

# THE NETWORKED PUBLIC SPHERE AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN POST-2011 EGYPT A LOCAL PERSPECTIVE

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This research examines the Networked Public Sphere (NPS) and its impact on spurring political debate, mobilization, and civic engagement in Egypt four years after the so-called “Arab Spring.” Specifically, the research explores whether and the extent to which the NPS as coined by Yochai Benkler was able to serve as a platform for the exchange of information and alternative viewpoints, which is conducive to a democratization process. The research conclusions are derived from fieldwork and social media analysis looking into the 2013-2015 period in Egypt with reflections on the January 2011 uprising. Qualitative and quantitative methodologies were used—namely, in-depth interviews, focus groups, and a quantitative survey together with social media analysis using digital tools. Findings show that Egypt’s NPS has mirrored offline politics. The NPS has also evolved with the Internet, and it is now populated by a broader cross section of society, including traditional political powerhouses. The space has become both chaotic and concentrated. While the initial successful impact of early adopters has now been diluted, the changing composition of the NPS means online spaces have become more inclusive of a diverse public with varying political tendencies.

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This work is dedicated to the people who made the Egyptian revolution a reality—the unknown soldiers who took to the streets from January 25<sup>th</sup> and onwards. To those who lost their lives, their limbs, and their eyes; to those who have temporarily lost their freedom but never their spirit: this modest effort aims at documenting a tsunami we were lucky to experience.

The Egyptian revolution has been romanticized, scrutinized, hijacked, and utilized. But it thrives in the continued revolt against tyranny, authoritarianism, and injustice. The Egyptian cause remains alive in the unrelenting quest for bread, freedom, social justice, and human dignity. #jan25.

*Nagla Rizk*  
*Cairo, February 11, 2016*



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A series of semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and a survey coupled with digital analysis informed our understanding of the becoming of Egypt's Networked Public Sphere today. Highlights include how the NPS has migrated to social media platforms, mainly Facebook and Twitter, particularly in the aftermath of January 2011. "The ground came online" was an expression and sentiment echoed by various veteran online users whose presence predates 2011. These veterans indicated that they felt a strong change with this massive advent of people to that online space they once called home. The Internet, our findings showed, has ceased to exist as a confined space for activists.

With more people and players coming online, online spheres started mirroring the offline ones, rather than informing and influencing them. This is manifested in online reflections of violence overtaking the political conversation in Egypt toward mid-2013.

This massive Internet expansion was aided by traditional structures such as powerful political and media actors playing a more pronounced role online. Powerhouses of political discourse such as mainstream mass media (television channels and newspapers), the state, and political parties expanded their online presence in the last years, and with this presence, they brought offline dynamics, in terms of topics of their interest and ways in which they are debated, to dominate the conversation. The presence of the state online also meant arrests were made on grounds of online activity, which meant a feeling of lack of safety ensued among those who spoke out against the state.

As the online space morphed to include offline players, these players brought their own organizational dynamics to the sphere. This is illustrated for example in how the administration of deposed President Mohamed Morsi and his group the Muslim Brotherhood operated their online channels. Respondents who worked for the administration highlighted the difficulties of trying to lead a successful, dynamic social media operation for a hierarchical organization. These include how hierarchical values of secrecy overpowered the need to be responsive and interactive with the public online.

Both centripetal and centrifugal forces coexisted to varying degrees at varying points in time in the NPS. While centrifugal forces dominated the online sphere during the phase of the early adopters, the entrance of traditional hierarchical structures challenged these individual voices. Yet as more diverse individuals and groups continue to come online, individual voices still carve a place for themselves.

Some respondents reflected on how the expansion of the Internet into a set of divergent users and a less homogenous space meant that its ability to support and mediate mobilization has become limited. As autonomous voices became diluted,

the space also has increasingly come to reflect and reproduce the state of polarization in Egypt following the ouster of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Originally, credibility online among the community of activists was meritocratic, based on histories of online engagement and subsequently followers, which built up trust. Offline structures joined the online space and brought new metrics of credibility, based on their offline influence. This research also found that the ethics of online conversations have deteriorated as a result of the broadening of participation on the NPS, moving from a self regulated space that earns its growth and relevance from a certain set of ethics and broader trust to a more polarized space mirroring the political reality and the prevalence of false information driven by conflicting political agendas.

The results reflected the experience of Egypt during the period under study, where a sphere originally dominated by a homogenous group of early adopters continued to transform as other individual voices as well as established hierarchies gained presence online. Debates within the sphere have become more reflective of the political state in Egypt and of power structures in place.

Discontent with the state of politics in Egypt as well as safety concerns online meant several respondents, both activists and those in opposition to the ruling regime, chose to disengage from online activity. In the meantime, supporters of the regime as well as traditional structures joined the space. This changing composition meant the space became more concentrated but also more chaotic. Despite the entrance of existing offline structures that tend to practice centripetal power online, this has not meant ultimate centralization, as new voices add to the diversity and perhaps chaos online.

Fieldwork also pointed to the importance of offline structures and dynamics for information sharing, mobilization, and influence in decision making. An example this research detailed is the reliance of the Tamarrod signatures campaign demanding Morsi's ouster on word of mouth and existing political networks as well as mass media to mobilize support and disseminate the campaign's message. Social media played a more supplementary role in this case. Results also suggested that respondents resorted primarily to mass media and existing offline structures for updates on the campaign, regardless of whether they were Internet users or not. Digital analysis indicated peaks in the online conversation about Tamarrod after more traditional players endorsed the campaign offline, showing how offline activity was governing the growth of the campaign. Results also indicated the existence of models predating that of the NPS that rely on mass media together with friends and family as key influencers on decision making, especially with regards to this campaign.

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## BACKGROUND

In describing the digitally mediated public sphere worldwide, the new network architecture has been often celebrated for facilitating access to expression, with reduced hierarchies and more horizontal modes of production rendering political engagement more possible. In the Arab World, wide uses of Internet technologies for political reasons preceded the Arab revolutions to become one of the elements that made the mobilizations possible.

Four years into the revolutions and with rising political stalemates and crises on different Arab fronts, the function of Internet technologies with respect to mobilizations has been put into question, especially with the exponential growth of the virtual online public space.

In this research, we examined the role of digital mediation in the formation of a “Networked Public Sphere” (NPS) in Egypt.<sup>1</sup> We asked whether the NPS as coined by Benkler was able to highlight, through meritocratic means and not traditional hierarchies of power, better sources of information and alternative viewpoints that are conducive to a democratization process through informed debates.

Since the late 1990s, the seeping of Internet technologies into the everyday life of Arab youth became slowly entangled with ensuing socio-political transformations. The unfolding of new spaces of unregulated debate and later of uprisings that would unsettle incumbent authoritarian rules has pressed the question of the extent to which a digitally mediated public sphere is able to affect political culture and social norms.

During the Arab Spring eruptions in 2011, there were many celebrations of Internet technologies for facilitating public action and for transforming the public into a networked one, able to debate, organize, and mobilize. The general feature of the uprising’s public formation was one where the Internet is a commonly used tool of expression and communication. Beside and among the existence of traditionally organized political groups on the frontlines of the uprising, groups of Internet savvy youth became the face of these revolutions. The revolutions were celebrated as leaderless, digitally mediated, and broadly made through a loose group of active Internet users.

In Egypt, the spoken success of Internet technologies in removing the Hosni Mubarak regime has further crystallized the role of a NPS in political and social change. This has stirred the curiosity of the broader masses, individuals, and institutions about the medium of the Internet, with a growing interest in joining the expanding network. Four years after the revolution, many more people and institutions became present online, and many of the promises of the revolution were reversed on the ground. These developments raised more questions regarding the aforementioned function of the NPS, unsettling the alleged triumph of Internet technologies’ ability to support people in their quest for political and social change.

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<sup>1</sup> Benkler, Y. (2006). *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Shortly after the euphoria of the uprising that led to the end of the incumbent authoritarian regime, violence unfolded systematically, as the triangle of the state's traditional masters, powerful political groups, and the people clashed over a meaningful and inclusive post-revolutionary political project. Violent clashes between security and revolutionary protesters were a common occurrence in 2011 and early 2012 under the interim rule of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, which was charged with quelling the uprising's fervor. In mid-2012, an Islamist regime under the helm of the Muslim Brotherhood took power with the election of President Mohamed Morsi. Before Morsi, a mostly Islamist parliament took control over the drafting of the country's new constitution. Under this regime, violence continued between the new rulers and the people, distressed by the Islamist authority's failure to fulfill the promises of the revolution. In the meantime, a power struggle between the military institution and the Muslim Brotherhood slowly seeped to the frontlines.

By mid-2013, a combination of popular anger and military interest in ousting the Brotherhood from power ended their rule with the abrogation of the constitution, the cancelation of parliament, and the deposition of Morsi. Another popular uprising swept the streets on June 30, at the heels of a wide-scale signature campaign by a group named Tamarrod, calling for early elections and the end of the Morsi regime. The June 30 mobilization raised a series of new questions about the nature of the mobilization and the function of the NPS in it. A military-appointed government took over until mid-2014, when Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, the former defense minister and Armed Forces commander, was elected president, ushering in another military takeover of the country's political space.

Against the backdrop of these events, masses of people who joined online spheres were expressing thoughts, debating issues, and fighting over political concerns on social media and other interactive websites. As this NPS expanded to include a broader section of society, the earlier influential voices were diluted, and the online sphere became another household for traditional power, with the state and the mainstream media coming more actively online. An inevitable debate rose over the difference between the 2011 mobilizations and the 2013 ones, and the extent to which a horizontal base of a networked public genuinely made both, or either of them, possible.

In the span of the last four years, the evolution of the NPS presented many interesting questions regarding its role in political culture and conversation and eventually political change. By engaging in this research, we broadly addressed three main areas:

- The structure, formation, and evolution of the NPS with respect to the different communities and institutions interacting in it.
- The issues introduced and disseminated in the NPS.
- The way content, information, and networks formed online related to activity and information in offline spheres, including mainstream media, government, and offline civil society.

Within these issues, we addressed the following questions:

- How did the NPS expand in the last four years in terms of players and activity?



- How have the veterans and early adopters of online spaces used social media and new web tools for political debate and organizing? What were the features of their online presence and engagement?
- Who is joining the networked public sphere today and why? Who are the newcomers?
- How is the state penetrating the network? How are mass media penetrating the network?
- How are online hierarchies formed, and how are they challenged by more traditional hierarchies today?
- What are the new features of the NPS today? How does it play into major themes such as organization, mobilization, and later, fragmentation, centralization, and polarization? Is polarization inevitable as the NPS becomes a better reflection of society at large?
- Does networked mobilization eventually allow for better political organization and serve as an anchor for democratic participation? Did the NPS enable people to be better connected and more engaged, hence aiding the mobilizations around January 2011 and in June 2013?
- To what extent has the NPS continued to be a counter force to that of the state four years into the revolution? Has the new media ecology and subsequent NPS upset the notion of durable authoritarianism or has it contributed to consolidating it? Does the Internet replace the state as an incubator of democratic practice?

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### HOW THE LITERATURE EVOLVED

The impact of the Internet on democracy has been an evolving topic of debate, with early optimistic views in the 1990s giving way to more reserved views in the early 2000s. The debate continues to this day across the spectrum of optimists and critics as events continue to unfold across the world, providing both new examples of successes of the NPS and other cases that question the universality of this success in mobilization and collective action. Initially, the Internet was heralded as a means by which to challenge traditional power structures such as mass media and the state's domination of public debate by giving a "voice to the voiceless."<sup>2</sup> Optimists also argued that citizens would be better informed as they would have the ability to customize what information they are exposed to, "the daily me."<sup>3</sup>

The debate evolved to include whether the NPS had in fact become more fragmented or polarized at one end<sup>4</sup> as a result of "information overload," or what Benkler describes as the "babel objection."<sup>5</sup> As well, the debate was over whether the Internet was more concentrated both in terms of architecture or economic concentration.<sup>6</sup> Some scholars argued that excessive customization and "filtering" of information would in fact steer societies towards "social

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<sup>2</sup> Hindman, M. (2009) *The Myth of Digital Democracy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. p.2.

