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# Facebook polls as proto-democratic instruments in the Egyptian revolution: The 'We Are All Khaled Said' Facebook page

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**Abstract**

This article examines the dynamics of political participation on the 'We Are All Khaled Said' Facebook page, which hosted the call for Egypt's 25 January 2011 revolution. It shows that the page served as a proto-democratic instrument by introducing both qualitative and quantitative polls and following up with actions based on majority opinion. This argument is developed through an analysis of discussion threads and polls from the page, selected from a data set of 14,072 posts, 6,810,357 comments and 32,030,731 likes made by 1,892,118 users, extracted via a customized version of Netvizz. The analysis demonstrates that the page provided a basic lesson in democratic participation to its users. 'We Are All Khaled Said' constituted an unprecedented public space for active discussions on fighting corruption, torture and police brutality. Moreover, it served as a practical example of shared governance and political participation, which became a model for its users to strive to apply to their country.

**Keywords**

Egypt, Egyptian revolution, Facebook, Khaled Said, online activism, political participation, public opinion polls, social media, voting practices

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I swear admin, I suggest you give a copy of this survey website to the Parliament, maybe they will learn from it how to apply democracy, they seem to have forgotten everything except for the word 'approooooooved'.

User comment on a poll on the 'We Are All Khaled Said' Facebook page<sup>1</sup>

On 10 June 2010, a Facebook page by the name of '*Kullena Khaled Said*' ('We Are All Khaled Said') was anonymously established on Facebook to the memory of a 28-year-old blogger who was killed 4 days earlier by two policemen in the northern Egyptian city of Alexandria. The page gained momentum fairly quickly within the Egyptian Facebook user community, which at the time was about 4 million users. Discussions of taboo issues such as police brutality and torture seemed to have struck a chord with Egyptian youth, many of whom were distraught over a picture of Khaled Said taken in the morgue and leaked by his friends. The picture, which showed a completely disfigured face of the young man, stood in direct contradiction to the official story at the time, namely that he suffocated after attempting to swallow a roll of marijuana.

Five days after the page was established, and amidst discussions of what young people could possibly do, one of the group members suggested to the administrator(s) of the page that the members stand silently on the Alexandria Corniche, wearing black t-shirts to symbolize mourning and with their backs to the street to embody dissent. The page administrator(s) posted the idea and asked the members what they thought about it. After several rounds of discussions, the members went ahead with the silent stands, which became the trademark of the page. Particularly striking is the participatory process through which decisions on the page (such as organizing the silent stands) were taken and actions carried out. Examining this process in detail, we show that the polling practices, manual and electronic, by the page administrators constituted a massive experiment and a valuable lesson in political participation. Given the large user base of the page, such participatory practices proved inspirational for the youths of Egypt, as they showed them that they have a voice and that their voice counts.

This article traces the dynamics of such participatory practices on the 'We Are All Khaled Said' Facebook page. While the page became world famous for launching the call for protests on 25 January 2011, which started the Egyptian revolution, the interaction between its users and admins has not yet been systematically examined. This interaction did not take place in the form of organized debate, but rather in the form of a constant and fast-moving stream of comments on proposals by the admins and users of the page. In some instances, these suggestions and proposals were 'polled' electronically or by inviting users to comment. Drawing from a very large set of admin posts and user comments, we explore in detail how such manual and electronic polls were employed to give users a voice and to actively involve them in developing new protest activities. To provide the necessary background for this analysis, we will start by discussing the development of social media within the context of political activism in Egypt.

## **Facebook and political activism in Egypt**

Egyptians were the first Arab youth to use social media for activism and mobilization starting with blogger activists in 2004 (Abdulla, 2011; Harb, 2011). While some,

particularly early on, called the Egyptian revolution a ‘Facebook revolution’ (El-Nawawy and Khamis, 2012; Hauslohner, 2011; Khamis et al., 2012; Sage, 2011; Talbot, 2011), most researchers argued that Egypt’s revolution was Internet based or assisted, meaning that the Internet was a main catalyst that helped facilitate, accelerate and organize revolt, even though the power of the people remains the most influential factor (Abdulla, 2011; Eaton, 2012; Gerbaudo, 2012; Harb, 2011; Lim, 2012; Vargas, 2012). Social media, mainly Facebook and Twitter, have been central to the discussion of the dynamics of the Egyptian revolution. They have been credited with expanding the public sphere (Meringolo, 2015), acting as a general mobilization tool (Harb, 2011), and with helping bring people together and organizing the logistics of protest (Lim, 2012; Tufekci, 2014). In the presence of Emergency Laws that made gatherings of five or more people illegal in Egypt, Facebook helped Egyptian youth carve out a public space for themselves that was previously non-existent, and to move their communication patterns from a vertical form in which they were spoken at by figures of authority to a more horizontal form in which they spoke among themselves, and regarded all others, including figures of authority, as equals (Abdulla, 2009, 2014). Facebook had the greatest impact on sections of youth that were not previously politicized, as the more politically inclined drew them into their circles and into their experiences of offline activism. For activists, it became a natural extension of political blogs and helped them spread their influence and gain more following and attention. For others, it offered access to interesting pages that appeared on their Facebook News Feed and enticed them to visit activists’ personal pages or pages advocating or promoting particular political groups, events or causes.

