

“Still, it cannot be denied, based on the observation of recent processes of sociopolitical change, that access to and use of wireless communication technology adds a fundamental tool to the arsenal of those who seek to influence politics and the political process without being constrained by the powers that be.”

-Castells et. al.

### *Introduction*

There are, generally, five kinds of newspapers in Egypt: the government-owned dailies, the opposition dailies, the party newspapers, the regional papers, and newspapers published from abroad.<sup>1</sup> Public discourse is still dominated by government-owned or controlled media, such as the newspaper giant *Al-Ahram* and the state television. Independent newspapers such as *Al-Masry Al-Youm* and *Al-Dustur* have changed this equation, but the circulation figures still favor the government-owned and aligned media outlets. Egypt’s press environment can best be described as somewhat free. Rugh recently classified Egypt’s press environment as “transitional,” by which he means “these systems were quite complex, containing strong elements of government control and influence, alongside elements of freedom and diversity.”<sup>2</sup> Rugh argues that while journalists have much more freedom than in the past in such countries (he includes Tunisia, Jordan and Algeria in the category) the government still retains certain privileges, and that there are “red lines” that journalists dare not cross. In a practical sense, this means there appears to be a lively press environment, with copious criticisms of regime practices and policies – even in the government-owned papers – but with a great deal of self-censorship occurring still. In Egypt, the process of obtaining a license to publish a newspaper is a daunting obstacle to any entity or individual who wishes to pursue one. Black<sup>3</sup> details the ordeal that awaited the would-be publishers of *El-Badeel* in 2007, who had to wait months upon months for their license.

As one might expect in such an authoritarian regime, many groups and individuals have difficulty accessing the public sphere. This exclusion might be due to social factors, as in the case of religious minorities such as Coptic Christians and Baha’is, or it might be due to political exclusion, as in the case of the Muslim Brotherhood. Whatever the source of exclusion, such groups have had great difficulty having their voices heard as part of a robust public sphere. Since the growth of the Internet in the mid-90s, scholars have looked for signs that the digital world might provide a haven for the growth of alternative public spheres for such groups, sometimes conceptualized as “electronic public spheres”, explicitly borrowing the concept of the public sphere from Habermas and applying it to the Internet. They do so in recognition that, as Palczewski argues, “Social movement and counterpublic sphere theories have recognized the importance of identity creation and self-expression to the disempowered.”<sup>4</sup> Blogs themselves have long been posited as “the

<sup>1</sup> Salih, Khalid. “Huriyyat al-Sahafa.” Cairo Center for the Study of Human Rights, 2007. pp. 13-15

<sup>2</sup> Rugh, William A. “Do National Political Systems Still Influence Arab Media?” *Arab Media & Society* (May 2007). P. 9

<sup>3</sup> Black, Jeffrey. “Egypt’s Press: More free, still fettered.” *Arab Media & Society* (January 2008). P. 11

<sup>4</sup> Palczewski, 2002. Palczewski, C. Cyber-movements, new social movements, and counterpublics. In R. Asen & D. Brouwer (Eds.), *Counterpublics and the State* (pp. 161-186). New York: State University of New York, 2001. P.

voice of the voiceless”, a way to democratize public life and add the voices of ordinary people to those of the elites.

In addition to blogging, the rise of Web 2.0 has given rise to the creation of what some scholars have called “social media”, what Shirky refers to as “social tools” and what I refer to as *Social Media Networks* (SMNs). *Social Media Networks* encompass Weblogs (i.e. blogs), social networking sites such as Facebook, niche-networking sites such as LinkedIn (for professional networking), crowdsourcing content such as Digg<sup>5</sup> (a site that allows users to rank and control media content), text-messaging services (by which mobile phone users can send written messages to one another), micromedia services such as Twitter (a many-to-many communications service that allows users to send messages to each other or post them to blogs), picture-sharing services such as Flickr (which allows users to mark or “tag” their photos and self-organize the content), and event-planning sites like Meet-Up. Much of what these services do is allow people to share information and to form groups, at a very low cost, with a very large number of people, and to do so interactively.

Online social networks are of critical importance when seeking to understand the impact of blogs. A single blog is simple a node in the vast network of the Internet. But not all nodes are created equal. In fact, the readership of blogs is governed by *power laws*, the idea that certain nodes in these networks have virtually no limit on their potential size or scale.<sup>6</sup> The nodes of ordinary networks – a street grid, for example – have a more even distribution of connections, but networks governed by power laws can have wildly uneven distributions. Gladwell and Barabasi, among others, have noted that while most people tend to have roughly the same number of acquaintances, a small number of people (those Gladwell termed “connectors”) have an extraordinary number of social connections.<sup>7</sup> In network terminology those connectors are hubs, and according to the law of preferential attachment, hubs are much more likely to attract new connections than other nodes in the network. The application of power laws to cyberspace was made when scholars tried to “map” the Internet and found that while there are millions of Web pages, only a few have more than a handful of links to other pages, while a select few (the hubs) have thousands and thousands. Again, as Watts argues, what distinguishes such a network from most of these ordinary networks is that a tiny minority of “nodes” will have an extraordinary numbers of connections, while the vast majority have few or none.<sup>8</sup> This finding has proven to be quite robust.<sup>9</sup> Understanding that readership is governed by power laws in the world of Social Media Networks will help us determine exactly how digital activists may and may not have an impact in authoritarian countries.

<sup>5</sup> The term “crowdsourcing content” is borrowed from Brian Solis and his graphical illustration of the social media world “The Conversation Prism”.

<sup>6</sup> The unfortunate and misleading term “scale-free” has been applied to networks that exhibit these characteristics. The term is misleading because such networks certainly *do* have a scale, just one that differs from other kinds of networks.

<sup>7</sup> Barabási, Albert-László. Linked: How Everything is Connected to Everything Else and What It Means for Business, Science, and Everyday Life. New York: Plume Books, 2002.

<sup>8</sup> Watts, Duncan. 2003. p. 107.

<sup>9</sup> Hindman, Matthew. *The Myth of Digital Democracy*.

The Open Net Initiative, which monitors the extent of government filtering of the Internet globally, argues that there are still no formal attempts to filter or block Web sites in Egypt (2009)<sup>10</sup>. Boas and Kalathil note that Egypt, in contrast to Saudi Arabia, has no formal mechanism to control or filter Internet content.<sup>11</sup> What the Egyptian government does do quite effectively is harass and repress bloggers and other practitioners of online media. In fact all three of the journalists in prison at the time of writing are bloggers, and the regime arrested more than 100 bloggers in 2008 alone. Still, the lack of architectural control mechanisms means that individuals have still been willing to engage in activism online<sup>12</sup>, and in many cases seem willing to suffer prison time. If Social Media Networks can help minorities challenge authoritarian states, we should be able to see this effect in Egypt, with its relatively liberal policies on online dissent.

