Blogging for Reform: the Case of Egypt

Just after midnight on Wednesday October 25 2006, Malek Mostafa published a post on his blog malek-x.net entitled *Downtown's Sexual Rabies*. Little did he know that his post would prove a blogging sensation and send shockwaves through Egypt's independent media.

Eliciting some 750 comments—a massive jump from the average 30 comments Malek receives—the post broke a story which Egypt's state-run media were either unwilling or unable to report: the sexual harassment of women in Downtown Cairo during the Islamic post-Ramadan feast holiday Eid in October 2006.

The post comprised an eye-witness account of what happened backed up by photographs taken by journalist and fellow blogger Wael Abbas. A total of 60,000 people read the post and for a week, Malek's site was getting some 8,000 visitors a day.

"One of the things I believe bloggers like me have achieved," says Malek, "is create a new breed of citizen journalists who communicate what they witness like any correspondent."

That night Malek, Wael (misrdigital.blogspirit.com), another blogger Mohammed El Sharkawy (speaksfreely.net) and Reuters stringer photographer Abdel Nasser Nouri had the opportunity to put their reporting skills to the test. They were sitting at a Downtown café when a friend came over and told them about the mass harassment of girls near the Metro Cinema where the celebrity belly-dancer Dina was attending the premiere of her Eid film. From what they were told, Dina had started dancing in the street causing a crowd to gather round her. The bloggers rushed to the scene to find hundreds of young men surrounding a handful of women—veiled, unveiled young and old—grabbing them and tearing off their clothes.

An hour later Malek blogged the whole incident, describing how some of the girls sought refuge in shops, while others were rescued by taxi drivers or security guards. He also detailed how there were no police present to stop the violations.

According to blogger Sandmonkey (who did not witness the event), “it was a disgusting pandemonium of sexual assaults.” To add insult to injury, when some of the bloggers asked the police to do something, they were told: “What do you want us to do? It’s Eid. Happy Eid to you too!” Officers even refused to file complaints by some of the harassed women at the police station because it would reflect badly on their peers.

But it was not just the police who refused to acknowledge the events. The incidents were initially met with zero coverage in the press and on satellite channels.

Some bloggers alleged that Al Jazeera had footage of the episode but was given strict orders by the authorities not to air it. And so it remained for three days until Nawara Negm, daughter of leftist poet Ahmed Fouad Negm and outspoken Islamist thinker and journalist Safinaz Kazem, appeared on Dream TV's magazine show *Al Aashera Masa'an* (The 10 O'clock Show) hosted by Mona El Shazly.

Nawara was originally invited to critique Ramadan TV shows, but suddenly diverted the issue to talk about the Downtown assaults that were being discussed all over the Internet.

El Shazly decided to investigate the allegations on her show. Her team subsequently went to the scene where the assaults were alleged to have taken place and spoke to shopkeepers, security guards and other eyewitnesses, including Malek, 90 percent of whom confirmed the incidents. She also contacted the Interior Ministry, which denied that anything had taken place and said that no one had filed any complaints related to such incidents.

From there, the story migrated to the independent press with columns appearing in the daily *Al Masry Al Youm*, *Al Dustour*, *El Karama*, *El Fagr* and also on Orbit's top show *Al Qahira Al Youm*.

The story shows the extent to which bloggers and independent media may be increasingly challenging the narrative provided by Egypt's state-run media. But the

growing willingness of private media to harness blogs poses difficult questions about the ability of individual bloggers to provide accurate accounts of events. It also calls into question whether blogs alone can drive the push for political reform in Egypt and the wider Middle East.

Blogging for a Cause: Harnessing Politics or Projecting Self?

The emergence of activist blogging in Egypt is closely tied to the Kifaya National Movement for Change, a loose grassroots, all-encompassing movement that has been agitating for human and civil rights and political reform since December 2004. If Kifaya has provided the political space for voices of opposition to speak out, blogs have provided the means for Kifaya's mobilization. Not only have bloggers continued to challenge the official version of events, exposing a wide array of abuses by Egypt's authorities and monitoring fellow activists' lives in jail, they have also rallied other activists to the cause by publicizing Kifaya demonstrations often overlooked by mainstream publications.

