Core to Commonplace: The evolution of Egypt's blogosphere

By Courtney Radsch

September, 2008. Over the past five years there have been three identifiable stages in the development of the Egyptian blogosphere, each shaped by key episodes of contention. These episodes, which pitted political movements against the state, reveal the mechanisms by which virtual media power is transformed into moments of political struggle through activism, newsmaking, and online interaction.[i]

The first stage is the **Experimentation Phase**, in which a few dozen Egyptians discovered and tinkered with a new publishing platform. These early adopters formed the core of the Egyptian blogosphere in its early stages and have become a blogger "elite" by influencing the mainstream media and fellow bloggers. This was followed by an **Activist Phase**, during which many bloggers became activists and activists became bloggers. Although not every blogger was an activist or vice versa, blogs gained exposure because of their role in political movements like Kifaya and the attention of mainstream media and human rights organizations. By the end of 2006 the blogosphere had grown exponentially, the Muslim Brotherhood built a noticeable presence and Kifaya was loosing its momentum. By this time the blogosphere was entering its third phase, the **Diversification and Fragmentation Phase**. From late 2006 through the present the Egyptian blogosphere expanded to include thousands of Egyptians and the subaltern was pushed into the public realm. During this phase one can distinguish virtual enclaves or communities of bloggers that tend to engage primarily, though certainly not exclusively, with each other, such as activists, Leftists, Muslim Brotherhood, cultural and poetic bloggers, Copts, Bahai, homosexuals, Salafis, social commentators and personal bloggers.

Antecedents and conditions

Egypt got connected to the Internet in 1993.[ii] In 2003 Egypt had 3 million internet users and nearly double that number of mobile phone subscribers; by 2005 the number of internet users had jumped to 5 million and mobile subscribers to more than 13 million,[iii] though connectivity numbers are inherently difficult to obtain because of the lack of data collection and the characteristics of Internet use in Egypt.[iv] Such figures also tend to discount the impact of public places like internet cafes, libraries, and schools that offer access.[v] In 2004 there were about 400 internet cafes in Cairo and high-speed DSL connections at home could be had for $50;[vi] by 2008 internet cafes were prolific and DSL had dropped to between $10 to $22 depending on the speed. Home computers and laptops were common and taken for granted among the middle and upper classes.[vii]

Online web diaries began gaining popularity in 1998 and became available to the general public in 1999 when Pyra Labs developed software that helped people publish online without needing to know any special programming or coding, although it did not become a popular platform until Google purchased the company in 2002. Until the late 1990s publishing in Arabic was technically difficult, but by the turn of the new millennium efforts at facilitating computerized communication in the Arabic language had made great strides. Blogspot, the most popular blogging platform, enabled Arabic script in its posts and its simple user interface meant that anyone, even those with little technological literacy, could create a blog. Online forums, the predecessor to blogs, were popular among many Internet users in Egypt. Many of the core bloggers had participated in them. By the time blogging platforms like Blogspot started to become popular their generation was already becoming familiar with email, online forums, and other technologies that by the third phase had become a relatively common part of daily life in the middle class.

As globalization accelerated in the late 1990s, the new century became a time of great developments in the Arab media industry and saw a relative opening of freedom of expression as Mubarak's government sought to stay in the good graces of the United States and international organizations like the World Trade Organization. The media industry during this time underwent a substantial makeover as satellite television and especially the Qatar-based news station al-Jazeera reshaped audience expectations and the practice of Arab journalism.[viii] The Iraq war and George W. Bush's "War on Terror" created a political context in which pressures for democracy had to be balanced against cooperation on terrorism, the war, and foreign assistance.

The experimentation phase: 2003-2005

In 2003, personal computers were still relatively scarce, and Egypt had about three million internet users.[ix] Protests against the Iraq war In January and February 2003 ushered in a new era of activism as thousands took to the streets. They culminated in a demonstration in central Cairo on the day of the invasion that resulted in mass arrests and drew 20,000 – numbers not seen since the 1972 student-led protests.[x] But there was not yet a link between new media technologies and the activists.

As the war got underway in Iraq, blogs written by Iraqis describing the situation on the ground drew international attention, inspiring others to start blogs.[xi] As one blogger put it: "The blogosphere blew up after the Iraq war, 2003, because we needed to document and express our feelings."[xii] But this blogosphere was primarily English and did not yet extend to Egypt.

Out of the Iraq war protests grew a new political movement that became known as *Kifaya*,[xiii] Arabic for "enough." The group made street protests and eventually blogging part of its repertoire of contention as it sought political change at the very top. Kifaya first appeared on the scene in December of 2004 when hundreds of people held a silent protest, their mouths taped with yellow stickers reading "*Kifaya*" at Cairo's High Court to demand that President Mubarak step down and hold direct, competitive elections.[xiv] Kifaya's manifesto called for civil disobedience and sought to break taboos and establish a right to demonstrate and talk about the country frankly.[xv] Over the next two years the movement inspired people to demand change by taking to the streets and speaking out; among them were many of the core bloggers who shared the same desire for change. A natural symbiosis between Egypt's early core bloggers and the emerging protest

movement helped popularize the Egyptian blogosphere as a site of protest as Kifaya grew in popularity during 2005.

