

# Egypt 2.0

Impact of authoritarian pressure on the political blogosphere  
in Egypt.

# Abstract

Bloggging as a phenomenon has spread far from its initial western context and provides new interesting research topics on the implications of the blogosphere in more authoritarian states. We however face many problems when trying to connect the technological complexity of the new information era and the social scientific theories of our discipline. By applying a framework designed to bring order and validity to our efforts to connect social science with information technology I try to define key features of both blogging and the blogosphere.

From this framework will we move on to charge the key features with a societal implication, in our case will the features be connected with their potential to assemble the blogs into a social platform for political deliberation.

And after presentation of the problems the researcher faces when gathering his data will I present the context in which the Egyptian political blogosphere exist. From this I will move on to propose the hypothesis that an authoritarian state actually will strengthen the quality of the information disseminated in the blogosphere.

We will eventually end up with an originally gathered data set and discuss what conclusions we dare to draw.

*Keywords:* Social network analysis, blogosphere, blogs, deliberation, Egypt, blog aggregator

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# 1 The Introduction

Blogging as a phenomenon has during the last few years grown dramatically and its implications have become wider for every year. On the cover of the December copy of Time magazine 2006 is a computer screen proclaiming “You” as the Person of the Year. Contrasted by the cover from January 1983<sup>1</sup> where a single computer sits proudly on a desk with a pale figure sitting passively in front of it and the headline naming the computer *Machine of the Year*. The subtitle is telling us that “The Computer Moves In”.

The contrast between the 1983 and the 2006 covers speaks great lengths about the evolution of computer usage. In 1983 the man in front of the computer is passive and grey, on the verge of being a ghost. The machine has moved in and taken over, leaving mankind pacified. In 2006 everything has changed, the cover is telling us “You, Yes you. You control the Information Age. Welcome to your World”. Needless to say, this “world” is more so than not considered to be developed in a western context with a long history of pioneering in IT infrastructure. How much control do we have over the information age in countries notoriously known to exert strong censoring and control over political participation? Egypt has recently been dubbed one of the top ten worst countries to be a blogger in<sup>2</sup>, how does this affect the blogosphere? Does there even exist such a thing as an Egyptian blogosphere? I intend to find out by asking the seemingly controversial question: *Have the authoritarian aspect of the Egyptian regime had a positive effect on the blogosphere’s properties as a forum for deliberation?*

This thesis will initially deal with the blogosphere on a high abstraction level and eventually zoom in on the case of the Egyptian political blogosphere.

I will start off with isolating a few defining features of the blogosphere and by theorizing them, from a deliberative democratic point of view, show what consequences the Blogosphere may have on the civic society under certain circumstances. From this I will propose a hypothesis claiming that the political blogosphere has diminished in numbers in the face of rising costs of blogging and set myself upon the task to empirically test my hypothesis in an Egyptian context.

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<sup>1</sup> Gurak, Laura J (2008) claims that this cover was featured on the Jan 1993 issue, this is not true however. Bill Clinton was the man of the year 1993 and the computer did move in decade before. The cover can be found here <http://www.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19830103,00.html>

<sup>2</sup> Committee to Protect Journalists. <http://www.cpj.org/reports/2009/04/10-worst-countries-to-be-a-blogger.php>

## 2 The Methodology

Delving into the depths of the wild wild web introduces a multitude of questions. In my everyday life, when seeking answers I use a well proven method: I simply open an internet browser and spend hours haphazardly reading blogs and looking at the top five search hits for my query on a search engine. This casual approach to finding answers on the internets would in the analogue world be equivalent to a stroll in the park. It may be nice and some anecdotal evidence on human behaviour might be gathered, I might even catch a glance of a billboard, but I dare say that very few academic results stem from the observation of people eating ice cream in the sunshine.

Instead, just as in the offline world, we need to construct a more solid methodology that is capable of generating valid results.

With the advent of new digital media and computer science there is a widening gap between the technical level of social scientific study objects and the level of technical expertise with the social scientists. Computer scientists used to deal with designing algorithms where a notoriously “clean” method is a must would perhaps be surprised at the way a social scientist may ambiguously add a new variable (or overseeing an old one) which would have devastating effects on the method’s performance and validity.

