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# Beyond the Soapbox: Facebook and the Public Sphere in Egypt

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Abstract

*The question of the internet as a forum for political debate is continuously contested. My research grows out of such scholarship but focuses specifically on Facebook as a virtual public sphere in Egypt. Based on an analysis of a note posted by Wael Ghonim during the January 25 uprising on the Facebook group 'We are all Khaled Said,' I discuss the structural and technological benefits of the platform, as well as user behavior and interaction with one another. Using Jürgen Habermas' The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere and Yochai Benkler's The Wealth of Networks as the theoretical groundwork for my study, I make observations about the internet's ability to allow considered opinion, not just to record popular sentiment. I argue that while Facebook's structure has both drawbacks and advantages for promoting discussion, the new medium's biggest limitation in helping to produce a virtual public sphere is user inexperience with the platform.*

Keywords

*Egypt, democracy, activism, Arab Spring, social media*

## Introduction

The events that took place in Egypt between January 25 and February 11, 2011 shocked the world, if only because of the veneer of stability created by ex-president Husni Mubarak's regime. When examined carefully, however, the Egyptian uprising that led to Mubarak's ousting and the dissolution of his National Democratic Party (NDP) reveals itself to have been a long-term project. As internet and social media usage rates increase worldwide, more groups and individuals will find themselves in the position of the Egyptians – a people with a newfound ability to express opinions contrary to those of a small ruling elite.

While the role of the media, specifically social media, in the Egyptian uprising has been hotly contested by pundits, the arguments have tended to be too general to accurately judge the value of new media in aiding the uprising. In my article, I wish to better understand the concept of the public sphere as it applies to the modern world. The media landscape has gone through a number of profound changes since the invention of the internet, and the current focus on interaction and participation in the media seems to fit well with the tenets of the public sphere. A society in which exist a healthy sphere for reasoned discussion and civil society can help to expand citizens' political role. If Facebook, along with other social media platforms, was able to expand the public sphere in Egypt, it would represent a crucial political development, as well as strengthen the public sphere theory.

In order to evaluate the role of social media in the Egyptian uprising, I attempt to mine the value of the Facebook group 'We are all Khaled Said,' analyzing the deliberation surrounding one note posted by Wael Ghonim before Mubarak's announcement of resignation. I will filter my analysis through the lens of the public sphere as constructed by sociologist and political scientist Jürgen Habermas in his monograph *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Focusing solely on the notion of the public sphere, I look through the comments posted on Facebook and seek out similarities between Egyptians' use of social media and the media Habermas wrote about in his analysis of social movements in Europe, as well as the updated, internet-specific model presented by Yochai Benkler in *The Wealth of Networks*.

I argue that Facebook does have the necessary components of becoming a place for considered debate and a virtual public sphere, but that users' inexperience with the platform has severely limited this capability. Before looking at Facebook and the public sphere, however, I establish the political and social contexts of the uprising. I focus specifically on the past decade of flawed economic and political policies put in place by Mubarak and his ministers and how this atmosphere was able to make two previously unknown men – Khaled Said and Wael Ghonim – the symbols of the upri-

sing. I then turn to Habermas' conception of the public sphere as outlined in *The Structural Transformation*, comparing his historical narrative to the virtual public sphere (if it may be so called) created by the Egyptians on Facebook.

## Egypt's Economic and Political Regression

The liberalization of Egypt's economy began in the late 1970s by Anwar Sadat in order to spur slowing economic growth rates (Africa News 2010). The next two and a half decades saw privatization of state assets and an abandonment of policies that had supported workers and peasants (Dahi 2010). While bread riots did erupt in Egypt on numerous occasions, as they did throughout the region, the authorities were able to subvert dissident activities by dividing the opposition and cracking down on radicals. Though liberalization and foreign investment in the mid-1980s and early 1990s did help the economy (and especially the military, which was the main beneficiary of foreign investment), the growth rates once again began to fall in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The economic liberalization decreased the power of NDP and the military. As more wealthy businessmen profited from the new economic policy, the state grip on the economy withered, becoming confined to "judicial, legislative and security – rather than economic – issues." (Africa News 2010)

In order to counter its diminishing influence over the economy, the Mubarak regime attempted to consolidate power in other ways. The November 2010 rigged parliamentary elections serve as an example of the NDP's falling legitimacy and the desperate measures the party had to resort to in order to stay in power. Traditionally, voting had been a way for NDP to retain its façade of popular approval. By giving the voters a choice – flawed though it may have been – the regime was able to sacrifice a small number of local seats without threatening the large parliamentary majority it had expected to enjoy. Though the rigging may have deepened Egyptians' disillusionment in previous elections, the blatantly fixed vote of late 2010 came alongside "rising food prices, growing economic disparity, a media crackdown, and a citizenry fed up with police brutality." (Topol 2010)

As the government became more and more detached from the population, cooperation among opposition groups – or, at least, tolerance of one another – grew. This made the state weaker: it became harder to exploit the differences among the secular and Islamist opposition groups. It also made the opposition stronger, as it presented a unified and coordinated front against the regime and made it clear that the stereotypes perpetuated by the regime were nothing but gross propaganda.

