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Governmental corruption through the Egyptian bloggers' lens: A qualitative study of four Egyptian political blogs

ABSTRACT

Corruption was among the most serious problems under the rule of ousted Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. Egyptian political bloggers played a critical role in reporting about the regime's corrupt policies which were among the main factors behind the 2011 Revolution. This study analysed a number of threads selected from four prominent Egyptian political blogs that dealt with the issue of corruption. The analysed threads were divided into three main categories based on the primary function they attempted to perform: public mobilization, documentation or deliberation. Findings showed that political bloggers have played a critical role in enriching, revitalizing and mobilizing the Egyptian civil society, particularly in the prelude to the 25 January Egyptian Revolution. Still, this study showed that the role played by digital media platforms, such as political blogs, in promoting civic engagement, boosting democratization, and aiding political change should not be

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exaggerated or overstated. In other words, there has to be caution in assessing these new media technologies' potential impact on reshaping the process of communication and democratization in the age of cyberspace.

INTRODUCTION

Corruption was one of the main pitfalls that characterized the regime of ousted President Hosni Mubarak in Egypt. Nepotism, money laundering, bribery, cronyism, market monopolies and the marriage between business and politics were defining features of Mubarak's era. It was a common practice for the government to allocate contracts for various economic projects to certain businessmen in return for monetary favours or illegal commissions.

> In 2008 the Corruption Perceptions Index produced by Transparency International ranked Egypt at 115 out of 180 states, noting that its overall score had worsened in relation to the previous year […] In the Middle East, Egypt is ranked 13 out of 18 [most corrupted] states.
>
> (El-Naggar 2009: 46–47)

Corruption cases were too much and too widespread for the semi-independent and the private media outlets to fully report on, therefore, it was the bloggers who played the biggest role in uncovering corruption and fraudulent conduct by members of the Mubarak regime and family.

This study utilized qualitative textual analysis of four Egyptian political blogs, in addition to in-depth personal interviews with Egyptian political bloggers to analyse the content of four prominent Egyptian political blogs that deal with corruption in an attempt to assess the role of these blogs in enhancing democratization and contributing to popular participation in the Egyptian civil society. The study will shed light on the degree to which these blogs reflect effective civic engagement and citizen journalism, as well as serving the functions of a vibrant civil society. The analysed threads were divided into three main categories based on the primary function they attempted to perform: public mobilization, documentation or deliberation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Much of the literature dealing with online activism revolves around whether political blogs can actually enable the creation of a vibrant and active civil society, through encouraging civic engagement and boosting political participation and citizen journalism.

Thanks to the Internet, civic engagement has expanded due to the fact that the average individual has a bigger say in the day-to-day issues of public concern.

> Structurally, the Internet has inverted the few-to-many architecture of the broadcast age, in which a small number of people were able to influence and shape the perceptions and beliefs of entire nations. In the many-to-many environment of the Net, every desktop is a printing press, a broadcasting station, and a place of assembly.
>
> (Rheingold 2004: 272)

There is an increasing agreement among scholars that blogs form an online public sphere where issues are raised, debated and sometimes lead to action

(Ward 2007). Despite the fact that blogging is a relatively new phenomenon, 'it shows some signs of potentially evolving into a miniature public sphere of its own, one of shared interests rather than shared geography' (Froomkin 2004: 10). 'Political blogs [in particular] may be considered to be a manifestation of Habermas' […] notion of a public sphere involving convergence of people […] from various walks of life who share in discourse' (Trammell, Williams, Postelnicu, and Landerville, (2006: 23). In other words, blogs could be said to contribute to the creation of new 'virtual public spheres' (El-Nawawy and Khamis 2009).

The term *public sphere* was coined by the contemporary German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, and it refers to the space 'between civil society and the state, in which critical public discussion of matters of general interest was institutionally guaranteed' (Habermas 1989: xi). The public sphere was exemplified in the intellectual discussions and deliberations that took place among members of the aristocracy or the 'bourgeois' at the salons and coffee houses during seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe. This was mostly a 'sphere of private people [coming together] as a public' to discuss matters of shared interest and to engage in stimulating debates (Habermas 1989: 27).

The rational-critical debates and dialogical interactions that form the gist of Habermas's public sphere have acquired a new meaning in the Internet world. In his discussion of deliberative communication, Habermas 'addressed the Internet only in a footnote, pointing out that interaction on the Internet […] has democratic significance in so far as it undermines censorship of authoritarian regimes' (Rasmussen 2007: 2). Unlike the traditional public sphere, which was characterized by face-to-face interactions and then by the mass media, the Internet 'propels a more differentiated public sphere […] [that is] more niche-oriented, both because of a more diverse media-scape, and because of a more ethnically and culturally pluralistic society in general' (Rasmussen 2007: 8).

