Virtual community: Formation and mobilization of a collective, democratic identity in Egypt

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Summary

Introduction

Egypt's democratic revolution

Beginning on 25 January 2011, for eighteen consecutive days, Egyptians from across the social, political and religious spectrum descended on Cairo's Tahrir Square in a culmination of collective dissent and proactive empowerment. With the whole world watching, these protesters expressed a collective will no longer tolerant of authoritarianism and paternalism. United in resistance to the status quo, they demanded freedom, civil liberties and the right to self-determination. Arguably two of the greatest outcomes of the Egyptian revolution are the departure of President Hosni Mubarak and the region-wide empowerment of the Egyptian public. Aided by independent media including al-Jazeera and new forms of Internet communication, most notably Facebook, Twitter and the widespread use of blogs, communicative resistance on virtual social networks translated into a physical presence on the streets.

The rise of information communication technology and in particular, virtual social networks has had an enormous impact on how political membership and participation are conceived of and mobilized toward political goals. For the current youth generation, the Internet is a powerful medium for political dialogue. It is an outlet of expression, of agency and self-determination. It fosters deliberation and reflexivity. This is clearly evident among Egyptian youth active in the political blogosphere whose online resistance was eventually taken to the streets of Cairo in a demonstration that resulted in the removal of Hosni Mubarak's thirty year reign of power. While popular discussions about this revolution regard it as a spontaneous online

movement that was organized in a short amount of time, this is too simplistic a view. In fact, there has been a coherent resistance movement in Egypt since 2004 in which opposition to Mubarak and support for real democratic reform has since been gradually fostered, legitimized and influential through the changing media landscape in Egypt. The rumblings of popular revolt were not difficult to hear, fueled by political disillusionment, endemic police brutality, economic stagnation, and mass unemployment and underemployment.

From John Stuart Mill to Jürgen Habermas, political theorists have emphasized the importance of public dialogue between diverse perspectives among citizens as a principal component underlying democratic institutions. Essential to democracy is public deliberation and the construction of an active, pluralistic civil society, which cannot be achieved without free media and expression. Thus, a key question surrounding the Egyptian revolution is whether a space for open democratic discourse was enabled by networked communication despite a repressive, elite-controlled public sphere in the traditional sense. The goal of this study is to: (1) examine the virtual community in Egypt that coalesced online in Web logs (i.e. blogs) and; (2) determine its role in propelling the formation of a collective, democratic identity within Egyptian society. Specifically, I will examine the role of influential blogs in political mobilization, public discourse and political outcomes prior to and during the Egyptian revolution of 2011.

Seeds of a revolution

New social movements and identities in the network society

Information-communication technology (ICT) allows individuals to communicate with an amorphous audience in a conversation that is unprecedented in human history. Prior to ICT, a

limited number of professional and commercial producers controlled the content of information and experience of that information by individuals who were located at the passive-receiving end of the cultural conversation. Today, people can easily and quickly produce content and share it with an audience limited only by the demand of the content. Rather than relying on a limited set of institutions to authorize the creation and distribution of knowledge, individuals—connected by networks—are actively participating in the creation, distribution and consumption of information and ideas in what is known as computer-mediated communication (CMC). The defining elements of CMC—speed, reach, anonymity, and interactivity—blurs the line between public and private (Gurak and Antonijevic, 2008). Similarly, virtual spaces do not neatly conform to conventional distinctions of the public and the private. This ambiguity is clearly represented in blogs.

Short for Weblog, a blog is an online journal or diary of short, dated entries ("posts") in reverse-chronological order maintained and published on the Internet by an individual or group. Bloggers ("those who blog") have considerable freedom of selection and presentation, thus the content and rhetorical style of a particular blog tends to be personally meaningful to the individual. Miller and Shepherd (2004) further the psychological features of blogging explaining, "What bloggers find most compelling about blogs is the ability to combine the immediately real and the genuinely personal." Blogs are not a one-sided conversation or outlet. They are intended to be read and very often, are open for commentary by readers. Bloggers tend to frequent blogs that share similar interests and thereby develop mutual relationships with other bloggers (Miller and Shepherd, 2004). These personal and interpersonal aspects lead some to consider blogs a genre that gives both an opening to the reflexive self and of the self in relation to others (Gurak and Antonijevic, 2008). In this way, blogs speak directly to what Anthony Giddens' (1991)

termed the "project of the self" in which, "A person's identity is not to be found in behaviour, nor - important though this is - in the reactions of others, but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going" (p. 54). Narratives are critical to the construction of both individual and collective identities and have the power to transform one's conception of the self and the collective in the context of their social enviornment.

