BB = BlackBerry or Big Brother: Digital media and the Egyptian revolution

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Abstract

This article examines the use of digital media in the 2011 Egyptian revolution (25 January–11 February), termed by many analysts and commentators a “Facebook revolution”, “Twitter revolution”, “digital revolution” or “electronic revolution”. Such appellations highlight the role of the youth who organized and mobilized for the revolution and the essential role played by digital media. Disengaging from the controversial debate over whether Egypt’s revolution was instigated by social media or simply used them for its purposes, the article demonstrates the uncontestable role that social networks, text messages, and satellite news channels played as a tool of control and manipulation, on the one hand, and a mode of resistance, on the other. Delineating some key reasons why the Egyptian revolution came to be associated with digital media, the article shows the government’s reaction to the threat posed by such media through analysis of a key moment on the night of 27 and 28 January 2011, when the Egyptian government decided to cut off all Internet and smart phone connections. Through a detailed chronology of the development of events during that period of blockage, the article analyzes the government’s decision along two axes: manipulation through blockage and manipulation through propaganda and brainwashing. It concludes by showing how the government’s attempts to sabotage the revolution came in the end to be used subversively by the protestors as means of resistance. It injected the revolution with more momentum, and in fact inadvertently led to its success.

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