Social Media in the ‘Arab Spring’:
The Example of Egypt
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Block what blocks you
Tomorrow you’ll see victory
You will fill the heart of darkness with light
As long as your heart beats on
(The Egyptian pop star Hamza Namira on his 2011 album Insān / ‘Human’)

Macht kaputt was euch kaputtmacht
(The German Polit-rock band ‘Ton Steine Scherben’ 1969/70)

You gotta be patient – patience is the best medicine
(The popular Egyptian singer Aḥmad ‘Adaweyya in his 1970s song Yā ‘ēnī ‘ālli māl bakhto)
Executive summary

Was the ‘Arab Spring’ a ‘Facebook revolution’? Or were social media mere tools used by revolutionaries like others before? What role did the internet play in the Arab uprisings? And beyond that: what impact do these new forms of communication have in the Arab mediascape and in society more generally? In 2011, the importance of social media was heavily and controversially debated in media and academia. To gain insight into how users themselves view the role of social media in the recent events, I did fieldwork in Egypt in autumn 2011 and spring 2012. Interviews and participant observation suggest that

1. while the importance of Facebook and Twitter may have been exaggerated in early reporting, social media did play a key role in mobilising and organising people;

2. the weight of social media in the flow of information is growing;

3. social media’s impact on socialisation may be at least as important in the long run as the immediate political role they play.
Social media Revolutions?

In spring 2011, the blogosphere and western media were quick to label the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt a ‘Twitter revolution’, ‘Facebook revolution’, or ‘social media revolution’. These new media, along with YouTube, were highly visible and easily accessible to Western observers and allowed them to follow events almost in ‘real time’. The fact that the Egyptian authorities chose to block internet services after two days of demonstrations only seemed to confirm the importance of the net in the uprising. These first impressions were, however, rebuked by none other than Evgeny Morozov who in 2009 had been the first to coin the term ‘Twitter revolution’ (in the context of the Moldovan civil unrest). He subsequently came to the conclusion that the role of Twitter, in Moldova as well as in Iran later that year and also in the Arab Spring, had been much exaggerated and that socio-economic and political conditions were more important factors than the media in triggering these uprisings. Media, Morozov maintains, are just tools that can be used in a variety of ways, for good as well as for bad, and in his The Net Delusion he warns that regimes around the world are in fact quickly learning to use these tools for supervision and repression.

Those who argue that media are ‘just tools’ ignore, however, that tools have distinguishing properties that enable their users to do things that are less easily accomplished without these tools (and conversely, their limitations may constrain action in certain ways). So while acknowledging that it was social, economic, and political factors that were the root causes of the ‘Arab revolutions’ (as they are mostly referred to in Arabic), it is nevertheless important to enquire what the tools used by the revolutionaries made possible, and what would not have been possible without them. And as important as it is to acknowledge parallels to how whatever happened to be the ‘new’ media of the time were used in earlier revolutions and by earlier contentious political movements, it is equally essential to recognise the differences, to identify the new openings and unprecedented ways of action that these ever ‘new’ media make possible. Regarding the ‘Arab Spring’, this last question is only slowly emerging as a research topic.

Facebook: The view from Egypt

How do people in Egypt view the role of social media in the revolution of 25 January? The following paper attempts to give an overview on this question based on interviews and participant observation during a prolonged stay in Egypt in autumn 2011 and several follow-up visits in the course of 2012. To balance previous accounts that were mainly based on interviews with the most prominent internet activists (the ‘A-list bloggers’), I focused more on ‘ordinary’, ‘nameless’ or ‘non-famous’ people that I met while walking the streets of Cairo, Alexandria, and a few small towns and villages in the Beni Sueif and Daqahliyya governorates, spending time in public spaces from Tahrir Square to neighbourhood cafes or juice bars, and networking from there.

Obviously, people in Egypt do not all share the same view on the role social media played in the events leading up to and during the revolution.

Some activists presented an enthusiastic view of the importance of the new media. Most prominent among them is Wael Ghonim, administrator of the Facebook group ‘Kullinā Khālid Saʿīd / We are all Khaled Said’ (established June 2010). In his book Revolution 2.0, he conveys the impression that the revolution was almost single-handedly created and managed via his Facebook group and associated actors.

Others, especially from among revolutionary activists and leftist intellectuals, expressed reservations and were critical of what they regarded as superficial and distorted accounts of a ‘Facebook revolution’. They emphasised that it wasn’t Facebook but widespread frustration about police brutality and the stalled economic and political situation that had caused the revolution. Some of the older ones were dismissive of what they regarded as ‘clicktivism’: much activity on the social media, they argued, remained limited to the media themselves. This reflects a frustration not uncommon among leftists in Egypt who tend to attribute the popularity of Islamist movements to their long-standing social and political work on the streets and in the poorer neighbourhoods. Leftists, on the other hand, accused each other of being more comfortable in their own debating circles.

It is interesting to note, however, that many of the less well-educated and less prominent young Egyptians that I talked to had a different opinion. In their view, Facebook did play a decisive role in the unfolding of events. Without it, they thought, the revolution wouldn’t have taken place the way it did. Many of those I interviewed had no or hardly any knowledge of blogs, so they were largely unaware of the role blogs had played in the 2005 Kifāya movement. 2008 was a
more important year for them. Some of my interviewees were around 17-20 years old at the time, and were politicised in the context of the ‘6 April’ general strike. This strike had its origin in the labour movement and its main geographical focus in the textile factories of al-Maḥallat al-Kubrā, but a Facebook group established by Cairo activists in support of the strike quickly grew into Egypt’s most successful political Facebook group, attracting tens of thousands of members in just a few weeks, and surviving smear campaigns in the pro-regime media to become a political force chiefly among the urban young people that the state was taking seriously.13