For Malek, 25, Kifaya's strength is in its diversity. "Everything in Egypt is centralized," he says. "That's why I was attracted to Kifaya. It's not centralized. It includes all the colors of the political spectrum."

Malek dabbled with several political affiliations including the Islamist-leaning Wasat Party and some leftist groups, but found little outlet for his political faith in

plurality until Kifaya came along. “I have an aversion to dogma,” he says. “In the beginning I thought I needed to belong to an organized group. Then I realized that I didn’t have to be part of any institution to function and be active. This is where blogging comes in.”

Malek readily acknowledges the importance of blogging in propelling the Kifaya movement. For him blogging is not just a channel for communication the authorities struggle to control, but also an inherently plural phenomenon that at once allows for community and individuality to develop. “It helps me reach an ever-growing group of politicized youth,” he says, “while at the same time I maintain my independence. It can also reach people outside the political sphere altogether.”

The crucial point is that Kifaya and political blogging developed symbiotically in Egypt—Kifaya providing a purpose for bloggers to write, and bloggers giving Kifaya an outlet to take root. Malek believes that for political change to take place the two must work together: “It’s not enough simply to write. Blogging must go hand in hand with street action, otherwise it’s just empty, useless protest.”

Mobilizing a political opposition movement to force political change is one thing, but institutionalizing the kind of diversity that blogging makes possible is quite another. This is particularly true in Egypt where a corporatist state continues to actively constrain political, religious, and ethnic plurality.

Yet Malek sees blogging as the ideal venue to fight for such a shift towards a state which embraces plurality. "Diversity is what gives taste to life and political diversity is the first step," he says. "A real democracy recognizes all groups as equals. It should not allow those who run for office to spend millions in campaigning for a service position. We need to have genuine multiplicity in political representation and trade unions, otherwise any "choice" we make is a sham."

According to 25-year-old construction engineer Amr Ezzat, author of mabadali.blogspot.com, blogs have allowed for a greater diversity of opinion to enter the public sphere. "It's like a camera following the lead actor's every move. [Blogs] humanize the "other" who is more likely to accept differences in opinion, politics and lifestyle."

In other words, blogs can force readers to accept difference. Amr feels this is particularly true of religious debate. "The atheists reign in their contempt for religion," he says, "while the religious bloggers—who would not even accept the existence of non-believers in the first place—can now see some shared values."

The unfettered opportunity to express his ideas about politics and his own personal experiences without feeling that someone is looking over his shoulder is the driving force behind blogger Mohammed El Sharkawy's interest in the medium. "As a citizen journalist, I want to be part of an alternative citizen media that will be a headache

for the regime. I want to say that we are watching, participating and writing what we experience with no ulterior motives."

Threading stories of individual experience into a shared narrative of community experience is undoubtedly one of the potentials of blogs. In a region where top-down nation building has often sought to erase or constrain diversity, blogging could provide the basis for ground-up rethinking of community which allows for much greater acceptance of pluralism.

But there are many who question whether blogs really provide for diverse readers. The argument that blogs rather encourage the formation of online ghettos of opinion remains strong in Egypt. Some go as far as suggesting that because of low levels of literacy and Internet access in Egypt, bloggers are voices from the margins mistakenly assumed to be the authentic voice of the average Egyptian.

"Are there any mainstream bloggers?" asks Tarek Atia[1], creator of the first local online news aggregator that launched in 1996, cairolive.com. "Or are they all extremists of one form or another—whether liberal or religious?"

Atia warns against foreign commentators and journalists crediting individual bloggers with being representative of the wider society in which they live. "It becomes a

[1] Atia's views are the fruit of several email conversations we had while I was at London's Westminster University in June preparing for my MA's final online project egyptblogreview.com

problem when certain blogs are picked up by the international media and seen as a fair representation of how Egyptians think. Some "celebrity" bloggers clearly pander to their audience."

If bloggers are individuals first, and opposition activists second, there are repercussions not just for the sense of community they may inspire. Individualism also comes to shape the very opposition movements that drive their writings. For Amr, this is a real problem which has hindered the success of Kifaya's opposition. "You end up having tiny groups with little impact. They will not achieve a popular base," he says.

