A new direction or more of the same? Political blogging in Egypt

By Tom Isherwood

September 2008. In November 2007, two Egyptian police officers were sentenced to three years in prison for torturing a minibus driver. What makes this case exceptional is not the fact that police were held accountable for their actions, though that is indeed rare in Egypt. Rather, this case is exceptional because bloggers[i] were largely responsible for bringing it to the public's attention and for providing much of the evidence used to obtain the conviction.

The original incident for which the two police officers were ultimately convicted occurred in January 2006 when 21-year-old 'Imad al-Kabir, a Cairo minibus driver, intervened in a fight between his cousin and two plainclothes police officers. 'Imad was taken back to the police station where he was beaten and sodomized with a stick. The whole ordeal was recorded on one of the officers' cell phones in order to send the clip to local minibus drivers to further humiliate 'Imad.

The video did not circulate widely until November 2006 when it was sent to the blogger with the penname Demagh MAK. He posted it on his Arabic-language blog[ii] and soon it was picked up by other bloggers, including perhaps Egypt's most influential political blogger, Wael Abbas, who writes a blog entitled *al-Wa'i al-Masri* (*Egyptian Awareness*).[iii] It was then picked up by the newspapers *al-Fagr*[iv] and *al-Masry al-Youm*[v], after which 'Imad was identified and persuaded to name his tormentors and pursue the case. This was not all without cost to 'Imad, who was sentenced to three months in prison for "resisting authorities" in connection with the same incident. During the trial of the police officers, the cell phone video spread by bloggers was a critical piece of evidence and, to the surprise of many observers, the trial found the two police officers guilty.

This is just one example of the increasing role that political blogging is playing in Egypt. This began in earnest in 2005 with the rise to prominence of the *Kefaya* (*Enough*) political movement, a loose coalition of groups united by opposition to President Hosni Mubarak and the prospect of his son, Gamal Mubarak, eventually succeeding him. Kefaya made heavy use of the Internet and most of the political bloggers who are influential today got their start at this time. To borrow Haugbolle's formulation regarding Lebanese bloggers and the war in 2006, the 2005 presidential elections in Egypt propelled Egyptian bloggers "from obscurity to the heart of the new Arab public sphere of transnational media."[vi]

Much of the reporting and analysis that greeted the emergence of blogging in the West breathlessly proclaimed the inherently democratic and society-changing nature of the

technology. Thomas Barnett, an American military scholar who writes about America's national security strategy, argues,

> Connectivity will drive change in the youth-bulging Middle East. It is the railroad of the American West, and it will change everything in the end. This revolution will be blogged from below and not driven by decapitating regime change.[vii]

Der Spiegel International chimed in too, "The power of the blogosphere is growing daily, much to the chagrin of those who view freedom of opinion as a threat to government authority."[viii] If more of these commentators could read Arabic, they might change their tune from excitement to fear when they notice that the biggest recent change in the Egyptian blogosphere is the entrance, en masse, of the Muslim Brotherhood.[ix]

But does Egyptian blogging really mark a new direction for politics in the country or is it merely a new forum for old practices to continue? An assessment of Egyptian blogging over the past five years suggests that blogging has accelerated the pace of changes triggered a decade ago by the growth of satellite television and an independent press.

IT in Egypt

Before analyzing blogging in Egypt, it is first necessary to outline the scope of Internet usage in the country. By the time blogging arrived in 2003-2004, computer usage was already firmly in the Egyptian mainstream. At the time, an estimated 10% of families owned a computer at home, Internet cafes were to be found in almost every town, and most of the roughly half million university graduates each year had acquired basic computer skills and familiarity with the Internet.[x] Furthermore, the government has promoted increased computer and Internet literacy through programs such as the "Free Internet Initiative" in 2002 and "A PC for Each House" in 2004.[xi]

It is notoriously difficult to get data regarding Internet usage in the Middle East and the data that do exist are unreliable at best. The International Telecommunications Union (ITU) estimates Egypt to have a 7.5% Internet penetration rate in 2007. Although the ITU's statistics are the most commonly used estimates of the state of Internet usage in Egypt, the validity of its assessments is questionable. The ITU collects data by sending surveys to the governments of various countries and asking them to fill them out.[xii] At best, this means that the statistic is a gross estimate, as evidenced by the unbelievably round number of 6,000,000 Internet users in the country. At worst, it is a number that could be open to political manipulation. The reported 7.5% penetration rate has also been contradicted by other reports: Tareq Mounir, a correspondent for Reporters without Borders, estimates only a 4% penetration rate once irregular "one night stand" Internet users are excluded; Gamal Eid, the executive director of the Arab Human Rights Network, estimates 10% penetration; and Wael Abbas, a prominent blogger, estimated around 13%.[xiii] It is possible that all of these figures are low because of the difficulty of counting those who access the Internet through semi-public locations such as Internet cafes,[xiv] universities, and research organizations or through pirated connections.[xv]