Much of this anti-government cooperation has taken place online. Internet usage in Egypt increased in 2002, when the government privatized the sector and ended its monopoly over internet service (Bahgat 2004). Blogging became a popular medium of voicing opinions around 2004 and 2005, and it helped to forge the Kifaya movement – an alliance of opposition groups which called on Mubarak to leave and was against the succession of Mubarak's son to the presidency (Hirschkind 2011). As Charles Hirschkind (2010) noted, "while many of those who write and within the blogosphere are involved in Islamist organizations, and identify themselves on their blogs as members of these organizations, the political language they are developing online departs radically from that used within these organizations."Put simply, the Kifaya movement and the bloggers who supported it played an important part in creating a culture of unified resistance against an authoritarian government that had been able to impose emergency laws for almost three decades. It is little wonder that when the government declared January 25 a national holiday to honor the police – freeing up the population to voice its displeasure – tens of thousands of Egyptians marched in protest.

The protests continued across Egypt for over two weeks, making famous the names Khaled Said and Wael Ghonim. They also raised questions among commenters on the media about the power of social media, specifically Facebook, and communicative action in closed societies. Said's death became a rallying point for many Egyptians, who initially saw his case as a humanitarian (not political) issue that the government had to deal with, but failed. This was the sentiment that Ghonim captured in his posts as the administrator of the Facebook group 'We are all Khaled Said.'

That 'We are all Khaled Said,' along with other Facebook groups and other forms of media, played an instrumental role by helping to organize, document, and publicize the uprising is clear. What my article examines is the role of Facebook beyond that, looking at its potential impact on the public sphere in a country that has experienced decades of political repression and media censorship, limiting critical debate and communicative action. By highlighting the relevant aspects of Habermas' conception of the public sphere, I establish a loose standard to which a forum should adhere, if it is to be considered a space for rational debate.

## The Public Sphere, Then and Now

In 1962, Jürgen Habermas wrote *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, the manuscript that helped to launch a new field of political theory. In his book, Habermas essentially "asks when and under what conditions the arguments of mixed companies could become authoritative bases for political action," (Calhoun 1992:1). The private individual was a product of a new social order that became possible due to the "emergence of early finance and trade capitalism," (Habermas 1989:14) which enabled a bourgeois class to separate itself from the individuals ruling the state and dominate certain parts of the economy. This eventually led to the development of civil society, which "came into existence as the corollary of a depersonalized state authority," (Habermas 1989:19). Market forces helped to solidify the private realm by encouraging interactions outside of state control. They also helped to mold "news itself [into] a commodity," (Habermas 1989:21) creating a way to popularize ideas that did not necessarily go along with (and in many cases went against) the agenda set by the ruling class.

As Habermas notes, the "medium" of the deliberation between the public and the state was "peculiar and without precedent: people's public use of their reason," (Habermas 1989:27). It was the best ideas – regardless of the identity of the speaker – were the ones that held the most clout. Opinion was considered, not common, and the participants scrutinized every proclamation. They attempted to distill from a plurality of selfish interests

those that were the most universal – "general, abstract [and] depersonalized," (Calhoun 1992:14). Disagreement, skepticism and criticism were meant to improve the strength of the argument to make it palatable to even the most ardent disbelievers. Habermas goes on to say, however, that this does not mean the transformation of public discourse into a sort of market for ideas, which would imply that some were producers and others consumers, and that some had a disproportional wealth to promote certain ideas – the "laws of the market were suspended as were the laws of the state," (Habermas 1989:36).

Forums for debate also presupposed "the problematization of areas that until then had not been questioned," (Habermas 1989:36). When information became, at least in theory, available to all, it also became available to all interpretations, not a single one formulated by the ruling class or the church, thus challenging the status quo. Related to this was the tenet establishing the public as "inclusive in principle," (Calhoun 1992:13). Habermas does not mean to say that the public sphere was composed of all members of society, but that the availability of information via the market made it theoretically available to all, thus making inclusiveness a necessary (though elusive) condition of the public sphere.