Before 2005 there were only a handful of bloggers in Egypt and about 40 total blogs.[xvi] These core bloggers were primarily bilingual twenty-somethings, many of whom were active in the online forums that predated blogs. Several worked in translation or technology jobs and most wrote in English.[xvii] These early adopters were primarily liberal, anti-establishment and often leftists who blogged about personal interests. They were also open-minded and flexible, committed to individual rights and collaboration across political and social divides.[xviii] Several were self-described techies or Linux geeks, such as Malek, Alaa, and Ahmad G., while others wanted to try out a new publishing medium. Blogs entered the consciousness of these forerunners randomly, through Google searches, for example, or through the attention granted to the Iraqi blogs made famous in the Western media in 2003.[xix]

A blogger who wrote his own history of the Egyptian blogosphere, which he argues is a distinct space from other blogospheres, described his discovery and adoption of blogging:

> The first time to hear about blogging was when I installed Google Bar in my browser, and saw the Blogspot icon there. I guess Rami Sidhom (Ikhnaton2) was introduced to blogging the same way. Then I found Manal and Alaa's Bit Bucket, which was a Blog Aggregator created by two married Linux and Programming Gurus. As you can see, at that part of the Egyptian blogosphere history, many blogs were into computers and IT, such as JPierre and Mohamed Sameer's FooLab. And even now, when there is diversity in blogs topics, away from the technical ones, you can still notice that many of today's bloggers are Engineers.[xx]

These initial bloggers were early adopters who were influential in spreading blogging among their friends, encouraging them to start blogs and even creating blogs for new users. Diffusion of innovation theory, which emphasizes the function of opinion leaders in creating knowledge of new practices and ideas, and their role in encouraging others to adopt exogenously introduced innovations,[xxi] helps explain why a few people had such a profound influence.[xxii]

Information diffusion does not occur in a concentric circular pattern, as Wilson notes, from richer industrial Western countries outwards to the developing world and the South. Rather, it happens through "key domestic elite innovators" who create social networks through which innovation travels.[xxiii] The core bloggers played this role in Egypt as they adopted new technologies created in the West to local political and technological conditions. Early bloggers like the Gharbeia brothers, Hossam el-Hamalawy,[xxiv] Ramy of Beyond Normal,[xxv] Mohammed of Digressing,[xxvi] Manal and Alaa,[xxvii] Sheriff Ahmed,[xxviii] Sandmonkey,[xxix] Malek Mustafa and others encouraged members of their social networks to create blogs and often provided technical assistance. They were also among the first to use Twitter and Flickr, but in a way not originally conceived of by the creators of such applications.[xxx] As Wilson also notes, IT networks have limited effects on most people but are centrally important to a small national elite who support developing knowledge culture and innovation to support wider diffusion of the information revolution.[xxxi] Core bloggers were overwhelmingly committed to freedom of expression and acted on the belief that the more people who use blogs, the better.

Among the most well-known English language bloggers from this first generation were the Arabist bloggers (Hossam, Issandr, Eman),[xxxii] Sandmonkey,[xxxiii] the Big Pharaoh,[xxxiv] Baheyya,[xxxv] and Nermeena.[xxxvi] Their posts were directed internally at a personal audience of friends and externally to a Western, English speaking audience. Alaa and Manal, the famous couple of Manalaa.net and founders of the Egyptian Blogs Aggregator,[xxxvii] refused to commit themselves to one or the other and have posted in both languages since the beginning. Beyond Normal,[xxxviii] Digressing[xxxix] and the Gharbeia brothers, Amr[xl] and Ahmad,[xli] were the first Egyptian bloggers to write in Arabic.

Unlike their English-language compatriots, Arabic bloggers spoke primarily to an Egyptian audience and sought to enhance the technology available for writing in Arabic on the internet. Ahmad, who started blogging in November 2003, created the Wikipedia entry in Arabic for "blog," describing what it is, how to set one up, and promoted the term *modawana* as the Arabic term for blog.[xlii] These bloggers often explain that they write in Arabic because it is their mother tongue and they are more comfortable writing in Arabic than in English, but also because they want to talk to their fellow citizens. "In Arabic people are trying to come up with a new discourse" and create content in Arabic on a range of topics – like climate change or nuclear power – that does not really exist in Arabic, explained Amr G. He told me that if he were to write in English, his posts would just be one more voice in a cacophony and thus "wouldn't matter" the way they do in Arabic.[xliii]

The impact of early adopters would have been limited without the multiplying effect of the networks of bloggers, activists, techies, and journalists they helped create and nurture. Techies helped develop Arabic writing and vocabulary online and offered their skills to human rights organizations and other bloggers. Others like Hossam el-Hamalawy worked as journalists or freelancers for Western news organizations. This cross-fertilization between journalists and bloggers helped create momentum for the new technology. Castelles defines a network as a set of interconnected nodes, with nodes representing points at which a curve intersects itself; networks are dynamic, innovative, open structures that are infinitely expandable and integrate new nodes as long as they share the same communication codes.[xliv] The core bloggers became central nodes in the Egyptian blogosphere because of their visibility and activity.

