


Unplugging a Nation: State Media Strategy During Egypt's January 25 Uprising

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INTRODUCTION

As access to information communication technology (ICT) becomes more widespread, it has become part of national infrastructure and global networks used not only by governments and businesses, but by populations at large. Though there is considerable debate concerning the impact of communication tools—such as the Internet and mobile phones—on political engagement, there can be no question that communication tools are socially and economically embedded. Traditionally, limiting communications has been justified by the potential negative impact its content could have on the security of a nation. In reality, governments crack down on communications because they fear the negative impact of watchdog-journalism and untethered opposition on their own positions of power.

In Egypt, the thirty-year-old emergency law has been used to justify many limitations on the content of expression, but during the January 25

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uprising, the government instituted a widespread shutdown of communication tools in an effort to quarantine dissent. This shutdown strategy has implications for the future relationship between governments and media and communication spheres. It also indicates how governments might perceive the potential of network- and communication-based political organization.

A government's attitude toward the media sphere is telling. Though violent attacks on protestors or extrajudicial arrests of opposition figures are easily identified as aggressive rights violations, attacks on the media are less visible in that they often result in the disappearance of an abstraction—the free flow of information between individuals. The process of the Egyptian government's aggressive assault on media requires careful consideration. It first attacked content (information traveling through media and grounded, non-aggregated social networks), followed by general platforms (Facebook and Twitter), and then communication infrastructure (mobile telephone and Internet services).

While certain countries, like China and Iran, have developed bureaucratic infrastructures charged with the task of Internet content filtration, Egypt has traditionally limited its involvement to monitoring the communications of actors, and not controlling the topography and content available in online spaces. Barring a major trend reversal, the technological know-how of activists—in the tactical use of circumvention and anonymity technology—will outpace that of the government. This cat-and-mouse game will require governments wishing to quarantine political communication to scale up the direct force of media interference from precise filtration and monitoring of content to full quarantine and shutdown of

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media infrastructures. The quarantine strategy employed in Egypt required a disproportionate attack on apolitical actors and was ultimately ineffective at fully impeding the communication networks of those that were most politically engaged.

This essay focuses on the Egyptian regime's recalibration of its conception of what constituted a threatening media sphere. This recalibration led to a shift in government policy on the acceptable amount of interference and

subsequent risk (reputational, financial, and political) necessary to hobble the opposition's coordination in order to hamper its momentum.

Between October 2010 and February 2011, the Egyptian government swiftly modified and intensified its strategy of attacking media content and tools while simultaneously utilizing them for its own purposes. This essay will proceed chronologically, beginning with the government's approach to media prior to the autumn of 2010, followed by full-scale government attacks on content, the shutdown of entire platforms and communication tools, and finally to the commandeering of communication mechanisms for the purposes of directly transmitting government propaganda to the Egyptian people. After cataloguing these shifts, this essay will turn to an analysis of the implications of measures taken by the government during the January 25 revolution and what they may mean for future uprisings in autocratic states.

THE GOVERNMENT'S SHIFT IN STRATEGY

Though the Egyptian government has used primarily a priori¹ censorship tactics—censorship that takes place prior to the publication or receipt of information—to handle perceived threats that strike close to the legitimacy of the ruling party, in October 2010, a systematic crackdown on the media and civil society coincided with the government's refusal to accept domestic or international election monitors. In the weeks before the elections, the government shut down fourteen predominately religious satellite television stations, fired four prominent outspoken critics of the regime from their posts at major newspapers and Egyptian television talk shows, and required all live talk shows to be broadcast from Egyptian state television headquarters.

These attacks were focused on content: journalists with a history of producing anti-government content were sacked, television stations suspected of doing the same were shut down, and live broadcasts were placed under the control of government-run offices to manage the information environment. This assault on content continued on the day of the elections as websites hosting major opposition newspapers, including *Dostora* and *Ikhwani Web* (the Muslim Brotherhood's online newspaper), were blocked.

The assault on media during the parliamentary elections constituted a significant shift for a government that had previously limited itself to using soft power with intermittent harsh crackdowns on media figures to create an environment of media compliance.² Indeed, the government's blockage of entire websites whose content showcased the fraudulent nature of the elections took place only on the day of elections. The immediate lift

of the blockage after elections shows that the government’s aim was not to wholly prevent information from reaching the population, but rather to prevent information from reaching the population at a specific time. This

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a priori censorship targeted the actionable period of election day and was ostensibly designed to prevent nationwide coordination of protests stemming from information distributed online.