<sup>3</sup> Negroponte, N (1995). *Being digital*. New York: Vintage Books.

<sup>4</sup> Sunstein, C. (2002). *Republic.com*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

<sup>5</sup> Benkler, 2006, p.10.

<sup>6</sup> See Hindman, 2009; Benkler, 2006 and Noam, E. (2003) "The Internet: Still Wide Open and Competitive?" OII issue brief no. 1 Oxford Internet Institute.



fragmentation.”<sup>7</sup> This would feed extremism and polarization if individuals choose to become less exposed to opinions or issues that they do not agree with or are not interested in.<sup>8</sup>

It has also been argued that online spaces are characterized by a “winner takes all pattern” and are a platform for novel forms of political elites and hierarchies rather than being a space where all voices are equal.<sup>9</sup> While the Internet in theory allows everyone a chance to speak, or to participate, this does not necessarily translate into an equal amount of attention or “readership.” “Audience concentration” or attention online is in fact unequal.<sup>10</sup> A few websites seem to catch most of the attention. While the Internet may have enabled participation, Hindman’s study found novel hierarchies online, ranging from structural to economic and social, all of which affect the average online participant’s ability to be heard.

Others including Benkler perceive the online space as one that allows for diverging viewpoints to exist and debate. Asking whether the Internet was “too chaotic or too concentrated to yield a more democratic discourse than the mass media,” Benkler answers that “neither is the case.” He argues that if the balance between chaos and concentration online “is not just right,” at least the networked public sphere is still more favorable than a “mass-media-dominated” one.<sup>11</sup> The real threat to the attractiveness of the NPS is the “polarization of discourse in society as a whole.”<sup>12</sup>

## THE TRIUMPHS OF THE NPS

The technical architecture of the mass media moderated public sphere is one that is hierarchical, with one-way channels of communication and the public at the receiving end.<sup>13</sup> Benkler compares this to the NPS, where the Internet has meant that hierarchies are reduced between individuals and where more horizontal modes of production facilitate participation and engagement in political debate. By inverting the mass media model, the NPS became an alternative platform for a more active and engaged citizenry.

An example of the possible triumphs of the NPS in terms of citizen engagement and mobilization is the public debate and subsequent action that took place around the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) and Protect Intellectual Property Act (PIPA) in the United States. Benkler, Roberts, Faris, and others demonstrate that as a result of an uproar of debate and mobilization online, both pieces of legislation failed to pass.<sup>14</sup> Opposition to this legislation culminated in a blackout of Wikipedia on January 18, 2012, in protest against the suggested restrictions to the free flow of knowledge and information online.

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<sup>7</sup> Sunstein, 2002, p.9.

<sup>8</sup> See Sunstein, 2002, Benkler, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Hindman, 2009, p.4.

<sup>10</sup> Hindman, 2009, p.17.

<sup>11</sup> Benkler, 2006, p. 239

<sup>12</sup> See Balkin qtd. In Benkler, 2006 p. 257.

<sup>13</sup> Benkler, 2006.

<sup>14</sup> For details see Benkler, Y. and others (2013). “Social Mobilization and the Networked Public Sphere: Mapping the SOPA-PIPA Debate”. Research Publication no. 2013-16. The Berkman Center for Internet and Society, Harvard University. Cambridge, MA: 2013.

Compared to a public sphere mediated by mass media, the NPS in this case was “vibrant, diverse and decentralized.” It succeeded in effectively channeling public sentiment to shape outcomes by involving new players, such as “small scale tech-media,” beyond the traditional powerhouses that shaped public policy in the United States.<sup>15</sup> Both individuals and organization were able to bring their differing opinions to the sphere. Rather than fragmentation or polarization, the authors argued that this resulted in “widespread attention across partisan divides.”<sup>16</sup> The authors also found an “attention backbone” whereby smaller voices were amplified by more popular sites.<sup>17</sup> Yet, the authors acknowledged the importance of context in considering this successful example, which included the campaign’s relevance to technology and thus the engagement of “technologically capable individuals.”<sup>18</sup>

Other scholars also echoed the merits of the digitally mediated public sphere. Much of the literature concerned with studying the function of ICTs, the Internet, and its new generation of tools, particularly social media, to political and social mobilizations has detailed their positive traits. Scholars have pointed to the shared awareness created through these media, alternative modes of organizing through non-hierarchical structures, and potential sustainability due to the network-based architecture of the Internet.

For example, Bennet<sup>19</sup> considered technology as a space that enables people to “organize politics in ways that overcome limits of time, space, identity and ideology, resulting in the expansion and coordination of activities that would not likely occur by other means.”<sup>20</sup> The “new temporal and spatial terms” on which ICTs aid processes of political mobilization and discourse production are new modes of resistance. Similarly, in the case of the Arab Uprisings Khondker described new media as providing “horizontal connectivity in social mobilization” and as an increasingly intersecting space with traditional media.<sup>21</sup> Other studies that suggested positive traits of the Internet and its role in the upheavals in the Arab region include Lynch,<sup>22</sup> Howard and Hussain,<sup>23</sup> and Wilson and Dunn.<sup>24</sup>

## THE NETWORK AND MOBILIZATIONS: IT’S COMPLICATED

Researchers have pointed to class divisions, cultural divergences, and other elements as factors that affect the potential impacts of the public sphere networked through online tools. Others have also pointed to misguided assumptions about the nature of social media platforms as ones that

<sup>15</sup> Benkler, Y. and others 2013, p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> Benkler, Y. and others, 2013, p. 4

<sup>17</sup> Benkler, Y. and others, 2013, p. 10

<sup>18</sup> Benkler and others, 2013, p. 10.

<sup>19</sup> Bennett, L. (2003) “New Media Power: The Internet and Global Activism.” In *Contesting Media Power: Alternative Media in a Networked World*, edited by Nick Couldry and James Curran. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield. <http://depts.washington.edu/gcp/pdf/newmediapower.pdf>.

<sup>20</sup> Bennett, 2003, para. 10.

<sup>21</sup> Khondker, H. H. (2011) “Role of the New Media in the Arab Spring.” *Globalizations*, 8(5), 675-679.

<sup>22</sup> Lynch, M. (2011). “After Egypt: The Limits and Promise of Online Challenges to the Authoritarian Arab State”, *Perspectives on Politics* 9, 301-310.

<sup>23</sup> Howard, P. and Hussain, M (2011). “The Upheavals in Egypt and Tunisia: The Role of Digital Media”. *Journal of Democracy*, 22, 35-48.

<sup>24</sup> Wilson, C. and Dunn, A. (2011). “Digital Media in the Egyptian Revolution: Descriptive Analysis from the Tahrir Data Sets”. *International Journal of Communication*, 5, 1248-1272.

necessarily promote democracy, and overlook the profit driven nature of such platforms.<sup>25</sup> Rather than exposing skepticism toward social media and new web tools as an agent in public sphere formations and resulting mobilizations, scholars have called on the need to intersect the role of these tools with other ones, such as pre-existing political contexts, identity formations, and modes of organizing among others.

For example, Murphy took on Habermas' conception of the public sphere to demonstrate a different Arab public sphere altogether.<sup>26</sup> Murphy recounted how Habermas' concept of the public sphere originated from a particular experience of 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe. Habermas' public sphere was a bourgeois phenomenon rooted in the origins of European capitalism, an arena witnessing the "growing autonomy of professional classes (capitalist achievers) from both state and religious power."<sup>27</sup> In juxtaposition to this model, Murphy argued that Arab countries followed a different route of capitalist development and so there was no "public sphere" in the Habermasian sense of the term. What qualified the Arab debate, according to Murphy, was the unified front of resistance against colonialism, which led to a different evolution. Murphy also argued that an actual Arab public sphere has emerged, however, through the use of ICTs in the recent years.<sup>28</sup>

Salvatore demonstrated how Muslim reformers used communicative instruments to draw a public sphere in a manner similar to the bourgeoisie's use of newspapers to bring about a notion of public interest, as documented by Habermas.<sup>29</sup> Muslim reformers used the printing press to articulate a discourse aimed at reviving Muslim traditions and a broader modern social reconstruction. The role of oppositional media as a communicative instrument shaping public spheres extended to the post-colonial era and the Arab Spring mobilizations, he noted.<sup>30</sup> Yet Salvatore was careful about the "reflex of technological determinism" in looking at the role of new media in shaping a public sphere and its ensuing mobilizations during the Arab Spring.<sup>31</sup> Instead, he pointed to a more unpredictable and less pre-determined function of these media. He also pointed to class divisions and cultural divergences as common challenges to Habermas' construction of public spheres and their successful formations through communicative processes. This also extends to the analysis of the publics shaping the Arab Spring mobilizations and the function of online tools to this movement.

Despite the potential of ICTs to spread information, influence opinions and mobilize, the impact of preexisting affinities such as the family, the neighborhood, the mosque, and the youth group

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<sup>25</sup> Spier, S. (2011) "Collective Action 2.0: The Impact of ICT-Based Social Media on Collective Action – Difference in Degree or Difference in Kind?" Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0168-ss0ar-281338>.

<sup>26</sup> Murphy, E. (2009) "Theorizing ICTs in the Arab World: Informational Capitalism and the Public Sphere." *International Studies Quarterly* 53(4): 1131-1153.

<sup>27</sup> Murphy, 2009, p. 1131.

<sup>28</sup> Murphy, 2009.

<sup>29</sup> Salvatore, A. (2013). "New Media, the 'Arab Spring' and the Metamorphosis of the Public Sphere: Beyond Western Assumptions on Collective Agency and Democratic Politics." *Constellations* 20(2): 217-228.

<sup>30</sup> Salvatore, 2013.

<sup>31</sup> Salvatore, 2013, p. 226.

play an important role in shaping individuals' beliefs. Diani<sup>32</sup> argued that especially in contexts of limited internet access, "ICTs may certainly facilitate the spread of shared beliefs among sectors of the public opinion that already share certain basic characteristics, but it is more difficult to see its impact over a much large population."<sup>33</sup> Accordingly, more longer-term affiliations and solidarities are needed for "sustained collective action" that cannot be replaced with technology.<sup>34</sup> He added that non-explicitly political networks and solidarities continued to play an important role in mobilization in Egypt. He concluded that the absence of particular social, political, and economic modes and structures of offline organization in Egypt or Tunisia that are present in more established democracies meant that the post-2011 revolutionary process remained mired in uncertainty. In pointing to these broader contexts of mobilizations, Diani argued that collective action was an outcome of the interplay between technology, type of mobilization, and the context in which it unfolded.

Reasserting the relevance of context to technology, Gerbaudo argued that to understand the impact of social media in social movements, we must look at "their interaction with and mediation of emerging forms of public gathering and in particular the mass sit-ins."<sup>35</sup> He added that practices around protesting today are characterized by "mediated communication" intersecting with physical presence in the public sphere.<sup>36</sup> Put in the context of an alternative political space to traditional mainstream ones, social media as forms of productive networks have other merits. Gerbaudo referred to the meritocratic nature of social media, which is associated with "the techno-libertarian promise" of social media as spaces in which "dedication and charisma could find the outlet that was not available in formal parties and NGOs in the traditional intellectual public sphere."<sup>37</sup>

However, Gerbaudo pointed to the "short-term over-reliance" on social media as conducive to lack of long-term planning or leadership assimilation. He described online mobilizations in the Egyptian web as fleeting in nature, and the space itself as "magmatic" where "campaigns, groups, and personalities come and go, without managing to solidify into more durable organizational structures."<sup>38</sup> With the lack of a durable organizational mechanism to social media, often celebrated for being low cost organizational tools, "issues of accountability and democratic control on the new emerging leaders of social movements" unfold.<sup>39</sup>

Kalathil and Boas conducted a study of the dynamics of information technology and authoritarianism across a number of authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes including

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<sup>32</sup> Diani, M. (2011). "Networks and Internet into Perspective." *Swiss Political Science Review*, 17(4), 469–474.

<sup>33</sup> Diani, 2011, p. 473.

