

STIMSON

# Seismic Shift:

## Understanding Change in the Middle East

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**May 2011**

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The Henry L. Stimson Center

ISBN: 978-0-9845211-8-0

Cover and book design by Shawn Woodley and Lacey Rainwater

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## Blogosphere and Social Media

Courtney C. Radsch

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### Explanatory Note

**O**ur treatment of blogs and social media is distinct from the other sectors because it is intended to describe and assess the rise of this sector as a new medium for communication and political mobilization. The chapter provides deep background and context for the recent and dramatic use of social media in the Arab revolts, and broadly summarizes the messages in the media. It does not, however, purport to provide extensive content analysis of the messaging, and we did not consider this sector as providing strategic analysis of prospects for political change comparable to the other sectors. Over time, the capacity to interpret and analyze social media and its impact will grow, and its implications for the politics of the region will be studied in depth.

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Blogs and social media in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region between 2005 and the end of 2010 revealed deep-seated discontent with the political status quo. Both Egypt and Tunisia had an activist blogosphere that made political demands and called for their leaders to step down (unlike the other Arab states), but it was only in Egypt that they revealed a concerted effort to develop a movement that would revolutionize the political system. There was little indication that Tunisia would be the first successful uprising, but when Egyptians saw their neighbors oust President Ben Ali it provided the spark needed to set off the revolution that had been building, to offer hope, and stamp out the fear that had kept people from taking to the streets on such a scale. And when the region saw that Egypt, the leader of the Arab world and in many ways identity, could overthrow Mubarak in a mere 18 days, it sparked a regional wave of protests aimed at expelling authoritarian regimes, as in Bahrain, Libya, and Yemen, or demanding massive reforms in more accommodating ones, like Jordan and Morocco.

The reason for focusing on these virtual venues is because, as Egyptian blogger Hossam el-Hamalawy noted, “In a dictatorship, independent journalism by default becomes a form of

activism, and the spread of information is essentially an act of agitation.”<sup>1</sup> Social media and blogs were the forums where this agitation occurred. From 2005 onward, cyber-activism became a defining characteristic of political contestation by the younger generation, who made up a third of the region’s population and faced severe levels of unemployment and stunted opportunities. And as Gillmor aptly observed in his book *We the Media*, “In country after country where free speech is not given, the blogosphere matters in far more serious ways. This is the stuff of actual revolutions.”<sup>2</sup>

The social media analysis focuses on influential and/or popular blogs and social network sites, with a focus on Egypt because of its overrepresentation in the blogosphere, and the fact that this was where the most political foment occurred. A 2009 quantitative and qualitative analysis of Arab blogs found the Egyptian blogosphere to be the largest, accounting for about a third of the blogs studied,<sup>3</sup> with a significant portion focused on politics, followed by Saudi Arabia, where bloggers focused more on technology than politics. This study combines research conducted on and offline since 2005 for the author’s doctoral dissertation on cyber-activism in Egypt, with additional analysis of key blogs in other countries.<sup>4</sup> Looking at social media for insights into looming changes can only tell part of the story. These texts must be examined not only for what they say, but also for the practices inscribed within them by the people who create them, and as the creation of particular people at a particular time. Hence the videos about torture reveal not only the abuses of the state, but also the concerted efforts to document it, to open up new issues to debate, and to hold the state accountable. Social media must be situated within a specific historic and technological context, and observers should realize that they represent a very small snapshot of society that is inherently biased towards the more affluent, literate, and impassioned portion of the population.

## Cyber-Activism

### Increasing Social Media Usage

Between 2005 and 2011, Internet access in the region expanded from 13 percent to 40 percent of the population. Blogging became a popular form of political activism and mobilization as it grew in popularity from 2005 onwards as new social media platforms emerged. Social media use in the MENA region expanded exponentially with the introduction of Twitter and Facebook in 2007, which Egyptians immediately adapted for political activism. By

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.arabawy.org/>

<sup>2</sup> D. Gillmor. *We the Media: Grassroots Journalism by the People, For the People* (O’Reilly Media, 2006). p. 140.

<sup>3</sup> The Berkman study created a network map of the 6,000 most connected blogs, and with a team of Arabic speakers hand coded 4,000 blogs. The size of the dot represents the number of other blogs that link to it, a measure of its popularity. The position of each dot is a function of its links with its neighbors. Etling, Bruse, John Kelly, Robert Faris, and John Palfrey. *Mapping the arabic blogosphere: Politics, culture, and dissent* (Cambridge: Berkman Center for the Internet & Society at Harvard University, 2009). [http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/sites/cyber.law.harvard.edu/files/Mapping\\_the\\_Arabic\\_Blogosphere\\_0.pdf](http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/sites/cyber.law.harvard.edu/files/Mapping_the_Arabic_Blogosphere_0.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> See end of chapter for description of methodology and blogs/social media pages reviewed.

the time the January 2011 uprisings took place, Facebook pages and Twitter hashtags were an integral part of any political protest. There were then more than 16.8 million Facebook accounts in the region representing about 13 percent of the population, and about 40,000 Twitter users, of which Egyptians accounted for about half.