Egypt's public sphere and civil society were weak before the fall of Mubarak, but they were not hopeless. The factors that allowed for the creation of the private individual were present in Egypt, as well. Many people were able to make monetary transactions outside of the realm of the state, but the government still controlled a large part of the economy. Indeed, the most lucrative positions and the ones that offered the best way for advancements – the military and the bureaucracy – were still tied to the state. Only the entertainment industry offered as good of an opportunity for advancement for middle-class Egyptians (Khalil 2012). The class comparable to Habermas' conception of the bourgeoisie was thus within the state, not outside it. Still, Egypt was developing a middle class that, in a way, leapfrogged the Egyptian economy and was establishing itself in the global market; Wael Ghonim typifies this demographic (National Public Radio 2011).

The role of the media in shaping the Egyptian public sphere was important even before the social media explosion. While Habermas 'disapproved' of the mass media, it is important to highlight it here to help understand the Egyptian context. Before the January 25 uprising, Egypt's national channels and newspapers were not actively censored, providing an outlet for those dissatisfied with the regime. This enabled the administration to keep a semblance of legitimacy in the eyes of the international community, which would have condemned outright censorship. However, the regime subjected the media to more subtle pressure and censorship. In 2010, for example, the state-controlled Nilesat company stopped airing 12 private satellite channels that supported the opposition Muslim Brotherhood a month before parliamentary elections (Committee to Protect Journalists 2011). International channels like Al Jazeera (based in Qatar) and Al Arabiya (based in Dubai, owned by Saudi Arabia) are not directly affected by such censorship, though the government decided to black out Al Jazeera's coverage in Egypt during the January 25 uprising (ABS-CBN News 2011).

Despite its seemingly rigid, one-to-many format of information dissemination, broadcast media actually helped to open up debate and promoted various viewpoints. Egypt is a regional broadcasting hub, and it has the highest number of households with televisions in the MENA region (Allam 2010). El Moustafa Lahlali (2011:66) writes, "the wide range of programmes offered by the Arab media has encouraged debate and rational criticism, which has been missing for so long in the Arab public sphere."Hirschkind's writings support this analysis. He writes that blogging, which emerged several years after Al Jazeera became popular, "allowed for the possibility of linkages, the articulation of shared interest and desires that otherwise would remain hidden, or at least fail to find institutional expression within existing forms of affiliation and political action." (Hirschkind 2010)

The internet allowed for many more people to express their opinions, which often lay contrary to the opinions of the state, but it was not the first medium that allowed for the expansion of the public sphere. In addition to promoting publics and critical-rational debate, television also promoted

education and literacy. Habermas does not single either of these out as a positive contribution of mass media, though – especially for illiterate Egyptians – popular media was one of very few sources of education. Before the uprising, the internet and broadcast media, even if they were not acting as a space for rational debate, began to alter the practices of the opposition and invited more deliberation among the citizens.

Though Habermas provides a good starting point for discussing the public sphere, applying a theory that was originally conceived in the context of bourgeois European societies to today's Middle East does not come without a set of challenges. For one, "the terms 'public' and 'private' are conceptualized distinctly in the Western discourse and the Arabic discourse," (Zayani 2008:71). This is especially true in the case of religion, which Habermas assigned to the private realm, "denying it sufficient visibility within the public sphere," (el-Nawawy, Khamis 2011:236). Furthermore, though the public sphere theory "rests on a degree of tolerance for difference... the co-existence of different traditions and viewpoints does not always produce symmetrical relationships whereby the better argument prevails," (Zayani 2008:71). This is true in Egypt, a society marked by old traditions and drastic divides among its people. On top of that, it is unclear whether an Egyptian public with a stronger voice will necessarily demand democracy. As Zayani points out, "the emergence and consolidation of an Arab public sphere does not necessarily herald democracy."

While these are important critiques that the reader must be aware of, I do not deal with them directly in this article. My goal here is to determine whether and how the tenets of public sphere manifest themselves in the specific Facebook group I am examining. It is not inconceivable that a certain aspect of a country's public sphere behaves differently from the rest, and I wish to determine the traits of the public as it manifested itself on Facebook.

## Public Sphere and Facebook

In many societies, Egypt included, citizens have been unable to build healthy civil society groups and to engage their peers in rational public debate.

Online media are only one aspect of a vibrant society, but they occupy an important place due to their appeal to the middle class and their emphasis on participation, not consumption. I analyze the discussions of the Facebook group 'We are all Khaled Said,' looking specifically for the factors that Habermas deemed to be crucial to the public sphere. Key among these are difference of opinion which leads to considered, not common, goals; a production of cultural as well as political commodities; a disregard of status among the participants and inclusiveness as basic tenets; common interest in truth or right policy; and an attempt to distill personal desires into abstract, universal ideals. I add to this list an important tenet of Yochai Benkler's, that the networked public sphere provides a way for readers and users to verify or refute claims made by their peers, what Benkler calls the "linking and 'see for yourself'" advantage of a virtual public sphere, (Benkler 2006:219).