<sup>34</sup> Diani, 2011, p. 473.

<sup>35</sup> Gerbaudo, P. (2012). *Tweets and Streets: Social Media and Contemporary Activism*. London, UK: Pluto Press. p. 5.

<sup>36</sup> Gerbaudo, 2012, p. 2.

<sup>37</sup> Gerbaudo, P. (2014). "The Built-In Obsolescence of the Facebook Leader," *Jadaliyya*, September 5, 2014. <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/19117/the-built-in-obsolescence-of-the-facebook-leader>.

<sup>38</sup> Gerbaudo, 2014.

<sup>39</sup> Gerbaudo, 2014.

China, Cuba, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt.<sup>40</sup> Findings include that information technology is not a silver bullet; “ending authoritarian rule is [not] a matter of wiring up enough people.”<sup>41</sup> In fact information technology can produce opportunities, such as using the Internet for state propaganda, as well as challenges for authoritarian states. The larger context in which Internet use unfolded will differentiate between the impact of the Internet in each case on political freedom and openness. Amongst the factors that shape the unique context of each country, especially authoritarian ones, is how state policy influences, directs, and regulates Internet use so as to control the nature of its use by different actors, including political ones.

While the Egyptian government invested heavily in ICT infrastructure largely for economic purposes and made no overt efforts to censor the Internet beyond promoting “self censorship,” the larger context of Egypt meant that the Internet, with penetration at less than 1 percent of the population, did not necessarily pose a major threat to the then stable authoritarian regime of Mubarak.<sup>42</sup> The reality of Egypt then, which remains very much true to this day, was one where networks of political patronage directed economic activity and wealth distribution, with little organized political opposition save for the Muslim Brotherhood. Using the case of Egypt and other countries in their study, Kalathil and Boas contended that “realism and not necessarily pessimism” is needed to assess the true potential of the Internet in disrupting authoritarian regimes.<sup>43</sup> Morzov holds a more skeptic view of the role of technologies in mobilization; he argued that in countries struggling with oppressive states that engage in censorship of the Internet as well as use it to further their own interests, the space is no longer as free as imagined in liberal Western contexts.<sup>44</sup> The reality in many cases is one where ICTs can be repressed, and totally blacked out, as in the case of Egypt during the 18 days of revolt in 2011.<sup>45</sup>

## DIGITAL MEDIA AND THE NETWORKED PUBLIC SPACE: A STORY FROM EGYPT

### METHODOLOGY

This paper derived its conclusions from fieldwork and web analysis looking into the 2013-2015 period in Egypt, through which we examined how a growing networked public sphere intersected with a fast-changing political space. We resorted to different methodologies in order to best capture answers to our questions; these include in-depth interviews, focus groups, a quantitative survey, and a web search through data scraping tools.

The studied period was marked by growing discontent from an extensive portion of the population over the Muslim Brotherhood rule, a mass mobilization demanding the group’s ouster

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<sup>40</sup> Kalathil, S. and Boas, T (2003). Open Networks Closed Regimes. Washington D.C. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

<sup>41</sup> Kalathil and Boas, 2003, p. 150.

<sup>42</sup> Kalathil and Boas, 2003, p. 122, 136.

<sup>43</sup> Kalathil and Boas, 2003, p. 136, 153.

<sup>44</sup> Morozov, E. (2011). The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom. New York: Public Affairs.

<sup>45</sup> Diani, 2011.

from power, an ensuing popularly supported military takeover, and major eruptions of violence in its backdrop. These events changed the political space in Egypt substantively and prompted questions regarding the role played by the NPS, which once was at the central stage of the 2011 mobilizations.

The different methodologies were used to answer questions on the way the NPS has developed, where its early adopters stand, and how its newcomers, including the state, other powerful political players, and mainstream media, have engaged. More particularly, we tried to look into the features of the NPS today and the role it is playing in mobilization, fragmentation, centralization, and polarization. Finally, we interrogated the notion of the NPS as a democratizing force.

### IN-DEPTH FOCUS GROUPS AND INTERVIEWS

One attempt to respond to these questions was through the organization of a series of focus groups and in-depth interviews with active online users who have engaged with political events in different ways. Through these encounters, we attempted to map the growing changes in the digitally connected public sphere and its relation with political developments.

A total of three focus groups<sup>46</sup> were conducted throughout the course of this study, in addition to a set of interviews with a fourth group. A purposive sample was taken to capture accounts from representatives from across the political spectrum in Egypt, which has grown increasingly divided over the studied period.

Within the first phase of this research in the summer of 2013, we conducted the first focus group with early adopters, representing veteran activists, whose ideologies span the political spectrum; some participants belonged to the far left; others were central left, liberal centrists, and social democrats; and few were more right-leaning. The choice of this first group to set the research stage was less concerned with the political tendency of the participants.

The second and third focus group meetings were conducted throughout 2014, in the aftermath of the ouster of the Muslim Brotherhood regime. The former was with a group of non-aligned participants who sided with neither the Brotherhood nor the military. The latter included regime/state-aligned respondents who generally supported the military regime. These two groups were mindful of the political divisions that ensued the regime change.

The fourth group<sup>47</sup> of respondents consisted of Islamist sympathizers and members of the Muslim Brotherhood. They were interviewed individually in the summer of 2014,<sup>48</sup> given the impossibility of putting together a group of Islamists who were willing to express their views in light of the prevailing threatening political context.

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<sup>46</sup> Focus groups included a minimum of 8 participants.

<sup>47</sup> The identification of these groups is corroborated by the insights coming from blogosphere mapping conducted by the Berkman Center for Internet & Society.

<sup>48</sup> Five in-depth interviews were conducted.



We formulated a series of questions to participants and interviewees and used them as an open-ended base of the conversation. The questions started with some broad points on participants' history with online engagement and the nature of their political activity, asking them to reflect on how their presence online wove a distinctive political space there. We then posed a series of questions on violence as a major political development in the studied period and asked participants about their views on ongoing violence and how they reflected these thoughts online and offline. We asked about specific incidents of violence such as the forced dispersal of the Muslim Brotherhood sit-ins in the wake of the regime's ouster as a way to help participants reflect on their views on violence and as a topic that has been heavily debated online. We then asked participants to reflect on the differences between how violence has been handled in debates online between 2013 and 2014 and around the 2011 uprising, prompting them to map the evolution of the NPS over the course of the last five years.

## FIELD SURVEY

A nationally representative survey<sup>49</sup> of 1055 respondents over the age of 18 was conducted in March 2015. The survey took up the Tamarrod signature campaign as a specific inquiry fitted to a large scale field survey, through which we hoped to map how the NPS served the political process in Egypt between 2013 and 2014. Being the viral campaign that it was, intersecting offline and online spheres, Tamarrod offered an interesting specific investigation into evolutions of mobilization and organizational politics in Egypt, and the extent to which digital tools played a role, compared to the more traditional tools of politics.

The survey questionnaire covered four sections. The first asked respondents about their media consumption practices. The second section included a series of questions on respondents' political participation. The third section of the survey put the respondents' engagement with the Tamarrod campaign (or lack thereof) in the context of their media use, political habits, and online and offline activity. The fourth and final section included a series of questions that compared respondents' broader political engagement with the June 30<sup>th</sup> protests to their engagement with the January 25 uprising. The survey was informed by background research and in-depth interviews with Tamarrod's co-founders, who helped frame questions on the campaign's mechanisms of mobilization and organization.

## WEBRADAR

We complemented our work with queries using WebRadar, an online data collection tool developed by Innova Tunisia for digital activity in the Arab World. The tool captured data from a number of online platforms including news websites, Facebook, and Twitter and allowed for different forms of analysis.

The tool allows for measurements of engagement such as page views, comments, and shares of a particular event, topic, or issue. The user determines a set of keywords that direct the focus of the search, captured through a function referred to as "radar." Interest can also be gauged through analysis of content production and demand. Visualizations representing radar results for

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<sup>49</sup> Including 22 representative governorates, as per Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics (CAPMAS) guidelines.



particular time periods can also be created to depict series of different parameters including Facebook pages, and linking pages by discussions of common topics.

## FINDINGS

### HOW IT ALL STARTED

The virtual space of the Internet was home to a community of early adopters, who were more or less politically coherent and close in age. This political coherence resonated with what Bennett described as a “consciousness” that has a more global and less nationalistic mode of resistance, a sense of “collectivism” that is based more on individual choices and less on pre-existing groups and less ideological discourses in general.<sup>50</sup> The post-ideological tendency of this networked space made it more accessible across social boundaries, and its content became more viral.

This online presence by a small number of individuals, many of whom took part in offline dissident politics before the 2011 uprising, has rendered the digital spaces of blogs and social media sites of community building, whose individual members are known to each other, at least virtually, and who are in constant open-ended conversations.

As noted by a respondent from the non-aligned respondents focus group, a veteran blogger who has been an active social media user:

For some time, we have been used to a certain level of tolerance and acceptance because we all look alike and we are from one generation. Yes, there are differences, but not [so stark] like when we take it to the streets. When we are talking on social media, we are happy, but if we say the same things on the street, we get beaten up. We had this confined place.

### LESS OF A COMMUNITY, MORE OF A SOCIETY

The advent of more active users in online spaces and particularly social media communities in the aftermath of January 2011 has expanded the NPS to include a broader cross-section of society. A respondent in the non-aligned group said:

If we look at the statistics of Facebook users in 2011 and Facebook users in 2013-2014, we would be talking about a nation. An entire nation has come online, which means that the people we used to go fight with [at home], family and friends, are now present to fight with us on social media.

A report published by the Ministry of Information and Communications Technology in 2012 stated that from January 2012 to June 2012, 1.6 million individuals joined Facebook in Egypt.<sup>51</sup> It is worth noting that in May 2012, Facebook users in Egypt reached 10.7 million, whereas in

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<sup>50</sup> Bennet, 2003, para. 48.

<sup>51</sup> Ministry of Communication and Information Technology (MCIT). (2012) “Egypt, The Biggest Facebook User Population in the Region.” Ministry of Communication and Information Technology. Nov 28, 2012. [https://mcit.gov.eg/Media\\_Center/Latest\\_News/News/2491](https://mcit.gov.eg/Media_Center/Latest_News/News/2491).

late 2010, they totaled only 4.2 million.<sup>52</sup> “The ground came online,” was the comment used by one participant in the focus group, reflecting that this advent brought more of the offline reality’s dynamic to the virtual spaces of online media. This dynamic reflected the state of political divisions on the ground, with the activation of a spectrum that has strong supporters of the regime and the military institution on one end, and the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamist supporters on the other.

A Twitter user from the early adopters group noted recently in reflecting on the loss of a sense of community and familiarity online:

Twitter feels like you have returned from travels to your home to find other people living in it, searching your own stuff and acting as if they knew you. And every time you enter a room you find them entering with you. If you agree, retweet...I mean like.

### THE ONLINE MIMICS THE OFFLINE

The online reflection of violence overtaking the political space, particularly in mid-2013 with the regime change that replaced the Muslim Brotherhood with a pro-military government, showed how the online spheres started mirroring the offline ones, rather than informing and influencing them. This has become the natural byproduct of more people coming online.

Another manifestation of a more diverse presence in online spaces is how organized political groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood operated their own online channels, bringing their own structure and organizational dynamics to the less governed space that was the Internet. A respondent who was a former member of the Muslim Brotherhood spoke of how in the lead up to the violent dispersal of the Rabea al-Adaweya sit-in, which was organized by Muslim Brotherhood members and supporters to demand the reinstatement of Morsi and where a hundred people died during the forced eviction, he and other members worked together to send coordinated social media messages that aimed to humanize the sit-in by showing how large, diverse, and peaceful it was in order to encourage solidarity. Meanwhile, a respondent who was a member of the Morsi administration and who worked particularly on its social media strategy spoke of how the Muslim Brotherhood mimicked its offline hierarchies online by centralizing decision making processes over online posts. While this dynamic may be typical of any political organization establishing an online presence, for non-aligned participants, as well critical respondents from the Islamist sphere, the non-organized and individualized tendency of social media is somewhat at odds with attempts of organized use by political groups, and renders that use foreign and distant. The same respondent from the Muslim Brotherhood who used to send coordinated messages on social media about the sit-in mentioned how he eventually felt individuals can be more trusted on social media than groups because individuals are more accountable to what they say. In fact, his colleague spoke of how the sit-in social media strategy was a cause of tension because the sit-in leadership would try to send radical messages, while the youth of the sit-in were trying to attract solidarity by sending softer messages.