Manuel Castells (1997) argues that the rise of the network society transforms the processes of construction of collective identity formation by constructing alternative values and identities that challenge the dominant institutions in society. Castells (1997) explains:

> "This is because the network society is based on the systemic disjunction between the local and the global for most individuals and social groups. … subjects if and when constructed, are not built any longer on the basis of civil societies, that are in the process of disintegration, but as prolongation of communal resistance" (p.11).

For the first time in history, geographically dispersed people who may never meet each other in person can form a virtual community—a group of individuals who share a collective space and dialogue—visualizing together how the space is used and built upon and sharing a dialogue limited only by their constructive abilities. Virtual communities enable individuals to construct for themselves their own identity as opposed to those ascribed by social class and community. Globalizing and modernizing forces open this possibility to conceive at oneself as someone other than a product of our immediate environment and social network. In this way, individual and collective identities are fluid and transitory.

Drawing from theories of narrative and symbolic politics, successful social movements are often mobilized when changes in the construction of roles, values and collective identity occur within a society (Brysk, 1995). Collective action, measured in mobilization, protest, and

rebellion, can be seen as "a search for identity by participants that communicates and transforms new roles and values to observers" (Brysk, 1995, p. 574). Similarly, new social movements can be conceptualized as "networks of informal relationships between a multiplicity of individuals and organizations, who share a distinctive collective identity, and mobilize resources on conflictual issues" (Diani, 2001, p. 117). Successful social movements rewrite political consciousness and transform social norms and roles between the state and society. Revolutions are marked by a break down in the social contract between rulers and the masses, which may be facilitated through the adoption of a new collective narrative. When the relationship between the two is no longer seen as legitimate, the collective will eventually demand change.

There is widespread consensus that the Internet has greatly expanded access to resources and organizational opportunities for social movements by facilitating cost-effective mobilization, a counter-medium to traditional media outlets and secrecy to bypass the state (Webster, 2001). Collective solidarity may be formed in "passive networks," defined as. "instantaneous communications between atomized individuals, which are established by tacit recognition of their commonalities directly in public spaces or indirectly through mass media" (Bayet, 2010, p. 22). These spaces facilitate the possibility of mutual recognition and solidarity formation. ICT is a powerful medium for individuals to connect and interact in the virtual world (Bayet, 2010). In Egypt, where freedom of expression is often repressed—and many times, violently so—communication over virtual networks may be one of the only means by which competing views of the world and what is possible or not possible is articulated, transmitted, contested, and mediated. In this way, communicative power is the crux of networked social action.

Bayet (2010) argues that ordinary members of different religious communities in Egypt increasingly engage in "everyday cosmopolitanism"— the idea and practice of transcending narrowly defined group boundaries and coexisting, interacting and associating with one another "at the level of the everyday" (p. 187). In essence, the distinctions made between the self and "the other" are not as clearly defined as some suggest and that in actuality, are far more complex in the daily interactions among individuals in the modern Arab city. However, Bayet (2010) also points to the frustration caused by the disjuncture between everyday cosmopolitanism and the socioeconomic realities of many Egyptian youths:

> "Many of them wish to possess, but cannot afford, the usual consumer commodities or travel to the places about which they often have great knowledge. Consequently, they are often pushed into the ranks of the poor, marginalized in life-chances and consumption realms, while struggling hard to maintain a lifestyle and taste that match their education and status" (p. 227).

Egypt's disillusioned youth

There have been significant gains in levels of educational attainment for Egyptian youth in recent years. According to the 2010 Egypt Human Development Report (EHDR) published by the United Nations (UN), Egyptians born in 1985 have on average over ten years of education, compared to only four years of education for those born in 1950. The EHDR (2010) also notes a considerable narrowing of the gender gap in Egypt. However, these gains have not translated into rising occupational opportunities for young Egyptians.