This article will explain the impact of social media on subordinated minorities in Egypt through the exploration of the case of ID cards for Baha'is. The case study will seek to answer two questions: 1) Are Social Media Networks creating electronic public spheres or counterpublics for these groups? and 2) What is the actual political or social *impact* of these efforts? In other words, while existing studies have usually merely documented the electronic activity of subordinated groups, this study treats such activity as *sui generis* and seeks to build theories about the conditions under which social media might alter the material political conditions for subordinated minorities. Such a recognition does not preclude an appropriate recognition of the importance of self-expression and identity for subordinated minorities, but argues that in addition to these important functions, Social Media Networks are the critical missing variable in explaining the impact of the Internet on minorities. The null hypothesis is that whatever their contributions to deliberation and building democratic values (and even these hypotheses are suspect given recent research by Sunstein<sup>13</sup> and Hindman<sup>14</sup>, Egyptian social media practitioners are doing little to nothing to change the political environment for subordinated minorities like women, Baha'is and Muslim Brothers. The alternative hypothesis advanced here is that SMNs transmit information from electronic public spheres into larger spheres, either national or global, and thereby impact perceptions of subordinated minorities and, under certain circumstances, lead to mobilizations. They do so through critical "nodes" of elite blogger-activists and their connections to the mainstream Egyptian media. The competing hypotheses will be evaluated against the evidence presented below in the hopes of arriving at an explanation and further building theory.

### *Politics in the online public sphere*

Since the rise of Internet advocacy in the 1990s, scholars have sought to categorize and explain the impact of electronic communities on politics and society, in the United States and abroad. One of the most popular subjects of scholarly inquiry has been the use of the Internet by marginalized groups – diasporas, ethnic, religious and political minorities, and

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<sup>10</sup> Available at <http://opennet.net/research/profiles/egypt>. Accessed May 27<sup>th</sup>, 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Kalathil, Shanthi, and Taylor C. Boas. Open Networks, Closed Regimes: The Impact of the Internet on Authoritarian Rule. Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment For International Peace, 2003. P. 122.

<sup>12</sup> Faris (2008) for example outlines the use of digital media by the April 6<sup>th</sup> Youth Movement in Egypt. Radsch (2008) details the long history of politically-motivated Egyptian blogging.

<sup>13</sup> Sunstein, Cass. Infotopia: How Many Minds Produce Knowledge. New York, NY. Oxford University Press, 2006.

<sup>14</sup> Hindman, Matthew. *The Myth of Digital Democracy*.

revolutionary groups. These inquiries are usually couched in language borrowed from Jurgen Habermas, in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Habermas defined the public sphere as “a domain of our social life in which such a thing as public opinion can be formed.”<sup>15</sup> The public sphere as it developed in Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries was imagined as a place where previously excluded groups and individuals could have their voices heard, through conversations in cafés, salons, and newspapers.<sup>16</sup> Habermas called the people’s “public use of their reason” “peculiar and without historical precedent”<sup>17</sup>. It is the aspect of unfettered access that makes it so difficult to theorize online public spheres as Habermasian public spheres, especially in authoritarian or impoverished contexts. However, Habermas’s third element, that “ideas presented in the public sphere were considered on the basis of their merits, and not on the social standing of the speaker”<sup>18</sup> does appear to apply to the Internet. Theorists of online public spheres are particularly apt to seize on this last point, since in theory blogs, chat rooms, and community Web sites are open to anyone – both for formation and participation.

Dahlberg, however, offers a full set of reasons why online public spheres fail to meet the standards delineated by Habermas.<sup>19</sup> Such reasons include the increasing commercialization of the digital world, the lack of civility and deliberation online, the difficulty of ascertaining the veracity of information, and the exclusion of certain groups and individuals because of unequal access to digital communications. One might add Hindman’s finding that the American blogosphere has merely crowned a new elite, since many prominent bloggers and activists are the graduates of Ivy League universities, are well-known journalists, or can be thought of in other ways as elites. Many such inquiries have involved delineating the terms and conditions of what might constitute such an online public sphere, and whether certain sites, communities, or groups meet those standards.

Other scholars have characterized the use of the Internet by subordinated groups as “virtual counterpublics” or “cyber-movements”<sup>20</sup>. Counterpublic theory may be a particularly appropriate way to analyze the use of Social Media Networks in Egypt. Fraser (1992) defines counterpublics as “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs”<sup>21</sup>. Counterpublics are theorized as operating in distinction from, and opposition to, the bourgeois public sphere of Habermasian theory, inasmuch as the public sphere itself can be exclusionary. Asen and Brouwer note that counterpublics have a dual nature – on the one hand they operate

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<sup>15</sup> Al-Saggaf, Yeslam. “The Online Public Sphere in the Arab World: The War in Iraq on the Al Arabiya Website.” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 12 (2006): 311-334.

<sup>16</sup> Poor, Nathan. “Mechanisms of an Online Public Sphere: The Website Slashdot.” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 10/2 (2005).

<sup>17</sup> Habermas, Jürgen. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989. P. 27.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> Dahlberg, L. “Computer-mediated communication and the public sphere: A critical analysis.” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 7/1.

<sup>20</sup> Palczewski 2002, 165.

<sup>21</sup> Fraser, Nancy, 2002. “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” in Craig Calhoun ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 1992. pp. 109–142

as sites of debate, identity-formation, and refuge from the public sphere, while on the other, they serve as sites of training and resistance for activism in the broader public sphere<sup>22</sup>. Ideas of exclusion, oppression, and resistance are key for counterpublic theory. In Egypt, Baha'is are struggling to constitute identities in the face of powerful state and corporate interests that seek to impose conceptions of identity and action upon them. And for all, the digital world of Social Media Networks offers the possibility of, at minimum, a discursive arena largely, though not entirely, free of state interference, where ideas and practices of resistance can be developed and senses of community fostered.