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Facebook and Twitter are used widely in Egypt, though the former has a significantly higher penetration rate. As of February 2011, there were 3.5 million Facebook users (a 4.5 percent penetration rate); 12,000 Twitter users (.00015 percent); and 13.5 million Internet users (16.8 percent penetration rate) in Egypt.³ Both Twitter and Facebook are platforms that can host and relay a wide variety of content—from pictures of cats with talk bubbles to political cartoons lambasting the president. Because of the wide use of these platforms, and the fact that they cater to both political and apolitical citizens, they have been largely off-limits from overt censorship when the Egyptian regime has attempted to quell a minority political uprising.⁴ In addition to broad-based platforms like Facebook and Twitter, activists in Egypt have increasingly used Bambuser to broadcast live from protests and allow for others around the country to follow protests and crackdowns in real time.⁵ According to Mans Adler, the co-founder of Bambuser:

[The site] had 15,000 registered users in Egypt...most of whom signed up just before last November’s election...[T]here were more than 10,000 videos on the site that were produced around the time of the election, focusing on activity at the polls, in what appeared to be an organized effort. Afterward, the level of activity settled down to 800 to 2,000 videos a day, but then soared back to 10,000 a day again when the mass protests erupted in Egypt last month...⁶

Though the government had made intense efforts to limit the documentation of protests (by confiscating cameras and mobile phones), it did not crack down on the Bambuser service until the 2011 uprising. On January 25, 2011, the Egyptian government was faced with a decision: continue allowing open communication via websites like Twitter and Facebook or shut them down entirely in order to destabilize a small subset

of their users. The successful coordination of marches using Twitter, and the momentum of the “We are all Khaled Said” Facebook page—designed to galvanize Egyptians against torture by using the specific case of Khaled Said, an Egyptian beaten to death by police on the streets of Alexandria, as a rallying point—were likely significant factors in the government’s eventual decision to shut down these platforms entirely on January 25.

The ubiquity of access to mobile phone technology in Egypt has made cell phones one of the most valuable tools for the mobilization efforts of activists.⁷ The government specifically targeted influential activists by shutting down their mobile phone lines concurrently with disruptions of the Facebook and Twitter platforms. However, activists were able to circumvent this tactic with ease by simply purchasing new SIM cards. Targeted attacks on mobile phone lines also included the FrontLine SMS hotline numbers of the Front to Defend Egyptian Protestors (FDEP). In response, the activists in charge of the FDEP services replaced the numbers multiple times.

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In an attempt to slow the flow of information through social networks and undermine the coordination of protests, the government went so far as to block SMS and almost all Internet nationwide on January 27 in the run-up to the “Day of Rage.”⁸ All Internet services were shut down with the exception of a single, small Internet Service Provider (ISP), Noor ISP.⁹ Noor ISP was not shut down until January 31. Internet services were not restored until February 2, and SMS services remained blocked until February 6. At the time, this blackout constituted the most holistic attack on national-level media infrastructures ever perpetrated by a government.¹⁰

After the SMS blockage, activists in areas outside of Cairo relaying information to urban areas about government attacks on peaceful demonstrators required voice calling or Internet connections. In southern Egypt, many Internet cafes were also shut, forcing the population to turn to satellite television, radio, voice calling, or face-to-face discussion for new information on the protests. For the vast majority of Egyptians without Internet access or satellite television services, the SMS shutdown was their first experience with government-imposed limitations on their ability to communicate openly. For nonpolitical individuals, the shutdown of SMS services likely came as a surprise, and it increased people’s engagement in the uprising, if only due to curiosity about the unavailable services.

The Internet blackout was part of a significant government effort to quarantine information at the national level. However, the five-day Internet shutdown had an unintended impact on apolitical segments of society, particularly the business community and the most-educated and wealthiest of Egyptian society.¹¹ This step further undermined the communication infrastructure that disengaged actors relied upon for nonpolitical

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reasons. The shutdown of Egypt's entire online infrastructure further indicated the lengths the regime was willing to go to limit political communication and mass organization.

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In the early hours of the "Day of Rage," all mobile phone connections in urban areas of Egypt were disrupted, leaving landlines as the only mode of communication aside from face-to-face interactions. In some areas of Egypt, there were confirmed reports of landline disruption as well, leading to a social communications blackout and forcing Egyptians to rely solely on satellite and radio news—and to a lesser extent state-run television—as their only sources of news from inside their own city. While cell networks were down for only twenty-four hours, this brief interruption in service was enough to rattle apolitical portions of Egyptian society. Given the mobile penetration rate and the small proportion of the population that had already taken to the streets, apolitical individuals were, in terms of sheer volume, disproportionately affected by this government strategy. This blackout undoubtedly made coordination of protests more difficult but ultimately was not sufficient to stop the demonstrations from taking place and gaining momentum.