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<sup>52</sup> Ahram Online. “Egypt’s Facebook Users Double: Ministerial Report.” Ahram Online, June 3, 2012. <http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/44676.aspx>.

Besides organized political groups, the state also made it more prominently online. The respondent formerly working with the Morsi administration explained how he had a difficult time explaining to the presidency that social media are not broadcast sites, but rather interactive ones. This is why he encouraged the administration to start a series on Twitter called “Ask the President,” but the series did not survive long as the administration was not able to take difficult questions.

The respondent explained that the administration’s policy was to rely on and prioritize traditional mass media for major announcements and not to release information on social media about ongoing plans until they were finalized. This policy was problematic for the Twitter initiative, he explained, as it meant that many questions could not be answered. For example, while many questions were received via the hashtag regarding the constitution, those responsible would not provide the social media team with answers and instructed them to not respond to any of these questions before a press conference was held. Other examples included questions on plans for educational reform, which also would go unanswered or receive generic responses since the administration was still finalizing relevant plans.

Given the lack of dynamism, the hashtag lasted only for two months, from April 2013 to mid June 2013. The respondent explained that despite emphasizing the importance of social media to the administration, the overarching policy continued to be a reliance on traditional mass media.

Through a quick review of the hashtag on Twitter, one sees a mixture of questions and replies. While some questions had an inquisitive nature on political, social or economic issues, others were sarcastic or even aggressive. There was also a mix of responses, with some sounding like a “broadcast” or a mass media headline and others being quite informal, as if an individual user from the administration was replying. However, when a conversation unfolded, the “president” did not respond. It mostly turned into an exchange of either sarcasm or bickering between supporters and opponents.

The state presence online also occasionally manifested in the arrest of activists due to their online activity, but it also emerged in indirect ways. A respondent from the non-aligned group explained how easy it has become to call people traitors on social media and to report people to the authorities for their social media activity. A non-aligned respondent said, “We were being advised that if someone [from our friends] gets arrested, we must block him or her automatically so no one would access our information through them.” Another respondent with Islamist tendencies spoke about feeling unsafe expressing himself online. He mentioned that when he and his peers entered the Ministry of Interior building during the 18 days in January 2011, they found spreadsheets containing email usernames and passwords.

## THE OFFLINE TAKES OVER THE CONVERSATION

In the mobilization surrounding the Tamarrod signature campaign demanding an end to Morsi’s rule, the campaign leaders reported that they relied primarily on more traditional offline organizing techniques, and less on online recruiting and information sharing. In an interview with one of the founders of the campaign, she explained that the campaign relied heavily on word of mouth and the dissemination of their message through public spheres, literally using

speakers and megaphones and pre-existing networks of political groups, rather than relying on social media. She highlighted the important role of mass media in creating awareness and support for the campaign. Social media and especially the group's Facebook page were used as a supplementary platform for disseminating information and more prominently posting videos from important TV appearances and other events.

Similarly, the fieldwork survey results suggested that mainstream media and offline players, spaces, and networks were instrumental to the success of the Tamarrod campaign. Out of the total sample of 1055 respondents, 764 people had heard of the campaign. The most popular venues were mainstream television news channels, talk shows, and networks of family and friends together with public spaces (see Figure 1 below). Despite being members of the online sphere, Internet users heard about Tamarrod primarily via news channels, talk shows, and word of mouth rather than from social media, which ranked fourth in terms of how Internet users heard about the campaign. The results suggested that people's participation in the online sphere did not influence how they received news about Tamarrod or what sources they resorted to for updates on the campaign.

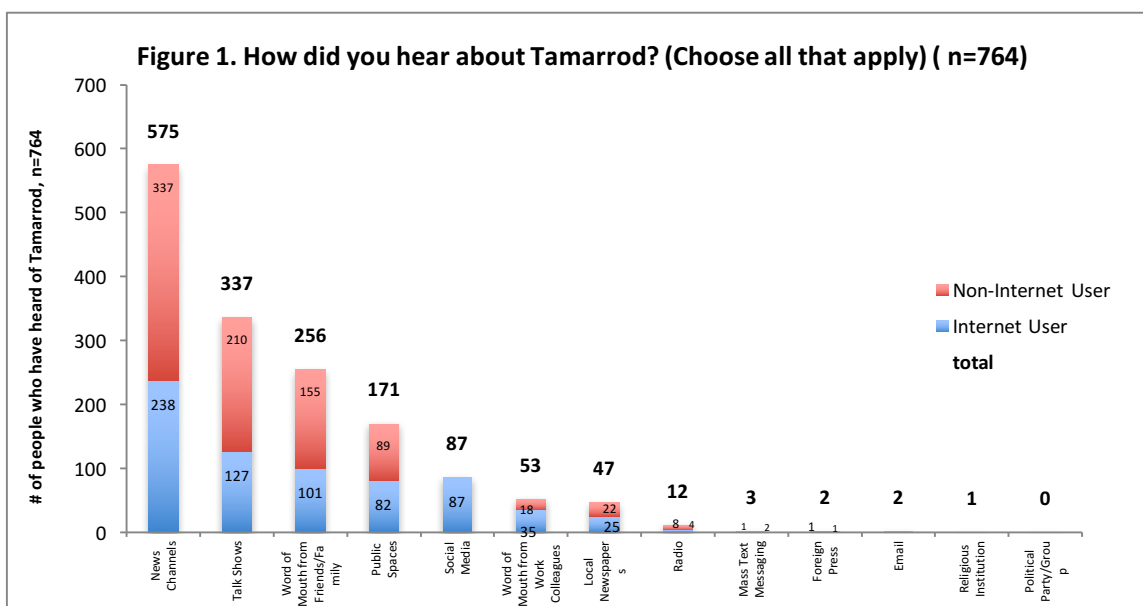


Figure 1: How did you hear about Tamarrod?<sup>53</sup>

The online and offline influence of powerhouses of political discourse were also evident in the survey results. When respondents were asked to choose the most influential factor in their decision whether to sign the Tamarrod petition, the majority of respondents picked mass media (328 people), as shown in Figure 2 below. Social media was identified as the sixth most influential factor. This comes in line with WebRadar findings (see Figure 4), which indicated that mass media played a key role in disseminating information about Tamarrod and driving the

<sup>53</sup> The results above display respondents' first choice when asked to list the means through which they heard about Tamarrod. News channels were the most popular. The trend was similar for Internet and non-Internet users.

conversation online along with other more traditional structures, suggesting the mixture between models predating the NPS, namely mass media, alongside friends and family.

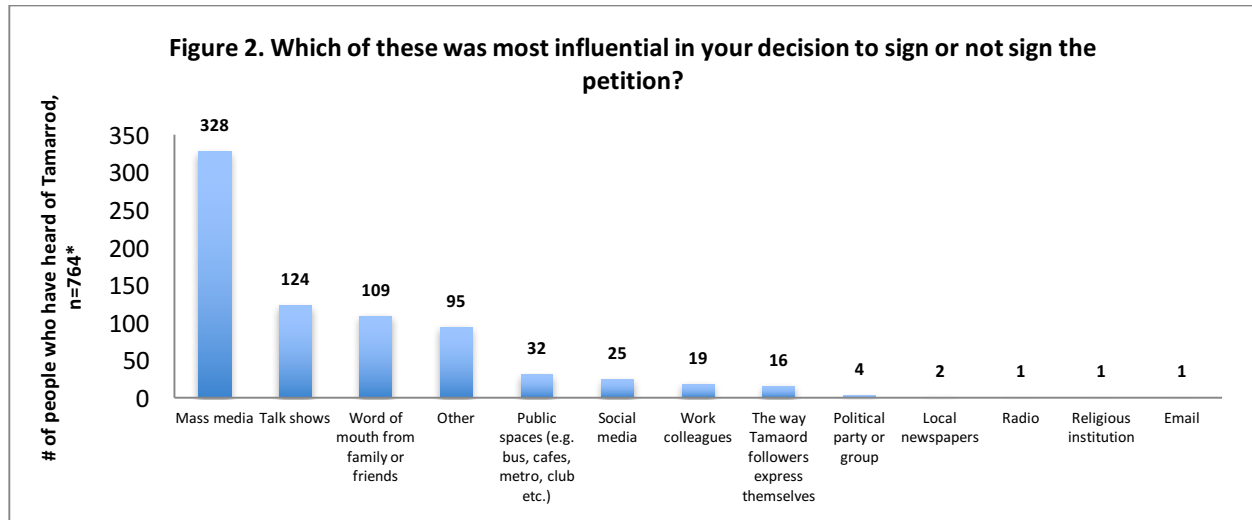


Figure 2: Most influential factors for respondents to sign/not sign the petition (\*757 respondents, as 7 declined to answer)

Almost all respondents (421 out of 422 respondents who had discussed Tamarrod) preferred to discuss the campaign in face-to-face gatherings with their circle of acquaintances, as shown in Figure 3 below. Other preferred offline networks included more random discussions in public spaces with strangers in public transport or cafés. This choice was followed by discussions on Facebook and telephone conversations. The survey showed a similar trend when respondents were classified by Internet use, meaning that Internet users did not necessarily prefer the online space as a platform for discussion.

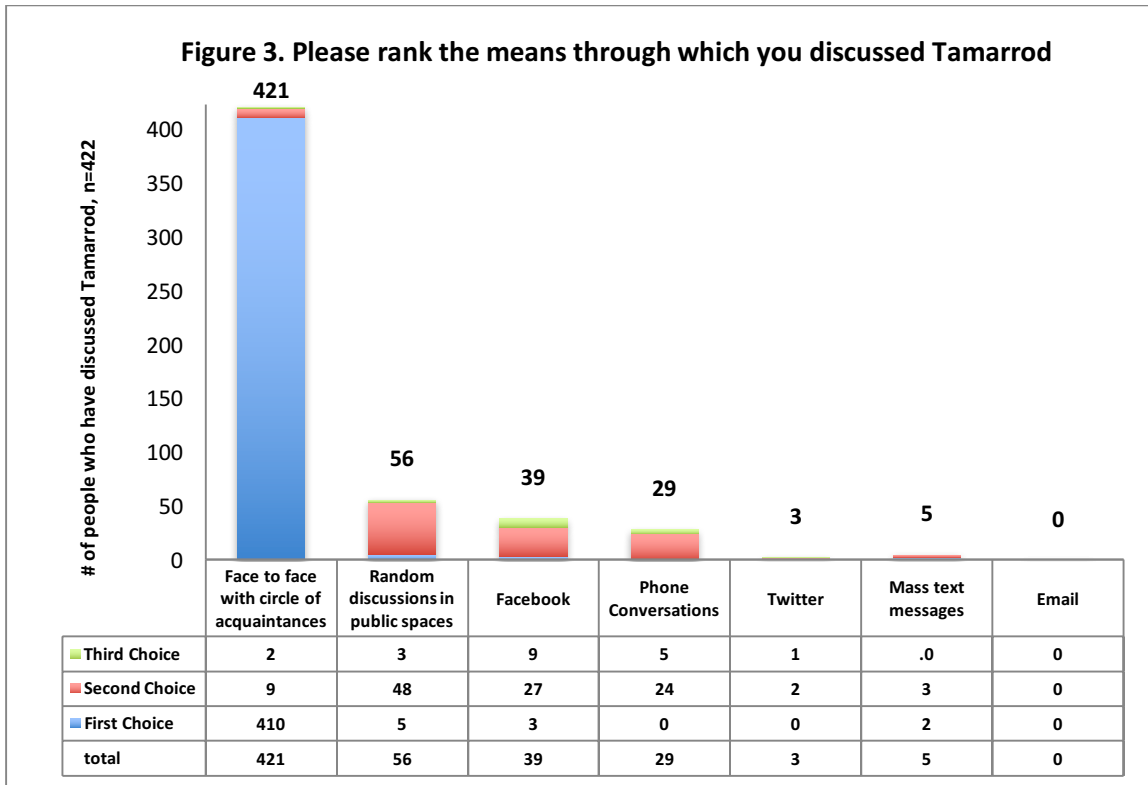


Figure 3: Rank the means through which you discussed Tamarrod

In an interview with one of Tamarrod's founders, she explained that mass media was an effective tool in linking online spheres with offline ones. Typically, a television appearance of a Tamarrod founder would trigger strong online response. She provided an example of a specific TV appearance that sparked 10,000 Facebook likes on the Tamarrod page in record time. Similar observations could be found when analyzing quantitative data obtained from WebRadar, as shown in Figure 4 below. While online spheres have had a limited influence on the Tamarrod campaign, their association with the January 25 revolution as a successful mobilization continues to give them relevance and attention by different political players.