The activist stage: 2005-2006

By 2005 the Egyptian blogosphere had burgeoned into several hundred blogs, with experts estimating the number at about 400;[xlv] by 2006 this number had increased nearly threefold according to Alaa Seif al-Islam, host of the main Egyptian blog aggregator.[xlvi] The blogosphere began to mature in 2005, developing new dynamics given the structural and relational factors that set opportunities and constraints on citizen activism. In Egypt these factors were both domestic and international. The former included government policy on freedom of expression and the media, choices about IT infrastructure and the emergence of a new political movement that focused on government reform and change. International factors included dynamics of U.S. foreign policy towards Egypt, the role of Western media and human rights organizations in certifying bloggers as a privileged group worthy of coverage and advocacy, and developments in IT. The opportunities configured by these internal and external dynamics helped propel the Egyptian blogosphere into the limelight and channel its development into an outlet for activism

Egyptian policy was to a large extent responsible for helping spur the development of bloggers into activists by adopting unpopular policies and cracking down on citizens who attempted to demonstrate against them. As Meyer explains, "dissidents" and "activists" are created through common cause and the construction of identity around that cause, which is often in response to government policies and configurations of the political environment. He offers the example of Eastern Europe, where "the state, by limiting democratic means of participation, turns everyone with a grievance into a democracy activist."[xlvii] Hosni Mubarak helped spur cyberactivism when he announced that in May 2005 there would be a referendum on a constitutional amendment to permit multi-candidate elections. The referendum offered citizens the chance to express their dissatisfaction and opened up debate about Mubarak's presidency, the possible succession of his son Gamal, and critiques of the political system that had kept Mubarak in power longer than any other Egyptian ruler since Muhammad Ali in the 19th century. Within this context, a symbiosis developed between Kifaya, activists and bloggers, which lasted through 2006.

The catalyst that propelled the Egyptian blogosphere into an active realm of contention, making activists into bloggers and bloggers into activists, were demonstrations in spring 2005 against the proposed constitutional referendum and in support of judicial independence. Several hundred protesters gathered in Tahrir Square for a demonstration during which women were assaulted by state security forces and hired thugs.[xlviii] The sexual assaults garnered media coverage by the local and international press, as did the arrests of several bloggers.[xlix] All of a sudden a new category emerged: bloggers. The American media picked up on the story and recognized the category of 'blogger' as an organizational identity frame.[l] International human rights organizations began regarding them as a category of social identity that could be named, invoked and politicized – they were citizen journalists. As such, they became beneficiaries of the advocacy and exposure granted professional journalists by international organizations like the Committee to Protect Journalists, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Reporters Without Borders, and others. These organizations reported on bloggers' issues, published press releases, advocated for their protection, pressured governments on their behalf and offered them the resources of their transnational networks.[li]

A series of sexual assaults in downtown Cairo occurring on Eid al-Fitr in 2006 became a defining moment in the Egyptian blogosphere and illustrates their power to set the agenda for mainstream media. On October 25, 2006 dozens of women were assaulted on the streets of Cairo by gangs of men while the police stood on and watched.[lii] A group of bloggers was sitting at a café when a friend ran in to tell them what was happening, compelling them to go to the streets and take pictures and video of the crimes being committed against random women.[liii] They posted them and wrote about what they saw, a newsworthy event without doubt. Yet for three days the attacks were unacknowledged by the authorities or the news media until Nawara Negm was invited to be on the popular talk show *al-Ashara Massa'an* to talk about a different subject. Negm asked the host, Mona Shezly, why there had been no coverage and Shezly decided to check it out, eventually leading to comprehensive coverage throughout the Arab and Egyptian news media.[liv]

The role of blogs in reporting on the abuses is widely credited by bloggers and journalists with triggering mainstream media coverage and as forcing the government to respond. "The online fuss did catch the attention of the BBC and eventually other news

organizations and talk shows and people in Egypt are a bit more aware about sexual harassment as a result, and things are happening," according to one blogger, whose translation of a detailed Arabic post from Malcolm-X into English brought her "loads and loads of hits and links."[lv] This event marked a turning point in the power of the blogs as alternative and credible information sources. Malek Mustafa, the first blogger to post about the attacks, saw his average of 30 comments per post increase astronomically to 750 on these posts.[lvi]

In 2005 *al-Dustur,* a weekly Egyptian newspaper hostile to the government, initiated a blog page to introduce the Egyptian blogosphere to a larger public. With only about 10 percent of the population online, Ihab El Zakhy, then editor for the independent al-*Dustur*, started a blog page in the newspaper to bring attention to the blogs and give them wider readership.[lvii]

In 2005 the pan-Arab satellite channel al-Jazeera broadcast a documentary about Egyptian bloggers called *Bloggers, Opposition and a New Voice,* which dramatically increased awareness among the general public about blogging and its political impact. As one blogger put it:

> [Al-Jazeera Producer Ahmed Zin] focused on the effect of blogs in political reform going on in Egypt and this movie really had dramatic effect on the awareness or more people know what is blogging. I think my mother didn't know what is blogging till she watched the movie. I think in that time lots of Islamic activists started to be aware of what's blogging and the effect of writing on the internet.[lviii]

Many bloggers, furthermore, were able to build credentials via their blogging to get positions freelancing. As several bloggers noted, many of the youth working with independent news media like *al-Dustur, AMAY, Ikhwanweb* and *al-Jazeera Talk* started as bloggers then became journalists. Brotherhood bloggers said they felt compelled in many cases to freelance on the side of their studies because the organizaion does not have its own newspaper or channel.[lix] "The media are the greatest power at this time and need to have it tell about Islam and society's problems," said Somaya Badr, a MB blogger whose father, also a member, has been arrested before. "But being a blogger doesn't qualify you as a journalist. If as an activist bloggers cover demonstrations and events it gives her experience but not as a writer, just doing journalism."[lx]

It was during this phase that Egyptian bloggers made a name for themselves at home and abroad as they focused on publishing articles, photos and videos of demonstrations and videos of torture and state-sponsored violence. The high profile of particular bloggers, many of whom published in English at least some of the time, garnered attention from human rights organizations since many of their activities coincided with Kifaya, which was seen by Western politicians and media outlets as a promising movement for reform. This attention made their case resonate with a Western audience when they were arrested and tortured, as several of the most prominent were, though this was primarily for their activism – as bloggers – on the streets rather than the content of their blogs. It was during this period that the term "citizen journalist" became fashionable and Western media started to confer this status on bloggers in general rather than as an identity enacted at particular moments.