Even so, because the percentages of the total population online remained relatively small, analysts and observers often discounted the importance of blogging and online social networking without acknowledging that official connectivity figures tend to discount the impact of public access points or pirated connections, while simultaneously ignoring the fact that youth, the middle class, and the politically active were highly represented. Mobile phones, on the other hand, were ubiquitous, with regional penetration rates surpassing 100 percent by late 2008. When coupled with Twitter, Flickr, and YouTube these became the most powerful tools for political activism, yet were largely outside the censorial regimes that governed the Internet.

Cyber-activists were particularly savvy at using digital media tools, the most important being their mobile phones, to build networks with transnational activist organizations and journalists around the world. Twitterers were especially likely to connect with media, perhaps explaining the fact that most users tweeted in English even though the Arabic platform was available in 2009. A 2009 survey found that nearly 60 percent of respondents said they interact most often with media and journalists, coming in just after friends at 70 percent.<sup>5</sup> By 2010, 9 percent of MENA Internet users said in a survey that they used Twitter, with Egyptians most strongly represented.

Interestingly, however, Internet and Facebook penetration does not necessarily appear to correlate with political upheaval. One likely explanation for this is that some of the Gulf countries host extraordinarily high numbers of foreign workers and resident expats, including significant percentages of Westerners, (representing some 70 percent of the population in the UAE, for instance, perhaps explaining why this country has the highest level of Facebook penetration in the region at 35 percent, and one of the highest levels of Internet penetration at nearly 76 percent.) Libya, on the other hand, has an Internet penetration rate of only 5 percent and a Facebook use of only 2.75 percent. Tunisia and Egypt were somewhere in the lower middle half of the region, with Internet access rates of 34 percent and 21 percent respectively, with 16 percent and 5 percent on Facebook.

Most of the online communities are grouped around Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the Levant, with active but relatively tiny communities in Tunisia, Bahrain, and the Maghreb (see Figure 1 on the next page). Analysis of the MENA blogosphere shows that blogs tend to group around countries, but that not all Arab countries have vibrant social media communities. For example, Egyptian Facebook pages are the only ones that garnered tens of thousands of supporters prior to the revolts. Yet even as these youth aspired to change, their prospects for fulfillment at home appeared dim. By 2008, youth unemployment in the region was 23.8 percent, making the risk of unemployment a whopping 3.5 times higher for youth as compared to adults.<sup>6</sup> Youth with a secondary education or above, and who were also

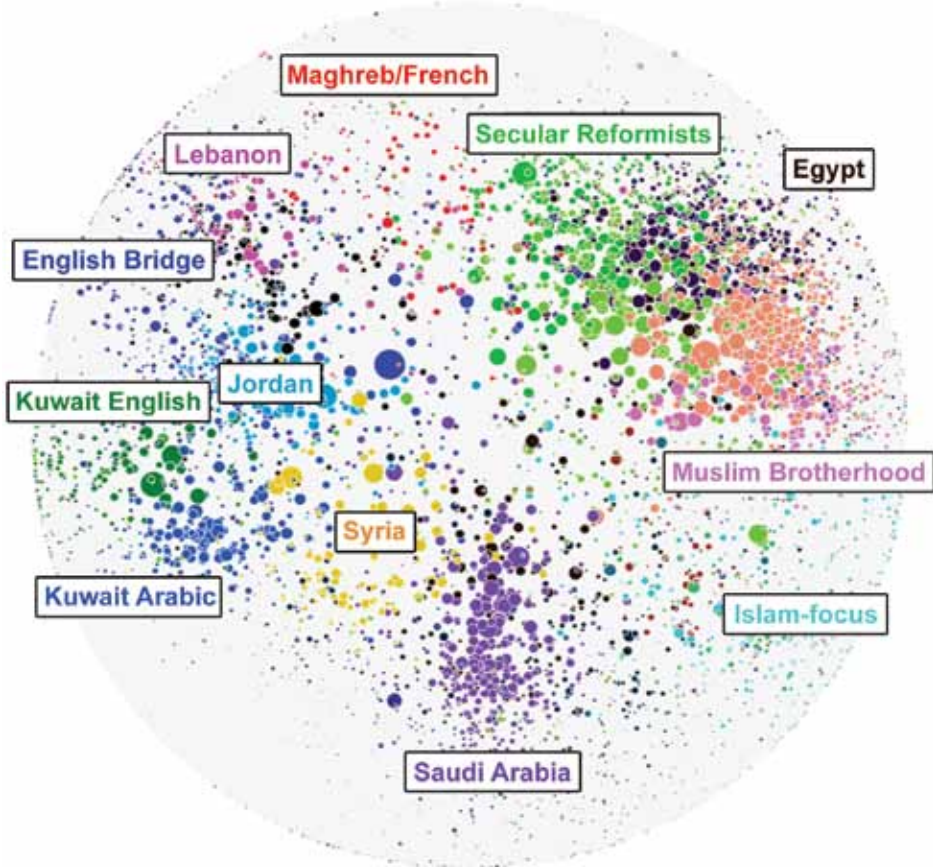
<sup>5</sup> <http://www.spotonpr.com/twitter-customer-service-survey/>

<sup>6</sup> International Labour Organization, *Global Employment Trends* (Geneva: ILO, January 2008), pp. 17, 20.

most likely to own or have access to a computer and Internet access, made up a staggering 95 percent of those unemployed youth.<sup>7</sup>

### Figure 1: Map of the Arab Blogosphere

The Berkman study created a network map of the 6,000 most connected blogs, and with a team of Arabic speakers hand coded 4,000 blogs. The size of the dot represents the number of other blogs that link to it, a measure of its popularity. The position of each dot is a function of its links with its neighbors.