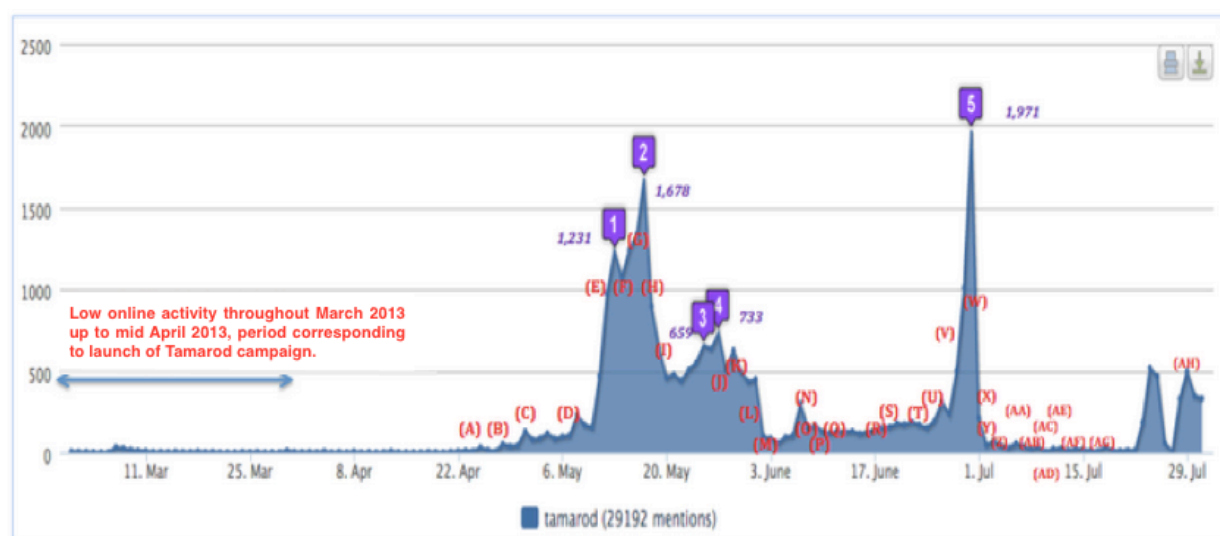


Figure 4: Tamarrod mentions on Facebook (WebRadar)

Figure 4 shows a surge in online conversation<sup>54</sup> that correlates with actions of offline media, political figures, and parties. When the Tamarrod campaign was launched on Facebook, as represented by Point B on the figure, there was no surge in online conversation about the topic. At inception, the Tamarrod campaign Facebook page did not have the same online popularity as the “We are all Khaled Said” Facebook page, for example. “We are all Khaled Said” is a famous Facebook page in Egypt that was created soon after the brutal murder of a young man outside an Internet café in Alexandria by the police in 2010. The incident has been held as one of the sparks of the 2011 revolution. The surge in online conversations about Tamarrod, as represented by the peaks labeled 1-5, takes place after players from offline mainstream spheres have endorsed the Tamarrod campaign. For example, peak 1 took place after the April 6<sup>th</sup> activist youth group announced their support for the campaign; peak 2 occurred after a combination of political parties endorsed the campaign through mass media outlets and press releases; the third and fourth peaks represent the effects of endorsements from prominent political figures and presidential candidates. Peak 5, representing the greatest rise in Tamarrod mentions, occurred during the June 30 protest near the Presidential Palace.

### CREDIBILITY IN SOCIAL MEDIA: TRADITIONAL VERSUS MERITOCRATIC HIERARCHIES

As recounted by respondents, the joining of more people and players in online spheres of conversation has crystallized the fact that those who have existed in these spheres for longer times have a stronger presence in terms of followers, and accordingly in terms of credibility. Hence, unspoken hierarchies have emerged based on histories of online engagement, volume of participation, and followers, amounting to what Gerbaudo described as the meritocratic nature of social media hierarchies and the role of charismatic users in deserving a position on top of the hierarchy.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Content captured by this radar comes mainly from Facebook (96.5%), with only 3.5% from Twitter.

<sup>55</sup> Gerbaudo, 2014.



This meritocracy emanated from the functional role played by early adopters. Participants from the non-aligned group explained how Twitter was a source of information from users with a small number of followers, reporting from the ground, especially from outside of Cairo. One respondent said that it was the space people looked at during the events of the revolution to know where to go, what to do, and about what to warn people in a credible manner.

A non-aligned respondent elaborated on the concept of following and credibility by saying that “social media has created the concept of the follower. If I have more than 10,000 followers on Twitter then I am right, if I have more than 20,000 followers then I am very right, if I have more than 100,000 followers, then why are you even talking to me.” These hierarchies are consolidated with the production of reports and algorithms that calculate the influence of an individual’s online presence based on the volume and history of their engagement and following. These realities and their formulations challenge prevalent constructions of the Internet mediating a NPS as a horizontally leveled, democratic environment offering equal opportunity for participation and expression.

With more groups joining online spheres, the challenge to the horizontally leveled networked public sphere persisted. We observed the joining of a larger section of society, in terms of both individuals and institutions, in online conversations. This enlarged volume of online users meant that the traditional online hierarchies have been joined by powerful individuals and institutions who gained traction online due to their offline power. Powerhouses of political discourse such as mainstream mass media (television channels and newspapers), the state, and political parties expanded their online presence in the last years.

One respondent from the non-aligned group said, “I don’t see borders between media or social media now. I do not watch television but television comes to me on Twitter and Facebook.”

Another respondent from the state-aligned respondents said that it became possible to find her posts read on television programs. This expansion meant filling the mainstream outlets with content of online spaces and correspondingly, extending their sphere of influence there.

Evidence from Web Radar (Figure 5 below) suggested a strong presence of mainstream media online. Web Radar was used to generate an image of the activity on public Facebook pages for the time period January 1, 2014 to December 31, 2014. Each circle represents an Egypt-based Facebook page. The size of the circle represents the number of comments on the page; the color of circle represents the number of fans the page has: the darker the color, the more fans there are. While some pages have both a large number of fans and a high volume of commenting activity, some have a lot of fans with little activity, or vice versa. The distance between circles is determined by the number of fans that pages have in common with one another.

Figure 5 shows a large and densely populated media cluster towards the right-hand side, outlined by the red circle. In addition to online news sources (Al-Youm 7, R.N.N., Masrawy), the media cluster also includes well-established offline newspapers, such as Al-Masry Al-Youm, Al-Shorouk, and Al-Ahram. TV channels also appear in the media cluster, such as Al-Jazeera Mubasher Misr, CBC, and ONtv. The cluster notably includes pages that are more Islamist in their tendencies, such as Al-Jazeera Mubasher, R.N.N, Bawabat Al-Horreya Wal Addala, Shabakat Nabd Al-Ikhwan, and Al-Horreya Wal Adala. Another prominent cluster appears on

the left-hand side that is composed of football fan pages for the two most famous Egyptian league clubs. This image suggests that of the different public Facebook pages captured by Web Radar, pages belonging to mass media appear to be significantly prominent online.

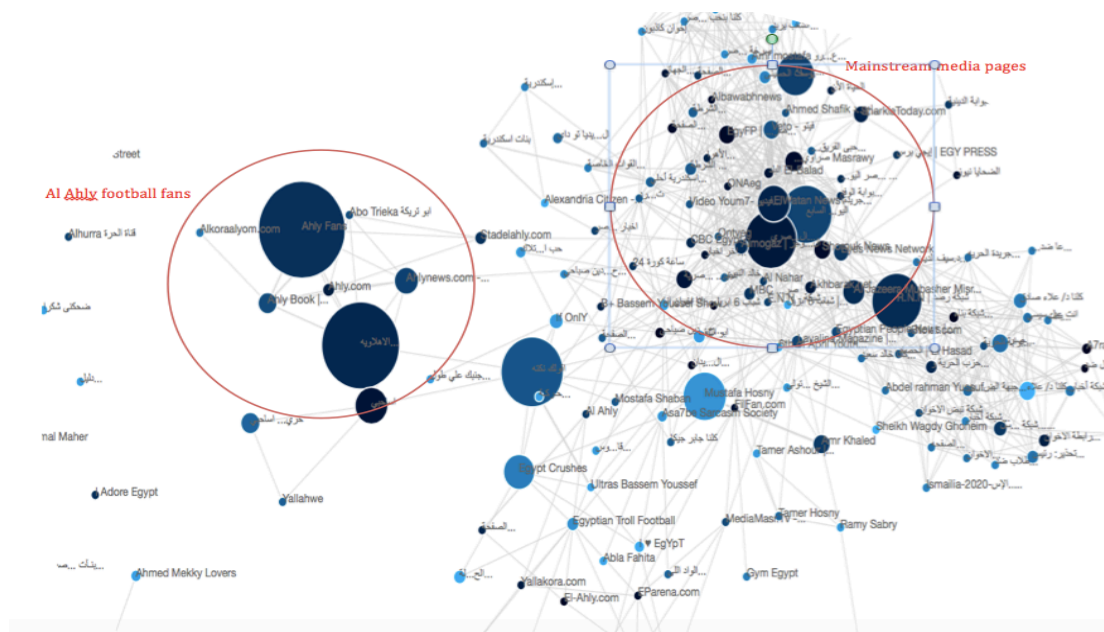


Figure 5: Top 200 Facebook pages (by comments) captured by WebRadar from January 1, 2014 to December 31, 2014

## NORMALIZATION OF VIOLENCE AND A DILUTED IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA MESSAGES

A more general and aversive effect of social media's once claimed power of mobilization is normalization of crisis and inaction. Participants from across the political spectrum spoke of how conversations and imagery of violence online spread so often that they stopped being effective, while before, these posts strived to mobilize people either to show solidarity from afar or to take action and engage with the event in different ways. A respondent from the non-aligned group mentioned that he had been observing people's reactions two weeks prior to the Rabea al-Adaweya sit-in dispersal and it corroborated a hypothesis he held a year after the revolution. He said:

People were very accepting of the events, a severe acceptance. They furiously attacked anyone who criticized how the dispersal occurred or that it was unjustified violence. I felt that people were behaving over their nature. People were drunk on blood. The revolution has helped us accept this. Social media has helped us accept violence after the revolution because violence became accessible. There is a relationship between the increase in violent content on social media and its acceptance. Every time I was exposed to violence, it became normal.

One participant from the regime-aligned group remembered how imagery of violence in the early 2000s in the wake of the second Palestinian Intifada moved her, while now her level of shock has dropped with the sight of similar imagery from home.

The same respondent who said that “the ground came online” elaborated that the smaller group who had a certain audibility online failed to address the growing online audience with the same language. He pondered:

This [is a] new country of people who joined. Activists first owned the space, and they talked in a certain way. Now online participants have increased, and we didn’t change the way we speak. So we must speak to the people in a different way if we want to get to them. Would you talk to people on the ground the same way you talk to your friends? We need to change this elitist attitude. If you can not deal with opposing attitudes in your own playground how can you begin to try to work offline?