Amr is convinced that the wide umbrella under which Kifaya has attempted to bring together the various political currents has rendered it impossible for the movement to be internally democratic, especially when it came to voting for heads of committees and coordinators. "It's ironic that we keep promoting democracy and condemning centralization of power, but can't even run a yahoo group," he says.

So here lies a central conflict within the Kifaya movement, in which blogging plays a crucial part: encouraging pluralism both in its ideology and in its *practice* of opposition, Kifaya has undermined its own ability to mobilize an effective and unified opposition.

Many commentators now argue that Kifaya is a spent force. It is said that the movement has not been able to organize and mobilize a wide enough base to mount a

credible challenge to the overwhelmingly powerful corporate structures of the regime—the army, the state bureaucracy, the unions and so on. So where does this leave bloggers like Wael who point to the power of blogging in its individuality? Can a movement which includes "all the colors of the political spectrum" to quote Wael also force change? And if the power of the blogging-led Kifaya movement is in its plurality, does it really represent the values of wider Egyptian society? Indeed, it maybe that the pluralism that blogging encourages is precisely why Kifaya is so weak. It may be that activists have prioritized their individuality and self-expression over developing the corporate structures of the movement. In other words, maybe activists' reliance on blogging has actually helped undermine Kifaya.

What Impact Has Blogging Really Had in Egypt?

In Egyptian bloggers' view, there is little doubt their web logs are becoming an increasingly effective alternative media source. "There has been a huge difference in how blogs are perceived since I began in 2004," says Wael. "Many independent newspapers depend on them, and while at the beginning there was talk of competition for audiences between e-news and print, now there is convergence."

The power to influence the news agenda inevitably implies a power to reach the regime. "Blogs are so influential to the point that they elicit responses from the highest state officials," says Wael.

For Nora Younis, 28, activist and development professional "blogging is empowering." In her view the technology is a leveler which has greatly improved activists' hand against the regime. "No matter what happens to me, I feel that I can get some of my own back, it won't go unreported," she says.

Blogs have not only opened an unrestricted space which activists can use to flag unreported trends and events, they have also allowed individuals to express their views and engage in debate. "Blogs have bypassed a need for print or broadcast media to voice one's opinion," says Amr.

And in bypassing mainstream news media, blogs threaten to unravel the carefully managed, state-controlled narrative which frames government policy as morally just and sensible. "For me this is the first step towards reform," says Malek. "When people's ideas change, they will be ready to change their reality. The way this change is articulated—whether peacefully or otherwise—will be determined by the will of the masses."

If change is to be driven by the many rather than the few, blogs could play an important part, so bloggers argue.

In a society where political checks to democratic change are justified in terms of social, religious and political threats to national prosperity and unity, targeting taboos becomes all the more urgent. Malek believes that such open discussion is the only way to

induce reform, and that the blogosphere, more than other online formats like forums and chat rooms which are subject to the censorship of an administrator, is the venue best able to stimulate such uncontrolled expression.

And activist bloggers really have claimed numerous scalps against the regime, not least scooping the sexual assaults scandal during Eid 2006. The "blog effect", says Wael, has supported Egypt's reform movement as bloggers deftly and conscientiously report on human rights infringements as well as organizing demonstrations and coordinating sit-ins.

Psychiatrist and human rights activist Dr Aida Seif El Dawla, who is also chair of the Egyptian Association Against Torture, strongly believes in the uncompromising power of bloggers who document events as they see them, without checks and balances. "They are a major challenge and a force to be reckoned with in a country where you're not supposed to know the truth. They are the popular media which seeks the truth no matter what."

To this extent, Nora would agree. Her blogging became more determined after her experiences of an anti-referendum demonstration organized by Kifaya to protest the cosmetic changes made to Article 76 of the Egyptian constitution in May 2005. The day came to be known as Egypt's Black Referendum Day.

"I was beaten, assaulted and watched other female journalists being molested by state security's plain-clothes thugs, as the officers stood by in approving silence," says Nora. "All because we had the courage to speak out for what we believed in." The experience combined with the authorities' "inability to identify those responsible" channeled her passion for documenting the movement. She joined Kifaya's initiative "El Sharei Lena" (The Street is Ours) and blogged unrelentingly about her experiences—experiences the state-run press were all too happy to ignore.