‘6 April’ demonstrated the viability of Facebook as a platform for political action in Egypt, but for two years, its impact remained largely limited to committed activist circles. In the summer of 2010, however, the Khaled Said page on Facebook turned widespread anger about police brutality into a mass public phenomenon. There was a brief period of general frustration and downheartedness following massive fraud in the parliamentary elections of October 2010, but at the turn of 2011, social media rekindled the spark of revolutionary hope and carried it from Tunisia across the Arab world, helped in good measure by Al Jazeera. Young people everywhere realised that it was not impossible to overthrow a dictator, unlike the attitude that many of them had been socialised into. In addition to this moral boost, social media helped to disseminate concrete experiences and tips on how to confront police forces.14

Finally, on 27 January 2011 the regime panicked, cut internet services15 and severely limited mobile telephony and text messaging. The common account is that this backfired by forcing everyone out into the streets: the activists, the clicktivists, the passive observers, and their parents who no longer could contact their sons and daughters via telephone. Many of my interviewees’ reports can be summarised in the following three main points.

1. ‘I’m not alone.’ Everyone knew of and was upset about police brutality and systemic corruption. However, most people were afraid to talk about this in public. Facebook made it obvious that hundreds of thousands of others shared these sentiments and were willing to publicly express them. This helped people to ‘break the barrier of fear’ (by now a proverbial expression) that had protected the regime for so long.17

2. Social media allowed people to mobilise, network, and organise more effectively than through face-to-face, telephone, SMS, blogs, or print communication. They did not replace these other media, however, but complemented them and expanded on them.

3. Like no other medium before, the structure of Facebook made it easy to spread information and opinion beyond the circles of those already actively engaged in political groups. ‘Likes’ from friends played a big role in this. The walls of many users who so far only had been subscribed to non-political groups were increasingly filled with links to political information cross-posted by friends from a growing number of protest groups and alternative information channels. Also during the revolution, many popular soccer, music and humour groups were taken over by politics and used for political discussions.

Representative for many others, here is the voice of one interviewee:18

‘People got together on Facebook, they sent each other information about what was happening, and when the internet got cut, they all got out on the streets.’ Would the revolution have happened without Facebook, I asked. ‘No. Of course, the oppression was there, but Facebook helped people to learn about it, see that other people had similar concerns, and get organised for demonstrations.’

In my interviews, I encountered this kind of assessment so often that it can be regarded as a standardised account; it is being repeated so frequently that it has become a stereotype — cautioning us to ask whether the interviewee is simply repeating the stereotype instead of reporting his or her own experiences. On the other hand, this account would probably not have become so widespread had it not rang true in the ears of many users. Compare it to the following extract from an Egyptian blog, written in April 2011.

From my personal living experience the social media gave the people the feeling that they are not alone, i am angry and so do you but how many of us share the same feeling? social media gave the answer and provided a new way for communication.

It also saved the revolution by continuously informing the people of what is going on on the ground, and what’s not mentioned by the classical media.19
Beyond this description, a more wide-reaching assessment of the use of Facebook in Egypt, and a highly interesting evaluation of its social and psychological implications, was provided to me by a young man in this interview:

- When we grew up, we were trained into not speaking our minds in front of other people. Or maybe someone is just shy. But on the computer, this barrier doesn’t exist, it is much easier to speak one’s mind there, and that’s what a lot of people did.
- Of course many people had an idea of what was going on in the country. But to see the brutality in pictures (the tortured face of Khaled Said!) still makes a difference, it gives it an emotional dimension, you get even more angry, plus you can share this easily with many others.
- During the revolution, all Facebook groups were full of politics. So even if you were only following non-political groups, like sports or jokes or music, they would be full of politics. And so everybody got drawn in.
- Facebook got so much talked about during the revolution that ‘everybody’ joined, even those who hadn’t been on it before.

At this point, we may be able to summarise as follows. Facebook was an important tool helping to mobilise people and get them to feel and express solidarity with the revolution; subsequently, many of them were motivated and spirited enough to go out and demonstrate on the streets. While this did not immediately and of itself change the ruling system, when asked many interviewees would still agree with the proposition that internet and Facebook use helps to build a culture of gradual emancipation from paternal and paternalistic authorities. In addition to its directly mobilizing effect, the impact of internet use may thus also be seen as effecting a gradual, generational change of attitudes. I shall come back to this point further below.

Twitter, blogs, and the Changing Attention Economy

I have focused on Facebook so far because it is the leading social media platform in Egypt, ahead of YouTube (which often is accessed via links from Facebook or other platforms). And since there is nothing more successful than success, Facebook user numbers in Egypt have skyrocketed after the 2011 revolution. Twitter, however, is performing strongly as well, although it still remains more of an élite affair in Egypt (figures for Facebook, January 2011: 4.6 million – June 2012: 11 million; Twitter, September 2011: 130,000 – March 2012: 215,000). Active Twitter users are often rich enough to be able to afford smartphones or tablets, but some activists are also tweeting from cheaper mobile phones. Usage patterns vary of course. While many users read much more than they write, some ‘tweeps’ (people writing frequently on Twitter) are updating their feed almost constantly throughout the day (and are often complaining how much time this takes).

A number of prominent bloggers (like Wael Abbas or Hossam el-Hamalawy) have gone over to tweeting much more than blogging. For others, Twitter is a more sporadic or periodic affair. And some regard the fact that Twitter is ‘smaller’ than Facebook as an advantage. In Egypt, it is not uncommon to send Facebook friendship requests to strangers (see further below), and it is (or at least has been) equally common to accept these friendship requests from strangers – to expand one’s network and to boost a large number of friends. During 2011/12, however, I heard from several people that they were starting to feel uneasy among so many unknown ‘friends’, or were getting warnings about the ‘immoral’ intentions a particular ‘friend’ might have. Some of these users claimed to have reduced their activity on Facebook and to write more on Twitter where the public timeline is shorter and where the number of followers, at least initially, appeared more manageable.