The shift into the digital age has brought a fast paced change to our ways of living and as such we have had too little time to orderly categorize and name all the new implementations of this technological revolution. Instead we’ve fallen into the temptation of gathering an endless array of terms and nomenclatures, bundling them together with duct tape and plastic strips and decided that all of these are part of ‘The IT’ and thusly created quite a mess.

This problem has fortunately not been left unattended, Mikael Sundström<sup>3</sup>, to whom I owe a great deal of inspiration, has addressed this problem and developed a comprehensive framework for studying IT and social science. In his dissertation he announced Kludgery, a methodological mess, his archenemy in order to “have a clear sense of purpose and a distinct focus” when connecting social science and information technology<sup>4</sup>.

In my thesis this distinct focus on providing the community with research that easily can be continued by other scholars might be lacking Sundström’s vigour and determination, but I will do my best to present a sound methodology for making the connection between blogosphere and social science and ask the reader

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<sup>3</sup> Sundström, Mikael (2001)

<sup>4</sup> Sundström, Mikael (2001) p.21

to always bear in mind that even though much is inspired by Sundström's earlier efforts some parts of his work has been modified or entirely left out.

And in no way do I see this infatuation with Sundström's dissertation as a problem, I am simply building upon the work of earlier scholars and in doing so I am hoping to add support to his, and the academic community's, effort to provide "coherent and accessible input" to decision makers and make sure that "shaping systematic communication-policies" still means "shaping good policies"<sup>5</sup>.

## 2.1 Blogosphere – Blogs and blogging

The first step in building a methodological platform from where we can survey, and from where I can perform empirical research on, the blogosphere is to reduce it into parts that are easily accessible to the reader, and me. Reduction might have different meaning to different readers, a reader more versed in the fields of chemistry might think of adding electrons while someone feeling more at home in a kitchen might think of thickening his favourite consommé.

I will attempt the opposite and steer away from adding and thickening the complexity of the term and instead break it up and show what I actually refer to when I use the term blogosphere.

Although I intuitively presume that a list of the blogosphere's features and attributes is a finite number (provided we focus on 'core properties'<sup>6</sup>), I make no claims of actually presenting an absolute and complete list. Such an ambition would probably also give a fairly short lived result, the technological evolution of blogging is a continuous process and would leave a definite definition outdated fairly fast.

Instead the process of breaking down and listing the features of the term blogosphere will be used to "provide explicit 'hooks' on to which one or more theoretical superstructures can later be latched"<sup>7</sup>. This superstructure will help connecting the attributes we choose to focus on and their societal implications.

So let us begin and see what attributes we can find by dissecting the blogosphere.

### 2.1.1 The Blog

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p.20

<sup>6</sup> Sundström, Mikael (2001) p. 32

<sup>7</sup> ibid

The Encyclopedia<sup>8</sup> Britannica definition of a blogosphere is “the online universe of blogs”. Another example is Webster’s New Millennium Dictionary of English<sup>9</sup> which calls the blogosphere “a collective term for the world of weblogs, the community of all weblogs”. These two definitions share a common feature, they both claim the blogosphere to be encompassing all blogs and give the connotation that the blogosphere is widely spread and well connected.

The two features, the world wide (web) community and high numbers, will be focused on later, but we still need to define properly what a blog actually is.

The word itself is an abbreviation of web log and can be described as an “online journal where an individual, group, or corporation presents a record of activities, thoughts, or beliefs” or as a “news filter collecting various online sources and adding short comments and Internet links”<sup>10</sup>. The description continues and says that “other blogs concentrate on presenting original material. In addition, many blogs provide a forum to allow visitors to leave comments and interact with the publisher”.

Given these definitions we end up having to reduce a blog before we can move on to define what an “online universe of blogs” or a “community of all weblogs” means. From what we have read so far we can reduce a blog down to four prominent features:

1. Publishing news (“a record of activities”).
2. Publishing opinions (“thoughts, or beliefs”)
3. Aggregating news (“collecting various online sources”)
4. Providing an interactive communicative forum.