In order to conduct my study, I have chosen to analyze a note written by Wael Ghonim and 100 comments to the note. I will begin by looking at the content of the note, moving to the comments thereafter. I decided to focus on the minutia and take a bottom-up approach, drawing cautious conclusions only after having analyzed a specific conversation on Facebook. Looking at a small sample of comments has its limitations, and my research is by no means conclusive. Yet focusing on the details and conversations is required to better answer questions about social media's effect on the public sphere.

Tension in Egypt had been brewing over the course of late January and early February. Ghonim wrote the note that I analyze at 3:00 p.m. on February 11, several hours before Omar Suleiman's brief statement announcing Mubarak's departure. The protesters' demeanor had begun to turn markedly sour after a speech made the night before by Mubarak, in which he announced his desire to stay in power, blamed the unrest on foreign elements, and called on the protesters to go home. The mood in Tahrir and elsewhere was "difficult to define – equal parts deflation, determination, and a mounting sense of pure rage," (Khalil 2012:259). The sense of blind defiance extended to the pages of 'We are all Khaled Said,' which by that point had evolved from

an apolitical call for the investigation of Said's beating to a more directly anti-regime movement; some users began to question Ghonim's allegiance to the revolution due to a misunderstanding.

A rumor began to circulate on the group's wall that Ghonim supported Mubarak staying on in an honorary figurehead position – anathema to those whose demands explicitly included Mubarak's resignation and a promise that Gamal would not succeed his father. This myth came about due to misreporting by the Middle East News Agency, which claimed that Ghonim called on the protesters to leave after Mubarak's speech, when Ghonim actually said this before the speech, thinking that Mubarak was announcing his resignation (Ghonim 2012:60, 284). The pressure being exerted on him, combined with the fact that he wrote many of his messages emotionally and spontaneously, resulted in a note that was raw and evocative, but also somewhat jumbled. It not only highlighted the divide between new and old forms of media – Ghonim did not clarify his statements in an interview, but chose instead to speak directly to his readers – but also bridged the gap between the virtual and 'real' worlds.

Ghonim (2011) begins by proclaiming that "Egypt is above all," affirming his patriotism, which was questioned by members of the group. He continues to highlight his fight for the revolution up to that point, reminding the readers of his activism for Egypt's freedom and the imprisonment he suffered because of it. His third point speaks directly to the publicness of the group and the concentrated effort of all Egyptians, not just one individual, in the success they protesters had had thus far: "the voice of the people is stronger than the voice of any one person... The people are stronger [than any leader] and the people are now in the streets fighting for their points of view regardless of the point of view of Wael Ghonim."

That Ghonim commends the collective over any individuals is encouraging, but he neglects to mention his readers and the users on 'We are all Khaled Said' as contributors to the revolution. While many Egyptians writing on the page's walls and commenting on each others' posts were also likely to be partaking in the street protests, it is clear that at least some of the people

were participating in the uprising solely by expressing their opinions online. This would have been the case with Egyptians (and other Arabic speakers) living abroad. Ghonim's neglecting to acknowledge the role of the individuals who are willing to express their opinion online speaks to the way their contributions are perceived vis-à-vis those actually partaking in the protests.

Ghonim is at once shaping opinion and stating that the opinions of others deserve to be respected, playing the role of the moderator that is reasonable but impartial. As the group's creator, he has the responsibility to encourage a plurality of ideas and establish the ideal that the group's publicness is inclusive in principle. That he promotes his own opinions while also encouraging others' is in itself not damaging to the freedom of the public sphere, as long as those who oppose him are able to voice their opinions. The note's visibility as the main text, however, allows for Ghonim's opinion to be buttressed by the structure of the forum itself. This is problematic but not entirely disqualifying the group from being a virtual public sphere – the pamphleteers and publishers that were important to Habermas were also acting as moderators and filterers of information while (either directly or indirectly) establishing their own opinions on the subjects they discussed.

## Facebook's Structural Inhibitions and Benefits

By 3:30 p.m., only thirty minutes after Ghonim published his note, 3031 of the 6003 responses had already been appeared – a rate of around 100 comments per minute, or 1.67 comments per second. This is a huge response and it indicates the importance of the page as a forum. By default, Facebook shows the 50 most recent comments, though users can click and open up the 'pages' of older comments, 50 at a time. At such a rate, those whose comments take five minutes to formulate and type would be ten 'pages' – 500 comments – ahead of where they began typing. The commenters, thus, would have a hard time, 1) identifying where in the conversation they began typing and what was said before the comment that led to their idea; 2) finding any responses to their comments; 3) keeping up with the

ideas posted before during the time it took them to write the comment; and, thereby, 4) sustaining a back-and-forth conversation with (especially) one, or more, individuals. Keeping track of all the new comments – if that is what one intended to do – would be nearly impossible during the time the conversation was taking place, making it difficult for all opinions to surface and have a chance to be debated.