But although bloggers have been widely associated with direct efforts to push for political reform in Egypt, their greatest role has probably been in indirectly pressuring for media reform. "Bloggers have imposed their presence by instigating certain debates among media practitioners," argues Tarek Attia.

Given that Egyptian mass media are so readily used to shape national, class and political conscience, as is so often legible in film, dramatic serials, and news, blogs can provide a refreshing distance from state messages.

"The power of blogs lies in the fact that they are not didactic," says Wael. "They assume an intimate relationship between the writer and the reader. The reader comes to me personally to either get my perspective on news or to verify a certain item. The moment it becomes a tool for indoctrination, or a mouthpiece for certain ideological groups, people will stop reading it."

And there is no doubt newspaper editors and television producers are taking note, as the efforts of the independent press and satellite channels to harness blogging reports of the Eid assaults show. Atia points to how the blogosphere has made its mark on independent outfits like *Al Dustour* and *Al Masry Al Youm*.

Some newspapers have even reprinted blog posts without editing them. The Nasserist *El Karama* newspaper, for instance, reprinted a post from Nora's blog post verbatim with attribution and a reference to her website. Although she would not have minded them running her piece without crediting her—"I'd be happy if the word is out," she says—she thinks that if readers know where to find her work, they will keep coming back. This is just one example of many in a growing collaborative relationship between bloggers and Egypt's independent media.

At the most optimistic extreme, Seif Al Dawla insists that bloggers' achievements are political and owe no thanks to other media sectors: "True some independent outlets have supported them, but that was after they had proven themselves and received international acknowledgement."

But though bloggers and commentators can see the potential of blogging, many are skeptical about the extent of blogging's impact on Egypt's media. "The state-owned press still conforms to a set party-line with no freedom to tackle issues in an open, inclusive manner," says Amr.

But what about the independent media? "Perhaps the relationship between blogs and the independent press can be summed up in one word: plagiarism. Although more people may be aware of blogs, they are not as effective as they are touted to be. The influence is on a very small scale and is often coincidental."

Mohammed El Sharkawy, who was arrested and sexually abused during the May 2006 crackdown on the pro-reform movement, has an even more hostile attitude to the state-owned and the independent press. "They only pick up blog posts that serve their interests," he says. "If a secularist [blogger], for example, published a coherent argument about any given issue, they will never run it so as not to upset the Muslim Brotherhood."

Some analysts are more skeptical than the bloggers. Naila Hamdy, mass communications professor at the American University in Cairo, who also teaches online journalism, in particular warns against over-estimating the impact of blogs.

"I don't believe that blogs have a direct public effect," she says. "As for their influence on independent media, it's minimal. Some journalists follow blogs because they represent a non-restricted space for individuals, but apart from the recent harassment story which migrated to the mainstream media, they hardly sway the news agenda."

Blogs, she believes, are not the sort of websites Internet users casually come across. "There's so much on the Internet that unless you're actively looking for them, you won't really ever come across blogs." She explains how, for instance, a week after the

Eid harassment story broke, she mentioned it during one of her classes at the American University in Cairo—home to a tech-savvy social elite with unlimited access to the web. She claims that 90 percent of the students did not even know what a blog was.

"The internet penetration barrier is perhaps one of the main obstacles to any real impact of bloggers on political reform. We must ask: how many people are literate? And how many are computer literate?" she says. With merely five million Internet users in Egypt[2], a small fraction of them bloggers[3], it's difficult to disagree with her.

Atia is similarly modest about the achievements of blogs overall. "Perhaps the most positive impact has been in the public discussion that blogs generate both through posts and comments and the fact that they point to other links and events," he says. "It's too early to talk about a serious impact because few people know what blogs are, fewer read them and even less are interested in creating their own blogs."

He points to the fact that the highly acclaimed anonymous female blogger, Bahheya, was only noted when the famous Egyptian journalist Mohammed Hassanein Heikal mentioned her in a column.

[2] According to internetworldstats.com, there were five million Internet users in Egypt as of December 2005, which represents 7% of the total population.