It is for these reasons that some scholars hailed the new communicative and deliberative possibilities enabled by this new 'virtual public sphere(s)' online (El-Nawawy and Khamis 2009). For example, Goode (2005: 107) argued that the Internet can contribute to 'the renaissance of dialogue, the advent of the "electronic coffee house" […] in which citizens would (re) discover the art of speaking, debating, and discursively testing the claims of the powerful and of each other.' Likewise, Dahlberg (2007) argued that

> The Internet is of great interest to deliberative democrats because it offers two-way, relatively low cost, semi-decentralized, and trans-national communication through which government and corporate power may (in principle) be bypassed and rational-critical deliberation fostered.
>
> (Dahlberg 2007: 50)

Along the same lines, Janack (2006) argued that

> the Internet's capacity for near-instantaneous, two-way, decentralized communication has made cyberspace a potentially attractive site for extended informal political deliberation. Furthermore, because markers of gender, race, and class are less obvious in an online environment, some have considered the Internet as a more democratic and egalitarian venue in which individuals could exchange ideas with less interference from personal prejudices.
>
> (Janack 2006: 283–84)

The alternative, anti-hegemonic nature of the Internet, and its related applications, such as blogging, has allowed politically marginalized groups to 'use [it] as a means for the formation of counter-publics, the articulation of identities and oppositional discourses, and the contestation of the discursive boundaries of the mainstream public sphere' (Dahlberg 2007: 60). Along the same lines, Simone (2006) argued that

> the web provides an outlet for developing and disseminating counter-discourse. Subaltern voices can find their way into popular consciousness with or without the support of the mainstream press. So, while use of the web may not result in a revolution, it is becoming as indispensable for critical debate as the newspaper was in the bourgeois public sphere.
>
> (Simone 2006: 361)

The virtual public spheres can allow for citizen journalism, which provides ordinary citizens with the opportunity to document their own version of reality and to tell their own side of the story. It is distinguished from professional journalism in that ordinary citizens use digital media tools to report on events on the ground, upload text and videos directly to the Internet, and feed the information and videos to media outlets. Therefore, we can contend that citizen journalism 'is a promising new breed of news-making that has been championed by various scholars […] [for] granting ordinary citizens a novel, hands-on role' (Reich 2008: 739). Citizen journalism 'gives people a voice and therefore power. The people's participation itself and what they produce are regarded with the hope to contribute to an informed citizenry and democracy' (Nip 2006: 212).

One could not think of a better example of online civic activism than the role of social media in instigating, covering and organizing the sweeping wave of popular revolutions in the Arab world, which led to unprecedented political transformations. It was new online media avenues, such as blogs, Facebook and Twitter, which were extensively used by members of civil society, especially youth, that revealed the true faces of their regimes and exposed their flaws to the international community at large, i.e. to the 'global civil society'.

However, Keren (2006) argued that blogging alone cannot lead to concrete political action on the ground, because

> bloggers [could be] helpless vis a vis the evil they experience or observe, and their helplessness is only marginally relieved by the sense of community that is emerging online […] Feelings such as fear of oppression, resentment toward authority and vulnerability […] are not easily reduced by online […] writing.
>
> (Keren 2006: 151)

This is especially true since the Internet technology by itself may not be the only answer to the problems facing civil society activists.

> The Internet will always be a supplement to, not a replacement for, other connections. Those who already have power can make more effective immediate use of the technology – so those with less power have to work harder to make it effective on their side.
>
> (Calhoun 2004: 241)

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF FOUR EGYPTIAN POLITICAL BLOGS

This study utilized a qualitative, textual analysis of four of the most popular Egyptian political blogs, which were founded by four pioneering and prominent Egyptian bloggers and political activists.

Textual analysis, which can also be referred to as 'interdiscursive analysis', entails 'seeing texts in terms of the different discourses, genres and styles they draw upon and articulate together' (Fairclough 2003: 3). Conducting textual analysis requires studying the actual text and interpreting the meaning(s) constructed through that text. Meanings in a text can either be explicit (i.e. overtly stated) or implicit (i.e. assumed or implied) (Fairclough 2003: 10–11). Since selectivity, on the part of the analyst, is an essential and inevitable component in every stage of textual analysis, 'there is no such thing as an "objective" analysis of a text, if by that we mean an analysis which simply describes what is "there" in the text without being "biased" by the "subjectivity" of the analyst' (Fairclough 2003: 14–15). This lack of objectivity in textual analysis studies implies that 'we have to accept that our categories [of analysis] are always provisional and open to change' (Fairclough 2003: 15).

Textual analysis as a method has taken on new forms and novel dimensions thanks to the advent of communication technologies. As advanced technologies that process and reproduce information are integrated with technologies that move information through space in practically no time, new patterns of communication emerge that deeply affect social experience and radically transform social relationships (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 2005: 44).

The four bloggers, whose blogs were analysed in this study, were Wael Abbas (http://misrdigital.blogspirit.com), Abdel-Monem Mahmoud (http://www.ana-ikhwan.blogspot.com), Nawara Negm (http://tahyyes.blogspot.com) and Maikel Nabil (www.maikelnabil.com), the only blogger (among the four) who was arrested and faced a military trial after the revolution. All four blogs are written in the Arabic language.