*(Berkman, June 2009)*

## Egypt Leads the Way

Egyptian youth in particular were the vanguard of cyber-activists in the Middle East, in part because the adoption of technologies like blogging and mobile Internet coincided with the rise of a new political movement, Kefaya, and thus provided both inspiration and outlets for political activism. The median age in Egypt is 24, and state-subsidized higher education meant that many of these youth were highly educated and technologically savvy, but faced economically frustrating conditions including high unemployment (30 percent) and a corrupt patronage system. These youth make up the majority of Internet and social

<sup>7</sup> *Arab Reform Brief*, Oct. 23, 2008 and author's research in the field.

media users,<sup>8</sup> and Kefaya laid the seeds for the Youth Movement, forging space in the streets for public protests.

Egypt has been the leader in social media use, especially when it comes to political activism. By the end of 2010, Egypt had nearly 4 million Facebook users, representing about 5 percent of the population. Facebook exploded in 2008 with the April 6 youth protests, and has doubled in the past year. Fifty-six thousand people signed up for the Khaled Said solidarity Facebook page within the first 24 hours, and it had more than 400,000 fans by the end of 2010. But unlike other countries that have experienced one-off moments of contention driven by new media technologies, few of these developed into a social movement the way it did in Egypt. Cyber-activists, citizen journalists, and bloggers all contributed to the revolutionary throwing off of 30 years of one-man rule. Understanding the genesis of the blogosphere, its cyber-activists, and how it expanded helps explain why this is, and offers an explanation for why a social movement emerged.

Egyptian cyber-activists adapted social media to create a powerful activist tool out of what was originally conceived as a way to keep in touch with friends, using Facebook to organize political protests on and offline, and incorporating Twitter via mobile phones in civic activism and citizen journalism. Their influence in the region and the West, through the media and non-governmental organizations, helped spread cyber-activism as a form of political contestation, but it was only in Egypt that a concerted and sustained campaign to overturn the existing political system could be seen fermenting in the cybersphere. Yet it took the spark of the Tunisian uprising to inspire the broader public to take to the streets and overcome the fear inculcated during Mubarak's 30 years of repressive emergency rule.

## The Medium is the Message

Content analysis of blogs and social media from the region reveals that there was vocal discontent with the repressive political systems that limited freedom of expression and opportunity for their societies, but only in the Egyptian blogosphere was there evidence of the coming popular uprising. The very fact that so many individual blogs and social media accounts were created permitted a level of free expression and discourse that was unprecedented and noteworthy in and of itself. Although there was certainly discontent and evocative statements in other blogospheres, Egypt was the only place where bloggers were, indeed, writing about revolutionary change coming. Stirrings of discontent were visible in Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, and other cyberspheres, but the foreshadowing of what was to come could only be seen in the widespread discontent and increasingly combustible mix of highly educated, underemployed youth living in repressive political systems during a time of global economic hardship.

The 2009 study by the Berkman Center for Internet Studies at Harvard University on the Arabic blogosphere found that during a particular snapshot in time in early 2009, criticism of domestic leaders topped the list of political topics discussed (see Figure 2 on the next page). More than 20 percent of blogs surveyed were critical of domestic leaders, while

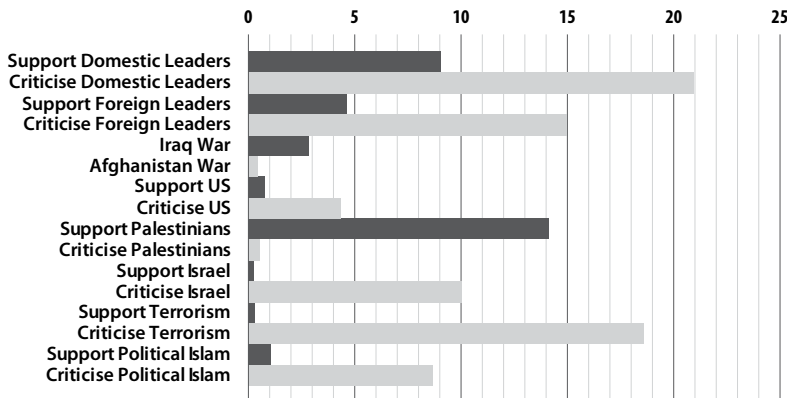
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<sup>8</sup> Although by 2011, users age 40 and above became the fastest growing segment of Facebook users in Egypt.

a mere 8 percent were supportive. This gave credence to the sense that cyberspace was a politicized realm dominated by government critics unsupportive of the status quo. The study provided quantitative evidence of the sense of injustice and desire for change that pervaded the online realm and youth more broadly.