In most countries, access is not evenly spread because it "tends to remain demarcated on the basis of wealth, age, skills, literacy, cultural background, class, disability, and many other factors."[xvi] Indeed, age, gender, education, and wealth are all important factors in determining who has access in Egypt, but none of them are straightforward, linear relationships. The Internet privileges the young because they have been socialized into computer usage in a way their elders were not, therefore reversing the usual age

hierarchy in Egypt. It also privileges the wealthy and the literate, but only up to a certain threshold; once the level of wealth necessary to afford access is passed and a basic level of literacy is attained, greater wealth and literacy are unlikely to correspond to significantly greater access. With the spread of Internet cafes, wealth, in particular, is not a huge barrier; Wheeler's study, based on interviews with hundreds of Internet cafe users in 2004, found that Internet cafes are frequented by "carpenters, sales people in small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs), tea boys, students, customer service representatives, secretaries" among others.[xvii] Literacy, which in Egypt was only 71.4% in 2005, is still a barrier.[xviii] Even more importantly, the *quality* of literacy varies significantly meaning that the 71.4% above likely includes many functional illiterates. The use of *ʿamiyya*[xix] in blogs becomes very significant in this light, as it provides a way for partially literate people to read blogs. Furthermore, the Internet is potentially leveling for women, but this might be limited by the preponderance of users who access the Internet in cafes, which are still male-dominated spaces.

Compared to other forms of mass media, the Internet has not reached a very high level of penetration in Egypt. However, looking purely at the numbers online misses the point. For instance, there are fewer Internet users than there are TV viewers, but Internet users have truly global access compared to a more local or regional set of programs that one receives on television.[xx] The interactive nature of the Internet also distinguishes it from television and radio.

Of course, most of these Internet users are not bloggers. The difficulty in determining the number of blogs means that most scholars have restricted themselves to broad generalizations about numbers of blogs and bloggers. Marc Lynch, for example, guessed in April 2007 that there were "perhaps a few thousand political blogs across the region."[xxi] Andrew Exum similarly put the number at around 1,000 bloggers in early 2007.[xxii] An estimate from within Egypt put the number of blogs in the Arab world as a whole at 40,000.[xxiii] Blogger.com, the largest host for blogs, has approximately 24,400 Egyptian blogs and Maktoobblog.com, one of the other larger hosts almost entirely for Arabic-language blogs, has approximately 10,000. This is only valuable as a rough estimate because most of these blogs are likely to be inactive, but this means that the number of bloggers in Egypt, based on the estimates of two of the larger hosts only, is likely in the tens of thousands. Furthermore, these bloggers are spread throughout Egypt, with many social organizations being started up for bloggers to meet other bloggers offline.[xxiv] The difficulty in estimating the size of the blogosphere is compounded by the fluidity of the medium. Even an incredibly accurate, thorough estimate could leave one asking, as Chadwick does, "Websites come and go, so how reliable is a snapshot?"[xxv]

Determining who writes these blogs is also difficult because, in many cases, they do so anonymously. My informants in Cairo contended that the blogging demographic was similar to the Internet user demographic: young, educated, with a higher proportion of social and political activists than in the population at large.[xxvi] Determining who reads blogs is even more difficult.[xxvii] Metrics for blog readership have been shown to mean very little even in the West.[xxviii] The number of readers varies immensely among blogs and over time. Wael Abbas professes to have about 30,000 visits to his blog per month, but in May 2005, after being one of the only sources to cover a protest that was brutally squashed by the government, his site received 500,000 hits in only two days.[xxix] Few studies try to gather data on readers, but one looked at Iranian blogs and found that

readers were primarily between the ages of 20 and 32 years and most had completed some post-secondary education.[xxx]

Looking at the comments sections on blogs could shed more light, but those sections are usually dominated by other bloggers and their friends or, in the case of prominent English-language blogs, by foreigners reading to get insights into the elusive "Arab street." Still, comments sections are important because they give a glimpse into how a blog is read, which is critical to understanding any writing, especially periodical writing, because it "to a large extent depends on an ongoing dialogue, open or tacit, with the audience. Incomplete knowledge of the readers' side of this dialogue impedes our understanding of the development of the written medium."[xxxi]

While defining the exact size of the blogosphere does not seem viable or, indeed, analytically vital, it is important to note that even if it is small, this does not imply the effect must be small. Eickelman drew the comparison with print, which was also limited to a small elite when it first arrived in the Middle East, yet its impacts were substantial.[xxxii] Whereas print media benefited from a "multiplier effect" of the literate reading to the non-literate, it is unlikely that blogs, which demand readers to decode text, graphics, and images together, would have quite the same "multiplier effect." Instead, blogs have a "multiplier effect" because they influence the print media, email newsletters, and satellite television, which all reach larger audiences. Alterman also points out that those who blog often "are the leaders and opinion-shapers."[xxxiii] This was echoed by Gamal Eid who runs an Egyptian NGO that works with web activism.[xxxiv]

Development of the Egyptian political blogosphere

The Egyptian blogosphere can trace its origins to Usenet groups and email listserves maintained before the advent of blogs themselves. Wael Abbas ran an email listserve in the late 1990s in order to distribute political information and facilitate discussions before beginning his blog. These listserves still exist today, with activist listserves such as *al-Mahrousa*[xxxv] reaching over 9,400 email addresses and receiving more than twenty messages most days.

