Citizen Journalism via Blogging: A Possible Resolution to Mainstream Media's Ineptitude

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Abstract

Throughout the past years, the emergence of the Egyptian Blogosphere has been a definitive phenomenon. The Egyptian Blogosphere went through fluctuations and evolutionary phases, resulting in it becoming a powerful platform for cyber space political activism and citizen journalism, in attempts to compensate for the mainstream media's inadequacy. This paper explores previous studies conducted on this topic. It is supported by a study that gives an insight on the extent at which Egyptian youth/citizens regard blogs as credible and reliable sources of their news, and more generally, as a source of news that can replace mainstream media. By conducting 101 online surveys with a random sample, this study investigates four hypotheses:

Before January 25 revolution:

H1: Politically active/interested internet users rely on blogs as a source of news

After January 25 revolution:

H2: Politically active/interested internet users rely on blogs as a source of news

H3: Politically active/interested internet users perceive blogs as a credible source of news/updates

H4: Politically active/interested internet users regard blogs as more truthful and inclusive than mainstream media because it is a form of citizen journalism

Findings reveal hypothesis 1 is unsupported, hypotheses 2 and 3 are partly supported, and hypothesis 4 is strongly supported.

Keywords: Blogosphere; Social media; Political activism; Facebook revolution

Introduction

The introduction of a "Wireless World" in the mid 1990's and early 2000's reformed the entire media landscape, giving media an entirely new role in society. Today, the world is becoming entirely wireless. Informational videos, movies, music, pictures and even personas and figures can be accessed anywhere with smartphones, modems or computers that are smaller than the size of the palm of your hands. With the advent of the internet, people now have access to news and information about almost any subject, at any time of the day. With the internet's increasing popularity, the new generation has organically evolved from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0, also known as "new media" which is defined as the second generation of the Internet and web-based technologies, characterized by a more dynamic platform through which internet users can interact and engage with other users. This new media structure has become ubiquitous through various forms. Whilst some people believe that new forms of media will make newspapers and traditional radio obsolete, others believe that there is room for the internet and for more traditional media to exist simultaneously, and that the wealth of new sources can complement, rather than replace, old forms of media.

Consequent to rise of new media, innovation in the tools of social media have reinvented social activism. With Social Networking Sites (SNS) like Facebook, Twitter and others, the traditional relationship between political authority and the public has been altered, making it easier for the powerless to collaborate, coordinate, and convey their voice and demands [1]. Activists were once defined by their causes; they are now defined by their tools. As the historian Robert Darnton wrote: "The marvels of communication technology in the present have produced a false consciousness about the past; even a sense that communication has no history, or had nothing of importance to consider before the days of the Internet" [2].

The potential of evolving web-based technologies lies in their capacity to engage people in collaborative endeavour, and in prompting new ways of organizing information. Social media has undoubtedly changed the face of mass communication; hence it has the potential to create an effective public sphere. Consequently, social media has a crucial role in enhancing civic responsibility and activism. In a world of co-creation, social media is increasingly recognized as a promising tool to change the form of information; to speed up information transmission; and to increase the level of information creation, dissemination and consummation. Yet, the most powerful technology developments took place with the evolution of the World Wide Web and the introduction of Web 2.0. In the Arab countries, the arrival of the Internet has brought with it some hopes of democratic change. "In Arab countries where the authoritarian grip over the channels of political communication is very tight, civil society groups and activists have turned to social media as a constructive tool for political communication." [3].

Types of new media

As highlighted earlier, new media has evolved as a result of the Web 2.0 generation, which is the new generation of the World Wide Web, acting as a medium in which content is user-generated, dynamic and offering interactive experience [4]. Now the experience of the user has changed and new media is the sole reason; rather than simply accessing information on the virtual platform, new media has allowed for a dynamic virtual-interaction platform, where website members interact with the content they access. Social media is the type of new media that incorporates the online technology and methods through which people can share content, personal opinions, exchange different perspectives and simply interact. Social media comes in various shapes and forms, for example text can be used to put across opinions or write blog posts while audio lets you create podcasts for users to download. Wikis are websites that allow you to create, edit and share information about a subject or topic while video sharing media is a platform on which you can upload and share your personal videos with the web community like YouTube. Other platforms include photo sharing that allows users to upload images that can be viewed by web users all over the world over such as Flickr [5].

Other forms of social media include News that provide a list of the latest news stories published by users from different websites like Digg, and social bookmarking which are websites that allow users to publicly bookmark web pages they find valuable. Weblogs, also known as Blogs, have become the most popular free blogging platforms that create, inspire, communicate and connect the public such as WordPress.com, and TypePad, and a derivative of that is Micro blogging, which differs from traditional blogging because its content is delivered in short bursts of information like Twitter as an example. Finally, the most powerful form of social media, social networking sites (SNS), such as Facebook, SNS are websites that enable users to create a personal profile, comment, interact, and share information with others [6].