There were still a limited number of bloggers at this time and many knew each other through meetings offline at rallies and protests. Bloggers reinforced their online

community through these gatherings, often convening for dinner or *iftars* during Ramadan.[lxi] They expressed solidarity with each other as bloggers across the political and religious spectrum.

In 2006 members of the Muslim Brotherhood started to emerge on blogs. The history of the MB blogs parallels that of the larger blogosphere in that it began with a small core group of activists and has since expanded and diversified. A young journalist, Abd Al Moneim Mahmoud, was the first blogger to explicitly identify himself as a Muslim Brotherhood member on his blog *Ana Ikhwan* (I am the Muslim Brotherhood), which he started in October 2006 with the help of blogger-activist and journalist Nora Younis.[lxii]

By early 2007 many more young MB members, men and women, had started blogs. A few key leaders like Esam el-Erian and Khaled Hamza encouraged talented youth to start blogs. By this time the impact of blogs had been noted by some in the leadership. While it does not appear that anyone ordered members to blog, some said they were encouraged to do so. A few leaders have their own blogs, and even those without their own sites read the more prominent bloggers. Several well known MB bloggers said that they had received calls from leaders about particular issues or questions raised in a post. Yet blogs proved a mixed blessing for the MB when a debate about the party platform in September 2007 made its way into the blogosphere and appeared to some members to be "airing dirty laundry" best kept private within the organization. Brotherhood bloggers remain divided today on whether this embrace of blogging is a good or bad thing. [lxiii]

Diversification and fragmentation: 2006-present

During the transition to the third phase in late 2006, greater numbers of Egyptians were starting blogs of all different types. The Egyptian Blog Ring counted at least 1400 blogs by early 2007.[lxiv] Today, the Egyptian blogosphere is no longer an intimate neighborhood, but a city where enclaves of different types of people connect and comment on each other's blogs, while retaining some contact across circles. These enclaves, or circles as I provisionally term them, include citizen journalists, non-denominational activists, leftists, Muslim Brotherhood and Islamists, culture and art enthusiasts, open source technology activists, English language political commentary and strictly personal.

Blogs created a publishing mechanism beyond state control (for the moment) that provided an outlet for anyone to express themselves on any subject. From *Aiza Gowaz* (I Want to be a Bride), which described the trials and tribulations of finding a husband, to literary/poetry, graphic art and photography sites to "*Saidi*" blogs by Upper Egyptians, bloggers in Egypt came from throughout society and represented a wide range of subjects. Subaltern groups found solidarity through blogs and some attempted to use them for activist goals. As the blogosphere expanded and diversified, identity communities began to form. Bloggers who identified themselves as homosexual, Coptic, Bahai, and *salafi* created blogs and commented on each others' posts.

The transition to the third phase in the development of the Egyptian blogosphere was propelled not only by the increasing numbers of bloggers and their diversity but also by shifting internal dynamics, especially disenchantment with Kifaya and government repression. External factors also contributed, particularly the abrupt drop in American support for democracy and free expression in Egypt following Hamas' victory in the 2006 Palestinian elections.

The symbiosis between Kifaya and blogging had created a new form of public engagement that was both subversive to the state and empowering to the public – cyberactivism. As Lynch notes: "Since much of the new energy in Arab politics comes from relatively small groups of activists, a technology which empowers their efforts could have a disproportionate impact even if it does not reach a mass base."[lxv] As editor of the *Daily News Egypt*, Rania Al Malky, described on her site *Egypt Blog Review*:

> In a country like Egypt where state control of the media has reached such epidemic proportions that self-censorship has become a worse threat than direct censorship, the empowering effect of a blog is undeniable. It was only natural that political activists would pick it up to spread their pro-reform message and coordinate demonstrations and other forms of civil action which have been slowly gaining momentum in the past two years. And they now have the tools to tell the real story of how their peaceful protests are "controlled."[lxvi]

These 'real' stories became important sources of information for citizens in the Arab world as well as for foreign journalists, governments and citizens. In 2008 blogs were well known in the media industry and by journalists whereas few journalists in 2006 had heard of a blog much less saw them as a key way of generating stories. Even the new generation of journalists working for the prestigious satellite news channels did not consider blogs important in 2006 but, noting their freedom from rules and regulations, thought the media should take them into consideration more.[lxvii] All the independent media outlets and the most important talk shows in Egypt regularly discussed blogs and blogging by stage three, and they continue to be fodder for news documentaries.

