

Revolutionary Media on a Budget: Facebook-only Social Journalism

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Abstract

The latest wave of revolutions that has swept the Arab world and Egypt has given rise to new forms of citizen journalism that have met the pressing need for instantaneous updates on protests as well as filled the gap left by traditional news agencies targeted by oppressive regimes. This form of citizen media is characterized by using amateur yet innovative forms of journalism. It operates on a low budget and utilizes social media as a platform and network builder. This paper analyzes this phenomenon by examining the case of the Facebook-launched Rassd News Network in Egypt, a citizen journalist network that had the largest audience base during the Egyptian revolution of 2011. The paper conducts a qualitative textual analysis of the discourse utilized by Rassd during the onset of the revolution guided by Gamson's collective action frames. It also discusses the reasons behind the network's success as well as the challenges that such initiatives face, including their ability to survive competition with bigger, wealthier, and more credible news agencies.

Introduction

In a time when people check their social media websites more than their emails or local newspapers, journalism has started to take on a more personalized form, sometimes referred to as social journalism. With more news agencies moving online, Internet users are overwhelmed daily with information and are hence in need of news filtering and personalization. The social media website Facebook provides users with the opportunity to share articles, audio, and video with their friends. This act of sharing is not simply the dissemination of content but also adds a personal weight to the shared content. Thus this content is branded as "recommended," although not "credible" as there is no clear or "legitimate" gatekeeping process for content production and information sharing (Kang 2010, 7). In keeping with this trend, many news outlets have recently created Facebook fronts to post instantaneous news feeds to their subscribers on Facebook and Twitter. These feeds save subscribers the effort of having to browse several websites in search of news, and at the same time they bring more traffic to news outlet websites. Other original attempts include Facebook-only news organizations run by amateur citizen journalists. These citizen journalists start off without an independent website and rely only on their Facebook network to disseminate news.

An example of this phenomenon is the Rassd News Network (RNN), a new kind of non-profit news agency based entirely on citizen journalism hosted on a Facebook page.¹ It was created with the goal of covering the Egyptian uprising and Arab Spring in what agency founders described as a professional and timely manner. According to Media Source, the UAE-based supplier of media data on North Africa and the Middle East, Rassd was rated the number one source of media influence in Egypt on June 13, 2011. Since then, it has been trading places with the more traditional news organization *Al Masry Al Youm* (Sociable Media 2011), an independent newspaper with online editions. Although one can say that Rassd has been very successful in covering the critical events of the revolution—given the large number of subscribers to the network—the question raised is whether these forms of amateur social journalism will be able to survive in a world of big media. Furthermore, will these citizen journalist news networks, given their limited resources and lack of organizational structure, only serve the pressing demands of certain transitional periods?

Theoretical Context

Social Media and Democratization

With the advent of social media websites, many have celebrated the new possibilities technology affords to the social and political polis. Some of these celebratory accounts are characterized by a utopian optimism whereby social media is viewed as a vehicle to digital democracy. Some scholars argue that this new generation of communication technologies has inherently democratic capacities (Loader and Mercea 2011, 759). Benkler (2010) regards the Internet's social production as a revolutionizing and democratizing force in societies. The argument contends that citizens are able to challenge the state and corporate monopoly of the production and dissemination of media content through a citizen-centered perspective on media production. Additionally, the openness of social media platforms allows for collaboration on a large scale by challenging discourses and publishing citizen opinions (759).

Others hold a more pessimistic view. For example, McChesney (1998), in his book *Rich Media, Poor Democracy*, predicts that the media monopoly existent in traditional media will soon be transferred to the web, writing that “corporate dominance and commercialization of the Internet have become the undebated, undebatable and thoroughly internalized truths of our cyber times” (136). Nonetheless, McChesney (2007) also acknowledges in his later book *Communication Revolution* that “we are in the midst of a communication and information revolution” (3) and that “no previous communication revolution has held the promise of

¹ Rassd currently runs a dedicated website (<http://www.rassd.com/>) but this study is dedicated to the analysis of its initial Facebook page (<https://www.Facebook.com/RNN.NEWS>).

allowing us to radically transcend the structural communication limitations for effective self-government and human happiness that have existed throughout human history” (5).

Loader and Mercea (2011) suggest it may be more appropriate to adopt a co-construction model that does not overlook the democratic influence of social media and recognizes the complexities of socio-cultural factors (760). A similar approach is adopted by Ameripour et al. (2010) who consider Internet social networks “through the ‘lens’ of conviviality” (how well the technology reinforces the community as well as individual freedom) and posit that Internet technologies cannot be viewed as an independent variable with deterministic effects on society in isolation of economic and political factors (245). For example, they argue that it is problematic to attribute the success of Iranian Internet campaigns to technology alone as they co-exist with other forms of activism including face-to-face communication (Ameripour et al. 2010, 256).

Social Media and the Digital Divide

The impact of social media on society has recently been the subject of a heated and open debate. McChesney and Nichols (2010) argue that putting Internet journalism in the driver’s seat would be “writing off the roughly 40 percent of the population that does not have an Internet connection” (82). They contend that unless there is a rapid transition to ubiquitous broadband connection, digital media will remain “more niche than general, more elite than democratic” (82). Moreover, Fraser (1990) argues that the models for a virtual Habermasian sphere (an open and accessible public space outside state control where individuals can exchange opinions and views) still carry the problems of deliberative decision making that may privilege a style of communication favoring white wealthy males (63).