Blogging began in Egypt in 2003-2004. The first generation of bloggers was highly influenced by the Kefaya political movement, which was a diverse political coalition opposed to Mubarak that was gaining traction at this same time. This has been described as "a close, organic relationship between blogging and a contentious political movement."[xxxvi] Indeed, it would be difficult to explain the origins of blogging in Egypt without discussing Kefaya, and it would be hard to explain the successes of Kefaya without discussing blogging. The Kefaya political movement began in the summer of 2004 and held its first major demonstration in December of that year. From the start, Kefaya was as much an online movement as an offline one. Its popular website (harakamasria.org) was launched in late 2004 and the webmaster, Malik Mustafa, has since begun writing one of the most prominent Egyptian blogs, *MaLcoLM X: when all the words became crazy* (malek-x.net).

Young political activists of all stripes joined the movement and either brought their blogs with them or, in many cases, began writing blogs during that time period. The blogosphere that emerged at this time reflected the diverse and cooperative nature of the Kefaya movement itself. Marxist bloggers such as Hossam al-Hamalawy and Alaa Abd El Fattah wrote and protested side by side with Islamists like Abdel Moneim Mahmoud.

The striking extent to which blogging decreases the costs of political speech is part of what has led to the profusion of blogging in Egypt and to the remarkable diversity of views online. Viewpoints not widely advocated in Egyptian political circles, such as Marxism, have vocal and compelling advocates in the blogosphere.

Throughout 2005, the movement held more demonstrations and succeeded in attracting national and international attention, largely because of online coverage. Around this time, Wael Abbas started his blog, *al-Wa'i al-Masri* as a home for the many pictures he was taking of political protests that the conventional newspapers would often refuse to print, or simply not have space for on a particular day.[xxxvii] Collectively, the new Egyptian blogosphere covered Kefaya's actions when the traditional newspapers were largely ignoring them.

While the initial development of the blogosphere corresponds with the development of the Kefaya movement, a second generation of bloggers has arrived with the entrance, en masse, of young Muslim Brotherhood bloggers. Characterizing the development of the blogosphere in terms of two waves or two main generations is common in bloggers' own assessments[xxxviii] and in scholarly writing on the topic.[xxxix] The Muslim Brotherhood has had an online presence longer than most political organizations, with unofficial movement websites run by students since 1999 and an official one launched in 2001.[xl] Despite this long-standing online presence, the Muslim Brotherhood was not quick to move to blogging.

Over the course of 2005 and 2006, the state took action in universities, tightening restrictions on the Brotherhood, preventing them from standing for student government positions and preventing many from graduating.[xli] This restriction of political space in universities drove many young Muslim Brotherhood members online to blogging. At the same time, many leaders of the Brotherhood were arrested, leading their families to create blogs in order to have a place to vent and to campaign for their family members' release. Even after the release of many of these leaders, their families continued to blog. Asma' al-'Iryan for example, began an Arabic-language blog at *I will live and withstand my sorrows* (http://banatelerian.blogspot.com/) when her father, 'Isam al-'Iryan, was detained. Today, she remains a prominent feature of the Muslim Brotherhood blogosphere. Lynch estimates that there were around 150 Muslim Brother bloggers online in Spring 2007, which was a significant increase over the previous year when there were virtually none.[xlii] This trend became significant enough that one Arabic-language blog hosting service began playing towards the new Brotherhood audience by positioning itself as a host that was concerned about Islamic issues by starting a campaign to organize bloggers against the Danish cartoons.[xliii] The diversity of this new wave of bloggers is striking, as it includes large numbers of women, wide geographic diversity, and a range of political positions including both liberal and conservative voices.