By this time, though, bloggers were abandoning Kifaya, and the movement's decline was fueled in part by withdrawal of support by core and activist bloggers. Some bloggers said the end of Kifaya came in December 2006 when only a handful of people turned out to a planned protest in support of a group of Sudanese refugees who were being deported after months of protest. The departure of Brotherhood members who joined Kifaya or participated in demonstrations also contributed to the group's decline. Its death-knell came in 2007 when bloggers and activists were arrested, beaten and tortured but the leaders of Kifaya were conspicuously absent, their mobile phones switched off and lawyers unreachable. Yet those same figures appeared on al-Jazeera "talking about their heroism."[lxviii] This slight promoted many activist bloggers to announce they would no longer participate in Kifaya-sponsored activities or demonstrate on the street. One former member described her motivations for leaving the movement:

> "I don't believe in demonstrating, especially in Tahrir Square. I don't encourage people to go to demonstration because you don't want to, to take those members, those activists and give them home-delivery to the police... Delivering your most activist, most trustful activist to the police people and what do you gain? You gain those great elitists, huh?! Appearing on TV saying that they are heroes. But they're not."[lxix]

But while Kifaya may have nurtured the growth of the blogosphere during the activist phase, its decline as a political force did not coincide with the decline of blogging. By then the blogosphere had grown and diversified so that by late 2006, activists were but one community of bloggers among several others that had disengaged from their previously close relationship to the movement. "I start with blogging when Kifaya started existing. Now Kifaya is dead and we continue," Malek Mustafa told me.[lxx]

And so the activists did, multiplying the ranks of activist bloggers by giving encouragement and technical know-how to prospective new bloggers.[lxxi] In 2006 a young Egyptian woman named Noha Atef decided to start the blog *Torture in Egypt*. "My little blog was not very well read," she said, but in 2007 she decided she wanted to enlarge her "traffic rank." So she contacted Alaa and Amr Gharbeia, two bloggers she did not know personally but whose blogs she was familiar with. "They said it was very good that I made a blog on torture," she said. "Then they helped me create a better blog, not on blogspot, then I started to learn how to use blogs, it was user friendly."[lxxii] The core remained, yet a much larger group of activists developed and the country's blogosphere lost its center, becoming a network of identity communities linked in a virtual place by virtue of their Egyptianness. Having a blog became a necessity for staying up to date with activists and *being* an activist.[lxxiii]

They were also linked by their identity group 'blogger.' The importance of this identity in mobilizing support and solidarity, especially regarding issues of human rights, is evident in the blogger campaigns. The arrests during this time of Alaa Abd el-Seif, Malek Mustafa, Mohamed Sharkawy, Abd Al Moneim Mahmoud and others led to blogger campaigns advocating for their release. Bloggers created banner ads, distributed logos calling on the government to "Free blogger x" and posted messages on their blogs written by the imprisoned bloggers on paper smuggled out during visits. But it also "hurt us (bloggers) to some extent because we became known to security forces and the public no longer a vague journalist, it was easier when we weren't know."[lxxiv]

By late 2007 the Egyptian state crackdown on Kifaya and the Muslim Brotherhood was accompanied by a crackdown on freedom of expression.[lxxv] One blogger termed the government's harsh reactions a "War on Bloggers."[lxxvi] The arrest of 24-year-old Kareem Amer[lxxvii] on November 6, 2006 was the first time a blogger was explicitly arrested for content of online writing rather than street activism. Hundreds of bloggers including the core mobilized and came to his defense. In February 2007, Amer was convicted of insulting Islam and President Mubarak on his blog and sentenced to four years in prison.

The campaign for his release continues, both in the Egyptian blogosphere and by local and international human rights organizations.[lxxviii] Nearly all the bloggers I interviewed expressed solidarity with Kareem on their blogs and in our discussions, though there was more ambiguity among Muslim Brotherhood and *salafi* bloggers. The vast majority, however, defended his actions in the terms of the right of free expression. His case became a rallying cry for freedom of expression but also a line in the sand drawn by Mubarak.

January 2007 brought more attention to bloggers and the plight of citizens living under authoritarian rule as campaigns against torture in Egypt propelled the issue to the forefront of the public agenda. Bloggers across the political spectrum began publicizing torture inflicted by Egyptian police by posting videos and photos on their blogs. The most famous example of the effect of blogs in Egypt came when Wael Abbas published a video of policemen beating and torturing a bus driver, garnering world wide recognition for his journalism,[lxxix] that resulted in the conviction of the two policemen.[lxxx] Videos of police torture came out of the woodwork. Egyptians sent him videos of torture shot on their cell phones and photos of abuse by SMS.[lxxxi]

New media platforms like Twitter, Flikr and Facebook, coupled with the convergence of mobile phone and internet technology, have changed the Egyptian blogosphere. Egypt's

April 6 General Strike exemplifies the convergence of new media platforms and political activism but also the necessity of linking online movements to offline organizing. What started as a workers' strike in Mahalla el-Kubra burgeoned into a nationwide general strike when individuals on Facebook created an April 6 group calling for solidarity with the workers and protesting skyrocketing inflation. It gathered 70,000 members, prompting some commentators to call the newly active youth using new media as the "Facebook Party." Bloggers, even those not active in the strike, and Facebook organizers were arrested the night before and throughout the day of the strike.