During demonstrations in 2011, the usefulness of Twitter for micro-coordination on the ground was unprecedented, while Facebook had a wider mobilising reach. Both Twitter, Facebook and YouTube were used for post-processing events (posting and interlinking reports, images and analyses). In this way, social media helped to keep up the spirit and maintain momentum after one had come home from a demonstration. This ‘continuity’ of engagement – not only of leading activists but of many thousands of participants – is a feature of the social media world that is different from earlier instances of demonstrations and revolts.

Compared to Facebook and Twitter, blogs often lay dormant during the revolution, reportedly for ‘lack of time’ to write. Twitter took over from the blogs also in another area: the transmission of local affairs to a global public. Bloggers had played this role since 2005; they were now joined by new Twitter stars in giving voice to the ‘youth revolution’ in international media. Interestingly, however, the term ‘blogger’ (mudawwin) continues to be used in Arabic even for people who are much more active on Twitter; it almost has become a generic word for ‘internet
activist.25 These people continue to be frequently invited to talk shows also on pan-Arab and Egyptian satellite TV stations that want to appear as being open to the young generation.

With the revolution, and with the development of social media into a mass phenomenon, we are witnessing a shift in the relative weight of social media compared to ‘older’ media. This is not to deny that TV still is the primary mass medium, but a change in usage patterns is evident. While for some years already the avant-garde of social media users have checked Twitter and Facebook before switching on Al Jazeera and opening the morning papers, this is now turning into a trend.26 In the case of Twitter in Egypt, this also seems to lead to a change in the population of the Twittersphere. Until 2011 at least, the Egyptian Twittersphere was clearly dominated by leftist and liberal voices. Islamists were a small minority, in contrast to the Gulf states. Since the revolution, voices of political Islam have begun to use Twitter more intensively.27 This corresponds to a general development whereby social media play a growing role in the domestic flow of political information. Institutions and politicians are increasingly relying on Facebook and Twitter as primary channels for releasing information and expressing points of view.28 Print and broadcast media then cite from these sources. This reverses the previously dominant relation between ‘old’ and ‘new’ media. Until recently, debates on the internet more often than not picked up issues that were first publicised in the ‘traditional’ media.

Blogs never attained the same prominence in the semi-official domestic flow of information – this is the big difference between blogs and social media, between 2005 and 2011. Blogs have, of course, played an important role for alternative ‘civil journalism’ since 2005, and have succeeded in forcing a number of ‘taboo’ issues such as torture in police custody or sexual harassment into the mainstream media, and thence into public debate, into court, and into the legislature.29 Blogs were thus pioneers in breaking the dominance of established professional journalism. The fact that during the Arab uprisings, Al Jazeera and other TV stations could rely on an almost unlimited supply of videos by ‘citizen journalists’ is only the most visible result of this development so far. Together with pan-Arab satellite TV and the internet more generally, blogs have been a crucial factor in breaking state hegemonies and creating an information field that eventually allowed for more critical reporting on local and national affairs also in the print media. While just a few years ago, press and television often were trying to hide behind blogs when taking up controversial issues (‘as the blogosphere reports …’), this has meanwhile become much less common and less necessary.

Political opposition and human rights activists have long used the internet to circumvent state control over the flow of information. They have fought repression and censorship to spread alternative narratives, and to mobilise new publics, not least an international audience that could help to exert pressure on governments at home. While social media offer new ways of evading censorship by hiding in the crowd, state authorities try their best to maintain control. Censorship and repression have anything but disappeared since the Arab Spring, and authorities and pro-government groups have also made efforts to harvest social media to this end. In 2009, Iranian authorities crowd-sourced surveillance by taking images from YouTube and other social media platforms, posting them on a pro-government site, and offering rewards for the identification of protestors. Pictures of people arrested were stamped ‘captured’.30 The same method was used in Bahrain in 2011 when a pro-regime group put online pictures of hundreds of people who were said to have participated in anti-government demonstrations or to have helped wounded demonstrators by providing them with medical assistance. Loyal citizens were asked to help in identifying these people. Crowd-sourcing was, however, also used by the opposition. Already in 2008, Egyptian activists created a ‘Piggipedia’ on Flickr to point out security personnel accused of brutalising demonstrators.31 To counter the pro-regime crowd-sourcing site in 2009, the Iranian opposition ran a ‘Green’ counter-site to try to identify undercover government agents. So far, government authorities largely appear to remain one step behind in this cat-and-mouse game. Of course, the role of media cannot be analysed in isolation from broader social and political developments, but in autumn 2011, Egyptian activists claimed that blogs and social media had helped to break the last political taboo in Egypt: the army.32 And indeed, by autumn 2011 criticism of the army’s political and economic entanglements could even be heard on Egyptian state radio.

Rather than celebrate the achievements of the digital elite, however, what I want to emphasise here is the fact that in the course of the revolution of 2011, ‘everyone’ (and not only the young avant-garde) realised that social media play a key role in the attention economy of a significant and growing section of society. If you can’t beat them, join them: in February 2011, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces in Egypt was the first in a long line of official institutions to open a Facebook account and use it as a prime channel to publish official statements.33 Blogs, as I pointed out above, have never attained this status.
Peer Communication and Socialisation

The importance of social media for political communication notwithstanding, it remains a fact that Facebook or YouTube are mostly used for other, not directly politically relevant, purposes. Social networking with friends and peers is chief among them, and parents and other ‘older’ authorities are often complaining that the young are ‘wasting’ ever more time on Facebook, the internet in general, or their mobile phones. The common stereotype of the ‘Facebook youth’ (shabāb al-Face) is not wholly without basis. In the parents’ view, they ‘sit in front of Facebook all day long, relax and lean back on the couch, stroke their hair, and don’t do anything useful’.