Perhaps, the first significant illustration of using social media for activism in Egypt came in 2008, when a 28-year-old female blogger created a Facebook page in support of the workers of the industrial city of Al Mahalla Al Kubra, who were planning a strike on 6 April. Rather than organizing a protest in Cairo, which would have been a dangerous political escapade, likely to be joined only by a few, she asked Facebook users to refrain from as many activities as possible on that day to provide moral support for the workers. To everyone’s surprise, more than 70,000 Facebook users ‘liked’ the page, which was unprecedented at the time. Encouraged by bad weather and fear of excessive police presence, many areas of Egypt were empty on that day, and the event served as a pleasant surprise to activists as to the potential power of a Facebook event (Abdulla, 2011; Bayat, 2010; Iskander, 2011; Rosenberg, 2011; Said, 2014). That page later served as the origin of what became known as the April 6 Youth Movement, which was instrumental in the revolution.

Facebook’s network structure helped the youth in Egypt and much of the Arab world develop a sense of equality to others, which developed into more confidence in voicing their opinions, more willingness and ability to cross societal and political red lines, and a feeling that their voice mattered (Gerbaudo, 2012; Lim, 2012). Before social media, the youth in Egypt were used to being talked at rather than talked to. Communication was happening in a vertical manner from different layers of authority all the way down to them. On Facebook, however, every user’s profile has more or less the same features, thus providing a sense of equality, even if only perceptual, as other users might enjoy a larger network or be an offline figure of authority. Public posts on Facebook and Twitter by young people speaking to ministers, prime ministers, potential or actual presidents,

particularly after the revolution, illustrate this point. Posts that constituted political criticism or even political humour that became pervasive on Facebook (and Twitter) helped young people break taboos and tackle authority. This was particularly relevant to youth who were previously apolitical, as it helped draw them into the circle of the politically involved. For the first time, there was a space they could claim as their own, even if it was only online. When the moment was right, we argue that this paved the way to occupying offline space, represented by mass demonstrations all over the streets and the squares of Egypt.

### *Examining 'We Are All Khaled Said'*

One Facebook page that played a pivotal role in the political transformation of Egyptian youth was the 'We Are All Khaled Said' page. Khaled Said was a 28-year-old Egyptian blogger, who, on 6 June 2010, was beaten to death by two plainclothes policemen outside an Internet café in his hometown of Alexandria. After 4 days, a page commemorating his name and dedicated to crimes of police brutality in Egypt was started anonymously on Facebook. Within 3 days, the page had gathered a staggering 75,000 followers. It continued to grow in popularity and to this day remains the most popular Egyptian page on Facebook, with over 4.1 million followers. Khaled Said's innocent picture on the profile contributed to the widespread feeling that anyone could have been Khaled Said. The sophisticated marketing tactics employed by the page admins, one of whom was later known to be Google's marketing executive Wael Ghonim, helped the page become a hit (Poell et al., 2015). When the time was right, and with Tunisia setting the example, the page eventually posted the invitation for an 'event' for 'the day of revolt against torture, poverty, corruption, and unemployment'. The event invitation went out to over a million people, almost 100,000 of whom replied positively, indicating they would be 'attending' what later became Egypt's revolution (Figure 1).

Youmans and York (2012) alert us to the fact that even though social media provide platforms for cyberactivism, they can curtail collective action based on the architecture of the particular medium and the corporate interests involved. The medium is particularly affected by its user agreements in terms of policies of anonymity, community policing, and tolerance for offensive and violent content. However, a good body of research has documented the importance of social media for political activism, particularly within the Egyptian revolution. Tufekci and Wilson (2012) reported that social media, especially Facebook, were instrumental in providing alternative sources of information. Facebook use affected the decision to participate in demonstrations and provided important logistical information about protests. Participants, in turn, also documented protests through further Facebook use. Khamis and Vaughn (2011) argued that pages such as 'We Are All Khaled Said' are effective tools for allowing opportunities for political networking and providing a forum for free speech. They can also help plan and organize protests, as well as document activism and regime brutality. However, since the physical presence of the masses is the primary condition for any change to happen, they argue that 'cyberactivism is a necessary, but not sufficient, factor in bringing about actual political change'.

Howard (2011) argued that information and communication technologies (ICTs) are important prerequisites for democratic transitions in Muslim countries. He highlighted

**يوم الثورة على التعذيب والفساد والبطالة**  
You are Attending · Share · Public event

**Time** 25 January · 00:00 – 23:30

**Location** كل محافظات مصر ابتداء من الساعة 2 ظهرا  
في القاهرة: دوران شبرا - دوران المنصورة - جامعة القاهرة - شارع جامعة الدول العربية

**Created by:** كلنا خالد سعيد

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لو خايف على مصر .. لو عايز حثك .. انشم لبنا .. وشارك وكفاية سكوت بقه لحد كده  
احنا مش أقل من تونس .. نزل عشرات الآلاف جابوا حقوقهم كلها ووصلت لدرجة إقالة رئيس الجمهورية  
وهرويه من البلد .. احنا عايزين حقوقنا ..  
مش عايزين بطالة وطواير عيش وطواير أنابيب وشباب مش لاقى يتجز .. في نفس الوقت اللي فيه  
حرامية في بلدي بيسترقوا المباريات وبيهرؤا .. وبيشترؤا أراضي ومصانع الشعب يرخس التراب  
عايزين اللي قتل خالد سعيد يتعاقب واللي قتل السيد بلال يتعاقب واللي اتسبب في موت المصريين في  
اسكندرية وينج حمامي يتعاقب وعايزين وزير الداخلية يستقيل .. عايزين أي شخص طب مصري  
يتحاكم .. عايزين قانون الطوارئ يتلغى .. مش عايزين قمع في مصر .. عايزين تكون أحرار  
عايز أعرف أمير عن رأيه في بلدي .. عايز مخالف من أمن دولة ولا ضابط شرطة .. عايز يتم معاملتي  
بتدنية واحترام بغض النظر عن جنسي ولا كونى ولا ديني ولا حالتي المادية  
ينلا يا شعب قوم وثورا  
يوم 25 يناير لازم نوري العالم كله إننا مش شعب خانع ولا شعب جبان  
مطالبنا الأساسية:  
أولاً رفع الحد الأدنى من الأجور لـ 1200 جنيه عملا بأحكام القضاء وسرف إعانات لعمالين عن  
العمل  
ثانياً: إلغاء العمل بحالة الطوارئ وإقالة وزير الداخلية وإخراج كل المعتقلين بدون أحكام قضائية  
ثالثاً: حل مجلس الشعب وإعادة الانتخابات مع ضمان نزاهتها وتعديل الدستور لمنع ترشح أي رئيس  
لأكثر من فترتين رئاسيتين

