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# Revolutions Without Revolutionaries? Social Media Networks and Regime Response in Egypt

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**Abstract**

Does the Internet change the balance of power between authoritarian regimes and their domestic opponents? The results of this case study of Egyptian digital activism suggest that the Internet has important effects on authoritarian politics, though not necessarily the kind we have come to expect from popular accounts of online activism. In this dissertation, I argue that what I call Social Media Networks can trigger informational cascades through their interaction effects with independent media outlets and on-the-ground organizers. They do so primarily through the reduction of certain costs of collective action, the transmission capabilities of certain elite nodes in social and online networks, and through changing the diffusion dynamics of information across social networks. An important secondary argument is that while states, including Egypt, have become more adept at surveillance and filtering of online activities, SMNs make it impossible for authoritarian countries to control their media environments in the way that such regimes have typically done so in the past. Case studies of media events in Egypt between 2006 and 2008 explain how SMNs undermine the process of authoritarian media control and why the independent press is critical for claims-making and the building of shared meaning. However, the power of SMNs is not capable of challenging the entrenched repressive capacity of determined states, nor can SMNs be substituted for the difficult work of grassroots organizing. I arrive at this conclusion through a case study of the April 6th Youth Movement, which staged nearly identical strikes on April 6th, 2008, and April 6th, 2009, with divergent results. Therefore, the dissertation concludes that even though SMNs may lead to richer information environments with increased capacity for organizing, the technologies themselves are not determinative of political outcomes. Finally, by studying the use of digital tools by Muslim Brothers and Baha'is, the dissertation argues that SMNs can provide critical public space and create discursive focal points for political and religious minorities.

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**REVOLUTIONS WITHOUT REVOLUTIONARIES?**

**SOCIAL MEDIA NETWORKS AND REGIME RESPONSE IN EGYPT**

**David Faris**

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For my parents

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David M. Faris

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**ABSTRACT**

**REVOLUTIONS WITHOUT REVOLUTIONARIES?**

**SOCIAL MEDIA NETWORKS AND REGIME RESPONSE IN EGYPT**

**David Faris**

**Ian S. Lustick**

Does the Internet change the balance of power between authoritarian regimes and their domestic opponents? The results of this case study of Egyptian digital activism suggest that the Internet has important effects on authoritarian politics, though not necessarily the kind we have come to expect from popular accounts of online activism. In this dissertation, I argue that what I call Social Media Networks can trigger informational cascades through their interaction effects with independent media outlets and on-the-ground organizers. They do so primarily through the reduction of certain costs of collective action, the transmission capabilities of certain elite nodes in social and online networks, and through changing the diffusion dynamics of information across social networks. An important secondary argument is that while states, including Egypt, have become more adept at surveillance and filtering of online activities, SMNs make it impossible for authoritarian countries to control their media environments in the way that such regimes have typically done so in the past. Case studies of media events in Egypt between 2006 and 2008 explain how SMNs undermine the process of authoritarian media

control and why the independent press is critical for claims-making and the building of shared meaning. However, the power of SMNs is not capable of challenging the entrenched repressive capacity of determined states, nor can SMNs be substituted for the difficult work of grassroots organizing. I arrive at this conclusion through a case study of the April 6th Youth Movement, which staged nearly identical strikes on April 6th, 2008, and April 6th, 2009, with divergent results. Therefore, the dissertation concludes that even though SMNs may lead to richer information environments with increased capacity for organizing, the technologies themselves are not determinative of political outcomes. Finally, by studying the use of digital tools by Muslim Brothers and Baha'is, the dissertation argues that SMNs can provide critical public space and create discursive focal points for political and religious minorities.

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

## List of Figures

**Chapter 1**

**Introduction**

*Cyberspace does not lie within your borders.*
*– John Perry Barlow*

*The discursive voices of the new media are fascinating, but their political importance*
*has yet to be demonstrated.*
*– Augustus Richard Norton*

In February 2010, discussion of the upcoming presidential elections in Egypt

centered around the potential candidacy of Mohamed ElBaradei, the former head of the

International Atomic Energy Agency. ElBaradei, a Nobel Laureate who commanded

broad respect inside Egypt for his achievements, had been living abroad in Vienna for

decades. When ElBaradei's flight arrived in Cairo on February 19<sup>th</sup>, hundreds of

supporters met him at the airport and greeted him like a savior. ElBaradei had caused a

stir earlier in the month when he hinted that he might run for president if the election

were to be genuinely democratic, rather than the farce that had taken place in 2005.

Observers, however, anticipated that power would be handed off from the ailing and

aging dictator Hosni Mubarak to his son and heir apparent Gamal, in another rigged

election. It was in this context that a group of young Egyptians started a "fan" page on the

social networking site Facebook dedicated to ElBaradei's potential candidacy. Before

long this group had over 150,000 members (out of roughly 2 million Egyptians on

Facebook at the time). ElBaradei's decision to participate or not participate in the election,

and the swift growth of his dedicated Facebook group, renewed debates inside and

outside the country about the effect of social networking sites like Facebook – and other

forms of "social media" like blogs, Twitter, and text-messaging – on politics in Egypt. In other words observers were asking, yet again, a question to which scholars have sought the answer for years: Is the Internet inherently a tool of democratization?

Unfortunately much of the research on the impact of the Internet in the Middle East has been somewhat anecdotal. Driven by popular press coverage of the latest application (like Twitter) or perceived success of online activism in places like Iran, our understanding of the impact of these technologies seems to change with every new protest or Facebook group. The goal therefore should not be to ask what the impact of Mohamed ElBaradei's Facebook group will be, but rather to generate robust theories that can help us understand events as they happen and make probabilistic predictions about the future. It is with that goal in mind that this dissertation seeks to explain the impact of the Internet in authoritarian countries through a single case study of Egypt, and to answer the following research questions: First, does the use of social media lead to more collective action in authoritarian societies? Do social media generate media coverage of sensitive events and issues in authoritarian societies? What is the effect of social media on socially or politically marginalized groups in Egyptian society? And finally, why do some states (like China) seem more successful at controlling the effects of social media than others? These questions intersect with several distinct literatures in the field of political science, which I will review below before proceeding to an outline of the case selection, methodology, and chapter organization.

*1.1 The Political Context of Social Media Networks in Egypt*

In addition to addressing questions in the field about the Internet and politics, this dissertation also engages with debates about the durability of authoritarianism. Given that the Egyptian state has responded to the threat of online activism with the similar strategies with which it has approached the control of the political sphere – Observers seem to be in general agreement that the Egyptian political system is quite stable (Carothers 2002; Kassem 2004; Lust-Okar 2005; Brownlee 2007; Bellin 2005; Cook 2007; Heydemann 2007). Dissenters from this consensus are few (see Alaasar 2009). Brownlee (2007) argues that the single-party system in Egypt provides incentives for individual elites to pursue opportunities with the NDP rather than joining the opposition, thus providing for long-term systemic stability. Lust-Okar (2005) sees Egyptian domestic stability as predicated on an ingenious divide-and-rule strategy which has kept the opposition off-guard and at loggerheads. Like a number of other semi-authoritarian regimes, Egypt allows a number of legal parties to operate and organize in the political system. These parties include the reconstituted *Wafd,* and among their many privileges are setting up and running their own newspapers. But one of the more popular organizations, the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood[1] -- is allowed to participate only indirectly, and has not been recognized as a political party. In fact since the election of Hamas in Palestine in 2006, the Brotherhood has been targeting aggressively by the regime, believing that international events have granted the regime new license in eliminating the group's political influence. The crackdown on the Brotherhood included the arrest and prosecution of dozens of senior members of the group's leadership in 2007-

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[1] Or Muslim Brothers, depending on the translation.

2008. Overall, by allowing certain parties access to power and privilege, the regime has driven a wedge between the opposition camps. As a result, just when the regime seemed the weakest (in the mid-1990s) the legal opposition groups became less likely to push for reforms in alliance with the excluded opposition (Lust-Okar, 2005, 147-148).

Kassem (2004) argues that the Egyptian regime is personal, and quite successful at that. Bellin also views Middle East regimes, and Egypt in particular, as enjoying "robust and tenacious" coercive apparatuses. Heydemann argues that authoritarian regimes in the region, including Egypt, have survived and thrived by what he calls "upgrading authoritarianism" – selectively creating openings in the electoral arena and the economic sphere while pursuing closer relationships with foreign powers that share their lack of interest in human rights and democracy (Heydemann 2007, 7). While El-Ghobashy (2007) and Rutherford (2008) find some possibilities for change in the increasing density of civil society and judicial oversight, respectively, neither sees democratization as particularly likely. Hanna (2009) argues that the architecture of electoral control erected by the Mubarak regime makes any challenge to Gamal's ascendancy, and any long-term change, difficult at best, while Cook (2009) argues that "the underlying patterns and processes of Egyptian politics" will prevent further liberalization. Regardless of where each particular author locates Egyptian authoritarian stability, the regime enjoys as close to a consensus in political science circles as there is in the discipline – façade democracy works for the Mubarak regime, the coercive apparatus is strong, resilient, and co-opted, and there are no clear-and-present dangers to its authority on the horizon. Most of all there seems to be wide agreement that the

mobilization capacity of the various opposition groups is very low, and thus a change of regime or democratization is highly unlikely.

The biggest jolt to Egyptian authoritarianism in recent years was perhaps the formation of *Kefaya* (The Egyptian Movement for Change), a broad-based coalition of leftists, Islamists, and other opposition figures. *Kefaya* has always been difficult to categorize, and very little has been published about the movement since its inception in 2004. As the anonymous blogger Baheyya writes, *Kefaya*:

> fits none of the available models found in the (admittedly dessicated) Egyptian political landscape. It's not an "opposition party", it's not an NGO, it's not a professional association, it's not a solidarity committee, it's not a party-in-waiting (like *Wasat* and *Karama*), and it's not a grassroots initiative (Baheyya 2005).

Shorbagy argues that this movement sprung out of the detritus of the legal-but-severely-restricted political parties, on the one hand, and the illegal Muslim Brotherhood on the other. Lacking an accepted, institutional voice, opposition politics in Egypt had come to a standstill during the early years of the new century (Shorbagy 2007, 175). *Kefaya*, a word with a unique meaning in the Egyptian context (it is colloquial for "Enough!"), included figures from across the political spectrum, galvanized to prevent Mubarak from assuming a fifth term as President of Egypt. This appeared to be the only focal point of agreement in the group. As Baheyya writes, "The only consensus is that Mubarak must go; everything else is up for debate" (Baheyya 2005). However, eventually this unwavering opposition to the Mubarak regime began to appear in the popular mind as an absence of any alternative, positive vision for the future (El-Amrani 2006). The emergence of *Kefaya*, as well as the nascent and perceived opening in the political system following the

U.S.-led war against Iraq, appeared to combine for a combustible situation, one that was ripe for organizing a counter-movement against the state. As leading blogger Issandr El-Amrani noted, in 2005 "there was so much happening and there was a lot of attention on Egypt because President Bush had decided to highlight Egypt as a place to democratize."[2]  And for a time it did appear as though *Kefaya* was galvanizing people in a way that had not happened in a long time – their street protests were bold, and undertaken without the regime's permission, which in any case remains quite hard to obtain (Shorbagy 2007, 190). However, these protests eventually become rote, and easy enough for the regime to disrupt by banning them or interfering with them, and arresting activists after the fact. El-Mahdi (2009) argues that while the Kefaya movement eventually fizzled, it ignited dissent in other quarters of Egyptian public life, particularly in the labor movement (1035).

*1.2 The Egyptian Media Context*

But *Kefaya* was not only important in and of itself – it also provided the institutional foundation for a new means of expression in the country, the growth of blogging as a tool for dissent and opposition. The appearance of blogs on the Egyptian scene in 2004 coincided with a larger opening in the press environment, which meant that opportunities for expression, oversight, and dissent multiplied almost overnight. For years Egyptians had been subject to a moribund local print press, with the government-run dailies and their fawning coverage of the President more or less the only game in town. While the state had legally licensed the opposition parties to run their own newspapers, these organs were not trusted sources of news, since their affiliation with the

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[2] Interview with Issandr El-Amrani, Cairo Egypt. February 16th, 2008.

state in the form of acquiescence to its rules made them suspect in the eyes of many. That left Egyptians dependent on international press organs like Al-Jazeera – but regardless of the undeniable impact of satellite TV, there was still a conspicuous missing link in the press environment, since no one was on the ground honestly covering local Egyptian political issues in a way that earned widespread public trust. This was all to change in 2004, when the independent (as opposed to "opposition"), privately-owned daily newspaper *Al-Masri Al-Youm* was launched by Hisham Kassem. As we will see in Chapter 3, the existence and growth of the independent press allowed a kind of nexus to form between activist bloggers and human rights agitators – they fed into one another, in the sense that bloggers link to and talk about the stories printed in the independent press, while the journalists in the independent press often rely on bloggers as sources. *Al-Masri Al-Youm* was a daily newspaper unlike anything that had been seen in Egypt in decades[3] – a privately-financed affair that was free to criticize the regime, make money, and publish hard-hitting investigative journalism. It may be that the kind of criticism carried in the pages of the newspaper emboldened bloggers to do the same on their new Web sites. And crucially this new nexus of blogger-journalist-activist created new kinds of networks – networks that the regime may never have seen before in this form.

The growth of communication on the Internet is also, not coincidentally, a major concern of scholars. Each information revolution – be it print, film and television, satellite broadcasting, radio, and now the Internet – has been met with both the great hopes of revolutionaries and opposition leaders, and the realities of state hostility to free

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[3] This is not to suggest that there were not other newspapers prior to *Al-Masry Al-Youm* which carried criticism of the regime, but these papers were linked to certain political parties and did not enjoy the kind of readership and respect eventually garnered by *Al-Masry Al-Youm*.

expression. This has long been the case in Egypt, whose film censorship office once

employed the renowned novelist Naguib Mahfouz (Starkey 1998, 413). Egyptian film

long served as a political battleground for ideas that could not be expressed in the public

sphere. But in fact the censorship of films – particularly Western films – actually

stretches back to the period of *de facto* British rule (Vitalis 2000, 278). The pre-

revolutionary regime seemed in particular to fear films that depicted revolutions (Vitalis

2000, 279). The post-revolutionary regime's belief that uncensored films present a

political and social threat to the regime's continued hold on power can be seen even

today in the recent controversy over the film version of the best-selling novel *The*

*Yacoubian Building*, a book which unflinchingly depicts corruption, homosexuality,

torture, and other desultory features of Egyptian political and social life. Censors clipped

parts of the film. But that was not enough for more vociferous critics, who wanted the

movie banned altogether.

But greater things were expected from the print media and radio in the Middle

East and Egypt. Lerner chronicled the Nasser-era state's takeover of print and broadcast

media almost immediately upon its assumption of power:

> Nasser, then has converted his earlier view that Egyptian society
> was not "ready" for mass participation into a more daring
> hypothesis – that he can use the mass media to achive national
> consensus without unduly raising public demands for full
> participation. This feat hinges upon effective control of the media,
> along with all other channels of access to the Egyptian mass (1958,
> 251).

Modernization theory's expectation that rising literacy and increased access to media

would change entrenched "traditional" social attitudes is mirrored by the regime's fear of

those attitude changes and its insistence on manipulating them. Part of this strategy was the regime's nationalization of newspapers in 1960, muzzling what had once been a relatively free-wheeling discursive arena (Jankowski 139). Lerner argues that Egyptian newspapers were brought under "central directive" long before that (1958, 254). While the decades have eroded the state's desire and capacity to thoroughly regulate the print media, the atmosphere is still fairly well-regulated. As for radio, Lerner argues, though that the Egyptian State Broadcasting's (E.S.B.) Voice of the Arabs (Sowt al-Arab) may have been instrumental in fomenting revolutionary Nasserist fervor across the region in the late 1950s (1958, 255-258). But the regime's desire and capacity to carry out state censorship and official control over these relatively new (to Egypt) forms of mass communication are the important factors.

One of the central conceits of modernization theory was the idea that the spread of mass communication and the changes in attitudes might presage a greater role for ordinary individuals in the political universe. Mass media and the rise of literacy had the chance to make public opinion "a real factor instead of a fine phrase in the arena of world politics" (Lerner 1958, 54). These hopes presage later enthusiasm about the Internet and its potential to change entrenched attitudes about gender and politics. Lerner and other advocates of democratization did not see, or did not want to see, that mass communication could also be used by the defenders and articulators of tradition to safeguard against more "cosmopolitan attitudes" brought by foreign media and economic influence. This reality is especially stark today in Egypt, where for every secular, cosmopolitan liberal blogging about government abuses, there are probably a dozen

Islamists using the Internet, newspapers, DVD's, cassette tapes and other media forms to propagate ideas that Lerner and other modernization theorists would find "traditional." This reality underscores the idea that new technologies are value-neutral and can be used by anyone to accomplish most any social goal.

*1.3 The Internet and Activism in the Middle East*

Recent scholarly work theorizes that the Internet and its associated tools and applications might reduce the costs of collective action. Rheingold (2003) argued that the coordinating capacity of tools like text-messaging might allow activists in authoritarian countries to mobilize and avoid the repressive arm of the state. Shirky argues that what he calls "social tools" spur group-formation and collective action by reducing the costs of communication and removing "two old obstacles – locality of information, and barriers to group reaction" (Shirky 2008, 153). Karpf (2009) argues that these mechanisms allow for new and unexpected forms of political organization and contestation. A competing tradition holds that states have largely been successful at shutting down online dissent (Mozorov 2009; Deibert et. al. 2008; Zittrain 2008; Boas and Kalathil 2003). Others, while recognizing the reduction in organizing costs and communication, argue that digital technologies have little effect on the institutions of authoritarianism (Faris and Etling 2008). Still others, while recognizing the way that the Internet empowers non-state actors, feel that regimes allow certain kinds of expression and deliberation online but refuse to change underlying structures, or worse, use that information for repressive purposes (Mozorov 2009b). Few studies, however, have investigated the effects of the Internet on

collective action in the Middle East, a region which is often regarded in the discipline as somehow exceptional.

Many scholars dismiss the Internet and Internet activism as chimerical and unimportant in the Middle East, particularly with limited access for most of the region's citizens and restrictions on the availability of certain web sites. Lynch argues that limited accessibility has hampered the ability of the Internet to affect public affairs in the Arab world (2005 50). And contrary to expectations, dictators have managed to design sophisticated systems of controls that serve to prevent the free flow of information (Lynch 2005, 51). Given these limitations, researchers must ask whether the Internet and the new political influence of blogs has any traction at all in these societies. But the fact that states – particularly China – have responded so forcefully to the information potential of the Internet indicates that at least one savvy regime perceives a genuine threat. And while a very low percentage of the region's inhabitants might own personal computers with internet connections, the proliferation and low-cost of internet cafes in major metropolitan centers means that even people of limited means can gain internet access – and that news might be cheaper to obtain in cyberspace than in print. Along with other forms of new media like satellite TV, it can be argued that the Internet helps eradicate states' "hegemonic control over the flow of information" (Hofheinz 2005, 78).

But regimes fear (and attempt to control) these other methods of mass communication as well. What is unique about the Internet? Anderson argues,

> In these respects, the Web is comparable in a contemporary
> context to early printing presses in the world of the scriptorium: it
> escapes the world of editors and arbiters of thought and

interpretation by displaying the materials of interpretation and
providing alternative organizations for them (Anderson 2003 50).

Anderson was writing about Islam on the Web, but his comments could apply to any political writing and organization on the Internet – overwhelmingly populated by blogs, political organizations, or online magazines – in almost any context. The Internet allows political commentary and organizing in real time and fosters the creation of online communities and pressure organizations. Just as satellite television and call-in shows have undermined state control over the media and democratized the regional discourse in the Middle East, blogs[4], chat rooms, and message boards have done the same -- and are available to anyone who can afford the comparatively low cost of internet access. And with the sheer number of blogs and web pages – as many as a million new web pages a day (Dreyfus 2001, 8) – state censors will be perpetually challenged to keep up. Even in states that can claim to have successfully filtered internet content, it would be impossible for governments to fully censor all political blogging and content. That said, free expression risks a serious response from the state. As Bucar and Fazaeli note in the Iranian context, "When blogging is at its most politically powerful, it risks its greatest punishment" (2009, 414).

Some scholars of the region have come to optimistic (in the sense that they believe the Internet is altering the balance of power between states and oppositions) conclusions about the potential impact of the Internet. In a statistical analysis, Best and Wade (2005) argue that Internet penetration is associated with an identifiable increase in

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[4] A blog is a agent-created Web site in which authors post entries in a journal-like format that are displayed with the most recent entry first. Blogs can be maintained by individuals, groups of individuals, or even corporations, governments, and political campaigns (author's definition).

democracy across the world (21). The authors identify a number of what they call "democratic regulators" that might allow the Internet to increase the level of democracy in a given country. Encryption technology allows regime opponents to organize and communicate in secrecy; the increasing cheapness of Internet access allows organizations and dissidents to better communicate, inform, and organize; and the Internet's architecture disallows "governments such as the United States from implementing back doors in the Internet to allow wiretapping" (Best and Wade 2005, 20). While they caution that each of these possible benefits has an authoritarian analogue (filtration software, political increases in the price of Internet access, etc.), they argue that overall the Internet has been beneficial – although they specifically note that there has been no such positive effect in the Middle East, perhaps because during the course of the study the region did not become at all more democratic. Meier (2009) argues that in some contexts, the Internet does seem to lead to more collective action outcomes – strikes, demonstrations, and protests, but that this finding depends on the level of Internet penetration. In higher-connectivity societies, the Internet does indeed lead to more collective action. In lower-connectivity societies, on the other hand, this does not appear to be the case.

Rahimi (2003) lists occasions where new media technologies have helped undermine authoritarian regimes, including the use of email bulletins as resistance in rural Zimbabwe (1). He also points to the most likely use of the Internet as a form of resistance to authoritarian regimes – the exposure of corruption and abuses. His case study of Iran indicates that while the state has struck back against Internet activists in the context of a formerly-loose environment, it has been unable to shut down dissent entirely,

making the Internet a new site of contestation over political issues that remain red-lined

offline.  Similarly in Saudi Arabia, Teitelbaum (2003) argues that the Internet "creates a

more level playing field for the opposition" (237). He also notes that despite the Saudi

regime's successful overall attempt to control Web content, the censoring of sites has

only led to dissent being transferred to other electronic arenas like email and chatting.

The rise of mobile technology since that time makes it increasingly likely that dissent

also takes place through SMS and other mobile technologies. He also notes the Internet's

utility in crossing traditional social boundaries, like gender. Meanwhile, Wheeler argues

that the Internet could lead to incremental changes in authoritarian societies through

changes in democratic habits attained through interaction with other people, and through

the creation of a democratic public sphere (Wheeler 2006, 5). Because of these

interactions and the concomitant reshaping of individuals' politics and beliefs, she

ultimately believes the state is "fighting a losing battle" (17).

> Lynch describes the contours of the public sphere created out of such interactions:
>
> The Arab public sphere can mobilize public outrage, pressure leaders to
> act through ridicule or exposure, shape the strategic incentives for rational
> politicians, and even incite street protests. But it cannot, in and of itself,
> act (2005, 54).

Lynch is referring mainly to the international public sphere created by al-Jazeera and

other Arab satellite television networks. Television, as noted years ago by Neil Postman,

is a passive medium (Postman 1985). With the exception of the few individuals whose

calls are taken by talk show hosts, satellite television and the "new Arab public"

generated by it, are not interactive. If Postman is correct that television culture is an

inherent attack on print culture, then democratic enthusiasts should be happy to see the

satellite television phenomenon accompanied now by an explosion in online writing and activism. And therein lies perhaps the crucial difference between the new Arab public and the new Arab cyberpublic – while the Internet may be available to far fewer citizens than satellite TV, it is also by its nature a far more interactive medium. One of the central features of most political blogs is the "comments" function, where readers respond to posts – often acrimoniously – and help shape the scope and direction of the debate on each site. Wheeler argues that such back-and-forth encounters, even in the context of continued authoritarianism, can have positive feedback effects in terms of democratic culture (Wheeler 2006a, 14).

The Internet is also said to facilitate organization on specific issues. This kind of organization has been termed "Issue ad-hocracy" (Berman and Mulligan, 2003, 84). Groups of disparate activists may form around narrow issues but develop into a larger coalition based on shared interests – interests that they may not have been previously aware of, and which were brought together by online activism. In other words, the Internet is a tool that makes these kinds of meetings and happenstances possible – in part because of its own unique technological characteristics, and in part because of the ways states have been unable to entirely clamp down.

On the other hand regimes have also been quite successful in responding to the threat of Internet activism – one need look no further than the Islamic Republic of Iran, where the Green Revolution of 2009 has turned into a bloody stalemate that still favors the repressive apparatus of the state (Morozov 2009). So while the Internet is conceptualized in the popular imagination as a central hub that anyone can plug into, the

reality is far different. In fact, contrary to expectations, ruling regimes have been able to design sophisticated schemes to filter Internet content before it reaches end users – including bloggers, activists, and their readers. While the Internet was designed to be a medium that eluded centralized control – based on the military origins of the technology – it has since evolved in ways that make such control possible. Boas (2005) details what he refers to as the "architectural constraints" on Internet access constructed by China and Saudi Arabia, as opposed to institutional constraints like law, social norms, and the market. In contrast to institutional constraints, architectural constraints seek to actually interpose the power of the state between Internet providers and their users. Zittrain (2008) details the ways that software companies and states have designed hardware and applications that make it easier for governments to censor and monitor their citizens.

While the Internet itself does not censor – as Boas writes, "the core of the network performs simple data transfer functions that do not require knowledge of how the ends are operating" – it is possible in some ways to intercept information. The Internet is "much less a single network of individual users as it is a network connecting separate computer networks" (Boas 2005). Since most individuals access the Internet through service providers, states have managed to route all ISPs through a central state server which can, with varying levels of effectiveness, intercept content deemed to be objectionable by political or cultural authorities. For instance, Saudi Arabia's 1.46 million Internet users can sign up with different providers, but all providers access the Internet through the same centralized state portal. Control of the vastly larger number of users in China is more complicated, but operates on the same general principle. These

techniques have allowed China and Saudi Arabia to establish what Boas calls "effective" control – not perfect by any means and capable of being thwarted by savvy and determined users, but enough to satisfy the "social, economic, and political goals" of the regime (Boas 2005).

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). Boas and Kalathil note that Egypt, in contrast to Saudi Arabia, has no formal mechanism to control or filter Internet content (Boas and Kalathil 122). What Egypt 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 this writing are bloggers, and the regime arrested more than 100 bloggers in 2008 alone (Open Net Initiative). Still, the lack of architectural control mechanisms means that individuals have still been willing to engage in activism online, and in many cases seem willing to suffer prison time. Thus if Web activists could have an effect on authoritarian structures, we should be able to see this effect in Egypt, which has a liberal Internet structure. The Egyptian government, as of the publication of that research, still appeared to view the commercial and administrative potential of the Internet as greater than the potential for political unrest and opposition coordination.

Perhaps no country in the region has seen a bigger impact from blogging and other forms of Internet activism than Egypt. Even beyond their domestic influence, Egyptian bloggers -- particularly those writing in English -- have become important parts of the discourse in the West, and may have an influence beyond domestic affairs. Many

activists choose to remain pseudonymous because of security concerns in the repressive

atmosphere of contemporary Egypt. But their ability to coordinate demonstrations and

garner international attention to their causes has not escaped the notice of outside

observers (Levinson 2005; Shapiro 2009; Faris 2008). The country's bloggers and

Facebook activists have been the focus of numerous journalistic accounts, but as of yet

have not been the subject of a systematic scholarly study. This dissertation seeks to fill

that lacuna.

*1.4 Methodology and Case Selection*

The dissertation employs a single-case study design and focuses on political

events in Egypt between 2005 and April 2009. This time period was chosen because it

coincides with the decision of the Egyptian regime to hold multi-candidate presidential

elections and thus was a time of increased expectations about levels of political openness.

Given the difficulty in obtaining quantitative data about the use of social media networks,

and the particular difficulty of conducting social network analysis in authoritarian

countries where respondents are likely to be unwilling to provide data about their social

networks, this study employs a qualitative research design. Open-ended interviews were

conducted with dozens of prominent bloggers, journalists, human rights activists, and

others in Cairo, Egypt on a number of field visits between October 2007 and June 2009.

In addition to those interviews, I used the American University in Cairo's print media

database, the Middle East Monitor, to conduct both qualitative and basic quantitative

research in the Egyptian print media. On several occasions, I was able to conduct

participant observation with the activists I was studying, most notably on April 6th, 2008,

during general strike organized via Facebook group. On other occasions I was privy to meetings and conferences organized by online activists, and invited to share in their conclusions. Finally, I conducted process tracing through reading individual blogs and the Web sites of electronic media organizations.

The selection of individual cases for study in Chapters 3, 4 and 5 was also driven in part by circumstance. When I arrived in Cairo in August 2007, the project primarily envisioned this as a study of the Egyptian blogosphere, based on observations I made in the summer of 2006 while visiting Zamalek, the posh neighborhood on the Nile in central Cairo. During the course of my first set of interviews with bloggers, beginning in October 2007, I kept hearing again and again that I needed to check out other new technologies that were being put to use by Egyptian activists, notably Twitter and the social networking site Facebook. Twitter at the time was a complete novelty to me, and it wouldn't be until the spring of 2009 that global audiences saw this application – which allows users to send short, 140-character messages to one another – used in an authoritarian country for activism. The ideas that came out of these interviews, in a follow-the-evidence fashion, now form of the core of my qualitative analysis, and changed the focus of this project from blogs to the larger world of networked social media. Those insights quite literally would not have been possible without the initial conversations with activists on the ground.

Many of the cases investigated in this study were uncovered via the interview process, by asking activists to explain the impact of social media technologies, and asking them to cite specific cases where they believed the technology had an impact. This

process was in many ways haphazard, and open to the charge of selection on the dependent variable. However, in each case, I was able to investigate the record of the public sphere to test whether events were really being driven by the technologies, or by other factors. This rigorous process led me to reject the perceived importance of digital media in certain cases, particularly in the April 6th Movement, which forms the core of Chapter 4.

Of course, some of these research choices were made by necessity rather than choice. The reality is that a number of prominent bloggers were not willing to speak with me – whether because of interview fatigue or because of fear of my motives. In fact it took months to win any credibility at all in the tight social world of the elite, and it was only after repeated calls, emails, and meetings that I was able to gain the trust of anyone at all. Furthermore, more quantitative investigations of social networks were simply not possible in Egypt, nor was an analysis of link structure between blogs, since Egyptian blogs are often structured very differently from their American counterparts. What this means ultimately is that this is less a quantitative study, and more of an attempt to build theory about the effects of digital activism in authoritarian countries.

I chose to undertake a single case study analysis for a number of reasons. First, in Egypt alone, the rate of internet usage skyrocketed during the past decade (Wheeler 2006, 5). Wheeler notes that in all likelihood there are more users than estimated because of the widespread availability of internet cafes (Wheeler 2006b, 34-35). And as will be demonstrated below, Egypt may be unique in the region in terms of how much influence blogs have had on events and public discourse – and this may have something to do with

the absence of overt filtering or censorship. In this way Egypt can be thought of as a critical case for the idea that the Internet has placed new tools and resources in the hands of the political opposition. In other words, if the tools do not have an effect in a relatively open authoritarian environment such as Egypt, we can be fairly certain that they will be of little use in stricter environments like Syria.

Additionally, Egypt looks like a strong comparison case to other authoritarian regimes and their regulation of the Internet. The response of authoritarian regimes to the Internet appears to run the gamut from total exclusion of most individuals from the Web (i.e. Burma) to the liberal encouragement of e-commerce and other online activities (as in the U.A.E.). Perhaps the best-known case of Internet regulation is in China, whose architecture of online censorship is discussed in more detail below. The relevant point is that the Chinese regime has cracked down hard on what it perceives to be online organizing by its chief opposition groups – notably the Falun Gong, whose e-activities have been almost totally curtailed by state strength (Kalathil and Boas 2003, 28-31). And why have Chinse attempts been so successful (MacKinnon 2008)? In contrast, the Egyptian regime appears to have gone after only a handful of prominent Islamist and secular Web activists, and only then when these figures transgressed very clear red lines of Egyptian politics. Why have Chinese and Egyptian authorities constructed different architectures of control, and why do they appear to perceive the threat posed by Web activism differently?

*1.5 Outline of the Dissertation*

      The primary contention of this dissertation is that what I call *Social Media Networks* (SMNs) can trigger informational cascades through their interaction effects with independent media outlets and on-the-ground organizers. They do so primarily through the reduction of certain costs of collective action, the transmission capabilities of certain elite nodes in social and online networks, and through changing the diffusion dynamics of information across social networks. An important secondary argument is that while states, including Egypt, have become more adept at surveillance and filtering, SMNs make it impossible for authoritarian countries to control their media environments in the way that such regimes have typically done so in the past. However, the power of SMNs is not capable of challenging the entrenched repressive capacity of determined states, nor can SMNs be substituted for the difficult work of grassroots organizing.

      Chapter Two, *Social Media Networks, Media Events, and Collective Action in Authoritarian Regimes,* provides the theoretical core of the dissertation, and introduces its key terms. In Chapter Two, I explain how advances in our understandings of networks, as well as research into the link structure of the Internet, helps us explain how information can be diffused more quickly across Social Media Networks, whether through blogs, text messages, social networking sites, or microblogging services, and how certain key nodes in networks are responsible for distributing information and influencing other members of their social networks. The chapter also argues that these diffusion dynamics can be instigators of "informational cascades," or sudden and widespread shifts in preferences, attitudes or behaviors. These informational cascades can do two things – first they can

make it difficult for regimes to maintain their control of information hegemony, and second, they can lead to the organization of collective action, by lower the "revolutionary thresholds" of individuals embedded in social networks.

Chapter Three, *Agenda-Setters: Torture, Rights and Social Media Networks in Egypt,* evaluates four case studies of blog-driven or blog-enhanced media events in Egypt to test the theories about media events and information control in Chapter Two. These three events are: 1) the sexual harassment scandal of October 2006; the torture scandal of January 2007; the Sudanese refugee crisis of 2006; and the Al-Qursaya Island takeover attempt of 2007-8. The chapter demonstrates the critical agenda-setting or story-breaking power of Social Media Networks – particularly in comparison to the absence of media coverage of similar events in the past – and casts substantial doubt on the null hypothesis, that SMNs have no substantial impact on authoritarian politics. Chapter Three further argues that in a country like Egypt, where few are connected to the Internet, it is the presence of a robust independent media that ultimately is responsible for transmitting claims out of Social Media Networks and into the broader public sphere. It thus revises our understanding of the causal pathways between the Internet and social or political change in authoritarian countries.

Chapter 4, *New Tools, Old Rules: Social Media Networks and Collective Action in Egypt*, evaluates case studies of social-media-driven mobilization to test competing hypotheses about the effects of SMNs on collective action. The two case studies are the April 6th, 2008 general strike, and the April 6th 2009 General Strike. The two events, with similar organizers, goals, and execution, are strikingly close to a natural experiment. The

chapter theorizes the April 6th General Strike as an informational cascade and tests this theory against other possible explanations of the day's events. The chapter also tests theories of regime response to these activities and answers questions about their effectiveness. The chapter argues that while the April 6th 2008 General Strike constituted an informational cascade, its organizers misunderstood its relationship to the on-the-ground organizing done by the labor movement. This misunderstanding attributed more causality to SMNs than was warranted, and led to the failure of the follow-up strike. Thus the chapter casts substantial doubt on the hypothesis that SMNs are direct causal factors of revolutionary moments.

However, even though they might not have a direct revolutionary impact, it is possible that SMNs can have additional impact on Egyptian politics and the Egyptian public sphere by creating and sustaining public spheres or "counter-publics" for marginalized groups like women, religious minorities, and sexual minorities. Chapter Five, *(Amplified) Voices for the Voiceless: Social Media Networks and Marginalized Groups in Egypt*, evaluates the use of the Internet by Baha'is and Muslim Brothers. It explains the function of Social Media Networks for these two groups, one socially and the other politically subordinated. The chapter uses evidence of blog-driven media coverage of to evaluate competing hypotheses about the effect of social media. The chapter finds that while blogs and other forms of electronic media increased coverage of issues for both groups, this effect can largely be explained by the writing of the same group of elite blogger-journalists who helped drive coverage of the issues in Chapter 3.

24

Chapter Six, *Cascades, Colors, and Contingencies: Social Media Networks and Authoritarianism in Global Perspective*, evaluates the SMN model tested in chapters 3 to 5 against outside-sample cases. It does so through a series of case studies of that evaluate the use of the Internet in crisis mobilizations, in Ukraine, during the Orange Revolution of 2004, in Moldova, during the so-called Twitter Revolution of 2009, in Kenya, during the 2007-2008 election crisis, and in Iran, during the Green Revolution of 2009-2010. The chapter seeks further to explain the role of the media environment in these cases. Chapter 6 confirms the findings of earlier chapters that SMNs contribute to informational cascades, that independent media outlets are critical transmission belts for claims made through SMNs, and that the outcomes of the crises in question depend not on the properties of SMNs, but rather on local and international features of institutional politics in each case.