> "Despite these significant achievements in educational attainment, there is growing concern among young people and their families that the returns they get for their education in the labor market are declining rapidly. The falling returns to education take

many forms, including lower monetary returns in the form of earnings, lower likelihood of obtaining formal employment for a given level of education, and generally lower job quality" (EHDR, 2010, p. 157).

The EHDR attributes this to the failure of the Egyptian the educational system, which produces large number of degrees with limited value in the private sector labor market. Research into this paradox by the Population Council showed that job quality in the Egyptian economy as a whole remained fairly constant over time, failing to keep up with the increasing levels of education of the workforce (EHDR, 2010).

According to UN statistical data, the unemployment rate for youth 15-24 in Egypt in 2007 was 24.5%, compared to the world average of 11.9% in 2007 (EHDR, 2010). A broad unemployment rate of 22.9% in 2009 suggests that 6.2% of the youth labor force was made up of discouraged workers who quit searching for work.[1] This was an increase from less than 3% discouraged unemployment in both 1998 and 2006 (EHDR, 2010, p.149). Unemployment and underemployment have remained high, with current unemloyment estimates by the IMF at 25% for young Egyptians.

Additionally in 2009, the UN conducted interviews with over 400 university students and university-educated youth in order to probe the high level of indifference to civic affairs and gauge perceptions and attitudes to political participation held by most young Egyptians. Researchers concluded that the perceived weakness of the state's developmental role, the limitations of state and party institutions with regard to education and real political representation were central sentiments that determined the state to be seen as illegitimate and lacking credibility (EHDR, 2010, p.111).

Disillusioned by the formal political arena, young Egyptians are carving out their own (virtual) spaces in which alternative voices can be expressed and heard. Bloggers increasingly challenged the narrative provided by Egypt's state-run media. Shannon Arvizu (2009) conducted a study on youth magazine publications in Cairo and concluded, "By continuously adapting new ways to communicate to avoid the suspicions of elites, while simultaneously creating more venues, such as the introduction of Arabic-language magazines, to increase their influence and include other perspectives, youth publics seek to democratize the current media structure by creating their own forums for expression" (p. 404). In a constricted media sphere, young, modern and educated Egyptians are bypassing the state and creating reflective and critical realms of discourse that could conceivably become a space of confrontation.

Tracing the origins of a virtual political community

In a state that has often sought to erase or constrain alternate viewpoints, blogs have been essential narratives in redefining the conceptions and boundaries of an Egyptian community. As Al Malky suggested in 2007, "blogging could provide the basis for ground-up rethinking of community which allows for much greater acceptance of pluralism" (p. 7). Blogging has also been instrumental at rewriting the political narrative in Egypt by contesting the dominant frame given by state-owned and controlled media. Khan (2011) claims that prior to widespread use of satellite television, mobile and Internet technology, "it was much easier for Mubarak's regime to project a make-believe image because Egyptians were willing to believe their country was respected on the world stage" (p.137).

Blogs have transformed from "hidden transcripts" (Scott, 1990) into powerful weapons of resistance. Bloggers such as Hossam e-Hamalawy, Demagh Mak and Wael Abbas have been

instrumental in the fight against police torture by publicizing videos and photographs of police officers beating and even torturing suspects on their blogs. These posts attracted thousands of readers, increasing the visibility of both police crime and the blogs themselves. Writing in 2006, Sameer Padania explains one prominent incident of police brutality published on Wael Abbas' blog and argues, "sustained pressure from the bloggers, and the publication of an investigative piece into the police torture video in the independent Egyptian weekly newspaper, El-Fagr, have forced the story into the mainstream." Over time, bloggers and other media outlets built mutual relationships: traditional opposition media forms relied on bloggers for their stories while bloggers relied on traditional media for exposure.

As oppositional media intensified and became visible to increasing number of citizens, Egyptian authorities reacted by arresting bloggers and tightening media freedom. Between 2006 and 2009, dozens of bloggers were detained and incarcerated under provisions outlined in Egypt's emergency law—a measure in place for thirty years. Abdel Karim Suleiman (Kareem Amer) was sentenced in 2006 to four years in prison for "insulting Islam" and one year for "insulting the president." He was the first Egyptian blogger ever to be convicted for his online writings (Sharp, 2009, p.23). Similarly, blogger and activist Mohamad al-Sharqawi was tortured and raped with a broom by security officers in 2006 (Al Malaky, 2007).