When considering the above arguments in the Egyptian context, one cannot overlook the fact that Egyptian and American societies’ governance and politics are strikingly different. The United States is a nation that has long experienced a rather mature form of democracy that may be in the decline, as some may argue, due to the media monopoly of politics (Parenti 2001). Egypt, however, survived colonization to enter into an era of authoritarianism. People were not permitted to exercise democracy even in its model forms: even in student bodies, fair elections were an unlikely possibility (Morrow and al-Omrani 2010). Habermas (1991) argued that the fundamental element of modern democratic revolutions has been the existence of an independent public sphere where citizens can meet to discuss politics relatively free from state interference. In Egypt, one can argue that new media is surging to constitute this alternative public sphere. Although the issues of the digital divide exist in both the US and Egypt, the penetration rate in Egypt has risen from 0.7 percent in 2000 to 21.1 percent in 2009 (Internet World Stats 2011). At the same time, and according to the OpenNet Initiative, “[m]ore than 200 Internet and data service providers operate in Egypt, making ADSL services among the cheapest in Africa” (2009). Furthermore,

almost a million Egyptian households have access to broadband, thanks to sharing of ADSL lines. Of these, 63.4 percent share the connection with their neighbors; 81.9 percent of households that share lines share them with more than three other households (OpenNet Initiative, 2009).

Though this might not be conclusive evidence in its own right, it may be an indication that in a society striving for democracy (and in a digital world not entirely though significantly infiltrated by the state), new media has managed to constitute a new polis. In this polis, people have a chance to manage their public and political debates that are later materialized in reality.

Citizen Journalism

Much of the research about journalism and online journalism rests on the theoretical framework of the gatekeeping theory. According to Shoemaker and Vos (2009), “gatekeepers determine what becomes a person’s social reality, a particular view of the world” (3). Recent versions of this theory view gatekeeping as a blend of both individual and organizational control (Lewis, Kaufhold and Lasorsa 2010, 165). Nonetheless, with the introduction of online technologies facilitating user-generated content, the idea of the journalist as a gatekeeper has been contested, transforming it into gate watching, or a form of “collaborative filtering” (Lewis, Kaufhold and Lasorsa 2010, 165).

Citizen journalism differs from professional online journalism in that its readers are not primarily on the receiving end of the communication spectrum but rather can participate with content that is more collaborative than editorially filtered. This is what Jay Rosen (2008) formalized in his definition of citizen journalism as “when the people formerly known as the audience employ the press tools they have in their possession to inform one another.” When attempting to determine the boundaries of citizen journalism, Goode (2009) argues that there are three areas where these boundaries can be questioned, namely: whether citizen journalism begins or ends online, the question of alterity, and what constitutes original citizen content (1288-1290). Citizen journalism does not necessarily exist online, for as Goode (2009) argues, even broadcast news can employ elements of citizen journalism such as footage from cell phones or reporting stories originally broken down by citizen journalism initiatives online (1288). Also, alterity can be relative, as citizen journalism can sometimes draw upon norms and practices of traditional media, while mainstream media can utilize elements of alterity in its reporting. Furthermore, there is an ongoing debate of what constitutes “real” citizen journalism; for example, rating, commenting, tagging or reposting are forms of “metajournalism” which according to Goode (2009) is distinct from journalism but not separate (1290-1291). He contends that the re-telling activities of metajournalism are an integral part of citizen journalism whereby “journalists themselves are filters and mediators, not merely disclosers” (Goode 2009, 1291).

In this paper, we prefer to adopt a broader conception of citizen journalism, whose main distinguishing characteristics are interactivity between users and editors (with varying degrees of richness), and reduced levels of gatekeeping on part of the news moderator.

Background

According to the website Internet World Statistics (2011), there are an estimated 20 million Internet users in Egypt with over six million Facebook users, which constitutes an eight percent penetration rate. In 2008, the Egyptian Cabinet's Information and Decision Support Center published a report entitled "Egyptian Blogs: New Social Space" which stated that:

By April 2008, the number of Egyptian blogs came to 160,000 representing 30.7% of Arab blogs, and 0.2% of international blogs. Active Egyptian blogs constitute 48.3% and the number of Egyptian bloggers is more than 162,200, most of whom are in the 20-30 age group. (2008, 3)

With the growing interest in personal blogging and citizen journalism, traditional electronic media have found it necessary to include grassroots journalism on their websites. They have realized that "bloggers could add detail, context, and personalization to the content" and that "reports authored by non journalists and not editorially supervised had a strong following" (Hamdy 2010, 6). For example, Egyptian newspapers such as *Al Masry Al Youm* and *Al Shorouk* are now dedicating a section for citizens' contributions. *Al Masry Al Youm* has provided its readers with the ability to create accounts and publish their blog posts, mobile videos, or pictures in a designated citizen section. Nevertheless, these citizen sections appear separate from the mainstream news features or articles of renowned columnists. This gives citizen journalists less exposure as Internet users usually only read the articles of well-known writers.

Social journalism is a term that has emerged from the marriage of social media websites with citizen journalism. Rising amateur news organizations entirely based on social journalism such as *Rassd* and Facebook groups such as *We Are All Khalid Said* do not segregate citizens' contributions from those of professionals. Instead of subliminally marking these contributions as "amateur," these groups push the contributions of good quality to the front by publishing them alongside their main newsfeed stream.

One can say that *Rassd* went beyond blogging to do what Ghannam (2011) describes as bridging the digital "online world with the physical world by offering community-driven quality news, online video stories, and forums for greater interactivity around timely issues" (7). This new form of social journalism is certainly changing the scene for what is known as citizen journalism by providing a prominent space for citizens' contributions. Not only that, but in the case of the Arab Spring and the events leading up to it, citizen journalism often

drove the content and discourse of mainstream media. This process occurred especially in areas where mainstream media was lacking, such as being present at and taking live pictures and videos of certain incidents. Hamdy (2009) cites several incidents where citizen journalism has driven mainstream media to cover a major story otherwise ignored. Riyaad Minty, head of social media for Al Jazeera, said of the network's coverage of the Arab Spring: "where [they could not] go live [they] had a lot of citizen media reports coming out" (Ulbricht 2011). Even MSNBC was following the English version of the Rassd News Network Facebook page during the protests (Cary 2011).