**Chapter 2**

**Social Media Networks, Media Events, and Collective Action**

**in Authoritarian Regimes**

*In any case, there is an irremovable political obstacle to becoming sufficiently knowledgeable: vulnerable regimes can block the production and dissemination of information potentially harmful to their own survival.*
*-Timur Kuran*

*2.0 Introduction*

The study of social media is becoming a subject of increasing importance for political science. Scholars are beginning to take seriously the claims that social media might lead to more collective action outcomes, and to consider the kinds of tools that may contribute to those outcomes. The study of networks is a critical variable for understanding the potential power of social media. The discovery of new laws governing networks in a number of different realms has led a small number of political scientists to investigate the relevance of network theories for their own areas of expertise. Some scholars have used advances in network theory to shed light on the mobilizing capacity of terrorist groups (Matthew and Shambaugh 2005), while others have used networks to enhance our understanding of globalization processes (Freyburg-Inan 2006). Slaughter (2009) uses networks to test theories about America's possible decline as a major power. The concept of the power law (defined below) has been used to analyze the frequency and severity of wars in the international system (Cederman 2003). And Elhafnawy argues that the existence of scale-free networks in complex societies poses important problems

for the pursuit of security (Elhafnawy 2004). The relevance of certain properties of social media has been used to look at intelligence gathering and sharing (Ackerman et. al., 2007). Pedahzur and Perlinger (2006) use social network analysis to examine the resilience of Palestinian terror networks, and notably argue that "hubs" are critical for terror operations and that these networks indeed are scale-free and function according to power laws. In this chapter, I explain how these network theories, and the Social Media Networks that operate by their laws, must cause us to revise our understanding of collective action outcomes, media events, and informational cascades.

*2.1 Networks and Web 2.0*

A flurry of scientific research in recent years has pointed to the importance of new discoveries about networks. Most importantly, this research emphasizes the idea that not all nodes or actors in a network are identical, and that certain kinds of nodes assume far greater importance in their networks than do others. A network, according to Watts, is merely anything that is connected to any other thing. Or as he puts it, a network is "a collection of objects connected to each other in some fashion" (2003, 27). Some networks are random, in that most nodes have about as many links as any other node – many scholars point to the U.S. highway network as typical of this kind of network. No node in the highway network is substantially more important than any other, and even the most well-connected stretch of road has a limited number of links. Most U.S. cities have a few connections to the interstate highway system, but none have dozens, and none have zero. Such randomness is how most scientists looked at networks until relatively recently.

But some networks operate according to different principles, what are called "power laws" – the idea that certain nodes in these networks have virtually no limit on their potential size or scale.[5] The discovery of what this study will call *power law networks* 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 have thousands and thousands. According to Watts, what distinguishes such a network from most of these ordinary networks is that they operate according to a *power law*: "most nodes will be relatively poorly connected, while a select minority of hubs will be very highly connected" (2003, 107). (I don't think this is a clear or complete enough explication of this concept which you will invoke so often) And these well-connected hubs operate according to the principle of the rich getting richer – they tend to attract more connections because they are already well-connected, transforming them from ordinary nodes into super-connected hubs. This is called the principle of preferential attachment- a principle that applies so long as the network is growing. As Barabasi puts it, when new nodes enter a network, they are much more likely to link to the existing nodes with greater numbers of links (Barabasi 2003, 86). New nodes in an existing network have great difficulty attracting link. Investigators intrigued by the results of the Internet mapping quickly discovered that power laws apply to diverse phenomena ranging from the spread of disease to the composition of terrorist networks.

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[5] 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.
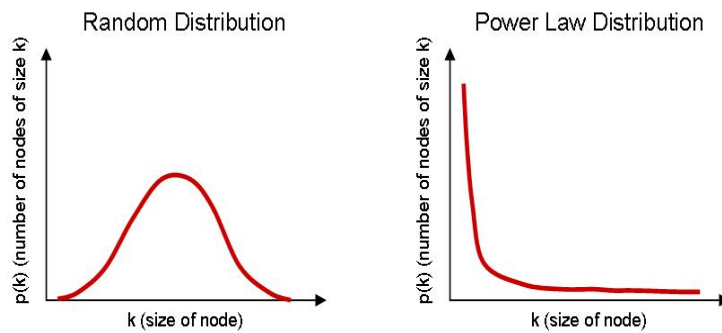
**Figure 2.1: Power law distribution versus a random distribution**[6]


What interests us here is not just the idea of networks themselves, but rather how

the tools of Web 2.0 enhance those networks and are enhanced by them. To answer this

question we must first arrive at an agreed-upon understanding of what Web 2.0 actually

is, how it differs from Web 1.0, and the kinds of services, tools, opportunities and

drawbacks it offers to users. The Web has evolved over the past decade in ways that are

theoretically meaningful. A definition is hard to come by, but O'Reilly argues that some

of the critical components of Web 2.0 are participation (as opposed to simply publishing),

"radical trust," in the form of Wikis like Wikipedia, "radical decentralization," and

"tagging, not taxonomy," in the form of the kind of user-generated sorting and rating that

takes place on certain Web sites (O'Reilly 2005).  The typical transformation from Web

1.0 to Web 2.0 can illustrated by the move from "dumping" offline, print content onto the

Internet, to the creation of online-only sites that utilize the new cooperative and

collaborative capabilities of the technology itself. O'Reilly points to the Web 1.0 site for

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[6] Image reprinted from http://orionwell.files.wordpress.com/2007/06/random-vs-power-law-distribution-2.jpg

29

the *Encyclopedia Brittanica*, to the Web 2.0 site *Wikipedia*, where user-editors both create, edit, and police the content.

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 will refer to as *Social Media Networks* (SMNs). *Social Media Networks* encompass Weblogs (i.e. blogs), Social Networking Sites like Facebook, Niche-networking sites like LinkedIn (for professional networking), crowdsourcing content like Digg[7] (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 like 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 people, and to do so interactively. Power laws have also been applied to the study of blogs in addition to commercial Web sites (Shirky 2008; Karpf 2008; Drezner 2007). Unsurprisingly, most of the blog traffic in the world is directed to a relatively small number of sites, whereas most blogs, like most Web sites, get zero to a handful of hits[8] per day. The reality that blogospheres are governed by power laws helps explain the popularity of certain blogs and bloggers against others, and generate hypotheses about why certain events and stories receive coverage and others do not. Power laws should also lead us to be cautious about

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[7] The term "crowdsourcing content" is borrowed from Brian Solis and his graphical illustration of the social media world "The Conversation Prism".
[8] "Hits" refers to the number of unique visitors to any given Web page.

assuming that, to paraphrase Hindman (2008), to speak in cyberspace is the same as being heard. The reality is that not everyone has an equal voice on the Internet, and that Web 2.0 technologies have the effect of amplifying those inequalities.

In the political realm, information is of far-reaching importance, and therefore, the speed and means by which information travels must be of equal importance. As Castells et. al. note, "Control of information and communication has been a major source of power throughout history" (2007, 209). This is particularly true of authoritarian systems, in which certain kinds of information – if shared by all citizens – might be damaging to the long-term viability of the system. SMNs perform a number of information functions that make them desirable for dissidents in authoritarian systems. First, they facilitate "many-to-many" communication and allow individuals to share information instantly with large numbers of people – news of an arrest, the dates and times of a demonstration, the impending arrival of security forces. This is increasingly true in the age of the "mobile web"- when accessing the always-on Internet from mobile phones becomes at least as prevalent as doing so from a laptop or computer terminal. Second, they make it difficult for regimes to cover up news stories or events that are deemed threatening to government control. Third, they dramatically reduce the amount of time it takes for information to travel – both because of the nature of the technology itself and because of social media's ability to enhance standard social networks – while simultaneously increasing the geographic and spatial reach of that information. To explain the impact of social media, we must first understand how networks function and how the new networks being

constructed and used are altering the social and political topology in societies that are adopting these technologies.

2.2 *SMNs and Media Events*

SMNs cause us to revise our understanding of the relationship of press freedom to authoritarianism in the developing world. By empowering non-professional actors and placing the tools of documentation and truth-telling into the hands of ordinary citizens, SMNs create linked activists who can contest the narrative-crafting and information-controlling capabilities of authoritarian regimes. In so doing they render questionable understandings in the literature about press freedom and its relationship to authoritarianism. For instance, non-partial rankings of press freedoms in the developing world may need to be updated to take into account the effects of SMNs and the feedback loop with the press that generates coverage for issues that may have been previously ignored in the official press

Farrell and Drezner claim that the effectiveness of blogs as sources of news and information is due to their consumption by political and journalistic elites. They write (in the American context), "There is strong evidence that media elites – editors, publishers, reporters, and columnists –consumed political blogs" (Farrell and Drezner 2008, 23). There is no particular reason to imagine that this isn't also true in authoritarian societies with relatively free presses. In such societies, the universe of prominent bloggers is quite small, limited both by the network structure of the internet (Shirky 2008) and by the still-limited Internet access for many ordinary citizens in less-wealthy parts of the non-democratic world. But this tiny elite of bloggers and journalists is able to have outsize

influence on public affairs, due to their interconnectedness with journalists As Ajemian notes, "…the value of blogs as a form of new media is that they allow for individual grass roots political journalism and facilitate the creation of a counter-public sphere of discourse that has the potential to penetrate mainstream media" (Ajemian 2008). SMNs governed by power laws serve to create or amplify the social connections between journalists and elite bloggers, making it far more likely that certain bloggers will receive press attention, or that their work will be picked up or "borrowed" by reporters.

SMNs have a number of structural advantages over the traditional media that make them quite different in their capabilities, and in some cases, able to report on subjects that other media outlets in authoritarian societies won't write or report about. First, SMNs have the advantage of instantaneity, in the sense that blogs can be updated instantly, either directly through laptops, or indirectly through SMS, Twitter, Jaiku and other manifestations of the Mobile Web. Maratea argues that the "speed of transmission" available to bloggers and Web activists is more important than the lowering of cost barriers for entry into the media universe (2008, 144). The fact that such individuals can make their claims without editors or interference from corporate entities makes it possible for them to reach diverse audiences instantly and to influence public discussion and debate. It also, of course, increases the amount of information available and thus concomitantly may decrease trust in its veracity (Garrett 2009). For instance, mobile activists can update their colleagues and readers directly via a Twitter post about an arrest or demonstration, well before editors and writers at even the fastest newspapers can put stories online.

A long body of literature points to the importance of a free press to democracy (Woodly 2008, 110) and the reverse side of that democratic coin is the importance of maintaining information and discursive control in authoritarian and semi-authoritarian governments. It is therefore not surprising that regime type plays an important role in the extent to which the Internet has penetrated a given society (Milner 2006). While semi-authoritarian countries may have some elements of a free press, those outlets are unlikely to have complete freedom of movement in the information market. It is therefore widely hoped that "new media" – from satellite TV to the Internet -- may provide an alternative source of information under such conditions, that might lead to more democratic outcomes or allow for more political space in the MENA region (Fandy 1999; Winston 2003; Lynch 2006; Wheeler 2006; Schliefer 2006; Sreberny 2001; Rahimi 2003; Hofheinz 2005 )[9].

What is less studied is that SMNs have a serious effect on the effectiveness of these alternative media outlets and the scope of their reach as well as the interplay between new media sources and professionals working in more traditional media. And by producing quicker informational cascades, SMNs may accelerate the transformation of certain kinds of discourses in the traditional media – they facilitate a process by which, as Somer writes, "previously taboo terms and concepts are openly expressed" (2005, 606). By serving as first-movers and accelerating the spread of certain memes, concepts, and ideas, social media pave the way for the adoption of these discourses in the traditional media – and this might be particularly true for journalists who adhere to regime-

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[9] I want to be clear that I am not attributing to any of these authors *uncritical* claims about the democratizing potential of new media; rather they have all wrestled with the question and argued that there is at least such potential.

sanctioned forms of discourse without having a firm conviction in favor of the government's position. Such individuals are particularly susceptible to the opinions of others (i.e. bloggers, journalists, and contacts maintained through social media) (Somer 2005, 609).

*2.3 SMNs, Collective Action, and Informational Cascades*

Power law networks force us to revise our understanding of collective action problems in social movements and revolutions. Networks interface with collective action problems by making communication, symbol-sharing, organization, and trust-building simpler and more efficient. SMNs directly impact three of the four pillars of social movement theory – by making organizing cheaper and faster, they affect the calculus of standard theories of resource mobilization. By affecting the spread of memes and symbols, SMNs make it easier to arrive at shared understandings of meanings. SMNs generate competing hypotheses about the generation and dissemination of frames. And by enlarging social networks and increasing the relevance of weak ties, networks might force a reevaluation of the processes behind the formation of relative deprivation grievances.

SMNs reduce the costs of organizing collective action. Shirky writes about how social media can both create new networks and strengthen existing ones – both at lower costs than in the past (2008). The standard model of organization involves a headquarters, an elite structure of salary-drawing leaders, and may include the costs of holding real-world meetings and conventions, as well as the price of producing and disseminating literature in the pertinent media environment. However, SMNs allow groups to form,

35

communicate, and "meet" virtually for free, after the costs of internet access and in some cases, the cost of maintaining a highly-trafficked web site are factored in.

Sunstein writes about the relevance of social media for communication practices in the business community, arguing that they effectively streamline a number of processes that once cost organizations a great deal of money. For instance, contrast the model of advocacy presented by Amnesty International – which maintains a paid staff in a certain number of cities worldwide, and has a substantial budget, with an organization like Global Voices, which operates for a fraction of that cost yet maintains reporters and staff in countries from Morocco to India. While Amnesty International is still the more prominent organization, the success of Global Voices – listed by the blog-ranking tool Technorati as one of the Top 100 blogs in the world[10] – in a very short time period should provide evidence of the efficacy of their organizing model. If the costs of both organization and participation are much lower, then it would follow that participation is more likely by rational actors seeking to maximize their utility. Just as individual are unlikely to participate in a collective endeavor whose benefits they can draw for free, organizers are unlikely to opt for models of organization that can be replicated and even improved upon for much less money.

Collective action theory also operates on standard assumptions about individual behavior. Specifically, it assumed that individuals will not take the considerable risks of revolutionary or oppositional behavior if the benefits do not outweigh the costs. Of course, costs and benefits must be conceptualized loosely, as more than simply economic

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[10] Zuckerman, Ethan. "Success. Success? Success." ...*My Heart's in Accra.* January 24th, 2008. http://www.ethanzuckerman.com/blog/2008/01/24/success-success-success/

benefits for individuals. Perhaps the most important difference between pure rational actor theory and the way real-life collective action takes place involves the role of social ties (Gould 1993, 182). Gould argues that in dense networks (like those in SMNs) the contributions of less central actors have a positive overall effect on the contributions of others (193). Furthermore, as a number of authors have noted, different individuals have different thresholds of participation in mass political action. Moreover, they appear to have incentives, under certain circumstances, for fully or partially falsifying their public preferences. (Kuran 1989). Since much of this literature concerns itself with the fall of communist regimes, this preference falsification involves the penalties for expressing one's true feelings about a government or an opposition in contexts that involve serious personal risks for political action. As Kuran notes, theories of collective action are very good at predicting the non-occurrence of revolutions, but leave us in search of theories of how, why, and where they *do* occur (1995). If individuals always have incentives to free-ride on the revolutionary action of others, how then do revolutions, or even mass political mobilizations, take place?

Networks facilitate the exchange of private information, which in turn makes political or informational cascades more likely – situations in which there is a widespread and sudden change in collective attitudes, beliefs, or behavior. SMNs also make it much less likely that hostile regimes can control the information environment to such an extent that this private information remains obscured or intercepted. As noted in the previous section, extensive SMN ties between activists and journalists assures that the stories documented and amplified by SMNs also make it to more mainstream press outlets.

Under certain circumstances, the cascades triggered by this SMN activity might lead to rapid and spontaneous collective action of the sort that generates large protest movements and in some circumstances brings down governments. Cascades can also, of course, work in the opposite direction, suddenly dismantling or crippling a protest or social movement (D'Anieri 2006, 334).

The work on cascades originally grew out of frustration with theories of crowd behavior which imputed irrationality to participants in crowd behavior (Berk 1972, 355). The crucial stepping-off point between theories of crowd irrationality and models that depend on rational individual decision-making is the idea that actors make decision based in part on the behavior and decision-making of others (Berk 1972, 363). They do so in an environment of "incomplete and unreliable information," a point that will be elaborated on in further detail below (369). Berk also notes that collective decision-making calls for extensive communication between individuals. Later work, stemming from the research of Schelling (1978), finds political cascade models using the idea of thresholds and focal points to suggest that certain social phenomena become widespread after reaching a so-called "tipping point" that leads more and more actors to change their behavior. Tipping models have been used to analyze everything from the dynamics of white flight and changes in discourse to the spread of new fashion trends. As Somer writes, "cascades explain how bandwagon effects and the strength of numbers can facilitate the occurrence of rapid changes in individual beliefs, expressions, and behavior during collective actions" (Somer 2005, 593). The theory operates largely at the level of the individual, and

assumes that actors are sensitive to the costs and benefits of participating in protests or rebellions (D'Anieri 2006, 333).

It also assumes that actors' thresholds are affected directly by the number of other people that they see participating in the activity (Granovetter 1978). As Granovetter writes, "The cost to an individual of joining a riot declines as riot size increases, since the probability of being apprehended is smaller the larger the number involved" (1422). He posits that all people have "thresholds" according to which individuals will participate in a collective action, and that these thresholds are in some part dependent on the total number of other visible individuals participating in that action. Thresholds apply not only to collective action, but also to fads and trends, and are analyzed with diffusion models. As Barabasi notes, "Acknowledging our differences, diffusion models assign a threshold to each individual, quantifying the likelihood that he or she will adopt a given innovation" (2002, 131). Those thresholds are also context-specific, in that an individual does not have some value assigned to "demonstrating," but rather adjusts his or her threshold according to the situation (Granovetter 1978 1436). I posit here that Social Media Networks, by affecting the speed and scope of diffusion, are likely to powerfully alter the "situations" of individuals, thereby, changing the speed and likelihood that thresholds will be met.

Individuals are also dependent on pre-existing preferences that establish those thresholds to begin with. The more individuals join the protest, the more likely it is that individuals with higher thresholds for participating will in fact do so. This makes each individual decision *contingent* (Granovetter 1978, 1434). The tipping point then, is that

moment when the protest or activity becomes self-reinforcing, and increases without further direct organization or action by the leadership. This is because the action or trend will at this point be adopted by individuals who don't much care one way or the other but who generally prefer to be on the right side of things. For instance, many people aren't particularly interested in what happens on the runways of Milan and Paris, but they will adopt a trend, like argyle sweaters, so they don't appear to be out of step with contemporary fashions. It is similar to the idea of network effects, which stipulate that a technology becomes more useful the more people who adopt it (Lessig 2008, 153-154). Ultimately this leaves only the small minority which is ideologically opposed to the movement.

Work on cascades was given new life by the unexpected events that caused and followed the breakup of the Soviet Union. It is widely-acknowledged that almost no one saw the breakup of the USSR coming far in advance. As Kuran argues, "The evidence is overwhelming that virtually no one expected communism to collapse rapidly, with little bloodshed, and throughout Eastern Europe before the end of the 1980s" (Kuran 1995, 1528). The sudden collapse of governments considered durable took the social science universe by total surprise. Similarly, few observers predicted or understood the swift breakup, along ethnic lines, of states like Yugoslavia. The descent of the Balkans into ethnic violence and genocide horrified journalists, social scientists, and policymakers alike, who were left to rely on theories of "primordial" or "ancient" hatreds put forth by popular writers (Somer 2001, 135).

It made seemingly very little sense for countries with thriving, multi-ethnic cities and traditions to suddenly implode and polarize along ethnic lines. However, using cascade models may help us understand the nature and causes of such a sudden and drastic shift. Somer argues that because of preexisting uncertainties about the extent of ethnic tolerance, observers may have underestimated the amount of ethnic polarization already present in the former Yugoslavia, and thus a small shift in the amount of publicly-expressed divisiveness led to a drastic shift in support for the leaders and strategies of polarization. Specifically, Yugoslav society may have polarized privately during the 1980s without a general understanding of this polarization, making the collapse of the state and the bloody wars of succession far more surprising than they should have been had private preferences been known and available, both for observers and for the individual agents themselves (Somer 2001, 142). The usefulness of these cascade models for understanding sudden, unexpected, and seemingly unpredictable shifts in collective behavior has obvious relevance for students and scholars of the Middle East, a discipline which has long been accused of making inaccurate predictions about collective outcomes, or of not having foreseen the changes that have taken place (i.e. Kramer 2001).

Lustick and Miodownik have defined a cascade as "a radiating pattern of transformation in behavior across a large population involving an accelerating change in available information about the future condition of the population" (2006, 3). The term is generally credited to Bikhchandani et. al., who defined informational cascades as taking place when "…it is optimal for an individual, having observed the actions of those ahead

of him, to follow the behavior of the preceding individual without regard to his own information" (Bikhchandani et. al. 1992, 994). Their model is sequential in the sense that every decision maker can see the decisions of all those who precede them (Bikhchandani et. al. 1992, 996). Their model, however, makes the problematic assumption that the ordering of individuals is "exogenous and known to all" (998) – i.e that everyone is aware of who the first-movers are and act sequentially, basing their own decisions on those of the first-movers and their followers. Firms and individuals react to the prior decisions of others, even when their own private information might lead them to do otherwise.

For Kuran, this concept of preference falsification is critical to his theory of how the events in Eastern Europe unfolded in the last days of communism. The reason that few observers and academics successfully predicted the fall of communism has a great deal to do with the fact that until the very latest hour, many individuals either falsified their preferences for revolution, or maintained their support for the status quo. As Kuran notes, the trouble was "imperfect observability" (Kuran 1991, 47). He defines preference falsification as "Insofar as his two preference differ – that is, the preference he expresses in public diverges from that he holds in private – the individual is engaged in preference falsification" (1991, 17).[11] Kuran's model gives individuals thresholds based on their available information about others. The size of the opposition affects an individual's payoff structure for supporting anti-government forces (1991, 18). Kuran defines an

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[11] Somer cautions that under conditions of widespread preference falsification, individuals are unlikely to really believe they hear in public (Somer 2005, 608). However, this leaves the problem of how these individuals, even if they sense the hypocrisy of publicly-expressed beliefs, are to ascertain the true level of support for their private positions.

individual's "revolutionary threshold" as the point at which the payoffs to joining the

opposition outweigh the psychological costs of maintaining public support for a regime

that the individual privately opposes (1991, 19). He also emphasizes that very small

changes in individual support for the regime can cause a cascade effect, as more and

more individuals' revolutionary thresholds are crossed. Exogenous shocks, such as an

external patron declaring its intention not to use force to prop up the status quo, can effect

these thresholds, insofar as they affect payoff matrices for supporting the opposition, or

by reducing the potential costs of revolutionary action. But as he notes, "neither private

preferences nor the corresponding thresholds are common knowledge" (Kuran 1991,

20).[12] He notes that this makes it possible to arrive at the very brink of revolution without

anyone knowing that the abyss is a mere step away.

In most of these models, too, the concept of private information is critical.

Opposition to a particular regime or to particular policies of that regime may be

widespread, but due to the possibility and cost of repression, that information is held and

kept privately. Kuran argues that the costs of protest go down as the number of

participants in widespread political action goes up. These kinds of analyses assume that

changes in the percentage of the population supporting mass action will change the

preferences of individual actors (Moore 1995, 446). The problem, then, for mobilization

becomes twofold – one is how to properly gauge and interpret the private information of

potential revolutionaries. The second is how to ensure that information, once transmitted

"publicly" reaches its intended audiences of both the regime and fellow potential

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[12] One could add that "revolutionary thresholds," inasmuch as they exist in the real world, may not be known to the individual in question either.

revolutionaries. Lustick and Miowdownik (2006) argue that standard rational choice

assumptions about private and public information falsely assume that individuals have

perfect information about the behavior of others. The authors argue:

> They assume that individuals do not receive information about their world from some subset of the population with whom they interact or in whom they place particular trust. Instead, individuals are modeled as learning about the state of the population as a whole by viewing the entire population or by making inferences from a random sample of it (Lustick and Miowdownik 2006, 6).

Instead, they argue that individuals are greatly influenced by their

"neighborhoods" – i.e. that subset of the population with whom they associate and have

more information than they do about the general population. Schelling referred to these

neighborhoods as "zones of knowledge," whereas Lustick and Miodownik refer to the

concept as "spatiality." Somer refers to them as "private zones of trust" in which

individuals are comfortable expressing beliefs about the political system that they would

not express in public (2005, 608). They point to research that suggests "tipping" is "more

rapid and more common when the local neighborhood of each agent is larger" (Lustick

and Miodownik 2006, 20). They note that focusing on spatiality in fact makes tipping

substantially less likely, and that "an important determinant of their rate of occurrence is

the size of the spatially defined neighborhood" (2006, 26). They argue that this finding

accounts, in some part, for excessive expectations of collective action in certain contexts.

If true, then private information stands in the way of collective action, and that things that

serve to decrease the amount of privately-held information in tightly-controlled political

environments would lead to a greater likelihood of a cascade.

For Kuran, the low likelihood of informational cascades ever happening makes the business of predicting (as opposed to understanding) revolutions a fruitless process. To him, acknowledging human inability to predict the time and place of successful rebellion against authoritarian governance is not to be confused with abandoning the social-scientific endeavor. "…accepting the limits of what we can expect from science is not an admission of defeat" (Kuran 1991, 47). Kuran notes particularly the difficulty of obtaining accurate information about private preferences in non-democratic societies – during the 1980s, it was virtually impossible to undertake sophisticated opinion research in communist regimes, and even when research was undertaken, there was no way to really know if the information was accurate or if respondents were falsifying their responses because of potential state reprisals (Kuran 1995, 1538-39). Furthermore, as Kuran himself notes, it is imperative for the regime itself to maintain its control over the flow of information – for according to his model, once it becomes common knowledge that the vast majority of citizens opposes the government, it is much more likely that individuals will be willing to take part in protest activity.

In that sense it is not just about private information, but also about the perceived likelihood of revolutionary success. Individual assessments of this calculus are thus very dependent on individual cognitive processes. As Sunstein and Kuran note, human judgments about probability depend on what they call the availability heuristic – the human tendency to make assessments based on "the ease with which we can think of relevant examples" (Sunstein and Kuran 1999, 685). They argue that these perceptions are often not empirically useful or correct – i.e. making judgments about the kinds of

conditions that lead to revolution based only one case that an individual is intimately

familiar with. The availability heuristic sometimes causes the spread of misinformation,

leading to the adoption of suboptimal responses by public officials, as in the case of the

panic over the contamination of Love Canal – a perceived public health threat that was

never proven as such (Sunstein and Kuran 1999, 691-697). As the authors note, far from

being irrational, the use of the availability heuristic may in many cases be the best option

for individuals operating in the real world, in which there are real obstacles to becoming

the perfectly-informed actors of pure rational choice theory (Sunstein and Kuran 1999,

690). For our purposes, however, it should be sufficient to note the authors' larger point:

that the availability of information leads actors to revise their own judgments about

things that are considered normatively accepted, and gives them clues about the

preferences and interests of others (767). The role of social media in making information

like this more readily available should lead us to think more about the conditions under

which cascades take place. It also challenges the notion, advanced by Shirky, that social

media merely helps brings together people who *already share preferences*, rather than

changing preferences themselves (2008, 288).

Sunstein writes about the information-aggregating potential of digital and social

media. In Sunstein's analysis, what prevents groups from properly aggregating

information is that certain members of the group will choose not to share their privately-

held information ----- whether preferences or critical information or simply new ideas –

for fear of ridicule or because of a willingness to go along with the group. Sunstein calls

these wells of private information "hidden profiles" (2006, 81) and defines them as "the

accurate understandings that groups could attain but do not." Groups arrive at sub-optimal decisions for a variety of reasons, among them the "common knowledge effect," by which information shared by all group members takes on a much larger significance than private information held by some or one member of the group (2006, 82). He also argues that lower-status members of groups are more likely to keep their hidden profiles hidden, and to be ignored even if they do speak up. According to Sunstein, and *pace* Bakhchandani et al., this actually makes cascades more likely since individuals in groups are liable to disregard their own private information and go along with the group.

SMNs have the effect of aggregating this dispersed, private information and revealing hidden profiles, either through the SMNs themselves, or by transmission from SMN activists to journalists. SMNs by their nature require users to share as much of their private information, political leanings, and activities as possible, and require deliberate action to make any of this activity private. What is new about SMNs is that *by default the actions of individual users are made public to that individual's entire network by automatically updating*. Blog postings are, by their very nature, public. Twitter posts, while not available to all in quite the same way as a blog, are also public for an individual's entire network. On Facebook, for instance, any change in an individual's "status" (a short, updateable, two-line note that appears under your profile) can be seen by the dozens, hundreds, or thousands of other people in that network. So if Facebook had been around in 1989 Leipzig, the message "Hans is heading to the square to demonstrate" would have been instantly transmitted to anyone in his network. While it is unlikely that Hans' close friends would have been particularly surprised by this decision

– since actors tend to inform those closest to them of their political preferences – it may have been news to the weaker ties in his social network: distant cousins, acquaintances from work, old college buddies – the people commonly referred to as "friends-in-law". According to Gould, if Hans is a marginal actor – i.e. a non-connector – the marginal value of his contribution to the collective action might be very high (Gould 1993, 194). These are precisely the kinds of ties that SMNs tend to "activate" in the sense that in the real world, such individuals are unlikely to interact or to exchange information on anything remotely approaching a regular basis. Of course, governments may use this practice as well, but because of the Friend of a Friend (FoF) nature of these sites, those messages are unlikely to be effective in reaching or changing the preferences of distant social clusters – in other words, there is a reputational component to SMNs that will be difficult for governments to fully overcome.

SMNs create large, dense networks that effectively collapse the distinction between strong and weak ties. SMNs transmit information that was formerly "private" – i.e. known only to a small subset of their larger social network, and make that information "public" in the sense of transmitting it to the entirety of that network (or at least the percentage of the network engaged in social media). For social scientists, a peek at this kind of data might allow for more informed classifications of regime popularity and legitimacy under conditions of incomplete or suppressed information – certainly an improvement over the kinds of information that scholars once used to judge the popularity of authoritarian regimes. As Kuran notes, in the 1980s, observers could only

compare official, falsified data with the observations of travelers and dissidents (Kuran 1995, 1538-1541).

This discussion of public and private preferences points to a problem, first, with the traditional schema of "public" and "private" information. While information transmitted in this way may be known to an individual's entire network, it is still not necessarily "public" in the way that Lohmann and Kuran would define it – i.e. available as random, public information to *any* member of the general population. So perhaps the critical distinction is not between public and private, but between networked and un-networked information. What matters is not whether information is, strictly speaking, available to anyone, but rather whether preferences are open and well-known in individual neighborhoods. And there can be little doubt that SMNs increase the volume and accuracy of information in an individual's network – even if it's also true that the amount of information available may be cognitively overwhelming. If only a small amount of formerly private information is transmitted, processed, and understood, it could drastically alter trajectories.

However, making more private information available to social circles does not necessarily mean that this information will reach beyond an individual's narrow network. However, SMNs are likely to facilitate the transfer of information across social circles, reducing the "small worlds" problem. Most people are familiar with the idea of "six degrees of separation," in which you can connect anyone in six steps or less to any other person." Barabasi locates the first written instance of this phenomenon in an obscure Hungarian short-story writer named Frigyes Karinthy, who speculated that there were no

more than five degrees separating any two people in the world (Barabasi 2003, 36). But most academic investigations refer back to the experiments of the controversial social scientist Stanley Milgram, who wanted to see if randomly-selected individuals could forward a letter to certain "target" individuals, and to count the number of intermediaries needed to get the letters across the country.

Although the study itself seems beset with difficulties in retrospect (see Watts), Milgram found that the median number of stops made by the letters on the way to their targets was 5.5. If there are so few degrees separating any two individuals, then we indeed live in what can be termed a "small world." Other discoveries include the idea that people tend to sort themselves into social "clusters," with small groups of well-connected people clustered around common interests or locales. Instead of all people having an equal number of social connections, in actual social networks, small clusters are connected by a few people with a high number of connections – what Gladwell called "connectors" (Gladwell 2002) and what others term "influencers". Furthermore, weak ties – i.e. acquaintances – are just as important as strong ties in bridging these clusters (Watts 1999, 15). This is because even a single connection bridging two distinct social groups has the effect of "shrinking mathematical worlds" (Freyberg-Inan 2006). It is worth quoting Barabasi in full here to get a full understanding of the importance of these links:

> The surprising finding of Watts and Strogatz is that *even a few* extra links are sufficient to drastically decrease the average separation between the nodes. These few links will not significantly change the clustering coefficient. Yet thanks to the long bridges they form, often connecting nodes on the opposite side of the circle, the separation between all nodes spectacularly collapses (Barabasi 2003, 53).

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The implications of this "spectacular collapse" of social distance are only now becoming widely-understood. But if true, then social networking tools may help solve one of the conundrums of small-world social reality – the limited cognitive ability of most people to sustain more than a few hundred connections at a time. In some ways, Facebook turns all of its users into connectors – people with dozens of instantaneous social connections that span social clusters and build bridges between distinct social groups. Not only does Facebook collapse social distance within clusters, it collapses social distance between them.

SMNs like Facebook thus might have an important role to play in amplifying weak ties, making them transparent and usable, and simplifying the process of activating them. Expanding on Gould's conclusions about the role of social ties in collective action, SMNs empower peripheral actors in very dense networks, whose contributions become more valuable. SMNs help build what Shirky calls "bridging capital" between diverse groups of people who might otherwise not think to work together for a common cause. Therefore, again, theories that operate on assumptions of randomness might be of less use in coming to a true understanding of the dynamics of informational cascades. Cascades take place in Small Worlds and so studies that start from an assumption of social randomness are at a serious disadvantage.

Assuming that individuals base their preferences not on a random subset of the population, but on their local neighborhoods, any change in the ratio of private-to-public information about those neighborhoods would have a corresponding effect on preferences

and revolutionary thresholds. SMNs reduce the amount of truly private information for individuals in any network – leaving only falsified public information (saying on your information page, for instance, that your political views are "very liberal" when in fact they are the opposite). Concomitantly, any increase in the amount of public information decreases what Sunstein calls "hidden profiles," and may lead to more optimal outcomes in cases of group action or deliberation. Users of these media forms tend to make this information public without a great deal of discomfort about the potential ramifications. In revolutionary or potentially revolutionary situations, then, the amount of what Sunstein calls "dispersed" information is greatly reduced. This makes it easier to organize, all things being equal, and makes it more likely that collective actions can be successfully organized. D'Anieri (2006) notes that later protest movements in Serbia and Ukraine were successful, whereas earlier movements, undertaken under similar circumstances, were not. He allows that the later movements were "clearly stronger, more organized, and better funded, than their predecessors" and avoids a discussion of why this might be *at the level of group organizing*, arguing that it was pre-existing divisions at the elite level that explain the divergent outcomes (347-348).

*2.4 Network Effects and Authoritarian Responses*

Authoritarian states are likely to recognize the threat posed by SMNs and to respond accordingly. The properties of SMNs, however, are likely to mediate the effectiveness of authoritarian response. SMNs are not invulnerable to destruction, but they do present unique challenges to anyone seeking to undermine them. As Matthew and Shambaugh (2005) argue, such "networks are easy to access but difficult to destroy"

(618). For activists seeking to oppose the state, the networking capabilities of SMNs make it both more difficult to take out hubs, and lessen the consequences of doing so. A large number of nodes need to be removed from the system before the network itself will cease to operate properly. To put it more directly, while the state can conceivably shut down any one human rights organization, it cannot erase the accumulated experiences, knowledge, and wisdom of its members, which exists independently of their physical headquarters and is situated in a larger, denser (online) network. On the other hand, it is exceedingly easy for the state to reach out and use repression on individual members of the network. The way that many prominent activists in authoritarian societies are linked to transnational activist networks also makes it costlier for regimes to systematically engage in this kind of repression.

However, a focus on the individual neglects more systemic variables that might affect a state's effectiveness in combating SMNs. First, the more powerful authoritarian states are moving toward a strategy of stripping SMNs of their power, by partnering with corporations to make "non-generative" and "tethered" technologies (Zittrain 2008). Tethered technologies reserve to the corporation, and thus the state, the ability to remotely track, alter, or destroy the devices upon which all SMN activity so critically defends. Powerful authoritarian states can also force SMN companies, like Google, Facebook, or Youtube, to capitulate to authoritarian demands – whether that is filtration, blocking individual users, or altering software to suit local repressive needs.

Authoritarian states that nevertheless possess functioning parliaments, quasi-independent press outlets, active parties, and at least mildly competitive elections are

most vulnerable to pressure from IT-based dissidence at moments of extreme tension and crisis. This conclusion is drawn from the lessons of the various "color revolutions" of the past six years. In Serbia, Lebanon, Georgia, and Ukraine crucial regime turning points revolved around elections and electoral competition in longstanding, authoritarian regimes. Mass mobilization in these situations was aided significantly by widespread IT usage, particularly mobile. SMN technologies like Twitter and SMS are tools that make these kinds of meetings and networks possible, in part because of their own unique technological characteristics and in part because states have been unable to entirely clamp down on users' activities. We should expect authoritarian regimes to engage in increasingly sophisticated attempts to control the use of SMNs, and for those responses to vary by regime. Strict authoritarian regimes are more likely to engage in strict control of the Internet's architecture – filtering, censoring, and surveillance, whereas semi-authoritarian regimes are likely to allow for greater debate but then respond to actual provocations with traditional repression.

## 2.5 Hypotheses

If the expectations and theories outlined in this chapter are correct, they lead to a series of hypotheses about the relationship between Social Media Networks and media events and political mobilization. The first and most obvious is that, *ceteris paribus*, an increase in the density of usership of SMNs should lead to an increase in group formation and political mobilization in any given society. Specifically, we should expect that under similar structural conditions, mobilization should be expected and observed whereas in the absence of social media, mobilization did not occur. We should expect to see, at the

least, attempts to mobilize what Olson called "the forgotten groups" – groups that in the past may have remained unformed. These are groups that may share common interests but that previously lacked the capacity to organize themselves into politically relevant entities. Of course this causes something of a methodological conundrum, since there is no way to establish cause-and-effect for absent social phenomena. Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.