97,666 Attending [See all](#)

محمد الرسمي  
Ali Boukris  
Mada Sata  
الشيخ حازم الشناوي  
Hend Shagee  
Princess RoRo  
راشد السنوي  
Cattie Black

33,355 Maybe attending [View](#)

966,251 Awaiting reply [View](#)

98,073 Not attending [View](#)

**Figure 1.** The event invitation to Egypt's revolution on the 'We Are All Khaled Said' page.

the role played by the Internet in building a robust civil society, and in providing an alternative to the narratives of authoritarian governments. Howard and Hussain (2013) stressed that 'digital media has – in different ways – become a necessary and sometimes sufficient cause of democratization' (p. 23). They classified the process of revolt in the so called 'Arab Spring' into five stages as follows: preparation, ignition, street protests, international buy-in and climax, followed by post-protest information. They concluded that 'digital media became a proximate cause of political revolution precisely because a significant community of users was already comfortable using digital media before the crisis began' (p. 27).

This article argues that one of the ways in which the 'We Are All Khaled Said' page was so instrumental was through polling its followers regarding issues of concern and following through with action corresponding to the majority opinion. In doing so, we argue that the page presented users with perhaps their first opportunities to participate in

an 'election-like' mechanism which they deemed trustworthy of their participation. This helped users realize that their voice matters and could make a difference in an environment that does not suffer from excessive corruption. It therefore encouraged them to participate freely, not only with the casting of their votes but also with generating ideas, and getting actively involved in discussions. It motivated them to try to achieve this same environment for their country, where one day they would be able to cast their votes in free elections in the absence of a corrupt regime that does not take their voices into consideration. In this article, we illustrate the mechanisms by which this process took place, and in doing so, we argue that the page was influential in teaching Egyptian youth about the value and the tools of democracy in a practical manner.

## **Methodology**

This study uses qualitative, interpretive content analysis of a purposive selection of posts and comments to illustrate our main hypothesis – that the page served as a proto-democratic instrument by introducing qualitative and quantitative polls and following up with actions based on majority opinion. Qualitative content analysis is used to describe and classify qualitative data in a systematic manner by assigning parts of the data into categories within a coding frame (Mayring, 2000; Schreier, 2012). Hsieh and Shannon (2005) defined it as 'a research method for subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns' (p. 1278). The method is characterized by three features – it is systematic, flexible and reduces the data (Schreier, 2014). Mayring (2014) explained that qualitative content analysis is a mixed methods approach that starts from the systematic, methodological basis of quantitative content analysis. Qualitative content analysis involves two steps: assigning text to categories in an interpretive manner (qualitatively), followed by analysis of frequencies of categories in a quantitative manner. Therefore, while some quantification is used in this study, we mainly depend on the qualitative analysis of the selected posts and comments.

The analysis of the interactions on the page draws from a large data set, extracted through the Netvizz application (Rieder, 2013). The full set contains 14,072 posts, 6,810,357 comments and 32,030,731 likes made by 1,892,118 users.<sup>2</sup> The posts were made in the period from 10 June 2010 to 3 July 2013, the day Islamist President Mohamed Morsi was ousted by the military. All the posts and the vast majority of the comments are in Arabic, although some comments are in English or in Latinized Arabic (Arabic written in Latin script). The page was set up in a way that only admins could post. Users could comment on, like and/or share these posts but could not publish a post of their own. The admins considered opening the page for all users to post briefly on 13 June 2010, but 20 minutes later announced that given the large number of users on the page, it would be impossible to remain focused on the cause if the Wall was open for everyone to post.

It has to be noted that Facebook introduced an electronic polling feature in March 2011. Before that, polling on the page was done manually, that is, the admins would post a question to which people would respond by writing a comment. The admins would then go over the answers and provide summaries of the responses. The introduction of the feature might have changed the dynamics of interaction on the page, as more people

could have just opted to vote with a click rather than post an answer or a comment to the post. Others could then choose to comment on a related issue without making clear reference to their particular vote since the vote would have been ‘counted’ electronically.

### *Choice of sample posts and comments*

We faced several methodological challenges with this study, including challenges with choosing a sample of posts and comments, given the vast amount of data we had, and the specificity of the type of comments we were looking for, which may even be deemed ‘irrelevant’ to the original discussions on the page. First, we tried to systematically search the full posts for terms like ‘poll’, ‘survey’, ‘polling’, ‘referendum’ and the like. This did not work for several reasons. First of all, there are no exact translations for all these terms into Arabic. Most of these terms translate into the word ‘*istiftā*’ in Arabic, which means ‘referendum’. Searching this term in Arabic resulted in posts that had to do with the official referenda that took place in Egypt during the lifetime of the page, especially the 19 March 2011 referendum on nine articles of the constitution. The other term that could be a possible translation in Arabic is ‘*istitlāra*’<sup>y</sup>, which is the formal Arabic term for ‘survey’. This term was also problematic because it is a formal, classical Arabic term, while most of the language on the page is in colloquial Egyptian Arabic. The fact that most of the conversation on the page was in colloquial Arabic also meant that the posts polling users did not necessarily use any of these keywords but was most of the time posted as a simple question of ‘So what do you think ...?’ This was particularly true after Facebook introduced electronic polling because it was so obvious that the post was a poll that it did not need to be called as such. The posts carried a simple question and did not use words such as ‘poll’ or ‘survey’. Similarly, a search for the phrase ‘what do you think’ in Arabic resulted in too many posts since it was a common phrase to use on the part of the admins even when no poll was being discussed. It therefore became obvious that it was not possible for us to detect the posts that might be useful for our analysis using only a keyword search.