Rassd News Network (RNN)

Rassd was launched on the night before January 25, 2011 (the day the Egyptian revolution started) with the intent of covering the revolution using both its own amateur journalism as well as citizen journalism contributions. At the time, it did not have any web presence except for a Facebook group. In only three days the group amassed 400,000 Facebook likes (Escobar 2011). The team behind Rassd is composed of "four different committees; one for editing the news, another for correspondents all over Egypt, a third for multimedia such as photos and videos and the fourth for public relations, development and training. They connect through closed groups on Facebook and meet at coffee shops" (Solayman 2011).

The page soon became one of the main sources of instant protest updates via text, audio, and video, for both Egyptians and Arabs in the region at large. The group provided an aggregation of news feeds from traditional media news outlets such as Reuters, CNN, Al Jazeera, and Al Arabiya so that its readers could be updated through the page alone.

The founder and former director of the group Anas Hassan—an Egyptian engineering graduate—says that Rassd was not his team's first attempt at citizen journalism. They had previously covered the Egyptian parliamentary elections of 2010, using the motto Rakib (monitor), Sawwir (take pictures), Dawwin (record/blog)—abbreviated as Rassd (Hassan 2011a). According to Ghonim (2012), their former page "Monitoring—2010 Parliament," attracted "more than 40,000 people before the elections even started" (119).

Wael Ghonim, the Google executive who helped organize the protests and founder of the influential *We are all Khalid Said* Facebook group, recommended that Amr Al Qazzaz, one of the co-founders of Rassd, create a new Facebook page "that is a source of information not a source of analysis or bias" (Ghonim 2012, 170). Ghonim later advertised Rassd on *We are all Khaled Said*, and "recommended that people use the [Rassd page] to follow the news updates" (171).

According to Abdullah Fakharany, a co-founder of Rassd, “RNN functions on the basis of a vast network of volunteering reporters, and a small core of volunteering editorial staff. Besides RNN’s volunteering reporters, members of the public are encouraged to send in text messages, pictures and videos documenting events they witness” (Schuh 2012, para. 8). With a staff of almost 200 volunteers, Rassd checked, formatted and published the news they received (para. 8). According to Schuh, “[i]n the 18 days following January 25, Rassd received an average of 6500 reports a day and published 4,000 of them, attracting every day an average of 40,000 new followers” (2012, para. 8).

Rassd became a central point of connection between the protesters and those not able to join them in person. According to Ghonim, due to the role played by Rassd and similar pages, “many Egyptians abroad were able to follow what was going on in Tahrir Square and accurately represent the protesters’ point of view to their local media” (236).

Rassd was launched without a dedicated website; nonetheless, Facebook provided the founders with the basic tools to publish, share, receive contributions, and get public feedback all with the added benefits of a highly interconnected social network. Facebook served as the ideal platform given the group’s limited resources and time constraints. As Bowman and Willis (2003) point out, “on the Web, the barriers to entry are next to nothing. The costs associated with distributing content online are so low that anyone can join and experiment with the democratization of the media” (47). Another example of a news station entirely based in Facebook is the Rocksville news station, a community news site based in Washington D.C., which on March 1, 2011 moved its entire operations and news coverage to its Facebook page (Lavrusik, 2011a).

Zweiri and Murphy (2011) note that the format of “modern media with its ‘annihilation of space and time’ lends a sense of urgency to wartime reporting” (21). Rassd, through its powerful launch coinciding with the Egyptian revolution, managed to compete with traditional electronic media such as Egyptian newspapers *Al Shorouk*, *Al Dostour*, and *Al Masry Al Youm*. The network took on the role of powerful organizations in bringing the action and fears into the homes of viewers (Zweiri and Murphy 2011, 21) by posting the events immediately as they unfolded.

After Mubarak stepped down, Rassd continued its news coverage of post-revolution Egypt, with the number of members exceeding a million in August 2011. It managed to cover events such as the break-in of the state security offices, sectarian unrest, and most importantly, the series of demonstrations that continued in Tahrir Square throughout 2011. This paper analyses the reasons behind Rassd’s success in covering the protests of 2011 and poses the following research questions:

RQ1: What were the dominant frames utilized by Rassd’s discourse in covering the Egyptian revolution?

RQ2: What distinguished Rassd as a participatory citizen platform from other mainstream and alternative forms of media, and what were some of the challenges they faced as a non-traditional citizen news platform?

Methodology

In an attempt to answer the first research question, we conduct a qualitative textual analysis of the discourse utilized by Rassd guided by framing theory. Framing denotes the process of meaning construction in which we assign meanings to events and occurrences which function to organize our experience and guide our actions (Benford and Snow 2000, 614). In the context of news media, framing is also the means by which a news story is constructed to make certain attributes of the event more salient than others in order to present the audience with a certain pattern of cognition, Erving Goffman's famous "schemata of interpretation," through which they can make sense of the world. As Entman puts it, "framing essentially involves selection and salience." Also, a frame can promote a certain "problem definition" (Entman 1993, 52). Frames determine the relevant pieces of information that attach to a concept (Kenix 2011, 1). Moreover, framing is not a static event but rather a process of meaning construction that is derived from the need to categorize news and information and frame them in a meaningful context (Kenix 2011, 1).

Collective action frames are essentially frames that are also meant to render events meaningful but they do so in ways that are "intended to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to greater bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists." In other words, they are "action-oriented" with the goal of inspiring and legitimizing the activities and campaigns of social movements (Benford and Snow 2000, 614).

Since Rassd is a citizen journalism platform that was constructed primarily for covering the events of the Egyptian revolution, we find it suitable to utilize collective action frames as the conceptual framework for conducting our textual analysis. Benford and Snow (2000) suggest three core framing tasks:

- 1) Diagnostic framing: problem identification and focusing blame or responsibility.
 - 2) Prognostic framing: the articulation of a proposed solution to the problem.
 - 3) Motivational framing: a "call to arms" or a rationale for engaging in collective action.
- (615-617)

An alternate conception was offered by Gamson (1992), who suggested three components to collective action frames, namely: injustice, agency and identity. The injustice component places blame or responsibility on a party that caused harm or grievances to another group of people. It is what Gamson (1992) describes as a "hot cognition," or a judgment laden with emotion (7). The agency component is the consciousness that collective action can be

orchestrated to affect change. It is empowering in the sense that it describes people as agents in charge of their destiny. The third component is the identity component defining the “we” who are “in opposition to some ‘they’” (7); as Gamson (1992) argues, without this adversarial component, the cause will remain abstract, such as ending hunger or poverty; however, with a target, certain policies can be changed and actions taken (8).