Some scholarly work contradicts this hypothesis. While Calfano and Sahliyeh (2008) found that increased access to the Internet has not led to increased political freedoms in the Middle East, a simple tally of internet connections does not lend insight into the full spectrum of applications and services offered by Web 2.0, many of which are specifically geared toward organization and mobilization. Since the MENA region has been late to adopt the Internet generally, it should also be expected that the region will lag behind other parts of the world in the pace of its adoption of social media. Therefore a more comprehensive approach would take into account not only internet connections, but also cell phone users, members of SNS's and so forth. Comparative, global statistical analysis is badly needed for political scientists to properly understand the role of social media in political change – and more importantly we need to leave behind the monolithic conception of "the Internet" as an explanatory variable, and come to more nuanced understandings of what takes place online, who is doing it, for what purposes, and to what effect.

Secondly, if SMNs facilitate the movement of information, it follows that we should expect semi-authoritarian regimes (which operate under some constraints) to have

an increasingly difficult time managing the information environment (as opposed to strict authoritarian regimes, as noted above). SMNs turn individuals into reporters, photojournalists, and documentary filmmakers, requiring nothing more than a standard cellular telephone. The topology of such networks suggests that the work of individuals is likely to be found, cited, or borrowed by traditional media sources, and thereby will be disseminated to the mass of un-networked individuals in societies with relatively free press environments. Therefore, the more SMNs, the more likely it is that government will be unable to quash stories that it finds threatening. On the other hand, in societies with little to no press freedom, SMNs are unlikely to be nearly as effective. This can be directly measured by the appearance of stories in the independent press as compared to the traditional press, in paired comparisons with previous instances of similar events and coverage. As manifestations of this prediction, we should expect to see similar news events receive disproportionately greater coverage in networked societies as opposed to un-networked societies. For the purposes of this project, the coverage and outcomes of labor demonstrations (increased ancillary activity in addition to on-the-ground labor mobilization), sexual harassment movements (increased NGO and street mobilization), and torture incidents (increased NGO activity, mobilization, and at least cosmetic changes in regime torture policy) should be considerably different between the pre-social media and post-social media age. Inasmuch as collective action is driven by events and grievances, this element alone should lead to greater organization around certain key issues, as will be seen most clearly with respect to the prior three issues in Egyptian politics.

These phenomena of SMN-driven coverage in the press and SMN-driven collective action are mutually reinforcing. SMNs may generate press coverage, the existence of which enriches the information environment, and in tandem with SMNs lead to informational cascades. Therefore our final hypothesis is that increased usership and density of SMNs should more easily trigger information cascades in authoritarian regimes.

# Chapter 3

## Agenda-Setters:

## Torture, Rights and Social Media Networks in Egypt

*"The internet means geography isn't so important, so if you an find the 1,000 or 5,000 or 50,000 people out there who want to make a certain kind of change and can connect them and show them a path, they want to follow you."*
*-Seth Godin*

*"Beyond their momentous effects, protest waves are intrinsically fascinating. The phenomena of ordinary people struggling to preserve their honour and dignity, organising to make forceful demands on those who control their fates and livelihoods, activating their citizenship, this is an awesome thing to behold."*
*-Baheyya*

*3.0 Introduction*

Until very recently, conversations about the impact of the Internet in Egypt (and

most parts of the Middle East) proceeded from a caveat: the limited access of most

Egyptians to the Internet stands in the way of any real impact. Not only that, but even

cursory observation makes it clear that most Egyptians still get their news and

information from print media and satellite television. The primacy of more traditional

media forms is true not just in Egypt, but comparatively as well (Woodly 2007, 109).

With these largely-uncontested caveats, the study of new media in the Middle East has

been considered marginal in comparison with longstanding institutional, economic, and

social realities. While there may be widespread admiration for the work and courage of

SMN activists, enthusiasm about their impact has been largely limited to popular

accounts (see The Nation 2007; Shapiro 2009) rather than academic inquiry. Even those

studies that postulate a link between New Media and outcomes typically fail to identify

causal mechanisms. However, outright dismissal of New Media fails to explain the way that Social Media Networks have generated coverage of previously taboo subjects, from sexual harassment to the Baha'i faith. Skeptics are right to insist on the primacy of traditional forms of media, but miss the SMN-enhanced social connections between journalists and activists.

As argued in chapter 2, one of the ways that SMNs generate traditional press coverage is through electronically-enhanced social networks. SMNs have the effect of extending an individual's social "neighborhood" by transforming weak into strong ties, and non-existent ties into weak ones. Journalists in general tend to be better-connected than the average individual, and in Egypt, prominent SMN activists are either former journalists (Wael Abbas, Nora Younis) or double as either print or electronic activists (Hossam El-Hamalawy). The ties between this small set of individuals and the large number of traditional journalists in Egypt means that the work of SMN activists has a significant chance of getting picked up by the press and written about or broadcasted. This does not necessarily mean that SMN activists will be credited for their work, as much as their work may convince traditional journalists that a particular issue or event should be covered. In the American context, Drezner demonstrated that journalists regularly read a small number of blogs, giving those bloggers an immense amount of influence and credibility. Egyptian journalists also routinely mention the same small number of bloggers as influential, particularly in the issue-areas of most interest to this project (human rights activism).

Skeptics also point to the limited utility and results of SMN activism in the Middle East as evidence of their essential irrelevance. Region-wide, no regime has been replaced by activism or organizing from the Internet, nor do any observers believe that the entrenched political and military power of authoritarian states in the region has been seriously threatened by SMN activists, with the exception being the events since June 2009 in Iran. The failure of SMN activism to effect these kinds of attention-grabbing changes seems particularly acute in comparison to the widely-acknowledged role that such technologies have played in regime changes in the Philippines, Ukraine, and Georgia.

However, the efficacy of those technologies in other contexts was demonstrated during times of serious regime-level crises, in two cases over fraudulent elections, and the other over corruption. SMNs are unlikely to *provoke* this kind of crisis as much as they are likely to be well-positioned to *contribute* to them. Furthermore, expecting SMNs to cause macro-level change in stable authoritarian regimes may be asking more than the technologies by themselves can deliver; a focus on the state level also misses the most important effects of SMN activism. Theorizing from the failure of SMN-led organizing or protest leads to conclusions of inefficacy, under circumstances in which few political or social forces have successfully mobilized for macro-change across the region. Success under such conditions needs to be defined much more narrowly. This chapter argues that SMNs have had a very clear, if politically limited, impact on several issue-areas in Egyptian politics, under conditions in which the opposition is fragmented.

As Mosahel argues, "Mubarak's opposition hums with disparate voices…." Often the failure of opposition forces to come together provides ample evidence for theorists who argue for the efficacy of Mubarak's divide-and-rule strategy. Unsurprisingly, these successes all fall under the umbrella of issues on which the opposition forces in Egyptian politics have found broad agreement. Rutherford (2008) argues that a "convergence of political alternatives" has taken place, in which Islamist and secular opponents of the regime agree on a small set of substantive human rights and rule-of-law reforms. It is SMN activism that focuses on this narrow area of convergence that is likely to be successful, and has been successful in the past.

This chapter will trace the emergence of the relationship between blogs and other forms of electronic media, on one hand, and the traditional Egyptian print media, on the other. In particular, it will be argued here that SMNs, by breaking some major stories, and reporting in unique ways on others, have contributed to an overall climate in which the Egyptian regime is unable to control public discourse and enforce its dictates without opposition. The paper will outline the structural differences between SMNs and the Egyptian press environment, and argue that while SMNs add essential elements to public discourse, they are still very dependent on the existence of the independent press to publicize their findings and to create an environment in which the general public has access to the discourse of the blogosphere and the issues raised by Web activists. The methodology will compare these cases of SMN-driven coverage against past coverage or non-coverage of similar events in the Egyptian political system, to determine the impact of both SMNs and the emergence of independent press outlets in 2003-2005.

*3.1 The Birth and Maturation of Egyptian Blogging*

Boas and Kalathil note that Egypt, in contrast to Saudi Arabia, has no formal mechanism to control or filter Internet content (Boas and Kalathil 122). The Egyptian government, as of the publication of this research, appeared to view the commercial and administrative potential of the Internet as greater than the potential for political unrest and opposition coordination, although a branch of the police now known as the "Internet Police" was formed in 2004 (Eid 2004).[13] With the inauguration of the National Project for Technology Renaissance in 1999, the regime set itself on a course of using information technology and the Internet as a way to streamline and improve government efficiency, as well as to attract international capital (Wheeler 2003, 631). Thus the regime, having committed itself to the positive externalities of e-commerce and e-government, set itself on a course in which it would be very difficult to substantially filter the Internet.

It was in that free-flowing context that one of the first "blogs" in Egypt was formed, Cairo Live. It began operating in 1995. At the time, Internet subscribership was miniscule in Egypt, and most Web content was in English. Cairo Live's owner was Tarek Atia, who says that he was "blogging before blogging was invented."[14] Cairo Live began as a news aggregation service, which summarized articles, and featured an interface similar to The Drudge Report. Atia, presaging much of the rationale for later bloggers, argued that

> The key function is to reengineer or reestablish news priorities. It's basically a window for readers to see that the news priorities that traditional news authorities present to them is not the paradigm that they have to function on.

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[13] Informally, accessing the Internet has become more difficult and more expensive between the summer of 2008 and the summer of 2009. Internet cafes that formerly offered free Internet access had locked down their service through Mobinil, and required registration through a cell phone. This practice was clearly intended to introduce an element of surveillance to what had been relatively open access practices in Egypt.
[14] Interview with Tarek Atia, Cairo, Egypt. February 6th, 2008.

It's an attempt to explain to people that politics should never only be limited to this concept of foreign policy or domestic policy. Politics is much wider than that, it's the stuff of everyday life. Our newspapers and our traditional media have limited what people think is newsworthy.

Thus Egyptian blogs provide an alternative to official discourses. Many bloggers consider themselves guardians of a kind of objectivity that they do not find in any of the newspapers or other media outlets in Egypt. However, with the exception of Cairo Live, this activity had to wait for the emergence of more sophisticated publishing platforms – as well as the right political moment. In the meantime, chat rooms, Yahoo groups, and email listservs played important roles in the development of the Egyptian public sphere, particularly with respect to Egyptian reactions to the second Palestinian Intifada. These now-outdated forms of discourse emerged in Egypt around the turn of the century. As Hossam El-Hamalawy notes, "I was being spammed left and right by people who have the boycott lists, updates about the Intifada, pictures of the dead, pictures of the atrocities – these were being emailed, and yahoo groups[15] were like the hip thing back then." In the early part of the decade, Blogger – one of the world's foremost blogging platforms – began offering service in Arabic, and the Egyptian blogging scene grew more vibrant. There was also a deep and intimate connection between the emerging blogosphere and the nascent protest movement that emerged in Egypt after the beginning of the Iraq War. The movement was known as *Kefaya* (literally: Enough!) and was conceptualized as a broad-based protest and political movement opposing corruption and the continuation of the authoritarian regime of Hosni Mubarak.

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[15] Interview with Hossam El-Hamalawy, Cairo Egypt, May 27th, 2009.

As Radsch writes, "A natural symbiosis between Egypt's early core bloggers and the emerging protest movement helped popularize the Egyptian blogosphere as a site of protest as *Kefaya* grew in popularity during 2005" (Radsch 2008). Radsch terms this period "the experimentation phase." As more and more politically-interested individuals formed their own blogs over this period, they made the platform of blogging itself increasingly relevant to Egyptian internet users, since according to Metcalfe's law, the value of a communications network increases the more people use it. The most prominent Egyptian bloggers of this period still blogged in English – sites like The Arabist, as well as the still-anonymous Baheyya, the Sandmonkey, Big Pharaoh, and others. Some of these bloggers were notable for their pro-Western positions, which together with their choice of language, placed them well outside of the political mainstream in Egypt and led some to dismiss blogging as the niche tool of an Americanized elite. This early period was also when the relationship between bloggers and journalists – before the maturation of the independent press – was most toxic. As Wael Abbas says, "The relationship between the blogs and the newspapers was not really good from the beginning. As I told you we had like exclusive material and exclusive footage, in the beginning they used to steal it without even crediting us…but it gradually grew into a cooperation between newspapers and blogs."

As noted in Chapter 2, strong evidence from other contexts indicates that journalists read and borrow stories from bloggers (Farrell and Drezner 2008). Every journalist I interviewed in Cairo mentioned at least a handful of blogs that they read on a regular basis – typically this includes Wael Abbas's influential blog, as well as people like Malek

Mustafa, Hossam El-Hamalawy (who writes about labor issues and human rights) and Nora Younis. In fact the universe of prominent bloggers is quite small, limited both by the network structure of the internet (Faris 2008; Shirky 2008) and by the still-limited Internet access for most Egyptians. But this tiny elite of bloggers and journalists is able to have outsize influence on public affairs, due to their interconnectedness with journalists – in fact many prominent Egyptian bloggers are or were journalists to begin with. As Ajemian notes, "…the value of blogs as a form of new media is that they allow for individual grass roots political journalism and facilitate the creation of a counter-public sphere of discourse that has the potential to penetrate mainstream media" (Ajemian 2008). Digital media serve to amplify the social connections between journalists and elite bloggers, making it far more likely that certain bloggers will receive press attention, or that their work will be picked up or "borrowed" by reporters.

Observers are split about the relationship between bloggers and the press. "My own theory is that bloggers want to replace old media," says Atia. "Any new media wants to become old media."[16] As even the activists themselves acknowledge, there is an element of competition and jealousy between members of the traditional media and the "blogosphere," with each side asserting its primacy and in many cases questioning the authenticity and legitimacy of the other. However, this competition does not negate the idea that the electronic media – spearheaded by SMN Activists who have their feet both in citizen journalism and activism – have taken their place in the Egyptian media and discursive environments and have irrevocably altered both. In some cases Egyptian SMN Activists see themselves as the only unrestrained and reliable sources of political

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[16] Interview with Tarek Atia, Cairo, Egypt. February 6th, 2008.

information, while the journalists view the bloggers as sensationalist and unprofessional. These repeated accusations are leveled, but at the same time most participants in this discourse understand that they are situated in a particular media environment and that they are each playing distinctive and important roles.

What SMNs accomplish in Egyptian politics is to expand the public sphere to accommodate new "claims-makers." As Maratea (2008) argues, the traditional press serves a "gatekeeping function" which serves to restrict access to the media and to control the content of what reaches the mass public (140). Citizens have traditionally had very little control over or input into the content of mass media, serving largely as recipients of information and consumers of entertainment and news (Maratea 2008, 141). However, the rise of digital media has created an environment in which individuals have the opportunity to interrogate the social and political worlds, and to influence the content of news coverage (Delli Carpini 2004). There is also, undeniably, an aspect of the Internet that has consolidated the interests of commerce (Pajnik 2005), but the reality of commercial domination of the Internet does not exclude the potential for the promotion of alternative discourses. As Maratea writes, "…the Web makes it feasible for average citizens to disseminate their own commentaries on mainstream media coverage, political events, or any other issue of relevance" (2008, 142).

*3.2 SMNs and the Egyptian Press Environment*

In Egypt, while there are certainly strains and invective between these two groups, the relationship is actually much more complicated and cooperative than one might be led to believe. 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" (Rugh 2007, 9). 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 what 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 (2008, 11) details the ordeal that awaiting the would-be publishers of *El-Badeel* in 2007, who were forced to wait months upon months for their license.

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 (Salih 2007, 13-15). The most-read and most important government papers are the dailies *Al-Akhbar*, *Al-Ahram*, and *Al-Gumhuriya,* while other government-aligned newspapers of note include *Rose Al-Yusef*. These papers, while not averse to carrying criticism of the government at times, generally toe the editorial line of the ruling National Democratic Party, and are known for ignoring stories that are unfavorable to the regime, or at least initiating coverage much later than other media. It is generally agreed that the Egyptian press environment was energized with the founding of the daily opposition paper *Al-Masry Al-Youm* in 2004, as well as the re-issuing of *Al-*

*Dustur*, first as a weekly, and then in 2007 as a daily. Their publication followed changes in the press laws that ended the government's monopoly on news information inside Egypt.

Today these two newspapers are by far the most important and influential opposition newspapers in Egypt, trailed in importance and circulation by the liberal opposition daily *El-Badeel*[17] and a handful of others. These opposition papers are willing to carry frank and often direct criticism of the Mubarak regime, and have tended to cover stories that the government papers won't touch. The existence of this independent press calls into question the routine lumping of Arab media systems together under the umbrella of unfree, and ignores the values that Arab journalists may share (Iskander 2007). As such they tend to carry a certain legitimacy not possessed by the government dailies, even while they seem to have a reputation for sensationalism that was only further reinforced in the summer of 2007 when *Al-Dustur* in particular headlined concerns about the health of President Mubarak and relayed rumors of his death. *Al-Dustur* Editor-in-Chief Ibrahim Eissa paid a steep price for these decisions, after being sentenced to six months in prison with hard labor.[18] In this environment it cannot be argued that blogs and new media are the only available forms of dissent available to Egyptians – one need only turn to the op-ed page of any major or minor opposition or party paper to see direct criticism of the state – although of course there are red lines, such as calling for regime change or insulting the president or his family, which are not always observed online.

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[17] *El-Badeel* has ceased its daily edition as of May 2009.
[18] "Egypt editor sentenced to six months, free on bond." *Reuters*, March 26th, 2008. http://africa.reuters.com/top/news/usnBAN635621.html. Accessed April 8th, 2008.

Instantaneous communication, as noted in Chapter 2, is very important in Egypt.

Such was the case this past year, when an imprisoned American journalist used Twitter to

get himself out of jail after covering a labor demonstration (Simon 2008). One major

newspaper editor admitted that on the day of the events in question, he turned not to Al-

Ahram or even his own paper, but rather to the blogs, for information about what was

happening and where.  He argues,

> I've been working on Sunday until the late evening for the first edition or the
> second edition, so this was my day off, so I've taken Monday a vacation. When I
> wake up in the morning I didn't turn on my TV or wandering around the papers,
> I've just opened the blogs and Haraka Masria site, and opened my email there is a
> very famous mailing group called al-Mahroosa, and I found many, many news
> entries for my knowledge. I want to know what's happening all night, and this is
> the first source I visited to know what's happening at night.[19]

This was due both to the reliability of the bloggers in question – earned the hard way over

a period of years – and to the structural advantages enjoyed by blogs and mobile media.

As noted in Chapter 2, (some) SMN platforms offer the possibility of remaining

pseudonymous to their writers and activists, particularly in a state whose security services

do not appear to be terribly sophisticated technologically. The roster of pseudonymous

Egyptian bloggers is long, from the caustic right-wing Sandmonkey to the reflective

Baheyya, and the critical Zeinobia, but the fact remains that the medium gives these

writers the option to remain anonymous to the security services.[20] The Egyptian

government has recently deployed new identity-tracking software in Internet cafes, but

with constantly-evolving and freely-available masking software it is unlikely that the

state will be able to clamp down on the kind of activity it would like to see stopped. And

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[19] Interview with Ehab El-Zalaky, Cairo Egypt. April 8th, 2008.
[20] At least in the case of the Sandmonkey, the author eventually came to feel that the security forces did indeed know who he was.

as Shapiro notes, activists are increasingly migrating to sites that are dual-purpose, like Facebook – commercial in purpose, but used cleverly by regime opponents to advance their claims (Shapiro 2008). The regime, in turn, has grown increasingly successful infiltrating those sites and forcing activists to move to still other applications, as we will see in Chapter 4.

SMN activists are willing to violate the red lines of the Egyptian media environment and to take quite unusual risks of punishment, arrest, imprisonment, or worse, therefore allowing them to report on issues and events that might go unreported in the state-aligned, opposition, or party presses. It is not that bloggers have never been arrested – on the contrary nearly every activist can tell stories of harassment, intimidation, arrest, and in some cases even torture – but rather that few have been sentenced, and even fewer have stopped writing and organizing due to these efforts, and thus many bloggers express a willingness to risk arrest for the sake of truth-telling and dissent. The fact that these individuals do not have to report to editors or institutions who might be wary of having their entire operations shut down by the state only makes it more likely that SMN activists will cross these boundaries and not ordinary journalists. This absence of institutional oversight and control – something that has been criticized by observers[21] actually means that the element of caution present in established relations between the regime and the opposition press is completely absent in the blogosphere. Bloggers report to no one but themselves and their readers, and they express their commitment to taking this responsibility quite seriously. As Mina Zakry of the Arab Network For Human

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[21] See for example the comments of Abdullah Schleiffer at the December, 17th, 2007 *BBC Free To Speak* debate held in Cairo, Egypt.

Rights Information (and the blog Egypt Watchman) told me, "Through my blog I was defending freedom of expression, freedom of religion, practicing political and social criticism."[22] Another activist for the Muslim Brotherhood, who infiltrated the show-trials of the organization's senior leadership, remarked that "Of course I am afraid, but I don't care, because it's my life in this country. I have been arrested two times."[23] This lack of reticence about the repercussions of activism is widespread in the small blogging and human rights community.

The content provided by SMNs increasingly resembles traditional reporting in terms of its emphasis on communicating hard news, often about arrests, reports of torture, violations of human rights, and other reports of abuses by the regime. In fact these citizen journalists function effectively as their own news agencies, and have developed a following that makes them more – or at least just as – respected and trusted than the traditional "blogger" who is not out on the street. The influence of bloggers on the public sphere takes place through social network connections between bloggers and journalists – connections that are strengthened (or created) by the capability of SMNs to bridge social clusters. Even when claims advanced in the blogosphere are not immediately picked up by journalists who may have other stories to cover, they provide what Maratea calls "a database of available claims" that can be drawn upon during lulls in news coverage (Maratea 2008, 156).

In many ways, the development of citizen journalism has led to a bifurcation of Egyptian blogging, one path leading to Wael Abbas and his style of first-hand reporting,

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[22] Interview with Mina Zakry, Cairo, Egypt, March 27th, 2008.
[23] Interview with Ahmed Abdel Fattah, Cairo, Egypt, December 10th, 2007.

photography, video-taking, Twittering, and commentary, and the other to what most people imagine when they think of a blog – an often acerbic, individualistic take on the news and other people's writing – the style pioneered in Egypt by the Sandmonkey. And as Hossam El-Hamalawy caustically notes of that blog, "He represents himself and like ten other people in the whole republic."[24] And while both have their utility and their role in the Egyptian media environment, it is becoming increasingly clear that the individuals who have the most influence are those who practice the former – those who perform all of the functions of traditional journalist but who are willing to cross lines and violate taboos that professional Egyptian journalists are (typically) unwilling to do.

Generally, the impact of blogs on the media in Egypt can be broken down into four categories. The first is *breaking* stories, when SMN activists either report original information not carried anywhere else in the news universe, or when an activist is actually present to provide the first-hand reporting. The second is *documenting* stories, when a SMN activist is present to provide unique textual, photographic, or video evidence of stories that were already present or would have been reported on in any case. The third is *transmission*, when SMN activists post or share videos, stories, or photos of something that has already happened, via a third party.  Finally, there is *red-lining*, the practice of SMN activists crossing traditional media boundaries in a case or cases in which traditional media practitioners are unwilling or unable to say or print certain things. The remainder of this chapter will detail one instance of each of these phenomena, which challenge the null hypothesis in different ways.

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[24] Interview with Hossam El-Hamalawy, Cairo, Egypt, May 27th, 2009.

*3.3 Breaking Stories: Sexual Harassment in Downtown Cairo*

In the spring of 2005, Egyptian blogs began to attract international attention, as they

served as a platform for coordinated protests against a proposed Constitutional

amendment (Radsch 2008). However, perhaps the defining moment of Egyptian blogging

took place in October of 2006, during the Muslim holiday of Eid al-Fitr. Downtown

Cairo witnessed a string of mob-like sexual assaults on women – assaults that initially

went unreported in the Egyptian press. By coincidence, two of Egypt's more well-known

SMN activists, Wael Abbas and Malek Mustafa, happened to be on the scene at the time.

A clearly horrified Malek (who blogs as Malcolm-X), detailed the assaults in all their

grotesque gratuity on his blog. Amira al-Husseini of Global Voices provided this

translation of Malek's initial report:

> We saw a large number of men whistling and running in the direction of Adly
> Street. We went with them to see what was happening. I was surprised to see a
> girl in her early 20s falling on the ground and a mob of men gathering around
> her, feeling up her body and tearing her clothes off her. I didn't understand or
> rather I couldn't comprehend what was happening. The girl got up and ran into
> a restaurant and hid inside. Some boys surrounded the restaurant and wouldn't
> leave until one of them shouted that there was another one coming. All of them
> ran towards Talaat Street again and there I saw a girl who was completely
> surrounded by a mob of hundreds of men trying to touch her body and take off
> her clothes. This girl was rescued by a taxi driver, who pulled her into his taxi.
> But the boys would not allow the taxi through and formed a circle around the
> car," he said.[25]

Despite the presence of bloggers and the pictures and videos circulating on the

Internet, the press remained completely silent for days. However, the first penetration

of the official silence came via a report on Dream TV on October 28th, with talk show

host Mona El Shazly and other reporters confirming the allegations with other

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[25] Ibid.

witnesses and shopkeepers (Al-Malky 2007). Then with a series of press articles, the

official silence began to crack. The first paper to run a report was *Al-Fagr*, by the

journalist Wael Abdel Fattah. Other outlets of the independent press soon followed

suit, including *Al-Masry Al-Youm* and the still-weekly *Al-Dustur*. The November 1st

issue of Al-Dustur, "borrowing" pictures straight from Abbas's blog, ran no less than

8 articles directly or indirectly addressing the incident.[26] Articles and criticism

followed in all the major independent and party newspapers, eventually trickling into

the official press. The regime denied that anything untoward happened downtown,

while the official press was largely silent. Typically when that silence was broken, it

initially took the form of attacking Abbas himself, a pattern that would become sadly

familiar in the years to come.[27] However, the protests, coordinated by bloggers such as

The Sandmonkey, forced a debate that eventually reached even the government press.

Activists called for the resignation of Interior Minister Habib El-Adly, which of course

did not happen. However, the more details leaked out about the case, the more it

appeared that sexual harassment on Eid enjoyed the official or unofficial support of

elements of the regime, particularly security forces who either participated in the

assaults or tolerated them.[28]

  With both video and photos, taken on cell phones, the event was difficult, if not

impossible, to credibly deny. What made the story even more poignant were the first-

hand accounts from women that day, some of whom were apparently inspired to begin

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[26] See for instance "al-Dakhiliya ankarat 'adat al-taharrush fi-l-Qahira wa qalat inna kullu shay' tamam ya fandim!" (The Interior Ministry denied the return of harassment in Cairo and said "Everything is fine, Effendim!") Mohamed Khayr. *Al-Dustur Weekly*, November 1st, 2006.
[27] El-Hamalawy, Hossam. "Rosa Al-Youssef hits new rock bottom". *3arabawy*. October 31st, 2006.
[28] This aspect of the case remains, unfortunately, very murky.

blogging by what happened that day. The short-lived blog Wounded Female From Cairo

provided the following account:

> We, girls, had our butts, breasts, and every inch of our bodies grabbed. I
> end up slipping into a car that was parking on the road side when I tried
> to catch one of the [profanity omitted] who insisted and never gave up
> on grabbing my butt. So, I end up with a deep cut in my right hand
> palm and another one on my thumb of the same hand as I slipped into
> the car's headlight that broke and cut my hand. 6 stitches on my hand
> palm cut and 3 on my thumb--still my anger is pretty fresh in the deep
> inside of me that makes want me to put all Egyptian men on fire right
> now for what they have caused...Don't you have sisters who can also
> face the same thing as we did?[29]

The story was another instance of SMN's providing undeniable evidence of a

social or political trend that many people may have preferred to ignore. Blog entries like

*Wounded Girl From Cairo* also provided indispensible platforms for the coordinated

protests that followed (including protests on November 9th and November 14th, 2006), a

subject that will be returned to in Chapter 4. While of course many Egyptians were aware

of the prevalence of sexual harassment, most were untouched by it or had never

witnessed it first-hand. The videos and pictures that made it out of the Eid harassment

story forced individuals to confront the reality of sexual harassment, much like the torture

scandal in 2007 – also propelled into the press from the blogosphere – forced Egyptians

to confront another unpleasant aspect of their government.  While the two incidents may

not have led to a regime change or substantial legal revisions, they did change the context

of the relationship between the regime and its people.

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[29] Girl4Cairo. "LOOK AT ME." *Wounded Girl From Cairo*. Thursday, November 9th,
2006. http://woundedgirlfromcairo.blogspot.com/2006/11/look-at-me.html

Several factors propelled the sexual harassment story out of the blogosphere and into the mainstream discourse. First, the assaults exposed the prominence of sexual harassment in Egypt, and deeply embarrassed the regime. Second the assaults appeared to dovetail with two major social problems in Egypt – the continuing delay in the age of marriage and the mounting sexual frustration of the country's young men (and women, although of course discourse focused on the former). Third, elements of the emerging SMN sphere contributed to the viral effectiveness of the story, such as the existence of digital videos which could be passed around through email and hyperlinks, and the ubiquity of pictures and first-hand accounts that the regime was unable to quash despite a total press blackout for the first week following the events. In short, blogs, mobile videos and the Internet made possible a staying power for this story that, while not impossible in the past, would have been phenomenally unlikely. Finally, the story was almost instantly picked up by international observers and organizations like *Global Voices*, which provided further extensive coverage and amplification of the events, and drove the shaming of the Egyptian government for its total inaction, particularly when it appeared that sexual harassment might interfere with the booming Egyptian tourism industry. This was a story that the activists refused to allow to die.

Crucially, however, the online writing and dissent moved into the real-world, with protests that were organized in part by the Sandmonkey.[30] And when the independent press started covering the story, they did so with vigor, forcing the government finally to acknowledge that something was at stake. That press attention culminated in a series of protests and a still-ongoing campaign against sexual harassment, spread across the

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[30] Interview with the Sandmonkey, Cairo, Egypt, March 23rd, 2008.

blogosphere and a number of human rights organizations. Blogs had officially become a

force to be reckoned with. Wael Abbas, who witnessed the events and wrote about them

on his blog, argues,

> Now with flocks of young people harassing and molesting girls, in a
> religious feast, in downtown cairo, or in the absence of the police or the police were
> there but didn't interfere, it brought to light the issue of sexual harassment in
> general in workplaces and families, and it made it to be discussed in TV talk shows,
> even in the official newspapers they couldn't ignore it. The only thing that pissed
> them off was that we exposed that the police were negligent for what was going
> on.[31]

The jump to international outlets was an acute embarrassment for the Egyptian

government and society, which relies so heavily on tourist receipts – not from the United

States, but from elsewhere in the West and the Middle East. For Egypt to develop a

reputation as a place that is unsafe for women to travel would be devastating for the

tourism industry. Still the state-run press dismissed the story, smeared the people

propagating it, and denied any official culpability. As Ehab El-Zalaky, Deputy Editor of

*Al-Masry Al-Youm* in 2008, says:

> it was a big shock for the whole society for that matter. You know that it
> happens Eid al-Fitr after the holy month of Ramadan ...so it was an explosive
> story for the blogs for two or three days, the first things came after that period of
> silence, it was being circulated as a story, and many were talking about what was
> happening, people in all of Egypt were talking about it, and there was pure
> silence from the mainstream media, and there was a statement from the interior
> ministry that no such thing happened at all. The first thing was published in *Al-
> Ahram* and denied what happened, and talking about things on their sites from
> their imaginations, some of the independent newspapers started to write about
> the issue, at the same time – blogs were trying to back each other, so some of the
> blogs published some blurry pictures taken with mobile phones, so it wasn't
> very clear what was happening, after about a week, one of the Egyptians who
> was living in the States sent Wael Abbas a video shot taken a year before that,

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[31] Interview with Wael Abbas. Cairo, Egypt, April 14th, 2008.

which detailed another mass sexual harassment in Cairo streets, he take the shots and took it back to the States and never thought about publishing it.[32]

El-Zalaky's last point makes it clear that this sexual harassment during Eid was not something new in 2006, but rather something that had happened in the past but that remained an undocumented rumor.[33] The tools of SMN's made it possible for distant contacts to pass videos through enhanced social networks, and the credibility of the bloggers in the streets allowed them to establish the veracity of the events in question. The way that the story went from rumor to full-blown media event in a matter of days calls to mind the kind of informational cascades discussed in Chapter 2. And the way it called attention to previously subordinated events recalls both El-Zalaky's claim that blogs provide "a voice for the voiceless" and serves as evidence for the efficacy of SMN's breaking news.

The linkages between SMN activists and independent journalists continued to give the story increasingly wide play. *Al-Dustur* ran a series of hard-hitting articles that December, not just about that particular incident, but about sexual harassment in general. The number of articles about sexual harassment in the Egyptian press– hardly a new issue in Egyptian politics – jumped from 33 stories in 2004 to 173 in 2006 and 171 in 2007. Other Arab print outlets picked up on the story, as did regional papers and outlets like Al-Jazeera. The Egyptian Center For Women's Rights launched a campaign against harassment in Egypt that continues to this day, in coordination with grassroots organizations like The Street Is Ours. The point is not that harassment has been

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[32] Interview with Ehab El-Zalaky, Cairo, Egypt, April 8th, 2008
[33] Research through the Middle East Monitor (formerly Zad) confirms the absence of any coverage of these events.

eliminated, for such a deeply-rooted phenomenon is difficult to change in such a short period of time, and after all women are harassed not just in Egypt but all over the West and elsewhere in the Global North. The point is that a cross-political coalition was forged, with the work of SMN activists, to contest the issue of sexual harassment in Egypt. In fact, Eid harassment has continued. In the Fall of 2008, there was a very similar incident that took place downtown – however in contrast to the 2006 incident, when security services did finally arrive, the harassers were arrested. As the Egyptian Center For Women's Rights argues, while it is unfortunate that such incidents still take place, a climate in which the perpetrators are punished does at least represent progress.[34] As Gamal Eid notes, "There are some official coalitions between some groups, but when these cases are finished, every group will be on its own."[35] El-Zalaky believes that this was the moment that bloggers gained domestic credibility: "This is one of the major hits and major turns of the blogs to be known by ordinary people and I think after this incident blogs gained a huge amount of credibility."[36]

*3.4 Documenting: Sudanese Refugees and the State*

Even before the widely-reported genocide in Darfur, Cairo has played host to thousands upon thousands of Sudanese refugees fleeing the country's endemic violence, particularly the civil war between the north and the south. The refugees themselves are in a particularly precarious position in Egyptian society, since many do not speak Arabic, cannot work, are very poor to begin with, and must contend with endemic racism. Overall

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[34] "The Collective Harassment During the Eid El Fitr Holiday and the Absence of a Law." Egyptian Center For Human Rights. Press Release, October 8th, 2008.
[35] Interview with Gamal Eid, Director of the Arab Network for Human Rights Information. Cairo Egypt, February 26th, 2008.
[36] Interview with Ehab Zalaky, Cairo, Egypt, April 8th, 2008.

there are upwards of 1 million refugees in Cairo. The Egyptian and Sudanese

governments signed an agreement in 2004, guaranteeing Sudanese refugees the right to

live, work, own property, move about freely, but critics argued that the agreement was

never implemented and that life for the refugees was very difficult in Cairo.[37] Most

refugees sought resettlement in a third country, not wanting to stay in Egypt where their

plight was grim, but not wanting to return to the endemic violence of their homeland. The

UNHCR had offered voluntary repatriation for the refugees on a case-by-case basis, but

the threat of mass deportation loomed and in any case Sudan itself remained manifestly

unsafe in many places. The Egyptian government, already strapped trying to provide for

its swelling population, had been very reluctant to grant asylum to the refugees, believing

it might lead to more refugees, more asylum applications, and more responsibility that the

government did not seek or want.

On September 29th, 2005, hundreds of asylum-seeking Sudanese refugees began a

months-long sit-in at Midan Mustapha Mahmoud, near the Cairo offices of the UNHCR[38].

Both the Egyptian government and the UNHCR maintained that the refugees were

economic migrants that would not have been in any immediate danger if they were to

return to Sudan.  Whatever the merits of this claim, the refugees, all in danger of

deportation, staged the sit-in to draw attention to their plight. The only attention they

drew, however, was from residents and merchants who considered their day-and-night

presence to be a nuisance. As the months dragged on, it became increasingly clear that

the regime was likely to break up the sit-in by force.

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[37] Nkrumah, Gamal. "Insecure but incisive." Al-Ahram Weekly. 24-30 November, 2005.
[38] "UN 'Shocked" By Violence in Cairo". BBC News. December 30th, 2005.

On New Year's Eve, the journalist and blogger Noura Younis was near

Mohandisin, an upscale neighborhood near downtown Cairo. Younis had been on her

way home when a friend told her that "the police presence in Mohandisin is incredible."