Of course, not all comments were analytical enough to take five minutes to compose, the seemingly most common being expressions, "Enough, Wael!" or "I am/we are all with you, Wael." They offer no explanation as to why, or whether, the user either opposes Ghonim or supports him, nor do they reference any of Ghonim's ten points, making it impossible to understand what exactly the commenter's position is on the issues at hand. Those users looking to circumvent the speed issue reposted their messages several times into the comments. This made their viewpoints more prominent by appearing more frequently, which helped to mitigate the issue of speed, as well as the issues created by the overall number of comments, discussed below.

If speed is to be scrutinized, however, its benefits must also be mentioned. Never before in Egypt – or any other place, for that matter – could such a multitude of opinions be recorded in so little time. Had the regime chosen to censor or punish those spreading heretical opinions, the task would have proven Sisyphean. Its monitors would be lost not only in the high numbers of responders, but also at the speed with which the responses were coming in. Recording and deciding which comments were the most egregious requires time – this time may not be long, but it is certainly longer than the seconds it took for new comments to appear. Indeed, targeting the top echelons of online dissent, Ghonim and internet access itself, seems to be the only sensible (but, in hindsight, misguided) solution.

The sheer number of comments presents its own challenges, which are magnified by the speed at which they appear. This criticism is often described as the 'Babel objection' (Benkler 2006:10). Benkler pinpoints this criticism into three arguments, 1) that large sums of money will have to be spent in order to promote one's opinion, despite the low entry costs to digital

publishing; 2) that the readers will fragment and "individuals will view the world through millions of personally customized windows that will offer no common ground for political discourse or action, except among groups of highly similar individuals who customize their windows to see similar things;" and 3) that discourse among these "highly similar individuals" will damage deliberation by polarizing the discourse (Benkler 2006:234–235). As Benkler shows, some scholars have responded to this criticism by highlighting the centralizing power of the internet, in which power law – the tendency for few sties to attract many visitors, and many sites to attract very few visitors – prevails in shaping and few sites are able to draw large numbers of readers. For a central group like 'We are all Khaled Said,' however, the problem of too many voices reemerges once again, on an individual-site scale, rather than internet-wide scale. Examining if and how the three points highlighted above surfaced in the comments of 'We are all Khaled Said' is important, as much of the scholarship pertaining to internet and the public sphere takes them into account.

Regarding the issue of money dominating discourse, the government was one entity with a budget large enough to shape the discourse. It is impossible to tell just how heavily the state monitored the internet, or how much resources the government spent on promoting its own point of view. However, the regime's point of view was not highly prevalent on social media, creating a negligible effect, if any at all. Grassroots campaigns like 'We are all Khaled Said' were not commercially driven. While it takes some amount of time and money to create a group or participate in its discussion, throwing more money at the group's comments would have had little effect on its discourse. If it became apparent that somebody was 'spamming' for his or her own commercial or political benefit, the other users would either oust the party responsible or move their conversation to another group. The readers of the group found the site, despite the fact that Ghonim spent very little money to promote the page and decided to contribute because of their solidarity with the group, not because of a commercial incentive.

The fact that Ghonim began his group as a civil and not political one allowed him to gather more followers than most of the overtly politicized

opposition groups. By focusing on a commonality among the Egyptians, Ghonim was able to at once deal with the two other problems proposed by the 'Babel objection.' The initially non-political nature of the group enabled it to recruit politicized individuals of different opinions. It brought them in contact with one another for a common cause, serving as important training that would unite the country during the January 25 uprising. As we will see, the range of opinions expressed on the page did not lessen as the uprising gained steam and Ghonim became more firmly anti-Mubarak. As the political situation in the country became more volatile, the group's members began to express their opinions more clearly and unabashedly. With such a number of competing ideas, it would have been difficult for any user to become more polarized and radical in his or her thinking. Whether or not these ideas were actually 'competing' against each other and judged by the readers on their credibility and strength of argument is the topic of the next section.

## Comment Analysis

The comments I have chosen to analyze for what they add to the public sphere are not an entirely random sample. Not knowing the content of the comments, I had no way of being prejudiced in order to support my hypothesis. However, I did decide to look at comments written over an hour after Ghonim's initial post in order to mitigate the effects of the speed problem outlined above. The comments also passed the 'eye test' in terms of their length – there were a few long comments and not as many single-line, simplistic statements either affirming the commenter's solidarity with Ghonim or saying "Enough!" to the protests. The average comment was around 50 words long, enough to formulate a measured response to either Ghonim's note, or to an earlier comment. Of course, those who wanted to express their opinion in a fuller way had the option of doing so and did – the longest of the comments was by user 'Sisters of Saudi Arabia,' who voiced her frustration with Ghonim's interview in 665 words.