Cho and Lee (2014) argue that sample selection is crucial when it comes to qualitative content analysis and grounded theory. The use of these methods makes it necessary for the researcher to search for the particular context that would be most appropriate to discover phenomena related to the process being investigated. Purposive sampling, therefore, becomes most appropriate and entails ‘selecting information-rich cases strategically and purposefully’ (Patton, 2002: 243). We therefore decided to go through all the posts from the inception of the page to see how the polling process came about and to iteratively select a few significant examples. The first set of examples centred around an idea proposed by one of the members a few days after the page started. The idea was to organize silent stands, and it became the trademark of the ‘We Are All Khaled Said’ activities for months. We selected six posts that covered the proposal and subsequent discussions. The second set, comprising four posts, related to a suggestion in July 2010 of writing protest statements on bank notes to spread awareness of issues of police brutality and corruption. Next, we selected one post that discussed whether or not protesters should have left Tahrir Square on 11 February 2011, the day Mubarak was toppled. This was the post with the most comments on the page, with 49,290 comments. The fourth set,



comprising three posts, was related to formulating the demands to be circulated to the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF), which ruled the country at the time the posts were made in June 2012. We analysed the posts themselves as well as the comments posted on the posts. As some posts had very large numbers of comments, we decided that if the post had over 100 comments, we would analyse only the first 100 comments. We considered analysing the comments with the most likes but decided against this idea because the comments we were looking for, those discussing the polls as a tool of democracy, might not necessarily have a large number of likes since they are actually a by-product of the post. Overall, we analysed 14 posts and a total of 1233 comments from 887 unique users.

### *Content analysis coding and operationalization*

Qualitative researchers agree that categories in qualitative content analysis can be developed inductively from the material in a particular study or deductively from previous literature (Cho and Lee, 2014; Mayring, 2014). This content analysis looked at the type of comments posted on the 14 selected posts ( $n=1233$ ). Using the comment as the unit of analysis, six coding categories were developed iteratively through emergent coding (Stemler, 2001). We first developed a checklist of features, compared them and reconciled differences between them. The related features were compiled into categories, which formed the basis of the analysis.

Qualitative content analysis also involves coding the manifest as well as the latent meaning of the content (Cho and Lee, 2014). Schreier (2012) argued that the method is appropriate for some degree of interpretation of meaning on the part of the researcher. By coding latent content, the researcher attempts to reach beyond the manifest content of the material in question to analyse the underlying meaning of the text (Cho and Lee, 2014; Graneheim and Lundman, 2004; Potter and Levine-Donnerstein, 1999). All 1233 comments were analysed by two coders, one a native Egyptian Arabic speaker and an associate professor of mass communication, and the other an assistant professor of Arabic language and culture. Intercoder reliability was calculated using Holsti's (1969) formula and resulted in an agreement coefficient of 98.5 per cent. Disagreements were settled through discussions between the two coders.

The categories were as follows:

1. *Providing general support to group.* These comments provided general support without alluding to any particular topics. They included statements of solidarity such as 'I'm with you' or 'we're all together in this', slogans of potential victory such as 'We will prevail' or 'nothing can stop us', and general prayers and good wishes for the group and its members such as 'May God help us' or 'God grant us victory'.
2. *Being sceptical/discouraging to group.* These comments were sceptical of the group itself or of any potential impact that it might have. They included comments such as 'There's no way anything will change in Egypt no matter what we do'.
3. *Discussing/providing input to idea.* These comments provided input to the idea being discussed, whether positive or negative. Since we were not interested in the members' evaluations of particular ideas, but rather in the concepts of

participation and involvement, we considered both positive comments (agreeing with or supporting an idea) and negative comments (disagreeing with or criticizing an idea) to be equal contributions to the discussion.

4. *Praising poll.* These comments were praising the actual process of taking the members' opinions in the form of a poll rather than discussing the idea itself. While they could be considered irrelevant to the post, these comments were the ones we were interested in the most for the purposes of this study.
5. *Objecting to poll.* These comments were sceptical of the idea of asking members their opinions. The posters of these comments still believed that their voices do not count for much change.
6. *Irrelevant.* The last category referred to irrelevant comments, including links to irrelevant songs, news, websites and so on.

## Findings and discussion

The analysis in this study was conducted on 14 posts and 1233 comments. The posts were divided into four sets according to their topics. Table 1 shows the distribution of the posts and comments per set of posts pertaining to a major topic.

It is worth noting that at the beginning of the lifetime of the page, posts had fewer comments as the page was new and its members were smaller in number. The six silent stand posts, which occurred during 15–18 June 2010, had a total of 450 comments, which were all analysed. During that time, the page reached the 100,000-member mark, but participation per post was still relatively low. The writing on bank notes posts, published during 10–13 July 2010, had a slightly higher comment rate, with the four posts having 383 comments. The one post about ending the Tahrir sit-in, posted on 11 February 2011, was by far the most commented on post on the page, with 49,290 comments. Since this was a very politically heated time, many posts made around that date received (many) thousands of comments. The fourth set of posts occurred during 2–3 June 2012 and comprised three posts, with a total of 2640 comments. If a post had more than 100 comments, we analysed the first 100. The relative increase in the number of comments from the early inception days of the page to its maturity is an indication of its members' increasing participation.