This new wave of Islamist bloggers has come into conflict at times with the first wave of activist bloggers associated with Kefaya. One flashpoint has been efforts to organize an official syndicate for bloggers with a code of conduct and elected leaders. Part of the stated goal was to control what was said on blogs to make sure that it did not come into conflict with Islam.[xliv] This was seen by many of the earlier wave of bloggers as, at best, a useless exercise, and at worst, an action that would facilitate a governmental crackdown or Muslim Brotherhood dominance of the blogosphere. Other members of the old guard complain of being criticized by the new wave for issues in their personal life.[xlv] The

author of the anonymous blog *Rantings of a Sandmonkey* wrote that these new bloggers "have nothing to say and nothing better to do but to attack and make fun of what other Egyptian bloggers, from the infidelic, unislamic, un-egyptian 'old guard', write about."[xlvi] Anger and criticism go the other way just as easily, with secular English-language bloggers such as *Modern Pharaoh* (modernpharaoh.blogspot.com) spending much time on Muslim Brotherhood blogs accusing them of destroying Egypt. Another cause of tension has been language use in various blogs.[xlvii] Many of the older bloggers write in English or in colloquial Arabic. They have come under fire from more traditionalist Islamists for degrading the Arabic language or, in the case of English-language bloggers, of being ashamed of Arabic.[xlviii]

At the same time, the harmony that prevailed during the heyday of Kefaya no longer exists even within the first wave of bloggers. One blogger claims activist bloggers have "started criticizing each other" and "focusing on our own careers."[xlix] To an extent, these bloggers have been victims of their own success. Many less well-known bloggers are jealous of the notoriety and attention lavished upon the largest Egyptian bloggers, such as Wael Abbas, Alaa Abd El Fattah, and Mohamed al-Sharqawy.

The new splits that have arisen between bloggers reflect, to a large extent, offline political splits between political groups.[l] Wael Abbas, a prominent blogger who has posted many videos of police brutality online, has been accused of advancing the agenda of the police by spreading videos that further intimidate the public. Abbas' response is that those people spreading this "conspiracy theory" are mostly pan-Arabists and Nasserists who have a political vendetta against him because of his pro-Sadat outlook.[li] In a post explaining why he was quitting blogging, the author of *Rantings of a Sandmonkey* sums up,

> One has to wonder at some point the futility of being a keyboard warrior in a country where nothing seems to matter to its people anymore. At the same time, there has been those amongst us who have loved the fame and the attention, and are now becoming the egyptian blogosphere's equivelant of Paris Hilton: They are famous for being famous, peddling the same stories and not really presenting anything of value to the debate.[lii]

One attempt to make sense of the Egyptian blogosphere was in a trailblazing article by Marc Lynch that tried to create a typology of Arab political blogging modes. He argued,

> Arab political bloggers engage in three principle types of activity: activism, bridge-blogging, and public sphere engagement. *Activists* are directly involved in political movements, using blogs to coordinate political action, spread information, and magnify the impact of contentious politics. *Bridgebloggers* primarily address Western audiences, usually writing in English with the intention of explaining their societies. Finally, *public-sphere bloggers* tend not to be directly involved in a political movement, but are deeply engaged with public arguments about domestic (and often Arab or Islamic) politics."[liii]

Although these categories have been adopted by others who have analyzed the Egyptian blogosphere, they are, in some ways, problematic.

This typology is analytically messy because the various categories are not parallel concepts. One's real-life political involvement is the variable that determines whether one is an "activist" or "public-sphere" blogger, while being a "bridge-blogger" hinges on the unrelated intention to attract a foreign audience. The "public-sphere" blogger

concept is particularly problematic. It is unclear what being "deeply engaged with public arguments" exactly means and it could be argued that any political blog falls into this category. It seems almost as if this category was concocted purely to provoke a discussion of Habermasian concepts of the public sphere. While this is an important issue to examine, it is clumsy when applied as a part of a typology of blogging.

Also, this typology overlooks one of the most important functions of blogging in Egypt: citizen journalism. This mode of Egyptian blogging is at the core of the blogosphere's self-conception.[liv] Some of the most important blogs seem to fit most squarely under this label and are not described adequately by any of Lynch's three categories. While Wael Abbas' blog, al-Wa'i al-Masri, might be a favorite of opposition activists, the postings on the blog itself reveal a stunning lack of activism. In the words of Issandr El Amrani, the Cairo-based, Moroccan-American editor of *The Arabist* (arabist.net) and analyst for the International Crisis Group, Wael Abbas is "the closest thing in the Egyptian blogosphere to a wire service."[lv]

Despite these criticisms, Lynch's concepts do provide a useful vocabulary. His typology should be seen as a non-exhaustive set of functions that blogging can perform, rather than as a complete set of labels to categorize political bloggers. Indeed, political bloggers in Egypt do participate in activist politics, serve as a bridge to the outside world, and participate in an online public sphere, in addition to performing other functions.

Bloggers and political organization

Not surprisingly, given the way its origins were tied up with the Kefaya movement, the blogosphere has played a significant role in politics in Egypt. Bloggers have extended the ability of existing political movements to organize, they have spurred independent campaigns and political action separate from mainstream Egyptian opposition politics, and they have driven internal debate within some political organizations by giving the youth a prominent uncensored platform.