Yet, efforts by the state to reign in Egypt's virtual public sphere and suppress dissent, could not contain the floodgates that bloggers had unleashed. In 2006, blogger Malek Mostafa posted an eyewitness account the of the sexual harassment of a group of women in Cairo during the Islamic post-Ramadan feast holiday Eid in which police stood by and watched, while another blogger, Wael Abbas backed up the account with photographs posted on his blog. Al Malaky (2007) cites a total of 60,000 people read the post and for a week, Malek's blog was getting some

8,000 visitors a day. Shortly stories such as these went viral, popular bloggers would receive dozens of photographs and mobile phone videos of state violence and abuse taken in police stations or during demonstrations (Al Malaky, 2007). By defiantly exposing state crimes in public, increasing numbers of citizens broke their silence and began to join voices in unified support of human dignity.

Kifaya

The emergence of political blogging in Egypt around 2004 is closely linked with the rise of the Egyptian Movement for Change, a decentralized grassroots opposition coalition, commonly referred to by its slogan, Kifaya, meaning "enough" in Arabic (Al Malky, 2007; Isherwood, 2008). Kifaya's political platform aimed to augment a new postnationalist, secular, and democratic politics in Egypt, embracing those from diverse ideological orientations and gender, religious and social groups (El Amrani, 2010). "The anti-Mubarak Kifaya movement used humor most poignantly to protest the indignity of an entire country becoming a hand-me-down for the Mubarak family, as the leader presses on with plans to anoint his son Gamal as his heir" (El Amrani, 2010).

Moreover, the Kifaya movement was avant-garde in its use of the Internet and mobile technology as its main channels of communication and mobilization, employing bloggers to spread the movement's ideas of political reform and contribute to its efforts of documenting human rights abuses by posting videos and photographs (Carnegie, 2011). Blogs were used to challenge the official version of events by exposing corruption and abuses by Egyptian authorities and publicizing Kifaya demonstrations often overlooked by mainstream publications, and to monitor imprisoned activists' lives in jail, fostering a shared commonality of resistance

among activist bloggers (Al Malky, 2007). Although Kifaya's achievements were limited, its novel tactics and bold demands for reform set a new, potent precedent within Egyptian politics. By directly challenging Mubarak's regime, Kifaya "ended the taboo surrounding saying 'no' to symbols of power" and "planted the seeds of protest in Egyptian society that without doubt inspired the establishment of smaller political initiatives" (Carnegie, 2011).

Whereas Kifaya gradually lost power and prominence in the political arena, activist bloggers continued to report on human rights abuses, police brutality, media censorship and democratic reform, proving that the political culture of reform in Egypt continued to grow and thrive in an increasingly connected Egyptian society.

The Shayfenkom Movement

The literal translation of shayfenkom in Arabic is "we can see you.'"Embodying this mantra, the Shayfenkom Movement was grassroots political movement in Egypt during the 2005 elections that pledged to monitor the election processes by sending representatives to election committees and booths, and observe and document what is happening (EHDR, 2010). The movement used the Internet for coordination and organization of its activities by encouraging citizens to become proactive and to report election violations by citizens to their website directly or through cell phones (EHDR, 2010).

The April 6 Youth Movement

The April 6 Youth Movement is an Egyptian Facebook group started by Ahmed Maher and Israa Abdel Fatah in Spring 2008 to support a strike by workers on April 6, 2008 in the town

of El-Mahalla El-Kubra (EHDR, 2010). On the group's Facebook page, they define themselves as:

> We are a group of Egyptian Youth from different backgrounds, age and trends gathered for a whole year since the renewal of hope in 6 April 2008 in the probability of mass action in Egypt which allowed all kind of youth from different backgrounds, society classes all over Egypt to emerge from the crisis and reach for the democratic future that overcomes the case of occlusion of political and economic prospects that the society is suffering from these days. Most of us did not come from a political background, nor participated in political or public events before 6 April 2008 but we were able to control and determine our direction through a whole year of practice.

