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

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

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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.

**Keywords:** Egyptian revolution; digital media; despotism; propaganda; Tunisian revolution; resistance

A common joke circulating among Egyptians during and after the Egyptian revolution (25 January–11 February 2011) describes ousted President Hosni Mubarak after his death meeting his predecessors, the former Egyptian presidents, Gamal Abdel Nasser and Anwar Al Sadat. When they ask him what brought him there, poison or a shotgun (Nasser having allegedly been poisoned, Sadat assassinated), he looks at them shamefacedly and simply says: “Facebook!”

This anecdote is indicative of the role of social media – as perceived by laypeople and political analysts alike – in the Egyptian revolution. For, despite its light humor, the joke’s contention that the former Egyptian regime has been toppled with the help of electronic media is not completely untrue. And “Facebook revolution”, “Twitter revolution”,

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“digital revolution”, “electronic revolution”, and so on are all appellations that have been used to describe the 2011 Egyptian revolution and the role of the youth who organized and mobilized for it. Whether or not a revolution can erupt solely because of social media and electronic activism is not the point I examine here, and much has been written on both sides of the argument. The fact remains, however, that social media have played an unprecedented role in Egypt’s recent revolution, both directly through mobilization and enlistment and indirectly through circulation and the dissemination of information.<sup>1</sup> This article aims to examine precisely the significant role of social media demonstrated through the former Egyptian regime’s reaction to them, focusing on a key moment when the government decided to cut off Internet connections and smart phone services and – in the words of a friend of mine – “take its own people hostage”. For in so doing, on the eve of Friday 28 January 2011 (what is now commonly known as the Friday of Rage), the Egyptian regime was indeed acknowledging the threatening effect of social media it felt to be a force that could bring about its own downfall. And it is from that point on that the government started to act as both Big Brother and propaganda machine, the Egyptian revolution’s Goebbels<sup>2</sup> par excellence, as the rest of this article aims to demonstrate. But before analyzing why and how the regime played that role, I would first like to examine why the Egyptian revolution came to be associated with social media in the first place.

### How did it all start?

People of my generation (born in the 1970s or earlier) have over the past two decades – at least – developed a solid belief that we Egyptians do not rebel. Tortured, politically suppressed, imprisoned, large segments of them unemployed, deprived of basic human rights, economically exploited (the list of abuses is very long indeed!), Egyptians have waded through 30 years of oppressive authoritarian rule meekly accepting, occasionally expressing distaste, often experiencing sudden waves of anger that never materialized into rebellion, let alone a revolution. And it is precisely this state of stagnation, the cesspool of corruption we have become accustomed to, that made the 25 January revolution take us all by surprise. Those of us who did follow the campaigns on Facebook calling people to take to the streets and demand reform at best expected this to be the usual 1000 people demonstrating, cordoned off by police officers at least three times their number, and, if not detained by sunset, going home in peace to mull over what to do next. No one saw a revolution coming. And, not knowing how it erupted, many justified it in the light of 21st-century media and lingo: a “youth movement”, “Facebook revolution” or “Twitter activism”. While I do not wish to deny the key role of social media in mobilization and recruitment, what one forgets in undertaking such processes of nomenclature is the people behind the revolution. Though publicized online, demonstrations and revolutions do not take place in cyberspace, are not populated by bots, and the blood of martyrs spilled is not virtual. In the words of Jeffrey Ghannam, writing a week after Hosni Mubarak’s ousting:

Few can deny that social media has [*sic*] enabled the most significant advance in freedom of expression and association in contemporary Arab history. During the protests, social media aggregated, disseminated and accelerated vital news and information. But in the end, Facebook and YouTube are tools – and tools alone cannot bring about the changes the world has witnessed in recent weeks. [...] So do not confuse tools with motivations. Thinking of this moment as a “Facebook Revolution” only demeans the challenges the protesters and

populations are overcoming. [ ... ] All the elements for upheaval were there; social media helped make the grievances all the more urgent and difficult to ignore. (N. pag.)<sup>3</sup>

In agreeing with Ghannam's views above, one can still acknowledge the logic that has associated the revolution with technology and social media. For 25 January 2011 is going to remain in collective memory as the day the Egyptian people *did* take to the streets in hundreds of thousands and *did* topple the regime. And if social media have not caused it, they have most certainly aided it. Egyptian novelist Ahdaf Soueif, actively involved with the Tahrir Square demonstrations and their media coverage, has succinctly detailed the role of such media in the revolution:

[T]here are [ ... ] many groups on Facebook which are Egyptian activist groups. [ ... ] And one of them in particular which was very active was the "We Are All Khaled Said". [ ... ] Khaled Said is a young man who was killed by the security forces in Alexandria last year. And he was [ ... ] not an activist. He was a young man who happened to be in possession of a video [ ... ] which showed police dealing narcotics, basically. And he was killed in the street by [ ... ] two people of the security forces. Coming out of an internet café.<sup>4</sup> [ ... ] And so, his website, which was run by Wael Ghonim,<sup>5</sup> the [ ... ] Google guy [marketing executive] in Dubai – put out this call for the protest on the 20th of January and was amazed, within a very short space of time, to get something like 360,000 responses saying, "We'll be there." So at that point about 11 groups, Facebook groups, decided to meet and coordinate this. And they coordinated the 25th of January. Very soon afterwards, they said that if they were to have any credit, they would have credit for about 20 percent of the people who came out on the 25th of January. The rest was all follow-on. (N. pag.)

Soueif is right about the importance of the Khaled Said group in mobilization for the January revolution, but I would also like to point out that the group was not working in a vacuum. Soueif herself refers in the same interview to various demonstrations that had been taking place on the Egyptian scene since 2003. And indeed Egyptian society has in the past few years witnessed an unprecedented number of demonstrations, and especially sit-ins and strikes, by unemployed youth, political dissidents and trade-union activists. And the area outside the gates of the People's Assembly in downtown Cairo's Kasr Al-Aini Street has come to be notoriously associated with strikes and sit-ins.<sup>6</sup>

Clearly, the moment had been ripe for change. People had been furious for years, boiling and not venting. But the question remains: why did action occur specifically at this point, and not at any earlier one? Two more occurrences were key in enabling the 25 January demonstrations to move forward. The first was the bombing of a church on New Year's Eve 2011, which left 21 killed and at least 80 injured "as several hundred worshippers left New Year's mass in the Church of the Two Saints in a middle class area of Alexandria about half an hour after midnight" (Saleh n. pag.). Such sectarian acts are not in themselves a novelty to Egyptian society. But what was different this time was the general feeling that the Egyptian Interior Ministry was not doing its duty to protect Egyptian (in this case, Coptic) civilians. This was especially the case as the bombing came after widely publicized threats by the fundamentalist Islamic group al-Qaeda to attack Egyptian Christians in Egypt and abroad ("Al Qaeda Threatens" n. pag.).<sup>7</sup> It did not help the Interior Ministry, either, that a similar, almost identical, attack had occurred against another Coptic church in Upper Egypt exactly one year earlier, on 7 January 2010 ("Egyptian Christians Killed" n. pag.). The general feeling was that the government should have been more alert, and the fact that it was not only added to the people's sense that the regime was failing.<sup>8</sup> The second factor that, in many people's opinion, encouraged the Egyptian revolution to take place was the fact that it came hard on the heels of

Tunisia's 29-day Jasmine revolution and the ousting of the Tunisian president, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. Many Egyptians saw the revolution in Tunisia as a "model" amenable to replication in Egypt. The fact that, one month earlier, no one could have predicted the events in Tunisia only gave Egyptians more impetus and hope that change could happen in Egypt too (Trager n. pag.). Moreover, as recently revealed by many, communication between Tunisian and Egyptian activists had been underway long before the demonstrations erupted. Not surprisingly, social media, especially Facebook, had been the chosen means of communication between the youth in both countries. As Kirkpatrick and Sanger write:

The exchange on Facebook was part of a remarkable two-year collaboration that has given birth to a new force in the Arab world – a pan-Arab youth movement dedicated to spreading democracy in a region without it. Young Egyptian and Tunisian activists brainstormed on the use of technology to evade surveillance, commiserated about torture and traded practical tips on how to stand up to rubber bullets and organize barricades. [ ... ] Breaking free from older veterans of the Arab political opposition, they relied on tactics of nonviolent resistance channeled from an American scholar through a Serbian youth brigade – but also on marketing tactics borrowed from Silicon Valley. (N. pag.)