She quickly made her way to the square, and when she arrived, public buses were being

prepared to take the refugees to an undisclosed location. Younis had her camera with her,

but her battery was low, so she began to document what was going on with her cell

camera and SMS messages. Younis was apopolectic. "I realize that I'm there to

document, nobody can stop this at the moment what we can do is not let them get away

with it. I was so angry. I was freaking out and I was crying."[39]

Younis snuck into an adjacent building and camped out on the 10$^{th}$ floor, where

she had an unimpeded view of the goings-on. What she saw was appalling: police had

turned water cannons on the astonished and terrified refugees, herding them toward the

buses. The security forces deployed force against the refugees, beating many of them, and

it was clear even to Younis from her 10$^{th}$-story vantage point that a number of people

were going to lose their lives. December 2005 was pre-Twitter, but Younis sent texts

from her cell phone, took pictures with the phone's camera, and her heretofore largely-

unknown site later became a clearinghouse for information about the incident. Younis

was unquestionably the first journalist on the scene, and the government press barely

mentioned the incident at all. Her account of the evening's events – which turned into a

massacre – was widely linked, reported, and cited by media organizations as a definitive

version of the evening's events came together. Below is an abridged version of her

account, as much an indictment of the racism of the Egyptian observers as it is of the

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[39] Interview with Nora Younis, Cairo Egypt, April 23rd, 2008.

police themselves. She called her account "Ashamed to be an Egyptian," and it detailed the confrontation between the police and the refugees in painstaking detail; Younis even followed the refugees after they were taken away in buses to a detention facility in Dahshur.

Younis' presence at the atrocity allowed for coverage by blogs, independent media, and non-Egyptian international press outlets. In fact, the account was cited as evidence for where the refugees were taken. As Ehab Zelaky argues, "No one wrote and took pictures of what happened like Nora Younis."[40] As Younis herself notes,

> My coverage of the Sudanese refugees, it got covered by the independent media and the blogs. People translated it into I don't know how many languages, it was weird, people were picking it up translating it, and I was getting comments from different places, but the mainstream media did not cover my coverage. The mainstream media commented on the human rights report, there was no report that was issued that did not make reference.[41]

The regime and its press allies predictably tried to pin the blame on the refugees themselves. Notably, the refugees (who were Christian) were said to have been drinking, attacking the police, having sex in public.[42] There was little to no evidence that any of this was actually true, but the rumors were calculated to diminish any potential public sympathy for the refugees themselves. The tourism ministry claimed, absurdly, that the refugees were tourists.[43]

Word leaked out that the surviving refugees were to be deported, which generated a firestorm of criticism in the Egyptian press, and attracted the attention of legal forces

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[40] Interview with Ehab Zelaky, Cairo, Egypt, April 8th, 2008.
[41] Interview with Nora Younis, Cairo Egypt, April 23rd, 2008.
[42] *Ta'dhib fi Masr*. January 2nd, 2006.
[43] Al-A'oumi, Yusef. "Wazarat al-siyaha: laji'u al-Sudan fi Misr siyah." *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, January 5th, 2006.

who sought to prevent the deportation. Younis's story ignited a debate in the press about the refugees themselves, their treatment, and the issue of racism in Egyptian society. It is important, of course, that Younis was on the scene that evening. Without the documentation from her cell phone, press outlets would have had no credible source, aside from eyewitness reports (of which there were many) for the stories that later ran about the massacre.

Coverage of refugee issues did not change much after the massacre, going from 15 articles between 1998 and December 29th 2005[44] to 21 between December 29th 2005 and January 1st 2007. So the immediate upshot appears to be that the Egyptian government relented on its plans to deport 654 refugees from Mustapha Mahmoud. In the aftermath of the incident, the regime had announced plans to deport the refugees. However, in the wake of a series of protests, as well as intense international press attention (which appeared to be more effective than anything that appeared in the Egyptian press)[45] the government relented and agreed to review the status of the refugees. While of course no direct cause and effect can be ascertained here, it would something of a coincidence that the regime agreed to review longstanding plans for the refugees – plans that had been hatched before the massacre in the Midan – just as activists mobilized protests, rights organizations organized on behalf of the refugees, and the regime was receiving negative press attention, both at home and internationally. The regime also saw

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[44] Research conducted through the Middle East Monitor (formerly Zad). Comprehensive searches not available prior to 1998.
[45] Slackman, Michael. "Egypt Says It Won't Deport Any of the Jailed Sudanese". *New York Times*, January 18th, 2006. See also Wright, "Activists Demand Probe in Cairo Killings" Reuters, January 1st, 2006; Ibrahim, Saad Eddin. "Egypt's Democratic Charade." Globe & Mail. January 17th, 2006; "UN 'Shocked' By Violence in Cairo". BBC. December 30th, 2005.

nascent cooperation between liberal and Islamist opposition forces, as the action was widely condemned, and the refugees were supported by the Brotherhood bloc in parliament. This perhaps was what frightened the regime most of all. It was perhaps a minor concern for the regime, but a concern nonetheless.

*3.5 Transmission: Torture and the Fate of Emad El-Kebir*

In January of 2006, a 21-year-old microbus driver named Emad El-Kabir was arrested for attempting to break up a police assault on his cousin. The allegations against El-Kabir, even if true, were relatively minor. However, during his detention, he was subjected to torture by the interrogating police officers, who beat and raped him. El-Kabir himself was nearly powerless to do anything about his brutal treatment by the police; while he could file a complaint, torture is widespread in Egypt, something that most individuals realize is taking place, but that until 2007 received little press attention. However, by 2006 the Mobile Web had arrived in Egypt, and one of the officers engaged in the practice of taping El-Kabir's torture with his cell phone, and then passing the video around to others.

The video, taken in January 2006, apparently passed around Cairo social networks for nearly a year before it arrived in the hands of bloggers like Demagh MAK and Wael Abbas. The video itself is graphic and devastating, as El-Kabir pleads with his captors, whimpering "*Ma'lish ya basha*! (Forget about it, Pasha!)". The naked El-Kabir is savagely sodomized with a nightstick – the video was so graphic that Youtube, where it was eventually posted as well, briefly suspended the account of Wael Abbas, who had posted it. Social Media Networks have the ability to accelerate the transmission of

information – including messages, videos, and frames – out of target networks, and this appears to be what eventually happened in this case as well. The officers who were supposed to share the video instead forwarded it along to someone – it is not clear who – who then passed the video on to the blogger Wael Abbas. Abbas posted the torture video to his blog in December 2006, and generated interest on the part of traditional media practitioners – while torture is widely-acknowledged, it is rarely discussed, and even more rarely documented so graphically.

El-Kabir himself apparently played no role in the dissemination of the video; in fact, when Abbas published the video on his blog, no one even knew who the victim actually was. As Abbas says, "I didn't know who he was and where, and what were the circumstances and when, and so an independent investigative journalist was able to find the microbus driver and interview him."[46] The journalist, Wael Abdel Fattah was from the independent newspaper *El-Fagr*[47], further underscoring the importance of cooperation between SMN activists and traditional media practitioners[48]. Other media outlets quickly piled on the case, with *Al-Masry Al-Youm* claiming to publish the first photo of an officer responsible for the torture of El-Kabir.[49] *Al-Masry Al-Youm* credited *El-Fagr* for breaking the story in its first piece on El-Kabir.[50] The publication of the story in different independent press outlets (none of which had anywhere near the circulation

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[46] Interview with Wael Abbas. Cairo, Egypt, April 14th, 2008.
[47] Saleh, Heba. "Fears for Egypt torture victim." BBC News, January 16th, 2007. http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/6264193.stm
[48] Abdel Fattah, Wael. "Officer from Qism al-Haram torture video arrested." *El-Fagr*, November 27th, 2006.
[49] Al-Sayyid, Emad. "Al-Masry Al-Youm: Alone in publishing the first picture of the officer in Bulaaq accused of torturing Emad Al-Kabir." Al-Masry Al-Youm, December 29th, 2006.
[50] Al-Sayyid, Emad. "El-Fagr batal fadihat al-ta'dhib fi bulaq: al-mabahith sawamatni wa-'arghamatni 'ala takdhib" (El-Fagr is the hero of the torture scandal in Bulaq: the secret police coerced and forced me into lying)

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of government dailies at the time) contributed to a kind of critical mass. Columnists denounced the torture and wrote about the venality of the practice, while newspapers covered the case in-depth as it made its way through the court system. El-Kabir's torture and the subsequent focus on torture as a practice constituted a kind of informational cascade. El-Kabir himself put himself at great risk when he decided to step forward and push for the prosecution of the officers themselves.

Perhaps more offensive to public sensibilities than the initial, undeniable torture was the fact that El-Kabir was subsequently sentenced to three months in prison for "resisting the authorities."[51] The re-arrest of El-Kabir signaled to observers that the authorities were unrepentant and bent on maintaining total hegemony. However, because the case had broken in the media, the regime was no longer able to keep the story hidden, and unable to convince anyone that El-Kabir had resisted the authorities, not with such graphic evidence on display for everyone to see. The idea that torture is widespread in Egypt became unremarkable, and press outlets became increasingly outspoken critics of Egyptian torture practices – with some even denouncing Mubarak himself in addition to El-Adly. Addressing Mubarak directly, Magdi Al-Gallad wrote in *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, "There is something terribly wrong, your Excellency, in the philosophy and ideology of the law enforcement agencies in Egypt" (Al-Galad 2007). Mohamed Baghdadi wrote that the videos were not evidence of the reality of corruption, since "everything is corrupt."[52] *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, in particular, provided ongoing coverage of torture in Egypt,

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[51] El-Hamalawy, Hossam. "El-Adly Videogate: Torture Victim Receives 3 Months in Prison for "resisting authorities"! *Arabawy*. January 9th, 2007.
[52] Baghdadi, Mohamed. "Fan ta'dhib al-muwatin." (The art of torturing the citizen). *Al-Masry Al-Youm*,

documenting torture complaints[53], publishing op-eds, and following the El-Kabir case as

it progressed. The paper also went into unusual, and gory, detail about conditions inside

the stations.[54] The independent press also provided close coverage of other torture and

abuse scandals, such as the slapping of a man named Ahmed Gad and the abuse of a

female murder suspect who was interrogated while suspended from a stick, like a spitfire

grill.

The El-Kabir case wound its way through the Egyptian court system, finally resulting in

sentences for the officers on November 6th, 2007[55]. While the sentences were light

considering the overwhelming evidence in the case, it was a small victory for human

rights activists. The years since 2007 have seen the solidification of a de facto alliance

against torture[56] Ultimately the significance of the El-Kabir case goes far beyond the

prosecution of three individual police officers, though that in and of itself was an

accomplishment for the opposition. Abbas and his fellow bloggers succeeded in making

torture a serious issue in the Egyptian public sphere, and the controversy appears to have

ignited a kind of coalition against torture – a coalition that reaches beyond traditional

political left-right boundaries and encompasses everyone that is interested in seeing more

serious implementation of the rule of law. Actors appear to recognize their mutual

interest in seeing practices of torture abolished or abated, and are acting rationally in that

self-interest. The Egyptian Human Rights Organization, for instance, is supported by the

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[53] Shalaby, Ahmed. "16 cases of torture inside police stations in July alone." *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, August 4th, 2007.
[54] Al-Dassouki, Farouk. "Adawat al-ru'b fi aqsam al-shurta." (Instruments of horror in police stations). *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, August 18th, 2007.
[55] McDonough, Challis. "Prison Term for Egyptian Police in Widely-Published Torture Case." *VOA News*, November 6th, 2007.
[56] Chapter 4 will explore how this *de facto* alliance uses SMN's to facilitate on-the-ground organizing, particularly Twitter.

Muslim Brotherhood faction in parliament, and together they publicly oppose the practices of the Mubarak regime with regards to torture – uniting under the guise of international legal conventions (Abdel Halim 2009). This not only suggests an emerging coalition, but also points to the power of international rights activism. Rights activist organizations who had long written about and documented torture in Egypt also noted the importance of the El-Kabir case.[57]

## *3.6 Red-lining: The Case of Al-Qursaya*

In late 2007, one of the biggest political controversies in Egypt involved a tiny island on the Nile in Cairo called Al-Qursaya. Home to some 5,000, largely impoverished Cairenes[58], the island was suddenly inundated with the regime's armed forces in the Spring of 2007. The exact purpose of the takeover was the subject of intense speculation, but the effort was eerily similar to another attempted regime takeover of Al-Qursaya and another Nile Island, that of Gold Island (Jazirat Al-Dhahab) in 2001. The most common, and plausible, explanation was that developers wanted to get their hands on the island, and that the Egyptian army was financially implicated in the takeover. Even with the independent press involved in the fight, however, it seemed like a David vs. Goliath situation. The army is a red line in Egyptian politics and journalism, and any public discussion of the armed forces is forbidden. No matter the outcry, in all likelihood the army would be able to do as it pleased to the island, regardless of the wishes of its marginalized residents. However, within a year the regime's plans for Al-Qursaya would

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[57] "Egypt: Hold Police Accountable For Torture." *Human Rights Watch.org.* December 12th, 2006. http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2006/12/22/egypt-hold-police-accountable-torture
[58] "An island occupied in Egypt." BBC radio World Service. http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/outlook/2008/01/080121_qursaya_egypt.shtml

be in tatters, defeated in two courts – the Egyptian legal system and in the court of public opinion.

The Al-Qursaya Island case presents a different kind of challenge to entrenched power. Unlike the sexual harassment and torture cases, the Al-Qursaya Island incident does not appear to have begun on the Internet or in the blogosphere, instead breaking initially in the independent press. The general outlines of the Al-Qursaya case remain somewhat murky despite considerable press attention to the subject. This murkiness is rooted in the involvement of the Egyptian army in the proceedings, meaning that ordinary press outlets writing in Arabic have been incapable of telling the true story of what went on between September of 2007 and the Spring of 2008. It is also true that officials involved in the takeover of Qursaya adamantly deny the idea that residents were to be evicted so that the Qursaya could be turned into some sort of neoliberal tourist paradise. However, because the government made a similar attempt on another Nile island earlier in the decade, the regime's credibility on this issue was low to begin with. The murkiness surrounding the takeover of Qursaya is given emphatic life in the signs posted all over the island after the army's arrival, announcing that Qursaya "….belongs to the army. No photography."[59]

The island of Al-Qursaya itself is a small outgrowth in the middle of the Nile, home to a population of fisherman and other hardscrabble Egyptians, and a place that has so far resisted the Westernized development that now characterizes other parts of Cairo. There had been rumors about the impending takeover in the Egyptian press as far back as the previous spring, but nothing concrete emerged until the army arrived, treating the

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[59] "Cairo farmers fight army for land." *AFP*. November 11, 2007.

island and its citizens like occupied territory. However, many of the residents have ownership deeds on their houses that in some cases go back 150 years, giving the lie to regime propaganda that the residents are squatters impeding the development of the Egyptian economy and tourism.

Almost immediately the independent press pounced on the story and began muckraking, turning Al-Qursaya into a virtual cause célèbre for the country's opposition. In June 2007, stories began to appear in independent press outlets like *Al-Dustur* warning that a vast crime was about to be committed against the indigent inhabitants of the island. At the time the story fed into a general press atmosphere of contempt for the Mubarak regime's lawless venality, and the press used its more sensational style to play up the story for its hungry audiences. Coming immediately on the heels of months worth of rumors about Mubarak's death, the trial of prominent editors, and a burgeoning economic crisis, the Al-Qursaya Island takeover represented to many the total venality of the Mubarak regime and its contempt for ordinary citizens.

One blogger who wrote about Al-Qursaya was former physician Mina Zakry. As he tells the story, "The government with some businessmen wanted to take over. Armed forces from the army went down to the island and intimidated the people, pushing them to sell the land, or even to just evacuate it."[60] Zakry acknowledges that newspapers were covering the story, but insists that they were unable to tell the entire tale. In the carefully-honed tradition of self-censorship, the news stories would write clear around the issue of an army takeover. As Zakry argues, "They [print reporters] would even say something like "a dominant body" or a "high entity" – the law prevents anything." This impression

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[60] Interview with Mina Zakry, Cairo, Egypt, March 24th, 2008.

is widespread, as is the idea that outside of *Al-Dustur* and *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, no one wanted to touch this story. On November 13th, 2007, weeks prior to Zakry's story, The Sandmonkey asked himself why the media wasn't reporting on the island takeover. His answer was "Because critisizing [sic] the army in any way can land you for at least year in jail. Plus, whatchu gonna do? Call them thieves? Can't really steal what you already own, and they own all of our asses."[61] The AFP story that Sandmonkey links to makes this same point – "Emergency laws in place for decades mean that any Egyptian will think twice about reporting on military activity, and the few media references to what is happening on the island studiously avoid mentioning the army."[62]

Research confirms the allegation that even the independent press was unwilling to print the truth about the island's takeover. Typical of this reticence is Fahmy Howeidi's December 27th *Al-Dustur* op-ed "Ghazwat Al-Qursaya." In his acerbic piece, in which he criticizes the island's takeover and lauds the efforts of the islanders, he refers to the perpetrators as "armed soldiers." While this may seem like a hair-splitting difference, it is in fact a deliberate semantic choice to avoid fingering the Army. This is in spite of the well-known fact that reporters were well aware of exactly who it was that was sending forces into the island and causing trouble between the regime and its residents. Howeidi even went to the trouble of writing a follow-up column for *Al-Dustur*, "Hidden Realities of Al-Qursaya" in which he writes about "armed forces" being behind the takeover, but refuses pointedly to direct attention to the Army. Some realities in Egypt must remain

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[61] Sandmonkey. "Al-Qursaya Island." *Rantings of a Sandmonkey*. Tuesday, November 13th, 2007.
[62] "Cairo farmers fight army for land." *AFP*. November 11th, 2007.

hidden. This was a pattern followed by nearly all other reporters and columnists at the time.

According to Zakry, an *Al-Masry Al-Youm* reporter dropped the Al-Qursaya Island file into his lap one day, claiming that the newspaper couldn't print the truth about what was really going on. Zakry, understanding the risks involved in telling the truth, decided to proceed anyway.[63] On December 3rd, 2007, Zakry published a story on his blog about the army takeover of Al-Qursaya. The entry was entitled "Video: The army conquers Al-Qursaya Island."[64]  The entry contains an embedded video that depicts the unmistakable signs of the Egyptian armed forces (*al-quwat al-musaliha*). Soldiers on a boat are captured on video by an intrepid cameraman, and those soldiers, as the commentary indicates, are clearly not from other organs of the Egyptian security apparatus.[65]

In the entry, Zakry claims that other than one story in *El-Badeel* (at the time a new paper with an extraordinarily limited circulation) he was the only person willing to go on record with the Army allegations. To his surprise he was not arrested – suggesting that perhaps the crossing of so-called "red lines" is possible in Egypt's new press environment, through a process of challenge-and-response. It is also possible that he got away with it because no one connected to the regime actually noticed. But perhaps once a new red line has been violated, other journalists and bloggers look to the transgressor to see whether he or she is punished. SMN activists are taking the lead in this process. Zakry's story was one small piece of a very large campaign on behalf of Al-Qursaya's

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[63] This version of events was confirmed to me by anonymous sources inside the newspaper.
[64] In Arabic: bi-l-fidyu: iqtiham al-jaysh jazirat al-qursaya.
[65] Egyptian security forces are divided into a dizzying array of different services.

residents, which unfolded over the course of the year. In November of 2008, the regime

was finally defeated in court, and the army takeover was halted (Abdel Hamid and el-

Karnashawi, 2008). While it is still possible that the army will resume its plans for the

island once the furor has passed, activists can legitimately claim this as a substantial

victory for the residents.

In addition to Zakry's reporting, digital media gave activists and citizens other

tools for pooling their resources. The reporting on Al-Qursaya falls under the umbrella of

awareness-raising. As Fenton writes,

> The internet has become home to mediated activity that seeks to raise
> people's awareness, to give a voice to those who do not have one, to
> offer social empowerment, to allow disparate people and causes to form
> alliances, and ultimately to be used as a tool for social change (Fenton
> 2008, 233).

Dozens of other bloggers took up the cause. The blogger Ahmed Al-Hiwari wrote a post,

typical of the blogging response to the crisis, on December 3rd, 2007 entitled "Al-Qursaya:

Island of Fear."[66] The article, which clearly editorialized against the takeover, featured

original reporting and gave first-hand insight into the lives of the islanders. This period of

early December was one of great import for electronic resistance to the takeover; the

prominent left-wing blogger Hossam El-Hamalawy, co-founder of the influential

English-language blog *The Arabist*, made a number of posts on the issue. On December

4th, for instance, he posted three videos of the island, one depicting islanders resisting the

armed forced, and another a documentary by the filmmaker Mohamed Abla.[67]

Hamalawy's story (and another story that same day on the main Arabist page by Issandr

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[66] http://masr.20at.com/newArticle.php?sid=12711. Accessed January 20th, 2008.
[67] El-Hamalawy, Hossam. "Resisting Mubarak's Army." *3ara\bawy*. December 4th, 2007.

El-Amrani) was the catalyst for a *Global Voices* story on December 5th, which placed the island takeover in the context of increasing regime incursions into civil society.

The photo-sharing site Flickr, for instance, was used to coordinate the upload of photographs of the island and its people. Bloggers reported the times and dates of demonstrations, and contributed to an environment in which the Al-Qursaya takeover was becoming a PR nightmare for the Mubarak regime. Facebook also became a site of dissent and resistance, presaging the site's role in the April 6th, 2008 general strike that brought widespread notoriety to the social networking site. Shortly after the publication of Zakry's story – which was widely linked in the small Egyptian blogging community – a group was formed called "*Anqidhu ahali jazirat al-Qursaya*" (Save the People of Al-Qursaya Island). It quickly boasted hundreds of members, and its wall featured links to outside stories and the times and dates of demonstrations.[68] In November 2007, over 600 people gathered for a press conference to promote a documentary about the residents (Singer 2007). Prominent human rights lawyers – including Amir Salim, who represented jailed opposition leader Ayman Nour – filed a case on behalf of the residents[69], drawing on a 2001 Prime Ministerial decrees which allowed the residents of nearby Gold Island to stay in their homes. Egyptian celebrities got into the act, staging a protest on New Year's Day to draw attention to the plight of the islanders. The pace of press coverage picked up,

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[68] Facebook. (Save the People of
Qursaya). http://www.facebook.com/wall.php?id=19903372840&page=1&hash=8177ac749eb7a592f4d53d
a247f9c038

[69] "Egyptian army weighs in on disputed Nile island." *Reuters*. December 12th, 2007.
http://www.reuters.com/article/inDepthNews/idUSL0664802420071212?pageNumber=2&virtualBrandCha
nnel=0

and the government press was forced to provide some grudging coverage. Protests were

arranged, including one at the journalists' syndicate downtown (Carr 2008).

Ultimately, the government – which had been stonewalling the press for months –

was forced to admit that it had drafted plans for the island. On January 4th, *Al-Dustur*

columnist Ibrahim Monsour reported that the government had admitted that it had

planned to turn the island into a tourist resort (Monsour 2008). Simply getting the

government to admit to this can be considered a minor triumph, considering the murky

relationship between the executive and the Army. The fact that residents ultimately

triumphed is remarkable. Zakry's account also coincided with an increase in the density

of coverage of the Al-Qursaya case. Between May 2007 and December 3rd, 2007, 85

stories appeared in the Egyptian print media on the crisis – mostly in the independent

newspapers Al-Masry Al-Youm, Al-Dustur, and El-Badeel.[70] Except for a handful of

stories, the state-controlled press largely ignored the story or printed accounts of

ministerial defenses of government conduct.[71] Between December 3rd, 2007, and

December 1st, 2008, however, that number jumped to 194 stories. While the majority of

these stories appeared in the independent press, the official press was forced to confront

the issue as well, with substantive articles describing the conflict appearing in *Rose Al-*

*Yusef*, *Al-Ahram*, *Al-Gumhuriya*, and others.

The relevant comparison for the Al-Qursaya takeover is not difficult to discern –

the regime has in fact made multiple attempt to seize the island, as well as others on the

Nile. A similar attempt failed in 2001, when the government was once again opposed in

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[70] Research was conducted through keyword searches via the Middle East Monitor (formerly Zad).
[71] See for example, the November 7th, 2007 story in *Al-Gumhuriya*.

court (Fayza 2001). However, the specifics of that case are difficult to come by – since

not a single article was published in the Egyptian or Arabic press about the case.[72] Since

the government did not successfully take over the island in 2001, we can assume that

press attention and digital media are not the only causal variable at work here – clearly

the government does not control the judicial system to the extent that some observers

imagine (Rutherford 2008). However, the outcry caused by the 2007 edition of the case

was far and away more extensive than anything that occurred in 2001; however further

research is needed to ascertain the relevant details and players of the earlier case, since

there is no extant press record. The evidence of a similar attempt in 1998 puts Al-Qursaya

in the same category as Qurna, a settlement in Luxor that the government tried for 50

years to clear of residents – finally succeeding in 1997. In other words, the Nile islands

around Cairo are clearly coveted by the regime or elements in the regime, and activists

and residents should expect repeated and continual attempts to push them out in the name

of progress or tourism.

*3.7 Conclusions*

In evaluating the evidence presented in the above cases, several hypotheses from

Chapter 2 are supported. The first is that Social Media Networks transmit information

through critical nodes. When looking at the Sudanese refugee case, it is striking that Nora

Younis is herself a journalist and has extensive contacts in the Egyptian press community,

making her not just a credible source, but a node in the broader SMN in which she is

situated. Her contacts allowed both for her presence that day, which was anything but

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[72] Research was conducted through the Middle East Monitor (formerly Zad) at the American University of
Cairo. Searches pulled in 111 articles between 2007 and 2009, and only one prior; it was published in 1998
in *Al-Ahrar*, a government daily.

serendipitous – it was rather orchestrated via a text-messaging network in which activists who knew her and knew of her interest in such matters were able to "activate" her and get her quickly to the scene, and for the seemingly instantaneous way in which the information she gathered made its way to the press outlets. While any ordinary Egyptian with a cell phone could have taken pictures and posted them to a blog, it was Younis – a highly-connected, and highly-read journalist-blogger – who was able to turn that hypermedia footage into more than an interesting entry on a little-known web outlet.

The same connection can be made with the sexual harassment and torture cases – in both cases information was first provided by a former journalist whose blogging and SMN activism was trusted and credible. Younis is trained as a journalist, and her presence on the scene mitigated the concerns expressed by a number of professional journalists that bloggers don't know what they're doing, are willing to report rumor as fact, or who can't or won't actually get out in the street, do interviews, and perform the difficult work of a paid journalist. As *Al-Ahram* journalist Amira Howeidy noted about another blogger, Hossam El-Hamalawy, "First of all, I know Hossam personally, I think that's an important factor, I know he is an honest person, and he's connected in his field, and he's into labor activism and he's a socialist and so on and he's very devoted to his cause, when there are events related to these issues, I find him credible."[73] It is this sentiment that drives the credibility of certain bloggers for journalists in the field. This is the difference between a dead end in cyberspace and a SMN with capabilities – with *power.* It is not the power to put an end to refugee crises, racism, or the lawlessness of authoritarian regimes, but the power to set the agenda of public debate.

[73] Interview with Amira Howeidy, Cairo, Egypt. April 19th, 2008.

Corroborative evidence is also found for the hypothesis that authoritarian regimes will have increasing difficulty controlling the media environment. The El-Kabir case points clearly to a shift in public discourse, and the willingness of Egyptian journalists to write about torture in the wake of the case. No one has argued that torture became more widespread between 2007 and 2009 - if anything police might have become somewhat more reluctant to torture given the consequences for the officers caught torturing El-Kabir. This does not mean, by any stretch of the imagination, that torture has been eradicated or that it is no longer a problem. It does, however, mean that it no longer takes place under a shroud of secrecy. The success of the El-Kabir story the and widespread use of cell phone cameras to document police abuse outside of police stations means that the watchers are being watched by the citizenry, and that individuals are increasingly emboldened to document cases of police abuse. This is particularly surprising given that a general scholarly consensus has emerged, arguing that Mubarak's regime has become emboldened to commit renewed human rights violations with the retreat of the Bush Administration's mid-decade democracy promotion initiatives.

A close reading of the Al-Qursaya case offers further understanding of how SMNs function in Egypt. First, not all cases of blogging's relevance involve breaking stories that would otherwise have gone unreported. This can be seen especially in the case of the recent Israeli invasion of Gaza. Blogs, of course, did not "break" this story, but along with other forms of digital media, they greatly amplified the activist response. Second, it is clear that the Mubarak regime cares about and is sensitive to its press reputation and the international repercussions of its actions. The regime appears to be

most vulnerable on populist issues – salaries, working conditions, the plight of the poor –

and on human rights issues that are capable of drawing the broad-based support of

Islamists, leftists, and liberals – issues like sexual harassment, torture, and due process.

This is not to say that activists have the upper hand, but rather that everyone involved

would benefit from knowing which issues they are likely to be able to successfully

promote *within* the system. Aside from a handful of developers and whoever was going

to benefit directly from the conversion of Al-Qursaya into some kind of magical tourist

paradise, few would publicly argue for the dispossession of some of Cairo's poorest

citizens.

This discussion of the cases should not lead us to believe that digital media

*necessarily* have a democratizing effect in authoritarian countries. The quantitative

evidence linking the Internet with democratization is spotty at best (Wheeler 2006;

Calfano and Sahliyeh 2008; Hofheinz 2005). Rather, under certain circumstances, digital

media can serve as tools in the repertoire of dissidents. They also create alternative public

spheres -- what some have theorized as counter-publics (Asen and Brouwer, 2001). 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" (2006, 312). Regardless of whether such places qualify as

Habermasian public spheres in the strict sense, they certainly operate as focal points of

dissent and allow individuals – particularly those from repressed minorities like Baha'is,

Coptic Christians, or others – to articulate their needs, desires, and dreams. In the uncoordinated chaos of the Internet, these focal points allow for the production of commentary and agreed-upon narrative frames and calls to action.

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 cases presented above is that SMNs greatly complicate the efforts of authoritarian regimes to craft and control narratives about politics. The four cases presented above, while not indicative of large-scale social or political change in Egypt, are illustrative of the new media environment in which authoritarian regimes must operate. They highlight the effects of cooperation between embattled reporters at independent media outlets and their digital media critics. Finally, it suggests that tactical victories are within reach of determined and digitally-mediated activists, under the right circumstances.

However, these battles are not simply one-off struggles, in which SMN activists sometimes win, and sometimes lose, nor is it simply another tale of regimes allowing for "safety valves" for the harmless release of pressure. The growth of SMN activism is an expression of dissatisfaction with the structural alignment of political forces in Egypt,

and the way that big decisions – economic, social, political – have been made without the input of actors outside of the NDP or the military. As Castells argues,

> sociopolitical forms and processes are built upon cultural materials and… these materials are either unilaterally produced by political institutions as an expression of domination or, alternatively, are coproduced within the public sphere by individuals, interest groups, civic associations of various kinds (the civil society), and the state (2008).

SMN activism contributes to a public sphere in which politics is *co-produced* by other actors with the state, particularly independent journalists and human rights organizations. While the state may still be the dominant actor in Egyptian politics, SMNs make it possible for other actors to contest that domination and occasionally to subvert it. The role of the public sphere in these developments– in theoretical terms – will be addressed in Chapter 5.

The importance of the independent press holds not just for the advancing of claims, breaking of stories, or introduction of marginalized actors into the public sphere, but also for the mobilization of collective action. The question of whether or not SMNs facilitate the organization and execution of collective action in authoritarian contexts is the subject that this dissertation now turns to in Chapter 4.

**Chapter 4**

**New Tools, Old Rules:**

**Social Media Networks and Collective Action in Egypt**

*4.0 Introduction*

Since their development in the early part of this century, activists all over the

world have seized on the tools of Social Media Networks as they organize opposition to

authoritarian regimes and practices. From the text-messaging armada that descended on

Epifanio de los Santos Avenue in the Philippines in 2001 to text-messaging protestors

and electronic journalists in the Orange Revolution, and now today to Iranian protestors

Twittering the news of mass protests, arrests, and intimidation, activists have proven that

under the right circumstances, SMN activism can be powerful and effective. However,

scholars have yet to identify the kinds of circumstances under which SMNs can be

effective, and why. This chapter, through the evaluation of case studies in Egypt, seeks to

explain the circumstances under which SMN activism can successfully mobilize

collective action in authoritarian contexts, and the circumstances under which such

mobilization is likely to lead to political change. One does not necessarily lead to the

other. In so doing, the chapter contributes a critical piece of theory-building as scholars

seek to understand the impact of technological proliferation in the developing world. The

chapter evaluates competing hypotheses about the mobilization and collective action

potential of SMNs under conditions of authoritarianism. The null hypothesis is that,

especially in low-connectivity societies like Egypt, SMNs have little to no role to play in

mobilizing dissent, because so few individuals have Internet access and because Social Movements are built and sustained by persistent frames, concrete demands, and organizational ties within communities. This hypothesis would expect that thriving social movements like the Muslim Brotherhood and the Egyptian labor movement will have a much greater role to play in the Egyptian collective action environment. The alternative hypothesis advanced here is that SMNs reduce the costs of collective action, and thus should lead to more protests, demonstrations, and strikes, the standard manifestations of dissent in authoritarian societies. Consistent with Lust-Okar's expectations that included groups are less likely to involve themselves in protest and dissent activities, it also seems a reasonable expectation that excluded groups like the Muslim Brotherhood will invest more heavily in the tactical tools of SMNs.

Mona El-Ghobashy (2008) poses a critical question for scholars of Egypt: if authoritarianism has in fact deepened and stabilized in Egypt through the institutional choices of the regime, or become "durable" in the popular language, as many scholars argue (Brownlee 2007, 4; Albrecht 2005, 378; Kassem 2006, 188) why has there been a massive increase in the number of civil society organizations, and an organized effort on the part of the judiciary to exert its power vis-à-vis the regime? Her answer involves the internationalization of Egyptian politics, in the form of routine connections between international NGOs and governments and domestic Egyptian actors, as well as the "mobilization of the constitution," by which opposition forces, including the judiciary and ordinary citizens, seek the enforcement of the actual laws on the books in the country as opposed to more arbitrary forms of state power. Ghobashy, however, whose argument

will be explored in more depth below, fails to conceptualize or seek to explain precisely what has enabled those international connections or the increased ability and willingness of civil society forces to agitate on behalf of constitutional issues in Egypt. In this chapter, in addition to testing hypotheses about the causes and consequences of new information technologies and their relationship to collective action, I will seek to fill the gap in El-Ghobashy's argument by arguing for the critical role of Social Media Networks in internationalization and mobilization in Egypt – even while remaining sanguine about the potential of these technologies for truly large-scale mobilization. As we will see with the Judges Club ferment, the April 6th movement and the reaction to the Israeli invasion of Gaza, SMNs are the missing variable in recent accounts of Egyptian civil society, and understanding how they operate, as well as their possibilities and limitations, is critical to a proper understanding of contemporary politics in Egypt. In so doing, I hope to explain the salience of SMNs in Egypt, and to situate the changes that have taken place in Egyptian politics within a larger narrative of authoritarian persistence.

This chapter will proceed by first looking at the collective action environment in Egypt and the ways that SMNs have changed the incentives and possibilities for organizers. It then proceeds to explain the contribution of SMNs to four discrete events: the struggle over judicial independence in 2005-2007, the April 6th 2008 General Strike, the 2009 General Strike, and the protests against Israeli invasion of Gaza in 2008-2009.

*4.1: Mobilizing Protest in Egypt*

In Khaled Al Khamissi's non-fiction pop sensation *Taxi*, the author relates a conversation with a cab driver ridiculing the size a demonstration on the streets of Cairo

by the opposition group Kefaya . "In the old days," says the driver, "we used to go out on the streets with 50,000 people, with 100,000. But now there's nothing that matters" (Al Khamissi 2008, 24-25). The driver located what he called "the beginning of the end" with the bread riots that rattled the Sadat regime in January 1977. The regime quashed that proto-revolution, "And since then the government has planted in us a fear of hunger…. They planted hunger in the belly of every Egyptian, a terror that made everyone look out for himself or say 'Why should I make it my problem?'" Al Khamissi, clearly rattled by the driver, who was able to recall the exact dates of the demonstrations in 1977, wonders what "the end" actually is.

Perhaps the end was the decades-long interregnum in street protests in Egypt, a pause that seemingly came to a close with the Second Intifada and the demonstration wave that has swept Egypt since 2003. But it is certainly true that no one has mustered the kind of street demonstrations that might truly threaten the regime of Hosni Mubarak and the system of emergency law that still governs Egypt – and that most demonstrations in Cairo and its environs consist of more riot police and plainclothes police (the dreaded *bultagiyya)* than actual demonstrators. El Khamissi's driver puts his finger on precisely the collective action problem that plagues any attempt to spur change from below in Egypt – the question of why anyone should make anything their problem.

Figure 1 indicate that protests in Egypt have increased in number since the 1990s, with a peak in 2005.

**Figure 4.1: Protests in Egypt, 1994 - 2007[74]**

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| | | |
|-----|------|---|
| Egy | 1994 | 1 |
| Egy | 1995 | 1 |
| Egy | 1996 | 2 |
| Egy | 1997 | 2 |
| Egy | 1998 | 2 |
| Egy | 1999 | 0 |
| Egy | 2000 | 4 |
| Egy | 2001 | 4 |
| Egy | 2002 | 1 |
| Egy | 2003 | 4 |
| Egy | 2004 | 0 |
| Egy | 2005 | 9 |
| Egy | 2006 | 0 |
| Egy | 2007 | 4 |

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The growth of opposition activities had a number of discrete causes, from the widening gap between rich and poor and neoliberal economic policies that were seen to disadvantage industrial laborers in Egypt. Declining wages for industrial wages were one of the primary consequences of the neoliberal economic program undertaken by the Mubarak regime (Mitchell 2002, 286).  The Egyptian government was also under pressure, since the attacks of 9/11 to open up its political system, as the Bush Administration adopted the position, at least publically, that terrorism was intricately tied to the absence of social and political freedoms in the Middle East. In the midst of this pressure, the Mubarak government allowed the flourishing of new and independent press outlets (see Chapter 3), and held multi-candidate (if far from free) Presidential elections

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[74] Data courtesy of Patrick Meier, Tufts University. This is, to my knowledge, the only existing data for this time period. I can also say with great certainty that this data is wrong, since it is compiled out of English-language reports from places like Reuters, the AFP, and the AP. One of the biggest problems with existing protest databases is their lack of engagement with local sources, in this case the Egyptian opposition press, which documents strikes and protests in great detail.

in 2006. The announcement of those elections came in 2005, which coincides with the

largest recorded number of yearly protests. The role of SMNs in mobilizing

demonstrations during this time period is well-known and has been written about at

length (Al-Malky 2007), but it is worth exploring how exactly it worked and why it

represented such a change.