Cyberctivists used SMS and Twitter to send updates on violence, imprisonment and State Security locations to journalists, bloggers and human rights activists. The microblog Twitter became a powerful citizen tool in the face of a repressive regime as a critical mass signed onto the site that merges the mass distribution potential of blogs with the access possibilities of text messaging. Cyberactivists and ordinary Egyptians who used Facebook to stay updated with friends joined forces to participate in recording the first draft of history.[lxxxii] Thousands of people worldwide, including human rights organizations, government officials and other bloggers followed the minute-by-minute accounts of cyberactivists while others created Facebook groups and published updates. Arrested activists and journalists sent messages announcing their arrests, offering information about police locations and organizing lawyers in advance of expected arrests.[lxxxiii] The photo-sharing site Flickr let activists get pictures out immediately to the blogs and the mainstream media, domestic and foreign. And the multiple contacts that one American photojournalist who was arrested in Mahalla had among the key cyberactivist nodes propelled his story about Twittering his way out of jail into an international story about the power of new media.[lxxxiv] But the only reason he was able to 'Twitter' his way out is because he was connected to key cyberactivists like Wael Abbas, Nora Younis, Nawara Negm, Amr Gharbeia, Mina Zerky and countless others who had, in turn, developed extended networks among journalists, human right organizations, local lawyers, and NGOs.

Egypt's story offers inspiration to activists around the world, but also provides a cautionary tale about the importance of linking cyberactivism with good old-fashioned grassroots organizing. Inspired by the success of April 6, some on Facebook called for another General Strike on May 4, coinciding with Mubarak's birthday, but seasoned activists and bloggers thought this was too soon and would dilute the power of a general strike in the future. Although the Muslim Brotherhood said its members would participate this time around, the strike never got out of the ether of cyberspace.

Conclusion: Assessing blogging's impact

Over the last five years, blogs in Egypt have challenged the privileged role of professional journalists by giving ordinary citizens platforms for mass dissemination, whether for a moment or a lifetime. In recent years the medium has also become a form of protest and activism, a type of alternative media, and a source for mainstream media. Bloggers themselves tend to be activists and more politically influential than the average person, what Lazarsfeld would call opinion-leaders.

The overlap of journalists and bloggers and the symbiosis between mainstream and alternative media is especially important. Blogger-journalists who write for Egyptian papers tend to use their journalistic outlets to write about politics and their blogs to write about personal and social issues because they see their blogs as about self-expression, or

don't feel the need to replicate on their blogs what they have already published in the newspaper. Blogger-journalists who write for the Western press, however, are a different story. They are few but relatively powerful, and possess a good deal of social capital.   Yet at times a job with a Western paper can actually hurt a blogger's activist impact because Western papers require blogger-reporters to censor their online writings, which are often checked by editors for evidence of bias. This appears not to be the case in the Egyptian media field, where blogging and journalism are not seen as incompatible.

The development of the sub-sphere of Muslim Brotherhood bloggers parallels that of the Egyptian blogosphere more generally. Members quickly became activists under the umbrella of the Kifaya movement and through the networks developed among activists more generally. They gained attention from the mainstream media and their leaders following an unprecedented public critique of the party platform released in 2007 and other organizational issues never previously discussed in public. A few leaders in the Brotherhood saw the potential of blogging and wanted to promote the free discussion on blogs.[lxxxv] Others thought the bloggers should be reigned in and avoid airing public critique. At a meeting held in Cairo a few key leaders met with several MB bloggers to discuss their role.[lxxxvi] The liberals won out, but other members including youth who believed internal matters should not be discussed publicly, began encouraging those with the same viewpoint to start personal blogs.

Throughout, the core bloggers still figured most prominently on everyone's reading list, from Brotherhood to leftist or personal. Wael Abbas' *Misr Digital, Beheyya,* Nora Younis, Hossam el-Hamalawy's *3Arabawy*, Abd Al Moneim Mahmoud's *Ana Ihkwan* and Sandmonkey remain among the most regularly read by both journalists and other bloggers. The liberal activist bloggers remain disproportionately influential, and their blogs, more often than not, are held up as examples of why people blog. And despite the myriad of blog types the fact remains that Egypt's blogosphere is distinct from its regional counterparts, where the majority of blogs are personal. "In most of other Arab countries blogs are personal not activist, Egypt is exceptional," says Abd Al Moneim Mahmoud.[lxxxvii]

Despite its virtuality, the Egyptian blogosphere is nationally bound, a distinctive space where national identity is expressed, and which is intimately linked to the material conditions of Egyptians. As with other countries, Egypt's blogosphere began with techies and grew into a diverse array of bloggers. But it was the early activist stage that set the dynamics of the Egyptian blogosphere, and which cause it to remain a sphere of contention. In America blogs have been to some extent professionalized and co-opted by the mainstream media, big business and even professional politicians, but the Egyptian blogosphere remains a domain of alterity eschewed by professionals who less often see value in blogging or equate blogging with risky political activity. The Egyptian blogosphere thus remains a realm claimed by individuals who resist the establishment – political and business.

The most critical stage in the development of Egyptian blogging was the activist stage because it helped empower bloggers by granting them access to the resources of international media and human rights organizations and transnational activist networks on a level incomparable to any other blogosphere except perhaps China's. The Egyptian case has at times become a blueprint for other online activists in the Arab world, from the freedom campaigns in Saudi Arabia and Morocco to the media savvy of the Lebanese blogosphere. Cross-national comparison holds great promise for future research and will

help determine how national and international policies interact with new media to enable cyberactivism and expand its repertoire of contention.