What the above modes of activism have in common is their utilization of social media as means of dissemination, mobilization, and networking (in the case of contact among the revolutionists in Egypt and Tunisia). It is quite logical, therefore, that the former Egyptian regime should have felt the threat that social media posed to its existence and structure, and should have responded to it. How it responded is discussed in the following section.

### *Isqat or iskat?*

When demonstrations started on 25 January, people's expectations concerning the numbers of demonstrators and mass involvement were low. Previous experience has shown that demonstrations tend to be elitist activities for the politically active, which the masses regarded either approvingly or indifferently, but always detachedly. As has since been revealed, the regime was aware of such activism and kept it under close surveillance, monitoring online activities and groups, but did not anticipate the force of the demonstrations or the number of people taking part. Ironically, even with the example of Tunisia ahead of them, people who mobilized for the demonstrations did not themselves expect such gusto or momentum. What made the demonstrations all the more surprising and forceful is that they were not limited to Cairo, but rather spread in large numbers across the country. For "protests [broke] out in the Mediterranean city of Alexandria, the Nile Delta cities of Mansura and Tanta and in the southern cities of Aswan and Assiut" ("Timeline" n. pag.). In the face of this protest, the government used tear gas and water cannons to disperse the demonstrators ("Timeline" n. pag.), tricks that had always worked in ending such demonstrations. It was clear, however, by sunset of 25 January that this was not an ordinary demonstration and the protesters' decision to spend the night in Tahrir Square and other major squares in Egypt rather than go home was a perfect signal to the regime that their efforts so far had been thwarted. But the signal was received by the people of Egypt as well, and those who had not participated in demonstrations on 25 January started taking to the streets the following day. With numbers increasing, violence also escalated, with the regime now firing live ammunition in the air in Cairo, and reports of killings in the city of Suez and the Sinai, eliciting appeals from the US administration, the Secretary General of the Arab League, and other renowned figures, all pleading with

the government to listen to the demands of the people and respond peacefully. By the end of 27 January, Internet and smart phone users in Egypt were experiencing disruption to connections, especially as regards Facebook, Twitter, and BlackBerry Messenger services.

It must be noted here that the demonstrations throughout the first three days were receiving very meager coverage, if at all, in the mainstream media. Egyptian state-run television, for instance, would simply have provoked more people by the minute by misrepresenting the demonstrations in Tahrir and other places as organized by a few dissidents who belong to the conservative Muslim Brothers group (“Timeline” n. pag.), parroting official statements issued by the Interior Ministry, at the same time that people could follow real coverage and footage of hundreds of thousands protesting aired live on Al Jazeera and other satellite news channels. Thus, as people chanted the by now famous *Al-sha‘b yurid isqat al-nizam* (the people want to topple the regime), the government opted for depriving people of that voice, responding to *isqat* (toppling) with *iskat* (silencing), and in that near homonym lay all the difference. In light of this, and following the Tunisian example, most people in Egypt relied heavily on social media for access to information, and Facebook updates and Twitter hashtags became primary sources of information without which one literally felt cut off if one were following the news from home (Le Coz n. pag.). This was all the more necessary following the government’s crackdown on non-Egyptian satellite news channels such as Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya, which became the target of the regime’s censure and accusations of agency and outright lies.<sup>9</sup>

This suppression coincided with several measures undertaken by the government to slow down and obstruct online access to opposition newspapers that did not present the rosy, stable image of the regime that the powers-that-be wanted to project. This was the regime’s attempt to limit access of information to a unilateral view obtained from mainstream newspapers and television: “this is a stable regime and dissidents are but a wayward minority that cannot affect the deep-seated stability of the President or his apparatus”. As Le Coz writes:

While people around the world were watching the live stream of Al Jazeera’s coverage, those in Egypt began reporting problems with their internet connections on January 26. There were particular problems when attempting to access the online newspapers *Al-Badil*, *Al-Dustour* and *Al-Masry Al-Youm*. Access to *Al-Badil* and *Al-Dustour* was subsequently blocked altogether, while *Al-Masry Al-Youm* experienced major problems. A huge online blockade was reported the night of January 27, which also happened to be the day before a general call for a Friday protest. (N. pag.)

The three newspapers that Le Coz mentions represent different shades of opposition to the regime, showing the latter’s despotism. And indeed she accurately describes the rift between what Egyptians received in official media, on the one hand, and what was presented on independent, satellite, and online media, on the other. But most relevant to our context are the difficulties of access that Internet users started to experience on 26 January, and which kept escalating until the night of 27 January. However, the measures that were taken the following day, 28 January, were truly unprecedented, at least in most Egyptians’ living memories.