Our analysis of selected threads from the four abovementioned blogs consistently revolved around three categories: public mobilization, documentation and deliberation. These categories emerged from our in-depth, personal interviews with the four bloggers whose blogs we analysed. All four bloggers argued that the functions of their respective blogs were to mobilize the public to take action, document the incidents of governmental corruption, and engage the public in insightful debates through online deliberations. While the bloggers alluded to other functions that were carried out through their blogs, these three were the main ones.

THE TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF SELECTED CORRUPTION THREADS

First: Threads urging public mobilization:

Important decree

This thread was taken from Nawara Negm's blog and was posted in Arabic on 21 November 2011. Negm proposed a decree – calling for an end to military rule, as exemplified by SCAF (the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces) – to be voted on and adopted by her blog's followers.

Negm wrote:

We, the protestors at Tahrir Square, announce our opposition to the policy of violence and confrontation that the Supreme Council of the

Armed Forces (SCAF) has adopted in its dealings with the people's demands. We hereby propose the following decree which we hope will be supported by the political activists all around the country: (1) SCAF should leave power to a transitional council composed of judges to ensure the safe and smooth transition of power in the period of time between SCAF's departure from power and the coming of the new president and his cabinet; (2) Parliamentary elections should be held on time, followed by presidential elections; (3) The elected parliament should form a committee to write the new Constitution, which will have to be voted upon in a national referendum under the supervision of the newly elected president; (4) Ending all military trials for civilians.

Negm's suggestion elicited several enthusiastic posts, as illustrated in the following examples:

Mahfouz[1] wrote: 'I wholeheartedly agree with you Nawara.'

Sakr wrote: 'I believe that it would be ideal if the head of the Supreme Constitutional Court runs the country, while calling to hold the presidential elections during the next 60 days. This goes along with the articles in the 1971 constitution, which were amended in a national referendum.'

Zaid wrote: 'I would add to your suggestions the firing of the current cabinet, which hasn't achieved much on the ground, and which was totally controlled by SCAF.'

Hady wrote: 'Please do not suggest that the chairman of the Supreme Constitutional Court acts as an interim president, and rule out any judge for that kind of position. You have to select someone who has a well-known political record.'

Gameel wrote: 'I suggest that we select the elected heads of all the profes-sional syndicates to form a presidential council. This group would be the only one that has actually been elected by the people.'

Naglaa responded: 'I wouldn't trust the judges to be part of the presidential council or to be involved in anything that has to do with this interim period. Those judges have let us down on several occasions and have proven their corruption and their collaboration with the ousted regime.'

Sameh wrote: 'If we have an elected parliament, it will be able to take over power from the unelected SCAF. Elections are the true solution to get us out of our current deadlock.'

Khadija wrote: 'I thought that you voted "yes" in the latest referendum over the constitutional amendments. And today, here are the consequences of voting "yes" over these amendments: The new Constitution will be written after a new president is elected, and this means that it will be tailored to fit the new president's wishes. The parliament will select the 100 members who will serve on the constitution committee, and so if the Muslim Brotherhood takes over in the parliamentary elections, they will monopolize the process of writing the constitution. The newly elected parliament will control the process of appointing a new cabinet, and in case the Muslim Brotherhood wins the parliamentary majority, they will run the country and form the government.'

The abovementioned thread was a good example of encouraging civic engagement in Egypt's post-revolutionary phase. In her post, Negm proposed a decree to get the country out of its ongoing political and legal crisis since the ousting of Mubarak. Negm, who got the general public from among the visitors to her blog involved in the democratic process by seeking their support for her proposed decree, tried to mobilize the public for the ultimate goal of promoting democracy.

Shedding more light on this thought and assessing the role of blogs in enhancing democracy, Dina Shehata an analyst at Al-Ahram Center for Strategic Studies, argued that blogging cannot replace institutional democracy. Shehata told the authors in a personal interview in 2009:

> Democracy is strongly associated with institutions: parties, elections, and the parliament. Blogs have expanded the platform of voices in the public debate in Egypt, but they cannot make up for the absence of democratic institutions. We don't have participatory democracy in Egypt, and blogging is a tool rather than an end for democracy.
>
> (Shehata June 15, 2009 interview)

A strong sense of collective engagement was reflected in the messages posted by most participants in this thread, who felt the urgency of the issue at hand and the value of their contributions to the ongoing discussion. Their high level of engagement and the concrete solutions that some of them came up with were a testament to the effectiveness of Negm's post in mobilizing her followers.

Another important point worth highlighting is the fact that Negm was practising street activism in the real world and was camping out with the protestors at Tahrir Square, which might have increased the degree of 'social trust' between her and the visitors on her blog in a way that 'facilitat[ed] coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit' (Booth and Richard 1998: 780).