[3] Egybloggers.com has listed a total of 1,457 blogs as of August 2006, 21.6 percent of which are political compare to 47.2 percent personal. Assuming that as many have not been listed, this would add up to a maximum of 3,000.

In Egypt then, political bloggers may have to wait for wider technological and social change before their efforts are really channeled into political reform. But there is good evidence that blogging has provided a refreshing dynamism and momentum to the independent media sector in Egypt.

The Government Crackdown: Shaping Public Perception and Jailing Bloggers

It is often claimed that the real obstacle to bloggers achieving greater political gains in Egypt is the repressive response of an authoritarian state. But Nora argues it is a common misconception that bloggers are under siege for the ideas they espouse or their online advocacy.

"Bloggers have not yet been blacklisted as a threat to national security and there have been no moves towards banning access to our sites," she says. "If my phone is tapped or I'm being followed, it's because of what I do on the street, joining demonstrations. This has been the case ever since I filed the complaint after Black Referendum Day."

Western human rights and journalist groups would beg to differ. In November 2006 the campaigning group Reporters Without Borders (RSF) listed 13 countries it labelled as "enemies of the Internet." The inclusion of Egypt, it said, was because

"President Hosni Mubarak is displaying an authoritarianism towards the Internet that is particularly worrying" noting the recent imprisonment of three pro-democracy bloggers.

The announcement sent shockwaves across the blogosphere but was seen as a triumph for human rights and free speech activists who felt that it would give cyber dissidents with a pro-reform agenda a new lease on life. Now that the issue is on the international civil rights map, it would be an international embarrassment for the regime to attempt any form of Internet censorship, they argue.

The question most people are failing to ask, however, is whether there actually is Internet censorship and whether the arrest of some pro-democracy bloggers constitutes a crackdown.

There appears to be a consensus, even among political bloggers and the most vocal human rights advocates, that the arrested bloggers were not targeted for the content of their blogs.

Seif El Dawla admits that the detained bloggers were rounded up for their involvement in street action, but still believes "the camera-toting angry citizen who participates and documents security violations is increasingly becoming a thorn in the regime's side."

"These detentions," says Atia, "fall into the category of people being arrested for performing their standard political right to demonstrate. Whether they were targeted for being bloggers, one cannot really tell. The question to ask in this case is whether they would have been arrested had they not attended the demonstration."

The most recent case involving Alexandria blogger Karim Amer deserves a bit more scrutiny.

Karim's case, according to the executive director of the Arabic Human Rights Network Gamal Eid, started on October 25, 2005. When he blogged about the sectarian violence that took place in Alexandria he was taken from his home and detained for 12 days, told to stop writing and then released.

But throughout this ordeal, his blog was not shut down and he continued to write what many bloggers describe as hate speech. Malek goes as far as to say that Karim's postings were "racist and discriminatory" criticism of Islam and Muslims.

Karim, who attended Al Azhar University's Law School, was then subjected to an investigation at the university which led to his expulsion in March 2006, followed by an official police complaint against him by the university, which claimed that the ideas he espoused and propagated on his website demanded a criminal investigation.

"Legally they don't have a case because the law does not incriminate citizens for their ideas," says Eid. "The law only punishes incitement of violence or hate. The university has overstepped its rights. Its role is to nurture freedom of conscience, not repress it."

During his interrogation early November, when network lawyer Rawda Ahmed Sayyed was representing him, Karim stood by his ideas, reiterating that he is a secularist, that he opposes the autocratic Egyptian regime and that he stands by his critique of certain historical Islamic figures. During what Eid describes as a breach of standard interrogation procedure, more than one prosecutor insulted and degraded him with derogatory comments.

Eid argues the charges against Karim—circulating rumours liable to disturb the peace, defaming the president, inciting the regime's overthrow, inciting hatred of Islam and circulating ideas prejudicial to Egypt's reputation—constitute "a blatant infringement of international covenants to which Egypt is a signatory."

Despite worldwide solidarity campaigns spearheaded by free speech advocates, an Alexandria courted sentenced Amer to four years in prison on February 22, 2007 — three years for posing criticism to Islam and one year for defaming President Mubarak. The sentence will be appealed by his lawyers, but was seen by observers as a dangerous precedent and setback to Internet freedom.