**Figure 2: Political Topics Covered by Blogs\***

Percentage of Arabic-language blogs that discussed the following topics, from April 2008 to March 2009:



\*Based on 4,370 blogs  
(Berkman, June 2009)

## What They Weren't Saying

But there were also group blogs like Global Voices, started by Tunisian journalist and activist Sami Ben Gharbeia in 2004, that provided a platform for activist bloggers to engage with a broader audience, attracting several prominent bloggers from around the region. It provides an overview of Arab social media, dating back to 2005 in several countries, and a roundup, often by prominent bloggers, of what is happening in their national blogospheres. Yet a comprehensive review of posts revealed few prescient posts on Global Voices outside of the Egyptians. It is ad-hoc, however, and thus selective. Nonetheless, a survey of the posts in MENA between 2005 to November 2010 revealed little inkling of what was about to take place, with the exception of a few scattered Egyptian posts. Even the Kuwaiti and Bahraini posts about national elections did not make sweeping calls for change, or call on bloggers to unite in a struggle for reform. Although there were posts about the political role bloggers played in elections,<sup>9</sup> elections take place within the system, and the posts were not concerned with overthrowing – much less fundamentally changing – that system. There was little evidence in the wider Arab blogosphere of the same level of political rancor and activism as that in the Egyptian blogosphere.

Yet even if bloggers weren't necessarily *saying* the revolution was on its way, their innovative uses of new digital media to organize collective action, mobilize street protests, publicize state-sponsored abuses, and network with Western media and advocacy organizations revealed that a significant youth contingent was becoming politicized and increasingly

<sup>9</sup> <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2008/04/02/kuwait-bloggers-to-play-leading-role-in-elections/>

adroit at using blogs and social media to challenge the status quo. Blogger trainings and capacity building focused on enhancing their activism skills, and connecting them into transnational activist networks. Bloggers were at the forefront of organizing virtual and street protests against government policy, in opposition to state repression, and in support of each other and their right to freedom of expression.

While political activism was prominent in the blogosphere and social media spaces from their inception, one could have been forgiven for dismissing cyber-activism as a fringe movement by a few disaffected youth. But the so-called “Facebook Strike” of 2008 should have been a wake-up call, with the launch of the April 6 Youth Movement and its strident anti-Mubarak agenda, commitment to the long-haul, and efforts to develop non-violent mobilization strategies.

## Elections

With the exception of Egypt, elections proved surprisingly uncontentious in the blogosphere. Even after the blatantly manipulated 2009 Tunisian presidential election, there were no calls for revolution or uprising, although blogs expressed disgust and satirized Ben Ali’s ridiculously high margin of victory. Heavy-handed government censorship, such as the targeted blocking of a wide swath of blogs and Facebook profiles ramped up throughout 2010,<sup>10</sup> and more sophisticated phishing schemes were coming to light as the 2011 uprising was gaining steam. Similarly, in Kuwait, there were no musings about imminent reform with the 2008 parliamentary elections and the death of its ruler Shaikh Saad Al Abdulla Al Sabah, just poetry and remembrances. Bloggers posted comments that were largely mild and moderate about calls for change,<sup>11</sup> such as “we are appealing for a little rationality and concern for the well-being of this land, which is tired and worn out from the burden of the actions of its people and government.”<sup>12</sup> Another blogger wrote about the need to look to the future, letting Kuwait’s rulers off the hook.<sup>13</sup> Although the Kuwait blogosphere was one of the more active, with similar numbers of English and Arabic blogs, it was not a realm of political contestation as it was in Egypt. Kuwait was freer than most of the countries in the region, ranking “partly free” throughout the decade according to Freedom House’s annual survey of political and civil rights.

In Egypt, however, the 2010 parliamentary elections were seen as a turning point by cyber-activists as far back as 2008. A campaign in support of Mohammed El Baradei drew huge support online, and inspired youth that this election would be different. A Facebook page calling for people to greet him at the airport drew thousands on and offline. His supporters and others mobilized for election monitoring, and integrated new media tools like digital mapping and SMS reporting into their unofficial monitoring efforts.

<sup>10</sup> <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2010/05/05/tunisia-a-black-day-for-bloggers/> and <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2010/02/08/tunisia-censorship-again-and-again/>

<sup>11</sup> <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2008/05/12/kuwait-election-call-to-women/>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.hilaliya.com/2008/05/a-call-to-the-kuwait-blogging.html>

<sup>13</sup> [http://5-q8.blogspot.com/2008/04/blog-post\\_2824.html](http://5-q8.blogspot.com/2008/04/blog-post_2824.html)

## The Building of a Cybersphere

### 2005: The Arab Spring Awakens as Repression Wanes

In 2005, George W. Bush's democracy-promotion agenda and a relative decline in government repression coincided with the rise of Internet activism. In Egypt, a new political movement called Kefaya (Enough) had emerged, whose central message was focused on the presidential powers and the presidential system. In 2005, the protesters chanted "*la lil tandid, la liltandith*," an insulting way of saying "get out Mubarak, get out Mubarak," a refrain that echoed throughout the blogosphere. For the first time in recent memory, Egyptians took to the streets for domestic reasons, not for Palestine or Iraq, but to demand domestic political reform, sustaining a "[R]egular, almost cyclical outbreak of protests and demonstrations in both large cities and smaller towns" throughout 2005.<sup>14</sup>