Also many young people themselves, when asked what Facebook means to them, describe their own use as mostly tasliya, pastime/amusement. Here is one of many similar stories, of a young man (ca. 22-25 years old) with a bachelor’s degree in computer programming from a technology school in al-Haram, Cairo, who was doing his 1-year military service at the time of the interview:

MM has been using a computer since his second year in intermediate school, when he was about 15 years old. His father bought the computer, mostly so that the son could use it. Says he has been using Facebook for a long time, ‘at least 5 years’ [sic]. How did he first hear about Facebook? ‘From friends. You could chat, upload pictures, etc.’ In addition to people you know in real life, ‘you can also check out pictures of beautiful girls and get to know them’ (grins).

A 27-year-old girl similarly told me that

in the beginning, she would accept many friend requests from many people even though she didn’t know them personally; this, she said, was common among Egyptians; they would type in names or even only a letter and look at the pictures and send a friend request, and if that was accepted, they would start chatting and find out where one lives and whether for example one could meet one day.

The Facebook wall of this girl is filled with romantic pictures, romantic poetry, flowers, and music. Asked about her Facebook use, she said

In the beginning, she was ‘glued’ to Facebook (‘12 hours a day’): ‘In the morning, I would get up and immediately check my Facebook for half an hour or so, before doing anything else, before drinking tea & milk. I didn’t want to get up, my mom called me to eat and I wouldn’t get up.’ Her parents would say, ‘yikhrib bēt il-Facebook w’llī ikhtara ʿ il-Facebook’ (damned be Facebook and the one who invented Facebook!). Just as before Facebook, they had said, ‘yikhrib bēt il-mobile w’llī ikhtara il-mobile’ (damned be the mobile phone and the one who invented it) – as she like other young people would sit and chat for hours on her mobile. Now, she says she spends only 2-3 hours per day on ‘Face’, mostly reading and commenting on friends’ posts and pictures, since ‘I’m using my brother’s computer and he takes it in the afternoon.

The ease of peer-to-peer communication uncontrolled by paternal or paternalistic authority clearly upsets these authorities, and the worries of parents are mirrored in those of the ruling institutions. The introduction of the internet in Arab countries has been accompanied since the early 1990s by agitated debates about the dangers this poses to the relationship between the sexes, the upbringing of children, the cohesion of families, education and work discipline, the structure of society, cultural identity, and the stability of the state. While it is important to recognise that moral and political concerns exist independently of each other, political censorship has often come under the cover of defending morality and ‘Egyptian values’. After the emergence of the 6 April group on Facebook in 2008, state media ran smear campaigns against the corrupting influence of Facebook on the young generation’s moral upbringing. Such moral indignation, however, only helps to emphasise the anxiety felt by established authorities – both parents and the state – at losing control over what their children and their subjects spend time with, get to see or read and are influenced by, and grow to regard as true and right.

Of course, far from all young people engage in politics. When I asked MM – whose self-description of his Facebook use centred on pictures and jokes – about political groups on Facebook, he said that he wasn’t interested in politics and was not following political groups.

‘Only my father follows politics because he trades in stock and gold and needs to know. Anyhow, he’s losing all the time,’ MM joked. I asked him about one of the largest Egyptian Facebook groups, ‘We are all Khaled Said’. ‘Khaled who?’ MM asked. I [AHH] am not sure if
he really didn’t know the group or just acted as if [...]. Whatever: he was adamant that most of the young people on Facebook were not into politics, and that those busy with politics were a minority of ‘knowledgeable people’ (nās fahmīn). Asked about Facebook groups that he himself was following, MM gave his local church’s group as an example [a group that was organizing local church events like choir rehearsals and theatre plays].

Politics, however, sneaks even onto the ostensibly apolitical Facebook walls of these users, via likes and shares from friends, or even in romantic and humorous disguise:

When your girl friend feels weak, be a father to her
And when she cries, be a mother to her
And when she’s upset and revolts, be a SCAF to her: fool her and tell her: your revolution has succeeded!

This witticism by the Egyptian satiric Galāl ʿĀmir spread like wildfire on Facebook in the days prior to the first anniversary of Mubarak’s resignation, and ‘romantic’ MR was among the earlier ones to post it on her Facebook wall, on 8 February 2012. A few days later, Galāl ʿĀmir was dead; he suffered a heart attack during a protest demonstration against SCAF that was brutally broken up by thugs (balagliyya) acting with impunity on behalf of state security.

MR would never have joined a demonstration herself; she was even afraid to be seen on Tahrir Square (‘If my parents would get to know, they would give me hell!’). The tension between young people and their parents was an underlying theme in many of my conversations, and in letting her fear of her parents prevail, MR appeared more the exception than the rule. Much more frequently my interview partners told me that ‘the youth has broken the fear barrier (ḥāţiz al-khawf)’ — using an expression that has become part of the stereotypical account of the Arab Spring. Politically, it is usually meant to express the idea that it was young people, those below thirty, who have managed to overcome the predominant fear of the state’s security apparatus and of economic reprisals against any challenge, large or small, to the ruling system — a fear that had paralyzed their parents’ generation for over thirty years. Many are conscious, however, that below this political aspect, the fear barrier has another dimension: the fear of parental authority. People have played on these two aspects in various ways. ‘#Egypt: The only country where the youth aren’t afraid to die, but are afraid of telling their parents they’re going down to #Tahrir.’ This tweet was widely spread on social media and in the larger public in November 2011, often accompanied by tales of how young people, locked up in their rooms by their parents, resorted to lies or simply climbed out of the window to be able to join the protests. Thus, many of the young people I talked to during the clashes on Muḥammad Maḥmūd Street in November 2011 told me that they had broken the fear barrier, and that the first barrier they had broken was that of being afraid of their parents and families, by defying orders to stay at home.