### *Generating discussion through admin posts*

The first set of posts we analysed came out of the idea to voice protest against police brutality and show solidarity for Khaled Said by forming a human chain that would stand silently across a large area of the Alexandria seafront. The chain would be comprising members standing 5 m (about 16 ft) apart to avoid breaking the draconian Emergency Laws that had long been in effect and which banned any gathering of more than five people in Egypt. The members would wear black shirts as a sign of sadness and dismay over police brutality and the killing of Khaled Said and would stand for half an hour to an hour facing the Mediterranean with their backs to the streets as a sign of protest. The idea proved very successful and the number of silent protesters increased with every stand. As such, silent stands became the trademark of the page and its members.

**Table 1.** Data distribution of posts and comments per set of posts.

|                       | Post frequency | Comments analysed | Total comments |
|-----------------------|----------------|-------------------|----------------|
| Silent stands         | 6              | 450               | 450            |
| Writing on bank notes | 4              | 383               | 383            |
| Ending sit-in         | 1              | 100               | 49,290         |
| Demands for SCAF      | 3              | 300               | 2640           |
| Total                 | 14             | 1233              | 52,763         |

SCAF: Supreme Council of the Armed Forces.

The posts introduced the idea to the members and attributed it to 26-year-old Mohamed from Alexandria. After introducing the idea in two posts and getting enough basic positive feedback for participation, the third post in this set clearly asks the members to voice their opinions and solicit further input for the idea:

This idea was proposed by a young man from Alexandria, 26 years, in an email. [...] I now want to ask you all [...] how can we make this idea successful? Can we please all discuss it and listen to each other's opinions? At the end I will read all your comments and summarize them.

The fourth post expanded the idea to Cairo and asked for more input:

There are people who suggest the idea be done in Cairo as well [...] I want to think aloud with you [...] The problem is that places on the Nile Corniche in Cairo are narrow and this could cause traffic problems, and we don't aim to cause any disturbance on the streets [...] Are there any suggestions?<sup>3</sup>

The final post in this set was published in celebration after the silent stands took place concurrently in several governorates of Egypt. It says,

Do you realize what we have done? [...] We have changed many notions. We have managed to prove to them all that a Facebook page can mobilize an army of young people who love their country. [...] We are very strong guys. [...] Imagine when the exams are over what we can all do together [...] Seriously, I can't talk anymore. [...] Watch the videos and share them with all of Egypt.

As the language of the posts illustrates, the admins emphasized that the idea being discussed came from a member of the group, and one whom they did not know personally. This also implies that just as anyone could be Khaled Said, anyone could be Mohamed who suggested this idea and therefore, all were welcome to hone the idea and/or to suggest other ideas. Soliciting input and feedback is clear in all the posts, which emphasized that not only are ideas welcome, but that different points of view are also to be encouraged. This set of posts introduces the idea of soliciting input for the admins to summarize and later present to the members, thus emphasizing that their voices count and could influence or change the course of action. Phrases such as 'I want to think aloud

with you' also emphasize brainstorming and participatory thinking rather than a mode of individual or small-group decision-making.

The second set of posts, made during 10–13 July 2010, discussed a proposal for writing protest slogans on bank notes to spread awareness of issues of police brutality and torture in Egypt. The admins posted the idea and asked for input. They later announced that over 1800 members had voiced their opinions, and that only 18 per cent were opposed to the idea. As some commented that writing on money might not be a very civilized thing to do, the admin said,

Because dialogue has to be the dominant feature of this group, we have to respect each other's opinions regardless of the differences in opinion. The money idea was proposed in a poll and only 18% objected to the idea, and of course they are to be fully respected but we will never reach a 100% consensus for any idea, even the silent stand there were many opposed to it, right?

When members seemed to voice significant opposition, the admins gave them one more opportunity:

Once again, people who didn't participate in the poll if they can please go in and voice their opinion. I appreciate the opposition to the idea, [...] and in the end this group is not mine [...] It's the people who are supposed to decide, my role here is to organize and gather the opinions and present them [...] But in the end we have to respect each other and each other's opinions and activities, [...] because we will never agree all of us on the same thing.

In another post, the admins once again emphasized the notion of giving opposing views ample opportunity to express themselves:

Please guys, we want the biggest number of people possible to participate in the bank notes poll, especially those opposed. [...] We have to reach a decision as soon as we can [...] because I'm already seeing people have started writing on bank notes and we want to coordinate efforts and at the same time organize our activities so that no one would be harmed.

Finally, after another 1680 people had participated, the admins announced that a majority had agreed to the idea, and that the slogans to be written were 'No torture; No Emergency Laws; We are all Khaled Said'. The admins asked members to write these slogans on bank notes of 10 EGPs or less because these are the ones most circulated. They also asked them to not write on all the bank notes they had so that no one would guess the identity of the writer. The admins said they aimed for having 1 million bank notes with the slogans.