Research statement

This paper focuses predominantly on Egyptian blogging as one of the biggest catalysts for change in the Egyptian society, a form of new media that has been at the forefront of the new media movement eliciting that change. The focus is on the Egyptian blogosphere as a unique political platform on which citizen journalism is practiced. The impact of this medium is explored through the careful analysis of why, how and when Egyptian blogging emerged, its development since its founding, and how Egyptian youth perceive it as a credible, reliable source of news that can possibly compensate for the mainstream media's ineptitude. This paper takes into consideration previous studies about the topic, and expands on them further through a methodology to aid our understanding of the varying perceptions of youth on Egyptian blogs before and after January 25 revolution.

Literature Review

Around the world, internet-based communications challenge the traditional establishment of public mass communication and provide new channels for citizen voices, expression of minority viewpoints, and political mobilization. One of the most prominent internet-based communication channels are Blogs. Opinions vary when it comes to the benefits and dangers that result from such online interaction. In the Arab world, discussions of the internet's potentials and evils often reflect these competing opinions.

Several studies have addressed the characteristics of a blogosphere and its implications. Bruce Etling, John Kelly, Robert Faris and John Palfrey at Harvard University, USA, in 2010, have conducted a study titled "Mapping the Arabic Blogosphere, politics and dissent online," exploring the nature, structure and content of the term "blogosphere," with focus on the Arabic blogosphere. They conducted their study using "link analysis", a term usually associated with frequency analysis (counting letters) and human coding of individual blogs. They have identified a base network of approximately 35,000 Arabic-language blogs, mapping –at that time- the 6000 most-connected blogs, and hand-coding over 3000. Their study represented a baseline assessment of the networked public sphere in the Arabic-speaking world. Findings of the study revealed the most politically active areas of the network to be clusters of bloggers in Egypt, Kuwait, and the Levant, as well as an 'English Bridge' group [6].

Differences among them varied in how online practices are surrounded by local political contexts. Moreover, they have concluded that Bloggers in these countries are focused mainly on domestic political issues, and that bloggers are more frequent users of the top Web 2.0 media tools like YouTube and Wikipedia, ironically more so than pan-Arab mainstream media sources such as Al-Jazeera. Etling et al.'s extensive study pays close attention to the role of bloggers in the Arab world and highlights key issues like the specific role of online media in political mobilization, public discourse, and political outcomes [7,8].

Blogosphere and the creation of cyber culture

Since 1999, blogs have become a noteworthy facet of online cyber culture. They have been considered as the new advocates of democracy. In his study titled "Entering the Blogosphere: Some Strategies for Using Blogs in Social Research", Nicholas Hookway [9] in 2008 of the University of Tasmania, Australia, introduced what a 'blogosphere' is and discussed how it might be treated as an online extension of diary research. He went on to investigate some of the methodological issues involved in doing a blog research, particularly in terms of impression management and trustworthiness. Moreover, he outlined several practical techniques for researchers entering the 'blogosphere' and highlighted some of the ethical issues involved in doing blog research. He chose Live-journal as the primary source for generating the "research-relevant" blogger, as he identified him. Two main phases constituted the data collection process; a passive phase of blog trawling and an active phase of blog solicitation. Hookway concluded that blogs, which he believed are the newest addition to online life, can be utilized as a qualitative social research technique. His article was inaugural in building this knowledge base, and most importantly, his work indicated the potential of research via blogs. Moreover, Hookway provided open-access guidelines to understand and study of the blogosphere; what they are, and how they could be used for sampling. He introduced several methodological and ethical issues associated with blog research.

In the context of western Politics in particular American ecosystem, Weblogs occupy an increasingly important position. Their effect is considered a dilemma: given the discrepancy in resources and organization, how can a collection of decentralized, non-profit, and discordant websites exercise any influence over political and policy outputs? In 2004, Daniel W. Drezner, and Henry Farrell in 2004 [10], presented a study entitled: "The Power and Politics of Blogs" which tried to answer that question by focusing on two important aspects of the "blogosphere": the distribution of readers across the array of blogs, and the interactions between significant blogs and traditional media outlets. They found out that under specific circumstances - when blogs focus on a new or neglected issue - they have the ability to construct a social agenda that acts as a focal point for mainstream media, shaping and constraining the larger political debate. Drezner and Farell's study focused on two interrelated aspects of the "blogosphere": the unequal distribution of readers across the array of weblogs, and the increasing interactions between blogs and mainstream media outlets.

Results also showed that even though there are over a million bloggers, posting approximately 275,000 new items daily, the median blogger has almost no political influence as measured by traffic or hyperlinks. This is because the distribution of web links is heavily distorted, with a few bloggers commanding most of the attention. Finally, blogs have the comparative advantage of instant publication, or dissemination, and in turn socially constructing interpretive frames for understanding current events. As a result, political commentators rely on blogs as sources of interpretive frames for political developments.