On April 6, 2009, a year after their first successful protest, word spread around through Facebook and various blogs to organize a national 'Anger Day'. Although there were an estimated 75,000 young Egyptians signed up in support of this protest, prior to the event taking place, heavy police presence as well as early arrests of April 6 members resulted in a relatively quiet protest (EDHR, 2010). The EHDR (2010) poignantly notes,

> An important lesson can be drawn from the 6th of April Youth Movement. Although the movement was repressed by government, it caught the attention of the local and international media and drew attention to how ICT can be used, especially by youth, in organizing political opposition movements and exposing autocratic governments' 'unsatisfactory' performance (p.129).

In 2009, Ahmed Maher met with Srdja Popovic, the leader of the Serbian student movement, Optor that helped overthrow former dictator Slobodan Milosovic in 1997. Maher gained insight into planning a successful, nonviolent revolution and advice on how to organize and mobilize people to the street, avoid violence, train others to demonstrate peacefully, and how to put demands forward in a peaceful way (El Amrani, 2011). In addition, Maher brought back

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video instructions from Popovic to share with other leaders in the April 6 Movement (Rosenberg, 2011).

We all are Khaled Said

Wael Ghonim, a Google executive living in Egypt, anonymously created and administered a Facebook page and webiste called "We are all Khaled Said". The page was named after Khaled Said, a businessman and blogger who was brutally beaten to death in police custody in 2010 (http://www.elshaheeed.co.uk/). Khaled became a rallying point and symbol of solidarity among human rights activists for the campaign against police brutality and played a crucial role in organizing the protest on 25 January 2011. Ghonim started the page in early June 2010; by mid-month, the page had 130,000 members, and as of Jan. 22, 2011, the number reached 380,000 members (Rosenberg, 2011).

These political opposition movements were instrumental in the creation of a collective, democratic identity in Egypt and the culmination of dissent witnessed in January 2011. Over time, virtual communities kindled opposition movements that –through the use of virtual and physical networks— connected Egyptians from across the socioeconomic spectrum in a collective resistance against the state regime.

Method

Operationalization

For the purpose of this study, I adopt a constructivist perspective of identity. Drawing from Ted Hopf's (2009) conceptualization, I view the construction of a democratic, collective

identity in Egypt as a process of social interaction embedded in the social structures and interactions of everyday life. Discourse in virtual spaces is the primary unit of analysis in this study since it is a basic form of social interaction. Abdelal, Herrera, Johnston and McDermott (2009) define a collective identity as a social category that varies along two dimensions: (1) content, which refers to the meaning of a collective identity and; (2) contestation, which refers to the degree of agreement within a group over the content and describes the fluidity and contextual nature of identities. The content of social identities may take the form of four, nonmutually exclusive types:

1. *Constitutive norms r*efer to the formal and informal rules that define group membership.

2. *Social purposes* refer to the goals that are shared by members of a group.

3. *Relational comparisons* refer to defining an identity group by what it is not – that is, the way it views other identity groups, especially where those views about the other are a defining part of the identity.

4. *Cognitive models* refer to the worldviews or understandings of political and material conditions and interests that are shaped by a particular identity (Abdelal et al., 2009, p. 14).

It is not enough to say that Egyptian bloggers have formed a collective identity. I am interested in the formation of a collective, *democratic* identity. A democratic identity will be measured in both its structure and content. Therefore, the networked public sphere itself can be viewed as a democratic structure as long as it supports interaction among diverse communities of interest. Research performed by Etling et al. (2010) indicates that the Egyptian blogosphere does

indeed facilitate some degree of cooperation between secular and Islamist reformers in Egypt and additionally, promotes discussion and reform within the Muslim Brotherhood.

My research questions are as follows:

RQ1: Have virtual communities in the Egyptian blogosphere facilitated the communicative construction of a collective, democratic identity in Egypt?

RQ2: Is resistance discourse a nascent formation of a new collective identity / understanding and progression?

RQ3: Did Egyptian blogs help write a new political consciousness among Egyptian society?

Hypotheses

Drawing from this framework in an approach to analyze the collective, democratic identity in Egypt, I hypothesize the following:

H1: Since deliberation assumes mediation between individual difference, a collective, democratic identity will be formed by a common link to resisting the status quo despite a plurality of ideological, religious and political affiliations. A collective identity will connect diverse individuals by a common goal of political change. This will be measured by the dialogue of resistance in virtual, public spaces as well as blog links that connect a virtual community of resistance across political affiliation.