Organizing a demonstration in the 1990s, prior to SMNs, was a painstaking affair

fraught with very real peril for both organizers and participants. Permits had to be

obtained, leaflets printed, and a location agreed-upon far in advance. Such high-profile

and easily-detectable efforts made demonstrations easy for the regime to see coming in

advance. Hossam El-Hamalawy elaborates:

> in order to organize a demonstration in the 1990s there was so much secrecy, you
> can't talk over the phone, you would meet people you would chat, and how would
> you publish for a demonstration, you had to print out something.[75]

During this time period, as well, the regime held what amounted to a news monopoly on

information and events in Egypt. As El-Hamalawy argues, if someone showed up at a

demonstration in the 1990s with a camera, demonstrators would turn away and hide their

faces, since they could be fairly certain that the journalist was from one of the 3 major

government dailies, *Al-Akhbar*, *Al-Gumhuriya*, and *Al-Ahram*. Reporters from those

newspapers were believed to feed information and pictures directly to the security

services, making it very dangerous to have your picture taken at any kind of

demonstration. Beatings, arrests, and other forms of rights abuse all took place with little

scrutiny from the press or international observers. The costs of organizing this kind of

collective action, then, were exceptionally high, and the odds of those protests, even if the

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[75] Interview with Hossam El-Hamalawy, Cairo Egypt, May 27th, 2009.

organizers pulled them off, being reported inside or outside of Egypt were low. A confluence of circumstances – largely related to relative calm in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and strong domestic economic growth rates – combined to make protest a relatively rare thing in the 1990s. Protest waves clearly depend as much on external and internal circumstances as they do on the means that demonstrators might deploy to execute their plans. However, the advent of satellite television in the 1990s introduced a competing news source into the Egyptian news environment (Lynch 2006; Sakr 2002), even if that source was typically focused more on international relations and Arab-Israeli conflict stories than it was on local Egyptian stories. Hossam El-Hamalawy explains:

> The outbreak of the Palestinian Intifada [in 2000] this marked the beginning of internet activism, that took the form of email lists, yahoo chat groups. I was being spammed left and right by those who have the boycott lists of updates about the Intifada, pictures of the dead, pictures of the atrocities. These were being emailed, and yahoo groups were like the hip thing back then.

The primary function of SMNs during this time period was coordination and information-transmission. Bloggers posted, texted, and emailed the times and dates of demonstrations or other actions, and SMN technologies like SMS messages were used to find agreed-upon places for demonstrations, to adjust those locales on the spot, and to communicate information about the results and any arrests. As Hossam El-Hamalawy says

> With the crackdown on the judges movement, I was mailing continuous updates, at the same time I had 50 plus numbers on my mobile that I had in a group, that I used to text updates, we would be running around in downtown, and seeing people kidnapped, and sending SMS and then running home, uploading emails and photos, and Issandr would post the pictures.[76]

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[76] Interview with Hossam El-Hamalawy, Cairo, Egypt, May 27th 2009.

SMNs like blogs, especially during this time period, also played a role in transmitting information to outsiders, and challenging the boundaries of public discourse. SMNs were important sources of information transmission and dissent during the class over judicial rights in 2005-2007. The struggle over judicial reform and the role played by SMNs helped set the political context in which the April 6th Movement – which forms the core of this chapter – developed. Understanding how that first struggle played out is critical to understanding where and how the April 6th Movement succeeded and failed.

*4.2 The Judges Club and the Protest Wave of 2005*

The Egyptian judiciary has been engaged in a struggle with the regime at least since the Second World War (Wolff 2009). The struggle has primarily centered around the function of the judiciary as a check on the power of the executive. Since Nasser, the executive has tried repeatedly to undermine the capacity of the judiciary for independent action. Thus do the members of the judiciary become "a favoured class in Egyptian society" (Wolff 2009, 103). Sadat's initial draft of the Supreme Constitutional Court law in 1977 would have left the organization toothless and subordinate to the regime (Rutherford 2008, 45). Opposition from prominent judges led the Sadat regime to agree to a far more invasive and powerful SCC than it had originally been conceptualized And because of that power, the SCC has again and again challenged the arbitrary power of the state, such as in 1985, when it ruled against Sadat and his attempts to use the emergency law to amend the Law on Personal Status (Rutherford 2008, 54). Rutherford concludes, "The SCC and the administrative courts have accumulated a large body of rulings that seek to limit state power and render it more accountable to the law" (2008, 52).

Especially since Hosni Mubarak took over after Sadat's assassination in 1981, the judiciary has struggled repeatedly to carve out victories vis-à-vis the state – for the right to form democratic syndicates and political parties, property rights, and freedoms of speech, in particular. The longstanding involvement of the courts in questions of multi-party politics in Egypt stretched across a number of national elections. And when, seemingly under pressure from the United States to democratize, the regime announced it would hold not just parliamentary elections, but a multi-candidate election for the presidency, the stage was set for different political forces to The 2005 presidential and parliamentary elections were thus set up as the perfect opportunity for a very public struggle between the regime, which wanted to rig the elections for the NDP, and the judiciary, which was constitutionally tasked with overseeing the fairness and legality of the elections themselves. The looming battle pitched the rhetoric of democracy and pluralism against the continued reality of the Mubarak regime using the threat of "terrorism" and the Muslim Brotherhood to continue the state of emergency that has been in place since 1981.[77] But compared to the decades-long struggle between the regime and judiciary, rather than just against the exigencies of the moment in 2005, it was clear that both sides saw the elections as a pivotal battle. Truly free and fair elections could potentially threaten the core of Egyptian authoritarianism.

The elections themselves split the Judges Club, between those who believed they should take no part in what would likely be fraudulent elections, and those who argued that they should exercise their power, even taking into consideration the institutional

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[77] Wolff notes that the regime renewed the State of Emergency on April 30th, 2006, on the dubious pretext that the question would be revisited at another, more amenable time.

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limits placed on judicial freedom.  After the elections, Mahmoud Mekki and Hisham Bastawisi, vice presidents of the Court of Cassation, very publicly declared the parliamentary elections rigged and presented evidence of their claims, igniting what Wolff calls "a huge civil society movement" (2009, 105). The judges themselves were arrested, along with hundreds of activists and leaders from the Muslim Brotherhood and Kefaya. The streets of Cairo became sites of contestation between these opposition forces, who sought transparent and fair elections, and forces of the regime, which hoped to quash them. The outcome of these struggles was and is unclear. Most observers agree that there has been a retrenchment in political rights since the heyday of the Kefaya movement in the mid-2000s. And it is certainly true that the regime won an important victory when the judiciary was essentially stripped of its election-overseeing component in 2007, as article 88 of the constitution was amended to create an electoral commission to oversee future elections. (Wolff 2009, 105). The regime's victory highlights the important difference between successful mobilization and successful political change.

On May 25th, 2006, *The Arabist*, at the time one of the leading English-language blogs in the Middle East, published what it called a "recap" of the demonstrations planned for that day. The author (Issandr El-Amrani) wrote that he was just "passing along the info". The post contained the times, places, and messages of the day's various protests, which were not just in solidarity with the Judges' Club, but also included an anniversary demonstration for Black Friday, May 25th, 2005, in which female journalists were assaulted by the security services.[78] *The Arabist* itself had long served as a depot for

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[78] "Black Referendum Day – demo recap." *The Arabist*. May 25th, 2006.
    http://arabist.net/archives/2006/05/23/black-referendum-day-demo-recap/

information, pictures and analysis about the demonstrations that were taking place in

Cairo against the usurpation of the judiciary's power. These posts often included links to

Flickr accounts, where amateur photographers gathered documentary evidence of the

day's events, building shared meaning through exchanging and linking to pictures. This

lent the blogs themselves both a pre-and-post demonstration utility – before the

demonstrations, they served to provide information to the select minority of Egyptians

who got information like this online, and after the demonstrations, they constructed and

deconstructed the demonstrations themselves, calling for more action, criticizing the

treatment of the demonstrators, and attempting to bolster the movement. Many posts,

such as the one that appeared on The Arabist on May 18th, 2006, depicted police brutality,

particularly by the so-called *bultagiyya*, the plainclothes police often hired by the regime

to break up demonstrations.[79] Demonstrations themselves took place over a long period

of many months, leading up to the passage of the constitutional amendments in 2007.

The struggles of the Judge's Club are arguably representative of the kind of

democratization that is taking place in Egypt, in spite of the fact that in many respects,

authoritarianism has worsened in recent years. El Ghobashy calls this "mobilizing the

constitution" – i.e. framing and organizing contention around the actual written document

of the 1971 constitution, and challenging the state on the basis of its legal precepts (El-

Ghobashy 2008, 9). It would not be the first time that "flawed constitutions" were used to

bring about democratic reform – as El-Ghobashy notes, the same strategy was used in

Poland. Many constitutions, even in authoritarian countries, promise rights that are not

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[79] "Pro-judges demo pics." *The Arabist*. May 18th, 2006.

delivered upon in real life. In Egypt, it was the ferment created by the announcement of multi-candidate presidential elections in 2005 that made this strategy the default mode of the Judges Club and the various NGOs organizing in support of them.

Once again, though, independent media and its relationship to SMNs played an important role in the mobilization process. With only the state press on the scene, it's unlikely that the kind of debate about the elections that occurred would ever have taken place. And the blogs would have had no one to link to. As Issandr El-Amrani put it,

> The 24-hour cycle in Egypt in terms of breaking news, didn't really exist [in 2005]. The official press is often vague about what's happening, it didn't have a lot of serious competition. That changed in 2004 with the new independent dailies that came out…it really created a wonky discussion about what was taking place in the political arena. It's not that it didn't exist before, it didn't get updated at a daily pace. It forced the issue of election fraud on the agenda, election fraud is nothing new, it's just that there are these outlets available and the right political atmosphere.[80]

As the protest movement continued its actions in 2005-2007, blogs became sites of discussion and documentation – of the demonstrations themselves, and also of arrests. Leading Arabic-language blogger Amr Gharbeia, on October 26th, 2006, wrote about central security forces surrounding the Judges Club, and about the arrests of fellow bloggers – in real time. "Central security forces are surrounding the Judges Club," he wrote, while also posting the names of arrested activists and bloggers.[81] Wael Abbas, on his blog *Misr Digital*, posted a detailed description of the protest events planned for May

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[80] Interview with Issandr El-Amrani, Cairo Egypt, February 16th, 2008.
[81] "500 Central Security soldiers around the Judges' Club." *Gharbeia.net*. October 26th, 2006. Author's translation.

25th, 2006, both in Egypt, and abroad.[82] The posting of times and dates of protests was common during this period, particularly since the movement to oppose the constitutional amendments was led by Kefaya, which had and still has a strong Web presence. Sympathetic activists in the blogging community helped spread the word about these protests. One such blog was "Manal and Alaa's bit bucket," one of the oldest and more well-known Egyptian political blogs, which was published sometimes in English and sometimes in Arabic. A typical post would list the time, date, and place of an upcoming demonstration, along with the organizers. They also included short descriptions of the events' raison d'etre, such as the demonstration in Midan Tahrir on March 15th, 2007, which saw the constitutional amendments as designed to "continue dictatorial rule and eliminate judicial supervision of elections."[83]

The protests continued through March of 2007, including demonstrations generally neglected by the international press on university campuses across Egypt. One such demonstration on March 25th, 2007 drew thousands of protestors across Egypt, not just in Cairo but in universities across the country, including in secondary cities like Tanta.[84] Still, constitutional amendments were passed over the objections of this movement. The Judges Club and their political allies lacked the grassroots organizing capabilities that might have put more people in the streets, while international pressure on

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[82] "Today's Activities in Egypt." *Misr Digital*. May 25th, 2006. Author's translation. http://misrdigital.blogspirit.com/archive/2006/05/index.html. (Abbas's posts do not generally have permalinks).
[83] "Muzhahara bi-midan al-tahrir 3-15 li-l-ta'bir 'an rafd al-ta'dilat al-dusturiyya." (Demonstration in Tahrir Square to express rejection of the constitutional amendments." Manal and Alaa's bit bucket. March 10th, 2007. http://www.manalaa.net/node/87226. Author's translation.
[84] "Al-Muzhahirat al-rafida li-l-ta'dilat al-dusturiyya tashmal mu'zham jami'at Misr." Demonstrations to reject constitutional amendments include most Egyptian universities." *Ikhwanonline*. March 25th, 2007. http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Article.asp?ArtID=27259&SecID=304

the regime proved incapable of changing its course. And while SMNs contributed to coordination and globalization, they were not the fundamental driving course of the events of 2005 -2007. However, the political context created by the struggles of 2005 – 2007 helps us understand the environment in which later organizing took place. To assess the impact of SMNs on collective action in Egypt, we must look at the April 6th Youth Movement, and the strikes organized on April 6th, 2008, May 4th, 2008, and April 6th, 2009 – strikes that were organized in large part online and whose success or failure can tell us much about the conditions under which SMN-driven collective action might succeed or fail. In terms of theory testing, these strikes were conducted by the same group of activists, under virtually identical political conditions, with widely divergent results. More than the Judges Club organizing, the April 6th Movement is a kind of natural experiment, so rarely possible in comparative politics – an experiment which will assess the possibilities and limitations of mobilization conducted through Social Media Networks.

*4.3 Informational Cascades and the April 6th Movement*

On the morning of April 6th, 2008, a small group of Egyptian bloggers and activists made their way from one internet café to another, updating web sites and Twitter feeds dedicated to the day's tumultuous events in Cairo and other cities. They generously allowed me to spend the day with them, to see what they were up to and how they were using the tools of Web 2.0 to facilitate political protest and social action in Egypt. The afternoon took me from the overpriced coffee joints of Mohandisin and Zamalek to the Judges' Syndicate, where a protest was the focus of several blocks full of plainclothes

115

police, riot police, participants, and gawkers both Egyptian and foreign. The young men and women spent their time in the cafes aggregating reports from other activists about arrests and protests, and while they of course were doing everything they could to avoid being arrested, the general attitude seemed to be one of acceptance of that risk. They were, of course, doing all of these things at the same time, often talking on the phone, updating a Web site, and speaking with one another, engaging in what has been dubbed "continuous partial attention." As one of the organizers and writers told me, "With the Internet you can get online anytime, wherever, so like now we are publishing all the same news the same minute. If someone got caught now, arrested now, we can write about it now, rather than the old style."[85]  By the old style, of course, this young blogger meant the traditional media, which has a built-in time-lag between an event and the delivery of news about that event, a delay that has been eclipsed by Social Media Networks.

Some of this activity appeared to be facilitated by the Internet. SMNs have little to nothing to do with broadcast news media, the traditional focus of academics studying Arab media, almost to the exclusion of all else (Armbrust 2007, 531). The day's events also had little to do with the kind of blogging we have come to associate with the form – the airing of opinion and analysis by non-professionals, or angry people in their pajamas railing against the media or political forces. These were blogger-activists, or "citizen journalists" in the new lingo of the field. The reason that April 6th, 2009 received so much domestic and international attention was because of the actions taken by a Ghad party functionary named Esraa Abdel Fattah, who formed a "group" on the popular Social Networking Site Facebook. She and her fellow activists turned April 6th from a

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[85] Interview with blogger, name redacted for security purposes, Cairo, Egypt April 6th, 2008.

localized labor protest into an international event. The Facebook activists, as they came to be called, triggered an informational cascade, as outlined in Chapter 2.

Abdel Fattah started the Facebook group in mid-March of 2008. The group was devoted to striking with the textile workers of Mahalla al-Kubra, in the Delta. The workers of Mahalla had chosen April 6th as the day to go on strike to protest declining wages and rising prices, and together with other creeping developments in the Egyptian economy and political system, the strike had the potential to develop into something much larger than an isolated labor protest. For months prices of basic commodities had been rising in Egypt at the same time that official figures on the economy continued to look rosy, and the regime didn't seem terribly interested in helping ordinary people out of trouble. Inflation was rampant, and yet the state still seemed determined to forge ahead with its program of neoliberal privatization (Beinin 2008). In addition, the government's heavy-handed campaign against top leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood was reaching a crescendo in advance of the state's attempts to rig local elections on April 9th (McDonough 2008), and the state was still feeling the fallout of its failed attempts to take over the Nile island of Qursaya (see Chapter 3). Finally, dissatisfaction with the state's position vis-à-vis the besieged residents of the Gaza Strip was serving to further delegitimize the state. The original impetus for the strike lay with the besieged Mahalla textile workers, but it was only with the bridging and amplifying capabilities of SMNs that a textile strike turned into a national event…

Within two weeks of forming the group, Esraa's Facebook organization had 70,000 members, quite astounding given that only approximately 790,140 Egyptians are

even members of Facebook to begin with.[86]  The idea was for the 70,000 plus group

members to stay home on the day of the strike, April 6[th,] and it soon took on a life of its

own.  In the heavily policed state of Egypt, organizing demonstrations is technically

illegal, and calling for a general strike particularly so. This does not, of course, prevent

them from happening regularly, but demonstrations are generally small affairs, thought of

by many as the domain of liberal and left-wing activists surrounded by blocks full of

black-clad riot police and plainclothes police. Certainly no one could have expected a 27-

year-old human resources coordinator to serve as the catalyst for an event that would grip

the national consciousness for the better part of a week (Mukkaled 2008). It perhaps

seemed even less likely that Facebook – an online social networking scheme hatched by

Harvard undergraduates just a few years ago, associated largely with American college

students, would be the chosen platform for this massive action. But when examined

against developments in the scale-free Egyptian blogosphere and the innovations in

network theory explored in Chapter 2, the events make much more sense.

 The state itself certainly recognized the power of these social tools and the threat

that they represent to the state's control of information. Shortly after the strike, the

regime undertook a campaign of delegitimization against Facebook and other Internet

sites deemed a threat to regime authority (Darabni 2008). Esraa, who was arrested the day

after the strike and imprisoned for more than two weeks, became a kind of celebrity

within the country, and a cause célèbre for international NGOs. And on a personal level

the state's intimidation worked, since she emerged from prison telling reporters she

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[86] Facebook data from http://www.facebook.com/ads/create/ as of July 20th, 2008.  There were probably
considerably fewer members in March 2008.

would not be getting involved in any more online organizing (El-Ghitany 2008). But the state's demonization of the strike's organizers did not seem to succeed in convincing the political class or prominent media voices that Facebook is illegitimate, that the day's events were a failure, or that everything is fine in Egypt. No less a heavyweight than *al-Dustur* and *Al-Ahram* columnist Fahmy Howaidy declared the Facebook organizers "hope for the future in Egypt."

Why wasn't the action on April 6th coordinated through blogs, long the darling of Egyptian opposition politics? First, a kind of a fatigue with Egyptian blogging has set in, which is driving the organizing and activity in opposition politics to other places. If you ask many observers – journalists, bloggers themselves, ordinary people, what they think of Egyptian blogs, they will tell you that their time has passed. As the anonymous blogger Sandmonkey told me about blogs having a real-world impact, "It's rare. We're talking three stories in three years." He was referring to a handful of major stories that were brought to the mainstream press by the bloggers, who he referred to as "pushers."[87] And even if they are still sold on the relative importance of Egyptian blogging, they tend to cite the same handful of bloggers – Hossam El-Hamlawy, Wael Abbas, and Nora Younis, among a very small handful of others. El-Hamalawy himself calls them "power bloggers." Other bloggers link to these blogs, as do newspapers, online media, international groups, and others. These hubs operate by "providing routing, coordinating, and information functions that increase the ease and efficiency of navigating the network" (Matthew and Shambaugh 2005).While these individuals do terrific work, their importance has made it more difficult for new voices to be heard in the blogosphere. In

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[87] Interview with Sandmonkey. Cairo, Egypt, March 23rd, 2008.

the U.S., the network architecture of the Internet creates a small group of power bloggers and excludes most other writers from the public sphere (Hindman 2008). There is no reason to believe that architecture works any differently in Egypt.

This might explain why organizing has migrated from the Egyptian blogosphere, governed by power laws, to the realms of Facebook and Twitter – the next generation, while of course free to start and maintain blogs, might find the door to internet fame and success closed to them in a way that it had never been previously. For an analogous example in the U.S., consider the success of the left-wing site Daily Kos, which is so popular that its traffic dwarfs that of even relatively well-read sites in that community, like MyDD and Firedoglake (Karpf 2008). In other words, the reason we haven't seen another *Araba3y* or *Misr Digital* is that the previous two sites might be so much more popular than their competitors that the properties of the network make it exceedingly unlikely that anyone else will gain such popularity. And while those communities may have great numbers of readers, there are several reasons why Esraa probably chose Facebook over either starting her own blog or going through existing ones to organize the general strike. First, the most popular Egyptian blogs are not participatory (if not democratic) communities like Daily Kos. This is not to suggest that they don't have communities of active participants and commenters, but rather that most have no "diary" function that allows individuals to generate unique content to contribute to the site. As Karpf notes, "Community blogs are designed to enable collective action" (2008).  So unless the owner of the blog were to get enthusiastically behind the strike action, it would be difficult to coordinate the action in that way. Second, while blogs do facilitate the

formation of ad-hoc alliances around certain issues, they do not make social connections

transparent and easier to use, and they do not lend themselves easily to the formation of

groups. Finally, blogs start off with the tiny number of readers who are initially told

about the blog, whereas the audience on Facebook begins with the number (often in the

hundreds) of social connections you've already made on the site, and then multiplies

rapidly through network connections. For all of these reasons and more, while observers

have long been looking at blogs as the predominant medium of online action and protest

in Egypt, there are alternatives that might work better.

   Facebook played an important role in transmitting the frames and calls to action

of the April 6th General Strike. It also demonstrated, not for the first time, the power of

SMS and Twitter in coordinating action and contesting the regime's crackdown on the

activists. In fact, subsequent events in both Egypt and in other authoritarian contexts have

demonstrated that Twitter in particular and micro-blogging in general may play a more

important role in information dissemination and mobilization. Twitter is particularly

useful for short-term organizing and on-the-fly coordination and adjustment. As El-

Hamalawy argues,

> Let's say we had a demo scheduled in the square, the initial scouts show up, they
> see they are detaining people already, they say, let's move the demo to the press
> syndicate, then we receive the updates, then we communicate it.

Not all activists and bloggers agree that all of the action is now on Twitter, though. The

blogger Mohamed Khalid (who blogs as "Demagh MAK" (the brain of MAK), argues

> I've moved to Facebook because Facebook is easier to write and more popular.
> Everybody's on Facebook all the time. I started 6 months ago, I posted on my
> blog and the same time I posted to FB, the comments and the feedback on the
> Facebook more than the blog, but I still love my blog, it's my main thing I do first

every month. You can write a note in the Facebook, then you tag 30 people and it's like a message and this 30 people and open their Facebook in the morning.[88]

The Egyptian press gave extensive coverage to both Facebook and the April 6th movement after the day's events. International press outlets also lavished attention on what everyone seemed to regard as a successful strike. However, not everyone agreed with the assessment that the 2008 strike was a success. Hossam El-Hamalawy, for instance, who played a critical transmission role from his temporary perch in faraway Berkeley, California, argues that in fact far from helping the main strike efforts in Mahalla, the April 6th organizers in fact provided a distraction for the regime, and had the effect of loading expectations and demands into the moment that were neither productive nor called for. El-Hamalawy and others warned not to read too much into the strike, and argued for the continued importance of grassroots organizing.

*4.4 April 6th Redux and the Limits of Online Organizing*

On the one-year anniversary of the April 6th 2008 general strike, the leaders of the April 6th Movement, together with the most important factions of the opposition – the Muslim Brotherhood, Kefaya, and many political parties, staged a follow-up demonstration. The regime was not, however, caught off guard this time, waging a weeks-long campaign in the press against the movement and the strike. When April 6th 2009 arrived, Egypt appeared to function normally, handing the April 6th Movement a serious defeat from which it is unclear whether it can recover. Whereas there was divergence in the coverage of the 2008 strike, with *Al-Dustur* calling it a success, *Al-Masry Al-Youm* declaring it a qualified success, and the government dailies trumpeting its

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[88] Interview with Demagh MAK. Cairo, Egypt, June 18th, 2009.

failure, there was no such disagreement in 2009. All the major news outlets and blogs, even those who are generally sympathetic to the movement's goals and practices, wrote of the day's events as a failure. However, the failure of the follow-up strike leaves us with a puzzle: if the same tools were used to publicize and organize the strikes in 2008 and 2009, what are the variables that explain the divergent outcomes?

Observers sought explanations for the failure of the day's events, and some agreement can be found. As Mohamed Adel argued, the first strike was tied to concrete wage demands of striking workers in Mahalla, and to the increase in prices for basic goods in Egypt that had taken place during the months preceding the April 6th, 2009, general strike. The absence of any such raison d'etre in 2009 is certainly one unmistakable explanation for the failure of the strike organizers to galvanize public opinion and mobilize participation in the strike. As Amr Shubaki put it,

> If we remember last year's General Strike, we will find that some of us forget that it was called by textile workers in Mahalla, not political activists or party members, to demand improved working conditions and to raise wages.[89]

Shubaki argues that the organizers did not learn the lesson of their first follow-up strike on May 4th, 2008, and in fact repeated all of that day's mistakes. He argues that in meeting the demands of workers for raises in wages, the government was able to defuse the nascent political movement that had piggybacked onto those social demands. Shubaki's comments are consistent with the findings of collective action literature which suggest that it is the presence of cogent demands that drive protest movements, rather than new technologies themselves, with their capabilities. The technologies themselves,

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[89] Shubaki, Amr. "Limadha fashala al-idrab al-'am?" (Why did the general strike fail?). *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, April 9th, 2009.

and the youthful, elite organizers of the April 6th Movement, cannot manufacture the conditions which might lead to widespread protest in Egypt.

Sensing that Egypt's diverse political oppositions had won at least a symbolic victory on April 6th, 2008, the regime set about making sure that such a convergence of technology, demands, and capabilities would be much more difficult to attain if organizers attempted a similar action. Ironically, it may have been the very success of the movement in drawing press attention to itself that provoked the state to crack down so hard. As Hossam El-Hamalawy argues, "They scared the regime about what was going to happen that day. The 6th of April guys came into the picture –  around that time that had 70,000 plus members – and the newspapers dealt with it very sensationally."[90] Hamalawy believes that it was this press attention that distracted activists from the actual demands of the Mahalla workers and allowed the state to co-opt substantial portions of the strike leadership. The test run for the regime's strategy for the follow-up strike was successfully executed on May 4th, 2008, when the April 6th movement tried to stage another general strike on Mubarak's birthday. The message, however, did not resonate, and came on the heels of the repression of well-known members of the movement itself. Between May 4th, 2008, and April 6th, 2009, the Mubarak regime employed three distinct strategies to derail the April 6th movement – economic, repressive, and technological.

The repressive end was most familiar, and easiest to execute. The leadership of the group itself was hounded practically into submission, and many bloggers and activists

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[90] Interview with Hossam El-Hamalawy, Cairo, Egypt, May 27th, 2009.

affiliated with the group were arrested.[91] First there was the forced exit of Esraa Abd El

Fatah, one of the founders of the original Facebook group for the sixth of April, from

political life. Kidnapped from her home and held for two weeks, Abdel Fattah appeared

to apologize for her role in the strike when she was released. Her abrupt about-face from

online organizer to quiescent subject set the tone for what the regime hoped to

accomplish with Egyptian youth at large. The regime appeared so threatened by this

movement, and by the online organizers who formed its core, that they needed to crush it

completely. Leaders of the group, including Ahmed Maher and Mohamed Adel, also saw

prison time. The fear that the regime has so successfully instilled in most activists means

that many keep ready-made SMS messages in their phones, to send off to human rights

lawyers, friends and families when they are inevitably kidnapped and snatched off the

streets. And many more young people never bother to join such movements in the first

place, preferring to pursue instead the creature comforts of post-Infitah Egypt. The

strike's failure was a shock to participants and observers enamored with the

transformational potential of social media. However, a closer look at the strike's

dynamics, and the actual capabilities of the tools themselves tells us why this effort was

probably doomed to failure, and how activists might more successfully contest the state's

hegemony in the future.

    The regime also dealt capably with demands from labor organizations and civil

society organizations for better wages. The Mahalla workers, though were also brutally

repressed. As the blogger Sandmonkey argues, "As for the real heroes of April 6th, the

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[91] Arab Network For Human Rights Information. "Istihdaf al-mudawinin al-masriyin: 'ard mustamir." http://www.katib.org/node/7888

poor underpaid and courageous workers who took a stand that day? Well, they were

never interviewed by the media, or the satellite news networks, never were invited to a

conference, or were the focus of a news piece. What they were the focus on, was the

government's vengeance."[92] The scuffle in Mahalla is part of a long-running and

intensifying battle between the Egyptian state and the labor sector – with 650 workers'

protests between 2006 and 2007.[93]Egyptian labor is organized under the umbrella of the

Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF), an organization that scholars consider to be

co-opted by the state and largely part of the official power structure. Some scholars argue

that even under such conditions, labor has been able to wring concessions from the

government, but overall the labor movement is repressed and suffers from a lack of

autonomy (Pripstein-Posusney 1997). At least some elements of the labor movement are

now seeking to construct trade federations outside the structure of the ETUF, most

recently the successful campaign of the tax collectors. However, while the movement has

seen its fair share of victories, the state has conceded just enough to forestall the kind of

national movement that the Mahalla strike seemingly threatened. Before the May 4th 2008

strike planned by the April 6th movement, the government announced a 30-percent wage

increase, and salary increases were due to kick in this July.[94]  Targeted salary increases

have also been used with certain professions (like doctors) to defuse potentially serious

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[92] "6th of April…again!" *Rantings of a Sandmonkey*. April 4th, 2009.
http://www.sandmonkey.org/2009/04/04/6th-of-aprilagain/
[93] El-Hamalawy, Hossam. "Revolt in Mahalla." International Socialist Review 59 (May-June
2008). http://www.isreview.org/issues/59/rep-mahalla.shtml
[94] Abdelhamid, Doha. "Mind the Gap." *Al-Ahram Weekly*. 14-20 May 2009.

labor disagreements.[95] So the regime capably executed control strategies on the economic and repression fronts. But it also lucked into some limits of the Facebook platform itself.

*4.5 The Limits of Facebook Activism*

What social media technologies help to solve, or at least alleviate, are problems of collective action and information dissemination (Shirky 2008). Facebook and other forms of social media, including Twitter, blogs, and photo-sharing sites, lower the costs of group-formation, group-joining, and information-sharing. In the build-up to the April 6th, 2008 strike, Facebook accelerated the transmission of the strike meme, because the site connects people with similar interests. As Shirky argues, "Because information in the system is passed along by friends and friends of friends (or at least contacts of contacts), people tend to get information that is also of interest to their friends" (Shirky 2008, 221). They furthermore have the effect of reducing the distance between networks of friends and acquaintances, and in so doing they can also build shared meaning. What Facebook did for the original strike group was first to construct, very easily, a symbolic call to action that allowed a maximum number of people to join with the least amount of effort. In so doing, the Egyptian state was confronted – almost overnight, since the group grew from nothing to 70,000 members in a matter of weeks – with what it regarded as a serious threat to its legitimacy. Whether Egyptians stayed home because they supported the strike or because they feared going into the streets is an open question unlikely to be resolved either way.

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[95]Carr, Sarah. "Doctors' Group Skeptical of Wage Increase Promised By Government." *Daily News Egypt.* July 16th, 2008.

But the reality is that at least some sectors of the regime, and many international observers, regarded the strike as a success and gave a good share of the credit to the April 6th organizers and to the Facebook tools that made their efforts possible. However, the problems of the April 6th movement in organizing follow-up actions appeared to be unrelated to both the costs of collective action and the exigencies of getting the word out. It appeared, simply, that the message of the movement simply did not resonate with enough Egyptians to make a difference in the larger scheme of things, and that not enough groundwork had been laid by actual, on-the-ground organizers. The call to strike on the anniversary of…a strike ... did not seem to strike most potential participants in collective action as worthy of the risks involved with either taking the streets or staying home. Those risks are substantial, even if one is predisposed to suffer for a cause. The action was also poorly-conceptualized. Anniversary actions probably only might work if the anniversary is of something of much larger significance – which is not to minimize what took place in 2008, but rather to emphasize the fact that the greatest resistance took place in Mahalla and that ultimately the whole thing ended with the regime more or less victorious. In other words, it wasn't exactly clear what was being commemorated. With the Mubarak regime having proven that the potential costs of repression remain very high in Egypt, most young people in the country took the rational approach and decided that they would let other people make a political statement for them. And in classic prisoner's dilemma form, that statement was never made because the vast majority of people made precisely the same calculation. While SMNs enable

actors with diffuse interests to come together around a common cause (Hindman 2008), they cannot necessarily create the cause itself.

To understand the failure of the April 6th, 2009 message, we must first understand what exactly it was about the message of the previous year that resonated with so many people to begin with. At the time, Egypt was undergoing price increases for basic staples, just as the global economy was beginning to take a turn for the worse. So even those individuals who did not know anyone in Mahalla or particularly care about the fate of striking textile workers had an access point to the movement's message, about economic justice. The increase in the price of bread, in particular, recalled the reason for Egypt's last large-scale street action, in 1977. Most importantly, the general strike call was yoked to a concrete, on-the-ground action – the strike of Mahalla textile workers and their demands for better wages and working conditions. Without the very real ferment in the streets of that city, it is unlikely that anyone in Cairo or Alexandria would have known what they were getting themselves into, or even cared enough to join a Facebook group to begin with.

It was the absence of such a clear message that led to confusion about the purpose of the follow-up strike. Individuals were asked to stay home and not to buy anything – but if they had to leave the house, to wear black. All of this was allegedly to protest the injustices perpetrated during and after the April 6th, 2008 strike, giving the whole movement somewhat self-referential. Given that the message of the April 6th Movement had not reached important sections of the Egyptian population to begin with, basing the follow-up strike on the events following the 2008 strike was probably not a wise tactic.

According to the movement itself, the April 6th, 2009 strike had four primary demands: the institution of a national minimum wage, indexing prices to inflation, the election of a constituent assembly to draft a new constitution, and the suspension of gas exports to Israel.[96] The third demand in particular was unrealistic at best, and probably only served to underline the regime's fears about the movement's true goals. The demand for a national minimum wage was almost certainly undermined by the regime's success in buying off sectors of the labor movement with wage increases, making the demand for a national minimum wage less compelling than it might otherwise have been. While this was less the fault of the movement than a success for the regime, it still points to the difficulties of crafting an effective message. Finally, the involvement of demands about Israel-Palestine probably only served to muddy the waters, even if anger about Israeli policies is widespread.

There are also important limitations to the capabilities of Facebook organizing itself. To begin with, Facebook groups seem to engender extraordinarily low levels of commitment on the part of their members. This should have been understood after the movement's initial follow-up action, the May 4th strike, failed very publicly. The technical capabilities of Facebook – such as the public nature of "status updates" and the ability of users to change their profile picture to adopt a widespread frame – lend themselves to the production and dissemination of ideas, but perhaps not as much to the mobilization of individual actors. The April 6th movement itself understood this, and boasted a Web presence to complement its Facebook profile, but even these three

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[96]"6 April 2009, General Strike in Egypt." 6 April Movement. Saturday, April 4th, 2009.
http://6aprilmove.blogspot.com/2009/04/6-april-2009-general-strike-in-egypt.html

technologies in tandem can't mobilize people without concomitant movement on the ground. So while the April 6th Facebook page still has [70,000] members, very few of them are active, either on the group's message board, or in real-life. While Facebook offers a work-around for the problem of a small number of famous and important bloggers controlling the discourse in the Egyptian blogosphere, it is not clear how much real-world mobilizational potential the site really offers in the long run. A focus on Facebook appears also to have missed the widespread shift of online dissent from blogs to Twitter. As Hossam El-Hamalawy puts it, "the migration is not happening to Facebook, it's happening to the microblogs."[97] He adds, "Facebook is one of the outlets I have, but the heavyweights are not using Facebook." The heavyweight bloggers that El-Hamalawy refers to were skeptical of the April 6th movement and its possibilities. As the blogger Demagh MAK puts it, "The thing is that its just easier to use Twitter than a blog. You are in the middle of a demonstration and someone is killed or arrested, you can't leave the demonstration and write a blog. One is killed two arrested, you can just send it by Twitter and everybody now knows."[98] What happens to the information after that depends on the work organizers have done on the ground, and whether or not local or global elites write about it.

It is not just commitment levels, but some features of the interface itself that make it of limited utility under certain circumstance. Particularly at the height of any given crisis, the "wall" of a group and the main Facebook status update page can be inundated with messages. "In that flood of data, it's possible to lose key messages," wrote Ethan

[97]Interview with Hossam El-Hamalawy. Cairo, Egypt, May 27th, 2009.

[98] Interview with Demagh MAK. Cairo, Egypt, June 18th, 2009.

131

Zuckerman before the first April 6th strike in Egypt.[99] Zuckerman also points to the

problem of "serial activists," who jump from cause to cause – Gaza, April 6th, freeing

Ayman Nour – without ever making any real investment of time or energy in any of them.

