

**Mohammed el-Nawawy and Sahar Khamis (2013).
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At a time of much scholarly debate over the role played by Internet activism in the 2011 Egyptian uprising against the Hosni Mubarak government, El-Nawawy and Khamis' *Egyptian Revolution 2.0* offers timely and important insights based on primary research. The book is the most comprehensive study to date of the role played by political blogging during the 2011 Egyptian revolution.

Chapter 1 sets out the study's primary purpose, which is to analyze five prominent Egyptian political blogs in order to find out how they fulfilled, or failed to fulfill, key democratic functions in the Egyptian context. The authors provide useful, thorough, and

comprehensive reviews of the relevant literature on the Internet in the Arab world, the nature and development of political blogging, and the democratizing potential of cyberactivism.

Chapter 2 further explores literature on both the democratizing potential of the Internet, and, in particular, political blogging. This literature is used as a guide to help explain and interpret the ways in which Egyptian youth activists used the Internet in general, and blogs in particular, in the lead-up to, during, and after the January 25, 2011 revolution against the Mubarak government. While devoting sufficient attention to the redeeming qualities and potentiality of the Internet, El-Nawawy and Khamis do well to cover the limitations of both the Internet and blogging. For instance, citing Karen (2006), the authors write that “blogging alone cannot lead to concrete political action on the ground” (p. 41). This is an important caution, especially in light of claims suggesting a causal relationship between Internet usage and the Arab Spring revolts.

Chapter 3 examines the development of the Internet in the Arab world, which has been hindered both by relatively high levels of illiteracy and low Internet penetration rates. Highly educated Arab youth, however, like their western counterparts, have grown up with the Internet, which has provided a space for Arab youth to discuss “taboo topics” and consume and comment on news, among other uses.

There is a wide range of bloggers, both conservative and liberal, and male and female, in the Arab region. Arab blogs are often overtly political in nature. The authors speculate that explicitly political blogs originate in the Arab world as an outlet for bloggers who live in otherwise censorial political and media cultures. Citing Lynch, El-Nawawy and Khamis document three categories of Arab bloggers: activists who are

explicitly political, bridge bloggers who try to connect with western audiences, and public sphere bloggers, who engage in arguments about local issues and politics.

Arab blogs have sometimes been sources of news for mainstream Arab news outlets. Blogs have put “pressure on mainstream media outlets to catch up with the coverage in blogs” (p. 70). This represents a tangible example of how blogs have impacted sociopolitical life in Egypt – they have contributed directly to the public discussion. This has resulted, sometimes, in policy considerations. For example, 2006 group sexual harassment crimes against women in Egypt were uncovered initially by bloggers. Also, an Egyptian blogger posted video of police torture, leading eventually to jail terms for two police officers. Overall, El-Nawawy and Khamis conclude, there have been “significant successes” (p. 80).

The authors are cautious, however, stopping short of claiming a “causal” relationship between blogging and the Arab Spring. They do say, though, that “it is not unreasonable to give [blogs] credit for paving the way or for being one of the main factors for this radical transformation, through enabling the exchange of political discussions and deliberations online and, most importantly, through exposing the governments’ many dysfunctions and malpractices” (p. 85).

In chapter 4, El-Nawawy and Khamis examine the role of Egyptian blogging in documenting and discussing human rights violations in Egypt. This was a potentially important activity in Mubarak’s Egypt, especially given the extent to which human rights were routinely violated and also the relatively closed political system, which didn’t allow for public deliberation and discussion. The authors analyze human rights-related threads of all five of the bloggers under study, and conclude that some key aspects of the blog

threads exemplify good citizen journalism and civic engagement. The examined threads documented human rights abuses, called for public mobilization, and provided an outlet for “online deliberation.”

For instance, a thread on Maikal Nabil’s blog provides a type of to-do list for activists because it calls on people to “act and do something to make their voices heard” (p. 90). Because Nabil’s thread also seeks to recruit more bloggers and activists, the authors argue that it fulfils scholar Larry Diamond’s “recruiting and training new political leaders” function (p. 91). Also, the comments written in response to the blog post represent a “good example of ‘civic engagement’” (p. 90).

A Nawara Negm blog thread calling on Egyptians to continue protesting against Mubarak exemplified Egypt’s polarization during the 2011 revolution. The authors, quoting Diamond, argue that this polarization “may be creative and advantageous for social justice and democracy at times of political crisis” (p. 95). Another Nawara Negm post “elevated citizens’ social capital” through education and emphasizing tolerance, rights, responsibilities, among other things.