Facebook, with its structure as a network of ‘friends’, is a prime example for the growing weight that peers are gaining through increasing use of social media in the social construction of knowledge and values. What peers ‘like’ and ‘share’ influences more and more what users of these media get to see, and the claims of parents, teachers, or TV are qualified and relativised by what gets mediated by peers in social networks. Of course, peer networks have always played this role and thus posed a certain challenge to top-down, authoritative discourse. Today, however, the structure or ‘code’ of internet communication, not least in the social media, and the public and pervasive nature of it, facilitates and magnifies the impact of this anti-hierarchical communication. The increasing role that internet and social media play in the socialisation of a growing number of young people thus promotes a development that challenges established authorities not only politically, but in society at large. It goes without saying that this development is also nurtured by
other socio-economic factors such as urbanisation, nuclear families, higher education, or international contacts. By directly structuring communication and the ways of exchanging meaning, however, social media play a particularly important part here.

In effect, the relatively unquestioned ‘self-evident’ nature of older hierarchies is undermined by these developments. This was also expressed to me in many conversations I had in Egypt, where young people emphatically stressed that they were no longer willing simply to accept what their parents or any other supposed authority was asking them to do, that they had their own opinion and had a right to express it and have it heard, and that they needed to be convinced of an argument instead of merely accepting it on the basis of some presumed authority. Typical for this attitude is the response I got from a 22-year-old woman (MK) when I asked her about why she was wearing the veil (hijāb). I pointed out that there were different opinions about whether or not this was obligatory, and that some people would argue that covering the hair with a hijāb was not enough but that a woman must cover her whole body and wear a face veil (niqāb).

‘I figured out that this was the right thing to do’, MK said, using the Arabic verb īghtahād, which in formal Arabic means to exercise individual reasoning, based on the canonical sources, in the elaboration of the law. ‘How?’ I asked. ‘Are you a muḥtahida (a person competent enough in Islamic law to exercise such individual reasoning)?’ She said that she had read in a book of Prophetic Traditions (ḥadīth) that this was her Islamic religious obligation. ‘Which one?’ I wanted to know. ‘Wait, I’ll tell you in a second ... what was the name of the book again? I think it was just called Ḥadīth al-Bukhārī.’ Then she immediately stressed: ‘This is my own free decision. The more a woman shows of her body, the more sexy she appears [she used the word ‘sexy’ in English]. Today you see me wearing what I wear: hijāb and trousers [she was actually wearing very tight trousers, a marked belt, and was very attractively clad and made-up, befitting her highly self-confident behaviour and way of talking]. Tomorrow, I might wear a niqāb. Or take off the hijāb. It’s my own free decision. It’s my freedom [she emphasised the word ħurriyya].’ I asked her if she was watching religious TV channels. She said, ‘Well, yes, occasionally, but it’s more like when I want to listen to [the] Qur’ān. I’m a very political animal. I’m always tuning into the news. I don’t turn on the TV to listen to Shaykh so-and-so.’

The same MK – who had joined the 6 April Youth Movement in 2008 when she was nineteen – explained to me on a later occasion that when she was younger, she had dreamt about becoming a cadre in the Muslim Brotherhood but that today, she was glad that she had not. Throughout the events of late 2011, she was very dismissive of the Brotherhood, voicing the disappointment of someone who felt the organisation had betrayed the hopes of the young generation, who had believed in it as a true force of opposition to the ruling regime but who now felt these aspirations were crushed by an old men’s club so keen on taking over power that they were readily making strategic alliances with the hated SCAF.

Another striking example of this anti-authoritarian attitude was provided by a young man on Tahrir Square:

A guy, ca. 20-23, resting next to me from the clashes on Muhammad Mahmūd Street, wearing a mouth cloth and jeans and no beard, told me: ‘I’m Salafi.’ I asked him what that meant. ‘It means I only follow the example (qudwa) of the Prophet (peace be upon him) and the Pious Predecessors (al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ). My allegiance is not to any party [he earlier had made dismissive remarks about the Muslim Brotherhood and their conspicuous absence from the demonstrations: ‘Where are they?’], and I’m not with, like, Ḥizb al-Nūr or so [the largest Salafi party in Egypt] – my allegiance is only to this country [he bowed to point to the ground].’ When I told him about the stereotyped image of the Salafi who grows a beard and colours it with henna, he explained: ‘This is only sunna [a voluntary supererogatory practice]. In Islam, there’s a difference between fard [religious obligation] and sunna. Sunna is voluntary.’ But, I said, according to my stereotype, a Salafi is someone who tries to follow the qudwa and the sunna of the Prophet in every detail, the jawhariyyāt (essentials) and the shakliyyāt (formalities). ‘So why do you insist on calling yourself
a Salafi?’ – ‘All Muslims are Salafis,’ he answered. ‘It’s the same thing. Muslims love the Prophet, and go by the example of the Prophet. I go by the example of the Prophet.’ – ‘But are you an ālim (a scholar)?’ I asked. ‘How can you be sure you understand correctly what exactly this example means?’ – ‘No, I’m not an ālim, but I follow only people I trust (athiq fihum).’ – ‘So can you name someone you trust?’ I asked. ‘For example Muḥammad Ḥassān,’ he replied. ‘So you do follow him, and not only the Prophet’, I objected. ‘No, I don’t simply accept what he says; he brings proof from the Qurʾān and the Prophetic Tradition (dalāʾil min al-Qurʾān wa’l-Sunna), he quotes Qurʾānic verses and ḥādīth, and I get convinced by that.’