### **Big Brother is pulling the plug on you!**

In George Orwell’s visionary text *1984*, the author invents the character Big Brother, Orwell’s mouthpiece for autocratic regimes and their dictators and ruling parties. Big Brother’s favorite activity is to keep the inhabitants of Oceania – where the events take

place – under surveillance, and both the reader and characters in the novel are constantly reminded that “Big Brother is watching you”. Since its first publication in 1949, the novel has been cited in relation to many a despot, proving Orwell’s genius and his foresight about oppressive totalitarian regimes. But for all his insightful depiction of Big Brother’s voyeuristic abuse of power, I do not believe Orwell could have predicted what the Egyptian regime did in the face of protesters’ demands for freedom. For the Egyptian “Big Brother” was not content with “watching” its people, and, in fact, accepted no less than cutting off its people’s communication with the world altogether. It was to this end that the Egyptian government employed

“Deep Packet Inspection” equipment that [could] be used to track, target and crush political dissent over the internet and mobile phones. Before January 27, mobile phone services were disrupted only where the protesters gathered. But on the night between January 27 and 28, SMS and phone connections were interrupted. (Le Coz n. pag.)

The government also forced four Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to stop their services altogether (Le Coz n. pag.). The result was that people could not access the Internet through either computers or smart phones. In an attempt to understand the implications of this drastic decision made by the Egyptian regime, I will present a chronology of the subsequent days’ events.

### **Chronology of concealment**

As mentioned previously, the Egyptian government cut off all Internet and smart phone services on the night of 27 and 28 January, including all phone calls and text messaging services, leaving people stranded and at a loss. This naturally posed a major threat to people’s lives and businesses, since they were unable even to call an ambulance in cases of emergency.<sup>10</sup> This was the government’s means of achieving three goals simultaneously. First, this was the regime’s means of sabotaging the protests. Since people had to deal with government-sponsored thugs and criminals, deprived as they were of any means of communication, and in the absence of the police, they would – the government thought – naturally pay more attention to protecting their lives and property and less to the protests demanding the immediate resignation of the president. Second, it was the government’s method of concealing the various atrocities it visited upon unarmed civilians in their homes and unarmed demonstrators in Egypt’s major squares. To complete the picture of deceit, the state-owned media staged phone calls (ostensibly from spectators at home) to spread an image of total chaos resulting from the protests, and to direct improbable accusations and allegations at the demonstrators in Tahrir. As Soueif points out: “[R]umors went round about how everybody in Tahrir was actually an agent of the Americans or the Israelis or the Iranians or Hezbollah or Hamas, who were all suddenly working together happily to destabilize Egypt” (n. pag.).<sup>11</sup> Third, as both Facebook and Twitter services were interrupted, the events in Egypt were getting less and less coverage abroad. With its crimes kept hidden in this manner, the Egyptian regime – or so it believed – would receive less censure and condemnation from the rest of the world, and its unlawful acts would go unpunished.<sup>12</sup> Thus Egyptians spent a whole day in the dark about the rising violence and death toll in their own country, deprived even of the symbolic support and pressure of human rights groups and activists.

The following day, 29 January, witnesses a limited return of mobile phone connections so that users can now make phone calls, but not send text messages or access the

Internet. Internet access is still not possible through ISPs. In the meantime, as Mubarak delivers a late-night speech in which he sacks the cabinet, thousands of demonstrators persist in their demands to topple the regime, “despite troops firing into the air in a bid to disperse them”; looters attack Cairo’s famed Egyptian Museum, home to “thousands of priceless artifacts”; the National Democratic Party’s headquarters are set ablaze; Britain, France, and Germany issue worried statements about the situation in Egypt; and both the UK and US embassies in Cairo advise their citizens to leave the country unless their presence is necessary (“Timeline” n. pag.).

The situation remains the same on 30 January, with the difference that now users start *receiving* text messages from telephone companies (the nature and implications of which I would like to return to below), but still cannot send messages or access the Internet. State-funded television starts a campaign urging Egyptian citizens not to listen to satellite channels that provided anti-government information, accusing such media of spreading rumors and sowing distrust between the people and the government.