Once again, the language in this set of posts implies several notions. First, the admins repeatedly emphasized the idea of dialogue and continuing discussions as an important characteristic of the page. They repeatedly called upon the members to participate and to voice their opinions, promising them that their opinions would be read, counted and summarized. Simultaneously, they emphasized the importance of respecting opposing points of view and inviting those who disagree to cast their votes on the matter. In doing so, the admins promised the participants that no idea would be put into action if it did not have a majority support. In fact, they specified that if the idea did not enjoy enough

**Table 2.** Frequency of comments analysed per type of comment.

| Comment type                          | Frequency | Valid percentage |
|---------------------------------------|-----------|------------------|
| Providing general support to group    | 39        | 3.2              |
| Being sceptical/discouraging to group | 29        | 2.4              |
| Discussing/providing input to idea    | 1039      | 84.3             |
| Praising poll                         | 41        | 3.3              |
| Objecting to poll                     | 8         | 0.6              |
| Irrelevant                            | 77        | 6.2              |
| Total                                 | 1233      | 100.0            |

support, it would be dangerous for some to do it because they would be risking getting their identities exposed as the writers of the slogans. This also implied another important aspect, namely, that the admins cared about the safety of the participants and were not willing to go through with an action that could result in potential harm for the members of the group, which in turn generated more support and participation among the members. Finally, the admins also explained that no idea would ever be supported by a 100 per cent consensus. Consequently, the page members would have to respect and abide by the majority opinion.

The third post 'set' comprised one post, published very early on the morning of 11 February 2011. Posted at 2:20 a.m. Cairo time, on the day Mubarak was eventually toppled, the post asked the page members whether they believed the sit-in in Tahrir should go on or be dispersed. The admin, by then known to be Google's marketing executive, Wael Ghonim, said,

I will now do a poll about people's opinions on the political gains and on the continuation of the sit-in. And I want all to participate because in the end just like we did everything based on our agreement we have to go on the same way.

This was a crucial post, and by far the most commented on the page, with 49,290 comments. The comments continued to come in all day and by early evening, with the announcement that Mubarak was giving up power, turned into a huge celebration by the members.

The fourth set of posts is during 2–3 June 2012. The three posts discussed demands to be posed to the Supreme Council of Armed Forces, which was ruling the country at the time, following demonstrations protesting the first-degree court ruling in the case that implicated Mubarak and his aides in murdering protesters during the 18 days of the initial wave of the revolution. The ruling, which fell short of the protesters' expectations, involved a life sentence to Mubarak and his minister of interior but declared all other aides innocent. The posts discussing this issue asked the members of the page first to list their demands so that the admins would include them in a poll. When the poll was ready, the admins called upon the members to vote 'so that we would know the majority opinion'. It is worth noting that this poll occurred after Facebook had introduced its electronic polling feature and, therefore, the third post included a link to the multiple-choice poll.

### *Participation by the page members*

As explained above, content type was divided into six categories, the distribution of which is illustrated in Table 2.

Comments providing general support to the page and its members accounted for 3.2 per cent of all comments analysed ( $n=39$ ). These comments were not pertaining to any particular topics or ideas but rather included general statements of solidarity, slogans of potential victory, or prayers and good wishes for the group and its members. For example, members would make comments in support not just of the idea but of the group and its purpose as a whole. One member simply said, 'I'm with you'. Another said, 'You know what is beautiful about this Khaled thing, it has brought us together around what's really right in hearts that are still beating'. Another member said, 'May God get Khaled's right from the unjust because unfortunately this could happen to any one of us'.

After the success of the first silent stand, one member said,

Really, there are no words to describe what we're in now and what we're all feeling. We are all really full of pride, it's an honor to us all. We will not be silent, we will speak out. Blessed are the youth.

A female member said,

I'm very proud, and very very happy. Seriously, we're not insignificant. The insignificant are those who did not appreciate and made light of today. Seriously we managed to unite, and I'm very very happy. Those who say 'the Facebook youth', it's that Facebook youth who moved, we've become one hand, really, I'm so happy.

It is interesting to note that as per Table 3, the comments providing general support to the group were concentrated around the early days of the page, mostly in the first post set of the silent stands. This post set had 92.3 per cent ( $n=36$ ) of all the comments providing general support. Later on, as the page progressed, the contributions of the members were focused more on providing specific input rather than contributing only general feelings of solidarity.

There were also comments that were sceptical of or discouraging to the group and its members, mainly to the tune that there is too much corruption in the country and nothing could ever be done by individual citizens to rectify it. These comments accounted for 2.4 per cent of all the comments analysed ( $n=29$ ). For example, one member said,

I swear if we even drowned ourselves in the sea no one from the government would give us any attention. People from other countries are denouncing the crime while the Ministry of Interior is saying we had nothing to do with it.

Another member said, 'And then what?! Do you think the government will actually do something?' It is also interesting to note that most of these comments that had no hope that any change would occur took place during the earlier days of the page. As per Table 3, 69 per cent of these comments ( $n=20$ ) were posted to the first set of posts (the silent stand), while 13.8 per cent ( $n=4$ ) were posted to the second set (writing on