However, the day's failure was due to more than mistakes and oversights by the

organizers – the regime's newfound savvy disrupting the functioning of SMNs must also

be credited.

*4.6 Regime interference with mobile activism*

The Mubarak regime has grown much savvier over the past year with respect to

interfering with the efforts of mobile activists, making it much more difficult for

individuals to conduct activism via the traditional tools of mobile phones. For starters, a

sophisticated registration-and-tracing system is in place, making it easy for the

government to track users, interfere with their signals, and to shut down large-scale

attempts to text-message. Another part of the problem is simple financial logistics –

Egyptian telecoms offer no unlimited texting services like those available in other

countries, including the United States. In the U.S. for instance, one can purchase, for only

a few dollars a month, a plan by which users are not financially penalized for the number

of text-messages they can send. This makes it substantially easier to send large numbers

of text-messages, to coordinate far-flung and wide-ranging action, and to adjust plans on

the go. In both the 2008 and 2009 strikes, the Egyptian government successfully blocked

the routes of Egyptian text-messagers. As Mohamed Adel, one of the primary organizers

and leaders of the April 6th movement, says, "In 2008, we used SMS, we used mobile

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[99]Zuckerman, Ethan. "Pros and Cons of Facebook Activism." *...My Heart's in Accra.* February 8th, 2008.
http://www.ethanzuckerman.com/blog/2008/02/08/pros-and-cons-of-facebook-activism/

technology to contact all the people."[100] In 2009, though, the government was able to block SMS messaging on April 6th.

The blocking of the text-messaging service vastly complicated the efforts of the organizers, who were already cash-strapped. According to Adel, the movement even tried to buy text-messages in bulk from India, which cost only $.01 per message, but the regime successfully blocked these messages as well. Unfortunately, this meant that the only coordinating mechanism on the ground that day was the micro-blogging service Twitter, which had previously shut down its text-messaging component anyway. Those activists who can afford the cost of the mobile web, either through USB internet connections, or through their cell phones, were still able to communicate and send many-to-many communications through Twitter, but unfortunately, many fewer individuals have or can afford to do this. Because the regime so successfully anticipated the day's events, which had been telegraphed and publicized by opposition forces months in advance, this left the activists essentially with no capability to execute or alter their plans after it became clear that the state was ready for them.

Technological problems were not the only thing hampering the efforts of the April 6th organizers. There are only roughly 2,000 full-time members of the movement, according to one of its founders, Ahmed Maher.[101] The movement also was riven, according both to its founders and other observers, with a factional split, between Maher and Adel and between Hizb al-Amal and other forces who sought to take control of the movement. Part of this disagreement can be traced to decisions made about funding the

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[100] Interview with Mohamed Adel, Cairo, Egypt, June 10th, 2009.
[101] Conversation with Ahmed Maher, Cairo, Egypt, June 10th, 2009.

movement- Maher himself is alleged to have sought $20,000 in cash from Freedom House, an organization believed in Egypt to have ties to the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. Rumors of CIA involvement in the April 6th Movement crippled the activists' credibility at a critical juncture. One activist told me that while opposition forces are happy to accept technical assistance from democracy-promoters, particularly with regard to new technologies, the acceptance of cash from organizations with known agendas can be deadly for the public credibility of organizers.[102]

In tandem with the clampdown on cafes, Egyptian telecoms now offer mobile Internet access through your laptop via a USB modem.[103] This is in many ways a unique and useful service, enabling individuals to bypass the unwieldy process of having an Internet connection turned on in their homes, an expensive and time-consuming endeavor. Activists tell me that this connection is quite good, works most anywhere, and is very fast. However, the process of obtaining one of these devices also falls under state surveillance, as applicants are required to submit identity papers, as well as addresses and phone numbers. This of course makes it possible for users to be tracked by the service providers, and hence by state authorities. Like all attempts at interfering with Internet access, on-the-ground realities offer any number of workarounds, as sympathetic merchants are sometimes willing to sell them using fake or falsified information. However, as with many attempts to step between the user and the Web, this step is not necessarily about perfecting enforcement or stopping the truly dedicated and savvy user from accessing

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[102] Interviews with Ahmed Abdel Fattah, Cairo, Egypt, June 14th, 2009, and Mohamed El-Gohary, Cairo, Egypt, June 13th, 2009.
[103] Several mobile phone service centers in Zamalek refused to sell me this device in May and June of 2009 without proof of residency in Egypt and requested my passport and address.

content, but rather about placing roadblocks between ordinary users and the information and communication capabilities of the Internet, the same way that slowing down the load time of a Web page will deter many users from loading that site at all. The cumulative effect of a series of small roadblocks or deterrent devices can add up to frustrated users who might simply accept that there are things they can't or shouldn't be doing online. In other words, the regime may be successfully raising the entry barriers and hence the costs of digital activism. Removing these individual nodes from a large network can slow down the information transmission capability of SMNs and render them much less useful, *pace* Metcalfe's law about the usefulness of communications networks growing as the number of users rises. The Egyptian regime, again, intends not to shut down networks (though that of course remains a possibility, particularly during short-term crises) but rather about creating uncertainty and difficulties for individuals who are also persecuted in much more straightforward and old-fashioned ways.[104] The number of activists willing to put up both with state harassment and technical interference is surely not as high as the number of activists willing to engage in this activity absent such efforts.

The regime has also instituted changes in the structure of internet cafes, vital sites of access to the Internet for ordinary people, which had been critical in both the building of online public spheres in general, and in the execution of the April 6th Movement in particular. For years, individuals were able to enter cafes and get online with minimal interference or surveillance either from café owners or the state. However, café owners are now required to collect vital information about the individuals using their computers (whether they actually do so is another question altogether). There can be little doubt

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[104]The April 6th organizers Mohamed Adel, for instance was detained for several months in 2008.

about the intent of these regulations, and while their effect might be limited in practice, symbolically the attempt to regulate access so closely could only have a chilling effect on the kind of writing, dissent, and activism individuals are willing to engage in.While of course sympathetic café owners still provide access to activists without collecting this information, it does present an additional hurdle to spreading information freely in an environment free of the threat of coercion, surveillance, and arrest. The reduction in the number of sites where free and unfettered Internet access is available at low cost can only reduce the network transmission capabilities of SMNs and interfere with the ability of organizers to communicate and execute plans.

Activists also have to contend with the reality of *de facto* non-generative technologies. Zittrain defines generativity as "a system's capacity to produce unanticipated change through unfiltered contributions from broad and varied audiences."[105] In other words, while many internet technologies were designed to be "open boxes," amenable to alteration by their owners, non-generative technologies are more like closed boxes, tied to their manufacturers, and vulnerable to alteration, tracking, and destruction remotely. Non-generative devices include the Ipod and TiVo. Zittrain argues that you can think of this as the difference between "contributors or participants rather than mere consumers." In the U.S., non-generativity is related to issues of profits and corporate interest, but in Egypt these questions are more closely related to surveillance and control than they are to money. Non-generativity is clearly the model being pursued by Egyptian telecoms and the regime. Organizers from the April 6th

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[105]Zittrain, Jonathan. *The Future of the Internet – And How To Stop It*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008.

Movement described what this change means for them in practice – while it is easy to change your mobile phone's "simcard", and hence your mobile number, the phones themselves contain a chip that can't be removed or altered, making it possible for your initial service provider to track that phone indefinitely. In practice, this means that the capabilities of the mobile phone itself are bifurcated – as we saw with the events of June 2009 in Iran, individuals are still able to access the Internet, either directly or by sharing proxy servers. However, the shutdown that occurred at a critical moment during the Iranian events destroyed the capability of individuals and organizers to use their mobile phones as coordinating and frame-building devices. Individuals with mobile Internet access can of course still access the Web directly, updating blogs, Twitter feeds, and other forms of social media communication. However, when coupled with the surveillance practices instituted by cybercafés and mobile service providers, such shutdowns add up to a crippling of the Internet's capacity to serve as an accelerant during moments of crisis – precisely the moment when they would otherwise be most useful.

*4.7 Mobilizing and Coordinating during the Gaza Campaign*

On December 27th, 2008, Israel launched an invasion and bombardment of the Gaza Strip. The Israelis had removed its civilian settler force in 2005, as well as its military forces. However, tensions remained high, particularly after the victory of the Islamist movement Hamas in the 2006 parliamentary elections. As a result of the organization's position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and because of accelerate rocket fire from the Gaza Strip into Israel, a blockade of the Strip was enforced by the Israelis and the Egyptians since June 2007. This blockade was controversial from the

outset, and engendered widespread resentment in Egypt as well. It was in this

environment that the incursion took place, 11 days after the expiration of a 6-month

cease-fire between Hamas and Israel that had been brokered by Egypt.[106] The war

generated substantial criticism in the Egyptian and global press, and led to the

mobilization of protests against the Israeli incursion and the perceived complicity of the

Mubarak regime. Such mobilization to reflects the same kind of widespread anger that

led to mobilizations against the Lebanon War in 2006, or against the Israeli-Egyptian

blockade of Gaza in 2008. But the battle between protestors and the state also in many

cases reflects the success of the state in shutting down protest against the regimes policies,

which had been causing resentment ever since the government agreed to help the Israeli

government conduct a blockade of the Gaza Strip.

SMNs also became important tools in the building of shared meaning. One of the

most prominent activities on Facebook was the changing of both profile names and

pictures to a first name of "Gaza." Doing so was a simple and powerful gesture of

solidarity, that in many cases reached out into a social network of friends with mixed or

hostile feelings about the cause of the Palestinians. Blogs and video-sharing websites also

remained important sites of documentation and functioned as work-arounds for a press

reluctant to write about the protests. Youtube, for instance,  provides powerful

documentation of protests in Alexandria on December 28th, 2008, in which engineering

students organized against the Israeli incursion. Thousands of protestors can be seen.[107]

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[106]Zahur, Sherifa. "The Lost Calm of Operation Cast Lead." *Middle East Policy* 16/1: (40-52).
[107]        http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M5bXQvr8AhI&feature=related. Accessed August 20th, 2009.

The government, however, was loathe to admit to this unpopular policy. The Egyptian official press cleverly disguised the prohibition against street demonstrations against Operation Cast Lead. *Al-Ahram*, on December 31st, 2008, printed a story with the headline "Angry responses sweep the streets of Arab capitals."[108] The story detailed the protests taking place across the Arab world in response to the Israeli incursion. It's Egypt section came first, but instead of details about street protests and mobilizations, the story talked about an announcement from the Lawyer's Syndicate, hardly evidence of an angry response sweeping the streets of Cairo. The Muslim Brotherhood was able to mobilize some protests across Egypt, including Mounifiya, Dimyat , and Fayoum[109], but overall the security prohibition against protests was effective in Cairo. Even when protestors did manage to take to the streets, such as after Friday prayers on January 2nd, 2009[110], their success was short-lived in the face of sustained repression from the regime. Outside of Cairo, though, protestors saw more success. In Alexandria, a demonstration on January 9th included as many as 50,000 people.[111] Reports indicated that security forces backed off the demonstrators because of the numbers involved. As a direct result of this protest, the regime arrested 21 members of the Muslim Brotherhood in Alexandria and charged

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[108] "Rudud al-fiʻl tajtahu shawariʻ al-ʻawasim al-arabiyya." *Al-Ahram*, December 31st 2008.

[109] "Waqafat ihtijajiya tajtahu muhafazhat Misr li-l-tandid bi-majzarat Ghazza" http://lazeeez.com/qalam/i-343-2725.html

[110] Jessica Desvarieux. "Hundreds Protest Closed Egypt-Gaza Border." VOA News. January 3rd, 2009. http://www.voanews.com/english/archive/2009-01/2009-01-03-voa3.cfm?CFID=265053033&CFTOKEN=57849127&jsessionid=8430d305506867ed7e7a1d4e6e771932297d

[111] Stern, Johannes. "Widespread anger in Egypt at Mubarak regime." World Socialist Web Site. January 24th, 2009. http://www.wsws.org/articles/2009/jan2009/egyp-j24.shtml. See also

them with organizing the protests.[112] Dozens of Brotherhood members were arrested across Egypt during Operation Cast Lead, as the regime sent an unmistakable signal that the protests had crossed the line.

Even these limited protests mobilized against the Israeli incursion into Gaza cannot be said to have taken place because of SMNs. It is impossible, in fact, to evaluate the actual contribution of these media to the mobilization itself, except by comparison to similar mobilizations that took place in the past. While SMNs have been used to mobilize protest against Israeli policies on many occasions in the past, including the invasion of the West Bank in 2002, the war in Lebanon in 2006, and the ongoing blockade of the Gaza Strip, it remains unclear whether those who attended the protests did so because of SMNs or for some other reason. Large protests against Israeli policies have also been organized by, for instance, the Muslim Brotherhood, an organization that has been quite prominent in its opposition to the Mubarak regimes perceived complicity with Israeli policies. Most media reports of Gaza protests during Operation Cast Lead credit the Brotherhood with their organization, and the group was also behind the January 2008 protests against the Gaza Blockade. While SMNs certainly contribute to these protests – Brotherhood members are active bloggers, Twitterers, and emailers – the group remains a grassroots organization whose strength is derived from on-the-ground organizing and face-to-face contact.  Another large protest was organized in Mahalla Al-Kubra, the site of the labor unrest that led to the April 6th, 2008 general strike.

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[112] "Shurtat Misr tulqi al-qabd 'ala 21 ikhwaniyan bi-sabab muzhaharat Ghazza." (Egyptian police arrest 21 members of the Muslim Brotherhood for Gaza protests." Masrawy. January 11th, 2009. http://www.wsws.org/articles/2009/jan2009/egyp-j24.shtml

The evidence from the Gaza episode tells us two important things about the mobilizational potential of SMNs in authoritarian regimes: first, while SMNs lower certain collective action costs, it is not at all clear that they lower the most important costs in Egypt and in places like Egypt. While communication, frame-building, and coordination carry substantial costs for any organizer, they are much smaller impediments to large-scale organizing than heavy repression. The precise conditions under which oppositions might be most successful is a subject which will receive greater scrutiny in Chapter 6. This leads directly to the second point, which is that the state makes a determination that there will no public protests about something, they appear to be willing and able to execute this strategy with a great deal of ruthlessness. While sympathy for the plight of the Palestinians is *de rigeur* in most Egyptian circles, the Egyptian government's success in keeping protests quiet in Cairo succeeded in hiding protests elsewhere from most international journalists. And since the government is sensitive to international opinion and pressure, this can only be seen as a victory for the state's control strategy. Elsewhere in Egypt, the large protests successfully executed by opposition activists provide an answer to the question of whether even a determined state can entirely prevent motivated citizens from expressing themselves. Even a determined state, however, cannot stop activists from transmitting information, frames, and calls for solidarity to international audiences, where they may create pressure on the Egyptian regime.

*4.8 Internationalizing but not Mobilizing*

This mobilization and activation of international networks of human rights activists can pressure the governments of authoritarian regimes like Egypt and to lend solidarity to strikers, protestors, and prisoners of conscience. Many of Egypt's top bloggers travel frequently to Europe, have contacts in IFEX and the global human rights community, and either work for or are otherwise active in local Egyptian rights organizations like The Arab Network For Human Rights Information (ANHRI), the Egyptian Center For Women's Rights (ECWR), the Egyptian Organization For Human Rights (EOHR), and the Hisham Mubarak Center. The networked contacts developed by this relatively small cadre of SMN activists reaches far beyond Egypt and into the West, in ways that are sometimes productive and sometimes unproductive (as we will see later with the April 6th Youth Movement). The blogger and rights activist Mohamed Khaled, who was the first major blogger to post and disseminate the Emad El-Kabir video to a wider audience, is also the program coordinator for AHNRI. He claims:

> We have connections with all the NGOs about specially freedom of expression, we are a member of IFEX this is the biggest network in the world concerning freedom of expression, we have a lot of contacts with other NGOs inside of Egypt and outside of Egypt, we can make a statement and send to the NGOs friends and sign it and campaign with us, we campaign with them, it makes a big media pressure on the government that the government doesn't listen to us anymore, so you get some international pressure on the government that would be more useful.[113]

The Internet thus becomes a crucial piece of local and international NGO activism, since the regime either does not have the capacity or the will to engage in sustained filtering or blocking of NGO Web sites themselves. This means that the sites themselves have

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[113] Interview with Mohamed Khaled, Cairo, Egypt, June 25th, 2009.

become accumulated stores of knowledge and communication between activists and the

international community, available to Egyptians with an Internet connection and to

anyone in the world interested in what's happening in Egypt. As Mohamed Khaled

argued, "it's opened the door for us, like if you wanted to speak or talk to the people

through the newspaper, this can be cut from the newspaper from the government, but

there is no censorship on the Internet, we can write about whatever we want." These

organizations now, as standard practice, compile yearly reports and documentation of

rights abuses, some only in Arabic (the Hisham Mubarak Center for instance) and some

of which are produced and translated into English as well (ANHRI provides some of its

reports in both English and Arabic, like it's yearly report on Freedom of Expression in

Egypt[114].

Scholars have noticed this increased internationalization of Egyptian public life.

Ghobashy defines it as:

> …the bargaining and interaction between Egyptian political actors and two
> specific sets of international actors: foreign governments and transnational
> nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and advocacy networks encompassing
> the international press and media (2008, 10).

Activists on the ground echo this scholarly appraisal. Nora Younis argues:

> I realized there was a gap between the activism and the media. Most of the
> activists don't speak English in a way or another there is a communication link
> that's broken somehow, so I started, I had already some of the numbers of the
> reporters, and I was SMSing news of who was being released and suddenly it was
> this list of 800 reporters and human rights activists, cameraman, lawyers and other
> activists and I was sending mass SMS's. The cell phone and the charger became
> the most important thing.

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[114]Reports available at http://www.anhri.net/en/

This is true whether the goal is labor reform or freedom of expression. SMNs facilitated the transmission of information to global labor networks during the campaign for an independent union of tax collectors, for instance. Ties between networked activists like Hossam El-Hamalawy and the global labor movement produced statements of solidarity and individual letters[115], like the one sent by a branch of the Northern Ireland Fire Brigades Union: "We totally support the efforts of the Higher Committee for Strike ( RETA) in trying to establish a free, independent and democratic trade union structure, to properly represent the rights and interests of ordinary workers and will do all we can to help make your voice heard." While the tangible benefit of such displays might be limited, anything that globalizes the campaign of internationally marginal workers in Egypt has the potential to raise the profile of the labor movement, which appears to be happening: Time magazine's August 2009 story on Egyptian labor unrest details the struggle for an independent labor federation and features an interview with El-Hamalawy himself.[116] Support from abroad may also galvanize workers and organizers struggling to maintain the morale of campaigns.

*4.9 Conclusions*

In evaluating the evidence from all of these cases, one thing becomes very clear: There is a substantial methodological difficulty in attempting to explain the impact of SMNs on protest and collective action in a single-case study of Egypt. There is simply no

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[115]     See for instance "Solidarity from Britain," which details a message from the UK Public and Commercial Services Union. http://arabist.net/arabawy/2009/08/11/solidarity-from-britain/

[116]     Hausloner, Abigail. "As Egypt's Mubarak Comes To Washington, Labor Unrest Surges at Home." *Time*. August 18th, 2009.

way to isolate the influence of blog and Twitter posts or Facebook groups, on any individual protest that took place in Egypt between 2005 and 2009. These difficulties are why the comparison between April 6th 2008 and April 6th 2009 is so important. It is, methodologically, as close to a natural experiment as you might find in qualitative social science. In each case, the demonstrations, in addition to being publicized, written about, documented, and coordinated online, were also organized by existing political forces on the ground in Egypt, most notably Kefaya and the Muslim Brotherhood. It is clear that the Muslim Brotherhood has consistently put together much larger demonstrations with little help from the toolbox of Web 2.0. Organizations with deeper social ties to local communities and an interest in the issue at hand will continue to have a mobilizational and organizational advantage over SMNs organized principally around "issue ad-hocracies" in the sense that the elite, blog-driven protest movement centered around the issues in question co-existed with a much more organic and well-organized protest drive by either the Brotherhood or by the labor movement, which possess organizing capacity far beyond the capabilities of even the most well-connected bloggers or SMN activists. This is because, during the period in question, the demands of Egyptian SMN core were quite diffuse and dependent on day-to-day developments in Egyptian politics and society, whereas MB organizing does not depend principally on daily developments, but rather around its core of enthusiastic and risk-taking supporters, which it developed through painstaking organizing over the course of decades.

The data presented in this chapter support the contention that SMNs can mobilize short-term protest activity and build linkages between groups and individuals seeking to

145

contest extant issues in Egyptian politics. Data and interview work also support the hypothesis that certain SMN technologies – particularly Twitter posts and SMS messages – have great tactical utility for activists seeking to plan and execute demonstrations, as well as to contest and avoid arrests. This is true even in collective actions organized primarily without SMNs. SMNs reduce certain costs of collective action, including communication and tactical coordination. In rare instances, they may spread information and frames rapidly enough to instigate an informational cascade, but this possibility remains to be demonstrated on a scale which would indicate the clear support of ordinary citizens beyond the educated, urban, Internet-savvy elite. SMNs also facilitate linkages to international groups and organizations who can lend their voices to public discourse and agitate for governments and NGOs to contest arrests, human rights violations, and structural economic and political policies.

However, the potential of SMNs to *ignite* large-scale opposition activity in Egypt (and in places like Egypt) appears to be quite low. There are a number of primary reasons for this difficulty. First, the Egyptian state, while avoiding the high-profile censorship of the Internet that brings condemnation from outside groups and might lead to interference with the state's economic goals, it has successfully made it difficult even to do the kind of on-the-spot organizing with mobile phones that has received so much press attention. The difficulties described by organizers in the April 6th movement are indicative of greater savvy on the part of the regime than many previously believed. In fact, the tools available to authoritarian regimes give governments great leverage to interfere with mobile-web-based activity such as Twitter and SMS. The formative cases of SMS-

organized people power movements took place in states which either lacked the capacity or the will to engage in widespread interference with telecommunications networks. In Egypt this is not the case – the major telecoms are all subject to state interference and clearly cooperate with the regime to a certain extent. Making text messages extraordinarily expensive, for instance, or blocking mobile accounts, can make it very difficult to use these tools to organize, especially since any individual in Egypt must connect to the network through one of the major providers, all of which are subject to state licensure and pressure.

The final conclusion drawn from the data presented in this chapter is that SMN-mediated protest and opposition movements must be based on grassroots organizing that takes place offline. The contrast between the two April 6th strikes suggests that the former had substantial support and sympathy, because of popular identification with the causes of the Mahalla strike in 2008, and because of the lack of any such defining characteristic in 2009. Successful micro-level mobilizations, such as those that took place around the constitutional amendments (2005), the Lebanon War (2006) the sexual harassment problem (2006) and the Gaza war (2007) demonstrate that is possible to mobilize elite support and contention around issue ad-hocracies, and that the tools of SMNs are critical in raising both domestic and international awareness for these causes, as well as for the coordination of the demonstrations and dissent themselves. However, there is no avoiding the conclusion that such movements tend to be ephemeral and are eclipsed by the structural exigencies of Egyptian politics. Despite the openings in the media environment detailed in chapter 2, and notwithstanding the very real challenge presented to regime

autonomy by the judiciary, other openings in the Egyptian political system have been quite limited. This is partly because the best-organized and most credible opposition force, the Muslim Brotherhood, is both systematically persecuted by the regime and prevented from forming a political party domestically, and isolated internationally because of its stances on women's rights, minority rights, and most importantly, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

These structural limitations of Egyptian politics are real and substantially circumscribe what can be accomplished with digital activism. The material presented in this chapter supports the theory that both the mobilizing and political potential of SMNs are context-dependent. However, it is possible that SMNs can have additional impact on Egyptian politics and the Egyptian public sphere by creating and sustaining public spheres or "counter-publics" for marginalized groups like women, religious minorities, and sexual minorities. This chapter argues that the context for the April 6th Movement was generated by political struggles which took place earlier in the decade. Chapter 5 will argue that by creating virtual counter-publics for marginal groups, SMNs can potentially lead to successful mobilizations. It is to those issues that this dissertation now turns.

**Chapter 5**

**(Amplified) Voices for the Voiceless:**

**Social Media Networks, Minorities, and Virtual Counterpublics**

*"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.*

*5.0 Introduction*

Chapter 4 explained both the possibilities and limitations of digital mobilization through Social Media Networks. While they diffuse information quickly and more efficiently than traditional modes of organization and communication, and while they lower certain costs and barriers to collective action, Social Media Networks themselves cannot bring about the revolution. If Chapter 3 explained the impact on the media environment, and Chapter 4 explained the impact on mobilization, Chapter 5 will explain how both the collective action and media effects of SMNs can combine to impact public discourse. The chapter will explain how, even taking the limitations outlined in previous chapters into consideration, Social Media Networks can impact public discourse and serve as channels for mobilization for marginalized groups in Egyptian society. These effects are realized, as in Chapters 3 and 4, through digitally-enhanced networks of journalists, elite bloggers, and the properties of information diffusion explained in Chapter 2.  Again though, as in Chapters 3 and 4, changes in discourse or even

mobilization do not necessarily lead to changes in policy. This chapter is crucial for building theory about SMNs, since Chapters 3 and 4 largely detailed the efforts of individuals who can be considered elites (i.e. bilingual international journalists, and educated, Cairo-based student activists). Arriving at a theoretically-informed explanation of the impact of SMNs on marginalized groups and individuals will help construct a generalizable theory of Social Media Networks under authoritarianism.

In Egypt, public discourse is still dominated by government-owned or controlled media, like the newspaper giant Al-Ahram and the TV station Nile Television. Independent newspapers, discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, have changed this equation, but the circulation figures still favor the government-owned and aligned media outlets. 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 like Coptic Christians and Baha'is, or it might be due to the 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, 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" (2001, 165). Blogs themselves have long been

150

posited as "the voice of the voiceless," a way to democratize public life and add the voices of ordinary people to those of the elites. While this may be true, earlier chapters suggest that those voices are only heard or amplified through critical nodes of elite journalists and bloggers.

The findings of Chapter 4 indicate that while Social Media Networks can be important tools of coordination and mobilization, they cannot mobilize in the absence of grassroots organizing, and they cannot challenge established institutions of authoritarianism. What they can do, however, as noted in Chapter 2, is connect diffuse actors with common interests. To test whether these dynamics hold in authoritarian systems, this chapter will evaluate and explain the impact of Social Media Network activity on two minorities in Egypt through the exploration of two case studies: the case of ID cards for Baha'is; and the growth of web sites and blogs dedicated to Muslim Brothers. The case studies will seek to answer two questions: 1) Are social media 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 (2008) and Hindman (2008), 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, once again, 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 building theory.

*5.1 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 U.S. 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 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. " (1989, cited in Al Saggaf 2006). The public sphere as it developed in Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries was imagined as a

place where previously excluded groups and individuals could have their voices heard, through conversations in cafes, salons, and newspapers (Poor 2005). It is this latter aspect 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" (Poor 2005, 1) 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 (2001), however, offers a full set of reasons that online public spheres fail to meet the standards delineated by Habermas. 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 (2008) 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. As chapter 3 demonstrated, however, such elites, through the dynamics of networks and power laws, can be the critical nodes in the dissemination of information into the wider public sphere. Therefore this chapter will not be investigating whether Habermasian public spheres exist as such, but rather whether and how Social Media Networks successfully introduce Baha'is and Muslim Brothers into the public discourse.

153

Other scholars have characterized the use of the Internet by subordinated groups as "virtual counterpublics" or "cyber-movements" (Palczewski 2001, 165). 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." Counterpublics are theorized as operating in distinction from, and opposition to, the borgouise 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 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 (2001, 7). Ideas of exclusion, oppression, and resistance are key for counterpublic theory. Thus in Egypt, the study of Muslim Brothers, Baha'is, and women, can usefully be characterized as the study of multiple public spheres, or counterpublics. Each group is 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 where ideas and practices of resistance can be developed, and senses of community fostered. As states like China have proven, however, that arena can be delimited by determined state authorities, and made to be substantially unfree.

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 18ᵗʰ-century Europe restructured "the intimacy of the private realm," which came to be seen as "the authentic space of human existence" (Edgar 36). The public nature of the novel meant that no one with the means to purchase them could be excluded from reading them. As will be seen later with the blogging of Baha'is and Muslim Brothers, 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. As Edgar notes,

> …the truth of the public sphere, is realized in the critical examination to which the public sphere subjects government policy and law" (37).

It was not always thus. Until developments in the 17ᵗʰ century in Britain and France, it was unheard of for ordinary citizens to have a say in the affairs of the state (Edgar 37). In Britain, the repeal of censorship laws led to the development of journals and reviews which featured prominent commentary by noted authors like Daniel Defoe. Together with the provision of access to parliamentary proceedings in 1803, these developments led to the creation of the fourth estate – a class of individuals whose profession was to watch over the affairs of the state and to engage the public, in much the same way that European legal reform proceeded from "the separation of the private realm of the family and civil society….from state interference," (38).

Today, 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. At the same time, 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 process of social and political mobilization that do not rely on formal politics…." (Castells et. al. 2007, 209). This is particularly important in places like Egypt, where formal politics offer limited or non-existent channels of participation in public life.

Thus conceptualized as virtual counterpublics, electronic communities in authoritarian regimes in Egypt and places like Egypt can be categorized, studied and better understood. Such studies can be valuable contributions to our store of knowledge about democracy, deliberation, and citizenship, among many other important topics. They do not, however, go very far toward answering the research question of this study, namely "What is the impact of the use of social media?" To answer this question, researchers must go beyond reading and parsing the material on these sites, and engage with the larger context in which the sites exist. Doing that requires tracing debates around issue-areas, examining the larger media context for signs that Social Media Networks are generating press attention and mobilization

A way of framing the impact of SMNs on Egyptian public life would be through Maratea's concept of "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" (2008, 140). However, 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 (Maratea 2008, 142). The introduction of new claims-makers often takes the form of blogs providing journalists with "a trove of available claims" (2008, 147). 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 like 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 like Baha'is and Muslim Brothers 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.

*5.3 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 – non *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 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.[117] 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 exist in a more vulnerable position than protected *Ahl al-Kitab (*This is not in any way to suggest that the position of Egypt's sizable Coptic minority or 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 unwed couples 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

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[117] "Baha'i Faith: Early Days in Egypt." *Baha'i Faith in Egypt*. June 6th, 2006. http://www.bahai-egypt.org/2006/06/bahai-faith-early-days-in-egypt.html

Muslim, Christian, or Jew. They were also prevented from practicing their religion in public, a serious violation of their religious freedom.

One of the 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 orientation 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 between the NDP and the opposition in parliament, the Muslim Brotherhood and the ruling party agreed that the rules should not be changed for Baha'is. As Religious Endowments Minister Mahmoud Zakzouk told the *Daily News Egypt*, Baha'ism is "not a revealed religion" for Muslims and thus not subject to special protection in Egypt.[118] 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 identification cards. The first recipient of one of these new cards declared the Baha'is right to leave that line blank

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[118] "State to Appeal Ruling that Favors Egypt's Baha'is." *Daily News Egypt*. May 5th, 2006. http://www.dailystaregypt.com/article.aspx?ArticleID=1394

"a victory for the citizen and the civilization of Egypt."[119] It is almost certainly more of a 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 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 Baha'i 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 you 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.[120]

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

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[119] 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 9th, 2009. http://www.almasry-alyoum.com/article2.aspx?ArticleID=221981
[120] Interview with Samir Shady. Cairo, Egypt, April 21st, 2008.

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 Samir 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.[121]

To that end, Shady frequently comments on media items and statements by leading figures in Egyptian public life, like 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.[122] 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 Nazhar Ukhra* (Another Viewpoint), argued in its very first post in 2006 that it wanted to offer "another viewpoint to what is published in the Arab media and the Western media."[123]

The distribution of participation and viewership is not necessarily between 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 Nazhar Ukhra*, for instance, is one of these blogs (although it should be noted that her blog is composed from Chicago,

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[121] "On the Baha'is and the Crusades." *Egyptian Baha'i.* February 23rd, 2008. Author's translation.
[122] "Ya Shaykh?" *Egyptian Baha'i*. January 29th, 2008.
http://egyptianbahai.wordpress.com/2008/01/29/oh_sheikh/#more-110
[123] "Introduction." Wijhat Nazhar Ukhra. August 3rd, 2006.
http://fromdifferentangle.blogspot.com/2006_08_01_archive.html

161

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'I Faith 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 (2008). 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. A small number of individuals appear able to move freely between these worlds, accepting jobs as journalists while still maintaining blogs and profiles in the international rights community

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. It is also the case that virtual selves sometimes have more power and cache than their actual selves. 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 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."[124] To be able to blog about their histories, to post photos and videos, and have those links be shared among a community of interested co-religionists, 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. 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,

> 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....[125]

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

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[124] "The Radwan Holiday in Egypt." *Egyptian Baha'i*. April 28th, 2008. http://egyptianbahai.wordpress.com/2008/04/28/ridwan_in_egyp/ Author's translation.
[125] "Egyptian Bah'ais and ID cards." *Baha'i Faith in Egypt*. June 2nd, 2006. http://www.bahai-egypt.org/search?updated-max=2006-07-09T19%3A01%3A00-05%3A00&max-results=50

and international audiences that popular attention is turned to their plight. It is also true, as Maratea (2008) 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.

*5.4 Power Law Dynamics and Baha'i Blogging*

Consistent with the expectations of network theory outlined in Chapter 2, there are 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 blogger-activists include "Living in Egypt Without ID; Egyptian Baha'i, *Wijhat Nazhar 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.

In Chapter 3, I argued that the 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, who has appeared in this project in every chapter. As if to

164

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, which specifically

mentioned her advocacy for the Baha'is in the award. The blog Egyptian Baha'i made

special mention of Younis and her efforts on their behalf.[126] 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 what the Baha'i people are, some Bahaii blogs
> appeared on the Internet, wrote about their religion their faith and their right to
> choose their religion, 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 Bahaii demands, and they have
> designed logos to put on the blogs and they are in some cases they are attending
> some proceedings….like publishing a photographs of the stands to support the
> Bahaiis and was led by the bloggers, and was led by a very famous blogger Nora
> Younis….[127]

Younis and El-Zelaky know each other personally, and that 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

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[126] "http://egyptianbahai.wordpress.com/2008/10/30/the_beautifu/2969734075_d676420219/.
[127] Interview with Ehab El-Zalaky, Cairo, Egypt, April 11th, 2008.

allow them to have ID's as other Egyptian citizens. She hoped that the government will 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 will be grateful if the government would strike through the field of religion, leave it vacant, register their real faith, or write 'others' in that field.[128]

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 17th, 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 day to day basis, and things will only get worse for them as time goes by."[129] Manal and Alaa posted a link to the protest event including the image below.[130] They also posted a lament in 2008 entitled "Yes, they will f—k your sister" 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.[131] (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

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[128] Izz Ed-Din, Ahmed. "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 21st, 2008. Author's translation.
[129] "Today's Baha'i Protest." Rantings of a Sandmonkey. December 17th, 2006. http://www.sandmonkey.org/2006/12/17/todays-bahai-protest/
[130] "Waqfa tadamuniyya min al-baha'iyin al-masriyin min ajli haqqihim fi ithbat diyanatihim aw kitaba (ukhra) fi khanat al-diyanah fi-l-awraq al-rasmiyya" http://www.manalaa.net/node/84324
[131] "Ba'd al-hukm 'ala 'Abd al-Karim wa-l-baha'iyin al-kuffar hayniku ukhtak" http://www.manalaa.net/the_heathen_and_your_sister.

minorities if we can't defend the majority?"[132]). 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?"[133] Issandr El-Amrani also added a post about the ruling, on December 17th, 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."[134] 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 5.1: Call to action prior to court decision, December 2006.**

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[132] "Kuntum fein lamma Faransa" http://www.manalaa.net/where_where_you_when_france
[133] "Ni'mil eih fi-l-baha'iyin ba'd ma mana'athum al-mahkama min ithbat dinahum fi al-'awraq al-thubutiyya?" *Gharbeia.net*. December 17th, 2006. http://gharbeia.net/node/179.
[134] "Court denies Ba'hais legal recognition." The Arabist. December 17th, 2009. http://arabist.net/archives/2006/12/16/court-denies-bahais-legal-recognition/

167

In one particularly well-known incident, El-Hamalawy, together with Younis and fellow blogger and Ibn Abdel-Aziz, 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). Abdel-Aziz, in a lengthy blog post on the day's events, corrected a number of errors in *Al-Masry Al-Youm*'s coverage of the event.[135] 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 that court case itself. El-Hamalawy and Abdel-Aziz both noted wryly the presence of protestors 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' 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 particularly egregious person's 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 the court room in the corridor. "Bahaai'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

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[135] 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.

talking about, and did not know if I should laugh or cry. It was pure bigotry.

"They are germs in our society!"[136]

While the solidarity actions of these four 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 of 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, seem to come together in this

particular instance – elite bloggers, many with heavy 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 rights."[137] 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).[138] *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

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[136] El-Hamalawy, Hossam. "Bigotry and sectarianism par excellence." 3Arabawy. December 16th, 2006. http://arabist.net/arabawy/2006/12/16/anti-bahaais-bigotry-and-sectarianism/

[137] Whitaker, Brian. "Egypt's step toward freedom of belief." *The Guardian*. March 17th, 2009.
[138] Stack, Liam. "Egyptians win right to drop religion from ID cards" *Christian Science Monitor*, April 20th, 2009. P. 6

Baha'is.[139] 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. Therefore, the Baha'i case appears to provide evidence for the hypothesis that SMNs can provide access to the public sphere for marginalized groups in authoritarian countries.