H2: Repetition of democratic messages and rejection of status quo messages through social networks builds unity and solidarity that empower political agency. Solidarity indicates the strength of collective identification.

Description of study and coding scheme

A qualitative approach of several key individuals, organizations and networks that actively contributed to a communicative construction of a collective democratic identity among Egyptian citizens was used in this exploratory study. Since this is an exploratory pilot study, I have attempted to study my hypotheses in various ways. As I researched the area, I came across the names of certain prominent Egyptian bloggers and visited their sites and the sites of other Egyptian bloggers that they linked on their blogs. Likewise, I used an 'influence map' of the best-connected and most-read Egyptians on Twitter during the revolution and through their Twitter account pages, was usually able to trace back to their personal blog. I collected descriptive information on twenty-eight blogs (based on availability) including:

- the bloggers name
- role of the blogger
- views toward the state/Mubarak regime
- blogs they linked on their site

- self-description;
- the nature of their blog posts
- political afilliation

All blogs sampled discussed Egyptian politics and/or news stories at least to a certain degree.

I used the "about me" or "about this blog" section to record the description. If these were unavailable or nondescript, I viewed their most recent posts and visited their first blog post recorded on the site and recorded any descriptive information found. This was done since many

bloggers, in their first post, will introduce him or herself to the virtual world, usually offering some direction as to the nature of the blog. Prior to the recording this data, I developed a coding scheme as follows:

The nature of the blog was used to determine the content dimension of collective identity:

- *1. Constitutive norms:*
    - **Self-description**: Measured by word frequency.
    - The **number of blogs linked** on their site was used to measure: (1) strength of community within the Egyptian blogosphere; (2) the occurrence of cross-cutting ideologies within the Egyptian blogosphere.

Bloggers frequently link influential sources and friends in one's blog roll with the belief that frequent linking to other bloggers will increase one's visibility in the network (Etling, Kelly, Faris & Palfrey, 2009). As Etling et al. (2009) suggest, "The result of this online linking behavior is a discourse network, tractable to empirical research as a massive corpus of text and hyperlinks created by millions of people and stored on thousands of the world's Internet servers" (p. 14).

- *2. Social purpose*:
    - **Role of the blogger**: (1) providing information; (2) providing assistance/support; (3) providing personal expression; (4) engaging in political advocacy.
        - Engaging in political advocacy was recorded as: (1) exclusively; (2) most of the time; (3) some of the time.
        - Frequent themes and/or issues were also recorded.
- *3. Relational comparison*

○ **Strength of their resistance**: Views towards the state were categorized in terms of (1) support (2) approve (3) critical (4) very critical.

○ Identification with Egyptian political organizations was also recorded.

Results

Initial findings

Table 1

Roles & Views Toward the State	Blog count
providing information*	25
providing assistance*	6
providing personal expression*	25
engaging in political advocacy exclusively	12
engaging in political advocacy most of the time	14
engaging in political advocacy some of the time	2
critical of the government	8
very critical of the government	20

*blogs could be classified in more than one category

Providing information generally included coverage of political and/or protest events and information regarding human rights, activist and political groups. Providing assistance generally included legal help and support for victims of human rights/police brutality abuses, contact information for legal defense and guides detailing citizen rights and protections. Providing personal expression generally included personal commentary and/or opinion posts regarding

Egyptian politics, religion and society. Importantly in Table 1, all blogs sampled were critical or very critical of the Mubarak regime. Although this is not wholly representative of the Egyptian blogosphere, the fact that the overwhelming majority of blogs are critical of the government does conform with findings by other researchers (e.g. Etling et al. 2010).

Table 2

Self-descriptors*	Frequency
egypt	9
rights	9
human	9
wrong	8
blog	7
people	7
egyptian	7
information	7
what	6
organizations	5
never	5

*Self-descriptions for five blogs were unavailable.

Table 3

Subject of blog posts	Frequency
media censorship	14
egyptian politics	12
egyptian elections	12
human rights	11
police brutality	11
current events	10

As Table 2 shows, Egyptian bloggers clearly identified as such. It is also important to note that as often as they referred to themselves as Egyptian bloggers, they identified as promoting human rights. Table 3 indicates that the most widespread topic covered by these bloggers was media censorship, followed by Egyptian politics, elections and human rights. This does not indicate the frequency of posts within each blog, but rather indicates the popularity of the issue amongst bloggers.