To further limit the amount of information available, particularly on satellite news networks, an orchestrated assault on international journalists began after the first week of the demonstrations. This aggression took the form of arbitrary detentions, arrests, beatings, and confiscation of recording equipment. The government also scrambled the Al Jazeera Arabic satellite channel's signal and pulled its license to operate in Egypt. These attacks were met with ire from the international community and resulted in condemnation from the United Nations, the European Commission, and the U.S. Department of State. Strong pressure was then applied by the international community to end assaults on journalists and for a normalization of Egypt's communication infrastructure.

As the attacks on international journalists subsided, the government took an intense and disturbing step by commandeering the country's mobile phone networks in order to conduct a countrywide SMS campaign directed at quelling protests. Before the SMS services were reactivated for consumers, the Ministry of the Interior and the Egyptian military exploited national mobile providers, forcing them to send out a series of text messages encouraging Egyptians to return home and cease all demonstrations. This commandeering of SMS message services by the Egyptian government also continued after SMS services were reactivated for consumer use.

IMPLICATIONS

While the impact of Internet and ICT-based social communication on political engagement is questionable, the Egyptian government's response was clear. The initial and common mechanism of targeting and blocking politicized content shifted to a more generalized assault on Egypt's entire media infrastructure. The Egyptian government's strategy of attempting to quarantine the portion of politicized information being disseminated has significant implications for uprisings in autocratic states.

The government chose to use any means necessary to quell the communication components facilitating the uprising, and by doing so, alienated the business community in Egypt,¹² disproportionately impacted apolitical citizens, and inadvertently increased international diplomatic attention on the crisis as a result of the government's own response.¹³ While the repercussions of media attacks were clear, it is difficult to pinpoint the impact of Egypt's quarantine strategy on the success of the uprising. Despite its own commitment to regaining its hold over society through several brazen courses of action, the Egyptian government's quarantine strategy ultimately proved ineffective at stopping the spread of information. When Twitter was blocked, activists used circumvention software to access it; when the Internet was shut down entirely, Twitter users called friends abroad on landlines to have them Tweet for them; satellite television showed Tweets on air and even provided telephone numbers for access to Google's newly developed Speak2Tweet system. When mobile lines and SMS services were cut, people came together to talk about events, again reinforcing the fact that governments cannot wholly shut down political communication if the will of the population to communicate political ideas and information exists.¹⁴

Using Egypt as a case study for the largest media blackout during a popular uprising, it quickly becomes clear that the regime had to sacrifice

considerably to quarantine political communication. The regime lost credibility with the international community, essentially unplugged Egypt's formal economy, and showed international corporations operating in Egypt (such as Vodafone) that they are subject to the will of the regime. Most importantly, in the example of Egypt, these sacrifices were ultimately not enough to keep the regime in power.

Subsequent uprisings throughout the Arab world have led to various degrees of government repression and aggression. Crackdowns on any visible opposition movements threatening the legitimacy and power of a ruling regime must be weighed against the potential international political and economic repercussions resulting from overt limitations of freedoms. This tension, referred to elsewhere as the "dictator's dilemma," is helpful in understanding the varied responses by Arab regimes in the face of popular threats.

For example, the Libyan government was quick to disable the Internet and mobile phones, but Libya's geopolitical relationships are largely unrelated to domestic freedoms. This lessens the political consequences of a widespread attack on media infrastructure and decreases the tension of the dictator's dilemma. By contrast, Bahrain, with its close ties to the American administration, has much more to lose in geopolitical spheres if it takes structural repressive actions. And while the Bahraini government has used deadly force against peaceful demonstrators, its actions against the Internet—blockage of YouTube and slowing down traffic speeds by up to 20 percent—were less significant than those of Egypt and Libya.¹⁵ The stated interest of American diplomats in media freedoms, particularly Internet communication, further challenges dictators that are entrenched and supported by the U.S. administration. When P.J. Crowley, the then assistant secretary of state, tweeted, "We are concerned that communication services, including the Internet, social media and even this #tweet, are being blocked in #Egypt,"¹⁶ the political cost of the media blackout, and by extension the dictator's dilemma, intensified. This ratcheting up of geopolitical, diplomatic pressure on media freedoms during times of uprising will likely affect decisions made by other regimes in the coming months and years. The Egyptian government's assault on media, its collapse, and the fact that it has not been repeated by other Arab leaders—with the notable exception of Libya—is evidence that such overt actions will not be tenable in the future. ■