**Figure 5.2: Nora Younis and another blogger hold 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 16th, 2006.**

The reactions of observers in the courtroom, suggest that Bahai's have not, in Egyptian political and social discourse, achieved the kind "authentic space of human existence" provided by the existence of a literary or political public sphere. Denied access

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[139] Slackman, Michael. "Hints of Pluralism Begin to Appear in Egyptian Religious Debates." *The New York Times*. August 31st, 2009. P. 6.

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 corruption and immorality."[140] The use of the common trope that Baha'is serve Zionist goals, from the pen of the 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-Maki wrote for *Al-Masry Al-Youm* about a draft law that would have essentially criminalized Baha'ism, "an assault on the Constitution and an attack on Egypt's reputation."[141]

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[140] "Majma' al-buhuth al-islamiyya: al-baha'iya haraka suhyuniyya tas'a li-nashr al-fasad wa-l-radhila" *Al Masry Al-Youm*, May 30th, 2009. http://www.almasry-alyoum.com/article2.aspx?ArticleID=213030
[141] "Ahmed 'Abd al-Mu'ti yaktub: mushkilatuna ma'a al-usuliyyin." *Al-Masry Al-Youm*. May 7th, 2009. http://www.almasry-alyoum.com/article2.aspx?ArticleID=210026

**Figure 5.3: An Egyptian national ID card with a "blank" for religion. Courtesty of** *Egyptian Baha'i*.

Whatever the cause, it is unquestionable that the cause of the Baha'is has become

part of serious public discourse in Egypt. Since little has changed in regards to the

position of Baha'is in public life since the 1952 revolution, causality must be attributed to

a combination of SMNs and the mid-decade political ferment in the country. This can be

seen simply from the chart below, which tracks the number of stories in the Egyptian

press about Baha'is. 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-Yusef*, which

derided opposition candidate Ayman Nour as "*Ghazil al-Baha'iyin, al-Aqbat, , al-Sa'idi*"

(The Courter of Baha'is, Copts, and Saidis)[142]. :

2005: 7

2006: 87

2007: 45

2008: 84

2009*: 233

*As of October 23rd, 2009.

By 2009 the Baha'is had a number of supporters in the press, who wrote
frequently for liberal outlets like *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. [143] Other
state outlets frequently lump Baha'is in with "apostates of Islam" during attacks on the

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[142] Basha, Ahmed. "Ghazil al-Baha'iyin, al-Aqbat, wa al-Sa'idi. Ayman Nour: Shoo?" *Rose Al-Yusef*,
September 3rd, 2005. p.27.
[143] Abdal Rahim, Gemal. "Ayn al-qanun salamat al-ghatha'a?" *Al-Gumhuriyya*. October 6th, 2009. P.16.

West or Zionism.[144] And advocacy groups, in the form of either diasporas (i.e. Coptic

Christians in the U.S.) or co-religionists. While there are at most a few thousand Baha'is

in Egypt, there are many more in the U.S., with their own lobbying arm in Washington

D.C. Other religious NGOs have appealed to U.S. President Barack Obama to raise the

issue of human rights for Baha'is and Coptic Christians[145]. 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.

*5.5 SMNs and The Muslim Brothers*

As one of the most popular political and social organizations in Egypt, the

Muslim Brothers occupy a radically different position in Egyptian public life than the

Baha'is. However, the decades-long political persecution of the Muslim Brothers is quite

well-documented, punctuated by a pattern of repression followed by periodic re-

integration into public life that has been repeated several times even before the coup that

brought the Free Officers to power in 1952. The pattern has been repeated so many times,

in such a similar fashion, that the Brothers can not be conceptualized as part of normal

political life in the country; rather, the group has occupied a precarious perch in both civil

society and the public sphere, operating on the margins, its leadership hounded into

submission, and its young members expecting to serve prison time at some point. In Lust-

Okar's "divided structure" of political contestation (Lust-Okar 2007), the Brotherhood

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[144] See for instance Abd al-Rahim, Gamal. "Shahidat al-hijab fi duwal al-irhab". *Al-Gumhuriya*. July 7th, 2009. P. 14.
[145] "al-Huriyat al-Diniya al-Amrikiya tutalib Obama bi itharat qadaya al-Aqbat wa-l-Baha'iyin." *Al Masry Al-Youm*, August 13th, 2009. http://www.almasry-alyoum.com/article2.aspx?ArticleID=222433

has found itself both on the inside and outside, but more often the latter. This repression has taken place in spite of widespread scholarly agreement that both the leadership and membership of the Muslim Brotherhood adheres to democratic values and expresses adherence to the norms of electoral participation (Harnisch and Mecham 2009; Aclimandos 2007; Leiken and Brooke 2007; Shehata and Stacher, 2006).

Lust-Okar provides one possible explanation for the Brotherhood's moderation, and the moderation of more radical groups in general. Her theory extends the typical typology of inclusion/exclusion to encompass relations between opposition groups in authoritarian societies. Societies in which all opposition groups are either excluded or included in the political system are termed "unified" structures of contestation, whereas regimes which include some (typically moderate) opposition forces and exclude other (typically more radical) groups feature "divided structures of contestation." The included groups therefore have incentives to preserve their own prerogatives and perquisites within the system. (In important ways this formulation seems quite similar to Brownlee's argument that dominant parties unite fractious oppositions and create a cohesive "in group" that can withstand outside challenges). In situations of prolonged economic crisis, included moderates will side with the regime against excluded radicals, and neither opposition group will be able to press its demands with the state. With some variations depending on the situation, this is how the Mubarak regime has been able to so successfully exclude the Brotherhood – by including other opposition groups in the formal political system, and by refusing to distinguish, rhetorically, between the Brotherhood and the more violent, anti-system groups like the Islamic Group.

The Brotherhood has surely sensed that it is a group on the outside looking in, despite its popularity, and that to win inclusion in the system, it would have to moderate its platform and core beliefs, granting leadership to reformist moderates like Khairat el-Shater. This is the advice the group has been getting from Western scholars and strategists for years, and it is behind the group's willingness, even eagerness to meet with anyone visiting the country – scholars, journalists, graduate students, undergraduates. This strategy, however successful it has been in convincing scholars that the group's behavior has been altered, has not been successful in winning a change in the long-term stance of the regime vis-à-vis the organization, indicating that the regime was never interested in the ideological makeup of the Brotherhood per se, but rather that it has always seen it as the most threatening competitor for executive power in the system. The regime, therefore, will likely adapt to seek ways to exclude the Brotherhood no matter what ideological stance it strikes – just as moderate secular groups like Ghad Party are persecuted even though, or perhaps because, they are clearly committed to the rules of electoral democracy.

As part of its campaign of normalization both inside and outside of Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood, an organization with a well-developed grassroots presence, also features a diverse network of Social Media sites, including comprehensive Web sites in English and Arabic, Ikwhanweb[3] and Ikhwanonline[4]. While the Brotherhood was a late entrant into the medium of blogging, which was dominated in the early days by secular bloggers writing in English, the organization's bloggers soon became influential both inside and outside the organization (Lynch 2007), with the young, networked blogging

corps having a substantial effect on internal debates in the organization. As Lynch argues, "In each of the major political controversies surrounding the Brotherhood in recent years, the bloggers have taken an active role" (2007). Lynch argues that the young brothers were particularly influential in the debate surrounding the release of the Muslim Brotherhood's party platform in the fall of 2007. This platform was released in the context of renewed confrontation between the regime and the organization, as the MB appeared to be making great efforts toward becoming a normalized political party (Hamzawy 2007). However, to the disappointment of the organization's young Cairo-based youth (as opposed to the more conservative youth elsewhere), the draft party platform contained a number of provisions that set off alarm bells for democratic observers. Notably, the platform called for the implementation of Islamic law, prohibited women and Copts from assuming the presidency, and refused to contemplate a separation between a MB political party and the organization itself (Hamzawy 2007). The element of the platform that was most at odds with the spirit of democratic practice was the idea that senior scholars in the organization might have the power to veto legislation that was deemed to be at odds with Islamic Law. Taken together, these elements pointed to a Muslim Brotherhood in turmoil, which refused to take the necessary steps to mollify observers within the regime or potential external patrons. The document appeared to please precisely no one, particularly the young bloggers, who attacked it and debated one another about the direction the organization should take. However, Lynch notes that even in this internal debate, it is not at all clear that the young bloggers were victorious (Lynch

2007), inasmuch as the platform itself was not received well by more important and powerful forces in Egyptian society and international observers.

The bloggers, which are tolerated and even encouraged by the senior leadership, do not appear to take direct orders from the organization. Mohamed Habib was circumspect on this point in an interview, refusing to say whether the organization's bloggers were or were not under control:

> Of course bloggers have a role, first they convey the ideas and actions of the brotherhood to others, which gives us a better image, second they analyze anything bad said against the brotherhood, and they say it from their own point of view and in their own way.[146]

Or as one young MB activist told me, "The bloggers can't be brought under control."[147] However, despite this enthusiasm, it isn't clear that the more liberal bloggers in the MB are positioned to take control of the organization. The leadership structure of the organization remains opaque. Bloggers finding their voices within the organization may yet turn out to be an important element of internal reform, but as of yet its impact has yet to be demonstrated. More important still are the organizations two substantive Web sites, which provide commentary, news articles, and hypermedia content for interested observers. The English-language Web site is a particularly important resource for international observers, and the organization goes to great lengths to develop journalists for these sites as well as to provide its editors with the resources to maintain them. It is also worth noting that a number of bloggers affiliated with the Brotherhood also double as journalists for the site. As Ikhwan Web editor Khaled Hamza says, "Around 10

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[146] Interview with Mohamed Habib, Cairo, Egypt,February 21st, 2008.
[147] Interview with Ahmed Abdel Fatouh. Cairo, Egypt, February 16th, 2008.

bloggers work with us, such as Abdel Rahman Monsour…they are much more flexible than other journalists."[148] Even these activities, however, are unsafe for members of the organization. Hamza was sent to prison in 2008 for nearly two months[149] for his stewardship of the site, and the site's offices have been repeatedly raided by security forces. However, there is evidence that other electronic activities undertaken by members of the organization have had a more concrete impact.

One of the most important roles of both blogs, the Web sites, and other SMNs, according to the practitioners themselves, is to reach international audiences with word of oppression against the Muslim Brotherhood. While domestic press outlets now routinely write about the state's treatment of the Brotherhood and its leaders, it can still be difficult to change deeply entrenched beliefs about the goals and intentions of the group. As Abdul-Rahman Monsour argues, "The government in Egypt doesn't want any government in Europe, western or anything to know what's going on in Egypt, and we….explain what we are doing in Egypt."[150]

*5.6 Muslim Brothers, Power Bloggers, and Social Networks*

Importantly, the most prominent Brotherhood bloggers and SMN activists are either current or former journalists themselves, giving them critical social network connections into the world of elite Egyptian journalism. One of the most notable of these journalists is Abdel Monam Mahmoud, who has been profiled a number of times.

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[148] Interview with Khaled Hamza. Cairo,Egypt, April 27th, 2008.
[149] "Khaled Hamza is free." *Ikhwan Web*. April 16th, 2009.
http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?ID=16728&SectionID=0
[150] Interview with Abdul-Rahman Monsour, Cairo, Egypt, April 9th, 2008.

Mahmoud began his blog in 2006, and called it *Ana Ikhwan*, which translates as "I am a Muslim Brother." Monam told me that he began his blog because he wanted people to understand more about ordinary members of the Muslim Brotherhood – that they weren't book-banning, movie-hating fanatics, but largely ordinary people who went to the cinema, worked normal jobs, and had the same dreams, fears, and hopes as other Egyptians.[151] His rationale for beginning a blog was remarkably similar to Samir Shady's reasons for blogging about Baha'is: at heart, theirs is a project of political and social normalization, and of counteracting what they see as popular stereotypes about their respective groups.

The Brotherhood bloggers have drawn a great deal of attention, but SMN activists have also played an important role in transmitting information about the trials of Muslim Brotherhood leaders in 2007-2008. Family members began blogs dedicated to their imprisoned loved ones, which became sites of contestation and dissent, as well as online platforms to coordinate action for release. One particular clearinghouse of information was the blog *Ensaa!*, which translates as "Forget!". *Ensaa* published accounts of all sessions of the military tribunals, by various authors including Abdel Monam Mahmoud and other activists. These pages-long diaries included blow-by-blow accounts of the day's goings on, as well as analysis and commentary. The blog itself typically featured text accounts and occasionally embedded photographs, as well as sidebars reproducing popular slogans and frames[152] and the main Ikhwan site, both of which published

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[151] Interview with Abdel Monam Mahmoud, Cairo, Egypt, April 23rd, 2008. Mahmoud kindly met me for coffee in downtown Cairo and talked at length about what his blog means to him.

accounts of the trial by Ahmed Abdel Fattouh and others. Fattouh described how he was

able to gain access to the trials, even though journalists were banned from entering:

> In the military court, only one journalist can enter, that journalist is me. And I enter like I am one of the family of these people and if they knew I was a journalist I would be under arrest.[153]

11-8 الجلسة الـ 29
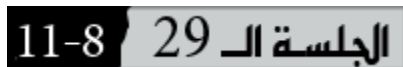
**Figure 5.4: The link on Ensaa! to a recap of the 29th session of the military trials of 40 senior members of the Muslim Brotherhood. The site features links to all 66 sessions.**

Fattouh claims that journalists from international news organizations frequently

relied on his accounts of the trials for their reporting. As he told me, "all the journalists in

every newspaper take from us to publish, because you don't have any….not newspapers

only, like Reuters, BBC, etc., they call me after the session."[154] International news

coverage of the trials appeared sympathetic to the imprisoned leaders of the group; while

news reports often hedged about the goals of the organization, they seemed to be careful

to note extraconstitutionality of the trials themselves, and to seek out family members and

others for comment[155]. Even briefer items tended to note that observers believed the trials

to be unfair.[156] Fattouh's presence inside the courtroom surely had something to do with

the positive coverage, and at the least prevented the regime from running the trials

without any journalists having firsthand access. International reporters have continued,

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[153] Interview with Ahmed Abdel Fattouh, Cairo, Egypt, February 16th, 2008
[154] Ibid.
[155] See for instance, Stack, Liam. "Egypt targets Muslim Brotherhood moderates." *Christian Science Monitor*, March 26th, 2008. P. 7. Stack, it must be noted, is also a personal friend with extensive ties in the Egyptian activist community.
[156] See "Cairo court jails 25 political opponents." *Reuters*, April 16th, 2008.

since the trials, to publish sympathetic articles about the Brotherhood, and to note repression of its activists and even bloggers – in fact the arrest of bloggers gets greater press attention than other forms of arrest, even when the bloggers appear to have been arrested for reasons other than their electronic activism. This was the case in April 2009, when the blogger Abdel Rahman Fares was arrested for distributing materials in support of the April 6th General Strike.[157]

In 2007, the government commenced trials for 40 prominent members of the Brotherhood on charges of corruption. The trials took place in military courts, part of the state of emergency that has remained in force in Egypt since the assassination of Sadat in 1981. While the state has certainly faced threats from terrorism, particularly during the bloody confrontations between the state and armed Islamists in the 1990s, it is clear that the use of the law, and the relegation of MB trials to military courts is for "political as opposed to security reasons" (Kassem 2004, 38). Members of the Brotherhood themselves believe they were targeted at this time because high-ranking officials were beginning to sound more plausible to Western states – with the organization rhetorically emphasizing its commitment to democracy. As Zahra el-Shater told a reporter in 2008, "My father was taken because he was moderate and liked to open dialogue with Western people, with American people."[158]

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[157] "Egypt police detain Muslim Brotherhood blogger." Reuters. April 9th, 2009. http://www.reuters.com/article/internetNews/idUSTRE5342BA20090405

[158] Stack, Liam. "Egypt Targets Muslim Brotherhood Moderates." *Christian Science Monitor*. March 26th, 2008. http://www.csmonitor.com/2008/0326/p07s08-wome.html?page=1

**Figure 5.5: Electronic banner supporting the release of Khairat el-Shater.**

The government's strategy rests on convincing the international community that

the consequences of handing power over to the Brotherhood could be dire (Kassem 2004,

188). This became particularly true in the aftermath of 9/11, and even more so after the

election of Hamas in Palestine, when the Bush Administration appeared to substantially

back away from its democracy-promotion activities due to fears that the scenario could

be repeated in Egypt. As one of the lynchpins of the geopolitical status quo between the

Arab world and Israel, there has been very little pressure from the U.S. and its allies to

give the Muslim Brotherhood a bigger political role in the region. The government also

appeared threatened due to the strong showing of the Brotherhood in the 2005

parliamentary elections and the well-regarded performance of Brotherhood MP's in

parliament, who became well-known for their stances against corruption and human

rights violations within Egypt (Shehata and Stacher, 2006).  While the group's stance on

the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (which calls for the abrogation of the 1978 Camp David

accord between Egypt and Israel) would likely still prevent the group from being

embraced by the international community, the regime was unwilling to take that chance, especially since the reformist leadership, including el-Shater himself, had made statements in the past indicating a more accommodationist stance toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. If the MB were to adopt a more moderate tone on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it would remove the Mubarak regime's rationale for continued repression, at least as far as Washington is concerned. A change in administrations in Washington D.C. appears to have done little to change the calculus that the status quo is more important than risking a transference of power to the Muslim Brotherhood, and democracy promotion in the region in general, and Egypt in particular, has suffered.

Ultimately, the efforts of activists and bloggers were not enough to offset the regime's goal of punishing the Muslim Brotherhood in advance of elections, and of re-establishing hegemony over the group in the wake of its strong 2005 parliamentary showing. While 15 of the 40 defendants were acquitted, many more received significant prison time, including 7 years for Khairat el-Shater, the group's deputy chairman, 5 years for five defendants, and 3 years in prison for 13 others. Others were sentenced in absentia.[159] Despite some mild protestation from the Bush Administration, relations with the United States were never at stake over these trials. Had they been, as Brownlee and others argue, it is possible that the regime might have been more careful with the extraconstitutional element of the trials. Even in defeat, however, SMNs transmitted

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[159] "Interview with Mohamed Baligh After Verdict." *Ikhwanonline*. June 15th, 2008. http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=17265

frames of dissent and served as outlets for dissatisfaction with the heavy sentences given

to the group's leadership.



**Figure 5.6: Electronic frame posted to the *Ensaa!* website as well as many other Brotherhood blogs decrying the sentences handed out to Muslim Brotherhood leaders after the April 2008 verdicts.**

The English-language site, as noted earlier, is of particular importance to international

audiences. As Khaled Hamza put it in an interview, "Interaction from inside Egypt is

very small, but we had a lot interaction from American readers and western websites like

CNN and BBC and Washington Post." [160] The site is probably the best existing resource

for reporters not based directly in Cairo, or for reporters in Cairo with limited Arabic

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[160] Interview with Khaled Hamza. Cairo, Egypt, April 27th, 2008.

capabilities. It also appears that Brotherhood SMN activists have had a great deal of

influence on the writing of international human rights reports detailing regime violations

of rights, particularly of members of the Brotherhood. As Abdel Rahman Monsour told

me, "The torture issue, you would find out that the reports that came up on Ikhwan web

were used by international organizations like amnesty and human rights watch…to come

up with reports talking about human rights in Egypt.[161] The state has taken particular

notice of this, seeking to prevent the transmission of human rights violations to

international actors by using both traditional brute-force repression (Monsour himself

was arrested for recording the activities of security forces in his hometown[162]) and more

sophisticated measures, like tracking mobile users through their cell phones. As al-

Shammi argued, the mobile phone and its information-transmission capability is "kind of

their own nightmare." Or as Mohamed Habib put it,

> It definitely makes it harder for the state to impose a blockade on us….Of course, they try to confine them and to prevent them from communicating with others and to reach the world, and we use these technologies to prevent this and to help the group reach the world and to reach the media.[163]

Electronic activists also play a role in humanizing members of the Brotherhood,

allowing access to their interiority, in the terms of Habermas. Social Media websites like

Facebook are one locale for this kind of activity. The imprisoned MB leader Khairat el-

Shater maintains a Facebook page with 655 "fans" (individuals who identify as followers

of el-Shater by clicking a link on Facebook). The page includes information about el-

Shater and a link to his Web site, maintained by his son Saad El-Shater. The younger el-

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[161] Interview with Abdel Rahman Monsour. Cairo, Egypt, April 9th, 2008.
[162] Interview with Abdullah Al-Shammi, Cairo Egypt, April 9th, 2008.
[163] Interview with Mohamed Habib, Cairo Egypt, February 16th, 2008

Shater posted frequent pieces of poetry, reminscenses of his father, and calls to action on the site. In so doing, for the readers, el-Shater became neither the caricature presented by the state media, nor the revered leader of the organization, but rather an ordinary man and father being subjected to extraordinary repression for his political and social beliefs. Still, el-Shater's plight never garnered as much attention in the elite Egyptian blogosphere as did the jailings of other Muslim Brothers.



**Figure 5.7: Early photo of Khairat el-Shater posted by his son on the latter's birthday.**

In other cases, SMNs helped create focal points and frame alignments for agitating around imprisoned Brotherhood leaders or activists. When Khaled Hamza, the editor of Ikhwanweb, was arrested in 2008, bloggers came to his defense across the political spectrum, including the radical socialist El-Hamalawy. Bloggers posted these pictures in posts and sidebars:

**Figure 5.8: Electronic banners calling for the release of Ikhwan Web editor Khaled Hamza.**

These focal points effectively solved the coordination problem inherent in trying to arrive at agreed-upon frames without leadership. They also posted information and accounts of his arrest. Nearly all of the A-list bloggers – Demagh, The Arabist, 3Arabawy, Egypt Watchman (who played a critical role in the Al-Qursaya case), and others, posted calls for Hamza's release, and reposted one of the above pictures (depending on primary language). These posts served to unite the Egyptian blogosphere around the essential injustice of Hamza's arrest. As Snow et. al., would argue, this is a process of frame alignment, wherein discrete actors with diffuse interests unite around a common cause.

Hamza's arrest subsequently became not the arrest of another Brotherhood leader, but of someone who the community of bloggers explicitly identified with, and his

freedom was linked to the general practices of Egyptian authoritarianism, or as El-

Hamalawy frequently puts it, "Mubarak's Gulag."[164] But before we grant the

technologies themselves with the frame-making power, we should return to an

understanding and appreciation of the importance of social networks. Hamza was, on El-

Hamalawy's admission, a "friend." He is personally friendly with the Cairo journalist

elite, since many of Hamza's writers were young, college-educated, and traveled between

the MB world and the world of other media outlets. Hamza's case and the agitation

around it seems remarkably similar to the campaign to free Abdel Monam Mahmoud,

*Ana Ikhwan*, who was jailed, either for blogging or for his political activities. As The

Sandmonkey revealed in an otherwise acerbic post, Mahmoud was friends with the power

bloggers, and not surprisingly, his arrest launched a movement "Free Monam," replete

with a Website, elite blog support, and international coverage. The campaign reached the

Global Voices platform, and was cross-posted on the Free Kareem site, dedicated to the

secular blogger Kareem Amer. Unfortunately, the Free Monem site is no longer

operational and all that remains are the links and banners on other sites. What is clear

though, is that the social network connections of the arrested matter when analyzing

whether a campaign for their freedom takes place – particular attention seems to be paid,

both in the Egyptian blogosphere and internationally, for journalists and bloggers,

whereas ordinary members of the MB receive much less attention for their plight, in spite

of electronic presence like el-Shater's family Web site. The point is that social network

connections appear to play a determinative role in coverage by elite bloggers – in other

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[164] El-Hamalawy, Hossam. "Solidarity from the U.S. for Khaled Hamza." 3Arabawy. February 24th, 2008. http://arabist.net/arabawy/2008/02/24/freekhaled_downwithmubarak/

words networks don't just change the diffusion dynamics of information, but help determine which information travels along those networks to begin with.

*5.7 Conclusions*

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. Generally we might theorize this process in the following way:

Frame-alignment → Claim-making → SMN activist → National/Global public sphere

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. This project does 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 dissent. It does, however, make an argument about the relative importance of discursive arenas versus networked access to the broader public sphere. In other words, as Chapter 2 argued, information does not diffuse in a vacuum – the socially well-connected are more

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likely both to diffuse politically relevant information, and to have an effect on their listeners.

The observations in this chapter also lend further credence to the ideas of network theorists like Watts and 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 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. The site Egyptian Baha'i, for instance, tends to accumulate dozens or even more than 100 comments on a single blog post – commenting that rivals even the most well-read and commented-upon blogs in the U.S. – while most other Baha'i bloggers are lucky to get a comment or two every time they publish new work. This is not just a matter of confirming theory – knowing that only a small number of blogs gets read – and who reads them – allows us to better understand the impact of those individuals on public discourse.

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 Nazhar 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."[165] She also explicitly mentioned reports published by the Arab Network For Human Rights Information and the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (which helped bring the initial Baha'i ID case), 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 (2008). Hindman argues that blogs (and one can imagine the argument extended to Social Media Networks) 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 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. In both cases, 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,

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[165] "Egyptian blogs and the Baha'is." *Wijhat Nazhar Ukhra.* December 13th, 2006. http://fromdifferentangle.blogspot.com/2006_12_01_archive.html. Her site does not provide stable URL links to each blog entry.

the sustained SMN attention the plight of Baha'is appears to have 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.

Again though, we run into problems of establishing cause and effect. It is impossible to ascertain whether elite blogger agitation led to the releases of Khaled Hamza or Abdel Monam Mahmoud from prison. And 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. Even if we see an uptick in attention to these issues in the Egyptian or international press, we cannot say for sure that it is due to the efforts of Baha'i or Muslim Brotherhood 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, like the U.S., and build on the data that has been 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, and in national and international stories about blogs. 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 counter-public-forming. Chapter 6 now seeks to apply this theory to other authoritarian contexts.

**Chapter 6**

**Cascades, Colors, and Contingencies:**

**Social Media Networks and Authoritarianism in Global Perspective**

*6.0 Introduction*

Thus far this project has theorized and confirmed limited but substantive changes in Egyptian politics as a result of Social Media Networks. Chapter 2 established the mechanisms by which Social Media Networks reduce the amount of private information about the preferences and behavior of other individuals in extended social networks in authoritarian environments, thereby triggering informational cascades that meet individuals' revolutionary thresholds. Chapter 3 argued that Social Media Networks, with the aid of independent journalists and global rights activists, created informational cascades that led to media events inside Egypt, restructuring discourses on sexual harassment, torture, and refugees. Chapter 4 demonstrated the utility of Social Media Networks for short-term collaboration, cooperation and coordination under conditions of severe repression, but also explained why large-scale mobilization required either an external shock or ties to popular grassroots organizing, even in the event of informational cascades. And Chapter 5 demonstrated the discursive potentialities of Social Media Networks for groups without stable access to the public sphere in authoritarian societies. In Chapter 6, I seek to apply the theories outlined in the preceding chapters to the broader universe of authoritarian societies, engaging the very limited literature on the subject, and offering some preliminary expectations.

The most pertinent variables when gauging the impact of Social Media Networks appear to be the: 1) the capacity and will of repressive forces; 2) the presence or absence of independent media practitioners in the authoritarian public sphere who can transmit the claims of elite bloggers and SMN activists (i.e. the open or closed nature of mediaspheres) ; 3) the mobilizing capacity of SMN activists and 4) the relative level of connectivity to the Internet in a given society. For our purposes, I will define "high connectivity" as 25% or more of the population having access to the Internet – anything below that will be defined "low connectivity." For Egypt, those forces are as follows: extremely capable and willful repressive apparatus, a robust if constantly harassed independent mediasphere, mixed mobilizing capacity for SMN activists, and low connectivity to the Internet.

For definitional purposes, open mediaspheres are ranked as "free" by Freedom House, contested mediaspheres are "partly free" and closed mediaspheres are "not free." Highly repressive security apparatuses are "not free" in the FH "freedom rankings, while moderately repressive regimes are "partly free" and non-repressive apparatuses are "free." Pertinent rankings for the project are presented in the table below:

|  | Egypt 2008 | Ukraine 2004 | Moldova 2009 | Iran 2009 | Kenya 2007 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Political Freedom | 6 (Not Free) | 4 (Partly Free) | 4 (Partly Free) | 6 (Not Free) | 4 (Partly Free) |
| Media Freedom | 59 (Partly Free) | 68 (Not Free) | 66 (Not Free) | 85 (Not Free) | 60 (Partly Free) |
| Internet Access[166] | 15.4% | <5% | 19.7% | 48.5 % | 8.5% |

**Figure 6.1: Relevant rankings**

This chapter will use the measures compiled by Freedom House to categorize states on media freedom and political freedom. And to best test this confluence of variables, I will apply the theory to the following out-of-Egypt cases: the mobilization against the 2009 presidential election results in Iran; the change of government in Ukraine in 2004, the mobilization around contested election results in Kenya in 2008, and the so-called 2009 "Twitter Revolution" in Moldova. These cases were selected for the following reasons: first, they include two cases in which mobilization succeeded in changing governments, and two in which those efforts failed. These cases have been

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[166] Data from Internet World Stats. http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm

extensively detailed through case studies by journalists and area specialists and offer rich data in the form of first-hand and second-hand accounts of the events in question.

This chapter should also provide a framework for evaluating competing theories of the durability of authoritarianism. Lust-Okar argues that divided structures of contestation (SoC), whereby certain groups are included, and certain groups excluded, from the political sphere, provide more stable means to withstand economic crises. As she argues, "where incumbent elites have fostered a division between legal moderates and illegal radicals, moderates become less likely to mobilize the masses and demand reforms as the crises continue" (2005, 172). While Lust-Okar's theory was geared toward economic crises, there is no reason it cannot be evaluated against the political crises to be explored in this chapter. Brownlee, meanwhile, argues that the presence of a robust ruling party serves as a channel to satisfy elite demands and leads to regime stability during crisis situations. Brownlee challenges the idea that "strong opposition movements can simply push elites out of power" (2007, 206). These two theories overlap partially, but not fully. Both theories would anticipate Egypt being perhaps the most durable authoritarian regime under consideration here. They would also anticipate Ukraine, and Kenya, neither of which had robust institutional ruling parties, as the most susceptible to unrest. However, Lust-Okar would likely argue that Iran's divided structure of contestation would successfully pit Iran's included and excluded elites against one another, whereas Brownlee explicitly expected Iran to be susceptible to elite divisions during moments of crisis. This chapter will seek to provide evidence for and against these competing theories.

|  | Divided Structure of Contestation | Unified Structure of Contestation |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Robust Ruling Party | Egypt | Moldova |
| No Ruling Party | Iran | Ukraine, Kenya |

**Figure 6.2 Party and contestation arrangements in the cases**

The theory advanced by this project posits the idea that SMNs are most useful in short-run coordination and communication during times of strife. It also argues that such moments are most likely to arise in competitive authoritarian regimes, centered around elections. This can be formulated in hypothesis form as

**H1: Social Media Networks can trigger informational cascades even the tightly-controlled media environments of authoritarian regimes**

They are able to do so because, as Mary Joyce argues, "the networked nature of the digital world allows for people to communicate and take action outside of – and sometimes in opposition to – traditional hierarchical power structures (Joyce 2010).My theory indicates that the networked structure of SMNs – whether on Facebook or on cell phones – vastly increased the speed of diffusing information, particularly across social clusters, and also decreases the costs of creating and sharing that information. SMNs shrink the already-small worlds of human social networks, and reduce the barriers erected

by authoritarian regimes to open information sharing.  they can trigger informational

cascades, as outlined in Chapter 2. Those informational cascades can take many forms –

in Egypt on April 6th, 2008, it meant the swift diffusion of information about and support

for a sympathy strike on Facebook, and then subsequently through the public sphere. This

chapter will evaluate the ability of SMNs to trigger informational cascades in other

settings – primarily during the course of power struggles following contested elections in

competitive authoritarian regimes. I also argue that the technologies themselves will be

unable to ensure the desired change in power, or to affect serious change in the face of

sustained institutional resistance to activist demands. In other words, SMNs are likely to

generate substantial press coverage, and to facilitate protest and organization. Such

linkages are likely to be not just between individual activists within authoritarian regimes

but also between activists and international journalists and elites. This generates the

second hypothesis:

**H2: Competitive authoritarian regimes with contested mediaspheres are more likely
to be the sites of SMN-mediated activism.**

Where individual moments of mobilization go from there, however, depends on

domestic press environments and elite commitments to repression. Chapter 3 argued that

it was the presence of an independent mediasphere in Egypt that made it possible for

online informational cascades to generate press coverage and contestation in the real

world. Therefore I argue here that countries with independent media outlets are more

likely to be the sites of informational cascades triggered by SMNs. This leads to the third

hypothesis:

**H3: SMN usage will have little effect on the ultimate outcomes of struggles in authoritarian countries**

If the expectations of this hypothesis are correct, SMNs have little to no effect at all, we should expect SMNs to play marginal roles in the unfolding of events in competitive authoritarian regimes. In the cases that follow, I will seek to disentangle the role attributed to the technologies by popular press outlets from their actual effects on the ground in authoritarian regimes. Overall these hypotheses are designed to lead to better understandings of when and where Social Media Networks are likely to generate successful activism, and to challenge technological deterministic understandings of new media activism which assume positive outcomes for digital activism. They will also shed light on ongoing debates in the study of authoritarian durability.

**H4: SMN activism is likely to generate greater repression.**

In a quantitative analysis, Whitten-Woodring (2009) argues that by providing sources of information to regime elites, independent media outlets can actually lead to greater levels of repression. If this is true, it must also be true that increased use of SMNs for organizing and protest might also lead directly to repression. Therefore, I posit a tradeoff between the openness of SMNs and regimes' ability to use the information that's easily attainable from them for repressive purposes. We should thus expect repression to increase in tandem with the success or perceived success of the activists themselves. The null hypothesis would be that levels of repression are constant.

*6.1 SMNs and "The Green Revolution" in Iran*

On June 12th, 2009, The Islamic Republic of Iran, held elections for the presidency, which turned into what Abbas Milani calls "an electoral coup" (2009, 11). Iran, an authoritarian regime which is considered "unfree" in the Freedom House political and media variables identified above, holds regular, competitive elections for the presidency. The Supreme Leader, and the Guardian Council, an unelected body of religious leaders, nevertheless possess what amounts to veto power over the candidacies of individuals, severely curtailing freedom of competition over the executive. The elections themselves ultimately come down to different candidates approved by the Guardian Council competing for control over an unusually weak presidency. Nevertheless, Iranian elections are spirited affairs that engender heavy turnout by regional and global standards, and which take on many of the trappings of fully democratic executive elections. In past elections, reformist candidates have been unexpectedly elected, ushering in periods of hope for greater reform. However, because the Iranian president possesses quite limited power in the context of the regime itself (Poulson 2009, 29), those hopes have been frequently dashed, particularly with the election of Mohamed Khatami in 1997. Khatami was seen as a reformist, someone with whom the international community, and particularly the United States, might work (Poulson 2009, 29). While some détente occurred during the Clinton Administration, it is widely felt within Iran that overtures made towards the United States after 9/11 were rebuffed by the Bush Administration. The election of Mahmoud Ahmedinejad in 2004 was seen as both a rebuke to the reformers and a repudiation of the Bush

Administration's continued refusal to engage even reformist elements in Iran in dialogue. In 2009, the sitting President, Mahmoud Ahmedinejad, battled challenger Mir Hussein Mousavi for the presidency, in what observers expected would be a close election that nevertheless favored the incumbent. On election day, it became clear that the result was bound to be contested, as allegations of fraud preceded the announcement of election results that showed Ahmedinejad an overwhelming victor. Almost immediately, forces of the opposition began to organize protests and send reports out of the country via blogs, videos, and Twitter.

The scenes of protest, violence, and chaos inside Iran captivated global audiences for weeks. Theatrical elements like the chanting of Allahu Akbar from rooftops (the same cry that was heard after the 1979 revolution)[167] only served to make the events more dramatic to international audiences, where sympathies were almost entirely with the protestors. Millions of protestors took to the streets to demand new elections in the kind of informational cascade theorized in Chapter 2 and in accordance with the first hypothesis presented above. The two defeated candidates, Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, led the movement, which was dubbed "the Green Revolution," since many protestors wore or carried signs, garments or banners in that particular color. The United States government, while refusing to intervene in the situation, condemned the Iranian regime's crackdown on the protestors. 70 individuals were killed in the ferment following the events, according to movement leaders, but the protestors were unable to affect a re-vote. Supreme Leader Ali Khameini certified the election in August, and Ahmedinejad

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[167] "How Iran's opposition inverts old slogans." *BBC News Online*, December 7th, 2009. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/8386335.stm. Accessed December 30th, 2009.

assumed office for another term as President. However, while protests tapered off, they continued to flare on and off during the months following the election, as the protest movement, once awakened, seemingly would not die. With explicitly anti-regime protests banned, the movement according to the BBC has "…adopted the tactic of using the relative safety of officially-sanctioned demonstrations on important days in the religious and political calendar to come out in big numbers and turn the official rallies into a show of force of its own, with an entirely different and opposing set of slogans."[168] Protestors captured Quds Day – typically a demonstration of solidarity with the Palestinians – for their own ends. Typical of this tactic were the protests that occurred on the day of Ayatollah Ali Hossein Montazeri's funeral.[169] Montazeri had been known as a critic of the Iranian regime. This most recent flare-up took  place in December.