The comments showed a wide range of opinions on a long list of issues, from Ghonim himself, to the Egyptian military, to foreign intervention. Of

the 100 comments, 35 supported Ghonim, 22 antagonized him, 17 referred to Ghonim but did not make clear whether the user was in support of him or not, and 26 did not address Ghonim at all. 'Shehab Elgendy,' for example, wrote, "The lives of those who are being harmed and those who will be killed in the coming days will be on your neck Wael. It is your fault that this sedition is being spread everywhere. Just stop this already." Others were more specific and less malicious in their criticism. 'Dr. K. Kamal,' for example, wrote, "Wael you are playing with our minds. You need to pick a direction to follow, go either right, or left. But you cannot say one thing and then later on, say something else." Others supported Ghonim. 'Mohamed Nabil Ali,' responding to one of the prevalent themes in the comments, wrote, "Wael, I urge you to ignore those idiots that say that America and Israel will enter our country because they are simply idiots who do not understand anything."

These inflammatory phrases and name-callings, however, did not have an effect on the commenters as they continued to express a wide view of opinions. This is likely due to the detachment from the conversation caused by the medium. The difference between a mass media environment in which the vast majority participate by consuming and one in which they are also able to publish their opinion is stark. In pre-revolutionary Egypt, the detachment from the real world – unrepresentative and authoritarian – only served to encourage ideas and participation in the public debate. There was little government-sanctioned space for any dissent, so it had to move either out of the country, as demonstrated by satellite channels, or online.

Curiously, user 'Rabab Farouk,' after chiding those who claimed that the achievements of the protests to that point had achieved enough, wrote, "So please, if you are simply too lazy to go out and protest, leave it to the bravery of those out on the streets to get us our rights back." The irony in him writing this statement on Facebook is unmistakable, but it is a significant proclamation as it distinguishes between the 'brave' protesters on the street who are calling for more reforms and those who are content with Mubarak's concessions. Farouk, it seems, does not mean to say that all those on Facebook are 'lazy.' He is encouraging people to out to the streets, but his state-

ment makes it clear that it is possible to participate in both spheres, and as long as the message for Mubarak to step down is being promoted.

During the uprising itself, some, though certainly not all, users participated in the protests, creating a bridge between the real and the virtual worlds. The majority of protesters would likely have gone to the January 25 protests had they been active on social media or not. However, the group 'We are all Khaled Said' was instructive and inspired its readers to participate in real-world campaigns. Aside from educating its readers, it also helped to promote cultural production, which the Mubarak regime was previously a patron of. Ghonim often posted pictures of graffiti and cartoons on the group's wall, as well as short YouTube videos and songs. The group became not just a place for expressing opinions, but also a cultural center that resisted Mubarak's rule in its totality. This cultural and opinion production helped the group to have a closer immediacy to the real world than a public sphere shaped by mass media alone.

Calling someone a *khain* (traitor) seems to be one of the few ways of interaction among the Facebook group's commenters. Indeed, for Habermas a key tenet of the public sphere is that it does "not merely [promote] sharing what people already think or know but [that it is] also a process of potential transformation in which reason is advanced by debate itself," (Calhoun 1992:29). I found few signs of furthering of ideas and deliberation in the comments I analyzed. Structurally, Facebook's continuous stream of comments – unlike threaded commenting that is prevalent on news websites and blogs – makes it hard to organize and pacify the speed and number problems outlined above. It also makes it nearly impossible to understand who a user is referring to.

The users' online skill level and understanding of Facebook's commenting platform also undermined the potential for a coherent discussion forming. One commenter, 'Aisha Gamal Ibrahim,' for example, wrote simply, "I agree with the opinion you wrote to Wael, but not the comment," apparently referring to another commenter. A more advanced user decided to copy and paste the name of the person to whom he was responding in English, which

would theoretically make it easy to find both the original commenter and any subsequent follow-ups. The substance of his reply, however, left much to be desired: "Mohamed Faisal, You are an ignoramus." Faisal did not comment again on Ghonim's note, despite having initially written a relatively lengthy post praising the administrator.

Indeed, the disappearing persona seems to be a recurring theme in Facebook comments. One of the first responses to Ghonim's note was by a man named Sofien. The comment must have been either extremely insightful or inflammatory, as it prompted a number of responses that voiced support for the Egyptian military. As one of the few comments that incited such commotion, I was anxious to read it; unfortunately, it was not there. Perhaps, Sofien did not like the attention he was getting and deleted it; perhaps, he deleted his Facebook account altogether – or was kicked off the website. Another comment, a relatively harmless one written by 'Dr. K. Kamal' had disappeared over the course of my study. Another user, who originally went by 'Tarek Mohamed,' had since changed his name to the more ambiguous 'Commandos Force,' and began toting Gamal Abdel Nasser's photograph as his profile picture.