Blogs also might offer a kind of updated literary public sphere. Habermas outlined two kinds of public spheres – the literary and the political. The former emerged through the development of novels out of letter-writing, and led to the development of interiority. Habermas argued that the development of novels in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Europe restructured “the intimacy of the private realm”, which came to be seen as “the authentic space of human existence”<sup>23</sup>. The public nature of the novel meant that no one with the means to purchase them could be excluded from reading them. Similarly, one of the animating goals of bloggers from subordinated minorities is precisely to humanize the Other, to allow access to the interiority of demonized groups, and to give them an “authentic space of human existence”. At the same time, those blogs offer not only a glimpse into the inner lives of the Other, but they also provide their authors with the ability to critically comment on the affairs of the state. Social Media Networks increase the "carrying capacity" for public debate. Maratea argues that "the emergence of social problems results from a competitive process in which claims-makers vie for public attention by promoting problem claims in public arenas"<sup>24</sup>. However, the public has limited attention, and traditional avenues of leveling claims in society have traditionally been limited - newspaper op-ed pages, demonstrations, and the mainstream media. The blogosphere, however, has been able to introduce new claims-makers into the public arena (what others might call the public sphere), by offering citizens publishing tools at very low cost<sup>25</sup>. The introduction of new claims-makers often takes the form of blogs providing journalists with "a trove of available claims"<sup>26</sup>. While Maratea was writing strictly about the blogosphere, the rise in importance of other Social Media Networks since 2008 only serves to provide elite journalists with more potential "troves" of claims and claims-makers. And in authoritarian contexts such as Egypt, the carrying capacity of traditional public arenas is even lower, due to repression, censorship, and self-censorship. So SMNs might play a particularly important role in such societies, transmitting claims from groups such as Baha'is to elite journalists, where they reach the public sphere. This study argues, again, that it is the links between elite journalists and SMN activists in Egypt that explains a great deal of the impact of these technologies on Egyptian public life.

### *Bahai's and virtual identity-formation*

The position of small religious minorities in Egypt has long been precarious. While Christians and, theoretically, Jews, enjoy some protections under the law, other groups –

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<sup>22</sup> Asen and Brower 2001, 7.

<sup>23</sup> Edgar, Andrew. *The Philosophy of Habermas*. Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2005. p. 37

<sup>24</sup> Maratea, Ray. “The e-Rise and Fall of Social Problems: The Blogosphere as a Public Arena.” *Social Problems* 55/1: 139-160. p. 140

<sup>25</sup> Maratea 2008, 142.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 147.

those that do not fall within the Islamically defined concept of *Ahl Al-Kitab* (people of the book) – enjoy neither protection nor respect in Egyptian society. One such group is the tiny religious minority of Baha'is. Founded in Iran in the 1860s by the man now known as Baha'ullah, the Baha'is believe that all people worship one God, making the religion difficult to classify. Baha'is are persecuted not just in Egypt, but in other parts of the Middle East as well, particularly Iran. The growth of the Baha'i community in Egypt appears to date to around 1895, when a Persian scholar named Mirza Abu'l-Fadl Gulpaygani arrived to lecture at Al-Azhar. A small community quickly converted to the faith<sup>27</sup>. Over the next few decades, the community, while still tiny, grew enough to see the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is founded in Egypt in 1924. Always seen by Muslims as a heretical offshoot of Islam, Baha'is receive harsher judgment and treatment than protected *Ahl Al-Kitab* (this is not in any way to suggest that the position of Egypt's sizable Coptic minority nor its miniscule Jewish population is secure). Combined with their exceptionally small numbers in Egypt, this renders Baha'is quite vulnerable to official repression, unofficial persecution, and all manner of legal and illegal discrimination. For instance, married Baha'i couples may not rent hotel rooms, since the state does not recognize their marriages, and couples who cannot show they are married are disallowed from renting rooms together (Westerners are often exempt from this prohibition unless they are traveling with an Egyptian). Baha'is received some recognition of their status in Egypt until 1960, when they were made to identify as Muslim, Christian or Jewish. They were also prevented from practicing their religion in public, a serious violation of their religious freedom.

One of the great controversies surrounding the Bahai's involves the issuing of national identity cards, which for all Egyptians includes a listing for faith. In March 2009, Baha'is won a long-running legal battle to have their entry for religious faith removed from those ID cards, arguing that listing the Baha'i faith on the ID card opened the card-holder to a host of discriminatory work and housing practices. The state on principle refused to grant the Baha'is an exception, arguing that since all other Egyptian citizens were required to list their religious affiliation on their ID cards, there should be no exceptions for anyone, since granting an exception would then constitute a form of special treatment. A lower court ruling in 2006 in favor of the Baha'is was immediately appealed by the government, and in a rare show of unity the ruling National Democratic Party and the Muslim Brotherhood opposition in parliament agreed that the rules should not be changed for Baha'is. As Religious Endowments Minister Mahmoud Zakzouk told *Daily News Egypt*, Baha'ism is “not a revealed religion” for Muslims and thus not subject to special protection in Egypt<sup>28</sup>. In the parliamentary debate that followed the ruling, at least one member of parliament argued that Baha'is should be killed as apostates. This long legal battle, begun in 2006, with a number of reversals for Baha'is including a negative ruling in December 2006, finally ended in victory in March of 2009, when the administrative court ruled that they could leave the religion line blank on their identity cards. The first recipient of one of these new cards declared the Baha'is right to leave that line blank “a victory for the citizen and the civilization of Egypt”<sup>29</sup>. It is almost certainly more of a

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<sup>27</sup> “Baha'i Faith: Early Days in Egypt.” *Baha'i Faith in Egypt*. June 6<sup>th</sup>, 2006. <http://www.bahai-egypt.org/2006/06/bahai-faith-early-days-in-egypt.html>

<sup>28</sup> “State to Appeal Ruling that Favors Egypt's Baha'is.” *Daily News Egypt*. May 5<sup>th</sup>, 2006. <http://www.dailystaregypt.com/article.aspx?ArticleID=1394>

<sup>29</sup> Bayoumi, Amr and Mohamed Azzam. “Baha'i twins receive first national ID card with a “blank” for religious affiliation. Their father considers it a rescue from “civil death.” *Al-Masry Al-Youm*. August 9<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

moral than a strategic victory, since a blank “religious affiliation” line can now mean only one thing: that the cardholder is in fact a Baha’i.

In the battle over ID cards, Baha’i blogs and electronic media outlets in Egypt and abroad played a role in writing about, publicizing, and articulating the needs of the Baha’i community in Egypt. One element of that role was and remains the presentation of Baha’i identity to Egyptian and global publics: what Asen and Brouwer called the “outward” manifestation of the counterpublic. One Baha’i blogger, Samir Shady, described the intent of his work as follows:

And since then, I didn’t want it to be a blog about the Baha’i faith, I wanted it to be a blog about a Bah'ai person, what does it mean to be a Baha'i in Egypt. I tried so much to keep it personal, I tried to comment on the news from my point of view, not just report the news, and not to go into issues of the faith itself. It was not my intention to spread the religion or tell people about the Baha'i faith, just about me and setting the facts straight and answering any misinformation in the media.<sup>30</sup>

Shady offers a refrain familiar to scholars who have sought to understand the motives of popular bloggers – a desire to correct the public record in some way, to alter popular representations of one’s identity group and to create a virtual counterpublic that leaves space for discussion and dissent while hoping to reach a larger audience and to change attitudes. Individuals who are part of subordinated groups often express deep frustration at being misunderstood by larger segments of society. So whereas Muslim Brothers often express exasperation with being treated in popular culture as fanatical, ascetic terrorists, Baha’is resent popular misrepresentations of their beliefs in the dominant culture. As Shady, the author of *Egyptian Baha’i*, wrote in a 2008 post:

From the beginning of the blog, I was determined not to write anything far from the basic goal: to present my personal thoughts, as an Egyptian Baha’i...I focused on correcting mistaken thinking seen on blogs and the traditional media.<sup>31</sup>

To that end, Shady frequently comments on media items and statements by leading figures in Egyptian public life, such as the Sheikh of al-Azhar. Typical posts on such topics might garner in excess of 70 comments, such as when the author deconstructed an interview by the sheikh with *Al-Masry Al-Youm* in 2008.<sup>32</sup> While the comments reflect the perils of pseudonymity that make the Internet a frequently uncivil medium, they also reflect, on occasion, genuine back-and-forth discussion about the nature of Baha’ism, the position of Islam on non-recognized religions, and other issues. Likewise, the Baha’i blog *Wijhat Nathar Ukhra* (Another Viewpoint) argued in its very first post in 2006 that it

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<http://www.almasry-alyoum.com/article2.aspx?ArticleID=221981>

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Samir Shady. Cairo, Egypt, April 21st, 2008.

<sup>31</sup> “On the Baha’is and the Crusades.” *Egyptian Baha’i*. February 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2008. Author’s translation.

<sup>32</sup> “Ya Shaykh?” *Egyptian Baha’i*. January 29<sup>th</sup>, 2008.

[http://egyptianbahai.wordpress.com/2008/01/29/oh\\_sheikh/#more-110](http://egyptianbahai.wordpress.com/2008/01/29/oh_sheikh/#more-110)

wanted to offer “a viewpoint other than that published in the Arab media and the Western media”<sup>33</sup>.

Their blogs are therefore a way of forming their identities – both for themselves, and against the predominant culture that refuses to allow them space for their private selves. Castells defined identity-construction as “the process of construction of meaning on the basis of a cultural attribute, or related set of cultural attributes, that is/are given priority over other sources of meaning”<sup>34</sup>. In accordance with his theory, Baha’is appear to be engaging in what Castells called *resistance-oriented* identity-formation, or the creation of group solidarity against overweening state or global authorities and institutions. By utilizing the power of social networks through digital media, Baha’i bloggers are upending the traditional schema of media power. Castells defines this as “counter-power” or “the capacity by social actors to challenge and eventually change the power relations institutionalized in society.”<sup>35</sup> He further regards the mobile, digital realm as an “extraordinary medium for social movements and rebellious individuals to build their autonomy and confront the institutions of society in their own terms and around their own projects”<sup>36</sup>. However, the bloggers of tiny minorities, writing in isolation, would probably have very little impact on public discourse. It is only through the power of Social Media Networks that Baha’i bloggers see their impact.

In the world of Social Media Networks, individuals who have no particular power in public discourse in the real world, or no particularly influential social or economic power, can become leading bloggers and opinion-makers, at least within their own communities, if not in the culture at large. Blogs can also be seen as a way of articulating history for subordinated groups, which had no official guardian since the National Spiritual Assembly was abolished in 1960. Baha’is in Egypt have therefore been deprived, for decades, of their place (however tiny) in the Egyptian national narrative. As one blogger wrote, the younger generation knows very little about the community’s history, and his only knowledge comes from “stories told to me by adults since I was young”<sup>37</sup>. To be able to blog about their histories, to post photos and videos, and have those links shared among a community of interested coreligionists, is of substantial importance in understanding how a community as small as the Baha’is might come together to articulate their interests against a powerful state and a hostile society.

The growth of Baha’i blogging in Egypt coincided with the battle over national ID cards in 2006. This is not accidental. In fact it would appear that some were started explicitly to take part in the debate over that issue. The English-language blog *Baha’i Faith in Egypt* devoted its second post to a recap of the controversy. As the author noted,

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<sup>33</sup> “Introduction.” Wijhat Nathar Ukhra. August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2006.

[http://fromdifferentangle.blogspot.com/2006\\_08\\_01\\_archive.html](http://fromdifferentangle.blogspot.com/2006_08_01_archive.html)

<sup>34</sup> Castells, Manuel. *The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture Vol. 2: The Power of Identity*. P. 6.

<sup>35</sup> Castells, Manuel. “Communication, Power and Counter-Power in the Network Society.” *International Journal of Communication* 1 (2007), 238-266. p. 248.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 249.

<sup>37</sup> “The Radwan Holiday in Egypt.” *Egyptian Baha’i*. April 28<sup>th</sup>, 2008.

[http://egyptianbahai.wordpress.com/2008/04/28/ridwan\\_in\\_egyp/](http://egyptianbahai.wordpress.com/2008/04/28/ridwan_in_egyp/) Author’s translation.

Because of this recently instituted computerized national ID system in Egypt, followers of the Baha'i Faith are deprived of their basic human rights, including admission to universities, obtaining birth and death certificates, marriage certificates, driver's licenses, purchasing property, obtaining public health care, employment, obtaining social services, pension and inheritance, travel documents, etc....<sup>38</sup>

However, as valuable as these web spheres may be to Baha'is in Egypt and abroad in and of themselves, it is only when claims-makers are able to transmit their claims to national and international audiences that popular attention is turned to their plight. It is also true, as Maratea argues, that high-profile public events can focus attention on claims-makers. It appears that this was the case with the April 2009 home-burnings in Upper Egypt, an event that brought international condemnation and re-focused attention on the somewhat obscure and difficult to transmit effort on behalf of the Baha'is to allow them to leave their ID cards blank for religious affiliation.

Consistent with contemporary expectations of networks outlined by Barabasi<sup>39</sup>, Shirky<sup>40</sup>, and others, there is a handful of influential and well-known Baha'i blogs, as well as a small number of activist-bloggers known to be supportive of Baha'i causes in Egypt. The distribution of readers for these sites appears to conform to the expectations of network theory outlined above. These Baha'i blogger-activists include "Living in Egypt Without ID"; Egyptian Baha'i, *Wijhat Nathar Ukhra*, the Baha'i blog ring and others. It is primarily material drawn from these sources that will be used to develop theory about the place of subordinated minority bloggers in Egypt.

