S NETWORK SOCIETY

Internet services reached Egypt through the Egyptian Universities Network and the Supreme Council of Universities (Abdullah, 2005). Between 1993 and 1996, the Internet penetration rate did not exceed 0.01 per cent of the population. Poor economic conditions, limited infrastructure (with a slow 9.6kbs speed), high illiteracy rates and rigid traditional cultural boundaries contributed to the low level of connectivity (El Gody, 2012). By the mid-1990s, the wave of globalization forced the Egyptian government to recognize ICT as an important factor in achieving sustainable development (Dutta, 2006). Therefore, to promote Internet connectivity and use, the Egyptian government decided to commercialize Internet use. However, it kept control over ICT infrastructure through effective monitoring and regulations (Abdulla, 2005). The partnership between the government and the private sector led to the establishment of several Internet nodes in rural areas, which boosted the number of users to 1.1 per cent of the population by the start of the twenty-first century (Abdulla, 2005; El Gody, 2012).

Realizing how strongly a communication and information technology (IT) sector could contribute to the troubled economy, the Egyptian government in 1999 created a new Ministry of Communications and Information Technology (Amin, 2003). Ahmed Nazif, who in July 2004 became the last prime minister of Egypt before the 2011 Revolution, headed the new ministry. Nazif believed that technology could be controlled and managed if it was steered by the right policies (Abdullah, 2005). The Ministry continued the growth and development of the ICT sector. The government established Egypt’s Smart