We believe that the conceptions suggested by Benford and Snow (2000) and Gamson (1992) have a lot in common. Notwithstanding Gamson’s assertion that an injustice component is part of any collective action frame, which is contested by Benford and Snow (2000) as lacking empirical support, Johnston and Noakes (2005) believe the overlap is significant enough to consider the two conceptions as two sides of the same mobilization coin (6). They explain this assertion by suggesting that if the identification of responsible parties in Gamson’s schema is collapsed into the diagnosis problem while adding a requirement that the schema motivates people into action, this would make the two conceptions “almost identical” (Johnston and Noakes 2005, 6).

In order to get a better idea of the discourse utilized by Rassd during the Egyptian revolution, we analyzed Rassd’s Facebook posts and Twitter feeds guided by both Gamson’s and Benford and Snow’s collective action frames. We chose a sample in the period between January 28 (the time of its inception), and February 11 (the day Mubarak stepped down). During this period, Rassd managed to amass a rapidly expanding number of subscribers eagerly seeking updates on the protests.

Rassd’s posts fell into four categories, predominantly citizen news and aggregate news. Additionally, we observe that Rassd, as a citizen media platform constructed initially for the purpose of covering the Egyptian protests, often blurred the line between unbiased reporting and activism, which added a third type of post that was mobilizing in nature. The fourth type of post stemmed from the classic conflict between citizen and state media, in which citizen journalists discredit the accounts of state television as not reporting the complete picture.

Identity

Collective action frames were conceived to “inspire and legitimize” the activities and campaigns of social movements (Benford and Snow 2000, 614). Although Rassd was not a social movement in its own right, its activist identity was evident in both the way it was envisaged to be the main source of coverage for the protests, and its citizen coverage dedicated to the revolution. The “we” of Rassd was evident in its motto: “Media created by the audience” in which it clearly aligns itself with its audience. As important as defining the “we” in identity is defining the others or the “them.” As we analyze the posts, we discern two adversaries for Rassd during the revolution: the state’s regime and its official state media.

The identity of Rassd, the “we,” was evident in two respects: its unique citizen news content and its challenge to the official media.

Citizen News. The unique nearly exclusive citizen “scoops” distinguished Rassd’s news from mainstream news. Its citizen news was characterized by the following characteristics:

Presence: Rassd reporters were present in different Egyptian governorates, not only Cairo, and therefore their coverage was more comprehensive than most mainstream agencies which focused on Tahrir Square. This provided them with the opportunity to break news at the inception of events or publish news scoops as the news was happening. Some examples are:

Urgent | confirmed | Cairo: thousands of protesters heading to the building of the Egyptian General Intelligence Service.²

10000 protesters in Ramses street heading toward Al Orouba Palace.

Urgent | agents of state security have been spotted in different cities with machine guns and rubber bullet rifles.

In addition to citizen news and in order to provide comprehensive coverage, Rassd provided aggregate news from major news outlets covering the Egyptian revolution. They provided snapshots from Al Jazeera, cut snippets from live speeches, and covered statements from influential religious and political figures.

Agility: On January 30, the Al Jazeera Arabic office in Cairo was shut down by the authorities, their equipment confiscated, and their press credentials revoked. Before the raid on their office, one of the Al Jazeera staff installed a camera in an apartment overlooking Tahrir Square which broadcast video of the square 24/7. Nevertheless, Rassd had another advantage over mainstream news outlets, namely their ability to move among and with the protesters for closer in-depth coverage. On February 8, people expanded the Tahrir Square protests to the People’s Assembly; Rassd’s reporters were able to move along with the expanding protests publishing posts such as:

A picture in front of the People’s Assembly right now, and the protesters are chanting ‘peaceful, peaceful’ but the army wants to dismiss them while the activists are calling on the free people of Tahrir to send [support].

² For the purpose of this study, Rassd’s posts, originally in Arabic, were translated to English by the author.

Proximity: As followers of the revolution's news, Rassd's audience desired insider insights on the state of the square and the protesters' morale. Here is an example of how Rassd provided protesters' reactions to Mubarak's addresses to the nation:

Tahrir Square: Protesters reply to Mubarak's speech by holding up their shoes.

On February 10, a day before Mubarak stepped down and after one of his speeches, Rassd reported the rage of the protesters in Tahrir Square saying: "Protesters are in rage after the president's address [chanting] 'To the palace we're going, a million martyrs'."

Other posts reported the different chants or activities in the square:

Protesters chanting in the square: Everyone come down [out] of [their] houses, Mubarak will leave in his tomb.

Activists: Next Friday major squares will be occupied by protesters.

Eye witnesses / Protesters are getting ready now to confront the thugs and state security vehicles.

Watchdog: The fact that Rassd encouraged citizen submissions facilitated their acquiring near classified documents. One post included a picture of a handwritten official note and underneath it was the caption "A document confirming the involvement of the governor of Dakahlia in orchestrating protests in support of Mubarak tomorrow, Friday." Another exclusive piece of news was their posting the names and detailed information of thugs who were captured attacking the protesters in Tahrir Square with pictures of their identification cards showing their explicit relationship to the then-ruling National Democratic Party (NDP). This apparently provided proof that the state was attacking peaceful protesters as opposed to the official story denying state involvement in the killing of civilian protesters. Another news tip came from the governorate of Ismailia, where Rassd posted:

Ismailiya // confirmed // leading figures in the ministry of interior affairs are attempting a bargain with the families of martyrs who have been shot by state security officers in Ismailiya during the events of the popular uprising. They are trying to reach a settlement that would prevent the families from going to courts to try the officers involved in such crimes. The families have refused to receive money in exchange for the officers' acquittal, and said: we will not let the blood of our children go in vain and we will take revenge for their slaying.