A small elite of Egyptian power bloggers has an outsized influence in Egyptian politics due to their access to traditional journalist elites. It does not appear as though the Baha'i bloggers have this same kind of influence, because of their much more marginal position in Egyptian society than even the most secular and pro-Western bloggers. But what does seem clear is that the Baha'i bloggers have influence in, or at least the ears of, the Egyptian power bloggers, and thus second-order access to the Egyptian journalist elite. Unquestionably the most important of those supporters is Nora Younis. As if to underscore the importance of these elite bloggers to the Baha'i cause, when Younis was awarded the 2008 Human Rights Award by Human Rights First, the award specifically mentioned her advocacy for the Baha'is. The blog Egyptian Baha'i made special mention of Younis and her efforts on their behalf<sup>41</sup>. Her work for Baha'is has not been lost on traditional media practitioners, either. *Al-Masry Al-Youm* Deputy Editor Ehab El-Zalaky told me:

there is no coverage or negative coverage for this case in the traditional media...some independent TV stations, but no one knows exactly what this thing is about, no one knows exactly

<sup>38</sup> "Egyptian Bah'ais and ID cards." *Baha'i Faith in Egypt*. June 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2006. <http://www.bahai-egypt.org/search?updated-max=2006-07-09T19%3A01%3A00-05%3A00&max-results=50>

<sup>39</sup> Barabási, Albert-László. *Linked: How Everything Is Connected To Everything Else*. New York: Penguin Books, 2002.

<sup>40</sup> Shirky, Clay. *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations*. 2008.

<sup>41</sup> "[http://egyptianbahai.wordpress.com/2008/10/30/the\\_beautifu/2969734075\\_d676420219/](http://egyptianbahai.wordpress.com/2008/10/30/the_beautifu/2969734075_d676420219/).

what the Baha'i people are. Some Baha'i blogs appeared on the Internet, wrote about their religion, their faith and their right to choose their religio. This is the first time you can find this kind of expression of views in the Egyptian media at all, and on the other hand, many many of the bloggers are making a campaign to support the Baha'i demands, and they have designed logos to put on the blogs and in some cases they are attending some proceedings....like publishing photographs of the stands (protests) to support the Baha'is (which were) led by the bloggers, and ... by a very famous blogger, Nora Younis....<sup>42</sup>

Younis and El-Zelaky know each other personally, and El-Zelaky's newspaper, *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, has provided some of the most extensive coverage of the Baha'i issue in the Egyptian press, notably sending a reporter to Washington, D.C. to interview American Baha'is, who were at the time exerting pressure on the Egyptian government to implement an administrative court ruling that the Baha'is had the right not to register as Muslim on their ID cards. The article reported an interview with one of those leaders:

Kit Bigelow, director of external affairs, National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States, said that Baha'is only demand the government to allow them to have IDs as other Egyptian citizens. She hoped that the government would execute the verdict so that they can practice their life affairs normally.

She added that no Baha'i so far was able to get an ID, unless he pretends to embrace either Islam or Christianity. She stressed that Baha'is would be grateful if the government would strike through the field of religion, leave it vacant, register their real faith, or write 'other' in that field.<sup>43</sup>

Nora Younis was not the only Egyptian "power blogger" to take up the cause of the Baha'is – nearly the entire core of the early blogging movement that drew so much international attention – The Sandmonkey, Manal and Alaa, Amr Gharbeia, all posted sympathetic pieces at one point or another about the Baha'is, with many clustered around the court decision in 2006. On December 17<sup>th</sup>, 2006, the Sandmonkey related the story of a Baha'i man who had to go through a terrible ordeal to get his recently-deceased wife buried. He lamented, "Stories like this one are not the exception when it comes to what the Baha'is go through on a day to day basis, and things will only get worse for them as time goes by."<sup>44</sup> Manal and Alaa posted a link to the protest event including the image below<sup>45</sup>. They also posted a lament in 2008 entitled "Yes, they will f—k your sister"

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<sup>42</sup> Interview with Ehab El-Zalaky, Cairo, Egypt, April 11<sup>th</sup>, 2008.

<sup>43</sup> Az Ad-Deen, Akhmed. "Leaders of American Baha'is demand the implementation of administrative court ruling on ID cards...and estimate the number of Baha'is in Egypt at 2000." *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, August 21<sup>st</sup>, 2008. Author's translation.

<sup>44</sup> "Today's Baha'i Protest." Rantings of a Sandmonkey. December 17<sup>th</sup>, 2006.

<http://www.sandmonkey.org/2006/12/17/todays-bahai-protest/>

<sup>45</sup> <http://www.manalaa.net/node/84324>

which linked a negative ruling on the Baha'i ID file with the imprisonment of Kareem Amr and the general atmosphere of oppression in Egypt at the time<sup>46</sup>. (It should be noted Alaa later posted a lament about the focus on minority rights in the blogging community when the majority was suffering so much as well. As he asked, "Why defend the minorities if we can't defend the majority?"<sup>47</sup>). Amr Gharbeia posted a poll asking readers "What should we do after the court prevented the Baha'is from providing their religion on ID cards?"<sup>48</sup> Issandr El-Amrani of *The Arabist* also added a post about the ruling, on December 17<sup>th</sup>, 2006, arguing wearily, "It's sad to see such a confluence of bigotry and Gestapo mentality: the sheikhs cling onto some abstract idea of what's a religion or not, while the security types are too attached to their system and too obsessed with religion to change the system"<sup>49</sup>. Hossam El-Hamalawy also devoted countless posts to their battle over the ID cards. Before a pivotal court decision in December 2006, El-Hamalawy posted a call to action in front of the courthouse. El-Hamalawy's call to action included the visual frame posted below, which appeared on a number of blogs and electronic Web sites:

### **Figure 5.0: Call to action prior to court decision, December 2006.**

In one particularly well-known incident, El-Hamalawy, together with Younis and other popular bloggers, attended the court ruling, expecting bad news, and held a silent protest outside the building after the court ruled against the Baha'is (they would later win on appeal). Sherif Abdel-Aziz of the *Justice For All* blog, in a lengthy post on the day's events, corrected a number of errors in *Al-Masry Al-Youm*'s coverage of the event.<sup>50</sup> The newspaper falsely identified the protestors as Baha'is themselves (none of the four bloggers demonstrating in sympathy was Baha'i) and specifically argued that Nora Younis herself was a Baha'i. Such mistakes lent credence to the view that no one outside the Baha'i community particularly cared one way or the other about the outcome of the court case itself. El-Hamalawy and Abdel-Aziz both noted wryly the presence of protesters for the other side, who they presumed were Islamists, cheering when the verdict was read and treating it as a victory for God. Much as in Younis's account of the Sudanese refugee massacre in December 2006 (just weeks away at the time of this incident), the bloggers themselves offered equally caustic indictments of the behavior of bystanders and passers-by as they did of the state itself. El-Hamalawy detailed what he saw as one person's particularly egregious behavior:

Another veiled woman, joined in the chanting. "God's religion is Islam! Bahaai's are infidels! They are infidels! Allahu Akbar!" The woman then knelt and kissed the floor. She then stood up, and continued her hysterical outcry outside

<sup>46</sup> [http://www.manalaa.net/the\\_heathen\\_and\\_your\\_sister](http://www.manalaa.net/the_heathen_and_your_sister).