This raises the issue of whether bloggers like Negm – who have gained the public's trust, thanks to their offline activism – also have the ability to mobilize the Egyptian public. Addressing the issue of the bloggers' role when it comes to inspiring 'on the street' mobilization, Negm told the authors in a personal interview in Cairo in 2009:

> I have great respect for the Egyptian people, and I believe that they are cautious and wise. The Egyptian people are able to get their rights. We, bloggers, have a certain cause, and we express ourselves on our blogs. We are not mobilizing people, but we are sharing and rendering their voices to the world. People are independent and they will decide when and how to take action.
>
> (Negm July, 17 2009 interview)

Another blogger and political activist, Ramy Raoof, echoed Negm's argument by saying: 'Online platforms cannot initiate change, but they can increase people's awareness and draw their attention to particular issues. It is our hope that people themselves can take action and initiate change based on their awareness' (Raoof July 10, 2010 interview).

Ayman Nour, a prominent Egyptian political activist and founder of Al-Ghad political party, tended to agree with Negm and Raoof with regard to the blogs'

role. Nour, who ran for presidency in the 2005 elections against ousted President Mubarak, told the authors in a personal interview in Cairo in 2010:

> The Internet is a virtual medium that has a virtual audience. You can post an invitation for a demonstration and have 100,000 people accept this invitation online, but then actually 100 people show up! So, you cannot base all your expectations on the Internet, but you can expect that social media can affect people's awareness and ability to mobilize and act. I think that blogs and social media can help rejuvenate and revitalize the Egyptian spirit, but they cannot be utilized as tools for actual change. They can create the awareness that can eventually lead to change. The Internet can create an environment that is conducive for change. However, it is only a catalyst for change.
>
> (Nour July 18 2010 interview)

Second: Threads documenting governmental corruption:

Mubarak's gold in the UK

This thread was taken from Wael Abbas's blog and was posted in Arabic on 2 February 2011, during the revolution. In this thread, Abbas posted documents in the English language that 'supposedly' exposed ousted President Mubarak's smuggled money and stolen fortune that were hidden in UK banks and elsewhere. Wael wrote:

> I have received these documents from an unknown person, and I haven't had the opportunity to independently verify their authenticity. Some of these bank documents include information about Mubarak's fortune of pure gold. I hope that those working for British banks can help us authenticate these documents.

One of the documents – a safekeeping receipt issued by the Caledonian Banking Group on 17 December 2009 – read as follows:

> We, the undersigned, being duly authorized officers of the Caledonian Bank hereby confirm with full bank responsibility that we are holding in safekeeping under the above safekeeping number the following bond security with a nominal face value of 620 billion US dollars.

The reactions from the posters were diverse. Some of them asked Abbas to remove these 'forged' documents in order to restore his blog's credibility, while others suggested concrete steps to return the money to Egypt and to put Mubarak, his family and his top officials on trial. Here are some examples of these diverse reactions:

Smith wrote: 'That's 620 BILLION US dollars, which is over three and a half trillion Egyptian pounds. That's roughly 1/6th of the U.S. Federal budget and about 16 months of Egypt's GDP. If frozen and returned to Egypt, it would be $7,500 for every man, woman and child in the country. It's also nine times any other figure I've seen mentioned for Mubarak. It might be real, but I have to be a little skeptical.'

Afaf wrote: 'Whether or not these documents are authentic, Mubarak has committed so many horrible crimes in this country, and he needs to be punished for his deeds which the whole world was witness to.'

Emad wrote: 'We are not the jury, judge or court to prosecute; hence we do not need verified documents. The truth is known and clear and whether it is 50 billion or infinity, it does not change the fact that the Egyptian gas was sold to Israel at a quarter of its market price (at a loss) while Israel has natural gas reserves. The Egyptian debt rose from 20 billion to 300 billion dollars!! Fifty percent of Egyptians live on a few dollars a month!! This, I believe, is the real chaos, not the peaceful demos.'

Magdy wrote: 'I have been living outside Egypt for 15 years since I couldn't find a job in my home country. I have spent most of my youth away from my country so that Mubarak and his family could enjoy the billions of dollars that they collected from the people. They sucked the blood out of this country, while many Egyptians were feeding on garbage and living under the poverty line.'

Kevin wrote: 'I totally support the demands of the people at Tahrir Square and hope that Hosni Mubarak soon leaves office, but this kind of misinformation can be deeply damaging to international opinion as it discredits the protestors. For the good of the uprising, I think you should take this material down and replace it with a note that you have now discovered they are not authentic.'

Jamie wrote: 'One of two things is going on here – and either one is very interesting: (1) Either these documents are legitimate and someone exposed themselves to massive personal risk by forwarding these documents to you; or (2) Someone went to a great deal of trouble to create forgeries for the purpose of discrediting you. Either way, they are important, and I hope you won't take them down.'

The abovementioned thread is a good example of citizen journalism, where Abbas posted several bank documents that included certain figures about Mubarak's alleged fortune. Abbas did not try to influence the opinions of the posters on this thread one way or the other with regard to these documents. Moreover, he made sure to mention that there was no way for him to verify the authenticity of these documents, but made an open invitation to bankers to share their opinions about these documents' validity. So, in a way, Abbas involved the posters to this thread in the decision-making process (Haas 2007) by putting them in a position to assess the government's accountability.