The above examples are what distinguished Rassd as a citizen news platform, namely framing their identity as a citizen news platform with an activist agenda.

Challenging the Official Media, “Them.” Rassd differentiated itself with its recurrent challenges to state media accounts of the events, or the “them” in the identity frame. This could be a reflection of the political contestation happening on the ground between activists and the regime, whereby Rassd represented the activist side of the journalism, while the state media was Mubarak’s mouthpiece. In several posts, Rassd defied the narrative perpetuated by state TV in an attempt to discredit the official side of the story and give voice to the protesters. One tactic was comparing and contrasting the information between the two news sources. For example, underneath a picture of the square filled with more than a million protesters, Rassd commented, “We dedicate this picture of the protesters to the Egyptian TV which claims they are but hundreds.”

Sometimes this challenge was expressed as a mere opinion, other times as a frame in which Rassd was explicit in describing Egyptian TV as deceptive:

The Egyptian TV and several other private satellite channels are orchestrating a campaign of dissuasion and toxic lies on their screens to discourage the masses from participating in the million man protests in Tahrir Square downtown Cairo and the rest of the governorates. Thousands of protesters are spending the night in Tahrir Square determined and persistent in their sit-in at Tahrir Square until Mubarak and his regime step down, and they are waiting for the rest of the crowds in preparation for tomorrow’s million man protest.

In other posts, they commended employees protesting the state TV policies:

A salute to Hala Fahmy the anchor woman who resigned in protest of the Egyptian Television coverage of the 25th of January events.

Rassd also often captioned its posted photos with the caption: “Rassd uncovers the whole picture,” insinuating that official accounts obscured parts of the story.

Injustice

Gamson (1992) argues that there is an injustice component to every collective action frame. Despite the fact that Rassd was not a social movement per se, it acted as a voice for the protesters in Tahrir Square and around Egypt, delivering their news and sentiments. Many posts were dedicated to exposing the injustices inflicted by state police or thugs on the peaceful protesters, emphasizing the brutality of the police, as opposed to the peacefulness of

the protesters. For example, one of their posted photos, showed policemen lashing out at both men and women; the caption with the photo read “[t]his is how the state thugs treat our mothers, sons, brothers and sisters.” Another similar picture read: “This is how the regime reacts to peaceful demonstrations.”

On February 2, pro-Mubarak thugs attacked men and women protesters from horses and camels in what has come to be known as the “battle of the camel,” leaving 11 dead and over 600 injured (Fathi 2012, para. 2). Rassd posted a picture of a camel stepping on a protester and captioned it saying:

True Mubarak supporters // Thugs... Mobs... These are Mubarak’s people and the protectors of his regime after Al Adly’s [former head of state security] army defeat.

Agency

While most of Rassd’s posts were informational in the sample covering the escalating events of the revolution, approximately one third were mobilizing and motivational in nature. This activism can be explained in light of the roles assumed by Rassd members as citizen journalists who may have viewed themselves more as part of the events than objective bystanders. For example, Anas Hassan emphasized the activist dimension of Rassd in a symposium held by the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, saying that Rassd “remained in place through Facebook until this day to protect the gains of the Revolution.” (Hassan 2011b)

As Robinson (2012) points out, “some citizen journalists ... [reject] the traditional understanding of the press-audience dynamic in order to reposition themselves as more authoritative as journalists” (809). She adds that online citizen journalists covering Hurricane Katrina assumed new roles such as “partners, friends, children in need of guidance, villains and naïve scapegoats” (808). In many cases, Rassd provided exclusive pictures fulfilling their journalistic role and a mobilizing comment fulfilling their activist role.

On January 29, the Egyptian government imposed an Internet blockade in an attempt to thwart what it perceived as a Facebook-facilitated revolution. In response, Rassd felt their entire online existence would be compromised, so they published a post that could be classified as more activist than journalistic in nature: “To the owners of Internet companies, what you are doing is treachery to this country.”

On January 30, as the protests were escalating, Rassd posted: “Victory is but an hour’s patience, and we will be victorious people. By Allah, it’s only hours and we will be victorious.” Other posts read: “Mubarak is the pharaoh of this era,” “Oh Egyptian bring on

victory, oh, oh, with our hands we'll get over the hardship." These posts and many others not only indicate Rassd's commitment to the revolution and the demands of the protesters, but are themselves mobilizing in nature.

Despite the serious nature of Rassd's posts, which often included pictures of injured protesters or videos of police brutality, Rassd intermittently utilized entertainment posts for motivational messages. For example they posted motivational songs such as Hamza Namira's (Egyptian popular musician and singer) tribute to the Tunisian Revolution; others were humorous such as videos or photographs shot by Rassd recording comedy sketches and the creativity of the protesters in Tahrir Square in designing protest signs.

Emphasizing their loyalty to the revolution and their assumed activist role, Rassd repeatedly posted pictures of martyrs and injured protesters, assigning to their photographs the caption, "We will never forget you." On the day marking one of the biggest protests, called "Friday of Departure," Rassd reposted the picture of the protesters' demands which were written on a large piece of cloth hung over the façade of a tall building in Tahrir Square, saying: "These are the demands of the youth. Could they be any clearer? Have they come true?" This was apparently in an attempt to counter the arguments for letting Mubarak finish his then-current term. Again, in these cases, Rassd provided exclusive pictures fulfilling their journalistic role, accompanied by mobilizing comments fulfilling their activist role.