Twelve blogs linked other blogs in a blogroll, averaging 38 links. Because political affiliations were difficult to analyze and verify with certainty, the nature of cross-cutting

ideologies in Egyptian blogs is unclear. Of the twelve that did link to other blogs, there is

certainly a mixture of ideological perspectives, but they cannot be generalized as representative

of the Egyptian blogosphere. There was evidence of secularists, socialists, members of the Ghad

Party, Kifaya and the Muslim Brotherhood within the sample, but the strength of their affiliation

and attitudes toward divergent viewpoints were undeterminable.

A closer inspection

In order to determine the democratic nature as well as the organizational and proactive

nature of these blogs, I did an in-depth analysis of three popular and influential blogs: *Rantings*

of a Sandmonkey, 3arabwy and *Egyptian Chronicles*. In each of these blogs, there is a clear

promotion of democratic principles and ideals, which culminated in an energetic—almost frantic

and anxious—culmination of mobilization efforts prior to 25 January 2011. While each blog

adopts a unique tone and attitude toward Egyptian politics and activism, there is a traceable

evolution from apathy to agency in recent years. In the days leading up to the revolution, the

events in Tunisia sparked a considerable amount of proactive responses to their own situation.

In a post titled, "Who is afraid of the Big Bad Brotherhood?" on 28 November 2005,

Sandmonkey writes,

> For the past weeks I have been one of the egyptian bloggers who panicked and cried foul
> over the fact that the MB [Muslim Brotherhood] is gaining seats in the parliament, but
> that was just the reactionary person in me speaking and I know that I have been acting
> like a drama queen over the whole thing. In reality, however, the fact that the MB is
> winning those seats is not something to be worried about or fear, but in actuality will be a
> very good thing in the long run. ... The fact that the results are not the ones we fancy is
> part of what living in a democracy is all about. We may not like it, but the people chose

them, and if we want to live in a democratic society we have to respect that, even if we don't like it. And hey, talk about an incentive to get up off your ass and vote the next time.

Sandmonkey discredits the protest attempt made by the April 6 Youth Movement in a post on Sunday 6 April 2008:

> People who read this blog know that I am not the most enthusiastic supporter of today's protest for both political reasons , and for the fact that I am not quite sure what it would achieve. It's hard to take a protest seriously that gives u the choice between being apathetic or participating by staying at home and doing nothing. However, the government seems to be taking it very seriously, so maybe I should to, especially that they arrested Malek and a number of activists yesterday, forcing a number of other bloggers and activists to spend last night in any other place but their homes. I just took a cab ride to Dowtown and the streets are crawling state security and they are stopping young men who are walking by themselves on the streets and checking their ID's and forcing them to get off the streets as soon as possible.

Yet, posts on 7 and 8 April 2008 indicate a reverse in attitude, as Sandmonkey appears very enthusiastic and supportive of the protest, likely because it was successfully disruptive. Importantly, it appears as though the substantive presence and effect of this protest transformed his apathetic and disillusioned feelings. In a post on 8 April 2008 titled, "We have come to see the Day…" Sandmonkey writes,

> Another picture that makes my hearts swell… Sea of people. Makes my skin tingle! ... The point isn't the overthrow of the government, not yet. It's a warning shot, letting them know that they can't get away with this shit much longer, that the corruption must stop, that political liberties must be respected and that the mismanagement of the economy can not continue. That the people won't just bend over and take it anymore. That they better change or this might breed the revolution you so rightly fear. But that won;t happen

today, or next week, so please, quit your whining, worrying and bitching about the protesters, and start fearing for their lives. Those people have almost nothing and are risking what little they have for a chance for a better life. Nobody asked you to act like them, nobody asked you to support them, but at least try to respect them. They earned that much!

It appears that these small struggles may have played a role in transforming the political consciousness of Egyptian society by proving to the disengaged and apathetic that civil disobedience and peaceful protest does affect state authorities.