Kefaya laid the seeds for Egypt's Youth Movement and helped forge space in the streets for public protests. It also inspired pro-democracy groups in several other countries. Mubarak's challenge to the independence of the judiciary prompted an outcry that resonated through the streets and the blogosphere against judicial tampering, providing an inkling of the political movement that was developing. "Judges' contemporary mobilization has sown seeds sure to be reaped by them in future iterations of struggle... Most fortuitous in my view is one unexpected process of linkage that's not likely to be sundered any time soon," wrote Baheyya.<sup>15</sup> But they were just gearing up in 2005, and organizers were just beginning to hone their mobilization skills. A post by cyber-activist Mahmoud Salem, of Sandmonkey, summed up the feeling: "The Egyptian blogosphere is almost as apathetic as the Egyptian public: Big on words, small on action. Actually, when I think about it, that's the problem of our country as a whole."<sup>16</sup>

The 2005 Egyptian activists focused their political demands, and perhaps aspirations, more narrowly. They protested the constitutional amendment, not the constitution. They demonstrated against the Press Law, but did not demand that the whole concept of criminalization of expression be tossed out. And they protested the existence of military tribunals when dozens of Muslim Brotherhood leaders were put on trial in 2006 and 2007, but they did not protest the role of the military in the system. The sum total of this new activism was that "something irrevocable has been set in motion, a process whose consequences we cannot fully fathom now."<sup>17</sup> This was also the point at which mainstream media 'discovered' blogging as a form of political activism in the Arab world, with a spike in coverage that included an *Al-Jazeera* documentary, articles in elite media, and increased interest in the roll new media might have in the Arab world.

Tunisian bloggers were also activists from the outset, especially when Tunisia hosted the World Summit on the Information Society in 2005. Cyber-dissidents launched the "Freedom of Expression in Mourning" campaign in conjunction with an online protest – Yezzi – against Ben Ali that garnered worldwide attention. The campaign won coverage on

<sup>14</sup> <http://baheyya.blogspot.com/2005/03/routinizing-right-to-protest.html>

<sup>15</sup> [http://baheyya.blogspot.com/2005\\_08\\_01\\_archive.html](http://baheyya.blogspot.com/2005_08_01_archive.html)

<sup>16</sup> Sunday, July 24, 2005.

<sup>17</sup> [http://baheyya.blogspot.com/2005\\_08\\_01\\_archive.html](http://baheyya.blogspot.com/2005_08_01_archive.html)

*Al-Jazeera* and *CNN*, with its calls for “enough of the dictator’s reign,” but was not linked to an offline movement, and the demands were not sustained.<sup>18</sup> Unlike Egypt, where the political movement Kefaya inspired new forms of political contestation, cyber-activism in the rest of the region was not linked to a broader political movement, and thus offered few opportunities for digital activists to learn organization, mobilization, and publicity skills. Thus cyber-activism largely remained confined to the cybersphere and the tiny sliver of the population that was online.

## 2006-2007: Retreat

With the election of Hamas in Palestine, and the Bush Administration’s concurrent pullback on the democracy agenda in 2006, political activism waned amid increased repression and socioeconomic unrest. Bloggers were arrested, and regional campaigns for their release became a key strategy for raising awareness and solidarity across borders.

In Egypt, labor strikes became increasingly common, with protest activities more than doubling during this time.<sup>19</sup> The early activist-bloggers had paved the way for a wider swath of youth to engage in political activism through the use of digital technology, with the labor movement being a focus for several from the outset. In Tunisia, blogs largely were seen as afflicted by “politicophobia” because they largely refrained from discussing national politics, and practiced self-censorship like the rest of the media.<sup>20</sup>

But bloggers were also looking to Egypt and Iran’s politically dynamic blogspheres, and professing a belief that Tunisia’s blogsphere could also potentially develop along those lines as greater numbers blogged. As one blogger noted, referring to other regional blogs: “Reading them, it is not doubted any more that the next great revolution will be cybernetic, or will not be,” while another suggested “[t]hese are Gutenberg times for us all.”<sup>21</sup>

Cyber-activism grew in popularity, usually focusing on solidarity campaigns with fellow bloggers in the country or the wider Arab world. In Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, for example, bloggers were focused on restrictions being put on the Internet and websites, arrests of bloggers, and the more general repression of free expression. They were not tied to a broader social movement or political activism, but rather focused more inwardly on their community and its concerns. There were certainly savvy insights, such as one blogger who wrote: “The reason why the Internet is so threatening to Arab governments is that it revolutionized the means of communication, making it virtually impossible to moderate or control.”<sup>22</sup> But there were really no calls for systemic change, predictions of major political upheaval, or any other indications of what would emerge during the 2011 uprisings. Bahraini blogger Mahmoud Al Yousif (Mahmoud’s Den) for example, saw back-room deals as being more important to change than street protests, exactly the opposite of the perspective in Egypt

<sup>18</sup> Only about 10 percent of the population was online at this time.

<sup>19</sup> Center for Socialist Studies. News Report: “Workers Leadership Forms Preparatory Committee for Workers” *The Socialist*. Pub. 1 (July 2009); Solidarity Center Report. *The Struggle for Workers’ Rights in Egypt*. [http://www.solidaritycenter.org/files/pubs\\_egypt\\_wr.pdf](http://www.solidaritycenter.org/files/pubs_egypt_wr.pdf). p. 15.