Karim's case is unique in that it is the first time a blogger has faced charges merely for his ideas and not for participating in street action. But there are plenty of precedents of print journalists being charged with similar crimes, something the recent cosmetic amendments to the publishing offences law have done little to correct.

The law, which effectively gags journalists, penalizes whoever owns, publishes or spreads by any means (even through phone messages) pictures or drawings that tarnish the image of Egypt, with a maximum of two years' imprisonment, and a fine reaching 10,000 Egyptian Pounds.

General Mostafa Radi, Head of the General Administration for Information and Documents at the Ministry of Interior, insists that the Internet crimes unit under his authority "only investigates cases where members of the public have filed an official complaint." These complaints include slander, libel, death threats, extortion, theft, he says.

When asked to comment on what the Ministry of Interior understood by the term "tarnishing Egypt's image" Radi replied swiftly that this did not come under his jurisdiction. "All I do," he reiterated, "is respond to complaints by starting an investigation. The investigation will go through all the legal channels and there will be a court case. Depending on the court's decision (which is dictated by the penal code) we would take action."

In keeping with the Egyptian government's determination to present itself as freedom-loving, Radi insisted that the authorities had little business in meddling with Internet users' activities. "We have no authority to order an ISP to block or bring down a site," he says. "This has never happened before and would only happen if there was a court ruling that the publisher of the site has broken the law and is subject to punishment. Otherwise we would have closed down many sites, but the fact is that all sites are open and available for everyone to read."

Karim's trial was recently adjourned for the second time until February 22nd at the behest of his lawyers, but efforts to have him released continue. The reaction of bloggers to Karim's arrest was to circulate a "Free Karim" poster on their sites. But their support for him was always conditional. Most are keen to defend Karim's right to free expression, but few defend what he is actually saying. Amr, for instance, argues that Karim works hard to pass himself off as the "martyr of free speech" who suffers discrimination for his enlightened ideas.

Sandmonkey's analysis of Karim's case is typical: "He wanted asylum out of Egypt, and he figured that the best way to do it is to make himself a hero."

So should this particular case be interpreted as an attempted gag on *Internet* freedom? Or is it part of the attempt to stifle discussions of taboo issues more generally, whether on blogs, in books or in the opposition press? "If he had said the same thing in a newspaper, the same thing would have happened to him," says Seif El Dawla.

Atia does not believe that any sort of crackdown is imminent, but not only because of the negative international uproar which may discourage foreign investment. He also argues the Internet has shifted the goal posts.

He recalls the case of Shohdy Sorour, Al Ahram Weekly's webmaster who faced charges for publishing one of his late father Naguib Sorour's "obscene" poems and had to flee the country. "Would this happen today?" Atia asks. "Probably not, because four years ago Shohdy was the only person doing what he was doing, but now there are dozens of people doing the same thing. None of these sites have been shut down."

Atia suggests that the state's ability to shape the public sphere is being increasingly eroded by the Internet. "The moral is, the more people blog or engage in political or non-political stuff online, the more impossible it will be to control it. The end result is that society and the market will set the standards, not security."

But detaining bloggers and shutting down their sites may just be a small (and increasingly outdated) part of regime attempts to retain control of the Egyptian online public sphere. It is quite possible that a far more insidious mechanism is at work.

Blogger's Credibility in the Balance: To Report or Comment?

Blogger and journalist Hossam El Hamalawy believes that although bloggers are not being arrested from their homes the government is still very much keeping an eye on them. Indeed every activist blogger interviewed for this story admitted to having phones tapped. El Hamalawy believes the regime's energies are focused less on detentions and more on discrediting activist bloggers.

"The state-owned media is launching an all-out attack on bloggers," he says. "There is a crackdown in the sense that there is a clear media campaign to discredit them. The situation may take a turn for the worse especially with the state-run media focusing so much on bloggers."

Nora concedes that there is a prevalent perception that bloggers and the reform movement work to "tarnish Egypt's image". But while the smear campaign against bloggers following the Eid assaults was intended to reinforce this negative image, she believes it backfired for the state-press because most women knew better than the official denials would have them believe.