On 31 January, as Mubarak names the new cabinet, 250,000 people continue their protests and refuse any attempts at reform, insisting on an immediate resignation (“Timeline” n. pag.). Six of Al Jazeera’s reporters are arrested by the Egyptian authorities and Al Jazeera announces that “its broadcast signal across the Arab region is facing interference on a scale it has not experienced before” (“Timeline” n. pag.). Meanwhile, in a gesture of solidarity much welcomed by Egyptian protesters, Google announces a new service, *speak2tweet*, a facility which “allowed people to leave voice mail messages [by dialing international land lines] that would be filed as updates on Twitter” (Preston n. pag.). Of course, despite the magnanimity of the gesture, its impact was inadequate in light of the limited number of people with international land-line access in the first place.

On 1 February, as the former president Hosni Mubarak promises more constitutional reforms and declares he will not run for another presidential term, opposition intensifies and the announced numbers of demonstrators “in Cairo’s Tahrir Square are revised to more than a million people. Thousands more take to the streets throughout Egypt, including in Alexandria and Suez” (“Timeline” n. pag.). Text message and Internet services are still not functional. And on 2 February, as preparations are underway for the resignation of President Hosni Mubarak, clashes between anti- and pro-regime protesters erupt. “Wael Ghonim [is reported] missing during the protests of the past week” (“Timeline” n. pag.). Google improves its *speak2tweet* service, and Internet connection is partly restored (“Timeline” n. pag.), though text messages are still not possible. Meanwhile, “Pro-democracy protesters say the military allowed thousands of pro-Mubarak supporters, armed with sticks and knives, to enter the square” (“Timeline” n. pag.). Mohamed Elshahed gives a moving account of government atrocities and people’s resistance on 2 February:

[A]s the state police retreated and protesters gained control, Mubarak sent paid thugs to attack citizens with sticks, knives and Molotov cocktails, and in a desperate and surreal move, he also sent plainclothes officers on horseback and camelback. There were violent moments [ ... ] but [ ... ] what remained was a new Tahrir Square. [ ... ] Entry points were manned by volunteers who checked for weapons and identification – denying entry to anyone employed by the Interior Ministry. [ ... ] Once inside, [ ... ] new arrivals walked through long rows of men and women who welcomed them with cheers. [ ... ] The square now belonged to the people who had defeated the regime’s efforts to disperse and defuse the young revolution. (N. pag.)



That day has since come to be known as “the Day of the Camel” and has caused almost all of Mubarak’s cabinet and members of the government – involved in plotting it on one level or other – to undergo investigation at the time of the writing of this article.

On 3 February, “Sustained bursts of automatic weapons fire and powerful single shots begin at around 4am local time [ ... ] and continue for more than an hour”, leaving at least five people dead and many wounded.<sup>13</sup> Violence continues on 4 February as activists mobilize for action against Internet blockage, culminating in an online petition circulating on email asking Vodafone, one of Egypt’s major mobile phone companies, to take more assertive action in the face of government bullying.<sup>14</sup> Silence on the regime’s side as regards the blockage persists. Finally, pressure seems to pay off as full Internet connection and text message services are restored on 5 February.

It was only with the full resumption of Internet connections that the true scale of regime violence was revealed, which might partly explain why the government sought to block connections in the first place. People started uploading videos and clips shot with their own mobile-phone cameras, another testimony to the power of digital media as a mode of resistance. It was thus only after 5 February that channels such as Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya began to dedicate hours daily to amateur clips available on YouTube or sent directly via email to those channels now that email communication was possible again – clips of random shootings by snipers at unarmed citizens as well as others of police cars, ambulance cars, and cars with diplomatic number plates randomly hitting innocent demonstrators. Any search on YouTube using the terms “Egyptian revolution” and/or “Egyptian police violence” would literally yield hundreds of results. In fact, some commentators estimate their number in the thousands, and see them as yet another sign of the potency of social media as tools of resistance and activism:

When the Internet was back up, YouTube, working with Storyful, a social media news curation service, took the thousands of videos pouring in from the protests in Tahrir Square to help people retrieve and share the information as quickly as possible on CitizenTube, its news and politics channel. (Preston n. pag.)