In 2005, Melissa Wall [11] from California State University–Northridge published an article examining weblogs or news-oriented blogs that were particularly active during the second US war with Iraq in the spring of 2003. Analysis suggested that these blogs (blogs of war) are a new genre of journalism that emphasizes personalization, audience participation in content creation, and story forms that are fragmented and interdependent with other websites. This distinctiveness suggested a change from traditional journalism's modern approach towards a hybrid new form of journalism. Building on previous contestations that blogs are a new form of journalism, Wall's study assessed the ways in which blogs contribute to the understanding of new genres of news in the 21st century [12].

Mainstream media, during times of war, became less critical of the government and military actions with a tendency to repeat propaganda techniques during the war [13,14]. This created room for other news providers, even foreigners, such as the British press, to blog, leading escalating numbers of Americans to turn to the Web for war news [15,16]. Wall's analysis suggested that blogs of war represent a new field of journalism; since they were offering news that feature a narrative style characterized by personalization. They also encouraged audience participation in content creation through story forms that are fragmented and interdependent with other websites. Ultimately, she concluded that some forms of online news such as blogs have diverted from conventional journalism's modernist approach to symbolize a form of post-modern journalism.

In 2010, Nagwa Abdel Salam Fahmy [17], of Ain Shams University, Egypt, presented a paper on the role of blogs in reporting stories that were "cut" or ignored by traditional media outlets. As bloggers are largely motivated by the desire to convey news stories which were ignored by mainstream media, the paper's main objective was to explore how blogs report these ignored news items and stories. Additionally, the paper investigated how Egyptian internet users comment on blogs. The research was also undertaken to determine how blogs report stories in a different style than the traditional media outlets. She provided an in-depth case study and analysis of recent posts in an Egyptian blog.

Agenda setting and digital democracy

The constant growth of literature on agenda-setting research began with a study by McCombs and Shaw for the 1968 U.S. presidential election, which drew a link between media and formation of public policy. This research showed that news media coverage, or the specific agenda set, was beginning to have a significant influence on public policy. Focusing on the 2004 U.S. Presidential election, Jae Kook Lee [18] found that political blogs had an influence similar to that of the mainstream media. A similar finding was reported in 2007 when they describe the relationship between weblogs and traditional journalism as complementary. Other

researchers have reported a complex didactic relationship between mainstream media coverage and political blogs.

In contrast, Fahmy [17] focused on the notion of agenda-cutting. The process of "agenda-cutting" has been raised by few scholars due to the difficulties found in any study aiming to uncover news stories that went unreported [19]. Most media researchers investigate factors affecting agenda-setting, agenda-building and agenda-framing, but few studies have revealed the reverse phenomenon taking place when the media deliberately ignore some news because of external influences; this is defined by the author as "agenda-cutting" [19]. Agenda-cutting may occur when people within or outside the news organization do their best to hide or camouflage stories. This is established by either "placing an item low on the news agenda or removing it from the agenda, or completely ignore it so it never makes it onto the news agenda to begin with" [19].

Fahmi's paper explored blogs' role as promoting digital democracy and defending human rights, with implication on developing the public sphere. From a theoretical point of view, this study aimed to apply a new approach to the agenda-setting theory. This new approach is Colistra's concept of agenda-cutting, applied to a study on the role of political blogs in an authoritarian state's media system. This research identifies some important findings about the role of Egyptian blogs when stories are "cut" from the mainstream media agenda, in addition to demonstrating the role of the blogs in supporting public concern toward domestic issues. Unfiltered Egyptian blogs can be considered, according to this study, a platform for free discussion about domestic issues, and they facilitate information disclosure. Fahmi's study demonstrated that the Egyptian blogosphere plays an effective role in reporting news stories that are not reported elsewhere. Blogs influence public opinion-framing on issues related to government abuse, as blogs are considered the main source of such information.

As Blogs have become news sources, questions have been raised about whether journalism ethics apply to them or not. Melissa Wall [11,20] found that bloggers tend to regard news-oriented blogs as a superior form of journalism to traditional media, partially because blogs are up-to-date when it comes to news, personal and opinionated. In the 2004 American elections, 21 percent of bloggers chose blogs as their preferred information source [21]. Concerns about bloggers' ethics may be provoked by both the public interest and journalists' concern over defending their turf [22]. Since ethical issues may vary according to the type of blog, a thorough examination of blogging ethics requires a consequential classification of blogs.