Such attitudes that not only indirectly challenge but openly and proudly proclaim defiance of parents and other established authorities and a self-confident reference to one’s own reasoning constitute a striking contrast to the frame of mind predominant among many young Egyptians thirty years ago. Back then, most were afraid to talk openly about politics, explaining that the eyes and ears of the security forces could be anywhere. While many would do things that were contradictory to ruling social and religious norms, great care would be taken to keep this out of the public eye; hardly anyone would dare openly to challenge these norms or the authorities behind them. This has decisively changed. Nowadays, both the internet and the streets are full of young people asserting their right to think for themselves, to come to their own conclusions, and to accept from the authorities of old only what they find logical and convincing. This attitude can be found among both secular and religiously minded young people, and it is perhaps more remarkable among the latter since these are people who in principle are defending the normativity of an ancient tradition. It was this same generation who, often having grown up as committed members of local Muslim Brotherhood youth organisations in their teens, had started to use blogs in the mid-2000s to openly criticise the Brotherhood’s age-old undemocratic hierarchies and inflexible leadership. It was this same generation who did not wait until their leaders gave them permission to descend on Tahrir Square to demonstrate against Mubarak. It was the same generation that scorned the indecision of the established parties, including their own, in the struggles with the military council after Mubarak’s fall. The genesis of such attitudes is of course complex, and anti-authoritarian positions have played a role throughout history. Currently, however, they are being performed as the attitude of today’s young generation, and the fact that the internet and social media with their architecture favouring peer communication play an important role in the socialisation of this generation certainly contributes to their growing social importance.
Conclusion

To understand the role that internet and social media played and are playing in the Arab Spring, their structural impact in the socialisation of a new generation is at least as important as their significance for networking, mobilisation and organisation. Communication on the net structurally reinforces the weight of peer-to-peer as opposed to top-down communication. Having been socialised on the net, young people today are more likely to be openly critical of traditional, established authorities and hierarchies, and assertive of an attitude of 'This is my view, my understanding, and my right.' Having experienced, in the run-up to and during the revolution, that such assertiveness can actually have an impact, many participants are now proclaiming that whatever political developments the immediate future may hold, they will not fall back into simple acquiescence to what leaders choose to decree.

In the words of the girl who invented the Twitter hashtag #jan25:

'The revolution, which started in January, has been a reward beyond anything I dared dream of. It’s not perfect, and to tell you the truth, we’ve still got a long way to go before it’s over and we can have a safe, free country. But it has opened up a horizon of possibilities I’d never thought I’d see. It has inspired me to get more involved, and now I can see my activism changing the world around me in little ways. I truly believe these little things have the power to effect real and lasting change.'
Endnotes


9. Wael Ghonim: Revolution 2.0 (see above); simultaneously published in Arabic (Wā’il Ghunaym: al-Thawra 2.0: İdhā ’l-Ša‘bu Yawman Arāda ’l-Ḥayāt, Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 2012).

10. Cf. interviews at a meeting of the Wikimedia Foundation, Cairo, 26 October 2011.

11. Interview M.K., Cairo, 4 Dec. 2011. In this article, I have chosen to anonymise my interviewees.

12. Some interviewees claimed that in fact, the revolution was much more subdued in social and geographical areas where social media were less widely used. This impression should be treated with caution, however, until better established by grounded data. And even if a correlation can be found between lack of Facebook penetration and lack of revolutionary action, this does not need to be a causal relationship.

13. Within the first two weeks, the Facebook page of the April 6 Youth Movement (https://www.facebook.com/shabab6april) had attracted over 60,000 members (David Faris, ‘Revolutions Without Revolutionaries? Network Theory, Facebook, and the Egyptian Blogosphere’, Arab Media & Society, 6 (Fall 2008) (http://www.arabmediasociety.com/?article=694). After initially having been dismissed by some as an online only phenomenon, the Facebook page grew into a movement with a presence also on the streets. It played an important part in the run-up to, during, and after the January 25 revolution, but has also been beset by several internal splits over both personalities and strategies. Apart from the original group (now often referred to as the Ahmed Maher front; 422,000 Facebook likes by Jan. 2013), the most important spin-off was the ‘Democratic Front’ (https://www.facebook.com/april6movement; 164,000 Facebook likes by Jan. 2013). Members of the latter stood behind the formation of a political party, announced on 28 Aug. 2012 (https://www.facebook.com/april6party/) but which has led to further disputes within the movement (Ḥusayn al-Badawī, “6

14. Among the material widely distributed via the internet was the book ‘Alashān mā-tiňdirībsh ʾalā āfāk Šo that you don’t get beaten on your nape by ‘Umar’ Affī, a former police colonel turned exiled human rights activist (‘Muḥāmī ʾl-Nās / The People’s Lawyer’, as he calls himself, is offering free advice via a variety of internet channels; see his Facebook page https://www.facebook.com/affi6). ‘Affī relied on his inside knowledge of the Egyptian security services to produce this guide book for activists on how to avoid police abuse. First published in 2008, its popularity surged during the Janu-ary 2011 demonstrations. Another example is the anonymous pamphlet Kayfa tathūr bi-ḥadā‘a [How to Protest Intelligently] that in various forms made its way onto the net during the revolution despite the explicit warning only to distribute it via photocopying or email since Twitter, Facebook, and electronic sites were all monitored by state security (for one example, see http://www.voltairenet.org/IMG/pdf/Manuel_AEI_Revolution_Egypte.pdf).


17. The wildly successful author Khālid al-Khamīsī has a Cairo taxi driver date the beginning of this government-instilled fear to 1977: following the bread riots in January that year, ‘the government planted the fear of hunger in us that led every wife hold her husband back and tell him ‘Don’t dare to go [to a demonstration], the children are going to die!’” (Tāxi: ḥawādīt al-mashāwīr, Cairo: Dār al-Shūrūq, 2006, cited after the 23rd print-run 2012, p. 24, my translation). People were very conscious of that paralyzing fear at the time. In an interview with CBS News’ 60 Minutes in late 1977, Kamāl al-Dīn Ḥusayn, one of the Free Officers of 1952 and an outspoken opponent of Sadat, said: ‘They are boiling inside. They are afraid to do anything now. But who knows, if this policy remains, there will be explosions’ (http://www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=7316962n).