Rassd as Participatory Social Journalism

Steve Outing, in his article "The 11 Layers of Citizen Journalism," defines citizen journalism as a multi-layered form of journalism (2005). These layers vary in their degree of citizen participation or the gatekeeping function performed by the journalist, starting with allowing readers to leave user comments and progressing to deeper layers in which citizens take a more active role, partially or fully participating in creating online content (a form of crowd sourcing) with varying degrees of editors' interference. The final layer is what Outing refers to as Wiki Journalism, in which news is edited in much the same way as information is presented on Wikipedia. Bowman and Willis (2003) also share Outing's layered view of participatory journalism by the function the audience serves in creating the news and stories behind the news. In an attempt to answer the second research question, we examine Rassd according to these different layers of citizen participation. We also examine the special participatory features dictated by the new and unique occurrence of Rassd as a Facebook-only social journalism platform.

Online comments

Rassd is by definition a form of participatory journalism: their slogan reads “Media created by the audience.” Hence, the participants’ commentary is a fundamental element. Rassd posts its news on Facebook in which online commentary is a basic feature. However, the larger the number of followers, the more challenging comment moderation becomes. A news piece can be posted by Rassd and in a matter of seconds hundreds of people have already commented on that post; some pieces of news receive over a thousand comments, many of them angry. The online debate, instead of connecting people in enlightening conversation, can end up as what Trygg (2012) describes as “a shouting match” (3).

During the period of the revolution, the openness of the Facebook platform also made it possible for the state-controlled Electronic Committee (*lagna electroniyya*) to abuse the comment section in an attempt to suppress meaningful debates. These government operators undermined the credibility of news posted via personal attacks on the network or via repeated identical posts by different user accounts. This is what managing editor of the Dagens Nyheter website, Björn Hedensjo, describes as the reality of comment boxes which “have come to be exploited by a small group of people including the expression of racist views” (Trygg 2012, 9).

Benford (1993) argues that “the very existence of a social movement indicates differences within a society regarding the meanings of some aspect of reality” (as cited in Benford and Snow 2000, 626). During and after the uprising at times the sheer volume of comments on Rassd’s page, in particular inflammatory ones (occasionally in the form of a cyber-attack), was enough to mask differing views and any ensuing discussion. This is perhaps due to the extent of polarization that occurs in turbulent times, for as Diakopoulos and Naaman (2007) point out, there is an “impact of topicality on the nature of the discourse [observed] in comments,” and thus not all topics are likely to induce such reactions (3).

Benford and Snow (2000) argue that the formation and elaboration of collective action frames are “contested processes,” in which the reality advocated by the movement is constantly contested by its opponents. One form of these contests is “counter framing” by opponents, bystanders and media. The state security electronic committee is an example of opponents, whereas casual comments by Mubarak supporters could perform a bystander role. Some of the comments were more emotional than inviting of debate, dismissing Rassd as traitors and foreign agents, and other comments accused them of being promoters of chaos. For example, when Rassd posted an image of an injured protester some comments, instead of identifying with the protesters, attacked Rassd saying: “Stop provoking people! Isn’t it enough what is happening in the country?... Quiet things down if you truly love this country;” “People, by God, of this page are traitors. I do not hate Mubarak and I am for his departure but without causing chaos or a coup.”

Perhaps the popularity of Rassd as the de facto reporter of the revolution and Arab Spring worked against it when it came to commentary. However, as events settled down, fewer comments came in and consequently fewer state-sponsored attacks occurred, significantly reducing the abusive language and resulting in more meaningful discussions.

Filtering and personalization

News filtering has recently become popular among news organizations, with many moving towards creating news pages customized to readers' specific interests. Vadim Lavrusik, the Journalism Program Manager for Facebook, adds another dimension to the concept of filtering news—personalized news recommended by friends. Lavrusik says:

The Facebook News Feed is essentially a social newspaper. With it, you're able to read and discover news shared by your friends, journalists, and media organizations you like. The personalized news stream includes everything from news about your friends' lives to their reactions to a news article. It's not only what is being shared, but who is sharing it that's important. (Lavrusik 2011b)

Bowman and Willis (2003) emphasize the importance of personalization in building trust, writing that “[w]hen deciding on what news to read, the audience often trusts other audience members for recommendation before they trust an editor.” This causes the “the popularity of the ‘most-read and most-emailed stories’” (59). They argue that such forms of participatory journalism “act as a filter on the news, helping its audience cut through the fat of the news and get what's important to them” (59). Moreover, Trygg (2012) states:

When surrounded by huge amounts of information and many competing sources, media consumers tend to search for platforms that offer recognizable identities and familiar editorial brands. Consumers look for like-minded communities. (14)

The advantage of social journalism is that it builds its news base first on the social level at which like-minded people have already gathered for a common cause (Sonderman 2011). Rassd exists on the social networking websites Facebook and Twitter, where personalization is a core feature, delivering only content relevant to their users (Cronin 2009). When Rassd posts a piece of news to one of their members, that member will normally share it with his or her group of friends also on Facebook, and the news item will reach their network as a “recommended” piece of news alongside friends' personal updates.

Grassroots reporting

Since the Egyptian revolution erupted, Facebook saw a surge of first-hand accounts of the protests and the events which were recounted in Facebook user notes and videos. Popular Facebook pages such as Rassd and *We Are All Khalid Said* served as platforms for

disseminating such notes to user networks of large numbers of subscribers. These eye-witness personal reports played a major role in forming public opinion against state media propaganda. This “official” media exerted every effort to show the protesters as violent, law-breaking, and disruptive of public order, what McChesney (2007) would describe as “discredited” or “illegitimate” media content (10). Even dissident online newspapers were not attractive platforms for citizen voices, because their published stories were not likely to make it to the front page of the newspaper. These stories are instead lost in the countless number of citizen contributions to sections entitled “citizen journalism” that few readers had the time to read and check during the flood of instantaneous protest updates. As Bowman and Willis (2003) assert:

Traditionally, media companies have viewed the concept of online community no differently than a section of a newspaper... or a segment of a newscast... It is something that has been segregated from the news – a closed-off annex where readers can talk and discuss as long as the media companies do not have to be involved. Such an architected virtual space is not a true online community. (56)

On the other hand, when citizens’ contributions are published to a Facebook page dedicated to news, they only have one outlet: its news feed, or in journalistic terms, its front page. In a citizen journalism news service, contributions have a better chance at passing for publication, especially in times when the evolving events are fast paced and the need to express one’s point of view to the widest audience possible is more pressing than having one’s piece published by an elite news agency. Citizen journalism was not only attractive to citizen reporters, but also to readers. According to Idle and Nunns (2011), “[w]ith new technology the old regime has lost its control over information... People no longer had to read stifled accounts in state-run newspapers when they could go on the Internet and hear from... protesters directly through social networks” (26).