Ethics of blogosphere

Mark Centie, Benjamin H. Detenber, Andy W.K, Koh, Alvin Lim and Ng Soon from Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, presented a study that investigates the ethical beliefs and practices of two distinct groups of bloggers – personal and non-personal [23]. Through a worldwide web survey, a stratified purposive sample of 1224 bloggers provided information about their blogging experience, blogging habits and demographics. They were asked about their beliefs and practices for four ethical principles: truth-telling, attribution, accountability and minimizing harm. The findings revealed that the two groups differ in terms of who they are and what they do in their weblogs. In addition, there were significant differences in the extent to which they value and adhere to the four principles, and some interesting similarities. For example, both groups prioritised attribution as the most important ethical principle, and both groups also believed that accountability is the least important. Reinforcing the proposition by scholars to introduce a blogging code of ethics to the blogosphere, this study found that bloggers themselves desire such a code.

This exploratory study of blogging ethics used a broad distinction between personal and non-personal blogs to examine the differences between bloggers' ethical beliefs and practices, and compared demographics, blogging experiences and habits to recognize the discrepancy between these two groups. In addition, it investigated the extent at which bloggers internalised a prospective ethics code for blogging. The study found several significant differences between personal and non-personal bloggers' blogging experiences and habits. For example, non-personal bloggers had more readers daily than personal bloggers. Such differences could be due to non-personal bloggers writing about topics with potentially bigger scale, unlike personal bloggers who write mainly about their personal lives. Non-personal bloggers reported a more frequent check on their viewership statistics, to monitor how many readers access their blogs, than personal bloggers; perhaps as a way of judging the quality of content. Non-personal bloggers also spend more time writing each entry than personal bloggers; in order to provide commentary, they need to spend more time on research and analysis. Overall, the bloggers reported that they value virtue and ethical beliefs. The first large-scale survey of blogging ethics conducted in this study negated any eccentric lack of ethics in these bloggers' practices.

Emergence phases of the Egyptian blogosphere

According to Courtney Radsch [24], the general Egyptian blogosphere went through three main stages since its inception; each has evolutionary signs and different characteristics.

The three main phases are, 'Experimentation phase' followed by 'Activist phase', then finally, 'Diversification and fragmentation phase.' The transition from one phase to the next took place in a small fraction of time which reflects the rapid development of the Egyptian blogosphere. The first phase, the "Experimentation Phase" started in 2003 and lasted until early 2005. During this stage, a specific segment of the Egyptian society comprised "early adopters" of blogging in Egypt; as it was- at that time- a new form of social media in Egypt. These "early adopters" fit a specific profile: they were mainly youth in their twenties, regarded as the well-educated and articulate bilingual "elite" of society. Their attention was drawn to blogging after the emergence of several Iraqi blog sites at the time. Consequently, the bloggers back then were

either technology-oriented, mostly liberal or leftist youth, or amateurs who wanted to try a new medium for self-expression and emancipation [24].

The "Activist phase" occurred in 2005 and 2006, during which blog sites became renowned platforms for online activism. Many political activists' attention was intensively diverted to blogging in 2005, especially with the emergence of more opposition groups; notably, the Kifaya movement, which was the flagship of this period in the evolution of the political blogosphere in Egypt. This area will be further discussed in the section Emergence of Political Blogosphere in Egypt. In fact, 2005 witnessed a turning point in the life cycle of the Egyptian blogosphere. More dedicated bloggers started to appear in the scene, motivated by local as well as global drivers. Local factors include suppression of freedom of expression, which became increasingly noticeable feature in the mainstream media; in addition to the emergence of more opposition groups that called for radical changes in governmental strategies. Global drivers included the West's recognition of the bloggers' society as an official entity, especially in Human Rights organizations, and "the US Foreign Policy toward Egypt" [24].

The final and current phase: " Diversification and Fragmentation Phase" started since the end of 2006; in this phase, as the name suggests, the Egyptian blogosphere grew to become more diversified and inclusive of different interest groups. These groups included the Muslim Brotherhood, opposition groups, "citizen journalists" and many other minorities who were marginalized in the Egyptian society and wanted to voice their existence. The phenomenon of the Muslim Brotherhood's existence in the Egyptian blogosphere was regarded by many as the beginning of a second generation of bloggers in Egypt, with Kifaya's generation regarded as the first; this will be addressed further [7]. Throughout the course of four years, the Egyptian blogosphere evolved rapidly, with the number of bloggers increasing immensely from dozens, trendsetters from the elite of society, to thousands, who come from widely various backgrounds [24]. Although Egyptian blogs have gone through all these changes, the most prominent feature among them is political activism. The second stage, "Activism Phase", is regarded as a milestone after which the Egyptian blogosphere was well acknowledged, not only locally and in the Arab world, but across the global community.

Online Citizen Journalism and Mainstream Media

The rise of online citizen journalism came with the vivid evolution of blogging in Egypt. Undoubtedly, this has its impact not only on political activism, but also on the mainstream media. According to the World Bank, "Egypt has the highest rate of Internet access among non-oil Arab states." [24] Audiences in the Arab world became more cognizant and concurrently more demanding; as a result of the mainstream media not satisfying their demand for "credible and culturally relevant" informative news, they turn to citizen journalism rather than the internet. This came as a result of draconian

dictatorships and widely spread authoritarian regimes that have the upper hand in tightly administering mainstream media in Arab countries. This in turn, acted as a fertile environment for citizen journalism too flourishes on the blogosphere.