Addressing the issue of political accountability in post-revolutionary Egypt, Esraa Abdel-Fattah, a prominent Egyptian political activist, told the authors in a personal interview in February 2011:

> The best thing that came out of the January 25 revolution in Egypt is that we are starting to have a system of checks and balances that will hold everyone in power accountable for their actions. This will serve as a way to make future governments more afraid to get involved in corruption because they know that they will be held accountable for it.
> (Abdel-Fattah February 12, 2011 interview)

In the abovementioned thread, Abbas, who is not a traditional journalist and does not work in mainstream media, shared some documents that allegedly showed the corruption of Mubarak and his family, but he did not propose a solution, a course of action, or a method of intervention to tackle the issue at hand. In other words, he focused on the function of documentation alone, but did not delve into the realm of mobilization or boosting civic engagement.

Habib El Adly is imprisoned in the same cell where he imprisoned us

This thread was taken from the blog of Abdel-Monem Mahmoud and was posted in Arabic on 18 February 2011, a week after President Mubarak was forced to step down. Mahmoud's post discussed the imprisonment of Habib El Adly, the Minister of Interior during the Mubarak regime, who was known for his corruption and abuse of power.

Mahmoud reflected back on the horrors committed by El Adly and other Mubarak men. He wrote:

> I learned from my sources at a late hour last night that the former Minister of Interior, Habib El Adly arrived in Tora prison. El Adly's imprisonment is for charges of alleged involvement in money laundry and corruption. Never in my life did I imagine that I would report on the imprisonment of an interior minister in the same cell where me and my colleagues were locked up in 2003 and 2006 for our political activism as members of the Muslim Brotherhood. I never imagined that I would report on the imprisonment of the man who was the reason for my late father's death, as a result of his sadness over my imprisonment. I am not rejoicing at the misfortune of El Adly, but I hold the ousted President Mubarak and his loyal man El Adly responsible for my father's death.

Mahmoud's message elicited four comments that were sympathetic to him:

Anonymous wrote: 'This is God's will Abdel Monem. Don't be surprised by the turn of events. The toppling of the Mubarak regime has brought shame and disgrace to many of his men for the outrageous injustices that they have committed.'

Fisherman wrote: 'I am from Alexandria and a good friend of your younger brother. I did witness most of the events that you have mentioned in your post, and all I can say is that human deeds never go unnoticed by God. The suppressed people always redeem their rights. We have really suffered enough from the acts of corrupt people like El Adly. May your father's soul rest in peace, along with the souls of all the Muslim martyrs. I hope to see Egypt the best country in the world.'

Hassan wrote: 'I hope God breaks all the other suppressors who have committed acts of aggression against the Egyptian people. You, Abdel Monem, are one of the people who did suffer a lot during the Mubarak regime, and I hope to see the revolution achieve all its noble goals so that people like you feel dignified and victorious.'

Tamer: 'What happened to El Adly is the result of the pleas of all the people who were suppressed by him. I wish the best for Egypt and its people.'

This thread, despite its brevity and the few posters who commented on it, is a good example of citizen journalism, where Mahmoud reported on information regarding the punishment of one of the key members of the Mubarak regime, whose name was associated with corruption and abuse of power. Through his post and the reactions it elicited, Mahmoud seemed 'to be committed to a form of deliberative democracy in which government officials are held accountable to the citizenry and in which citizenry actively participate in local community affairs' (Haas 2007: 3).

In his post, Mahmoud did not just report on the issue of El Adly's imprisonment, but he seemed personally involved in the issue at hand. It was a form of 'political advocacy' rather than 'political neutrality' on his end (Haas 2007: 76). Political involvement in the journalistic report is what distinguishes citizen journalism from traditional or mainstream journalism. In this context, Mahmoud told the authors in an interview in 2011:

> Blogging liberated me from the restrictions involved in the journalistic profession, such as avoiding mixing news and opinion. I don't believe you can have objectivity when covering injustices in the world. The true objectivity is to side with the people in their cause.
>
> <div align="right">(Mahmoud July 20 2011 interview)</div>

Third: Threads encouraging deliberation:

<u>The army and the people were never one hand</u>

This thread was taken from the blog of Maikel Nabil, and was posted in Arabic on 7 March 2011 – two months after the launch of the 25 January Revolution. In his post, Nabil expressed harsh criticism against the Egyptian army by posting many videos and pictures of soldiers torturing, hitting, or attacking civilians and showing graphic images of citizens injured as a result of their clashes with the military.

Nabil wrote: 'The revolution has succeeded in getting rid of the dictator Mubarak, but dictatorship still exists in other forms. Given my position as someone who participated in this revolution since day one, I had the opportunity to live the whole experience with all its events. In the following report, I will provide evidence showing that the military has never taken the people's side in this revolution, and that it has been acting all along to serve its own interests, not the people's interests. We can divide the Egyptian revolution, according to the military's role, into three stages:

- Stage one: Before the military control over the situation on January 29, 2011. During this stage, hundreds of thousands of protestors took to the streets, and they were attacked fiercely by the police forces. During that time, Lieutenant General Samy Anan, the Chief of Staff for the Egyptian military, informed the U.S. administration that the Egyptian military was supportive of Mubarak and will not let him down. According to a news item posted on the American military news site, *Start 4*, on January 25, 2011: "It was not a coincidence that the Egyptian military Chief of Staff was in Washington, D.C. to assure the United States of the Egyptian military's backing of Mubarak." On January 28, 2011, massive numbers of protestors started heading toward Tahrir Square after the Friday prayers, and they were resisted by the police forces, which used tear gas bombs, rubber bullets and live ammunition. On that day, the battle between the police and the protestors lasted for 10 hours until the police ran out of ammunition. At that point, the protestors saw several cars that belonged to the military making their way through the crowds and trying to reach the police forces. After these military cars left, the police resumed shooting at the protestors. That's when the protestors realized that the military was helping the police, and that it was not on their side. As a result, the protestors burned two military cars and took over four tanks.