19. Ashraf Amin: ‘The Role Social Media in the Egyptian Revolution’ (sic), Colombo, 21 April 2011 (http://ashraf-colombo.blogspot.no/2011/04/role-social-media-in-egyptian.html; original orthography preserved). The blog continues: ‘It is without any doubt that our generation is quite lucky to have such tools, as for children and the coming generations they will be able to read about the Egyptian revolution from what was recorded from the media and the social media. To keep such important documents saved, the National Center for Archives in Egypt has decided a few weeks ago to add all digital documents of the revolution including recorded testimonials of the protestors who were in the streets standing bravely to bring liberty to Egypt.’ – On this project, see ‘The National Archives: Commission for Documenting the January 25th Revolution’ (http://www.tahirdocuments.org/2011/06/the-national-archives-commission-for-documenting-the-january-25th-revolution/); as of January 2013, it is unclear how far this enterprise has come (see the website http://jan25.nationalarchives.gov.eg). A similar project at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina has likewise made little public progress. The private tahirdocuments.org has put many activist papers online, but has not been updated since May 2012.

20. Interview with A.S., Cairo, 10 Nov. 2011.


22. On 29 Jan. 2013, Facebook was the most popular web site in Egypt (a position it had since spring 2011) while Twitter stood at rank 12 (according to Alexa.com). These rankings for Egypt closely mirror the global ones.


misrdigital.blogspirit.com), and Ḥusām al-Ḥamalāwī’s Twitterfeed (http://twitter.com/3arabawy) to his blog 3arabawy (http://www.arabawy.org). By 11 Nov. 2012, for example, the last entry on al-Wā’y al-Misrī dated 3 Oct. 2012 and on 3arabawy 12 Oct. 2012.

25. This was also confirmed to me in a meeting with the well-known Tunisian blogger Slim Amamou, Tunis, 5 Jan. 2013; cf. his blog (http://nomemoryspace.wordpress.com) vs. his Twitter feed (http://twitter.com/slim404).


27. Some examples: The Muslim Brotherhood’s Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) established their Arabic Twitter account (https://twitter.com/FJPparty) on 11 July 2011, at a time when hundreds of thousands of demonstrators were again filling the streets of Egypt protesting against the SCAF. The FJP’s English-language account (@FJPtoryOrg) followed on 21 Nov. 2011, after the outbreak of violent clashes in Muhammad Mahmoud Street in Cairo had rekindled international attention in Egyptian affairs. Prominent Muslim Brotherhood activist Hiba Raʿūf established her account (@Dr_Heba_Raouf) on 14 Sep. 2011. The largest salafi party, Ḥizb al-Nūr, opened their account on 10 Nov. 2011, during the run-up to the parliamentary elections. Maverick Salafi presidential hopeful Ḥāzim Ṣalāh Abū Ismāʿīl’s account (@7azenSalah) was created on 20 April 2012, a week after he had been banned from running in the presidential elections.

28. The most recent examples date from the clashes during the second anniversary of the revolution on 25 Jan. 2013, when President Mursi used his Twitter feed to release official statements trying to calm the situation (‘In a few minutes... short messages from the President of the Republic’, 25 Jan. 2013 11:43 PM <https://twitter.com/MuhammadMorsi/status/294938623260909588> (and the subsequent tweets), and on 27 January when he first used Twitter to call for a national dialogue (‘I call for a dialgoue for all parties and national forces and tonight there’ll be a detailed presidential statement’, 27 Jan. 2013 8:55 PM <https://twitter.com/MuhammadMorsi/status/295621023745843202>); or the use of the Egyptian army’s Facebook page (https://www.facebook.com/Egyptian.Armed.Forces.one) by the Minister of Defense on 29 Jan. 2013 to warn that the current crisis ‘could lead to a collapse of the state and threaten the future of the coming generations’ (‘Egypt army chief warns of ‘state collapse’ amid crisis’, BBC News, 29 Jan. 2013 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-21241753>). On 31 Jan. 2013, al-Masrī al-Yawm ran the headline ‘Taghrīdat inqādh’ min al-Barādiʿī’ (‘Tweet of salvation’ from Baradei’, http://today.almasryalyoum.com/article2.aspx?ArticleID=369345&IssueID=2762), reporting on the opposition leader’s call for a national dialogue that he had published on Twitter the day before (https://twitter.com/ElBaradei/status/296536968819531777).


In October 2006, reporting by bloggers forced news about mass sexual assault on women during the ‘Id celebrations in downtown Cairo into the mainstream media (Amir Al Husseini: ‘Arabic: Sexual Harassment and the Egyptian Blogosphere’, Global Voices Online, 30 Oct. 2006, http://globalvoicesonline.org/2006/10/30/arabic-sexual-harrassment-and-the-egyptian-blogosphere/). Eventually, this led to greater public debate about sexual harassment, and in January 2010, a draft law to combat the problem was introduced to the Egyptian parliament (N. Abou el-Magd: ‘Sexual harassment law drafted in Egypt’, The National (UAE), 5 Jan. 2010, available from http://www.muslimsdebate.com/faces/sn.php?nid=233=). No new law was passed, however. After the revolution, many more grave cases of sexual assault were reported, and on 21 October 2012, Prime Minister Hishām Qandil announced on his Facebook page that new legislation was being drafted to combat sexual harassment on the streets (https://www.facebook.com/drkandil). Since 2012, public awareness campaigns about this issue have much intensified in the social media and on the streets (only two

31. ‘Piggipedia | Mawsī’at al-Gallādīn’, Flickr group pool (http://www.flickr.com/groups/piggipedia/).