**Table 3.** Comment type by post set cross tabulation.

|                                       |                       | Post set      |                       |               |                  | Total |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------------|---------------|-----------------------|---------------|------------------|-------|
|                                       |                       | Silent stands | Writing on bank notes | Ending sit-in | Demands for SCAF |       |
| Providing general support to group    | Count                 | 36            | 3                     | 0             | 0                | 39    |
|                                       | % within comment type | 92.3          | 7.7                   | 0.0           | 0.0              | 100.0 |
|                                       | % within post set     | 8.0           | 0.8                   | 0.0           | 0.0              | 3.2   |
|                                       | % of total            | 2.9           | 0.2                   | 0.0           | 0.0              | 3.2   |
| Being sceptical/discouraging to group | Count                 | 20            | 4                     | 3             | 2                | 29    |
|                                       | % within comment type | 69.0          | 13.8                  | 10.3          | 6.9              | 100.0 |
|                                       | % within post set     | 4.4           | 1.0                   | 3.0           | 0.7              | 2.4   |
|                                       | % of total            | 1.6           | 0.3                   | 0.2           | 0.2              | 2.4   |
| Discussing/providing input to idea    | Count                 | 353           | 338                   | 58            | 290              | 1039  |
|                                       | % within comment type | 34.0          | 32.5                  | 5.6           | 27.9             | 100.0 |
|                                       | % within post set     | 78.4          | 88.3                  | 58.0          | 96.7             | 84.3  |
|                                       | % of total            | 28.6          | 27.4                  | 4.7           | 23.5             | 84.3  |
| Praising poll                         | Count                 | 0             | 6                     | 32            | 3                | 41    |
|                                       | % within comment type | 0.0           | 14.6                  | 78.0          | 7.3              | 100.0 |
|                                       | % within post set     | 0.0           | 1.6                   | 32.0          | 1.0              | 3.3   |
|                                       | % of total            | 0.0           | 0.5                   | 2.6           | 0.2              | 3.3   |
| Objecting to poll                     | Count                 | 0             | 5                     | 3             | 0                | 8     |
|                                       | % within comment type | 0.0           | 62.5                  | 37.5          | 0.0              | 100.0 |
|                                       | % within post set     | 0.0           | 1.3                   | 3.0           | 0.0              | 0.6   |
|                                       | % of total            | 0.0           | 0.4                   | 0.2           | 0.0              | 0.6   |
| Irrelevant                            | Count                 | 41            | 27                    | 4             | 5                | 77    |
|                                       | % within comment type | 53.2          | 35.1                  | 5.2           | 6.5              | 100.0 |
|                                       | % within post set     | 9.1           | 7.0                   | 4.0           | 1.7              | 6.2   |
|                                       | % of total            | 3.3           | 2.2                   | 0.3           | 0.4              | 6.2   |
| Total                                 | Count                 | 450           | 383                   | 100           | 300              | 1233  |
|                                       | % within comment type | 36.5          | 31.1                  | 8.1           | 24.3             | 100.0 |
|                                       | % within post set     | 100.0         | 100.0                 | 100.0         | 100.0            | 100.0 |
|                                       | % of total            | 36.5          | 31.1                  | 8.1           | 24.3             | 100.0 |

SCAF: Supreme Council of the Armed Forces.

bank notes), which took place only 1 month after the inception of the page and before the eruption of the 25 January 2011 revolution. Once the mass protests started, however, the sceptical comments were down to 10.3 per cent on the third set ( $n=3$ ), and only 6.9 per cent ( $n=2$ ) on the fourth set (even though this set was in response to an unsatisfying court ruling). These differences showed statistical significance as per a Chi Square test, with  $\chi^2=387.754$  at a probability level of  $p=.000$ . While some of these comments, such as the above examples, were sceptical of the outcome of any potential action, others were initially sceptical of the possibility that many people would actually join any action. Displaying a typical third-person effect in commenting on the first set of posts, one member said, 'I'm in, but I bet you no one will show up'.

Another said, 'I don't know, I think this idea is a bit too difficult'. A few members thought the whole page was just empty talk. For example, one said, 'I think we should all go sleep because this talk is just useless'.

### *Lessons in democracy*

Political participation and the creation of platforms for public expression are important components of the democratic process. As this study indicates, the vast majority of the comments analysed ( $n=1039$ , 84.3%) had to do with discussing or providing input to an idea. This is a testament to the participatory nature of the page and the involvement of the group of people that constitutes its user members. Although the admins alone could publish posts on the page, their style of connective leadership (Poell et al., 2015) set the agenda for political discussions during a contentious time and encouraged people to speak out, brainstorm and reach solid conclusions at least some of the time. This helped reiterate the principle stated by the admins in one of the above posts, that the page belonged to its members even if the admins were the ones in charge, and that much of the page's activities would be based on the inputs of the members. This in turn increased the page's credibility among the members and increased membership. As we explained, one of the main ideas of the page, the silent stands, was suggested by a member. Providing input, whether by positively reinforcing or enhancing an idea, or by voicing opposition to that idea, created an atmosphere of lively discussions on the page at all times. This was encouraged by the participatory language that the admins used in running the page, frequently using the phrase 'What do you think ...?' Members were also behind many of the small details of the activities on the page. For example, it was the members who suggested wearing a black shirt during the silent stands and doing them on Fridays, the first day of the weekend in Egypt. They also suggested the precise areas for the stands in Alexandria, Cairo and other governorates. On the writing on bank notes idea, the members suggested what phrases to write on the bank notes, eventually settling on the phrases 'No torture; No Emergency Laws; We are all Khaled Said'.

Of particular interest to the central thesis of this article are the comments that praised the polls, even when that was not part of the expected outcome of the question or discussion being raised in the posts. While very few comments were sceptical of polling ( $n=8$ , 0.6%), they were dwarfed by the overwhelmingly positive attitude of the members. We argue that by continuously inviting the opinions of the members of the page, the admins introduced several important concepts, perhaps foremost among which was the notion of 'my voice counts'. Within the sample we analysed, the comments praising the polls accounted for 3.3 per cent ( $n=41$ ). This is a significant number of comments, particularly given that they were volunteered despite being almost irrelevant to the topics being discussed. Facebook only introduced multiple-choice polling in March 2011, 9 months after the inception of the page and 2 months after the start of the revolution. Before then, polling on the page was done manually through qualitative questions posted by the admins which asked for the members' opinions and/or solicited their input. While we found no such comments on the first set of posts we analysed, arguably because the page was only a few days old, this type of comment started appearing very soon after. It was already detectable