It acted as a news source which many of them find credible, more truthful and inclusive than the government-controlled mainstream media. Based on the vigilance of the Egyptian blogosphere in covering the events that most concern citizens about the government and was cut from the mainstream media, the slogan of the Egyptian Blog Review is "from citizens to watchdogs." [24].

According to Reporters without Borders, most recent ranking for press freedom in 2019 is 163rd out of 180 countries [25]. As a matter of fact, in many instances and pivotal historical moments in contemporary Egypt, the Egyptian blog ring proved to be a key player in investigating truths and even advocated for many neglected stories to be covered by the mainstream media. A famous instance is the mass harassment of women that took place in Eid El-Fitr (the Fitr Feast); it was noticeably disregarded by the mainstream media of Egypt. At that time, bloggers managed to report the event and fact-check the exact incidents through videos posted by eye-witnesses. As a result, foreign media, as well as "local independent newspapers," subsequently covered the event once it gained prevalence in the Egyptian blogosphere. This inaugurated and catalysed the shift to blogs being regarded as "competitors to the mainstream media" [24].

Rania Al Malky, former journalist for Egypt Today newspaper, in reflection to Radsch's notion stated that: "In a country like Egypt where state control of the media has reached such epidemic proportions that self-censorship has become a worse threat than direct censorship, the empowering effect of a blog is undeniable. It was only natural that political activists would pick it up to spread their pro-reform message and coordinate demonstrations and other forms of civil action which have been slowly gaining momentum in the past years. And they now have the tools to tell the real story of how their peaceful protests are 'controlled'" [24]. Traditionally, bloggers adopted the main role of the media, acting as watchdogs on the government and on the country's mainstream media.

Political Blogging in Egypt

Unlike conventional blog sites globally, with content covering politics, social issues, entertainment and a wide variety of 'life topics', the case of the Egyptian blogosphere is an exception: Until today, the Egyptian blogosphere lacks light, effervescent topics, due to the emancipative opportunities the platform gave to the Egyptian citizen during its inception, which in turn led to the prominence of political critique and investigation saturating the Egyptian blog pool. Upon investigating the reason behind this phenomenon, in an interview with blogger Zeinab Mohamed El Guendy, known as Zenobia, she clarified that the main reason behind the dominance of political blogs in Egypt is due to the

circumstances that the country has been going through, leading almost every Egyptian citizen to become politically-engaged after being immersed in the everyday events and news. Zenobia elaborated:

"The news that has been leaked mainly throughout the past five or six years about the vastly spread police brutality, prisoners' torture, declining economic status of many people and injustice of Mubarak's regime in general, has led bloggers – as Egyptian citizens before anything – to express their opinions and to feel the duty to enlighten people about the hidden truth. Also, the marginalization of rather important news in the mainstream media worked as a drive for bloggers to report on this missing news; as a result, our Egyptian blogosphere has an inclination toward a journalistic style that is concerned with informing the citizen in a biased manner."

In light of this analysis, the blogosphere is a crucial display of media convergence; it transmits facts and news to citizens through "print, video and broadcast", which is an alternative means for groups that are misrepresented in the mainstream media to voice their views/demands freely on blog sites [26]. Therefore, in many cases, the blogosphere assumes the role of news outlets and thus bloggers become journalists practicing citizen journalism. This phenomenon of citizen journalism is gaining momentum amongst political bloggers who are offering complimentary material to the mainstream media. According to Issandr El Armani, International Crisis Group analyst, commenting on the famous Egyptian political blog Al Wa'i Al Masry (Egyptian Awareness), by the political blogger Wael Abbas; this blog is "the closest thing in the Egyptian blogosphere to a wire service" [7]. Evidently, blogs give an opportunity to otherwise-censored crucial societal topics, such as police brutality or sexual harassment, to see the light [17].

Adopting such a popular role, the blogosphere in Egypt started to become a communal platform for opinion-sharing for political opposition groups and parties that are antagonized and silenced by the current government. Once misrepresented or marginalized by mainstream media, these groups now voiced their opinions and beliefs to the people. Consequently, the emergence of the Egyptian political blogosphere was most prominent in 2005 with the initiation of the Kifaya (Enough) Movement, which objected to Mubarak and his regime. Kifaya used the cyber space intensively – including their own website and bloggers – to disseminate photographs of torture and human rights violations that took place in Egypt (Nadia Oweidat, Cheryl Benard, Dale Stahl, Walid Kildani, Edward O'Connell, Audra K. Grant). In the year of its inception, more light was shed on the Egyptian blogosphere as a strong platform of online political activism. At the time, Kifaya blogger Malik Mostafa's blog, MaLcoLMX: "When all the words became crazy" [7], became one of the most renowned blogs in Egypt.