### **Big Brother meets Goebbels**

The above account shows the former Egyptian regime’s tactics: to manipulate Internet connections in order both to control the dissemination of information and cover up its scandalous acts against innocent civilians. This would certainly have been enough to implicate the regime as the perpetrator of criminal acts. However, the former Egyptian government was not content with this and decided to add insult to injury, sending provocative pro-Mubarak text messages (to which I referred above) to mobile phone users even as those users themselves could not send messages to save their lives. In what follows, I aim to present a few samples of such messages and contextualize them within the events that were concurrently taking place, to better expose their intent and propagandist nature.<sup>15</sup>

The first of these messages starts circulating between 29 and 30 January, immediately after the massacres of the Friday of Rage, conveying a plea from the Egyptian army – ordered onto the streets on 28 January – to “honest and loyal men” to stand against “traitors” and protect Egypt and its future. This message is met with much surprise and censure. For one thing, this is the first time the army has communicated with the people,

let alone in such an unusual method. For another, the ambiguity of the content – not making it at all clear who is “honest and loyal” and who is a “traitor” in this context – drove many to interpret the message as a sign of the army’s alignment with the regime, especially coming at a time when the army had not made any clear statements as to whose side it was on.

On 31 January, another message is received, spreading fears among demonstrators concerning the safety of houses and lives. The timing of the message, coming as it did when demonstrators felt they had reached a point of no return, only provoked demonstrators and non-demonstrating (though sympathetic) civilians alike, both of whom felt that mobile companies were selling out to the regime at the expense of lives lost and blood shed.

On 2 February, some mobile phone users receive messages quoting parts of Mubarak’s infamous speech of 1 February in which he declares he will not run for re-election, but refuses to step down. The direct quotations from the speech only assure people of the complicity of mobile phone companies and their decision to act as mouthpieces of the regime’s propaganda. The next message, sent on the same day, assuring civilians that the army would never use violence against peaceful demonstrators, does little to alleviate the sense of betrayal that protesters felt against telecommunications companies, despite the message’s reassuring content. And the situation only gets worse with the third message received that day, one from an unidentified sender given the name “EgyptLovers”, calling for pro-Mubarak demonstrations. The message is frowned upon for two reasons. First, identifying pro-Mubarak demonstrators as “lovers” of Egypt was immediately felt to divide Egyptians into two camps, simultaneously branding the other (anti-Mubarak) camp as “non-lovers” of Egypt. Second, the fact that no text messages were sent to call for anti-Mubarak protests made it clear where the telecommunication companies’ allegiances lay. And the next message, arriving on the night of 2 and 3 February, in which Vodafone users are asked not to “listen to rumors” and to “keep Egypt’s safety in sight”, does very little to explain Vodafone’s stance or clarify the “rumors” referred to, who perpetrates them, or how to maintain “Egypt’s safety”. Most of all, the message intensifies the sense of ambiguity felt concerning telecommunication companies’ role in the events and their motives in sending these messages.

It was only expected in the light of such ambiguity and customer dissatisfaction that telecommunication companies should issue some statement clarifying their stance. A statement came from Vodafone on 3 February, stating that it was “forced” to send the messages and claiming that the “Egyptian authorities had been using the country’s emergency laws to script text messages to its customers since the beginning of the unrest”. Alleging that “it had no ability to change the content of the messages”, the company demanded that “all messages [ ... ] be transparent and clearly attributable to the originator” (“Vodafone Forced” n. pag.). The statement did not quite absolve Vodafone and other telecommunications companies in the eyes of the people, for more than one reason. First, through a tweet sent on 25 January Vodafone had earlier denied blocking social networks: “We didn’t block twitter – it’s a problem all over Egypt and we are waiting for a solution” (Fildes n. pag.), so it was now felt the company was simply looking for a “dignified exit” by claiming it was forced to send such material. Second, though Vodafone did generally abstain from sending anonymous messages after issuing this statement – restricting circulation to messages from the Military Council – it was felt that the statement would have been more genuine and noble had it been issued earlier, or had Vodafone refused to obey government orders and exposed

the regime instead. Third, by this point, the damage and loss of life had been too great for people to accept the kind of excuse to which Vodafone was resorting. However, it must be said that whether or not mobile phone companies *voluntarily* chose to conspire with the government, they have indeed been exploited by it and made into mouthpieces for its self-preserving brainwashing. Witch-hunting the pawn in this game should not distract one from holding accountable the oppressive propaganda machine which exploited it.

