

The Role of the Internet in Shaping the Political Process in Egypt

Nahed Amin Azab, The American University in Cairo, Egypt

ABSTRACT

There has been a growing debate about the extent to which the Internet influenced the Arab World's recent revolutions described as the "Arab Spring". This belief that the Internet had a contribution is supported by several events and evidences that occurred prior to these revolutions and provided clear indications about the Internet's power. This paper investigates the effect of the Internet on shaping politics in Egypt. Research was conducted a few months before the revolution (January 25, 2011) covering the relevant literature, and the news and events that took place. A questionnaire was sent to a sample representing different segments of Internet users in Egypt to recognize their perceptions towards the value of the Internet in politics. Findings indicate a high interest among Egyptians in accessing news online, especially international and privately owned media. In addition, survey participants recognize the Internet's potential for committing political change. Survey results show that the Internet is perceived in Egypt as a strong tool that political candidates could use to communicate with citizens; however, it is still used primarily for mobilization and information dissemination. Moreover, it was proven that age, gender, education and reading frequency of online news all have varying effects on civic engagement and perception of the role the Internet can play in politics in Egypt.

Keywords: Democracy, Digital Divide, Egypt, Freedom of Speech, Information and Communication Technology (ICT), Internet, Participation, Politics

1. INTRODUCTION

The development of the Internet and related technologies such as wireless communication, digital video and photography in the last decade resulted in a considerable change in the way people communicate and share information (Metcalf et al., 2008). Given that the number of Internet users reached almost 1.97 billion - constituting roughly a third of the world's population, with a growth rate of 445% from

2000 to 2010 - (Internet World Stats, 2010), more people turn to the Internet for different purposes: search information, shop online, listen to music or watch movies, get the latest news, communicate with others personally and professionally, and more. It can be said that any social activity performed physically can be mirrored on the Internet, possibly with more advantages and features that cannot be experienced offline.

Among the different effects the Internet has on people is its ability to engage them in politics. They do so through gaining access to

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different views on the same topic, being in touch with the latest events, and sharing opinions with friends and others they have never met and most probably will not meet in the future. The power of the Internet is acknowledged to the extent that it was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize 2010 by the Italian version of Wired magazine (in the person of its Editor-in-Chief Riccardo Luna), Nobel Peace Prize laureate Shirin Ebadi, founder of One Laptop per Child Association (OLPC), Nicholas Negroponte, and 160 Italian parliamentarians. In its issue of November 20th 2009, Wired Magazine cited the use of the Internet as a tool to advance “dialogue, debate and consensus through communication” and to promote democracy (Dsouza, 2010; Cashmore, 2010; Melchionda, 2010). Even though the Internet did not win the prize, it largely contributed to choosing the Nobel Laureate Liu Xiaobo in 8 October 2010. The Chinese dissident published an article in The Sunday Times valuing the Internet because it “has brought about the awakening of ideas among the Chinese” (Xiaobo, 2009). Xiaobo, the first “digital peace laureate”, praised the Internet because it served as a channel for him to publish his essays calling for democratic reform in China, seeing as other media tools are controlled by the Chinese government. His views were widely circulated on the Internet together with the support of China’s top bloggers (York, 2010).

This paper investigates the role of the Internet in affecting politics in Egypt and the new realities created by the Internet that did not exist before. Since being introduced to Egypt in 1993, the Internet went through different development stages promoting its diffusion. This included successful initiatives such as dial-up or broadband connections, or through mobile phones. Consequently, Internet users in Egypt have been - and still are - increasing at a high rate, and are becoming more engaged in politics. Such progress is mainly due to the ability to access information and to express views freely, promptly and inexpensively through the Internet, in contrast to the other media tools that were censored by the old Egyptian regime.

The paper presents first a brief demonstration of Internet’s penetration and diffusion in Egypt, followed by a discussion about the digital divide as seen from different perspectives, the factors affecting it, and its relationship with democracy. The paper then sets the stage for the relation between the Internet and politics in Egypt, and the extent to which the Internet could play a substantial role in changing the political picture in the country. These issues were addressed at a critical time where parliament elections were taking place in November 2010, and the presidential elections were scheduled for September 2011. During the same period, the paper’s aim was further strengthened through conducting empirical research to obtain the feedback of Internet users belonging to different education backgrounds and age groups, regarding their perceptions towards the effect of the Internet on politics, and to study their behavior and attitude in relying on the Internet as a powerful tool in this regard. The paper assesses also the effect of the frequency of accessing online news, and socio-demographic characteristics (such as age, gender, and education) proved to be of great influence (Mosca, 2010) on people’s behavior. Data gathered from the survey will be examined in light of the Internet’s relation to politics in Egypt, leading to derived conclusions.

The role played by the Internet in the Arab revolutions in general and in the Egyptian revolution in particular further emphasized the importance of studying this phenomenon. This paper therefore attempts to fill a research gap in the literature related to digital divide and democracy in the Arab World, an area still unexplored, especially during this transformative phase. The importance of this study lies in the fact that its research was performed during a very unique period of time (i.e., few months before the Egyptian revolution). Recreating the exceptional circumstances affecting the subjects’ responses cannot be possible. Describing and analyzing the Internet environment prior to the Egyptian revolution – through analyzing events and people’s beliefs and their use of the Internet – would definitely help in understanding how the Internet had participated in the revolu-

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