The efficacy of the use of blogs as a means of vocalism, articulation, and awareness-raising soon reflected on Kefaya; their organized street movements and protests grabbed the attention of the Egyptian opposition allies as well as the global community (Isherwood). This came as a result of the blogosphere's coverage of their actions, with heightened efficacy at times when the movement's membered are portrayed as being marginalized and ignored by the mainstream media. Wael Abbas, Al Wa'i Al Masry blogger, appeared at that time, and was one of the most vigilant in covering Kifaya's protests via photographs and videos on his blog [7].

Consecutive to Kifaya, the Egyptian blogosphere became a haven for various political views and movements that were disliked and muted by the government, among which is the Muslim-Brotherhood group. Whenever depicted by mainstream media, the Muslim-Brotherhood was labelled as 'the banned Brotherhood group'. This reveals the government's strict control over the mainstream media's subjectivity, defaming groups that shaped any threats to the regime. Furthermore, in 2005 and 2006, the government started posing restrictions on students who were affiliated to the Muslim-Brotherhood, impeding their active role in "student government positions" and hindering their academic advancement and graduation [7]. Consequently, the Muslim-Brotherhood started to effectively exist on the Egyptian blogosphere since 2005 [26]. In order to confront the obstacle of being misrepresented by the mainstream media during the elections that year, the group held an "online campaign" featuring a "two-hour video" which displayed the group's "election platform" and its background history (Ajman). The blogosphere was also a tool used by the group in order to mobilize activists' protests during the 2005 Presidential elections [26].

By the same token, the leaders of the Muslim-Brotherhood introduced blogging to their family and "networks" in order to maintain the continuous voicing of the group's views and updates. A famous case is Asmaa Al Iryan, the daughter of Muslim Brotherhood member Islam Al Iryan and a prominent blogger of the group. She started her own blog, "I will live and withstand my sorrows," on which she announced that her father was detained [7].

January 25, 2011 Revolution and Social Media

A study done in the year 2010 by David Faris, University of Pennsylvania, emphasizes that social media networks are strong drivers to the overflow of information that can trigger social mobilization. Faris suggests that the reasons behind that are the reduced cost of "collective action" as well as the proficiency of transmitting information [26]. Having blogs as prominent tool of social media, many bloggers or activists decided to make their voice better heard and amplifying their impact on society through their blogs along with Facebook. One remarkable social-media-organized strike was the April 6th movement group created by activist Esraa Abd El Fattah. Workers of al-Mahala, a rgion in the Nile Delta chose April 6th, 2008 to protest, in objection to the inflation in prices and significantly lower wages. Back then, around 790,000 Egyptians used Facebook, and in a period of 14 days April 6th group members reached 70,000. Nevertheless, the government resisted their dissent by arresting Esraa and trying

to "delegitimize...Facebook" as a main "threat to the authority" [27].

By 2011, Egyptians finally managed to topple the regime through the January 25 revolution, which was organised via social media. According to political blogger Hossam El Hamalawy, this revolution is the result of an amalgamation of a "chain" of revolts that have been ongoing in Egypt for years, all for the same goal; Mubarak's regime must fall (Hossam El Hamalawy). Hamalawy also believes that "in a dictatorship, independent journalism by default becomes a form of activism, and the spread of information is essentially an act of agitation". Consequently, the study conducted in this paper examines the extent at which Egyptian citizens regard political blogs as a credible and reliable source of news that they can follow and rely on regularly; the investigation compares the status of credibility and reliance on the blogs before and after they January 25 revolution.

Research Methodology

Many studies have tackled the functionality of blogs as a source of news in parallel to their credibility as conveyors of news. This study observes delves deeper into the differences found in blogs' viewership and the perception of Egyptian youth of blogs as credible sources of news; the variable in this study is the context of the Egyptian revolution. By comparing youth's perception before the revolution and after it, the shift in citizens' trust in mainstream media is evident, and their getaway to alternative media forms is highlighted. In order to best reach our target sample – youth who use social media tools and are active on the internet - the survey was conducted and distributed through the means that best serves this purpose; an online survey. The survey was distributed on a random sample of participants via Social Networks Systems and emails.

Research hypothesizes

Before January 25 revolution:

H1: Politically active/interested internet users rely on blogs as a source of news

After January 25 revolution:

H2: Politically active/interested internet users rely on blogs as a source of news

H3: Politically active/interested internet users perceive blogs as a credible source of news/updates

H4: Politically active/interested internet users regard blogs as more truthful and inclusive than mainstream media because it is a form of citizen journalism

Findings

The online survey was aimed at internet users who are politically active or interest in following political news and events. The first section of the survey aimed to identify the participants' political preferences and status. A total of 101 surveys were conducted; of which, 42 considered themselves as politically active, 19 said they were not interested in politics and 37 participants were neutral (**Table 1**).