- Stage two: Between January 29 and February 11, 2011, the day Mubarak stepped down. During that stage, the military realized that it could not face the increasing number of protestors in a direct confrontation, so it changed its tactics by trying to suffocate the protestors through surrounding them and preventing them from reaching target places, such as the Ministry of Interior and the parliament. During that stage, the military adopted a form of passive neutrality. While it announced on several occasions that it would protect the protestors, it did not prevent a group of thugs, supportive of Mubarak, from attacking the protestors by using camels and horses on February 2 and 3 at Tahrir Square. This incident resulted in 10 deaths and more than 1,500 injuries from among the protestors.
- Stage three: From February 12, 2011 until present. During that stage, the Egyptian military tried to convince the people that it was officially part of the revolution, but in reality it did everything possible to make the revolution fail by taking the following steps: (1) Trying to co-opt and control the media through appointing one of its members as the chief supervisor of the Egyptian Radio and Television Union; (2) using force to end the protests at Tahrir Square and preventing reporters from filming or taking photos at the square; (3) continuing the imprisonment and torture of the political activists and protestors who participated in the revolution.'

Nabil's post elicited strong and varied responses from his followers. For example:

Anonymous 1 wrote: 'We all know that the military has some bad elements, but it doesn't make any sense for you to have such an inflammatory post now while the country is going through these highly sensitive circumstances.'

Anonymous 2 wrote: 'The military has not been trained in tackling political issues or dealing with the protestors. This has made the military pressure Mubarak to resign, with the promise that it will not haunt him or his family. I highly advise you against sharing some of the details that you showcased, since this is not the right time to do so.'

Safwat wrote: 'I personally testify to the nobility of the Egyptian military, which refused to listen to Mubarak's orders of surrounding the protestors. I was at Tahrir Square, and I heard a military officer tell the protestors to sleep underneath the military tanks, since the military received orders to besiege the protestors and they will not execute these orders.'

Anonymous 3 wrote: 'The military is the last resort for the security of this country, and that is why I totally refuse your words and I will not allow you to destroy the military which is our last bastion in this country.'

Hussein wrote: 'Maikel: You hardly provide any evidence for what you mention. The photos that you included could have been fabricated or used in any other context. If people lose confidence in the army, it will be a crisis. Who will secure this country against its enemies?'

Reem wrote: 'Maikel: Your words are true; yet some people are still in denial when it comes to the military's abuses against the protestors. People forgot that the military tortured political activists and conducted virginity tests on some female protestors at Tahrir Square. What do you expect from a military institution that was part of the highly corrupted Mubarak regime for 30 years?'

Anonymous 4 wrote: 'The military leaders are not angels. They have committed some abuses, suppressed the political activists, and proceeded with unjustifiable military trials against civilians.'

Anonymous 5 wrote: 'I was one of the protestors at Tahrir Square, and I even got shot. I would like to clarify several points: The military has never provided any ammunition to the police forces during the revolution. I am totally opposed to doing away with the Emergency Law now, given that the country is still unstable and there are many thugs that are threatening internal security.'

The abovementioned thread was the reason for Nabil's arrest in Cairo on 28 March 2011, a few days after he posted this article. He faced trial before a military court and was sentenced to three years in prison for 'insulting the military'. During his imprisonment, Nabil went on a hunger strike, and he was pardoned by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) on 23 January 2012.

In a personal interview with the authors in 2010, Nabil said:

My blog has been the only venue in Egypt that opposes the Egyptian military and that is critical of it. All of the articles that were published about the military in the Egyptian media were released and approved by the Egyptian military intelligence. That is why my blog is a breakthrough that has broken the 'military taboo' in Egypt.

(Nabil June 2, 2010 interview)

In another interview with Nabil from inside his prison cell in Cairo in June 2011, he told the authors:

Through my blog, I uncovered several violations conducted by the military during and after the revolution, such as supporting political corruption, protecting the ousted President Mubarak, and delaying the trial of several members of the Mubarak regime, thus giving them the chance to flee the country. After the revolution, many people started to realize that blogs about military corruption were right on the mark. This encouraged other bloggers to criticize the military.