Because Egypt has been under emergency law since Sadat's assassination, it is not legal for large groups to assemble without a government permit. This does not mean that opposition political mobilization has not occurred since Sadat's assassination, far from it. However, when it has occurred it has been with the constant possibility of police intervention. The advent of the Internet and the spread of blogging made mobilization safer and easier for Egyptian opposition activists. Throughout 2005, 2006, and 2007, one of the ways that activists were made aware of upcoming protests was through posts on blogs. These notifications of upcoming political action would spread virally, moving from blog to blog, as each blogger learned of the event. This all could change, however, as the state becomes more adept at Internet surveillance.

The spread of blogging not only makes mobilization easier, but it also influences the types of movements that arise. Egyptian bloggers themselves have been aware of this possibility since the first days of Egyptian blogging. Alaa Abd El Fattah and Manal Hassan played a role in creating a website for a "decentralized leftists collective" in the hope that it would help "the egyptian left get over its long history of problems and infighting."[lvi] In the same vein, Chadwick argues that "the Internet may be making possible looser, more diverse political campaigns, but this is no guarantee that they will be any more successful in achieving their goals than traditional, more ideological coherent campaigns based around traditional groups such as labor unions."[lvii] This

statement both explains some of the success (and limitations) of the Kefaya movement and the 6 April 2008 strikes. This attempted general strike was advocated by an extremely loose, diverse coalition cobbled together from the Ghazl al-Mahalla workers, the Kafr al-Dawwar labourers, the Kefaya movement, al-Wasat party, al-Karama party, the 9th March Movement for University Autonomy, and other groups.[lviii] It is almost certain that these various groups would not have been able to coordinate their efforts so quickly without the Internet. However, the very diversity of the effort was a significant weakness since it allowed the government to buy-off or intimidate select groups within the coalition. The blogger 'Amr Ezzat who writes at *What it seems to me* (mabadali.blogspot.com) worries that this sort of problem might be endemic to online politics: "It's ironic that we keep promoting democracy and condemning centralization of power, but can't even run a yahoo group."[lix] Far from being hyperbolic, this concern is actually quite literal, after disputes over who would run the youth for change yahoo group, affiliated with Kefaya, effectively shut the group down.[lx] In the end, a general strike, as called for in cyberspace, failed to materialize (as did a similar strike organized on Facebook for 4 May). However, what did occur on 6 April was a dramatic workers strike in al-Mahalla, which was able to gain significant publicity in large part by the efforts of bloggers and Internet-savvy activists.[lxi]

Blogs not only help promote political action planned by parties and movements, but they also spur independent political action. Alaa Abdel Fattah and a couple other activist bloggers organized a protest attracting around 300 people in a working-class neighborhood, partly out of frustration at the focus on downtown protests within the opposition.[lxii] In the wake of the Sharm al-Sheikh bombing in 2005, another group of mostly secular, English-language bloggers organized a candle vigil against terrorism, which was ultimately partially called-off because state security threatened to break it up.[lxiii]

Blogs have also proved crucial in allowing minority factions within political parties to start internal debates over the direction of the party.[lxiv] One example of such a debate is the discussion within the Muslim Brotherhood in which young, liberal members of the movement have gained significant attention through posts on their blogs. A flashpoint for this debate within the Brotherhood was the publication of a provisional party charter put out in September 2007. Many young Muslim Brothers came out harshly against some aspects of the charter,[lxv] which spurred a debate over the charter itself and over "what it means to be a member of the Brothers and the limits of public dissent."[lxvi] Another point of conflict between generations of the Muslim Brotherhood was when Abdel Monem Mahmoud, one of the most prominent young liberal Muslim Brotherhood bloggers, wrote a scathing critique of an article published by Brotherhood elder, Ali Abdel Fattah. His article claimed that it was impossible to separate religion and politics, a claim that Abdel Monem Mahmoud referred to as "dangerous."[lxvii]

The debate within the Brotherhood is not only between young and old, but it also reflects a geographic divide. Lynch explains,

> Outside of Cairo and Alexandria, however, the vast majority of Brotherhood youth seem to be traveling in a different direction, toward a more conservative, religious orientation unconcerned with politics.[lxviii]

Blogging bears primary responsibility for facilitating both the debate between generations within the Muslim Brotherhood and also the geographic debate between Brotherhood bloggers in different regions.

Bloggers, the diaspora, and transnational networks

Bloggers play a fundamental role in linking domestic Egyptian political activists with diaspora networks and foreign journalists.[lxix] Haugbolle has argued that this function of blogging is "generating a new realm for Arab transnationalism."[lxx] Anderson argues that the Internet has created "a new social space denominated by means of access" where "Arabs temporarily or permanently overseas" are "able to participate in homeland culture, politics and religion through the Internet."[lxxi] This linkage serves multiple purposes. In countries with heavy censorship, information flows inward from the diaspora to the activists in the country. Information also flows outward from activists to the diaspora, keeping them connected to what is happening.