<sup>47</sup> [http://www.manalaa.net/where\\_where\\_you\\_when\\_france](http://www.manalaa.net/where_where_you_when_france)

<sup>48</sup> "Ni'mil eih fi-l-baha'iyyin ba'd ma mana'athum al-mahkama min ithbat dinahum fi al-'awraq al-thubutiyya?" *Gharbeia.net*. December 17<sup>th</sup>, 2006. <http://gharbeia.net/node/179>. .

<sup>49</sup> "Court denies Ba'hais legal recognition." *The Arabist*. December 17<sup>th</sup>, 2009. <http://arabist.net/archives/2006/12/16/court-denies-bahais-legal-recognition/>

<sup>50</sup> El-Zelaky himself later admitted that there were errors in the coverage of his paper, but argued his reporters were doing their best. Interview with Ehab El-Zelaky, Cairo, Egypt. April 19<sup>th</sup>, 2008.

the court room in the corridor. “Bahai’s are the cause of problems in Iraq! They also destroyed Lebanon!!” she kept on screaming. I had no clue what the heck she was talking about, and did not know if I should laugh or cry. It was pure bigotry. “They are germs in our society!”<sup>51</sup>

While the solidarity actions of these bloggers almost certainly represented a tiny minority within mainstream Egyptian public opinion on the issue of Baha’is in Egypt, their protest garnered press attention and helped introduce, as Maratea would argue, new claims-makers into Egyptian politics, even if the immediate effect is to scorn those claims-makers and their supporters as outside the political and social consensus of society. Maratea’s expectations about claims-makers, together with Drezner and Farrell’s insights about the journalistic impact of powerful bloggers<sup>52</sup>, seem to come together in this particular instance – elite bloggers, many with strong connections inside the world of mainstream journalism, are able to help introduce the claims of minority bloggers to a wider audience. International journalists have followed the Baha’is’ cause with interest, and wrote positive articles when they finally won their court case in March of 2009. *The Guardian*’s Brian Whitaker called the ruling “a small but important step toward freedom of belief and equal right.”<sup>53</sup> Liam Stack, writing for the *Christian Science Monitor*, wrote a piece entitled “Egyptians win right to drop religion from ID cards.” (Stack, a personal friend, lived in Egypt for years and has extensive ties with the Egyptian activist network)<sup>54</sup>. *The New York Times*’ Michael Slackman argued that the case represented “hints of pluralism” in Egypt and quoted the lawyer who submitted the case for the Baha’is<sup>55</sup>. However, as Maratea notes, it may also take a particularly spectacular event, such as the 2009 burning of Baha’i homes in Upper Egypt, to create a kind of “focal point” that draws international attention to the plight of the Baha’is, in spite of the best efforts of SMN activists inside and outside of the country.

**Figure 5.1: Nora Younis (left) holds enlarged copies of a Baha’i ID card in protest against an Administrative Court ruling upholding the government’s right to deny cards to Baha’is who refuse to select Islam, Christianity or Judaism as their religion. December 16<sup>th</sup>, 2006.**

The reactions of observers in the courtroom suggest that Bahai’s have not, in Egyptian political and social discourse, achieved the kind of “authentic space of human existence” provided by the existence of a literary or political public sphere. Denied access to normal life in a political system whose channels for participation are already limited, Baha’is are easily demonized and Othered by accusations of heresy by Muslims. In Egypt, Islamist researchers have charged that Baha’ism is a “Zionist movement aiming to spread

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<sup>51</sup> El-Hamalawy, Hossam. “Bigotry and sectarianism par excellence.” 3Arabawy. December 16<sup>th</sup>, 2006. <http://arabist.net/arabawy/2006/12/16/anti-bahaais-bigotry-and-sectarianism/>

<sup>52</sup> Drezner, Daniel and Henry Farrell. “The Power and Politics of Blogs.” *Public Choice* 134 (January 2008): 15-30.

<sup>53</sup> Whitaker, Brian. “Egypt’s step toward freedom of belief.” *The Guardian*. March 17<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

<sup>54</sup> Stack, Liam. “Egyptians win right to drop religion from ID cards” *Christian Science Monitor*, April 20<sup>th</sup>, 2009. P.

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<sup>55</sup> Slackman, Michael. “Hints of Pluralism Begin to Appear in Egyptian Religious Debates.” *The New York Times*. August 31<sup>st</sup>, 2009. P. 6.

corruption and immorality”<sup>56</sup>. The use of the common trope that Baha’is serve Zionist goals, from the pen of the late Sheikh of Azhar, Dr Mohamed Sayed Tantawi, is a staple of anti-Baha’i discourse from Egypt to Iran, where the group is even more persecuted. By lumping them together with Zionists, Baha’i detractors are able to dehumanize them. This is not to say, of course, that Baha’is don’t have their defenders in the media. As Ahmed Abd El-Mu’ti, writing in *Al-Masry Al-Youm* about a draft law that would have essentially criminalized Baha’ism, called it “an assault on the constitution and an attack on Egypt’s reputation”<sup>57</sup>.

**Figure 5.2: An Egyptian national ID card with a “blank” for religion. Courtesy of Egyptian Baha’i.**

Whatever the cause, it is unquestionable that the issue of the Baha’is has become part of serious public discourse in Egypt. This can be seen simply from the chart below, which tracks the number of stories in the Egyptian press about Baha’is.

2005: 6

2006: 92

2007: 47

2008: 92

2009: 536

It can also be seen in the evolution of public discourse on the issue. In 2005, for instance, one of the few mentions of the Baha’is was in *Rose Al-Yousef*, which derided opposition candidate Ayman Nour as “Ghazil al-Baha’iyeen, al-Aqbat, , al-Sa’ayda” (The courter of Baha’is, Copts, and people from southern Egypt)<sup>58</sup>.

Some of this uptick in stories is due of course to a proliferation of media outlets, but even that explanation cannot account for the massive increase in media attention to Baha’i issues. By 2009 the Baha’is had a number of supporters in the press, who wrote frequently for liberal outlets such as *Al-Masry Al-Youm* and *El-Badeel*. In 2009, indeed, two of Egypt’s power bloggers were in fact working for *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, giving the Baha’is two prominent voices inside the newsroom of the most powerful and influential opposition newspaper in Egypt. Such independent media outlets are of particular importance, since government press outlets still frequently feature attacks on Baha’is. The most frequent argument is that Baha’is are “enemies of Islam” and that focusing on their plight distracts from other, more important tasks for the Egyptian state<sup>59</sup>. Other state outlets frequently lump Baha’is in with “apostates of Islam” during attacks on the West

<sup>56</sup> “Majma‘ al-buhuth al-islamiyya: al-baha’iya haraka suhyuniyya tas‘a li-nashr al-fasad wa-l-radhila” *Al Masry Al-Youm*, May 30<sup>th</sup>, 2009. <http://www.almasry-alyoum.com/article2.aspx?ArticleID=213030>

<sup>57</sup> “Ahmed ‘Abd al-Mu’ti yaktub: mushkilatuna ma’a al-usuliyin.” *Al-Masry Al-Youm*. May 7<sup>th</sup>, 2009. <http://www.almasry-alyoum.com/article2.aspx?ArticleID=210026>

<sup>58</sup> Basha, Ahmed. “Ghazil al-Baha’iyin, al-Aqbat, wa al-Sa’idi. Ayman Nour: Shoo?” *Rose Al-Yousef*, September 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2005. p.27.