(Nabil June 2011 interview)

The abovementioned thread offers a good example of both active civic engagement and citizen journalism. Most importantly, however, it provided a vibrant platform for dialogue and deliberation, since Nabil posted several photos that he shot at Tahrir Square during the Egyptian revolution, and he tried to engage his blog's followers in a discussion about a highly sensitive issue, namely the alleged violations committed during and after the revolution and the extent of the military's involvement in them. It might have been the sensitivity of this issue that led most participants in this thread to use 'anonymous' in their posts, instead of real, or even fake, names. The posters' feedback was highly emotional, either in their defence of, or attack on, the military.

While some posts were geared towards problem-solving and called for action by asking the military to hand over power to a civilian council, there were no guarantees that these suggestions were going to be implemented. In this context, Haas (2007: 77) argued that

While journalists can promote political change by sponsoring and reporting back on citizen deliberations, encouraging citizens to continue their deliberations and act upon their outcomes within civic and political organizations […] and applying pressure on relevant government officials, they cannot on their own ensure […] that given citizen solutions are enacted, or that government officials implement given policy recommendations in practice.

DISCUSSION

The bloggers whose threads we analysed in this study tried to 'build social capital by bringing citizens together to cooperate as peers for their common advancement' (Diamond 1999: 249).

Those bloggers were active during a time of political transition in Egypt, which is the time frame that separates one regime from another. During that time, the role of political institutions is expected to grow.

From this moment onward, and especially following the announcement of competitive elections, the initiative in the democratization shifts back from civil society into a reconstituted political society […] [It is during that transitional time that] the institutions of civil society have a crucial role to play in the consolidation of democracy. At the deepest levels of political culture, civic institutions include the political norms and values that underpin the rules of democratic competition.

(Bratton 1994: 10–11)

When a society is going through a drastic political transition, people should contribute to the public sphere by being part of the process of monitoring the government's abuses in a way that forces it to be held accountable for its actions. Many of the threads analysed in this study were an exemplification of 'accountable governance', which refers to 'power relations between the state and its citizens' (Fox 2000: 1). More specifically, they were an example of 'vertical accountability', through which civil society is organized to

drive the creation of certain institutional checks and balances […] [in a way] that limits the use and sanctions the abuse of political power. Public exposure [of government abuses] is necessary but not sufficient to limit or sanction the abuse of power […] Political accountability can be promoted through both state and non-state institutions.

(Fox 2000: 1–2)

Some of the bloggers whose threads we analysed did, although in an indirect way,

play a role in checking, monitoring and restraining the exercise of power by the state and holding it accountable. This function can reduce political corruption, which is pervasive in emerging democracies [like post-revolutionary Egypt]. It can force the government to be more accountable, transparent, and responsive to the public, which strengthens its legitimacy.

(Bunbongkarn 2004: 141)

According to Haas (2007), citizen journalists

> should hold citizens themselves accountable for the outcomes of their deliberations. Thus, if the interventions endorsed by citizens fail to advance the overarching goal of reducing […] [or ending corruption], journalists should see it as their right – indeed their responsibility – to publicly say so, including by advocating their own alternative interventions and lobbying relevant government officials to enact those interventions in practice.
>
> (Haas 2007: 45)

The high level of polarization and galvanization which was exhibited in some of the analysed threads reminds us of some of the limitations of new media in fostering genuine political deliberation through the virtual public sphere that would affect the offline public sphere. As Howard (2004) indicates:

> Although many pundits have lauded new media technologies for their potential roles in democratic deliberation, there is quite a difference between imagining how a technology might play such a role, building such applications, and getting the public to use them as desired.
>
> (Howard 2004: 6)

This, according to Howard (2004: 6), signals 'the complexities of the transition between technological dreams and political applications […] [and the difference] between being technologically overdetermined and being sociologically overdetermined'.

Rheingold (2004: 265) reminds us that 'We should not close the books on the debate about the mental or social health of virtual communities and their relationship to the non-virtual world. And neither should we stop at a shallow level of analysis'. He believes that this is especially important because 'In coming years […] the far more important questions will have to do with the nature of collective action in social cyberspaces' (Rheingold 2004: 266).

Therefore, this compels us to consider both the strengths and weaknesses – as well as the potentials and limitations – of digital media platforms – such as political blogs – in promoting civic engagement, boosting democratization and aiding political change. There is no question that political bloggers have played a critical role in enriching, revitalizing and mobilizing the Egyptian civil society, particularly in the prelude to the Egyptian revolution. In this context, Ahmed Badawy, an Egyptian blogger and one of the cyberactivists who were camping out in Tahrir Square in Cairo during the Egyptian Revolution, talked to the authors in the immediate aftermath of the revolution about how blogs and other forms of social media were the impetus or the catalyst to the revolution. According to Badawy:

> Bloggers played a big role in disseminating information about the intention to launch the revolution. Most of the work of those bloggers and of online activists, in general, has been on the Internet in the prelude to the revolution. Once the revolution started on Jan. 25, all bloggers and online activists started to shift their efforts from their computer screens to the streets. When you are blogging, you don't see all the immediate reactions to what you post, but when you talk to people face-to-face on the streets, you get immediate and direct feedback, which is amazing.
>
> (Badawy February 12 2011 interview)