## Conclusion

In this paper I have attempted to show the use of digital media by the regime and protesters alike. Without wishing to engage with the debate as to whether social media instigated Egypt's 2011 revolution or were simply used within it, I have demonstrated the uncontested role that social networks, text messages, and satellite channels played as a tool of control and manipulation, on the one hand, and as a mode of resistance, on the other. In delineating some key reasons why the Egyptian revolution was dubbed an "electronic revolution", I have shown the government's reaction to social media along two axes: manipulation through blockage, and manipulation through propaganda and brainwashing.

It becomes clear from the above analysis that it was precisely the former regime's recognition of the significance of digital media and the threat they posed to its stability that led to its ferocious crackdown on such media. This was thus the government's "smart move" to sabotage the revolution, using tactics it knew best: to silence and oppress the people. However, I would like to argue that, ironically, their move was not that "smart", since the harder the regime's onslaught on social media, the more resistance it met with on the part of the protesters. For one thing, cutting off communication among protesters and between them and their families only led more people to take to the streets, wanting to gain first-hand access to what was happening (Soueif n. pag.), and Internet blockage only increased the number of protesters in Tahrir and other major squares all over Egypt. Furthermore, what the government intended as sabotage came to be used subversively by protesters as resistance, bringing them together in closer solidarity: "Egyptian people [ ... ] found ways to share their messages even when the government tried to stop them. Using VPN [Virtual Private Networks], proxy sites, third party apps and other tools, they were able to continue sharing news with those [ ... ] on the outside" (Prettyman n. pag.).<sup>16</sup> Moreover, in a further irony, the numbers of Internet and social media users saw an immediate and unprecedented increase during January and February, in direct response to the regime's blockage of communications. The numbers include 632,120 new Facebook users in January and February (a 12.16% increase), 100,000 of these joining on 1 February upon resumption of partial Internet connection; 1,317,233 tweets related to Egypt between 24 and 30 January; and a tenfold growth in Twitter adoption among Egyptians in January (Esposito n. pag.).

A common chant during the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions comes straight out of Tunisia's national anthem by the Tunisian bard Aboul-Qacem Echebbi: "Iza al-sha'bu yawman arad al-hayah fa la budda an yastajib al-qadar", which can be roughly translated as "If a people wanted life someday, Fate must respond." Fate has responded in Tunisia and Egypt, and is responding still elsewhere in the Arab world. And as Fate responds, we must not forget that "While the numbers [of digital media users] are spectacular, the [y] pale in comparison to what the Egyptian people were able to do" (Esposito n. pag.). Big Brothers of the world, take heed!

## Notes

1. For more on the widespread use of Facebook and social media in the Arab world, and Egypt in particular, see Linda Herrera's description of her research conducted with university students in Cairo and Alexandria in 2010:

Many of them were using a new colloquial term, "El-Face" when talking about Facebook. These Facebook users carry traits of being politically savvy, bold, creative, outward looking, group regulating, and ethical. And their numbers are fast growing. In March 2008 there were some 822,560 users. After the Arabic version of Facebook was launched in March of 2009 usership jumped. By 1 July 2010 there were some 3,581,460 Facebook members, making for an increase of 357.2% in a two year period. The site has become increasingly Arabized, though many users show dexterity in using both English and Arabic. (N. pag.)

2. Paul Joseph Goebbels, Hitler's ally and Propaganda Minister in Nazi Germany, known for his brainwashing tactics and attacks on German Jews.
3. Herrera expresses similar views concerning the use of digital media in the current surge of revolutions in the Arab world, writing that

[S]ocial movements belong to people and not to communication tools and technologies. Facebook, like cell phones, the internet, and twitter, do not have agency, a moral universe, and are not predisposed to any particular ideological or political orientation. They are what people make of them. (N. pag.)

For similar views on people as "heroes" see MacKinnon.