<sup>59</sup> Abdal Rahim, Gemal. “Ayn al-qanun salamat al-ghatha’a?” *Al-Gumhuriyya*. October 6<sup>th</sup>, 2009. P.16..

or Zionism<sup>60</sup>, or with advocacy groups abroad including, for example, activists among the Coptic Christian community in the United States. While there are at most a few thousand Baha'is in Egypt, there are many more in the United States, with their own lobbying arm in Washington D.C. Other religious NGOs, as well the government-financed U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, have appealed to U.S. President Barack Obama to raise the issue of human rights for Baha'is and Coptic Christians<sup>61</sup>. The work of such groups serves to amplify the domestic claims of local actors, and to increase the carrying capacity of the Egyptian public sphere.

### *Conclusions*

The case of the Baha'i identity cards is about private, dispersed, and marginalized citizens in Egypt coming together to protest state interference in their most personal matters – property laws, employment, and marriage in particular. Thus the public spheres of bloggers become both literary, in their provision of access to the interiority of subordinated groups, and political, in lending the individuals in those groups the ability to critically comment on the affairs of the day, to contest the passage of laws and the injustice of existing laws, and to agitate for better conditions and treatment. We can only speculate about the long-term effects of these processes, but what is clear is that the technologies themselves offer marginalized groups channels of expression and that the state is unlikely to be able to completely shut them down. In part this is because the development of mobile networking technologies means that there are multiple channels of access to the Web itself, making it more difficult for authoritarian states to interfere with the development of these public spheres. These technologies “bypass political or business control of communication” and create “autonomous processes of social and political mobilization that do not rely on formal politics....” (Castells et. al. 2007, 209)<sup>62</sup>. This is particularly important in places such as Egypt, where formal politics offer limited or non-existent channels of participation in public life.

The preceding evidence can be divided into two types: evidence of community-building, frame-alignment and identity-formation at the group level, and evidence of SMN-led information transmission. The former process fits well with existing understanding in the literature about the way the Internet is used as a discursive arena for groups seeking to contest hegemonies. In nearly every case, it is ultimately the networked access to the Egyptian and international public spheres that explains any impact by the electronic public spheres of subordinated Egyptian minorities. I do not seek to contest arguments about the importance of identity-creation in virtual counterpublics, nor about the value of discursive spaces free of oppression by majority groups or state or corporate entities. Such spaces, should they be accessible to more individuals, could be crucial sites of resistance to state policies. The Baha'i case does, however, lead us to make an argument about the relative importance of discursive arenas versus networked access to the broader public sphere. The observations in this chapter also lend further credence to the ideas of network theorists such as Clay Shirky, who argue that the Internet is organized according to power laws, and that a small number of Web sites (and thus the owners of those Web

<sup>60</sup> See for instance Abd al-Rahim, Gamal. “Shahidat al-hijab fi duwal al-irhab”. *Al-Gumhuriya*. July 7<sup>th</sup>, 2009. P. 14.

<sup>61</sup> “al-Hurriyat al-Diniya al-Amrikiya tutaalib Obama bi itharat qadaaya al-Aqbaat wa-l-Bahaa’iyin.” *Al Masry Al-Youm*, August 13<sup>th</sup>, 2009. <http://www.almasry-alyoum.com/article2.aspx?ArticleID=222433>

<sup>62</sup> Castells, Manuel, et al. *Mobile Communication and Society: A Global Perspective*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007. P. 209.

sites and their content) acquire an enormous amount of power and prestige. This is true not just for Egypt's "power bloggers", whose migration to new sites and platforms can cause hundreds or even thousands of others to do the same (on their telling), but on a smaller level as well. Egyptian Baha'i, for instance, tends to accumulate dozens or even more than 100 comments on a single blog post – a level of commenting that rivals even the most well-read and commented-upon blogs in the United States – while most other Baha'i bloggers are lucky to get a comment or two every time they publish new work.

Consistent with expectations of the "long tail" curve, the choices are not strictly many comments versus zero, as some blogs in the middle often post 10 to 15 comments on certain entries, suggesting a small, if stable readership. *Wijhat Nathar Ukhra*, for instance, is one of these blogs (although it should be noted that her blog is composed from Chicago, Illinois). *Shabab Baha'i* occasionally gets in excess of 10 comments, though the majority of the posts on the site receive zero comments. This might be because Shebab Baha'i, like many personal blogs in the Arab world, intersperses political discussion with other topics and ideas, including poetry. This lack of posting stability can make it hard to attract and maintain readership in an information-rich environment. The English-language blog "Baha'iFaith in Egypt", for instance, despite quite literate and informative posts, rarely garners more than a handful of comments. In fact, frequently the site gets the dreaded "zero comments" identified by Lovink<sup>63</sup>. The posts of Egyptian Baha'i are thus a kind of focal point for the global community of Baha'i writers and activists interested in the plight of the Baha'i community in Egypt. Network theory would have us believe that this is largely due to the advantage of first-movership, but the profiles in this dissertation also suggest that one overarching reason for the power of certain blogger-activists is their position in the larger community of Egyptian journalists and international human rights networks.

However, the participation of Egyptian power bloggers in the Baha'i cause should give further support to their critical role in the Egyptian blogosphere in general, and in the promotion of human rights and rule-of-law issues in particular. The Baha'i bloggers, while they recognize the importance of their virtual counterpublics in and of themselves, also see the importance that the power bloggers and their SMNs played in the ID cards case. As *Wijhat Nathar Ukhra* wrote, "I believe that simply calling for this support was an important event in the crystallization of the role played by Egyptian bloggers in the electronic expression of opinions"<sup>64</sup>. She also explicitly mentioned reports published by the Arab Network For Human Rights Information, which underscores the importance of information transmission and networking between Cairo-based human rights organizations and individual bloggers.

In some ways, the evidence lends credence to the "fire alarm" theory advanced by Hindman<sup>65</sup>. Hindman argues that blogs facilitate the creation of ad hoc coalitions when something in the public sphere goes wrong – when public officials or respected members of the public sphere violate the public trust in some grave way, or when it appears as though the legitimate interests of the public at large or a small public will be violated. In

<sup>63</sup> Lovink, Geert. *Zero Comments: Blogging and Critical Internet Culture*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2008.