Echoing the same thought, Israa Abdel-Fattah, the political activist who was mentioned earlier, told the authors in a personal interview in 2011:

> Since 2008, new media have been playing an important role as a tool that young Egyptians and online activists used for preparing, coordinating, organizing and paving the way for their activities on the street. Recently, young activists started printing some of their online posts in the form of brochures and pamphlets that have been distributed among average people on the streets. We have recently printed more than 50,000 pamphlets for people before the revolution. That way, we made sure that our messages reach everybody, even the ones who do not have access to the Internet. This was a way of connecting the virtual world and the real world.
>
> (Abdel-Fattah February 12 2011 interview)

Still, we need to practise caution in our assessment of the blogs' role in the Egyptian political scene. For example, we have to be aware of 'the need to be cautious about assuming that simply adding new media to old electoral politics will entice new and younger voters to greater participation' (Xenos and Foot 2008: 65). We also have to bear in mind that

> understanding the generation gap in online politics as a clash between differing notions of interactivity clearly identifies the ways in which these differences must be negotiated, if the true potential of the Internet as a medium capable of facilitating significant changes in political participation among […] youth is to be realized.
>
> (Xenos and Foot 2008: 65)

In weighing the pros and cons of these new media technologies and their potential impact on reshaping the process of communication and democratization in the age of cyberspace, we believe that there is enough reason to be

> hopeful that informed and committed people can influence the shape of tomorrow's cybersociety in a positive manner, although it has become increasingly clear that democratic outcomes will not emerge automatically. A humane and sustainable cybersociety will only come about if it is deliberately understood, discussed, and planned now – by a larger proportion of the population and not just the big business, media, or policy elites.
>
> (Rheingold 2004: 273)

We agree with Rheingold (2004: 273) that in order for these positive outcomes to be reached, 'Intelligent and democratic leadership is desperately needed at this historical moment'. Indeed, we can argue that young political activists in Egypt, including bloggers, played a vital role in securing this needed leadership, through engaging in myriad activities to boost civic participation and engagement, both online and offline.

The threads which were analysed in this study offered clear

> examples and possibilities of a growing movement of youth who inform and organize themselves online, and then proceed to take action in their communities […] [as well as] a growing movement of interactive online

civic engagement sites based around social tools […] aimed at facilitating youth engagement by providing access to peers, information and tools to mobilize and organize.

(Raynes-Goldie and Walker 2008: 186)

In this context, we agree with Raynes-Goldie and Walker (2008) that

The most burning research question revolves around the development of an evaluation methodology that assesses the efficacy of online civic engagement sites, specifically the connection between online and offline preparation and action […] [which requires] more detailed investigations into the use and potential improvements to online civic engagement sites for networking with peers, finding information, and organizing.

(Raynes-Goldie and Walker 2008: 186)

The significance of this process lies in the fact that

young people who are interested in civic, community, or activist issues are looking to the Internet for information about causes important to them, connections to like-minded peers and organizations, and for ways to organize and mobilize. When these needs are met, youth report […] that they are able to make positive change in their lives and in their communities, demonstrating that the action or result of online engagement is occurring offline.

(Raynes-Goldie and Walker 2008: 170)

This is certainly applicable in the context of the Egyptian Revolution which witnessed the translation of online youth activism and mobilization into effective civic engagement and action offline.

CONCLUSION

The differences between the blogs analysed in this study did not just encompass the aspect of cyberactivism that each of them chose to focus on, whether it was mobilization, documentation or deliberation; the centrality of the blogger's role; or the role played by the posters and their degree of interactivity on each blog. Rather, they also included the uniqueness and individuality of the analysed blogs in terms of the diverse ideological positions adopted by the bloggers (and the posters) vis-à-vis various political issues.

These new forms of online communication are deeply embedded in the daily lives of the Egyptian political bloggers and the posters on their blogs. Moreover, these forms of virtual public sphere have restructured the participants' identities and their sense of community, both online and offline. Most importantly, there is a clear indication that these forms of communication played a crucial role in destabilizing the older hierarchies of power in society, as evidenced in their contribution to shaking the Mubarak regime and paving the way for sociopolitical reform.

A critical question that demands an answer is: will the Egyptian bloggers be able to play as an effective a role in building civil society in the 'New Egypt' as they did in toppling a corrupt regime? We anticipate that the Egyptian bloggers will play a key role in effectively and positively contributing to rebuilding

the Egyptian civil society. However, one must always remember that blogs could never, on their own, enhance civic engagement without a vibrant civil society to complement their role in the offline world. This is especially true since blogs are 'an ideal tool for connecting loose networks of association, bringing together otherwise disparate groups and individuals to support a common cause' (Wilkinson 2011: 7).

All four bloggers included in this study were well aware of the role of political blogs in complementing offline civic engagement, since they all started out as political activists on the ground before turning to online activism. It is our hope that the current and future generations of Egyptian bloggers will draw upon sufficient resources in the offline public sphere and facilitate their transfer to the domain of civic engagement, both online and offline, in an effort to supplement the ongoing challenges of sociopolitical reform in Egypt.

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