Many bloggers have experience of official intimidation aimed at sullying their reputations in public. Wael describes how an Interior Ministry spokesman "libeled" him on Orbit's *Al Qahira Al Youm* by referring to him as a dubious source with a police

record. “This smear campaign was a response to the bloggers’ success in exposing the police’s complete inefficiency in securing ordinary citizens,” he says.

If political bloggers see themselves as being watchdogs on the government, it is crucial that they gain credibility beyond their immediate circle of fellow activists. Gaining an authoritative voice is not easy, especially if the core of celebrity activist bloggers are locked in confrontation with an authoritarian regime. Such a confrontation demands that momentum be maintained and regime abuses of power are continually highlighted.

But the drive to provoke a hostile public reaction to the government can also be counter-productive, as Amr asserts.

“This preoccupation with scandalizing the regime and exposing it is a moot point because people already know that—they experience it firsthand,” he says. “If people start believing that it’s safe to demonstrate then they are more likely to take a stand. Such fear-mongering is counter-productive,” he says.

Atia agrees, arguing that the perception of blogging as this hard-line, oppositional medium which uses overly antagonistic language will scare people away: “It’s not positive to boil blogging down to a small group who are constantly agitating. You can be very effective without having this image. ‘Renegade blogger’ headlines may not be the best way in the long run.”

With the Egyptian public increasingly aware of the dangers of political instability which grip Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine, Atia believes that bloggers have some Public Relations work to do in order to sell political and social reform to a wider audience.

"Because the more outspoken bloggers are political activists, blogging is getting the reputation that it's a disruptive media," says Atia. "In reality the majority of blogs don't deal with politics. It's not necessarily in the interest of new media and blogging to be perceived as solely political. It may drive them in the same corner that the opposition and reform movement finds itself and thus eliminate yet another chance to diversify view points and bring in more people."

It is more important for political bloggers to achieve sustainability and credibility than to make a big noise, Atia believes. He also suggests that working to achieve sustainability will actually temper the views of key activists, thus likely bringing a wider audience over to the reform agenda.

Much of the debate surrounding how credible bloggers are in the wider public view depends in great measure on the way in which bloggers write. Are they more interested in commenting on and debating events or actually reporting them?

A few of the most well-known Egyptian bloggers focus on reporting events. Wael, for example, works as a professional journalist (he used to be the Cairo

correspondent for the German Deutsche Press-Agentur) and treats his weekly e-journal as a kind of news agency. His strict adherence to the principles of accuracy in reporting events supported by photographs has established him as a credible source both among bloggers and other media outlets.

But that is not always the case. Amr, who also dabbled with professional journalism for a while, is fully aware that his reputation is affected by his fellow bloggers. If they claim to 'report' something as fact when it is not, the credibility of all political bloggers suffers. While he believes that exposing the Eid sex assaults was a triumph for bloggers, who proved both their credibility and their growing role as a viable alternative to mainstream media in certain kinds of domestic news, he regrets that many opposition-minded activists concentrate on exposing violations to the point of exaggerating them.

He recalls how during the judges crisis when three high-profile bloggers/activists (Alaa Seif El Islam, Malek Mostafa and Mohammed El Sharkawy) were detained,[4] the Kifaya blog spoke of torture and vicious human rights abuses that were blown out of

[4] On May 11, 2006, shocking images of plainclothes policemen brutally kicking and beating peaceful demonstrators spread like wildfire on Egyptian blogs. Throngs of riot police were also keeping busy. The protest was in solidarity with two senior Egyptian judges, Hesham Bastawisi and Mahmoud Mekki, who were being prosecuted for criticizing the 2005 presidential and legislative elections as fraudulent. They had refused to enter the court when security services stopped members of their defense team from coming in with them. Their case had become the centre of the popular movement for political reform, which regards the independence of the judiciary as one of the pillars of a democratic society, a cause célèbre for hundreds of other judges and pro-democracy activists.

proportion (this before Mohammed El Sharkawy's sexual abuse in detention had taken place).

"The positive side is that blog coverage is more in-depth," Amr says. "It includes the personal angle and it's motivated by public interest not money or deadlines, so there is a lot of emphasis on accuracy in reporting."

This emphasis on a 'personal angle' suggests that readers find the experiential element of blogs rewarding and engaging. Certainly, a blogger who has experienced a demonstration or police mistreatment first-hand can report it in a personal way which a professional reporter cannot.