<sup>64</sup> "Egyptian blogs and the Baha'is." *Wijhat Nathr Okhra*. December 13<sup>th</sup>, 2006.

[http://fromdifferentangle.blogspot.com/2006\\_12\\_01\\_archive.html](http://fromdifferentangle.blogspot.com/2006_12_01_archive.html). Her site does not provide stable URL links to each blog entry.

<sup>65</sup> Hindman, 2008.

both the cases of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Baha'is, coalitions were mobilized not around the ordinary abuse of power, but around what appeared to be extraordinary violations of rights and a breach of the day-to-day power configurations of Egyptian authoritarianism. Bloggers and electronic media sites were crucial information gathering and sharing hubs for both local and international journalists. This is what is so remarkable about the legal victory of the Baha'is – there is almost no organized constituency for Baha'i rights in Egypt, nor would one expect the interests of one tiny minority to be adequately represented in such a repressive state. Nevertheless, the sustained online attention which the plight of Baha'is appears to have won led directly to the kind of local and global press attention that made it difficult for the Egyptian regime to countenance the continued violation of Baha'i rights.

It is not that digital media *necessarily* have a democratizing effect in authoritarian countries. The quantitative evidence linking the Internet with democratization is spotty at best<sup>66</sup>. Rather, under certain circumstances, digital media can serve as tools in the repertoire of dissidents. They also create alternative public spheres. These alternative public spheres function through the empowerment of individuals whose ability to express themselves and participate in politics is severely limited in other ways. As Al-Saggaf writes: “The Internet not only allows people to discuss and debate issues of utmost importance to them, it also makes them authors of media content rather than a passive audience”<sup>67</sup>. Regardless of whether such places qualify as Habermasian public spheres in the strict sense, they certainly operate as focal points for dissent and allow individuals – particularly those from repressed minorities such as Baha'is, Coptic Christians, or others – to articulate their needs, desires, and dreams.

Of course, even recognizing the importance of blogs in the ID card case, we run into problems of establishing cause and effect. There is no way to quantify the effect of Baha'i blogging on the way the ID card court case wound its way through the court system. We must be careful to recognize the efforts of the actual participants in these cases, the lawyers risking careers and safety to bring them to court, and the judges whose verdicts challenge and constrain state power, as Rutherford argues<sup>68</sup>. This article does not attempt to attribute direct or even indirect causality to the efforts of electronic activists, but merely to highlight their potential importance in identity-building, publicity, and organizing. Digital activism, as the April 6<sup>th</sup> Youth Movement found out the hard way, is not a substitute for on-the-ground organizing. And even if we see an uptick in attention to these issues in the Egyptian or international press, we can't say for sure that it is due to the efforts of Baha'i bloggers, or to the effects of elite blogger agitation through SMNs. What this project can do, however, is build on theorizing in places with better available data on social networking, such as the United States, and build on the data that has been

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<sup>66</sup> See for example: Wheeler, Deborah L. *The Internet in the Middle East: Global Expectations and Local Imaginations in Kuwait*. Albany, NY: State University Press of New York, 2006; Calfano, Brian Robert and Emile Sahlieyeh. “Transmitting Reform? Assessing New Media Influence on Political Rights in the Middle East.” *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 17/1 (spring 2008): 63-77; Hofheinz, Albrecht. “The Internet in the Arab World: Playground for Political Liberalization.” *Internationale Politik und Gesellschaft*. (March 2005): 78-96

<sup>67</sup> Al-Saggaf, 2006, 312.

<sup>68</sup> Rutherford, Bruce K. *Egypt After Mubarak: Liberalism, Islam, and Democracy in the Arab World*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008.

presented – the fact that Egyptian journalists do appear to read blogs, that they report stories that first appear on the blogs, and that the same small handful of bloggers is cited again and again in interviews for this project. In so doing, we can estimate more precisely the kinds of authoritarian contexts that are likely to see an impact from blogging, and what contexts are likely to see bloggers writing in vain, or having their activities restricted to identity-building and forming counterpublics. The arguments presented in this article further support the theory that it is the presence of independent media outlets in authoritarian, low-connectivity countries that facilitates the transmission of claims from Social Media Networks.

### *Coda*

Wael Abbas, the internationally-recognized Egyptian blogger and citizen journalist, told me that “We are recording history so that in the future no one will dare to lie about it”. Abbas says that Egyptian media (and Arab media generally) have a long tradition of deceiving citizens about the true nature of news events and social and political developments. He cites the Egyptian media’s cover-up of the country’s devastating loss to Israel in the 1967 War – the way that press organs cooperated with the Nasser regime to downplay the Air Force and Army’s terrible losses. While it cannot be said that regimes have lost all control over information control, one of the lessons of the Baha’i ID card case is that SMNs greatly complicate the efforts of authoritarian regimes to craft and control narratives about politics. And anything with the potential to undermine authoritarian control over narratives should be recognized as a potentially revolutionary tool. In short, the regime can no longer argue that up is down and down is up – or rather it still can, but savvy information-seekers will be able to see through the lies.

But of course, Abbas himself has come under great scrutiny from the regime. On December 16<sup>th</sup>, 2009, Wael Abbas was sentenced, in absentia, to six years in prison, for sedition. Abbas, whose home was ransacked while he was at a conference in Beirut, decided not to return to Egypt for fear of his personal safety. His “arrest” and prosecution are chilling harbingers of things to come for online activists in Egypt, who have long operated in a legal and institutional gray zone. Abbas has been Twittering and Facebooking his ordeal ever since it began. The Abbas case suggests that the Egyptian government may no longer be satisfied with piecemeal harassment and imprisonment of its activists, but may rather be moving toward a more long-term strategy of ending online politics as an avenue of dissent altogether, perhaps in anticipation of what could be a tumultuous presidential election period in 2011. It also answers a puzzle that has only grown more difficult since online activism took off in 2005 – why, since many SMN activists operate so openly in Egypt, has the state not cracked down more brutally on them? Perhaps the state feared the mid-decade interest of the U.S. administration in regional democratic development and feared a backlash, and perhaps now calculates that the United States can’t spare the diplomatic capital to make an international incident out of the plight of a single blogger. But if Abbas is allowed to be driven from public Egyptian life, it will likely discourage others of similar beliefs and intentions from taking part in citizen journalism, and deprive the Egyptian public sphere of one of its most vibrant and courageous voices. The fact that the regime has so far succeeded in this endeavor suggests once again that institutional features of authoritarianism are every bit as important as the structural features of digital activism in understanding the impact of

these activities and predicting their future trajectories. We should be careful, then, about making recommendations to such practitioners, whose lives or personal safety are likely to be placed accordingly in jeopardy. If the state is willing to repress as well-known a figure as Abbas, it might be even more willing to strike back at digital activists using Social Media Networks to agitate for minority rights.

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