In a post on the blog *3arabawy* dated 22 January 2011, Hoassam el-Hamalawy writes,

> I wish all of our brothers the Egyptians, that their movements, such as their brothers in Tunisia, the movements of a peaceful, and that the cross-communal abhorrent, and Ialo Egyptians over the differences between Muslims and Christians, because our battle is a battle all the citizen against the corrupt and thieves. [sic]

Throughout the eighteen day revolution, posts on 3arabawy provided information regarding protest locations, endorsements by political, labor and civic organizations, how to obtain information if/when SMS (text-messaging), Facebook and Twitter are shut down and continual updates about the progress of the protest.

> Responding to the lack of recognition of the Doweqia catastrophe (train accident) by the Egyptian government, on 4 January 2011 Zeinobia writes on her blog *Egyptian Chronicles*,

> This is not an official discrimination against Christians, it is actually official discrimination against Egyptians, we know very well that we are so cheap for that regime. We are strangers in our own country whether Muslims or Christians, you can't change that feeling with the current mindset that rules us.

On 17 January 2011, Zeinobia writes,

The official media is reminding us over and over by all possible and provoking ways that what happened in Tunisia can't and will not happen to Egypt , the official media is speaking about pseudo achievements of Mubarak's economic policies living in their dream world that the people will buy their lies anymore.

All these statements and all these denials are actually strong indicator on how scared and fragile the Egyptian regime is currently. As I have repeated over and over in the past 4 years and up till all eyes and expectations were and are on Egypt when it comes to the next earthquake of regime fall that will change the region forever.

On 19 January 2011, foreshadowing events on 25 January in a post titled, "Will 25th of January 2011be a remarkable Day in our history ??" she writes,

25th of January is the national day of Police Egypt where we remember how our police force in Ismailia stood besides the people and the resistance against the British occupation in a very rare patriotic incident in 1952.

Now in 2011 there is a big event organized by "We are all Khaled Said" group and supported by other opposition political parties and groups on that day and there are huge hopes that this event will change Egypt forever especially after what happened in Tunisia.

This in-depth analysis clearly indicates that certain Egyptian bloggers were actively engaged in the dissemination of information and mobilization of protest activities leading up to and during the revolution on 25 January 2011.

Discussion

The major flaws in all of the data analyzed are the number of blogs used and a likely selection bias within the sample. I do not speak Arabic and while I have analyzed a few Arabic blogs, translated by google, there are limitations caused by this approach, one of which is the representativeness of using a majority of blogs written in English. Obviously blogs written in English speak to a certain, elite and possibly foreign audience. I maintain that this was an

exploratory, pilot study. Along with a group of researchers, I am currently collecting a large number of blogs through a webcrawler program that will be analyzed in the near future. This pilot study shed light into the effectiveness of the current coding scheme and adjustments will be made for the future study.

Likewise, this research provides insight into the nature of Egyptian blogs and the unifying aspects of the virtual community in which they operate. This sample undoubtedly supported the hypothesis of a common discourse of resistance against the Mubarak regime since all were in opposition. The democratic principles evidenced in this sample, such as the protection of human rights and freedom of expression in the media, are consistant with the content of a democratic identity. The widespread nature of these themes also points to the collective nature of these principles. Moreover, the structural elements of blogs as a medium as well as the evidence of linking and commenting between bloggers may demonstrate the democratic nature of these blogs. This sample cannot provide sufficient certainty, but does indicate that the direction of this research project is worthwhile.

Conclusion

Narratives empower individuals to re-imagine the existing norms of society and assert themselves as active agents in the conduct of their own lives as well as the functioning of the collective. Narratives are both an expression and mechanism of agency. Employing blogs as a narrative of resistance against state authorities, the Egyptian blogosphere may have played a critical role in transforming the political consciousness and conditions of political possibility in Egypt and plausibly opening the floodgates to the mass political protest witnessed in 2011. By placing the revolution in the context of collective identity formation, I emphasize that the

number of Egyptians with grievances toward the state have not necessarily changed, but rather

by enabling citizens to come together and virtually share their dissatisfaction with the

government, the Egyptian blogosphere helped transform their awareness of collective consensus

and political agency.

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notes

[1] The UN's definition of broad unemployment includes — within the ranks of the unemployed — individuals who are not working, are ready and available for work, but have not engaged in any search activity. That group is often referred to as the discouraged unemployed. In fact, broad unemployment increased from 2006 to 2009 at a time when standard unemployment declined slightly (p.149).