And one more dimension need of course be added, the fact that blogs to a great extent only exist on the internet.

5. Located online

Looking at the features we have gathered so far and comparing them to an online newspaper, not much seems different. Have we then failed in finding what features define a blog? The answer is fortunately no, but still some change must be done to truly differentiate a blog and an online newspaper<sup>11</sup>. The key is in how we treat the features, instead of only using a simple binary yes/no we should focus on “dimensions of change”<sup>12</sup>. Because we can all agree on that publishing news and opinions online have existed before the advent of blogging.

So in order to define what a blog is we focus on the change it has brought in the abovementioned dimensions. And to follow Sundström’s advice on the matter we will allocate these dimensions of change along a more/less scale to avoid that our methodological platform is built far too simplistic.

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<sup>8</sup> <http://dictionary1.classic.reference.com/browse/blogosphere>

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*

<sup>11</sup> 2 Minutes ago I received a twitter feed from one of the more prominent bloggers in Egypt saying “There is apparently a school for online journalism to differentiate themselves from bloggers.” Hopefully I’ll be able to show that the difference is not only fiction created by journalists and that there is a viable difference between the two.

<sup>12</sup> Sundström, Mikael (2001) p.33

My proceedings to find dimensions of change convey the idea that I am comparing blogging to something that pre-existed before blogging, otherwise my choice of dimensions to focus on would seem arbitrary and in stark contrast to my above mentioned ambitions to provide a sound methodological framework. However, in the scope of this relatively short work I will have to limit myself, and my ambitions, and focus on a smaller number of features. Therefore I will use Sundström's comparisons of a vast number IT's and their dimensions of change<sup>13</sup> and simply admit that *my* personal interest will inevitably decide the choice of focus from Sundström's listed dimensions of change.

The most interesting dimensions that define a blog are in *my opinion* the "sender-enabling cost" and "transfer-enabling cost".

These two dimensions, when placed on a more/less scale is what truly defines a blog and differentiates it from earlier information technologies, for example, an online newspaper.

To be able to send information through a newspaper requires you to own a newspaper and needless to say, it is for a great many people a cost that is too high to bear. In the case that you are employed by a newspaper to write for them, costs such as education, courting the newspaper for employment and negotiating with an editor still apply. In comparison, blogging offers a fairly low enabling cost, the only real cost is to either own, or rent (internet cafés e.g.), access to the internet and spending enough time to get used to the online tools available for blogging.

The second dimension, or feature, is the transfer-enabling cost. This is simply the cost for sending information after the initial sending has been enabled. The costs in both the case of the online newspaper and the blog is similar, after sending has been enabled, the costs drastically diminish, especially in the case where a computer and internet connection has been bought instead of rented.

Although blogging certainly has a multitude of interesting features for a social scientist to explore, I will be content with focusing on the sender-enabling cost and the transfer-enabling cost for now. In the next chapter we will add two more features which we will use to hook our theoretical superstructure with and explain the societal implications that our features may have.

The attentive reader may now have noticed that I have shifted the initial focus from the blogosphere to the single blog, it was of course a necessity to first define a blog before exploring the implications of a multitude of blogs. But nevertheless I apologize for any experienced confusion and will immediately turn to address the blogosphere.

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<sup>13</sup> Sundström, Mikael (2001) p. 51 ff

### 2.1.2 The Blogosphere

From the two definitions used in the previous chapter to define the blogosphere we can read that it is a community/universe of all blogs. But what does this actually mean? Firstly, the blogosphere is perceived to be a community, meaning that it is inter-connecting the blogs and creating a social network. Secondly, it encompasses all blogs, meaning that the online network constitutes, presumably, quite a high number of blogs. This high number of blogs suggests that a high number of opinions are available within the blogosphere and this notion have extensive support in empirical studies.<sup>14</sup>

If we now add the features extracted from our definitions of a blog we are now ready to construct these methodological hooks that we will latch our theoretical superstructure to. These four features will now be our primary focus for studying the blogosphere:

1. Inter-connectivity
2. High variation of opinions
3. Low sender-enabling cost
4. Low transfer-enabling cost

We will now continue to charge these features with societal implications by adding a social scientific theory to our framework.