But this interest in the 'personal' also suggests a contradiction which Egypt's political bloggers are still working through: how can a 'personal' account at once relate to events in an intimate way yet retain a critical distance required to maintain an authoritative and trusted voice?

Amr believes the equation is not so difficult to balance. Talking of his coverage of Kifaya member Kamal Khalil's campaign during the 2005 legislative elections, he says: "Many people heard about blogs at that time. They liked the writing style, the objectivity and the healthy distance I maintained from the events. As an outsider looking in, I was able to monitor people's reactions, talk about the chaos, the enthusiasm and observe both the positive and negative aspects. I was often told that my coverage was more personal

and dynamic, hence more engaging than the humdrum traditional reporting they were used to."

If bloggers capture events as readers experience them, they can no doubt surpass traditional standards of journalism in Egypt. As Nora argues, bloggers gain credibility from reporting cases of female molestation—such as the Eid assaults—because many are aware it takes place despite official silence: "When it comes to this particular issue—a sort of skeleton in our closet—it's impossible to deny that it happened because thousands of women experience it every day. The bloggers came out victorious in this particular credibility battle."

But the potential for false information to pass rapidly through the highly interlinked world of the blogosphere rumor mill points to the dangers of trusting voices which cannot guarantee the reporting checks of news corporations and agencies. How can a sole blogger, who relies on friends' and fellow bloggers' accounts, match the rigorous reporting techniques of large news organizations which have been honed over many years?

Agencies have brand identity to protect and professional disciplinary procedure to ensure standards. Bloggers have only their reputations at stake, and in an online world where it is hard to identity the source of a story, blaming others is all too easy.

The crucial question is how Egyptian and pan-Arab news outfits relate to blogs in the coming years. If bloggers will increasingly be used as credible sources by news producers, audiences may migrate to blogs as technological infrastructure improves.

Given the large number of interview requests Nora received from independent newspapers and even Egyptian terrestrial TV's Channel 1, it may be bloggers are already a trusted news source. For blog readers, a reading across various blogs might produce a qualified view of events. But the likelihood of mass readerships surfing through numerous blogs is low.

Wael believes bloggers are actually likely to be more accurate than news organizations because they do not inherently have to satisfy state or commercial needs: "[Readers] won't get [the truth] from the national, opposition or independent press because they each have their own agendas. Even satellite TV is not independent and is controlled by the laws of political economy, ideology and government policy. These are obstacles to relaying accurate information."

Malek agrees. "Some bloggers are better at relaying the truth than professional journalists," he says, showing his complete lack of trust in Egypt's mainstream media, particularly the largest state daily, Al Ahram. "Who are they fooling? They present what they print as facts. A fact should be the truth, but there is no "truth" in their coverage."

The obvious reporting successes of blogs cannot escape the fact that political blogs are driven by overtly political agendas. In this sense they are more suited to alerting readers to events and trends, commenting and providing analysis, rather than detailing events as they happen. If bloggers try to out-report mainstream media, mistakes and campaigns to discredit them will cost all bloggers in the wider public eye. But if bloggers combine forces with independent media, collaborating and harnessing the strengths of each others' media, they will be more likely to have political and social impact.

Conclusion

Activist blogging in Egypt has had an impact, but on a very small scale. Collaboration between bloggers and independent media in highlighting regime abuses of power have been remarkable, but if blogging, as a new media tool, continues to be associated with antagonistic, political activity it will never achieve the widespread appeal that would eventually set it up as a forum for wider public debate, a channel for social change, or an alternative information source for the many rather than for the few. Indeed, although key members of the Egyptian opposition movement Kifaya have channeled substantial energy into blogging gleaning international credit, reformists have been unable to mobilize wider public opinion against the government through blogs alone. The plurality of the medium may encourage greater social acceptance of pluralism, but also may impede efforts to build a unified opposition movement. The future of political

blogging in Egypt greatly depends on its fostering links with mainstream independent media, links which will likely determine whether blogs are seen as enclaves of marginal opinion and hearsay, or rather as venues for news and commentary deeply rooted in Egyptian society and central to its political life.

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