ENDNOTES

- 1 A priori censorship is considered to be any form of censorship that takes place prior to the publication or receipt of information. This can take the form of requiring the pre-approval of publications or restricting access to content that would be otherwise publicly available (such as a website).
- 2 Press freedoms fluctuated under Mubarak's regime but there was a notable lack of a priori censorship, with the exception of limitations on the establishment of new publications. In 2004, the government allowed several major independent media outlets to begin operating, some of which were openly critical of the regime.
- 3 Facebook Figures: Jennifer Preston, "Movement Began with Outrage and a Facebook Page That Gave It an Outlet," *The New York Times*, February 5, 2011, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/06/world/middleeast/06face.html?hp>> (accessed April 16, 2011); Twitter Figures: Jolie O'Dell, "How Egyptians Used Twitter During the January Crisis," *Mashable*, February 1, 2011, <<http://mashable.com/2011/02/01/egypt-twitter-infographic/>> (accessed April 16, 2011). Internet Penetration: "Egypt: Internet Usage and Telecommunications Reports," *Internet World Stats*, <<http://www.Internetworldstats.com/af/eg.htm>> (accessed April 16, 2011).
- 4 The motivation behind limiting interference in social media platforms with a diverse membership can also be attributed to: 1) the attention that such shutdowns would receive from the international community 2) the desire of the Egyptian regime to monitor and infiltrate groups rather than unplug their online meeting spaces and 3) the desire of the regime to avoid confrontation with apolitical segments of society that make up the majority of these online communities.
- 5 Jennifer Preston and Brian Stelter, "Phone Cameras Credited With Helping the World See Protests in Middle East," *The New York Times*, February 18, 2011, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/19/world/middleeast/19video.html?ref=global-home>> (accessed March 8, 2011).
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 "Egypt Reaches 72 percent mobile penetration," *Comm*, April 9, 2010, <<http://comm.ae/2010/04/09/egypt-reaches-72-per-cent-mobile-penetration/>> (accessed March 8, 2011).
- 8 The Day of Rage (as it was named by organizers of the day's protests) took place on January 28, three days after the initial January 25 protests. After Friday prayers, demonstrators took to the streets and marched on Tahrir Square and riot police attacked. It was in the early hours of the Day of Rage that mobile phones were all shut off and landlines were disconnected in some rural areas of Egypt.
- 9 James Glanz and John Markoff, "Egypt Leaders Found 'Off' Switch for Internet," *The New York Times*, February 15, 2011, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/16/technology/16internet.html>> (accessed April 16, 2011).
- 10 For other examples of so-called just-in-time blocking, whereby communication is cut off at particularly critical moments, see Masashi Crete-Nishihata and Jillian C. York, "Egypt's Internet Blackout: Extreme Example of Just-in-time-Blocking," *OpenNet Initiative*, January 28, 2011, <<http://opennet.net/blog/2011/01/egypt%E2%80%99s-internet-blackout-extreme-example-just-time-blocking>> (accessed April 16, 2011).
- 11 Interestingly, BlackBerry customers' messenger services (BBM) were not disrupted.
- 12 See "The Cost of Egypt's Internet Blackout: \$110 Million +," *Read Write Web*, February 6, 2011, <http://www.readwriteweb.com/archives/the_cost_of_egypts_internet_blackout_110_million.php> (accessed March 8, 2011).

- 13 The first aggressive statement from the United States came from State Department Spokesman P.J. Crowley who called for a normalizing of social media and communication services; the first condemnation from the United Nations called for an end to the assault on international journalists.
- 14 For quantitative and qualitative data documenting these trends, see <www.tahrirdata.info>.
- 15 Fahmida Y. Rashid, "Bahrain Restricts Internet Traffic, Blocks YouTube in Crackdown on Protests," February 18, 2011, *eWeek Mobile*, <<http://mobile.eweek.com/c/a/Security/Bahrain-Restricts-Internet-Traffic-Blocks-YouTube-in-Crackdown-on-Protests-386152/>> (accessed April 16, 2011).
- 16 See "Protests in Egypt – as they happened," *The Guardian* news blog, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/blog/2011/jan/28/egypt-protests-live-updates>> (accessed April 16, 2011).