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<sup>14</sup> To name a few; Munger, Michael (2008) shows how blogging covers both Republican and Democrat sides in the last US Presidential election; Zuckerman, Ethan (2008) gives a good summary of international blogging and Park, Han Woo (2008) analyses the South Korean assemblymen's blogs and shows that not only major political opinions are existent within the blogosphere.

## 3 The Theory

So far we've used a method of fairly logical assumptions about the Blogosphere in order to find what features define it. But what importance do these features have? And more importantly, how are they important to political science and in the Egyptian context? To extend the discourse beyond the limits of anecdotal evidence "we need better arguments about why and how blogs have significant consequences"<sup>15</sup>.

I will attempt to theoretically discuss what consequences the blogosphere could have in permitting a good political deliberation and eventually end up with proposing a hypothesis to be proven empirically in the Egyptian context.

First of all we are going to take a step down on our abstraction ladder and exclude certain parts of the blogosphere. Since it is encompassing a wide variety of opinions and topics, many of them irrelevant to political science, we must specify that in discussing the blogosphere's potential impact on the political discourse we are discussing the *political* blogosphere. I ask the reader to ignore the vast numbers of blogs about fashion, kittens and porn when contemplating the claims in my work.

### 3.1 The Deliberation

Research in the field of social psychology has shown that even the smallest opportunity for a conversation creates an *us* that works to collaborate to the greater good of the group<sup>16</sup>. Conversation itself has been defined as the exchange of opinions and/or information and this is the very essence of a deliberative democracy. And if a "blogosphere, created by a collection of blogs, can serve as an online social space"<sup>17</sup> where a high number of opinions and pieces of information can be shared we have a very good setting for creating a lively political discourse online. Or in short, a bigger *us* will create a bigger group all with the ability to take part in a political deliberation which would help to ensure a higher political legitimacy<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> Farrell, Henry; Drezner, Daniel W (2008) p.6

<sup>16</sup> Montgomery, Henry (2003) p.261

<sup>17</sup> Park, Han Woo (2008) p.5

<sup>18</sup> Karlsson, Christer (2003) p.218

But the goal of the deliberation is not necessarily to make someone change their preferences<sup>19</sup>, this is but a plausible effect and the importance is the deliberative process. This process, of exchanging ideas in an information rich environment is what almost all of our discursive knowledge, political or not, is depending on.<sup>20</sup>

Creating an appropriate space for this process can lead to greater levels of citizen participation and increase the legitimacy of the government.

But what makes us so sure that the blogosphere could serve as this forum? Or is the blogosphere perhaps a forum open for deceiving information that easily could be spread without checks and balances? If we talk about the blogosphere being a social forum for political deliberation, we should investigate whether it is a *good* forum.

### 3.1.1 The Objections

Austen-Smith<sup>21</sup> argues with a game-theoretic model that if the sending of information is cheap (i.e. low costs) in a discussion on political decision making, there is no incentive to not be deceiving. And if, as I have argued earlier, blogging is a low transfer-enabling IT we could expect the information found within this social forum as fairly unreliable. This is perhaps even more so the cause if we consider Austen-Smiths argument that talk is costly if statements are easily verifiable by listeners and liars can be punished, he continues to claim that “(...) frequently political talk is costless and the content of speeches too costly to verify”<sup>22</sup>. If we consider the low-transfer enabling function of the blogosphere it would seem extremely easy to send deceiving information and adding up to the unreliability of the blogosphere.

And another problem is with the earlier discussed *us*, some research has shown that it might turn into an *us and them* scenario. In this case the high number of participating opinions in the deliberation process would be rendered toothless and the inter-connectivity is limited to networks where the links are only connecting nodes with similar interests<sup>23</sup>. The argument in short is based on Zaller’s “receive-accept-sample” model<sup>24</sup> which predicts that more politically aware receivers are more likely to resist and reject information not conforming to their beliefs, or simply put: “I don’t just randomly read blogs, I read the blogs I know I already like.”