Courtney C. Radsch *is a Ph.D. candidate at American University in Washington D.C. whose research focuses on media in the Arab world. Her dissertation is about cyberactivism in Egypt. She is also Associate Editor and Senior Journalist for AlArabiya.net and is currently based in Dubai.*

---

[i] Doug McAdam, Sidney G. Tarrow, and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention*, Cambridge Studies in Contentious Politics (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

[ii] Deborah L. Wheeler, "The Internet in the Arab World: Digital Divides and Cultural Connections," (Jordan's Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies: 2004).

[iii] "World Development Indicators," (The World Bank, 2008).

[iv] Wheeler.

[v] Such figures also elide the difference between access, which measures an individual's capacity to go online and ability to use internet, and use, which measures behavior (Robert J. Klotz, *The Politics of Internet Communication* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004), 19-20.

[vi] Wheeler.

[vii] Based on the author's informal survey of her informants. Several people expressed surprise by the question "do you have a computer at home" since "everyone has a computer" and this is simply "taken for granted" or you "don't even ask this question these days." Alaa Abd el Fateh noted in an interview that "it is a rare town that does not have a NetCafe" "Egyptian Linux Advocates' Replies ", Slashdot http://interviews.slashdot.org/article.pl?sid=04/05/13/1346237 (accessed 7 Feb. 2008).

[viii] Courtney Radsch, "How Al Jazeera Is Challenging and Improving Egyptian Journalism," *Reset: Dialogue on Civilizations* 22 June (2007). http://www.resetdoc.org/EN/Radsch-Ucsb.php [accessed 21 July 2007]. Courtney Radsch, *Middle East: Charter Checks Satellite Tv Revolution* (Oxford Analytica, 2008).

[ix] "World Development Indicators."

[x] Amira Howeidy, "A Day at 'Hyde Park'," *Al Ahram Weekly*, 27 March - 2 April 2003.

[xi] Wael Abbas, 14 April, Interview, Personal Communication, Personal Communication. Cairo; Lee Rainie, Susannah Fox, and Deborah Fallows, *The Internet and the Iraq War: How Online Americans Have Used the Internet to Learn War News, Understand Events, and Promote Their Views* (Washington, D.C.: Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2003); Gordon Robison, *The Promise of New Technologies in the Arab World* (Los Angeles: USC Center on Public Diplomacy, 2005); M. Wall, "'Blogs of War': Weblogs as News," *Journalism* 6, no. 2 (2005).

[xii] Sherif Ahmed, 10 March, Personal Communication, Personal Communication. Cairo.

[xiii] The official name of the movement was the Egyptian Movement for Change (al-Haraka al-Misriyya min ajl al-Taghyir) but it became more commonly known as Kifaya.

[xiv] Mona El-Ghobashy, *Egypt Looks Ahead to Portentous Year* (MERIP, 2005).

[xv] George Ishaq, 12 July, Interview, Interview. Cairo.

[xvi] Exact numbers are notoriously difficult to specify, but most bloggers interviewed give the figure 20-30 at the outset and perhaps 100 by 2004.

[xvii] The precise figure is unknown but several of the first bloggers interviewed described the blogosphere in Egypt as predominantly English.

[xviii] Ahmad Seif El Islam Hamad, 30 April, Interview, Interview. Cairo.

[xix] Baghdad Burning, http://riverbendblog.blogspot.com/, is probably one of the most famous. The story about a girl blogger from Iraq writing in English captured the attention of the Western press and she published her first book in 2005 (Riverbend, *Baghdad Burning: Girl Blog from Iraq*, 1st Feminist Press ed. (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2005).

[xx] Tarek Amr, "Three Years Blogging," in *Not Green Data* (2008).

[xxi] Srinivas Melkote, "Everett M. Rogers and His Contributions to the Field of Communication and Social Change in Developing Countries," *Journal of Creative Communications* 1, no. 1 (2006): 113.

[xxii] Everett M. Rogers and F. Floyd Shoemaker, *Communication of Innovations: A Cross-Cultural Approach* (New York: The Free Press, 1971).

[xxiii] Ernest J. Wilson, *The Information Revolution and Developing Countries* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004).

[xxiv] http://arabist.net/arabawy/

[xxv] http://beyondnormal.blogspot.com

[xxvi] http://digressing.blogspot.com/

[xxvii] http://www.manalaa.net

[xxviii] http://justice4every1.blogspot.com/

[xxix] http://www.sandmonkey.org

[xxx] These applications did not gain popularity until the third phase

[xxxi] Wilson, 404.

[xxxii] http://www.arabist.net

[xxxiii] http://www.sandmonkey.org/

[xxxiv] http://www.bigpharaoh.com/

[xxxv] http://baheyya.blogspot.com/

[xxxvi] http://nerro.wordpress.com/

[xxxvii] http://www.omraneya.net/

[xxxviii] http://beyondnormal.blogspot.com/

[xxxix] http://digressing.blogspot.com

[xl] http://gharbeia.net/

[xli] http://zamakan.gharbeia.org/

[xlii] Ahmad Gharbeia, 22 April, Personal Communication, Personal Communication. Cairo.

[xliii] Ibid.

[xliv] Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, III vols., vol. I (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 470.