<sup>20</sup> <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2006/10/05/blogging-tunisia-whisper/>

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.mideastyouth.com/2007/02/22/democracy-is-possible-arab-bloggers-assure-us-every-day/>

during that time. There were few, if any, calls for mass mobilization. Even during the 2006 protests in the run up to Bahrain's parliamentary elections there was not a sense of the protests portending broader political change coming from the people, but rather a new era was at hand because of the King's reforms.<sup>23</sup>

By late 2007, the Egyptian state crackdown on Kefaya and the Muslim Brotherhood was accompanied by a crackdown on media freedom and regression on freedom of expression.<sup>24</sup> One blogger termed the government's harsh reactions a "War on Bloggers."<sup>25</sup> The imprisonment of bloggers for their activism on the streets in demonstrations was a personal hardship, but helped draw attention to them and get youth interested in learning about, and working with, the new technology. Around the same time, one of Saudi Arabia's most famous bloggers, Fouad Al Farhan, was arrested (December 2007) and held without charge for four months because of a critical post he wrote. Fouad's blog was blocked in Saudi Arabia, and an online campaign to advocate for his release was widely covered. Although he wrote about the need for political reform and was highly critical of the ruling family, his arrest had a chilling effect on criticism and did not instigate street protests or inspire significant numbers of youth to blog for freedom and against repression.<sup>26</sup>

Yet it is noteworthy that despite an international campaign for Fouad's release, the campaign's Facebook page (active 2007-2008) had fewer than 1,000 members. And although there were posts calling for freedom of expression and democracy in Saudi, there were no prescient comments or insights about any coming or future uprising. "We lack the concept of 'collective action' in our country, but I hope that blogging will help to change that. The social networking aspect of blogging can play a big role in building recognition of such a concept, through groups of bloggers who work together in what can be called 'online activism'."<sup>27</sup> The one explicit mention of any sort of revolution was actually a link to another blogger's post that rejected the idea of an overthrow of the government. In the post he writes that he found an interesting post from "Nour, a blogger from UAE, [who] thinks that the Internet can do for the Arab world what the printing press did for Europe, helping them to find the way out of the Dark Age."<sup>28</sup> He links to the post, in which the blogger writes:

- *"A Revolution is bubbling underneath the shrouds of ignorance. It will not happen overnight, but everyday is a step closer to it ... when I say 'Revolution', I don't necessarily mean overthrow-the-government-in-a-bloody-coup type of revolution. I mean an intellectual revolution, a social revolution, a religious revolution, a cultural revolution. Preferably, a peaceful revolution. The world's already lost too much blood. We've got to save whatever we can of it."*<sup>29</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Bahrainis disillusioned with government and opposition.

<sup>24</sup> Human Rights Watch. *Egypt country summary*. 2007; Reporters Without Borders. *Egypt -- annual report*. 2007.

<sup>25</sup> Nora Younis. "War on bloggers unfolds." 2007. In Nora Younis.

<sup>26</sup> In Egypt, on the other hand, the arrests of prominent bloggers critical of the government like Alaa, Wael Abbas, Mahmoud Sherkawy, Malek Mustafa, Abdelmenem Mahmoud, Mahmoud Salem, and dozens of others inspired many youth to begin blogging or join Twitter or Facebook, often with an explicitly political approach.

<sup>27</sup> <http://saudijeans.org/2006/11/12/on-online-activism/>

<sup>28</sup> <http://saudijeans.org/2006/04/28/peaceful-revolution/>

<sup>29</sup> <http://grynprynt.blogspot.com/2006/03/internet-our-printing-press.html>

## Turning Points

### 2008: The April 6 Facebook Strike and Egypt's Demonstration Effect

In 2008, there was a political re-awakening as a new cohort of youth joined the blogosphere through social media, like Facebook and Twitter, and media began to wake up to the political effects of blogging and cyber-activism. Indeed, online Egyptian activists exploited new technologies, such as Twitter, as key tools for popular mobilization in applications that even the developers of Twitter did not themselves anticipate. “[W]hen we heard about this story and that Twitter was being used in Egypt in 2008 to organize these protests,” said Twitter co-founder Biz Stone, “that was one of the early, eye-opening experiences for us, that made us realize this was not just something in the Bay Area for, you know, technical geeks to fool around with and to find out what each other’s up to, but a global-communications system that could be used for almost anything and everything.”<sup>30</sup>

The second half of 2008 was a watershed moment in the region amid rising discontent, and labor strikes over the prices of food.<sup>31</sup> The Egyptian Facebook strike inspired Arab youth throughout the region, with solidarity strikes being called for by bloggers in Jordan, and a special coverage page on Global Voices. Other countries also covered the Egyptian blogosphere, such as Kuwait, where a newspaper inaugurated its blog coverage with an interview with Sandmonkey (also prompting dismay from Kuwaiti blogger).<sup>32</sup> And efforts to organize and collectivize Arab bloggers resulted in the first Arab Bloggers Meeting in Beirut.