32. Blogger Maikel Nabil took a lead in breaking this taboo by publishing a detailed account of abuses by the army against anti-Mubarak demonstrators during the revolution (‘The army and the people wasn’t ever one hand: Is The Egyptian Army Standing Beside the Revolution?’, Maikel Nabil Sanad Son of Ra, 8 March 2011 (http://www.maikelnabil.com/2011/03/army-and-people-wasnt-ever-one-hand.html). For this post, he was arrested on 28 March 2011 and subsequently sentenced to three years imprisonment; he was released on an amnesty to mark the first anniversary of the revolution in January 2012. Cf. also Ekram Ibrahim: ‘Five taboos that fell with Mubarak’, Al Ahram Online, 23 Jan. 2012 (http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/114/32169/Egypt/-January-Revolution-continues/Five-taboos-that-fell-with-Mubarak.aspx).

33. The current Facebook page of the SCAF (http://is.gd/jwJh6T) was created on 15 April 2011; it was preceded, however, by another one that was established right after Mubarak’s resignation but that is no longer available. SCAF used their Facebook presence to publish official communiqués (risāla). As of 28 Jan. 2013, the last such communiqué is dated 22 Dec. 2012.

34. Interviews with the parent generation of a family in al-Wāsiṭa, Beni Sueif province, 29 Nov. 2011.


40. Galal ‘Āmir, posted by MR on her Facebook wall, 8 Feb 2012. SCAF = Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, the body that controlled politics in Egypt since Mubarak’s resignation 11 Feb. 2011 and until the elected president Muhammad Mursī effectively removed its powers on 12 Aug. 2012.

41. Cartoon commemorating Galāl ‘Āmir, by Carlos Latuff, a Brazilian cartoonist of Lebanese origin whose works are highly popular on Arab social media (http://latuffcartoons.files.wordpress.com/2012/02/egyptian-writer-satirist-galal-amer-1952-2012.gif).

42. MR when asked if she could come to the anniversary demonstration on Tahrir Square, Cairo, 10 Feb. 2012.


46. ‘The Women of Egypt: Message Nr. 1: It/He shall not rule’ – a poster carried by women’s organisations protesting against SCAF’s ‘Message Nr. 91’ on Facebook where SCAF apologises for abuse carried out by its security forces against demonstrators in central Cairo in mid-November 2011, including sexual abuse. The poster is designed in the style of SCAF’s Facebook messages and has a double connotation: ‘It (=SCAF) shall not rule’ and ‘He (the male) shall not rule.’ See Muḥammad al-Mursī: ‘Radd ḥarāʾir Miṣr ʿalā ‘asaf’ al-ʿaskarī: mā-yiḥkumshī. Hatakū al-ʿarḍ wa-qālū āsifīn – banātnā mish āblīn’, al-Faǧr, 20 Dec. 2011, available at http://www.jaridatak.com/ChildPages/Political/elfagr/Ar36558.htm. SCAF’s message nr. 91 has subsequently been deleted from their Facebook page.

47. On these developments, see also Olivier Roy: Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah, New York: Columbia University Press, 2006.


49. That ‘all Muslims are Salafis’ because they all follow the example of the Prophet is something I was told repeatedly on Tahrir Square in autumn 2011, by both ‘stereotypical’ salafis and other Muslims.

50. Interview YS, Cairo, 20 Nov. 2011. Muḥammad Ḥassān (http://www.mohamedhassan.org) is one of the most prominent Salafi preachers in Egypt, with a high-volume presence on a range of Salafi TV stations, including his own al-Raḥma channel (founded 2007). His background is with the Alexandria-based al-Daʿwa al-Salafiyya. Both the Nūr and the Aṣāla parties have tried to use his name in election campaigns, but as the Vice-President of the Salafi Maǧlis Shūrā al-ʿUlamāʾ al-Muslimīn (https://www.facebook.com/shora.alolamaa) he was officially prevented from engaging in party politics. In 2009, there were 91 Facebook fan pages for Muḥammad Ḥassān (Nathan Field & Ahmad Hamam: ‘Salafi satellite TV in Egypt’, Arab Media & Society, Spring 2009, http://www.arabmediasociety.com/?article=712); by February 2013, this number had grown to 472.

51. Cf. Marc Lynch: ‘Brotherhood of the blog’, The Guardian: comment is free, 5 March 2007 (http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2007/mar/05/brotherhoodoftheblog); id., ‘Young Brothers in Cyberspace’, MERIP, 245 (Winter 2007) (http://www.merip.org/mer/mer245/young-brothers-cyberspace). While the young Muslim Brotherhood bloggers were once regarded as representing the hope that the Muslim Brotherhood could be rejuvenated and democratised from within, all the prominent ones have left the Brotherhood starting already before the 2011 revolution, expressing frustration about the Brotherhood’s unwillingness to abandon its patriarchal structure (interviews with ‘ʿAbd al-Rahmān Manṣūr, the second admin of the Facebook group ‘Kullinā Khālid Saʿīd’ and credited with having been the first to suggest 25 January 2011 as a focal date for anti-regime demonstrations, and with ‘ʿAbd al-Rahmān ‘Ayyāsh, one of the early Muslim brotherhood bloggers, http://al-ghareeb.blogspot.com, Cairo, 18 Oct. 2011.

52. ‘The Setback was not 67 – the Setback is people who hear but stay silent. I will take part in the million man demonstration on 18 November’ – Internet poster shared on social media ahead of the big protest demonstrations against SCAF on 18 Nov. 2011 (for an example, see http://twitpic.com/7fidrd). The ‘Setback’ (al-Naksa) is the standard reference to the defeat of the Arabs in the 1967 war with Israel; it occupies a hugely important position in the Arab and Muslim mind, marking the realisation that something had gone terribly wrong and that things must decisively change to emerge from this debacle.