Chapter 18

The Cyber–Propelled Egyptian Revolution and the De/Construction of Ethos

Samaa Gamie
Lincoln University, USA

ABSTRACT
This chapter examines two key Egyptian Facebook pages that became the voice and face of the youth movement that ignited the Egyptian revolution. The “Kolena Khaled Said” and “We are all Khaled Said” Facebook pages, respectively, represent the Arabic and international branch of the Egyptian human rights campaign against police violence. This chapter explores the complexity of ethos construction in activist digital discourses by analyzing the visual and textual elements of each page, the communal ethos, and the sense of shared identity that emerge in these digital social networks, as well as the internal and external challenges posed to their emergent ethos. The results of the analysis of both Facebook campaigns indicate the powerful role anonymity plays in activist digital discourses in creating a communal ethos that, combined with the visual and textual elements of the page, are able to achieve massive outreach that legitimates their calls for reform, activism, and revolutionary work. The chapter reflects upon the possibilities of integrating the critical study of ethos in composition teaching.

INTRODUCTION

The January 25th 2011 Egyptian revolution not only marked a popular uprising against a long-ruling dictator but also a technological revolution in which cyberspace and social networking sites were used as tools for political activism and as means of organizing and coordinating revolutionary work. The Egyptian cyber-propelled youth revolution organized around a few key movements that launched on Facebook: The January 25 Movement, 6th of April Youth Movement, and We Are all Khaled Said. These three movements initiated an Egyptian revolution by spreading their message to millions of Egyptians of all ages and socio-economic backgrounds, and they were a key factor in the success of the revolution that ended a thirty-year dictatorship and started a new phase of
The Cyber-Propelled Egyptian Revolution and the De/Construction of Ethos

The Cyber-Propelled Egyptian Revolution and the De/Construction of Ethos

democratic reforms in Egypt. Hence, in this paper, I will examine We Are all Khaled Said, a cyber movement that ran two concurrent, yet separate, campaigns and Facebook pages: one in Arabic based in Egypt and another in English based in the UK. In my analysis, I will explore the construction of the communal digital ethos of these key youth cyber movements and the challenges posed to their communal digital ethos by pro-regime, counter-revolutionary pockets. The chapter aims to explore the role authorship and anonymity play in these activist digital discourses and how these digital users discursively and visually merge Western humanism, Islamism, and post-sectarian Egyptian nationalism in the formation of their communal digital ethos legitimating their calls for reform, activism, and revolutionary work.

BACKGROUND

It is undeniable that digital social networks have emerged as the fermenting ground for the propellers and proponents of democracy and reform. Theodore Roszak (1986) saw in information technology the potential to “concentrate political power, to create new forms of social obfuscation and domination” (p. xii), thus presenting opportunities for social control and suppression of freedoms and rights while also increasing the power of the individual. With the increased power of the individual comes the decentralization of power and knowledge, where a group member’s take on national or international policies occupies center stage alongside the views of politicians and the elite, leading to the democratization of this digital sphere. Simultaneously entrenching chaos and confusion, while renewing the sense of community, and creating rich opportunities for social contact and growth. This is no less evident in the discourses that emerged pre and post-the Egyptian revolution.

This sense of community and shared identity, in both material and virtual social spaces, arises from “an understandable dream expressing a desire for selves that are transparent to one another, (with) relationships of mutual identification, social closeness and comfort” (Young, 1990, p. 300). In essence, through identification or a series of identifications, cooperation, social cohesion and ultimately persuasion, the community identity or ethos is achieved. Herein, Burke’s (1950) conception of identification can assist us in conceptualizing digital ethos as a discourse community whereupon the individuals and the cyber community collaborate in the formation of this communal ethos. In this sense, we can view ethos as a textual system with stated and unstated conventions for exercising power that extend beyond sociological lines. Such ethos that emerges from this discourse community is unstable and dynamic—possessing great complexity as the digital discourse community presents itself as “‘an unstated assemblage of faults, fissures, and heterogeneous layers’ and a network of intersecting systems, institutions, values and practices” (Porter, 1997, p. 107), stressing the intertextuality of such discourse communities and the ethos that emerges from, within and outside them. In viewing ethos as a “network of discursive practices” and conventions (Porter, 1997, p. 110), ethos can be seen as a discourse with an established set of conventions for knowledge production and dissemination.

This view of ethos as a discourse community lines up with Laura Gurak’s (1999) discussion of ethos as a group quality expressing the cultural and moral tone of a community that allows group members, who share similar concerns and interests, to create a strong community ethos and to mobilize and spread relevant information more quickly and effectively. According to Gurak (1999), this communal sense of ethos promotes conformity and discourages dissent creating insular digital communities where speed takes precedence over accuracy and the beliefs of the community supersede the communal and individual responsibility of citizens to make informed decisions. Thus,