The dominance of conversations on violence in online spheres as a reflection of a widening networked public sphere also meant less control over the debate from the smaller active mass on the Internet. Participants from the group of non-aligned activists recalled how during the January 25 revolution, violence was also occurring but less talked about online in order not to compromise the overall peaceful face of the uprising. Though some participants in the uprising were putting police stations on fire and attacking holders of the formerly ruling National Democratic Party, their acts were seldom reported or condemned on social media, as the majority of those active online controlled the narrative then. Instead, the word “selmeya,” Arabic for “peaceful,” was widely propagated online and was used, as recounted by some respondents, as a propaganda tactic for the revolution.

This lucid use and somewhat control over social media by a number of like-minded participants with large followings subsided with the advent of broader and less cohesive groups of people. A respondent from the non-aligned group explained how a single tweet would be enough to mobilize a substantial group of people.

At the same time, the voices of traditional offline powerhouses influencing public opinion have become more consolidated online, a manifestation of what Benkler described as the “second generation critique.”<sup>56</sup> The Internet becomes less decentralized than originally thought and particular sites—or in the present day, Facebook pages or Twitter accounts—increasingly dominate online, compared to smaller voices (see Figure 9 above).

Like elsewhere in the digital economy, the networked public sphere witnessed two opposing trends taking place concurrently. On the one hand, digital technologies have triggered centrifugal forces moving away from the center, empowering the small player and opening spaces for voices that were before unheard. On the other hand, already established hierarchies are being perpetuated through the use of the very same tools, illustrating a case of centripetal forces moving towards the center. Those two currents have occurred simultaneously on different

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<sup>56</sup> Benkler, 2006, p. 10.

layers—economic, social, and political—thanks to the vast developments of digital technologies and the pervasiveness of the Internet.

These opposing forces have also coexisted with varying predominance at different points in time. The phase of early adopters witnessed the prominence of centrifugal forces, as individual voices presided over the networked public sphere. As vertical hierarchies moved in to take over the conversation, they crowded out the voices of the small players, illustrating a predominance of centripetal forces. Yet gradually, and as “the ground came online,” individual voices still carved a place for themselves. The new pool of individual voices has included a larger diversity of players with content and conversations that do not necessarily fit the textbook definition of a democratic debate. Nevertheless, and as it stands, both forces—away from and towards the center—remain strong and continue to exist in parallel.

### A DIFFERENT USER ETHIC

Interacting online is often described an opportunity to perform, and to be removed from reality, at times. Respondents from the regime-aligned group said that each person contributes a persona on social media and thus they contribute an image that they believe is real but that is at times removed from the ground. A respondent said: “You can think of something that you want to happen, but it does not relate to reality.” He gave an example of the demands of the revolution and how they were right and that he supported them until they clashed with reality. For him, social media became the place where these ideas were expressed, just as it was the place where he posted his nice pictures and not his ugly pictures. Another respondent from the same group gave the example of how her friends asked her to remove a picture of theirs that she posted because “their nose looks ugly.” Agreeing, a non-aligned respondent mentioned that it was not only that we saw a different reality on social media, but also that reality on the ground or in the offline sphere was perceived differently.

The crowdedness on social media brought about a change to the online culture and practices of early adopters. Namely, a shifting ethic online from that of verifying content before posting it, which facilitated the creation of achieved hierarchies, to less regulated and in many instances more aggressive behavior. With more people posting unverified content, the notion of credibility became increasingly secondary. An interviewee with Islamist sympathies spoke of the loss of the core values that belonged to the earlier group of online activists, with a wider group of people on social media celebrating state violence against Islamists, particularly with the forced dispersal of the Muslim Brotherhood encampments in the Nahda and Rabea al-Adaweya squares. He further explained that while there were differences among these early adopters, basic values were shared.

This shift reflected an important development accompanying the coming of powerful entities existing offline and practicing centripetal power in the online sphere. Their power has not translated into ultimate centralization and homogenization, as the diversity of voices arguably caused more disintegration and chaos than close alignment.

Today, respondents referred to the increasingly common spread of false information and testimonials on social media, particularly in the wake of violent events and their politicization. In other words, many users have falsified the facts in order to advance their political positions. For

example, respondents from the regime-aligned group mentioned posting videos showing the police's safe exit strategies during the dispersal of the Rabea al-Adaweya and Nahda sit-ins to counter-argue the use of excessive violence by the police. In other instances, they mentioned that the Muslim Brotherhood pages posted footage that was from the Syrian civil war to show how aggravated the violence used against them was.

A participant from the regime-aligned group mentioned that at first, he used to take the information his friends posted on Facebook for granted because he knew them personally. However, with time, he started questioning their credibility as he later realized that individuals can have a political agenda too. He clarified that it is not a matter of right or wrong information, as much as it relates to having different agendas. Another participant from the same group said that through what he is posting, he can present two alternative and opposite stories regarding the same event to the extent that the viewer will not sympathize with babies getting run over by tanks.

A respondent said that, by means of an experiment, he tweeted false information pertaining to the Muslim Brotherhood preventing people from voting at poll stations in a neighborhood in Cairo while no elections were taking place on that day in this particular neighborhood. He noticed that this information went viral to the extent that it reached traditional media, which were eager to publish content condemning the Muslim Brotherhood, as part of their bias against the group.

Interviewees with Islamist sympathies also referred to how individuals' biases intersected with how information was spread online, particularly with regards to the dispersal of the Rabea al-Adaweya sit-in. In fact, an interviewee cited an urge to physically go to the encampment and report back as he was increasingly displeased with the false information he read on social media about the sit-in. Another Islamist interviewee also pointed to the fact that he increasingly trusted specific individuals online as opposed to groups. He explained that even though he was officially a member of the Muslim Brotherhood at some point in time, he would not trust the information disseminated on the Brotherhood's Facebook page and instead would read what specific individuals and activists were saying, even though they had different political affiliations. His claim raises a question on the extent to which the initial individual and personalized (as opposed to institutional) use of the online sphere defined the scope of trust among users that could not be replicated with political groups, parties, and the state coming online. This reflects a growing awareness of individual politics and biases in the reporting of unfolding events.

A member of the non-aligned group mentioned a recently established Facebook page called "Is this true?" where users verify images and videos in a quest to limit the growing falsification of facts by users and media online. This Facebook page, started in April 2013, was an example of grassroots efforts from amongst the community to raise awareness on the existence of false information and the need to verify facts or posts before sharing them. A group of volunteers who claim to have no political affiliation tackle news that has already spread. A post needs to have been shared a minimum of 300 times before the team is able to invest their effort and time to verify it. Although not a widely followed page, its existence and continued activity are a testament to its relevance.

## A DIFFERENT PLATFORM USE

Parallel and perhaps in close relation to the changing impact of social media, a change in the use of available platforms has also unfolded. A well-known migration from the spaces of the blogosphere and the more broadly open web to the more interconnected network of Facebook was recognized by participants, especially those from the non-aligned group who also happen to be early users. With this shift, active users engaged on Facebook in ways that replicated their use of blogs by writing lengthy posts, some of which would be shared extensively. At the same time, the migration toward Facebook had its cost for the depth of the conversations that would ensue in response to a blog post, where arguments were developed with a certain level of integrity and responded to in comments with the same level of integrity. In other words, stronger and deeper conversations emerged in blogospheres, as opposed to the hastier nature of Facebook interactions. Moreover, the blogosphere, which was founded by the community of early adopters, activated a culture of hyperlinking and contributed to a more informed and inclusive debate. It is unclear whether this process of collectively filtering, citing, and responding to the work of others is adequately reproduced in the spaces of Facebook posts. Another question is whether conversations are more easily and more frequently interrupted on social media and whether this might exacerbate polarization.

Twitter remained a more limited platform, originally associated with the spreading of information and news, especially that disregarded or distorted by mainstream media and coming from remote spots outside of the capital city. But this function of Twitter worked better when there were fewer people participating, respondents from the non-aligned group purported. With more people joining Twitter, its informational function subsided. With the passing of time, it turned into a “source of opinion,” a “popularity contest,” “voices wanting more followers,” and “users imitating specific users.” Despite the brevity of its posts, Twitter had also grown to become a more politicized public space for a smaller community, as indicated by respondents from the non-aligned group, while Facebook was a broader multi-purpose platform, where people talked politics, but also shared personal stories. Respondents from the regime-aligned group cited how Twitter’s short messages were easier to go viral and be politically influential. They added that due to Twitter’s short messaging format, it became the adequate medium to cover events as they occur on the ground. But this political aspect of Twitter was quickly replicated on Facebook, which remained the hub of the larger, more diverse segments of society and the site of dynamic political conversations mediated by individuals and groups. Meanwhile, a respondent from the non-aligned group lamented how Twitter, which was originally for her a source of information, turned into a platform for opinion and that made it increasingly unreliable for her.

## SERVING POLARIZATION

Not only did the NPS witness the dilution of autonomous voices calling for change and an overall shifting value system; it also became a place mirroring and reproducing the condition of polarization that overwhelmed Egypt following the ouster of the Muslim Brotherhood and its replacement with a pro-military government. As such, the polarized politics on the ground became omnipresent online, particularly with regards to condoning violence.



Features of this polarization were clear in the online sphere's response to the growing violence following the 2013 regime change. Respondents from the non-aligned group cited how individuals online would ask what political group the casualties in clashes belonged to, pointing to the dehumanizing effect of polarized politics. For them, this type of online conversation echoed offline ones. Respondents from the non-aligned group as well Islamist sympathizers interviewed spoke of the simplified and flat rhetoric of associating anyone with a different political position with an adverse political group and how this extended to online spaces in a clear representation of a dominant political polarization. For example, individuals condemning violence against political dissidents were slammed online for being Muslim Brotherhood affiliates, while those criticizing the Muslim Brotherhood were often bashed in Facebook and Twitter threads for being sympathizers with the military rule.

Interviewees with Islamist sympathies also commented on how violence was condoned clearly in online conversations when it was exercised by people they dubbed as “traitors,” as an extension of similar conversations offline. Respondents from the group of regime and state-aligned interviewees said that they chose not to interact much with news related to the violent dispersal of the sit-in because they knew there was violence, but they thought it was inevitable. One Islamist sympathizer mentioned that online reactions to the Rabaa al-Adaweya sit-in dispersal went from acceptance to encouragement. He shared with his friend the sense that President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's call for public support to counter any threat against the country legitimized government violence and constituted a threat to his life. He was particularly troubled that his friend was okay with this. Another Islamist respondent mentioned comments he saw such as “you deserve it, sheep” or “go to hell” following the dispersal of the sit-ins.

A respondent from the non-aligned group spoke of the notion of “digital treason” when he tried to divert people from going to a place where deadly clashes may occur. Respondents from the same group lamented how their lack of support for the use of violence in the sit-in dispersals has automatically led to labeling them as Islamist sympathizers. The tendency is reflective of the political instrumentalization of violence, as cited above by respondents lamenting the loss of broader moral values that were more present in social media in its earlier days. In other words, social media and its earlier group of users promised alternative narratives to those of mainstream ones. This has then transgressed to social media becoming yet another mobilizing site for the defense of violence as an inevitable course of action given the political circumstances, just like in traditional media and, more generally, offline conversations.

In fact, one participant said that online spaces have had their own brand of spreading violence by housing aggressive interactions. Ganging up against particular users, groups, or pages to defame them has spread, as have character assassinations, where someone's online posts and history are documented to discredit them. Insulting someone for their political view, rather than debating them, has also become commonplace. The inhibiting effect of the growing online violence has led many to opt for silence even if they had clear positions, regardless of whether they condoned violence or rejected it. Several respondents from the regime-aligned group chose to remain silent for many reasons. One mentioned that opinions were already forged, and it would have not been productive to engage in violent debates. Another mentioned that he did not want to post anything in order to avoid being perceived as sympathizing with those who were dying or cheering for those who supported the sit-in dispersals.



But while this violence has become more visible online, it has been present for a longer time—though not as immediately evident, given the limited volume of participation online and the fact that the engagement mostly came from like-minded users. For example, some participants from the state-aligned group of respondents professed that they were bullied online due to their anti-revolution positions.