[xlv] Amira Howeidy, "Battle of the Blogs," *Al Ahram Weekly*, 17 - 23 November 2005. Elijah Zarwan, *False Freedom: Online Censorship in the Middle East and North Africa* (Human Rights Watch, 2005), 22, Vol. 17. No. 10(E).

[xlvi] Ethan Zuckerman, "Alaa on Egyptian Blogs and Activism," in *My Heart's in Accra* (2006).

[xlvii] David S. Meyer, Nancy Whittier, and Belinda Robnett, *Social Movements : Identity, Culture, and the State* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 13.

[xlviii] "Women Demand Mubarak Apology", Aljazeera.net http://english.aljazeera.net/English/archive/archive?ArchiveId=12467 (accessed 20 April 2008).

[xlix] Michael Slackman, "Assault on Women at Protest Stirs Anger, Not Fear, in Egypt," *The New York Times*, 10 June 2005.

[l] See for example Michael Slackman, "Democracy in Egypt Faces 2 Tests Today," *The New York Times* 2008.

[li] Elijah Zarwan, 8 Feb., Personal Communication, Personal Communication. Cairo. Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998).

[lii] Hossam el-Hamalawey, "Downtown's Sex Predators," in *3aeabawy* (2006); GemyHoood, "Indilaa Thowrat Al Hayaj Al Jinsee Bi Shawaraa Sasat Al Balad," in *Gemyhoood's Blog* (2006); Malek Mustafa, "Souwaar Wasat Al Medina Al Jinsee," in *MaLcoLM X* (2006).

[liii] Abbas.

[liv] Mina Zekry, 15 April, Personal Communication, Personal Communication. Cairo.

[lv] Forsoothsayer, 29 April, Personal Communication, Personal Communication. Cairo.

[lvi] Rania Al Malky, "Blogging for Reform: The Case of Egypt," *Arab Media & Society* Feb. (2007).

[lvii] Ihab El Zakhy, 16 April, Interview, Interview. Cairo.

[lviii] Amr Magdi, 4 March, Personal Communication, Personal Communication. Cairo.

[lix] Journalism is not a well-respected profession in Egypt, where salaries are low and skepticism high. Few of the bloggers who freelanced that I interviewed actually studied journalism or communications in college. Most, especially MB bloggers, were in the engineering or pharmacy schools but expressed a passion for journalism.

[lx] Somaya Badr, 2 April, Personal Communication, Personal Communication. Cairo.

[lxi] Abbas.

lxii Abdel Menem (Ana Ihkwan) Mahmoud, 16 May, Personal Communication, Personal Communication. Cairo.

lxiii Focus Group with Female Muslim Brotherhood Bloggers, 27 March, Focus Group with Female Muslim Brotherhood Bloggers. Zagazig, Sharqiya. Focus Group with Male Muslim Brotherhood Bloggers, 26 March, Focus Group with Male Muslim Brotherhood Bloggers. Zagazig, Sharqiya.

lxiv Courtney Radsch, "Blogging in Egypt," *Reset: Dialogue on Civilizations*, Sept-Oct. 2007.

lxv Marc Lynch, "Blogging the New Arab Public," *Arab Media & Society* Feb. (2007).

lxvi Radsch, "Blogging in Egypt."

lxvii Lena Ghadban, 10 July, Personal Interview, Personal Interview. Cairo.

lxviii Nawara Negm, 3 April, Personal Communication, Personal Communication. Cairo.

lxix Ibid.

lxx Malek Mustafa, 29 April, Personal Communication, Personal Communication. Cairo.

lxxi Zeinab, 15 May, Personal Communication, Personal Communication. Cairo.

lxxii Noha Atef, 28 April, Personal Communication, Personal Communication. Cairo.

lxxiii Mohamed Gaber, 9 Feb., Personal Interview, Personal Interview. Cairo.

lxxiv Abbas.

lxxv *Egypt Country Summary*, (Human Rights Watch, 2007). *Egypt - Annual Report*, (Reporters Without Borders, 2007).

lxxvi Nora Younis, "War on Bloggers Unfolds," in *Nora Younis* (2007).

lxxvii http://karam903.blogspot.com/

lxxviii Among the organizations that advocated on his behalf were: Reporters Without Borders, The Committee to Protect Journalists, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, the Egyptian Human Rights Organizations and others. For a chronology of statements by these organizations and international media see Kareem Amer, "Kareem Timeline, Interactive," in *Free Kariim* (2008).

lxxix "Egyptian Blogger, Burmese Reporter Named 2007 Knight International Journalism Award Winners", International Center for Journalists http://www.icfj.org/PressBox/PressReleases/PR082407/tabid/797/Default.aspx (accessed 6 July 2008).

lxxx Heba Saleh, " Fears for Egypt 'Torture' Victim", BBC News http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/6264193.stm (accessed 7 July 2008 2008).

lxxxi Abbas.

lxxxii Abdulrahman Ayyash, " April 6th General Strike in Egypt Draws Together Diverse Groups Using Newest Technologies," in *Arab Media Blog* (2008).

lxxxiii Description based upon participant observation conducted at that time in Cairo.

lxxxiv Mallory Simon, "Student 'Twitters' His Way out of Jail" http://www.cnn.com/2008/TECH/04/25/twitter.buck/index.html (accessed 6 July 2008).

lxxxv Mohamed Hamza, 6 April, Personal Interview, Personal Interview. Cairo.

lxxxvi Magdi; Mahmoud.

lxxxvii Mahmoud.