by the time the second set of posts was taking place, merely a month after the inception of the page. One post which was highly appreciated by the members was the one in which the admin urged them to cast their votes on the poll because they were the owners of the page, and that in the end the majority opinion would be binding. The wording of the post (cited in full above) struck a chord with the members, who were thirsty for political participation in any meaningful manner, and initiated many replies praising the democratic practice of polling. For example, one member said, 'I swear admin, I suggest you give a copy of this survey website to the Parliament, maybe they will learn from it how to apply democracy, they seem to have forgotten everything except for the word "approooooooved"'. Although the idea of writing on bank notes was controversial, members still appreciated settling the differences in opinion by voting. One said, 'Bravo veery much, I very much like this way (of deciding), it's civilized. Even if I don't agree 100%, this is the way we're supposed to manage differences in opinion'. Another member said, 'Even though I oppose the idea, as long as the majority has agreed, I respect their opinion and will also carry out the idea'. A female member said, 'I'm one of those who said "no", but I seriously respect the opinion of the majority who said "yes". We have to settle for the result of the poll because this is democracy'. The ideas of democracy and shared governance again come up:

You know admin what is the best feeling I have about this page? It's that everyone feels it's like his country and he has a right in it. The page now has become public, it's owned by everyone who participates.

Another member said, 'Excellent poll [...] I'm very optimistic that our country will change democratically in the short, medium, and long terms [...] Our country will be better no matter what'.

By 11 February 2011, the day Mubarak eventually left power, it was the members of the page who were asking the admin to post a poll to measure their opinions. This was a very contentious day as everyone had anticipated that Mubarak would step down on the previous day; but, after keeping the whole nation in suspense amidst strong rumours he would resign, he spoke to the nation at midnight and announced that he was staying, promising to introduce reforms and to not run for another term once his term expired in November 2011. Most Egyptians were severely disappointed, and the question became whether to carry on with the demonstrations and sit-ins risking violent dispersion by security that would likely waste many lives, or to give up and be satisfied with what Mubarak had promised. The admin, Wael Ghonim, announced that he was uncertain of what the correct move was. At this point, the members called upon him to put up a new poll, to which he complied. The poll was posted at 2:20 a.m. on 11 February and was by far the most commented on post with 49,290 comments. Again, the members praised the admin for posting the poll. One said, 'This is right. You've listened to us, and the majority will decide. I hope we all make the decision'. Another said, 'This is right. He who consults is not lost'. Another said, 'This is democracy, Wael'. Perhaps, this one post put it best:

Look, admin, there's something I like about this group that this country and many of us miss, that is taking our opinions and votes. Anything you or any group members want to do is sort of polled, and whether right or wrong, the majority opinions goes. As they say, this is the price of democracy.

## Conclusion

We argue in this article that the 'We Are All Khaled Said' Facebook page managed to constitute a proto-democratic instrument that helped introduce youth in Egypt to the practices of political expression and participation, which are important components of democracy. While we do not claim causality, we argue that the page afforded its members, who peaked to 4.1 million users, a space to voice their opinions in a way that was unprecedented before and helped them realize that in a democratic community (in this case, the page, but eventually possibly also the country), their voices and their votes can and do make a difference. Coming to life at a time when the youth were mostly excluded and characterized by massive political apathy and/or frustration, the page slowly managed to attract young, previously apolitical citizens to unite around the cause of fighting torture and police brutality. At a time when gatherings of five or more people were criminalized by Emergency Laws, the page offered a meeting point for thousands of youth, who learned that they were not alone in their frustrations and in feeling that the injustice in the country must be confronted. The page's participatory nature and the admins' leadership style and insistence on repeatedly inviting the opinions of the members helped young people get over their apathy, frustration and sometimes fear. As illustrated in the analysis in this article, even though the admins were the ones with the ability to publish posts, they used language that emphasized participation and shared governance and made the members feel they were owners of the page.

One of the first factors that helped in this regard was vigorously discussing and eventually carrying out an early idea by one of the members, the silent stands, which soon became the trademark of the group. By offering the space for members to voice their opinions regarding the main idea as well as its details and logistics, the admins created an atmosphere of inclusion and helped promote the important and at the time lacking notion of 'my voice counts'. Although there was some scepticism at the beginning, members soon experienced success and became very proud of what they had accomplished, thus promoting further loyalty to the page and credibility in its admins and its content. Participation in protests kept increasing until it finally exploded with the 25 January 2011 protests, in which hundreds of thousands participated. The invitation to these protests, which was hosted by the page, went out to over a million users, about 100,000 of which said they would participate.

The efforts of the admins in their connective leadership style have to be emphasized here. Even at the time when Facebook did not support electronic polling, hundreds of posts carried simple invitations for members to discuss or voice their opinions on important issues, helping members realize that they had the right to express themselves and that they could actually influence the outcome of the course of action the page was about to take. For some, this also helped combat the fear of expressing political opinions in general, particularly in opposition of the regime. Other than offering an excellent venue

to organize and mobilize youth, the page helped promote a pattern of horizontal communication and to provide a sense of commonality and belonging as the members learned they were not alone in their grievances and frustrations but were joined by hundreds of thousands of Egyptians. The participatory, proto-democratic nature of the page helped entice active discussions on ways to fight issues of corruption, torture and police brutality and provided an unprecedented practical example of shared governance and opinion-taking, which became a model for the members to strive to apply to their country.

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## Notes

1. All posts and comments were originally made in Arabic, most of the time using Arabic characters, but sometimes also using Arabic in Latin characters. The ones used in this article were translated by Rasha Abdulla.
2. For more information on the data extraction process, see Rieder et al. (2015).
3. It has to be noted that while this conversation was going on, the admins created two separate event pages for the silent stands both in Alexandria and then in Cairo, which meant that some of the user comments were routed to these other pages. Our analysis here focused only on the comments on the main 'We Are All Khaled Said' page.

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## Author biographies

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