The group's commenters were also not very keen in returning to the conversation – 477 users contributed more than one comment. The vast majority of those posted only two different comments. Only five individuals posted ten or more unique comments. Overall, of 6003 comments, 79.7% were by users who posted only one unique response (some users copied and pasted the same comment, which increased the comment's visibility but did very little to advance discussion). I do not mean to imply that there were no comments that responded to someone else. The majority of comments that did refer to someone directly, however, were targeted at Ghonim.

Some users did decide to post their opinions to things other than Ghonim's statement, leading to at least the potential for debate of these tangents. While very few people responded to specific users, many more responded to categories of users at a time – "Whoever says that Wael will take the first flight out of Egypt if Israel attacks us...," "To all those who took part in this

revolution for the sake of change and for the sake of bringing down corruption...," "How interesting it is that all of sudden people are asking others to calm down..." Due to the large number of comments, the users appear to be keen on targeting strands of ideas and multiple individuals at once. Thus, one user responds to many, in a way replicating the mass media model of the public sphere. Of course, on Facebook, the 'many' can respond, though there seems to be little desire among the commenters of 'We are all Khaled Said' to have back-and-forth conversations. While some did attempt to spur discussion, such efforts were mostly futile, as most readers only posted once and the number and speed of the comments made it difficult to keep up with the conversation.

One way to encourage discussion amid the commenters would be 'electing' representatives who argue on behalf of the masses. This would allow for ideas to be deliberated among few individuals, representing large groups of followers; this structure is the backbone of representative democracies worldwide. While Facebook as a platform does enable 'Likes' – a simple voting tool that does not reveal any insight, but could be used to single out the authors of the top comments – these were not used effectively and tended to favor the earliest comments to Ghonim's note. As the frequency of the comments increased, it became simply too time-consuming to look back into the comments, as the new comments were coming at torrential speeds. Had there been a feature to sort the comments by the number of 'Likes,' it may have been possible to sort out the best arguments and establish the several users whose input was valued the most by his/her peers. Since no such function exists, however, the most liked comments to Ghonim's note are currently hidden among several thousand others.

Complicating the idea of an elected representative is the fact that few people seemed willing to distill their comments to the most basic and agreeable tenets in order to help the discussion. While some did distinguish between personal beliefs and the best course of action for the country, the majority of comments either reflected personal opinions or collective opinions not necessarily backed by the reality of the wide range of viewpoints represented

in the group's comments. There is a distinct difference between forming an opinion based on personal experience that can be discussed among many people and assuming that one's opinion applies to all; the overwhelming majority of the 100 comments I analyzed fell into the latter group. Supporting one's opinion with an argument based on established facts – what Benkler called "linking and 'seeing for yourself'" – did take place, but was also underdeveloped.

While linking is theoretically possible in Facebook comments, the practical use of the feature has not kept up to its potential. Ideally, it should provide evidence for arguments, move the discussion forward, establish writers' credibility, and protect against fragmentation. There are only 150 links in the 6003 comments to Ghonim's note, and many of those are the same links 'advertising' other Facebook groups and pages, and YouTube videos. In fact, there were only eight unique links that referred readers to sites other than Facebook and YouTube. Of these eight, five linked users to blogs or forums. Those looking to provide support for their arguments or to educate their peers, therefore, only linked to six articles published in three established organizations, The Guardian, Al Masry Al Yaum, and Al Yaum As Saba'. Few links were used in context, as many of them were posted on their own or with only a sentence or two – hardly enough space for a genuine critique of the contents.

## Conclusion

Egypt's economic, communicative, and political developments over the past decade created conditions in which an alternate, underground political sphere would not only thrive, but would be essential for expressing opinions in a non-violent matter. The brutal beating of Khaled Said stood in stark contract with Egyptians' non-violent calls for change in the country and enabled Wael Ghonim to create a virtual space in which people of various political affiliations could unite for a humanitarian, not political cause. As the Egyptians' conditions deteriorated, the group became more politicized – not necessarily backing a specific candidate (even though Ghonim was a

supporter of El Baradei), but opposing the current regime. Ghonim's marketing prowess, as well as the structure and the comments on the Facebook group 'We are all Khaled Said,' have shown that while some problems of the mass-media public sphere are scaled back in a networked environment, new ones arise.

As constructed in the comments to Ghonim's note, the most significant benefits of the virtual public sphere that I examined are: 1) the inclusive atmosphere which is impersonal and anonymous enough to encourage responses; 2) the creation of a virtual 'community' that generates not only educational but also cultural products; 3) the ability to use various forms of media to support one's argument, including pictures and video; 4) the ability to see others' opinions on a mass scale; 5) the capability to push a story into the mainstream; and therefore 6) the feeling of contribution to a national dialogue that, in the past, had been limited to only a few individuals.

