

Chapter 82

Revolution 2.0: New Media and the Transformation of the Egyptian Political and Communication Landscapes

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ABSTRACT

This chapter analyzes the role of new media, especially Internet-based communication, in accelerating the process of political transformation and democratization in Egypt. It analyzes the Egyptian media landscape before, during and after the 2011 revolution which toppled the regime of President Hosni Mubarak. In the pre-revolutionary phase, the eclectic and paradoxical political and communication landscapes in Egypt, and the role that new media played in paving the way for the revolution, is discussed. During the 2011 revolution, the role of new media, especially social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, is highlighted in terms of the multiple roles they play as catalysts for change, avenues for civic engagement, and platforms for citizen journalism. In the post-revolutionary phase, the multiple changes and challenges exhibiting themselves after the revolution are analyzed, especially the divisiveness between different players in the Egyptian political arena and how it is reflected in the communication landscape.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter draws a picture of the rapidly shifting Egyptian political and communication landscapes, which are closely intertwined, and the role of new media, especially Internet-based communication, in accelerating the process of political transformation and the shift towards democratization. It analyzes the Egyptian media scene during three important stages, namely: before, during

and after the 2011 revolution which toppled the autocratic regime of President Hosni Mubarak. In the pre-revolutionary phase, the eclectic and paradoxical nature of the Egyptian political and communication landscapes, which witnessed limited freedom in the political domain coupled with rising oppositional voices and diversity of opinions in the media domain, are be discussed. During the 2011 revolution, the role of new media, especially Internet-based communication plat-

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-6433-3.ch082

forms, such as *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and *YouTube*, will be highlighted in the context of the multiple roles they played as catalysts for change, avenues for civic engagement, and platforms for citizen journalism. In the post-revolutionary phase, the multiple changes and complex challenges exhibiting themselves one year after the eruption of the revolution are thoroughly analyzed, especially in relation to the divisiveness between different players in the political arena in Egypt and how it was reflected in communication practices, both online and offline. Finally, the most important findings about the transformative and interconnected Egyptian political and communication landscapes are summed up.

THE PARADOXICAL EGYPTIAN MEDIA LANDSCAPE PRIOR TO THE 2011 REVOLUTION

Before the 1952 revolution, Egypt was a monarchy under Ottoman rule, and it struggled against French and British occupations. This political context of fighting against Ottoman rule and foreign occupations gave birth to a general media atmosphere which was characterized by hot political debates, highly nationalistic sentiments, and patriotic struggles against foreign invasion and colonialism (Hamroush, 1989). This era was also rich in its cultural wealth and intellectual diversity, because the newspapers provided platforms for various writers, poets, and thinkers to display their literary contributions. It also witnessed the birth of a strong and dynamic partisan press and a highly politicized and vibrant media environment.

When a group of army officers toppled the monarchy and seized power, turning Egypt into a republic, the so-called 1952 revolution led to mostly tragic developments in the Egyptian media scene. The pluralistic and vibrant media scene that had prevailed before the 1952 revolution was replaced by a much more monolithic and restrictive media environment, after Egypt achieved

her independence. In this new era, all media fell under strict governmental supervision, control, and ownership. Newspapers of the pre-1952 era started to disappear, as many were closed by the government, heavy financial fines were imposed on them, and many journalists were jailed (Abdel Rahman, 1985; 2002).

The era of President Gamal Abdel Nasser, in particular, was characterized by autocratic leadership, since he exercised an iron fist policy in dealing with his opponents. His policy led to a severe backlash in the margin of freedom enjoyed by various media, because he deliberately controlled mass media to mobilize people behind the government's policies and ideologies (Boyd, 1977; 1999). Most importantly, "Nasser's nationalization of the press marked the end of its freedom, professionalism, and excellence" (Nasser, 1990, p. 4) by curbing its diversity and plurality.

When Anwar Sadat came to power as president in 1970, after Nasser's death, he legitimized the birth of political parties and enabled them to publish their own newspapers. Although he started to ease off some of the harsh restrictions and limitations posed by Nasser on the media, the damage to the Egyptian media scene during the Nasser era was grave, and this remained for a long time. Under Sadat, "the press system changed several times, both towards and away from more diversity and freedom of expression. Sadat's attitude towards the press and toward freedom of speech generally was... ambivalent" (Rugh, 2004, p. 152). That was because he was torn between his desire to increase democracy and his fear of its exploitation. Therefore, his era, which started with the granting of a relatively wider margin of freedom and pluralization in both the political and media domains, ended with very strict and restrictive measures against his political opponents and their publications. Many of Sadat's political opponents were jailed, and the publications to which they contributed were shut down shortly before his assassination.

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