Throughout 2008, hundreds of worker strikes continued to take place across Egypt, and when two young activists created a Facebook page calling for a general strike in solidarity with the workers in Mahalla, it spread like wildfire, attracting 70,000 virtual participants in about two weeks at a time when only about half-a-million Egyptians were even on the social network. The solidarity strike lacked specificity about how people were expected to participate, and the blogosphere was full of debate about its effectiveness, with seasoned activist bloggers feeling it would be futile to take to the streets and simply invite arrests and detentions of activists, effectively taking them out of commission. They supported the ideals, but not the means. Whether the strike was a success or not depends on who you ask. However, everyone was in agreement that it was practice for later, and not meant to be the endgame. The blogosphere was a-twitter with discussions about the “Day of Rage” coming in the future, about this being practice for the “long revolution.”

Several bloggers covered the worker’s strike in Mahalla, which turned violent when government thugs fired on protesters. Bloggers posted pictures of crowds tearing down posters of Mubarak and stepping on them, an unheard of action that spread through the

<sup>30</sup> National Public Radio. “Twitter's Biz Stone On Starting A Revolution” *Fresh Air*. February 16, 2011.

<sup>31</sup> <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2008/05/01/arabeyes-looming-food-crisis/>

<sup>32</sup> <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2008/07/17/kuwait-blogs-in-the-news/>

blogosphere like wildfire. One such post on Manalaa.net drew more than 40,000 views.<sup>33</sup> The April 6 strike helped increase public knowledge about social networking, and propelled Facebook to be the primary social network among Egyptians. As blogger and journalist Nora Younis observed: “More people are joining the blogosphere, Facebook, and Twitter by the hour... There is a techie, passionate, frustrated generation now on the playground... and one could only expect more to come. In few years time, there will be no need for registration of political parties. Like-minded people will organize and will be heard.”<sup>34</sup>

Other bloggers noted that the strike and its repercussions “sure hit a nerve, with thousands of people mobilizing themselves, and freely available online tools to demand their freedom, equality, democracy, and an honorable life for themselves and the future generations of Egypt.”<sup>35</sup> Anyone reading the blogs could have perceived a seismic shift underway.

### Linking the Revolution of Politics with the Revolution of Bread

The April 6 activists were strategic and committed to a struggle, asking why they should *not* talk about changing the whole system – the constitution, the government, people’s sociopolitical habits. To paraphrase a Sept. 29, 2008 post: People want to change, but there’s no reason to make small changes, the whole thing needs to be changed, the entire package, we’re not talking about hanging a person, but changing the whole system – the constitution, the government and ministries, the judicial system, and change people’s habits where they think that the way they are cannot be changed or fixed.

These calls for radical, revolutionary change were preceded by a demand to know where the thousands who were on the streets for the Iraq war, and hundreds from Kefaya’s apex in 2005 had gone.

“So how are we going to get to a million-person demonstration? People are scared to follow someone they don’t know if they can trust, they’re afraid to go into the street. You have to connect people and connect the revolution of freedom with the revolution of bread.” Such broad calls for revolutionary change were missing elsewhere in the Arab blogosphere, however, although there was certainly a recognition that successful initiatives depended on bridging the digital divide.

Interviews with Tunisian bloggers confirmed that no one in that blogosphere saw the revolution coming. But there were broader signals that in hindsight seemed to foreshadow change as far back as 2008, according to bloggers interviewed in the aftermath of the revolution. Among these signals were the 2008 protests in Gafsa and Al Radeef that bloggers labeled the “Revolution of Bread,”<sup>36</sup> when none of the mainstream media would cover them. Chants at football games, and other subtle signals marked a turning point in the acquiescence of society to Ben Ali’s rule. By this time, with Internet access at a mere 35 percent of the Tunisian population, nearly 20 percent were on Facebook, surpassing the number of newspaper readers.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>33</sup> <http://manalaa.net/node/87357>

<sup>34</sup> <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2008/04/30/egypt-facebooking-the-struggle/>

<sup>35</sup> <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2008/04/07/egypt-a-wake-up-strike/>

<sup>36</sup> <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2008/04/15/tunisia-al-radeyef-protests-when-bloggers-give-a-voice-to-the-voiceless/>

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

## Going for Broke: Calls for Systemic, Revolutionary Change in Egypt

On the eve of the first anniversary of the April 6 strike, Abdul Halim Kandil posted on the April 6 blog a call to protest against Mubarak and lift the veil of fear.<sup>38</sup> He discussed how originally they were going to call for Kefaya and opposition/banned parties to join in a general strike, but instead they called it a “Day of Rage,” the same term later used in 2011 during the protests that brought down Mubarak. He wrote that this was not only just a protest to mark the anniversary, but also planning for the future, for more protests, until the day of the 2011 parliamentary elections. “Egypt will not be the same by the end of 2011,” he wrote, noting that a fuse had been lit and the regime was delusional, falling apart, and perhaps, would not even last until the election.

These online debates and street protests opened up fundamental questions about what type of political system Egypt should have, further weakening the status quo. “Openly debating who should rule the country and how they obtain this power is now a defining feature of the political landscape,” as the anonymous blogger “Baheyya” put it on her post from August 15, 2009. In the post she blamed “change-hating Mubarak” for making “everything up for debate.” She similarly saw the current political contestation as part of a longer movement. “This does not mean that Egypt’s citizens are on the cusp of choosing who rules them. Not soon and not for some time to come, alas.” That time would be January 25, 2011.

