Chapter 6

Social Networks, Media, and the Egyptian Revolution: Building Democratic Front?

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ABSTRACT

The utilisation of social media in Egypt has irrevocably changed the nature of the traditional Egyptian public sphere. One can see the Egyptian online society as a multiplicity of networks. These networks have developed, transformed, and expanded over time, operating across all areas of life. Audiences started to utilise social media platforms providing detailed descriptions of Egyptian street politics, generating public interest and reinforcing citizen democracy. This trend changed the way audiences consumed news, with media organisations starting to expand their presence online so that, as well as providing news content, they also provided audience a ‘space’ to interact. This chapter establishes understanding on the role of social media in developing an Egyptian networked public sphere. Further, the chapter discusses the role social media plays in post 2011 revolution democratisation process. This study employed qualitative ethnography (nethnography) and network analysis on 20 Egyptian news and social media newspapers and websites to monitor online deliberation.
INTRODUCTION

The opening months of 2011, world witnessed a series of turmoil events in Egypt that soon lead to uprisings toppling President Mubarak 30-years regime. The Egyptian revolution was the most media exposed event in the Arab World, not only because of Egypt’s position as a main political hub in the Middle East/ North Africa, but also for citizen using different forms of social media to voice Egyptian opposition to the world. Even with the Egyptian government shutting Internet lines, cutting off mobile communications, confiscating newspapers, imprisoning protesters, blocking media websites, and scrambling satellite signals to limit coverage of the events, Egyptian activists curbed government pressure to voice their cause online. This lead many label the Egyptian revolution as the ‘Facebook’ or the ‘Twitter’ revolution.

Internet service reached Egypt in 1993. The Introduction and utilisation of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) has irrevocably changed the nature of communication and news consumption. One can see the Egyptian online society as a multiplicity of networks that expanded and developed over time operating across all areas of everyday life. Several Egyptians become active and indeed interactive online citizens (sometimes journalists), providing detailed descriptions of Egyptian street politics, posting multimedia material, generating public interest and reinforcing citizen power and democracy.

Internet services reached Egypt through The Egyptian Universities Network and the Supreme Council of Universities (Abdullah, 2005). Between 1993 and 1996, Internet penetration rate did not exceed 0.1 per cent of the population. Poor Economic conditions, limited infrastructure, high illiteracy rate and cultural beliefs contributed to the humble connectivity. Globalization pressure, however, forced the Egyptian government to recognize the power of ICTs as an important factor in achieving sustainable development (Dutta, 2006). To promote Internet connectivity and use, the Egyptian government decided to commercialize Internet use keeping control, however, over the Internet through effective monitoring and regulations (Kamel, 2002). Internet commercialization helped to increase Internet population. The partnership between the government and the private sector led to the establishment of several Internet nodes in rural areas that boosted the number of users, as well as helped in closing the internal digital divide.

Realizing how strong a communication and information technology sector could contribute to the economy, the Egyptian government in 1999 created a new Ministry of Communications and Information Technology (MCIT) (Ministry of Communication and Information Technology, 2011; Amin, 2003). Ahmed Nazif, who in July 2004 became the last prime minister of Egypt before the 2011 revolution, headed the new ministry. Nazif, led a technocrat/ businessmen government that believed that technology can be controlled and managed if steered by the right policies (Abdullah,
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