Given that mass media have been playing a major role in this polarization, their active presence online meant exporting this polarization to the Internet. Similarly, the mass media have instrumentalized online spaces to serve this condition of polarization by selectively quoting divisive voices. Polarization, as Balkin opined in his work cited by Benkler, is a major challenge to the NPS.<sup>57</sup>

Figure 6 is an illustration of polarization, specifically on Facebook.<sup>58</sup> The period of time covered in the image is from June 30, 2013 through August 31, 2013, when the military government overthrew the Islamist regime and during the forceful dispersal of the encampments at the Rabea al-Adaweya and Nahda Squares. A radar was created to capture content containing the word “Rabea” in a number of forms including Arabic. The figure below shows interactions between public Facebook pages, captured by Webradar, containing variations of the word “Rabea.” The metric is public posts shared by pages producing the most content and captured within the “Rabea” radar.<sup>59</sup> The circles represent the different pages from which these posts came. The size of each circle represents the volume of posting on the page. The distance between the circles is reflective of the extent to which common topics are discussed. The circles that are linked are discussing common topics and have a similar stance towards these topics. The top right corner of the image shows a cluster of Islamist affiliated pages, whereas on the left, there is a cluster of regime affiliated and supportive pages. In this image there is an absence of pages that represent the non-aligned groups. While this maybe due to technical reasons including bad data collection, it may also be a reflection of their choice to disengage and therefore not post any content. For example, the “We are all Khaled Said” page has not posted any content since July 3, 2013. Non-aligned groups may also have been more active on private pages or on other social media platforms such as Twitter, as indicated in the focus groups.

<sup>57</sup> Benkler, 2006.

<sup>58</sup> During the period under study (mid 2013), Facebook penetration was at 16% (almost 14 million users) (Dubai School of Government, 2014a). Twitter, on the other hand, had a penetration rate of less than 1% (Dubai School of Government, 2014b). Dubai School of Government. (2014a). “Facebook in the Arab Region,” Dubai School of Government: Arab Social Media Report.

<http://www.arabsocialmediareport.com/Facebook/LineChart.aspx?&PriMenuID=18&CatID=24&mnu=Cat>. Dubai School of Government. (2014b). “Twitter in the Arab Region.” Arab Social Media Report.

<http://www.arabsocialmediareport.com/Twitter/LineChart.aspx?&PriMenuID=18&CatID=25&mnu=Cat>.

<sup>59</sup> This image above is at a high threshold (90), which eliminates 90% of the weakest relationships between the Facebook pages displayed. WebRadar allows users to set a threshold to eliminate weaker relationships between items. At a low threshold, all pages would be very closely linked to each other. A threshold is a benchmark that shows the degree of strength or weakness between the sources, which are Facebook pages in this graph. The higher the threshold number is, the more the weakest relationships between the items are eliminated. This allows us to see the clustering of closely linked Facebook pages. In this image the clusters are formed according to the common topics discussed, similar stances on the topics, and usage of similar words.



Figure 6: Polarization, June 30, 2013-August 31, 2013 (WebRadar)

## ENDING MOBILIZATION?

Participants in the non-aligned group pointed to success stories of active mobilization via social media for certain causes. One remembers, for example, how social media were an important site of mobilization against a 2010 decision by the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology to ban the distribution of news via mass short messaging services on mobile phones, which was considered a limitation on freedom of expression. Alongside a legal campaign by rights advocates, social media users wrote against the decision, which was eventually overturned.

Another participant from the non-aligned group of activists reflected how in 2011, when clashes between security forces and protesters were recurrent, a single tweet by a prominent activist would be enough to mobilize people to show online solidarity with the protesters and to eventually join them.

But this kind of mobilization was problematized by some respondents who recognized that not everything amplified by social media leads to a positive outcome, even if it is for the right cause. For example, a respondent from the non-aligned participants focus group mentioned how the online hype that erupted in parallel with the clashes between police and protesters near the Maspero state television building in October 2011 led to more people joining the clashes and eventually more casualties.

A respondent who was a former member of the Muslim Brotherhood said that social media had more of a mobilization function when fewer people participated and when they managed to turn it into a homogenous space. When it became less homogenous, with many other users joining, it became less functional, according to him, and people reverted back to mainstream media.

This retreat in social media's power to mobilize was also caused by stronger state scrutiny, as a former member of the political wing of the Muslim Brotherhood opined. "There is someone on the other side," he said, referring to how people used to act more unreservedly on social media, but now no longer. This same person resorted to mainstream media that he knew had a supportive stance toward the Muslim Brotherhood and liaised directly with their journalists to post facts about the sit-in, its dispersal, and the ensuing violence.

A respondent with Islamist tendencies explained that her online presence inscribed a sense of action and engagement that complemented her actions offline, but also spread them to a wider world. In 2014, the absence of any peaks of hope in her view meant she decided to go silent online, just as she has opted to disengage politically offline. She participated in marches following the deposition of Morsi until the sit-in dispersals and then stopped. She said, "I felt a lot of injustice when the coup happened, so I became much more involved because I felt it was my right. After the dispersal I lost all hope and attachment."

As far as Tamarrod is concerned, the survey results showed the mobilizing role of social media to be marginal. The success of the campaign was attributed by the survey respondents to public volunteers, the media and political parties, as shown in Figure 7 below. Out of the survey sample, 533 people thought Tamarrod was successful. When asked to rank the possible enablers of Tamarrod's success, respondents' most popular first choice was that of public volunteers (210 respondents). The second most popular choice as an enabler of Tamarrod's success for respondents was the mass media (183 responses). Established offline structures like political parties and the state were also cited, but to a lesser degree.

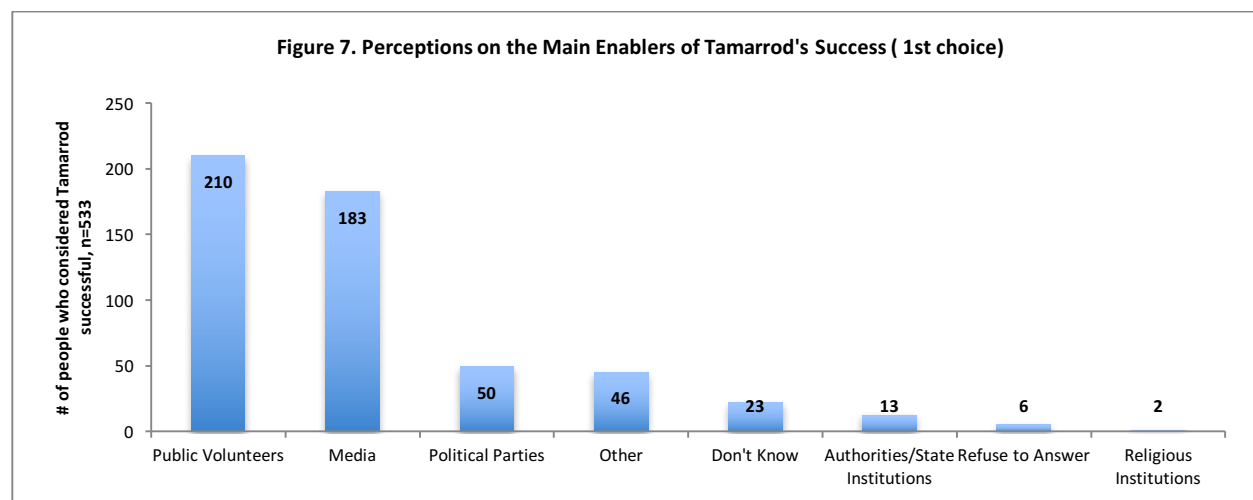


Figure 7: Respondents' perceptions on the main enablers of Tamarrod's success (1st choice)

While social media and the broader online sphere did not seem to be a chief broadcast and dissemination tool for Tamarrod, it did have an organizational role. In an interview with one of Tamarrod's co-founders, she explained that Facebook was a mirror image of the campaign's work offline, and a way for people to connect with them. She mentioned cases when people in

remote governorates would send them private messages on Facebook to volunteer and donate, and this is how they could connect. Tamarrod organizers would post on Facebook the names of the volunteers. This function would extend to some active conversation online about Tamarrod that would eventually serve its image, especially in response to online attacks. Also, when people attacked the page, the Tamarrod organizers were not concerned with answering because members of the page would do the attacking back for them, which reflected upon the campaign's popular, more organic type of support.

Volunteers played an important role in promoting the Tamarrod campaign. They physically distributed and collected the petition form in addition to playing other roles such as discussing and mobilizing for the campaign. Some volunteers were already members of political parties. In recruiting volunteers Tamarrod's founders relied primarily on word of mouth and their personal contacts in existing physical networks on the ground. In some cases, where no direct ties existed, as in distant governorates, Tamarrod founders received requests from prospective volunteers via Facebook.

The sense perceived through the survey results is people's identification with the campaign as an organic initiative that incorporated fellow citizens. Out of the respondents who heard about Tamarrod (764), almost 70 percent associated the campaign with "people like us" as seen in Figure 8 below. This term has a more random and organic connotation.

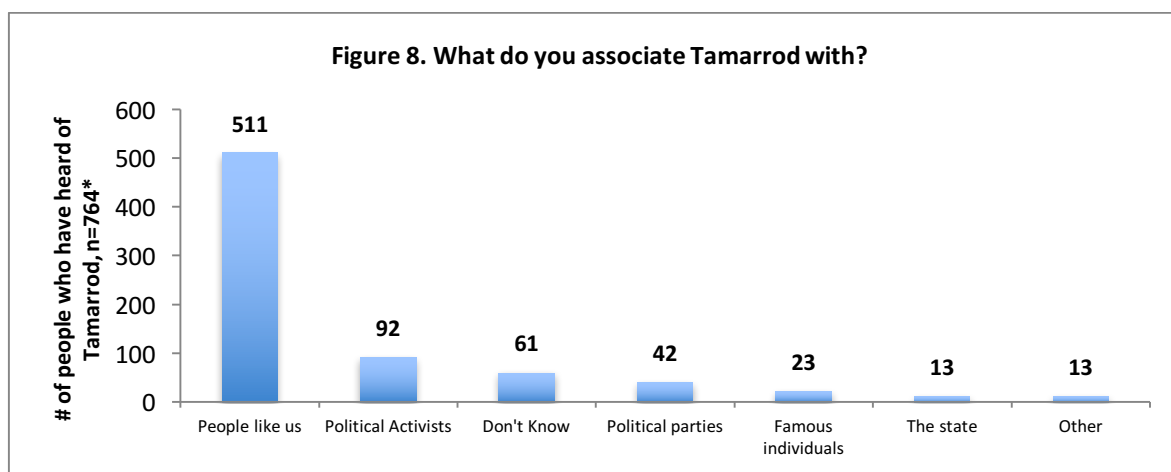


Figure 8: What do you associate Tamarrod with? (\*755 respondents, as 9 declined to answer)

When asked about Tamarrod's governance and organizational structure (Figure 9 below), perceptions were mixed. In terms of decision making, of the 764 respondents who heard of Tamarrod, we received equal responses in agreement with the statement that "Tamarrod leaders made all decisions" (137 agreed) as well as the statement that "decisions were made by volunteers", and hence a more organic structure (138 agreed). One interpretation pointed to a relatively larger set of responses in agreement (and strong agreement) with the latter statement (316 responses) as opposed to those who agreed (and strongly agreed) with the former (212 responses).

Survey results from figures 4, 7 and 9, as well as our interviews with Tamarrod’s founders, pointed to the coexistence of simultaneous forces behind the campaign’s success. On the one hand, a prominent role was played by mass media, established political figures, and traditional hierarchies in promoting the campaign and driving the online conversation. On the other hand, volunteers and face-to-face interaction in existing networks were integral in mobilizing for the campaign and securing the signatures. While Tamarrod didn’t necessarily thrive online, social media played a role in tandem with the strong forces interacting on the ground.