4. For more information on Khaled Said and his death as a result of police brutality, visit his Facebook group "We Are All Khaled Said."
5. Giglio offers more insight into Wael Ghonim's online activism and his role in instigating the Egyptian revolution.
6. Prominent among the groups calling for such strikes is the "6th of April Youth Movement" created on Facebook upon the famous strikes of the workers of the Al-Mahalla Al-Kubra factory, Egypt's main textile producer, on 6 April 2008, one of whose main activists is Asmaa Mahfouz. The latter is credited with sparking the Egyptian revolution because of a clip posted on YouTube. The Khaled Said group and others – such as Kefaya (Enough) – have, as Soueif points out above, teamed up at various points to seek and mobilize for common goals. For more on Kefaya, see Oweidat et al.
7. Similar threats by al-Qaeda had been circulating against Egyptian Copts since October 2010. See, for instance, "Al-Qaeda's Iraqi Affiliate".
8. Much has been made recently of the role played by the former Interior Minister, Habib Al-Adly (currently on trial), in not only turning a blind eye to but also in fact plotting the bombing in Alexandria to foment more sectarian strife among Egyptians (Smith n. pag.).
9. See, for example, Le Coz's words on the Egyptian government's treatment of Al Jazeera reporters:

On January 31, five foreign and Egyptian journalists from the pan-Arab broadcaster Al Jazeera were interrogated by the Egyptian military, and their equipment was confiscated. They were released, but the day before Egyptian authorities ordered the closure of the network's Cairo office. (N. pag.)

Similar actions are reported to have taken place against Al Arabiya's reporters, and both channels saw various attempts at distorting their transmission signals in Egypt over the 18 days of protests in Egypt. On 30 January, Al Jazeera transmission had been interrupted and the channel had to change its transmission frequencies or air through other channels many times over subsequent days. Al Arabiya, on the other

hand, received outright threats that its transmission would be blocked if it did not abstain from spreading “rumors” and “lies” – words used to describe what people automatically interpreted as the truth.

10. This was even further intensified in light of what the government had done since the beginning of the revolution. For the government had systematically released prisoners (estimated at 24,000 in number according to various reports) all over the country, and let hordes of thugs (previously used to terrorize citizens and aid National Democratic Party candidates undeservedly win counterfeit parliamentary elections) loose, furnished with ambulance cars, sticks, and knives, high on prohibited medical tranquilizers, to attack civilians on the streets and in their homes. The government’s implicit message was that chaos was a direct result of protests, as opposed to the alleged “stability” Mubarak promised. The people’s response has been accurately detailed by Huda Lutfi:

[L]ocal groups of citizens’ watches were formed to protect each neighborhood. [ ... ] These groups of young men are volunteering all their time and energy to protect us against such violence. As the attacks continued, the [ ... ] committee[s] of young people began to erect barricades on [ ... ] street[s] for more protection; they created checkpoints and organized night shifts to prevent further attacks. Despite such efforts, looting and burning of property continued. (N. pag.)

11. The number of comedy shows that were later produced to satirize such media coverage and staged phone calls gives the measure of their intensity and the Egyptian media’s blatant lies aimed at supporting the regime that has created and used them for its own benefits. See, for instance, the “Bassem Youssef Show” (8 episodes to date), a YouTube Jon Stewart-style show that parodies many of these TV programs and lies.
12. The following, reported by Al Jazeera, is but one example of what the regime sought to conceal: “Egypt’s interior ministry also warns of ‘decisive measures’ [ ... ] Egypt remains on edge, as police and protesters clash throughout the country. Eleven civilians are killed in Suez and 170 injured. [ ... ] At least 1,030 people get injured countrywide” (“Timeline” n. pag.).
13. Of course, the full extent of massacres, deaths, and casualties was not revealed until much later. What was first thought to be five people dead in Cairo was later revised to more than 300 deaths. To date, the number of protesters who have been killed at the hands of proponents of the former regime and its police forces has reached 864, and there are still no accurate statistics on this.
14. In addition, several Facebook “events”, “pages” and “groups” have called for boycotting and/or suing the three major mobile phone companies in Egypt for cutting off Internet and smart phone services. See, for instance, “Boycott Vodafone Egypt For One Day Campaign” (<http://ar-ar.facebook.com/pages/Boycott-Vodafone-Egypt-For-One-Day-Campaign/131101710294953>) and “The Campaign for Suing Telecommunications Companies for Cutting off Connections During the Revolution (Arabic)” (<http://ar-ar.facebook.com/pages/181628558549147/>>).
15. This is by no means a comprehensive catalogue of all such text messages, for two reasons. First, different users would sometimes receive different messages depending on their service providers. Second, because such messages were sent to all users of a given service, this would sometimes cause congestion resulting in some users not receiving a particular message that others would receive, and much of the information on such messages depended on word of mouth.
16. Idle and Nunns document the role of “citizen journalism”, focusing on mobile-phone and Twitter activism during the revolution.

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