Table 1: Answer to: Do you consider yourself politically active/ interested?

	Number	Percentage
Yes	42	42.86%
No	19	19.39%
Neutral	37	37.76%

When asking if there is a blog that they regularly follow; the majority of the sample - 86 participants - didn't have a favorite blog, while only 12 had a favorite (**Table 2**). Since the beginning of January 25 revolution, 28 participants out of 42 who do follow blogs started following them more regularly. Some of them started following blogs since their emergence in 2005. Reasons behind their interest in blogs varied; "to know different opinions of people regarding the revolution, to stay posted and updated, to get more news.' Some added that they follow blogs "because of the freedom that is not possible in other media outlets, the opinions of ordinary people who are just like me are displayed in an articulate manner, information about actual events that cannot be found in other media outlets are available".

Table 2: Answer to: Do you have a favorite blog that you regularly follow?

	Number	Percentage
Yes please specify	12	12.24%
No	86	87.76%

Most of the suggested blogs have been popular among the majority of the sample, but three blogs were very prominent: Arabawy, Sandmonkey and Egypt Chronicles (**Table 3**).

Table 3: Answer to: Are you aware of any of these blogs (mark all that applies).

	Number	Percentage
Arabawy	24	17.78%
Egyptian chronicles	12	8.89%
Ranting of a Sandmonkey	30	22.22%
Misr Digital	12	8.89%
Baheyya	7	5.19%
Cairo Freeze	4	2.96%
Other (Please Specify)	46	34.07%

Results revealed that 58 out of 101 participants had never followed or tuned in to blogs before the Egyptian revolution that took place on January 25th, 2011; only four had the habit of checking blogs on a daily basis (**Table 4**). After the

revolution, those who followed the blogs seldom displayed change in the frequency of their viewership, but 40 of the participants have been more eager to follow blogs to discover more about recent and current events (**Table 5**).

Table 4: Answer to: How frequent did you follow blogs before Jan. 25th revolution?

	Number	Percentage
Daily	4	4.08%
Twice a week	5	5.10%
Once a week	5	5.10%
Rarely	25	25.51%
Never	58	59.18%
Other	1	1.02%

Table 5: Answer to: Did your viewership rate differ after Jan. 25th revolution?

	Number	Percentage
Yes	41	41.84%
No	40	40.82%
Neutral	17	17.35%

Concerning respondents' perception about blogs as a credible source of news, only 13 participants viewed blogs as a credible source of news, 40 did not perceive it as a credible source, while 45 were neutral. Respondents stated the reasons why they believe blogs are not credible, mostly saying: "they may convey viewpoints that are not welcomed in the mainstream media but they don't convey news events" or "it's more of points of views not sources of information, so it's not really considered as a media source ", and others said that it really depends on the news item and on the blog (**Table 6** and **7**).

Table 6: Answer to: Do you believe Blogs convey news that has been banned from mainstream media?

	Number	Percentage
Yes	49	50.52%
No	17	17.53%
Neutral	24	24.74%
Other (Please Specify)	7	7.22%

When it comes to credibility, participants were asked to rank several media tools relating to their credibility level. 1-being the least credible and 5-being the most credible media tool, mainstream media mainly scored 1, 2 and 4; thus, they are viewed - by the majority - as the least credible source of news and only 23 saw it as a credible source. Independent and satellite channels were seen by 78 participants as the most credible source among all choices. Newspapers ranked 3 in the

credibility scale of media tools. Internet was very dispersed in its ranking, as they believed that the rank and the credibility level would depend on the site they are receiving information from.

Table 7: Answer to: In general, do you believe blogs are a credible source of news?

	Number	Percentage
Yes	13	13.27%
No	45	45.92%
Neutral	40	40.82%

As for the social media, it ranked as both most and least credible as the same time. Some saw it as the gate for freedom and other saw it as a motivation for a bigger conspiracy theory. While others presented these as their most credible source of news: Rasd, Facebook and Al Ahram. Furthermore, 71 participants believed that blogs will indeed have an essential role in the political arena, and will impact future political movements, 19 were neutral and 8 believed their role has been taken by the evolving social networking systems and new technologies of social media (**Table 8**).

As for the respondents' demographics, 71 of the sample were females and 27 were males (**Table 9**). The age group of our sample ranged from 25 to 35 years old; as they are perceived to be the active category of the society, only one respondent was 40 while another one was 53 years old. 86 of the participants were BSC holders, 14 had a PhD degree, and others were MA holders and Undergraduate students. Occupation of our survey's respondents varied from: software engineer, manager, broker, freelancer, pharmacist, financial analyzer, journalist, to students, teacher assistant and media analyst. For more information on respondents, check appendix.

Table 8: Answer to: In the future, do you believe blogs will have a role in political activism?