April 6 inspired many others to start using the social networking platform Facebook, with similar strikes being planned in Jordan, and calls for action in every country going out via Facebook. A page called “Facebookist Movement to Overthrow Mubarak” was created, and from then on protest movements throughout the region made use of the social networking platform to build support and awareness. Egyptian social media were far more activist and able to mobilize far more supporters than any of their fellows in the broader Arab blogosphere (aided by the fact that at that time about 18 percent of its 80-million people were online, including early adopters of Twitter and Facebook). Elijah Zarwan, however, cautioned that “[i]f it’s dangerous to dismiss what’s happened in Egypt as mere agitating on the part of a few left-wing activists, it’s equally dangerous to imagine that Facebook and Twitter are going to usher in a Gucci Revolution in Egypt.”

Another call went out for a strike on May 4 against price increases, but largely fizzled. A call went out on Facebook, however, and was picked up by others in the region. “It is a protest against the situation in the country in general, and in solidarity with a similar strike being held in Egypt on the same day,” the blogger at *Jordanian Issues* wrote in a post. Another blogger, Ibrahim Safa wrote on *Al-Jazeera Talk* that the call for a solidarity strike “has triggered a call for strikes across the region against increasing prices in the Arab world,” adding “the reason is to send a message that the people of Jordan are not able to withstand more.”<sup>39</sup> Yet there was very little discussion in Jordan about upending the system, as blame more often lies with the government, not the royal family. In fact, just two months later the king gave a wide-ranging, detailed interview addressing

<sup>38</sup> March 31 post.

<sup>39</sup> <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2008/05/03/jordan-gearing-up-for-strike/>

economic issues and criticism, and even left a comment on a blog, thought to be the first time a royal monarch directly interacted on a blog. This action garnered him significant good will.

## 2010: “We Are All Khaled Said”

When, in July 2010, the brutal murder of a middle-class youth, who looked like anybody’s brother or son, was captured on video and quickly went viral, it was clear that cyber-activism was not dead. Wael Ghonim, an executive with Google, set up a fan page for the deceased Khaled Said. Within the first 24 hours 56,000 people signed up for the “We Are All Khaled Said” page, growing to more than a quarter-of-a-million fans in a month. With more people joining daily, a post from August 31 expressed belief that there would be an end to emergency law and to imprisonment without charge, with fans writing that they believed in the future, and would continue their non-violent struggle. The fan page attracted international media coverage, with a picture of Said even being featured at a Pink Floyd concert in Florida. By the end of 2010, the page had more than 400,000 fans. Compare this to the eight months it took the Egyptian Movement for Change, or Kefaya, to gather 300 signatures for its founding statement.

On June 29, activists disgusted with the mainstream Egyptian press coverage of the murder held a sit-in in front of *Al-Gomhouria* newspaper, described by one blogger as an historic first. Protests continued for weeks, often violent, while unrest in Sinai continued. On September 4, the Arabic page “My Name is Khaled Said” was suspended, but the “We are all Khaled Said” page continued. In November, the administrator’s account was disabled. *The Arabist* posted an insightful link explaining that “Khaled Said’s brutal murder is a chilling reminder of what emergency law – and Interior Ministry impunity – means for Egyptians. Frustration with that impunity is what leads protesters to take to the streets.” On November 17, posts on the Facebook page said that November 26 would be day of anger, when Egyptians will no longer sit quietly watching police torture and abuse, vowing their voice would be heard. And indeed they were.

## Conclusion

Those who were watching Egyptian blogs would have seen a growing discontent and call for revolutionary action that, when combined with the factors of youth unemployment, stunted political opportunities, and expanded platforms for political activism outside the traditional power structures, was combustible. What was missing was the spark that would inspire hope, and dispel fear among a populace so that they would take to the streets in massive numbers. Tunisia was that spark (although there was little indication in the social media sphere that it would become so) that Egypt needed to propel the movement that had been growing online, and expand it to a broader segment of the population.

## Note on Methodology

The author conducted a systematic review of all MENA blog posts on Global Voices between 2005 and November 2011 (usually between 100 and 300 posts per month), which covers the entire region, along with comprehensive review of posts on the following individual blogs: Baheyya, Sandmonkey, Egyptian Chronicles, April 6 Movement, April 6 Facebook page, El Shaheed /We are all Khaled Said page, A Tunisian Girl, Mahmoud's Den (Bahrain), Silly Bahraini Girl, Ali Abdulemam (Bahrain), and Saudi Jeans. In addition, the author surveyed The Arabist/3arabawy (Egypt), Manalaa.net (Egypt),<sup>40</sup> Gr33n Data (Egypt), and Saudiwoman's Weblog. The focus was on individuals and blogs that could be searched chronologically, thus citizen journalism platforms like Nawaat, which was an important group blogging platform in the lead up to Tunisia's January uprising, was not included. The Tunisian government was the most active at censoring and hacking the accounts of its cyber-activists, so many Tunisian blogs that had been active prior to 2008 can no longer be accessed. Dozens of other blogs were also reviewed less systematically, especially when they were linked to and referenced in a relevant post by another blogger. Given time constraints and the parameters of the project, the author focused primarily, though not exclusively, on English-language content in the public sphere.

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<sup>40</sup> Blogger "godfathers," 10th most linked source in 2009 Berkman study, only individual blog in top ten linked to sites by Arabic blogs.