In times of political confusion, people are more inclined to believe a Facebook note written by a friend of a friend or recommended by a trusted citizen media outlet such as *Rassd* than a newspaper article whose publisher may be engaging in political advocacy. As Bowman and Willis (2003) note,

The official voice of journalism is usually formal, drained of color and attitude, and written as an objective and balanced account. In contrast, weblogs... thrive on their vivid writing... and personality-rich nature—traits that many readers find compelling.” (55)

These published citizen notes act as a form of annotative reporting, adding explanation to information otherwise unavailable in mainstream news and which is not always synonymous with accuracy (Mooney 2004, 2). User notes also gave a human touch and urgency to events being witnessed. As Comminos (2011) notes, the user-generated content (UGC) in the 2011

uprisings “often offered views and perspectives that state-run and conventional media did not offer, as well as images that no other media was there to record” (9).

Fact-checking and credibility

Pan-Arab television stations such as Al Jazeera used to be the main credible sources that people resorted to in Egypt for uncensored news. During the events of the Egyptian revolution, the state struck back by shutting down Al Jazeera’s Cairo office and persecuting their reporters while targeting journalists from other news agencies as well. Reporters such as Anderson Cooper of CNN and others from news outlets including the BBC, Fox News, the Washington Post were also targeted. This paved the way for citizen journalism to fill the void by transmitting updates of the revolution and exposing the regime’s brutality. Unlike Al Jazeera, Rassa contributors were unofficial and unidentifiable, making the network resilient in the face of strikes from the security forces. In fact, there were times when Al Jazeera showed videos originally posted on Rassa by citizens, describing them as videos circulated on the Internet. In other words, user-generated content published by Rassa “acted as a conduit for the provision of news around unfolding events not covered by, or outside the reach of the conventional media” (Comminos 2011, 9).

In regards to funding, many major citizen journalism sites such as “OhMyNews, NowPublic, Digg and even the avowedly “alternative” Guerrilla News Network, are all based on “for-profit’ business models” (Goode 2009, 1295). Rassa, on the other hand, was non-profit and did not broadcast to sell. All its reporters were volunteers or ad hoc citizen journalists (Farrag and Tolba 2011). In response to a question about Rassa’s funding, Anas Hassan said that Rassa, being a Facebook page operating with volunteers only, did not require funding; its reporters were protesters from the square who took pictures with their personal cameras and commuted using their personal cars (Hassan 2011c).

An oft-cited concern with this kind of citizen reporting is credibility. However, as York (2011) argues,

[J]ust as with any form of citizen journalism, there’s always a risk of false or incorrect information, but ... similar risks exist within traditional, mainstream media, despite more stringent fact-checking. The advantage of citizen journalism in this case, of course, might outweigh the risk: Egyptians know their country better than CNN, MSNBC, or even Al Jazeera possibly could. (para. 9)

Rassa realized early on that they would not survive the competition from traditional media outlets if they lost their credibility. Prior to endorsing their page, Ghonim told Rassa “which was an unknown source to most people,” that it “would become credible only if it showed proof together with the news reports. On Jan25, Rassa must not publish information unless its members had supporting evidence to publish with it” (Ghonim 2012, 171). Therefore, the

network devised a mechanism of labeling news either “confirmed,” “almost confirmed,” or “not confirmed,” depending on criteria such as supporting evidence or confirmation from multiple or single sources (Farrag and Tolba 2011). Wadah Khanfar, former general manager of Al Jazeera, commended the role played by citizen journalists in the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, contending that “citizen media is a hundred times more credible than state media” (Khanfar 2011).

Baudrillard (2002) argues that news outlets frame the news into a pre-packaged news narrative that does not necessarily convey reality, but rather a hyper-reality. He contends that “[e]ven revolution can take place only if there is the possibility of spectacle; what people of good will deplore is that the media has put an end to the real event” (204). The fact that the Egyptian revolution was mostly covered by amateur journalists raises the following question: does the raw footage without media framing provide us with an escape from the grip of Baudrillard’s theory of hyper-reality?

Despite the fact that citizen-produced videos were mostly raw (without commentary or editing), they nonetheless contained elements that could frame reality. An example is the context in which the video is posted, for a video can claim to belong to a certain time or space that is inaccurate and that cannot be easily verified. Also the title of the video can arguably lead the viewer to watch it with a preset bias. Another caveat of online social media is perhaps caused by the readers’ bounded rationality and finite time (Alstynne and Brynjolfsson 1997), which is the tendency to read only the titles of stories and videos without bothering to read the body of the story or watch the video content. In many instances, news outlets (including big media companies) publish sensational story headlines that are not accurate in order to attract more traffic to their websites, often leaving a reader skimming through the titles alone.

A criticism often leveled against social news networks such as *Rassd* is the lack of fact checking due to limited resources and the inability to pursue long-term investigative reporting. For example, there have been several accusations against *Rassd* for publishing inaccurate information about some parties or individuals. The Justice party, a somewhat conservative libertarian party, accused *Rassd* of publishing false accusations of its receiving illegal foreign aid (El-Adl Party 2011).