	Number	Percentage
Yes	71	72.45%
No	8	8.16%
Neutral	19	19.39%

Table 9: Gender distribution of the participants.

	Number	Percentage
Male	27	27.55%
Female	71	72.45%

Analysis and Conclusion

According to the survey findings, the percentage of respondents who never followed blogs before January 25

revolution is 59.18% of the sample, this means that they did not consider blogs as a source of news. Hypothesis #1 stated that politically active/interested internet users rely on blogs as a source of news before the revolution. Therefore, according to the mentioned findings, Hypothesis #1 is unsupported.

On the other hand, the percentage of respondents who viewed blogs noticeably more after the revolution is 41.84% , while 17.35% remain neutral. Hypothesis #2 stated that politically active/interested internet users rely on blogs as a source of news after the revolution. Therefore, based on the mentioned findings, Hypothesis #2 is partly supported.

Testing the respondents' perception about the credibility of blog content, the percentage varied between 40.82% who were neutral, 45.92% who did not think that blogs are credible, and the remaining 13.27% who perceived it as a credible source of news before the revolution. Hypothesis #3 stated that politically active/interested internet users perceive blogs as a credible source of news/updates after the revolution. According to the findings, Hypothesis #3 is partly supported; although 45.92% perceived it as not credible, however 40.82% were neutral, and as a result, the Hypothesis can neither be supported nor fully unsupported.

Finally, Hypothesis #4 stated that politically active/ interested internet users regard blogs as more truthful and inclusive than mainstream media because it is a form of citizen journalism after the revolution. Testing this Hypothesis, the percentage of respondents who believed that blogs, in the form of citizen journalism, cover neglected news in the mainstream media is 50.52%, and the percentage of neutral respondents is 24.25%. Consequently, Hypothesis #4 is supported.

Despite efforts done by several Egyptian bloggers to cover news that are not covered in the mainstream media in a biased manner and a journalistic style, many respondents justified their perception of blogs as non-credible by stating that they are more about the opinions of their bloggers rather than real news. This reveals inconsistency between the bloggers' targets and the readers' perceptions. In that sense, it is implied that Egyptian political bloggers who have the intention of compensating for mainstream media's incompetence and failures should practice online citizen journalism more accurately and effectively.

On trials to investigate this issue, Zeinab El Gendy – also known as Zenobia – commented on this issue, stating that Egyptian bloggers who try to practice citizen journalism correctly through reporting on important issues to publish as news on their blog sites, face hurdles that stand in their way. Zenobia clarified the obstacles bloggers face saying: "When I was trying to cover the constitutional amendments referendum, I was banned because I did not have a journalist license according to officers; we were promised by the Egyptian Association for Electronic Press to change the rules and conditions, in order for us to have more authorization to practice citizen journalism freely". This highlights the obstacle that must be considered when Egyptian bloggers attempt to efficiently and effectively resolve Egyptian mainstream media's

faultiness and ineptitude. The government should start acknowledging citizen journalism, especially after it has been intensively practiced during the revolution.

Several respondents stated that Al-Ahram newspaper, besides Facebook's Rasd News Network group, is more credible than blogs, in their perspective. This is insightful in reinforcing the assumption that blogs' credibility might be directly linked to journalistic professionalism. Rasd News Network is an online news agency which emerged and became most popular during the days of the revolution. It relies on Egyptian citizens as its reporters from within the action and the events; in other words, they endorse online citizen journalism and advocate for high journalistic standards. In turn, they are rapidly gaining the audience's trust in their credibility as a source for information.

In communities like the Egyptian one, the need for citizen journalism arises. Yet Social Networks have superseded blogs in that role, given their design feature which provides them with a better chance to inform the public and get them engaged faster. Nonetheless, 71 participants believed that blogs will have a role in the political development of Egypt in the coming years. This implies the respondents' acknowledgement of the potential power blogs can possess, however the platform still needs further development and definition.

Limitations

The survey conducted in this study used a random sample, which makes it invalid to make general assumptions on the entire politically-engaged online community, using the results obtained and findings reached. Another limitation is that the representation of the age groups turned out to be dispersed in number, leaving some age groups poorly represented. Some of the responses were inconsequential as they required a more representative sample. For example, questions relating to choice of favorite blogs and reasons why he/she began following blogs. Total number of surveys conducted was 101 respondents, which is too small to be permissible for publishing in an academic journal. Additionally, most of the survey questions were based on the weakest level of measurement which is nominal.

Future Recommendations

Since the sample used in this research was a random sample, leading to a discrepancy in the results, future research should involve a purposive sample and it should be conducted on a larger number of participants, in order for findings to be valid for generalization. Future studies can investigate bloggers' trials to practice citizen journalism in addition to mainstream media's perception about it, answering the question whether Egyptian blogs are considered potential competitors for mainstream media. Furthermore, future studies can thoroughly investigate the main factors that affect the audience's perception of blogs credibility.

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