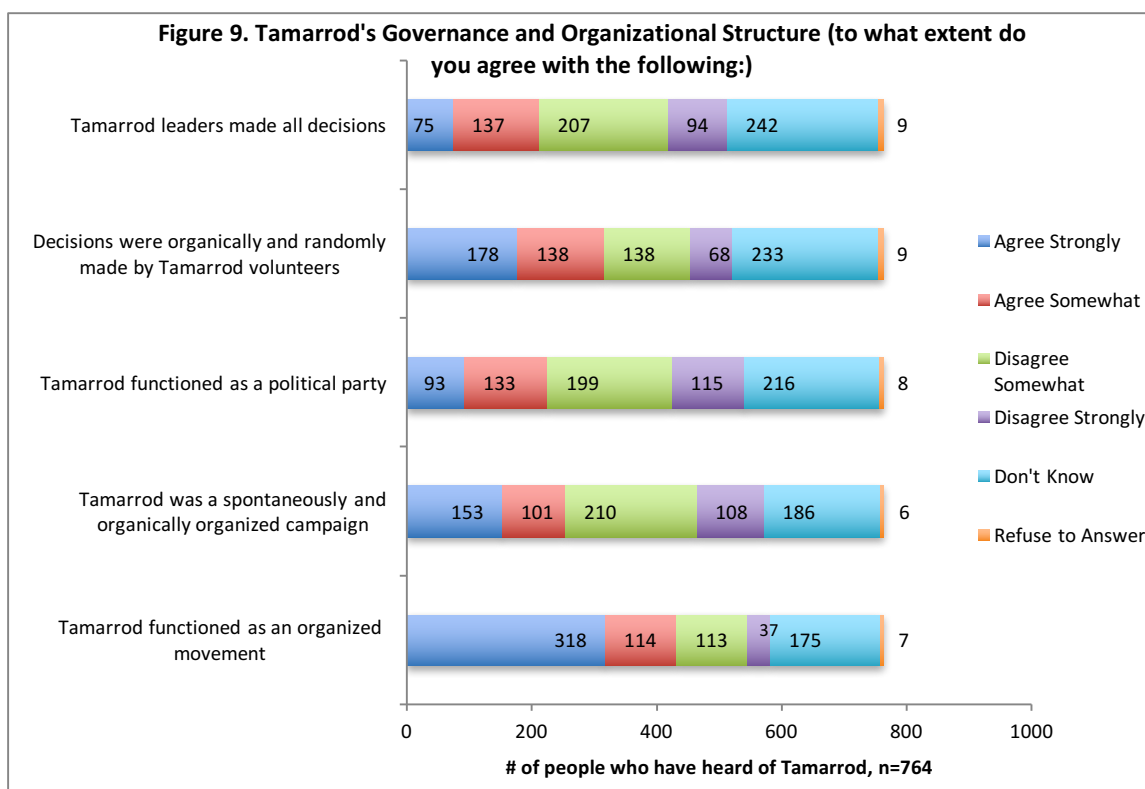


Figure 9: Respondents’ opinion of Tamarrod’s governance and organizational structure

## OPTING OUT

The need to feel safe online was expressed by several respondents, and it governed their choice of which platforms to engage with. For example, some respondents spoke of reverting to Facebook, after having moved from blogs, then to Facebook, then to Twitter. This return to Facebook was explained by its more personal nature and its perception as a fitting space for self-expression. One respondent from the non-aligned group called Facebook a “comfort zone” that one migrates back to, while Twitter is a platform where you have discussions with strangers. Another explained that he made a mistake when he accepted Facebook friend requests from strangers. Another user chose to sign off Facebook because he wanted to “cut his personal losses,” as he knows that his group of friends will disagree with his Islamist sympathies. Instead, he chose to stay with the more impersonal space of Twitter, as a spectator. A Muslim Brotherhood member explained how he refrains from having public debates on social media and

instead asks people to message him privately. Other users spoke of bypassing the limitations of the platforms by creating several accounts on each, some that are for public consumption and engagement and others for personal use. Respondents from the non-aligned group added that they realized that social media platforms are not necessarily designed for debates and explained that is why, along with crowdedness and increasingly divergent opinions, it became harder to continue using them.

By and large, activists spoke of the power of social media to mobilize support for certain issues and causes as an extension of their sense of ability that they can effect change. Once this sense subsided, their ability to mobilize on social media retreated. Reflecting on the reasons behind this retreat, respondents in the group of non-aligned activists spoke about the failure of veteran social media users and digital activists in developing a discourse online that would be appealing to the masses who would join them later from the ground. This raises the same questions flagged by Aday and others who wondered whether the Internet bonds groups together or bridges members of different groups.<sup>60</sup> A respondent said:

There is an entire crowd that came online after the revolution, and we are still in the same state. We are used to talking to each other and understanding each other. We sing and dance together, but now the audience has completely changed. They are no longer an audience, even. The people who are now online changed, but we have not changed the way we speak. We must learn to speak in a new way, as we keep saying we must reach the people offline, but here are the people now with us. We have to try to speak to the people in the same manner they speak. I think the newcomers are crazy, but how will I manage this situation? If you cannot deal with them online, which is supposedly your playfield, how do you expect to deal with him offline? 7000 likes on a post does not translate in the poll stations.

This group slowly grew to become disconnected from the larger public and acted increasingly in a bubble, respondents said. This, respondents argued, happened concurrently as more organized groups offline, such as the Muslim Brotherhood and pro-military groups, started developing communication strategies online that rendered their traditional narratives more audible there. These online communication strategies by these organized groups have been arguably successful in aligning followers of these groups more closely, and the Internet has become an additional space for the consolidation of their narratives. For example, an Islamist sympathizer gave an example of how his group in the Muslim Brotherhood would agree on the same opinions offline and strategize about using the same hashtags and the best time to tweet collectively.

Respondents from the non-aligned group framed their online disengagement with statements of despair and loss of direction rather than apathy. One respondent mentioned that she did not want to take sides, and she excluded herself from using social media because defending rights would automatically label her as being on one end of the spectrum. Another respondent spoke of

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<sup>60</sup> Aday, S. and others (2010). "Blogs and Bullets: Social Media in Contentious Politics." United States Institute of Peace. Peaceworks No. 65. First published 2010. <http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/pw65.pdf>.

disengaging from social media because it was no longer a space that helped her make sense of politics. “You can’t make sense anymore,” she said.

Some referred to the need to resort to action and engagement elsewhere, outside the scope of online spaces that aren’t conducive to the same level of engagement as before. A respondent from the non-aligned group talked about a state of vagueness and confusion in which she found herself. She described social media turning into a small room where people fight. She was no longer invested in tweeting, especially about politics, and said that she has oriented herself toward mostly offline work surrounding education campaigns.

A respondent from the non-aligned participants condemned the silence chosen by many of the veteran online activists as others celebrated and promoted state violence. Yet, respondents from the same group insisted that this silence was a byproduct of disengagement from the overall state of politics that held no space for their voices, and from online spheres, by extension, as they grew to more closely represent this state of politics.

A respondent from the non-aligned group spoke about signing off her social media accounts completely at some point, frustrated with the growing political polarization online, which didn’t render this space any different from the offline world. Her thoughts were echoed by other respondents who had also either opted out completely or reverted their use of social media to an extremely personalized one, where they share images of foods and cats rather than engaged in political discussion.

Going offline, signing off, and disengaging were common threads among some early adopters and people discontented with the ruling regime. A respondent with Islamist political tendencies tied her sense of hope to her presence on social media. In other words, being present online is closely connected for her to her political engagement. For this respondent, peaks of hope and engagement in the last few years were present in the 18 days of the January 2011 revolution, the campaigning period for former President Mohamed Morsi in 2012, and the Rabea al-Awadeya sit-in in 2013.

In parallel to such retreats, the NPS was gradually being populated by new entrants from various points on the political spectrum, more so from the supporters of the regime. Online debate was no longer confined to “the revolutionaries,” and the conversations clearly reflected the polarization on the ground. Despite the change in composition of the debate content and its participants, it was still a conversation between individual voices, albeit alongside active participation from institutional hierarchies. Indeed, and as mentioned earlier in reference to the concurrent forces toward and away from the center, both centripetal and centrifugal forces existed concurrently. Indeed, the Egyptian networked public sphere became both chaotic and concentrated.

## CONCLUSION

This work was motivated by an interest to investigate the function of the NPS in political debate and change in Egypt. We examined the extent to which the NPS facilitated political debate and engagement, as well as organization and mobilization, when used by a technically sophisticated



elite. However, the power of individual nodes influencing fellow individual nodes was diluted with the advent of broader members of society in the online space, including traditional powerhouses such as the state and the mass media.

This study found that initially members of this technologically savvy elite of early Internet adopters managed to create a community online, able to influence both online and broader publics. As such, they created a merit-based hierarchy in a space that promised some horizontal network building. However, the horizontal nature of the network allowed for the masses eventually to join these elites online. This included the traditional political powerhouses on the ground, which managed to learn how to navigate online spaces and to create spaces of power for themselves in these spheres. They have eventually become dominant players in the NPS, thus diluting the voices of the early adopters.

The byproduct of these evolutions is an online space that is both chaotic and concentrated. Benkler described the mix of chaos and centralization as “just right” to produce a “more attractive democratic discourse.”<sup>61</sup> The case of Egypt can be described as an evolving sphere of mixed chaos and centralization, in transition towards producing a democratic discourse. Egypt’s NPS has increasingly been mirroring offline politics and dynamics. Part of this reversal of Internet political power, and the increasing reflection of offline politics in online spaces, is the permeation of the polarization that has dominated Egypt’s socio-political space in the last two years. The online sphere’s ability to mobilize for political action has also come into question.

On one hand, the broader cross section of society joining the NPS and engaging with it is considered democratizing in and of itself. While Internet tools can help exacerbate polarization, the networked public sphere has opened the door for equality of opportunity to engage. A recent poll found that 32 percent of Egyptians consider engagement on social media as a form of political participation.<sup>62</sup> One of the questions asked during the focus groups is, “Do you find social media and the Internet democratizing?” One of the respondents said, “Is it democratizing or dogmatizing.” When the door is open for equality of opportunity and everyone comes in, one is bound to get results that they don’t always prefer. Yet, the ability of this broader section of society to engage in a meaningful political debate that is conducive to change and to democratization remains questionable, as this society’s roots in political practice and culture preceding the NPS’s emergence come into play.

The path taken in Egypt over the period under study illustrated a unique experience. It is far from ideal, and it may not have achieved the desired political change. Early adopters carved a space for themselves, but were later crowded out by established hierarchies. Eventually, individual voices reclaimed space in the public sphere as more players (including regime supporters) joined. Over time, the debates within the sphere became polarized and violent and reflected the power structure in place.

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<sup>61</sup> Benkler, 2006, p. 239.

<sup>62</sup> Refaei, M. (2015). “Political Participation in Egypt: Perceptions and Practice.” Baseera - The Egyptian Center for Public Opinion Research, [http://www.baseera.com.eg/pdf\\_poll\\_file\\_en/Political Participation in Egypt.pdf](http://www.baseera.com.eg/pdf_poll_file_en/Political%20Participation%20in%20Egypt.pdf).

This study thus investigated this path. It elucidated the need to look into not what the NPS has or has not produced in terms of tangible political change, but rather how it has influenced political culture and practices, with all the shortcomings that were witnessed. Looking into the changes that occurred in the last four years in Egypt, and the digitally mediated public sphere in particular, it is important to separate between the role of online platforms in tangible political change and in longer term influences on the political culture and overall sense of engagement in emerging spaces for conversation and potentially alternative political imagination.

This study raised questions around how analysis of the NPS can be better informed by a broader analysis of the Arab public sphere and its origination, influences, and evolution. In a moment of flux like we are living in Egypt, there are tremendous tensions and challenges, but also opportunities. As we carve our own path towards democracy, our transition is informed by our experiences, our failures, and our successes.

The “ground coming online” and the inhabiting of the masses of the online spaces created new possibilities and promises. The very existence of these “cracks” in the pre-existing structure of the public sphere offers potential for more, longer-term change. The NPS has played a role thus far in unsettling the relationship between people and the state, and this is an achievement of the early adopters.