With citizen journalism, it is not only the role of the reporter that has shifted, but also the role of the reader. As the active audience paradigm suggests, audiences now are producers of meaning as they are not just reading the news passively (Goode 2009). Rather, audiences are pulled in by the social media gadgets surrounding the piece of news to discuss and collaborate in the making of the story and “reframing it in the process” (Goode 2009, 1293). The Internet reader now uses the web for making sense of the overwhelming flow of information online and deciding what information to trust.

Charges of Favoritism

Rassd's motto, "Media created by the audience," promises democracy in the publication process. However, unlike popular citizen journalism sites such as Digg, GNN, and NewsVine, Rassd's news selection process is not handled through a supposed "objective" software algorithm. News posts are handled manually through Facebook administrators. This has left Rassd open to accusations of favoritism in publishing news articles or notes of specific writers or specific circles of personal acquaintances. In fact, when observing the notes published on their front page in the post-revolution period, three to four bloggers/writers are noticeably published on a recurring basis. One can contend that this favoritism may be a side effect of the overwhelming number of contributions made by members or non-members. The network lacks editors needed to perform the necessary screening as well, and those that are present are themselves unpaid volunteers. This favoritism could also be an internal publishing policy poorly communicated with the public that places more importance on collecting video and audio snippets from the public than on written opinion pieces (which need more scrutiny).

However, the network was also accused of refraining from publishing articles that attacked specific authority figures or certain political trends. According to Ghonim (2012), Rassd's co-founders were sympathetic to the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) (119). When asked about Rassd's relationship to the MB, Anas Hassan explained that though many of its founders are members of the organization, Rassd itself is not part of it or any other organization. He added that their operation room consisted of activists of different political orientations such as the media committee of the ElBaradei campaign and Da'am center in addition to the youth of the MB (Hassan 2011c). While this alleged bias may have been difficult to discern during the first 18 days of the revolution, it was considerably more noticeable afterwards. During the post-revolution period, Rassd's posts refrained from covering much of the criticism directed at the Muslim Brotherhood; as Goode (2009) describes a similar criticism of Guerrilla News Network: "not all users are convinced that the editorial blocks are pragmatically as opposed to politically motivated" (1299).

Discussion and Conclusion

This article looked at the rising phenomenon of Facebook-only social journalism represented by Rassd, the reasons for Rassd's success, and its weaknesses as a viable news-delivery model. It analyzed the discourse utilized by Rassd in covering the Egyptian revolution according to Gamson's collective action frames: identity, injustice and agency. As mainly a news platform, most of Rassd's posts on Facebook and Twitter fell into the category of citizen news and aggregate news. However, given the initial goal for which it was constructed, Rassd's posts sometimes blurred the distinction between objective news

reporting and mobilization. Almost one third of the posts surveyed had an element of activism which expressed an opinion about the regime, garnered support, or mobilized readers into participation in the protests. Other posts emphasized the injustice inflicted by the regime, while others delineated the role of citizen journalists as challengers of the official narrative of state media.

Facebook has managed to amass an audience base of users by tying their social lives to their social networks. Now users are linked to the site more than ever by tying their intellectual and political lives to their Facebook pages. Social journalism largely depends on the fact that people are obsessively using social networking websites. When social news shows up next to their friends' status updates and tweets, this news meets a natural demand by saving user time and energy. *Rassd* managed in a matter of a month to accumulate a number of subscribers to its Facebook page unmatched by more traditional and established electronic media sources. Throughout the events of the Egyptian revolution, *Rassd* was the main feeder of news for Egyptians following the protests online. The group's founders promised a form of journalism that was timely, resilient, striving to be credible, and unique in its citizen content. In the post-revolution state, the frequency of newsworthy events subsided, but Egypt has been going through a state of political vacuum and confusion that prompted people to seek more personalized firsthand accounts of events. Thus, *Rassd* continues to fill a role not played by traditional media due to its emphasis on citizen content. *Rassd*'s concept has spread, for several sister networks, such as *Barq* in Libya, and *Sham* in Syria, have been established.

We noted how *Rassd*'s form of citizen journalism peaked during the political turmoil taking place in Egypt in the early months of 2011. However, the network did not have the resources or capacity for long-term investigative media reporting. As a result, the network was sometimes characterized by a lack of professionalism and an inability to pursue serious investigation. Dan Gillmor (2004) wonders: "If citizen media took over Big Media, who will do big investigative projects, backed up by deep pockets and the ability to pay expensive lawyers when powerful interests try to punish those who exposed them, if the business model collapsed?" (16) McChesney and Nichols (2010) also question the future of citizen journalism and ask: "[w]hat happens when the income dries up for all the journalists providing material to the web? What will be left standing, besides volunteers and citizen journalists?" They contend that this could be an end to serious investigative journalism (83).

Khanfar (2011) emphasizes the unique contributions of citizen journalism in covering the Arab Spring. He describes how Al Jazeera often had no choice but to depend on citizens' contributions in places where they were not permitted to operate, like Tunisia, or where they do not yet have offices. But he also contends that without big media, citizen journalism will still be limited by the boundaries of the Internet and its restricted usage in the Arab world (2011).

McChesney and Nichols (2010) acknowledge that the new journalism promised by a digital revolution can open up our politics. They contend that although there are many new variables that come with the technology, and it is impossible to predict how the new system of journalism will work, the ingredients of a new media revolution are in place (81).

In weighing the benefits of citizen media against the essentials of traditional journalism, Khanfar suggests a collaboration model. In this model, citizen media such as Rassd can contribute its citizen content to big news outlets such as Al Jazeera which in turn can disseminate it to millions (2011). Perhaps the existence of either model does not necessarily predict the doom of the other. Perhaps we should seek a “balance that simultaneously preserves the best of today’s system and encourages tomorrow’s emergent, self-assembling journalism [grassroots journalism]” (Gillmor 2004, 29). McChesney and Nichols (2010) may have described it best in their conceptualization of new journalism as a symphony where citizen and amateur journalists are “the improvisers that push the logic and beauty of the music to its limits” while “paid journalists are the rhythm and melody” without whom the improvisers “are just making noise,” but together they “produce genius” (81).

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