Blogging has also been important in fostering inter-Arab connections between activists and youth. This has been most dramatically the case in the creation of dialogue between Israeli and Lebanese bloggers. However, it is also the case with Egyptian bloggers, who interact heavily with bloggers from other countries. When Malik Mustafa, an Egyptian blogger, was arrested on 5 April 2008, one of the first comments on his blog was from a reader who asked if there was any news and then signed off by writing "with good wishes to you from Tunis."[lxxii] These networks, which exist online, have begun to be supplemented by connections in real life, usually at international conferences. One recent conference held in Cairo and hosted by the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information brought bloggers from all around Egypt together with some from other countries in the region including Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Tunisia, UAE, Jordan, Oman, Syria, Palestine, Lebanon, Libya, and Bahrain.[lxxiii] Similar conferences bring bloggers directly in touch with other groups interested in their work, such as human rights activists in the West, academics, journalists, and other bloggers.

Blogging has also facilitated the emergence of transnational online campaigns. Alterman predicted the emergence of such movements in 1998, writing that "the greater exchange of ideas through the region and a concomitant increased strength of transnational movements in the region is not only possible but likely."[lxxiv] There have been campaigns organized in support of detained bloggers in Saudi Arabia[lxxv] and a host of campaigns to free bloggers in Egypt.[lxxvi] Perhaps the most famous of these campaigns is the campaign to free Karim Amer, an Egyptian blogger who was arrested in 2006 for denigrating Islam and insulting the president. This transnational movement has organized demonstrations in many cities around the world in support for Karim, it has encouraged bloggers to put banners on their websites in solidarity with Karim, it has organized care packages to send to Karim in jail since his family has disowned him, and it has succeeded in attracting significant international media coverage. One remarkable thing about this movement is the way it has mobilized the Egyptian diaspora and even seemingly random groups of European and North American youth.

Blogging and the state

Egyptian bloggers are perhaps one of the clearest examples of the changing power dynamics surrounding technology in the world today. Rolls points out, "Since the Industrial Revolution, thanks in part to the Luddites, challenges to ruling elites have often been cast in terms of challenges to technology."[lxxvii] Yet, the Internet revolution has flipped this on its head and put technology in the hands of those who wish to challenge the state.

Bloggers have had tense relations with the state since the start of blogging in Egypt. The Egyptian blogosphere is almost uniformly opposed to Mubarak's regime. Although early advocates of the Internet claimed that it was impossible for governments to control what is done online, this is not the case as Dutton explains,

> The techniques designed to enable the Internet to be a free-flowing and open exchange of information also make possible the tracking of sources and destinations of messages and information. This gives governments and others with appropriate knowhow and technical capacities the opportunity to trace Internet traffic and the location of Websites. Authorities can also close cybercafes, install automatic Internet filters to check lists of prohibited key words and terms, or implement blocks that limit or ban the use of particular search engines and politically- or culturally-sensitive Websites (Zittrain and Edelman 2004).[lxxviii]

What is remarkable in the Egyptian case is how few of these tactics the state actively pursues so far.

Unlike in the Gulf countries where there is widespread blockage of controversial Internet sites, Egypt blocks very few web pages. The website for *al-Shaʿab*, the newspaper of the Labor Party, was blocked from 2000 to 2006. Similarly, the Muslim Brotherhood's website was blocked in 2004 and an electronic newspaper called *al-Mithaq al-ʿAraby* was also blocked in that same year. More recently, the Save Egypt Front's website, based in London, was blocked in Egypt in 2006. Apart from these few examples, there has been practically no blockage of Internet sites.[lxxix] Even when the aforementioned sites were blocked, the technologically savvy were able to use proxy-servers to get around the restrictions. Despite the rarity of blocking sites, the courts have reaffirmed the government's right to block them if it deems necessary.[lxxx] In a sense, the Egyptian regimes attitude toward Internet sites has been similar to its view towards newspapers. It rarely shuts down newspapers and it exercises no prior restraint. Instead it finds other, subtler ways to deal with dissent, such as arresting targeted journalists, harassing the families of dissidents, and performing character assassination through the government press.

The harshest measure taken against bloggers has been imprisonment, usually for short periods.[lxxxi] Only a very small number of people have been arrested for what they wrote online. In 2002, an Egyptian journalist was imprisoned for six months for what he wrote in an online journal. Similarly, in 2003, a human rights activist, Ashraf Ibrahim, was arrested for "sullying Egypt's reputation" after emailing around pictures of a brutal police reaction to a protest.[lxxxii] Shohdy Suroor, who posted online a copy of the "obscene" poem, "Kus Ummiyat," written by his father Nagib Suroor, had to flee the country to avoid arrest in 2002.[lxxxiii] Abu Islam Ahmad Abdallah, author of balady.net, was arrested in 2005 for what was essentially hate speech against Christians.[lxxxiv] Most recently, in July 2008, a blogger was arrested under the emergency law for inciting demonstrations via the Internet.[lxxxv]