What has been the contribution of SMNs like Twitter to these events? As the Egyptian activist Ahmed Abdel Fattouh writes, one of Twitter's great advantages is the multiple channels of access it offers to its updates. Because you can receive Twitter updates on your cell phone, and make Twitter updates through mobile telephony as well as the Internet, regimes must eradicate multiple channels of communication at the same time to put a stop to updates that take place via Twitter.[170] The Iranian regime even threatened Twitter users with prison if they used the site to disseminate information about the uprising; however, users continued to rather unapologetically use the site for this very

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[168] Ibid.
[169] Coughlin, Con. "Why the Mullahs are Vulnerable." *The Wall Street Journal*. December 29th, 2009. http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703278604574624191585240728.html. Accessed December 30th, 2009.
[170] Abdel Fattouh, Ahmed. "Limatha Lem tastati'a Iran qama'a ath-thowra al-khadara'?" (Why couldn't Iran crush the Green Revolution?" Personal correspondence. August 16th, 2009.

203

purpose. One further advantage for Twitter users is the ability to update the site through mobile telephones and to hide the users' phone number.[171] Given the sheer number of individuals posting Twitter updates at any given time, the regime's task effectively became impossible – it simply could not carry out the delicate task of maintaining order while simultaneously repressing individual Twitter users who numbered in the tens of thousands. This is how and why Iranian Twitter users became the primary source for on-the-ground updates during the events following the elections. But the multiplicity of access points to the service is not the only reason it was so useful during the Iran events – more useful than other tools like blogs and Facebook. Another substantial factor for Twitter is the service's filtering and crowdsourcing potential, achieved through what are known as "hashtags." By placing the symbol "#" before a subject tag, users can aggregate posts around a particular subject area, and thus spread information out of network. So for instance the tag "#greenrevolution" can be used to aggregate posts by users on that subject – even users who do not know one another and are not connected as "friends" as you must be for similar action on Facebook.[172] The particular hashtag adopted by the Green Revolutionaries was #gr88.[173] Hashtags eliminate the need for interested observers or participants to spend time and energy collating information.

The international press certainly noticed the prominence of Twitter during the post-election tumult. Year-end press round-ups inevitably mentioned the Iranian election protests and Twitter's role therein, as one of the defining events of 2009. One paper even

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[171] Ibid.
[172] Pfeifle, Mark. "A Nobel Peace Prize for Twitter?" *The Christian Science Monitor*. July 6th, 2009.
[173] "Internet Brings Events in Iran to Life." BBC News Online. June 15th, 2009. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/8099579.stm. Accessed December 30th, 2009.

called 2009 "The Year of Twitter."[174] With their own journalists barred from the country,

news organizations relied on the Twitter reporters and their interlocutors for information.

This is in spite of the fact that it was unclear how much Twitter was being used by Farsi-

language activists, since Twitter did not support Farsi at the time.[175] Some reports even

included a reference to the case of the imprisoned Egyptian journalist who Tweeted his

way out of prison, mentioned in Chapter 4. During the initial stages of the aborted

revolution, CNN's correspondent Octavia Nasr was reading the Twitter posts of Iranian

live on the air.[176] In addition to Twitter, individuals seeking information about the day's

events turned to Facebook, where groups sprouted and where Mousavi's  "fan" page soon

had more than 50,000 members.[177] International tech elites, some of them located as far

away as California, helped collaborate with Iranians to provide proxy servers, which

avoid the regime's blocking of certain Web sites and ISPs.[178] As Jonathan Zittrain told

the New York Times, "The qualities that make Twitter seem inane and half-baked are

what make it so powerful." Zittrain is referring to the very short messages that Twitter

allows users to send, which made it from the start easy to dismiss as a boutique service

that allows people to broadcast mundane updates about their daily activities.

       The accelerant for all the press coverage of Iranian Twitter users, however, was

not the Iranians but rather their supporters in the elite global mediasphere, particularly the

British-born American blogger Andrew Sullivan. Sullivan's blog became a "one-stop

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[174] *The Straits Times*. "Surviving The Year of Twitter." December 27th, 2009.
[175] Musgrove, Mike. "Twitter is a Player in Iran's Drama". *The Washington Post*. June 17th, 2009. P. A10.
[176] The Guardian. Interview with Gordon Brown. June 19th, 2009. FINISH CITE.
[177] Stone, Brad, and Cohen, Norm. "Social Networks Spread Iranian Defiance Online." *The New York Times*. June 16th, 2009. P. 11.
[178] Stone and Cohen.

shop" for all updates out of the Iranian Twitter universe, and gave support to media

claims that Twitter was responsible for the protests themselves, or at least a critical

component of them (Morozov 2009, 9). Sullivan used his very well-trafficked English-

language blog to post update after update from Iran, many simply cut-and-pasted or

translated directly from the source material. Of particular importance were the bilingual

bloggers and Twitterers, who could act as mediators between the Farsi-language

mediasphere and the English-speaking Western world eager to consume bytes of

information about what was happening in the streets of Tehran. In many cases, these

intermediaries were Iranian political exiles in the ever-growing diaspora who engaged in

"flooding the country's throttled Internet and heavily controlled airwaves with news,

videos and insight."[179] One Washington-based Iranian exile, using Youtube, claims that

more than 500,000 Iranians had seen the daily videos he posted to the video-sharing Web

site.[180] The Iranian case appears to corroborate findings in Chapters 3-6 about the

importance of elite bloggers (domestic and foreign), particularly well-connected,

multilingual local bloggers.

Ultimately, however, the mobilizations against the elections were unsuccessful in

forcing the regime to relinquish power. International journalists and observers belatedly

took note of the inability of the tools themselves to affect actual change on the ground.

Mozorov has dubbed ineffective Facebook and Twitter campaigns as "slacktivism." He

defines slacktivism as when "our digital effort make us feel very useful and important but

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[179] Daragahi, Barzou. "Exiled, but still insiders;
The latest wave in Iran's diaspora is tech-savvy and playing a key role in countering hard-liners at home."
*Los Angeles Times*. December 10th, 2009. P.1.
[180] Ibid.

have zero social impact. When the marginal cost of joining yet another Facebook group are low, we click "yes" without even blinking, but the truth is that it may distract us from helping the same cause in more productive ways" (Mozorov 2009). As *The Daily Telegraph*'s Will Heaven noted in an acerbic December op-ed, "There has been no revolution in Iran."[181] Heaven went so far as to argue that the government's sophisticated cyber-security techniques were greater than the activists' and the Internet might be a boon to their repressive efforts as much as it is an aid to the activists. As if to underscore this concern, Twitter was hacked in December by a group that may be affiliated with the regime. And there is no question that the government used Twitter to monitor the activities of protestors.[182]  Indeed as time wore on, and more and more members of the opposition were arrested, some for their activities online, it looked like the usefulness of Twitter had bumped up against the tradeoff between openness and repression to which SMNs are subject in such environments. With no independent media to speak of in Iran (which receives the lowest FH ranking for press freedom), no one in the country was able to contest this crackdown.

To explain the subsequent events, we must rely on the more familiar theories and explanations from comparative democratization. With the executive unified and with softliners unable to exert control over the armed forces, the Green Revolution has so far petered out far short of its goal of a new election. This conclusion to the summer's events had nothing to do with the mobilizational capabilities of the technologies themselves and everything to do with larger institutional arrangements in Iranian politics and society

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[181] Heaven, Will. "The fatal folly of the online revolutionaries;  Smug Twitter activists are wrong to think they are liberating Iran, says Will Heaven." *The Daily Telegraph*. December 29th, 2009. P. 16.
[182] "Twitter Taken Over By Iranian Cyber Army." *Brand Republic News Releases*. December 24th, 2009.

beyond the control of SMN activists or even Mousavi himself. Milani, for instance, situates the ongoing protests within splits internal to the regime (2009, 11-15). Boroumand, on the other hand, locates the success of the protests in organization undertaken by civil society groups over a period of years (2009, 20). While the U.S. took a number of steps to informally side itself with the opposition, Mousavi's history also suggests that the U.S. foreign policy elite was not convinced that his government would be substantively all that different from the one that currently rules. But even had the U.S. been convinced that Mousavi would have represented a break with the Iranian status quo, it is unclear if anything concrete could have been done to support the opposition. The regime's dedicated security forces – particularly the Revolutionary Guards – seemed unwilling to defect to the opposition. Absent such a defection, the means of violence remain in the state's hands, no matter the volume of Twitter posts at home and admiring blog posts from the quarters of the international elite.

*6.2 Tent Cities, Elections, and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine*

  In the winter of 2004, shortly after the bitterly contested U.S. elections narrowly won by George W. Bush, the world was transfixed by what appeared to be a similarly bitter and narrowly-won contest in Ukraine. The election, which broke down along ethnic lines as well as political ones, featured Party of Regions candidate Viktor Yanukovych, the successor to post-communist dictator Leonard Kuchma and the favorite of both Russia and the ethnically Russian Eastern Ukraine, in a very close election against the opposition candidate, the independent Victor Yuschenko. Yuschenko was aligned with the US and the EU, and favored NATO membership for Ukraine, while Yanukovych was

supported by Russia and favored a more Eastward orientation (Lane 2008, 527). Ukraine

at the time was considered "partly free" by Freedom House. The period following

independence from the USSR was marked by continued autocracy under Kuchma, as

well as intense economic dislocation during the transition to a more market-oriented

economy. By 2005, the economy, measured by GDP, was still far below the level of 1989,

creating widespread dissatisfaction with the government, and resentment against

economic elites (Lane 2008, 525).

In addition to its bitter ethnic features and high-stakes democratization

implications, the election featured a sinister plot against Yuschenko that seemed straight

out of a Hollywood thriller. Only months before the election, Yuschenko fell gravely ill

after a dinner, and it was later determined that he had been poisoned, probably by forces

of the regime.[183] Yuschenko, who had been a handsome, dashing young reformer, was

transformed seemingly overnight into a brittle older man, and it was said that he was in

so much pain that he traveled during the campaign with a spinal painkiller IV. Of course,

there are still dissenting voices who suggest that Yuschenko was not poisoned, and that it

was part of a stunt by opposition forces. The truth of the matter is difficult to determine,

but there is no doubt that the poisoning allegations added an element of theatricality to

the proceedings, and generated widespread sympathy for Mr. Yuschenko. On election

day, official returns gave Yanukovych a narrow, 54% to 46% victory, which was

immediately charged as suspect by neutral observers. Opposition forces rallied and set up

camp in downtown Kiev, in Independence Square. And there they stayed, in the

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[183] "Yuschenko and the Poison Theory." *BBC News Online*. December 11th,
2004. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/4041321.stm. Accessed December 18th, 2009.

unforgiving Ukraine winter weather, for 11 days and nights, the crowd growing to as many as 500,000, camped out in tents, surrounded by uneasy security forces of the regime. They demanded not an immediate revolution, but merely a re-vote, since by that time the actual results of the original election were greatly in doubt. Still, it was clear that simply giving the election to either candidate at this point would have caused a massive crisis of leadership legitimacy, since both camps would have regarded the election as stolen.

A re-vote was eventually granted, and Yuschenko emerged victorious. Observers dubbed the events in the Ukraine The Orange Revolution, and the tactics of the Ukraine protestors would be mimicked and adopted in places as far away as Lebanon and Iran – the coordinated color campaign, the non-violent street protests, and the demands for new votes after crooked elections. (These tactics, and the scholarship they have inspired, are far from uncontroversial. As David Lane argues, "The literature on these phenomena, however, is often journalistic in approach, partisan in orientation and normative rather than objective in content" (2008, 526).) Bunce and Wolchik call this "the electoral model," which they define as "a distinctive and unprecedented set of activities that are consciously designed to maximize the prospects for an opposition victory at the polls…." (2009, 70).

What was the role of SMNs in the election contest? Michael McFaul's oft-cited argument that the Orange Revolution "may have been the first in history to be organized mostly online" (McFaul 2005; also quoted in Goldstein 2007) is bold but so far largely unsubstantiated in precisely the same way that Iran's "Twitter Revolution" is a finding in

search of empirics. Goldstein argues that Ukraine, while a competitive authoritarian regime, nevertheless featured a mainstream media environment that was almost entirely controlled, directly or indirectly by the regime. One prominent method of control was self-censorship, punctuated by occasional acts of violence by the regime against the opposition. A climate of fear was reinforced by the 2000 murder of Georgiy Gongadze, an opposition journalist who used the Internet as a platform for dissent. Gongadze's murder, almost certainly at the hands of Kuchma allies, sent an unmistakable signal to opposition journalists that pursuing the truth could put their lives in danger. However, it also spurred such journalists to continue using the Internet as a site of dissent, and in the years between Gongadze's murder and the 2004 elections, such online news sites (as opposed to blogs in other locales) grew in importance, despite the tiny number of Ukrainians using the Internet at this time (Goldstein 2007, 5).

Goldstein uses the Katz and Lazerfield Two Step Flow model of information – in which the mass media influences a select few opinion leaders, who then influence their friends – to come to essentially the same conclusion that this chapter arrived at in Chapter 3 – that bloggers and online journalists can still have immense importance in a society even if very small numbers of people are online. This is due to the influence of "Online Political Citizens," people who consume blogs and online information sources and then disseminate that information to mass publics. In Egypt this happened through the independent media, whereas in the Ukraine the argument is that it happened through existing social networks. Observers of the Ukraine revolution also believe that the existence of independent media outlets played an important role in the events, with

McFaul (2005) going so far as to generalize the existence of independent media as a direct causal contributor to all of the so-called "color revolutions".

Goldstein also argues that the protest group Pora made particularly good use of the Internet before, during and after the elections, In particular, the well-developed network of text-messages was activated early in the crisis and played a significant role in organizing and coordinating the tent cities which played such a vital role in bringing international attention to the plight of the Ukrainian protestors (7-8). Sites like the online opposition site Pravda provided real-time updates as protestors across Ukraine (including groups outside of the capital city of Kiev) set up their own tent cities and joined the growing protest movement. This is similar to the role played by the 6th of April Web site and the various opposition Twitter activists on April 6th, 2008 in Egypt. Goldstein ends his research note with a question: "are these tools inherently conducive to the expansion of civic engagement and democratization, or will authoritarian governments adapt the technology to their own advantage?" The answer to this question, explored more fully in the conclusion to this chapter, argues that the efficacy of SMN activism depends deeply on institutional features of existing authoritarian regimes.

The technologies themselves cannot explain the defection of the Ukrainian security services, nor the refusal of the Kuchma government to unleash violence on the protestors. The regime could conceivably have chosen to break up the protests before they reached the level of hundreds of thousands. It was the diffusion dynamics of SMNs (which helped generate the initial gatherings), together with the fateful decision to allow the protestors to camp out in Independence Square, gathering momentum and

international press attention, that probably doomed the regime's attempts to rig the election. This lends substantial support to my first hypothesis, as well as to the second. It may also have been Western support for the favored opposition which tipped the scales against the regime, providing support for hypothesis 3 (that outcomes are independent of mobilizations themselves). The apparent lack of repression of activists, though, appears to contradict the fourth hypothesis – that levels of repression will increase with greater use of SMNs.

*6.3 The Twitter Revolution in Moldova*

In April 2009, the communist party of Moldova (PCRM) appeared to sweep parliamentary elections. Moldova was one of a handful of remaining post-Soviet states that were still ruled by the vestiges of the ancien regime – vestiges which had actually returned to power via what were considered free elections in 2001. But since that time, Moldova's democratic situation has deteriorated (Pippidi and Munteanu 2009, 139). This backsliding, which accelerated after 2001, took place despite sustained democracy-building efforts by European organizations (McDonagh 2008, 143). Similar to many post-Soviet states, Moldova is divided by rivalry between a Russian-speaking minority (in this case concentrated in the breakaway province of Transnistria) and an indigenous majority. This conflict has been so potentially destabilizing that the EU has not promoted membership for Moldova. There seems to be a consensus that offering incentives for EU membership positively affects the level of political and civil rights in Eastern Europe (McDonagh 2008, 159). This conflict has manifested itself in electoral politics via the support by ethnic Russians for the PCRM and by younger Moldovans (ethnically

Romanian) who support opposition parties. In practice, this split is almost identical to the split between European-oriented Western Ukraine, and Russian-oriented Eastern Ukraine. In the April 2009 parliamentary elections, a coalition of opposition parties also claimed victory and accused the communists of rigging the elections, by fabricating votes by people who had left the country (impoverished Moldova has a very high rate of out-migration, particularly to EU-member and neighbor Romania). The opposition parties differed on many issues, including the relationship of Moldova to Romania (some parties like the Liberal Democratic Party (PLDM) want to reunite with Romania) but they all shared a fundamentally pro-EU outlook that clashed severely with the Eastward orientation of the PCRM (Pippidi and Munteanu 2009, 142).

The capital of Chişinău was soon gripped by the kinds of organized people-power demonstrations that took down regimes in Ukraine and Georgia. The woman credited with organizing the protests claims not to have had any idea that her call to demonstrate would resonate with so many people. As she told the *Guardian*, "we expected at the most a couple of hundred friends, friends of friends, and colleagues", she said. "When we went to the square, there were 20,000 people waiting there. It was unbelievable."[184] Such a swelling from initial, low expectations, to sudden, mass protest can only be characterized as an informational cascade. The low barriers to the transmission of information on SMNs meant that Natalie's message reached a huge number of people instantaneously. Aware of their friends' preferences and intentions (the revelation of private information), individuals were therefore more likely to act on their desire to contest the fraudulent

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[184] Stack, Graham. "Leader of Moldova's 'Twitter revolution' goes into hiding: Fugitive surprised by size of protest fears arrest: Organiser says Kremlin behind police targeting." *The Guardian*. April 16th, 2009. Pg. 19.

elections. In other words, the diffusion of this information increased expectations of turnout to protest, thereby meeting the revolutionary thresholds of individual protestors.

While the official media cloaked the events in a shroud of silence, word spread, both within Moldova and outside the country, via the now-familiar pathways of Twitter, Youtube, and text message. Observers estimate that as many as 30,000 people descended on the capital's center to express their dissatisfaction with the results. Like Georgia, however, the demonstrations were not entirely peaceful, as demonstrators stormed and then burned down the parliament building. Still, an OSCE report argued that the April parliamentary elections had been fair, while members of the opposition denounced Russian influence in the OSCE (Pippidi and Munteanu 2009, 139). In any case, the communists remained in power, and commenced a massive crackdown on the opposition. Activists and journalists were arrested. The regime tightened control over the media, expelled foreign journalists, and blocked access to Romanian media sources (Pippidi and Munteanu 2009, 140). However with only 60 of the 101 seats in parliament, the communists were unable to secure the election of a new president as per Moldovan law.

The opposition managed to block the election of a new communist president, an impasse which continued for months as then-President Vladimir Voronin continued to rule. Because of that, new elections were scheduled for later in the summer, and in fact took place. However the street presence of the opposition gradually waned, as the EU appeared to throw its support behind the legitimacy of the elections. The crucial fulcrum shifted then from the activists in the streets to the opposition members in parliament, whose demands for a new election had to be met. In the meantime, however, the putative

organizer of the Flash Mob that led to the burning of the parliament, went into hiding. Natalie Morar, who had been thrown out of Russia for making print allegations about the murder of a prominent Russian central bank leader, apparently also feared retribution from Russia, which sided with the regime.[185] While she later returned from hiding, a cloud of legal uncertainty remained over her head.

Security forces appeared quite ineffectual overall, however. While the ruling party held fast at first, over the course of the summer, as global attention was fixated on Iran, it eventually relented and agreed to new elections. While still winning a plurality of votes, the Communists were unable to maintain their grip on power, as a coalition of opposition parties cobbled together enough victories to unseat the communists from power. While the "Twitter Revolution" in Moldova hasn't received nearly the level of attention as similar events (perhaps because Moldova, an impoverished country of 5 million that is both strategically and culturally marginal), the events of 2009 are no less instructive about the effects of SMNs on political outcomes. The regime's initially successful attempt to retain power appears to corroborate hypothesis 3 presented above, that informational cascades triggered by SMNs are not predictive of outcomes.

Indeed, the Moldova case highlights the enduring importance of authoritarian institutions. While the state, on paper, still possessed the capability to deploy violence against its own citizens, it lacked the will to do so, at least in the long run. Clearly SMN activists in Moldova were no more clever or brave than their counterparts in Iran – their success was not due to short-run contingencies or unique strategies like the burning of

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[185] Ibid.

government buildings. As Schell argues, power comes not when violence is deployed, but rather when individuals act together in concert (2008, 218) . The case thus confirms the importance of SMNs for reducing the costs associated with the collective action problem.

Conversely, the success of non-violent action depends not on the characteristics of the actors but rather on the unwillingness or inability of the state to defeat them violently in the streets. While the state employed moderate violence (including a handful of fatal casualties), it was certainly capable of greater harm. After the events, the Moldovan president, Vladimir Voronin, expelled the leader of the National Democratic Institute, a Washington-based NGO that was involved in many of the other "color revolutions" (Pippidi and Munteanu 2009, 139). However, the degree to which the NDI was actually involved in the Moldovan unrest is difficult to determine. If anything, in this geostrategic backwater, the state could conceivably have cracked down violently with little to no consequences from the international community. Certainly, even in the context of wrangling with Russia (which may have influenced the case of Georgia and certainly had influence in Ukraine), Moldova was of far less consequence than Ukraine. Therefore international variables alone cannot explain the outcome here. In fact, because the "revolution" appeared to fail at the outset, observers appear to have drawn all the wrong conclusions from the events. Writing in July 2009, just months after the initial unrest, Pippidi and Munteanu drew the unsurprising conclusion that "The Moldovan case underlines the lesson that democratization cannot make progress in strongly unfavorable external environments" (2009, 141). Because Russia was so invested in the success of the

Communists, this line of thinking goes, activists were powerless to affect a non-violent

transfer of power to the opposition

However, if the PCRM remained in control of events and the security services,

why were new elections ordered? Why submit to opposition demands for new elections

when they could easily have simply foisted a new communist president on the opposition

by fiat? This is a question that Pippidi and Munteanu left unanswered. Clearly, though,

there are steps that even parties and factions allied with Russia are unwilling to take in

the light of international attention. In fact, subsequent events demonstrate that in fact

oppositions can make headway in spite of "strongly unfavorable external environments."

Those events also underscore the reality that in such situations, SMNs can influence the

coordination and execution of protest, and can reach outside observers and media

organizations with their work, but that they cannot fundamentally control the shape of

subsequent decision-making processes. Those decisions depend on, among many other

things, contingent decisions of relevant actors, which can be explained within the elite

decision-making models of Schmitter, O'Donnell, Przeworski, and others. Again, as with

Iran, the attribution of the revolution to Twitter alone can lead to dangerous

misunderstandings of the actual capabilities of these technologies. What, for instance,

would have happened if Yanukovych had won his run-off with Yuschenko? Would the

Orange Revolutionaries have put another 500,000 people in the streets until they obtained

the desired result? Don't both cases, in fact, demonstrate the same outcome? Perhaps the

Russians, nervous about the thousands of Moldovans in the streets, about the potential

involvement of Romania and the EU in its Transnistria problem, submitted to new

elections, figuring that as long as they controlled the breakaway province, their interests in Moldova were more or less assured. In other words, let us not reify our understandings and preconceptions about the geopolitics of these transitions – three of which now, the Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova , have taken place despite strong and vocal Russian criticism.

*6.4 Violence and Narrative-control in the Kenya Election Crisis*

To disentangle some of these factors highlighted by events in post-Soviet countries, it would be useful to step out-of-area to Africa, where a violent electoral crisis gripped Kenya, and where SMNs played a role, both positive and negative, in the subsequent events. In stark contrast to the crises described above, the Kenya crisis led to widespread violence and suffering, with more than 1,000 people killed and hundreds of thousands turned into IDPs (Goldstein and Rotich 2008, 3). The situation was all the more alarming and dismaying given Kenya's international reputation as one of the more successful post-colonial states in Africa (Kiai 2008, 162). This reputation existed in spite of great corruption within Kenya, where the President is granted immense, super-presidential privileges, and in which legislators have enormous salaries that dwarf the average per capita income in ways that have sparked outrage (Kiai 2007, 164). The disputed election was grafted onto a longstanding ethnic rivalry between the Kikuyu, who had been privileged during and after the period of British colonialism, and other groups.

On December 27th, 2007, the incumbent government of Mwai Kibaki won what appeared to be a narrow victory over the opposition, led by Raila Odinga. Kibaki's

victory was certified quickly by Kenya's electoral commission[186]. Particularly

problematic was the apparent last-minute swing in the election totals, which took days.

As of December 29th, Odinga and his allies were cruising toward a huge victory, with an

18% lead in the count halfway through.[187] Kibaki was supported by the Kikuyu, and his

disputed victory ignited the tragic violence that followed the elections. It was largely

Kikuyu residents who were expelled from their homes in the Rift Valley (where the

violence was centralized).The valley is one of Kenya's most troublesome areas – a

Presidential Task Force recommended, in 2004, the formation of a Truth, Justice and

Reconciliation panel to help resolve the region's longstanding grievances, but the body

was never formed (Riai 2008, 165). Luo's were also victims of violence in different parts

of the country.[188] SMS messaging was used to spread messages of hatred and violence,

much as radio was used in the Rwandan genocide to mobilize violence (Goldstein and

Rotich 2008, 5). However, government officials were persuaded to keep the mobile

network running, in the hopes that messages of peace sent by the provider Safaricom

might counteract the more predatory messages being spread by would-be genocidaires.

     The opposition and its supporters also organized huge street protests, which were

brutally suppressed by the government, which had adopted a "zero tolerance" policy.[189]

Clashes between police and protestors frequently turned deadly, as members of the

opposition, and in a move familiar from other cases, the government harassed foreign

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[186] Maloney, Brenna. "A Disputed Election Leads To Violence; Hundreds Killed as Two of the Country's Ethnic Groups Clash. *Washington Post*. January 7th, 2008. P. C12.
[187] Gettleman, Jeffrey. "With Half of Vote Counted, Kenyan Opposition is Poised to Sweep." *The New York Times*. December 29th, 2007. P. 9.
[188] Maloney 2008.
[189] Gettleman, Jeffrey. "Kenya's Opposition Switches its Tactics From Street Protests to Business Boycotts." *The New York Times*, January 19th, 2008. P. 6.

journalists, particularly those following Odinga.[190] Non-partisan observers, including

Kenyan civil society groups, Transparency International, and American diplomats,

declared the elections fraudulent. Ultimately the government refused to step down, and in

fact the human rights situation for members of the opposition continued to be quite

fragile, with human rights activists under protection, and several killings suspected of

being perpetrated by the state itself.[191]

Goldstein and Rotich note the effectiveness of blogs for countering official

narratives in Kenya. While the official state media peddled the government's line,

bloggers – and their connections abroad and in the Kenyan diaspora – helped decouple

the horrific violence taking place in the Rift Valley from what they saw as the

unanswered question of election-rigging. As in other cases, perhaps the most important

use of the technology was information dissemination. As the state media tried to

downplay the violence, citizen journalists wielding cell phone cameras posted videos and

first-hand accounts of what was actually happening in the streets. Again it was cell

phones rather than the Internet per se that had the greatest impact, since at the time only

3.2% of Kenyans had Internet access.[192] SMS messages transmitted from ordinary

Kenyans were posted both on prominent Kenyan online sites, as well as international

forums like BBC's *Have Your Say*.[193] This information exchange boomeranged back into

the Kenyan press environment, leading one prominent Kenyan blogger to argue that "I'm

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[190] Ibid.
[191] Kenya Human Rights Commission. "Kenya; Unprecedent State of Violence." *Africa News*. May 21st, 2009.
[192] Biz-Community. "Kenya; Bloggers Keep World Informed." *Africa News*. January 4, 2008.
[193] "Blogs, SMS, and the Kenyan Election." *Internet & Democracy Blog*. http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/idblog/2008/01/03/blogs-sms-and-the-kenyan-election/ Accessed December 21st, 2009.

getting more news from BBC than from anywhere else right now. "[194] And the

prominence of English-language bloggers like Kenya Pundit highlights the importance,

noted in Chapter 3, of these bilingual bridge bloggers, who are able to translate events in

far-flung places for global audiences, giving them enormous power over the shape of the

debates that take place in the international public sphere. This is particularly true when

the state temporarily turns off the information spigot. On the other hand, it is also

instructive, and should serve as a further note of caution, that the state was successfully

able to disable the SMS network when it so desired. The state also maintained the

capacity to track individuals sending text messages, and threatened to prosecute anyone

caught sending inflammatory messages to others.

The Kenya case further underlines the reality that the effects of SMN activism are

contingent. In some circumstances, SMNs can help topple unsteady regimes (Ukraine,

Moldova) and in others they can put together the organizing that threatens more

entrenched authoritarian regimes (Iran). And in still others, they can both instigate and

mitigate violence, as well as document abuses and organize demonstrations against

crooked election results.

*6.5 Conclusions*

The case material presented above appears to lend at least qualified support to the

four hypotheses outlined at the beginning of the chapter. First, the cases lend support to

the hypothesis that Social Media Networks can trigger informational cascades in

authoritarian countries. Cascades appear to be the mechanism for each of the cases

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[194] *Kenya Pundit*. "Post-media blackout update, January 1, 4:30 p.m."
http://www.kenyanpundit.com/2008/01/01/post-media-blackout-update-jan-1-430-pm/

discussed above. I would further argue that electoral authoritarian regimes are likely to have better chances post-transition than non-competitive regimes. This is because parliaments, elections, and parties create routinized sites of contestation, debate, and coalition-forming before democratic transitions. However, these sites do not actually structure the opportunities for transitions themselves, which depend on factors beyond the capabilities of opposition actors to put people in the streets. Still, that does not mean that such competition is meaningless. Brownlee (2009) argues that competitive and hegemonic authoritarian regimes have better chances of successfully consolidating democracy after a transition from authoritarianism.

But what about the way that such institutional arrangements might structure the ability of SMNs to structure contestation prior to transitions in authoritarian countries? It also seems to be the case that those sites of contestation serve as ideal platforms for opposition elites seeking to contest the hegemonic role of the state using Social Media Networks. This may be why many of the most heavily-documented instance of SMN mobilization have taken place in and around elections in competitive authoritarian regimes, and why such mobilizations have been sporadic or non-existent in the many authoritarian countries that do not undertake periodic exercises in controlled contestation.

The cases under examination here would seem to challenge both institutional theories presented earlier. Brownlee's expectations that the Iranian regime would be vulnerable to elite divisions have not been borne out by the 2009-2010 electoral crisis (at least not yet). Indeed, while the regime has witnessed substantial intra-elite division, it has tenaciously clung to power, for reasons that are not yet clear to observers. And Lust-

Okar's expectation that regimes unified structures of contestation are most vulnerable during prolonged crises does not seem supported by the case of Kenya, which allowed all groups to participate and yet also weathered its electoral crisis. The collapse of the Moldovan regime and its ruling communist party also appears to challenge Brownlee, whereas the survival of the Egyptian regime and the collapse of the Ukrainian regime appear to lend support to both Brownlee and Lust-Okar's theories. Overall, the set of outcomes here leads me to conclude that neither the presence of political parties, nor structures of contestation are determinative of outcomes during electoral crises in authoritarian regimes.

Second, SMNs themselves appear to have no direct relationship to the success or failure of activism in a given authoritarian context. The divergent outcomes of SMN-driven activism in Kenya, Ukraine, Moldova, and Iran demonstrate that scholars and observers cannot simply assume the democratizing impact of SMNs. Indeed, in Kenya, the technologies were put to much more nefarious uses, whereas in Iran SMNs were turned on their users quite effectively

The third hypothesis, that independent media are critical variables for the transmission of claims made through SMNs, is more challenging. I conclude that while independent media systems make it possible for SMNs to transmit claims during ordinary political times, those independent media outlets are not necessary variables during the kinds of crises discussed here, where tactical tools like Twitter and text-messaging can circumvent media blackouts and facilitate informational cascades. The primary effect of the independent media variable within authoritarian countries is to make newsworthy a

whole host of issues and events that would normally be unintelligible or uninteresting to global audiences. In other words, the routinized presence of opposition or independent media practitioners in authoritarian public spheres makes possible daily contestations and dissent, as opposed to the more sensational events – like elections and electoral fraud – that tend to draw the attention of international media. Thus in Egypt, independent press outlets were critical in the dissemination of news stories about sexual harassment, refugees, torture, and other issues that are rarely of great interest to global media elites. Rather, they are of interest to international NGOs and rights organizations with a vested interest in a certain kind of activism. In Kenya and Ukraine, both partly-free states with partly-free media systems, blogs and new media had for years served as alternative sources of news and information to state-run media agencies and as workaround to self-censorship.

However, in Moldova, bloggers and Twitter users appeared on the scene as new actors in state politics. Little attention was paid prior to April 2009 to bloggers, Twitter activists, or other individuals deploying these tools. This might be because in 2008, Moldova's media system was considered "not free" by the Freedom House ranking.[195] Once the crisis arrived, however, networks of text-messagers, Twitters, and Youtubers were able to circumvent the regime's media blackout and reach critical external audiences (even if those external audiences were not, ultimately, ready to make sacrifices for them). And in Iran, another media environment considered not free, the change in the SMN age is that the state was unable to control the information environment during these

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[195] "2008 Freedom of the Press World Ranking." Freedom House.
http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=442&year=2008

critical junctures. The state no longer has the capability to close its doors and promote its own alternative (one might say fictional) account of what actually took place in its streets. With citizens aware at all times of the protests, accessing international media outlets via proxy servers, and sending information to international journalists, authoritarian regimes, even in the most closed societies which have gone to great length to control the Internet have been unable to control emerging media narratives around discrete events in the political system.

The difficulties of transmitting claims in the absence of independent media is also why Syria, whose citizens are also on Facebook and Twitter, has not seen the kind of online-driven mobilizations witnessed in other contexts. Partly this is because Syria's brand of authoritarianism is much more severe than other cases here, partly because of the absence of independent press outlets to transmit claims, and partly because there are no competitive elections around which to organize in that country. Syria's rate of Internet penetration is also quite low (Pavel 2009). So while Syria has seen some coordinated dissent online –with one case seemingly successful in changing government policy on personal status law— crucially that dissent has not moved offline into the realm of real-life politics. Syria can also persecute its online citizens, which it does ruthlessly (Pavel 2009). So while SMNs might "constitute a direct challenge to highly centralized authoritarian regimes such as Syria,"as Pavel argues, they have yet to demonstrate their utility in combating the policies of noncompetitive authoritarian regimes. There appears to be very little material on the web documenting Syrian police abuses, for instance, the kind of videos and pictures that appear in the thousands about Egypt. This is also clear

when the case of China is introduced, where citizens have repeatedly organized ad-hoc events and demonstrations using new media, but where a concerted effort by the state, and a total absence of independent media, has resulted in a near-perfect filtration and surveillance system.

Finally, the substantial repression of activists generated in Kenya, Moldova, and Iran suggests that at the least we cannot reject the hypothesis that increased SMN activism leads to increased repression. Together with the evidence from the Egyptian case, the Ukraine case (which saw little repression during and after the electoral crisis) appears to be the outlier. The implications of this hypothesis are discussed below.

*6.6 Coda*

On December 16th, 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. in regional democratic development and feared a backlash, and perhaps now calculates that the US 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.

The exile of Wael Abbas, and the increasingly dire outlook for Egyptian digital media activists, points to an observation first made by Jenifer Whitten-Woodring. She argues that far from being a panacea for authoritarianism, independent mediaspheres might actually contribute to greater repression (Whitten-Woodring 2009). This counter-intuitive observation rests on the durability of apparatuses of repression, and the kind of open-source intelligence provided by SMNs and independent press outlets in authoritarian regimes. By allowing a modicum of press freedom, the state might be playing a double game – forcing (or tempting) activists to reveal themselves and their networks, and simultaneously deploying the full force of state power against them. It must also be the case that the information that diffuses through SMNs also reaches authoritarian elites, by crossing social clusters via informational cascade. Whitten-Woodring's hypothesis squares with the idea advanced here, that there is a tradeoff

between online openness and networking, and a regime's ability to use that information against individuals and activists. We should be careful, then, about making recommendations to such practitioners, whose lives or personal safety are likely to be placed accordingly in jeopardy. Egypt may yet play host to the kind of successful ferment seen in places like Ukraine and Georgia, or even to unsuccessful mass mobilizations like those in Kenya or Iran. However, the lesson of this study is that we should not take a technologically deterministic approach to understanding the use of SMNs, in Egypt or anywhere else. Outcomes still depend on political, social, economic, and even natural forces, which can't be predicted in advance, and which we will almost certainly struggle to understand if and when they are unleashed.

This dissertation began with a story about a Facebook group, and asked how that group might impact politics in Egypt. I believe the answers have been provided here. The Mohamed ElBaradei Facebook group can do many things – alert individuals to the preferences of their friends and acquaintances, build shared meaning about ElBaradei's presidential candidacy, even disseminate calls to action and facilitate debate. However, we know that levels of commitment to this group are likely to be quite low, and that without organizing on the ground by committed individuals with ties into the non-networked mass of poorer Egyptians, is unlikely to play a direct role in any succession crisis. That crisis organizing, should it come, may be augmented by text-messaging, Twitter, the independent media, and the blogosphere, but absent changes in Egyptian political institutions, such mobilization is unlikely to be determinative. However, we should not dismiss the importance of this activity either. We simply do not know the

ultimately, long-term consequences of this kind of networked, public dissent, and can only imagine its implications for compliance with authoritarianism. These media – particularly those written and analyzed in Arabic, give us an important glimpse into the everyday in Egyptian society, and give their users the means of expression and organization which they have long been denied. Even as savvy a regime as Egypt cannot fully shut down this discourse, nor can it predict the consequences of its flowering. In short, there can be no revolutions without revolutionaries. But neither can there be authoritarianism with no means to control information. The way that this struggle plays out in the years ahead should be of continued interest to scholars and policymakers alike.

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April 19th, 2010.

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