However, serious drawbacks are also apparent: 1) the speed (as well as the number) of the comments makes it nearly impossible to sort out any continuous thread of ideas; 2) the difference in the level of understanding of the medium makes less advanced commenters incapable of using the platform's full range of tools; 3) the contentious nature of the topic made various personal opinions hard to distill into relatable similarities among the Egyptians, which, while did not fragment the users, made the vast majority of comments too specific or too presumptuous to encourage reasoned debate; 4) the benefit of relative anonymity, which encouraged comments, also made commenters likely to not follow the discussion or read reactions to their post; and 5) the ideal of linked, fact-backed discussion was hardly apparent, as the few commenters that used outside sources linked only to several places.

The benefits and drawbacks outlined above do not fit neatly into the Habermasean tenets of the public sphere. To be sure, there was a considerable variety of opinion expressed among users posting in the comments, both regarding Ghonim and the uprising itself; cultural as well as political ideas were expressed; there was an interest in doing what was best for Egypt and

its citizens, though the course of action varied differently; and inclusiveness was a well-established fact, though some users certainly did not express the utmost respect toward those whose ideas were drastically different. On the other hand, there were few attempts to distill personal opinions and desires into universal goals; few used the linking feature and the links that did appear were homogeneous; ideas were rarely debated; and very few people trying to engage their peers into a conversation.

Structurally, Facebook can be an apt platform for a virtual public sphere, but it is not without its limitations. Linking is easy, which gives users the potential to buttress their opinions with credible sources. Facebook also enables readers to vote for the best arguments by 'Liking' them, giving any comment the potential to stand out. However, the problem of the 'disappearing persona' is a keen one. It reduces the amount of trust the users have toward each other and damages the inclusiveness aspect of the public sphere. While the tools for publishing an opinion are relatively cheap and accessible to many Egyptians, the fact that every user is able to delete his or her comment, instead of attempting to support or elaborate it when it is questioned by others, undermines any chance for a coherent debate taking place. This is especially true if the deleted comment was a controversial one, which seemed to be the case with 'Sofien's' missing post. Another structural flaw the constant stream of comments makes it nearly impossible to engage someone in a structured debate. There are ways to circumvent this problem (by copying and pasting someone's name into the comment, for example) and several users did use the platform to its fullest advantage in order to stimulate discussion. The vast majority, however, did not. The detachment from the chaos of Tahrir could have been beneficial to the users; for most, however, it was not, as their (understandably) emotional and rash comments hurt the prospect of deliberation in the comments.

User indifference was hardly an issue, as a range of opinions was expressed and at times quite forcefully. The main issue inhibiting the commenters, I believe, was their inexperience with the medium. While some users left comments that encouraged responses or themselves responded to opposing

viewpoints, the atmosphere in the comments was hardly one in which "reason is advanced by debate itself," (Calhoun 1992: 29). The conversations that took place were largely stuck in several simple narratives, with users mainly avoiding confrontation with others' ideas, choosing instead to label them traitors if their opinions were too unorthodox. This atmosphere may have been encouraged by both the violence on the streets of Egypt, as well as the decades of seeing government libel against its opponents in the mass media. It seemed, ultimately, as if the users were looking to broadcast their messages to the greatest number of people, instead of standing behind each comment and attempting to advance the debate by resorting to a rational discourse. It should not come as a surprise that Ghonim – a marketing executive at Google, after all – was perhaps the ideal internet user in engaging the virtual Egyptian public sphere. The way he and co-administrator Abdel Rahman Mansour moderated the page, filtering the news and cultivating a culture of disbelief of the status quo, allowed it to become a virtual community.

But Ghonim can also be criticized for not doing more to shape the community into a sphere for deliberation and for not responding to the users in order to set an example of a back-and-forth conversation. Ghonim's prominence as the note's writer of the certainly allowed his viewpoints and opinions to be the most visible; however, the same was true of the writers and pamphleteers 250 years ago. The difference between the Facebook administrator and the European writers is the medium that they use to spread their ideas and beliefs. Ghonim did encourage some participation, through voting or commenting, and repeatedly stated that his opinion is not the opinion of every protester. He may have been more effective, however, by using Facebook's tools to interact with his readers in a back-and-forth manner, not just creating more lively debate, but also providing an example to the other users.

How Egyptian public sphere will adapt to the post-Mubarak era remains to be seen. While Facebook is a promising tool that may be used for genuine deliberation, it is not yet widespread or familiar enough to influence

the country's public sphere at large. It does, however, provide a unique set of tools to the few individuals who are interested in encouraging political discussion. If these individuals can lead by example and promote rational critical debate, Facebook's effect on the public sphere at large, in Egypt and elsewhere, will become more pronounced.

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