The most prominent case of an Egyptian being arrested unambiguously for what he wrote online was Karim Amer, mentioned above. Abdel Kareem Nabil Sulieman, a former student of al-Azhar University Faculty of Law who blogged at *Kareem Amer* (karam903.blogspot.com), was arrested on 6 November 2006.[lxxxvi] What is puzzling about Karim Amer's arrest is his lack of prominence. Unlike Alaa Abd El Fattah or Wael Abbas, Karim Amer's site did not have very much traffic and was not influential.[lxxxvii] Karim Amer's case sent shock waves through the blogging community, having a chilling

effect on free speech. This is partly the case because his "crime" included brazen insults leveled on many figures in early Islamic history including Mohamed and his companions, which made many bloggers, especially those affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, loathe to jump to his defense.

Many more bloggers have been arrested for their offline activities than for what they actually wrote online.[lxxxviii] One pivotal moment came in the spring of 2005, when a number of bloggers were arrested for their offline participation in protests organized by Kefaya. Although the arrests have been widespread, it is important to clarify that "the Egyptian authorities are not targeting bloggers per se. They are more likely to be against activists who recently have been using blogs as political tools. Hence, the authorities do not persecute bloggers but rather the activists among them, and it is important to make this distinction."[lxxxix] Regardless of why they are arrested, the imprisonment of these bloggers also has had an intimidating effect on the rest of the blogosphere. This is especially true when reports of police brutality are widespread, such as the case of blogger Mohamed al-Sharqawi being tortured and sodomized in prison.[xc]

Intimidation, character assassination, and trumped up legal charges are even more common tools of censorship than arrests. Wael Abbas explains how these seemingly soft tactics combine to form something more substantial,

> [The government] is spreading rumors about us and targeting us for character assassination. Judges allied with the government have filed lawsuits against more than 50 bloggers, accusing them of blackmail and of defaming Egypt and demanding that their blogs be shut down. Meanwhile, security officials appear on television to claim that the bloggers are violating media and communications laws.[xci]

Wael Abbas has also reported receiving threatening phone calls from state security officials saying they would frame him for a crime in order to put him in jail.[xcii]

The government press contributes to this persecution. Ahmed Mousa, one columnist for *al-Ahram*, wrote a series of columns accusing blogger Abdel Monem Mahmoud of being a Brotherhood infiltrator in *al-Dustour* newspaper and calling for his arrest.[xciii] Similarly, *Rose al-Yusuf* has published multiple editorials against Wael Abbas, assaulting his character and claiming that he publishes fabrications.[xciv] There have also been a few pro-government blogs begun with the specific goal of tearing up the reputation of prominent bloggers.[xcv] In addition to visits from state security and accusations leveled in the state press, lawyers sympathetic to the government have brought numerous court cases against bloggers. One recent case was brought by a judge in Alexandria, who was proven to have plagiarized large sections of his new book after a blog investigated the issue. In retaliation, the judge brought a case against twenty-one different websites, including the blog that criticized him and a host of others.[xcvi] Although the case was ultimately unsuccessful, it did succeed in intimidating the authors of the blogs named in the suit causing some of them to shut down altogether.

Aside from this campaign of harassment, the government has also begun taking bureaucratic steps that could have a stifling impact on blogging. One of these efforts has been to restructure the way that Internet subscriptions are priced. Currently, it is a fairly low price for unlimited access and bandwidth. Under the new plan, there would be a cheaper rate with heavy limits on bandwidth and a much more expensive plan without the same limits. Since many bloggers upload and download significant amounts of multimedia, they would have to move to the prohibitively expensive plan. Another

similarly bureaucratic action involves licensing of Internet cafes. The difficulty in getting a license means that most of them operate without legal permission. This has resulted in police officers threatening to close down many Internet cafes if the owners refuse to report suspicious behavior.[xcvii] Wael Abbas recounted a humorous situation where he was kicked out of an Internet café in Maadi, a neighborhood of Cairo, for reading his own blog.[xcviii] Internet cafés also face requirements to report the names and details of their users to the government. This monitoring has also spread recently to more expensive cafes that, until recently, offered free wireless access. Two Internet providers, Mobinil and Link.net, have taken over Internet provision in these cafes, but are now demanding detailed user information and payment in line with updated governmental regulations.[xcix] The effect of all this regulation is to make accessing the Internet more expensive and less secure for bloggers.