Another blog post, by blogger Wael Abbas, exemplified citizen journalism because it featured Abbas breaking a story – using sound and video – of a young protester shot dead by police. Based on the comments, Abbas’ blog post seemed to both inform and elicit strong emotion. As a result of the post, the authors’ analysis concludes that “posters in this thread adopted a proactive approach and came up with some concrete solutions to reduce the pain of the Egyptian protesters and to publicize their case” (p. 108).

A September 2011 blog post by Mahmoud Salem (aka Sandmonkey) infused optimism at a time when many Egyptian revolutionaries felt deflated and that the revolution had been lost. The responses to Salem's optimistic post were positive, and El-Nawawy and Khamis argue that the thread "reflected several civil society functions" (p. 120).

Overall, then, chapter 4 constitutes an empirically and theoretically driven analysis with practical considerations for both scholars and activists. At each step of the analysis, the authors analyze blog texts in the context of larger theoretical ideas of civic engagement, public participation, and democratic citizenship. This chapter represents arguably the most practical example of how El-Nawawy and Khamis demonstrate the role of blogging in the Egyptian revolution. The authors say blogs helped in "paving the way for the 2011 revolution by raising public awareness about severe governmental violations of human rights and restrictions on various forms of freedom, as well as encouraging effective action and organization during the revolution itself to help rally public support and orchestrate the mass movement against the regime in power" (p. 136). Importantly, the blogs also served as forums for "online deliberation" and "electronic debate" (p. 139).

Chapter 5 addresses bloggers' treatment of government corruption. Although some mainstream news media covered some corruption issues and cases, they neglected many, and bloggers played a key role filling gaps, argue El-Nawawy and Khamis. In this chapter, the authors again analyze blog threads, specifically those dealing with corruption, organizing them around the "main [democratic] function they seem to focus

on” (p. 144). The authors categorize threads according to whether they encouraged public mobilization, documented corruption, or urged deliberation.

For example, a blog post by Negm suggested a new restructuring of the post-revolutionary government, and ultimately solicited a good deal of positive feedback from Negm’s followers. Taken as a whole, the thread constituted an example of “encouraging civic engagement” (p. 146). Another of Negm’s post is even more direct about a call to action, and, according to the authors, provides “clear evidence” that civil society can be aided through deliberation in the virtual world.

In chapter six, El-Nawawy and Khamis make sense of their findings and discuss similarities and differences between the five blogs they analyzed, with attention to the unique democratic functions performed by each. The authors also outlined how, specifically, the examined blogs performed democratic functions, contributed to Egypt’s 2011 uprising, and, ultimately, played a role in “invigorating Egyptian civil society and enhancing civic engagement” (p. 202). The authors also consider the future of political blogging in Egypt, and ask important questions about the potential role of blogging in a budding democracy characterized by a disproportionately youthful population.

A general conclusion from this analysis is that blogging has “a great deal of potential” (p. 54) to alter political life in meaningful ways. However, both bloggers and observers should be cognizant of the fact that blogging will not necessarily bring about “actual change” (p. 55) and that there are some unique problems associated with blogging, including issues of accuracy and balance, among others.

The authors are careful not to attribute the Arab Spring entirely to social media, blogging, or the Internet, and altogether avoid causal claims. They argue that an

“embedded media perspective” (p. 207) can best explain the symbiotic relationship between the virtual and real worlds of political activism, and that “it is the unique combination of online activism in the virtual world with offline activism in the real world that paved the way for actual political change” (p. 152).

Citing Isherwood (2008), the authors also note that, “indeed changed the way politics [are] conducted in Egypt. However, in most cases, [they] have done so not by dramatically altering or revolutionizing politics, but rather by intensifying and speeding up trends that had already begun with satellite media and the opposition press” (p. 83). The authors also note that, in the Arab Spring, blogs provided “platforms for free speech and uncensored expression of individual and collective opinions; enabling the formation of virtual public spheres, where ideas and views could be freely discussed and openly deliberated” (p. 84). These quotes perhaps best capture the influence blogs have had over the past few years in Egypt.

However, the authors arguably over-exaggerate the extent to which actual political change occurred during what has been called “the Arab Spring,” and, in particular, in Egypt. The authors speak of “unprecedented political transformations” (p. 41) in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. However, according to some political scientists, serious change has yet to occur in Egypt, and, according to one perspective, Egypt’s July 3, 2013 military intervention to remove President Morsi represented a major regression. The return to quasi-authoritarianism in Egypt raises significant questions about the ability of online activism, and political activism in general, to help generate substantive and sustained political change. The authors, having finished writing this book in late 2012, did not have the luxury of knowing about important summer 2013 developments in

Egypt. Further analysis is needed to understand how and to what extent, in the aftermath of the events of July 3, 2013, blogging is able to influence political realities in Egypt and similar societies.