Even multinational corporations sometimes seem like they are against Egyptian bloggers. YouTube deleted all the videos that Wael Abbas had posted online documenting police torture. While the declared reason for this was the graphic nature of the videos, the deletion was interpreted by many bloggers as a deliberate attempt to silence them, and it resulted in a campaign against YouTube that ultimately succeeded in getting the company to reinstate Wael Abbas' account.[c] Partly because of all this harassment, the Egyptian political blogging community is filled with a measure of paranoia. Wael Abbas' view seems to be one shared by many bloggers: "I am an Egyptian blogger. And the Mubarak regime is out to get me and others like me."[ci] This has led to some worries that spread throughout the blogosphere but turned out to be ill-founded. One example of this was the concern that Google was deliberately hiding Kefaya's website from the search results.[cii]

Taken as a whole, the Egyptian government's approach towards the Internet appears "schizophrenic" in the way that it promotes widespread access for commercial reasons, but cracks down sporadically and unevenly on online dissent.[ciii] This leaves the actions of the Egyptian government open to a number of possible interpretations.

One interpretation is that the government does not perceive blogging as a major threat. Wheeler argues that the types of activism fostered by the Internet are "often too subtle to be interpreted by the state as threatening."[civ] The other view claims that the government does indeed see blogging as threatening. In this view, the government is conducting a coordinated effort against bloggers, but they are doing it in a way that shows they do not want to bring domestic or international attention to the issue of Internet freedom and cyberdissidents.

Under the first view, Karim Amer's arrest was the result of local factors. His professors at al-Azhar noticed his blog and, of their own accord, took the case to the courts, which ultimately followed legal procedure and found him guilty. In the second view, Karim Amer was deliberately targeted because, as a vocal atheist who had written inflammatory posts against Islam and the founders of the religion, he could be arrested as a warning to other bloggers without generating domestic sympathy.[cv] Many bloggers also claim that this was a deliberate stratagem to divide bloggers further into an Islamist camp and a liberal camp. Elijah Zarwan injects a note of caution into this sort of argument, saying that "as the Egyptian blogosphere grows, it is becoming more reflective of the diversity and pluralism of Egypt itself. Kareem didn't divide the blogosphere. It wasn't unified to begin with."[cvi]

Similarly, there are two views on the arrests of bloggers during street protests. They might occur simply because the bloggers are activists participating in demonstrations. Another view – held by many bloggers – is that state security specifically looked for prominent bloggers in the crowd and targeted them for imprisonment. In the same way, the wave of character assassination and harassment by state security could be due to local factors and personal animosities. Or, it could be part of a broader, coordinated government campaign against bloggers. The court case brought by an appeals judge in Alexandria against a number of bloggers, some of whom had accused him of plagiarism on their blogs, seems likely to have been driven by local and personal factors. On the other hand, Tareq Mounir, the Reporters without Borders correspondent in Cairo, argues that all of this does actually fit into a broader government effort, which is only constrained by the difficulty in prosecuting people for online activities. He argues that the actions that have emerged are part of a "sneaky" campaign by the government to silence online dissent.[cvii]

It is likely that the truth lies between the two interpretations. The government does seem to have some intention to directly stop the work of bloggers as evidenced by a pair of statements by the Interior Minister, Habib al-'Adli. In October 2005, he said, "Yes, we practice censorship... so that he who is afraid will not talk."[cviii] Later, he clarified that "posting information on the Internet against the government was 'a very dangerous crime,'" and that bloggers who had revealed police brutality were part of "an unpatriotic campaign to hit a national service that seeks stability in the country."[cix] On the other hand, it would probably be a fallacy to ascribe all of the tactics used against bloggers to a central government plan, when much of it is probably the result of pro-government newspaper editors, lawyers, and judges taking matters into their own hands.

Regardless of whether there is a grand plan behind the government's actions towards bloggers, the crackdown has had an effect on bloggers. The optimism that prevailed in 2005 and 2006 has dissipated and what is left is doubt about the future of online activism. As Wael Abbas said, "the future is not clear because of the constant crackdown."[cx]

Does political blogging matter?

At this point, it is possible to return to the primary question: does blogging change established political practices and processes or is it merely a new forum for old practices to continue? The answer, as demonstrated above, is that blogging has indeed changed the way politics is conducted in Egypt. However, in most cases, it has done so not by dramatically altering or revolutionizing politics, but rather by intensifying and speeding up trends that had already begun with satellite media and the opposition press.

In many ways, blogging has intensified current trends in politics and media. The opposition press in Egypt and the transnational satellite media had already begun covering the regime much more aggressively in the past few years than previously. Blogging has furthered this trend by providing an outlet for any story or opinion that is too controversial even for such newspapers. Similarly, blogging has made political organizing easier by moving much of it online.

In a few ways, blogging and Internet politics actually have shifted the direction of current trends. This is true in the way that blogging has upended traditional age hierarchies. The current internal debate occurring online in the Muslim Brotherhood is a clear example

where blogging has empowered a younger generation to challenge the views of the leaders of their organization. Yet, many of these conclusions could change. As Chadwick cautions, "Internet politics is a fast-moving field characterized by uncertainty, paradox, overstatement and understatement."[cxi]

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