I will try to deal with these two objections, starting with the latter and unfortunately leaving it fairly open ended and then move on to contend with the

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<sup>19</sup> Karlsson, Christer (2003) p.216

<sup>20</sup> Mackie, Gerry (1998) p.76

<sup>21</sup> Austen-Smith (1990a, b)

<sup>22</sup> Austen-Smith (1992) p.46

<sup>23</sup> This is more elaborately explained in Munger, Michael C. (2008)

<sup>24</sup> Zaller, John R. (1992)

theoretical assumption that deliberation online would be increasingly unreliable due to its low-transfer enabling cost.

I said in chapter 2 that there is empirical support that a high number of opinions exist within the blogosphere, so even if the blogosphere is divided into fractions of opinion and of equal numbers, the casual reader is just as likely to be exposed to either view when using a search engine for example.

Hargittai, Gallo, and Kane elaborates on this and goes beyond the casual reader and says that a blogger that is more likely to link to those who share his views still does “some amount of linking to opposing points-of-view. As the qualitative analyses of the data showed, while a considerable proportion of these links are for straw-man arguments, numerous links substantively engage others’ arguments or, in the least, politely acknowledge them as the source of some information discussed by the blogger.”<sup>25</sup>

They also note no change towards an increasingly fractionalized blogosphere during the 10-month span they studied.

It would of course be interesting to do a similar study on the Egyptian political blogosphere but unfortunately it would not be permitted within the scope of this work. I have instead chosen to leave this question open for other scholars to investigate and move my focus to the first objection, the low-transfer enabling cost.

## 3.2 The Hypothesis

The concept that the low-cost of blogging is increasing the risk that deceiving, or at least unreliable, information is being spread has perhaps been put most starkly by CBS Executive Vice President Jonathan Klein:

“You couldn’t have a starker contrast between the multiple layers of checks and balances [i.e., fact checkers at 60 Minutes] and a guy sitting in his living room in his pyjamas writing”

However, Austen-Smith model of low cost leading to unreliability is based on the general assumption that every transfer of information is a single occasion, and this, which I will hopefully show clearly, doesn’t apply to the blogosphere.

Gerry Mackie suggests that in a “structure of repeated interaction a reputation for consistently providing accurate and valuable information would determine credibility”<sup>26</sup>. And the blogosphere is definitely such a structure, the cost of providing deceiving information is paid in the currency of the realm<sup>27</sup> namely links. The inter-connectivity of the blogosphere ensures that providers of “bad” content will not be linked to and deceiving information would incur a cost. Although I have no evidence that bloggers are aware (or care) about the costs and

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<sup>25</sup> Hargittai, Eszter; Gallo, Jason; Kane, Matthew (2008) p. 19

<sup>26</sup> Mackie, Gerry (1998) p. 84

<sup>27</sup> Coined, as far as I know, by Munger, Michael C (2008).

that they try to maximize their “profit”, it seems likely that it would be in their interest to gain links and readers which also Drezner and Farrell agree upon<sup>28</sup>.

The high-numbers of the blogs together with the inter-linking also work as an aggregator that can work as a distiller of truth. Drezner and Farrell discussed this and concluded that the distribution of links is skewed to favour a few “elite” bloggers commanding most of the attention<sup>29</sup>. Munger asks us to “consider for a moment a network of people, most of whom are potentially in communication with each other. At any point in time, resource and attention constraints require that I am in actual communication with only a tiny fraction of these. And the messages received by me from these other sources are selected by me: I choose to listen, or not listen, by allocating attention.”

Because only a small fraction of the blogosphere is being read, these elite bloggers “serve an aggregative function, distilling from the great mass of content certain central tendencies, and they also serve as portals or conduits for this information(...)”<sup>30</sup>. He concludes later in his article that the “(...)registering of many independent views and the emergence of a central tendency, more by analogy to the central limit theorem of statistics than to market processes in economics, that can lead to wisdom, or at least the distillation of truth”.

Considering all of this we note that the blogosphere have several nice properties that would seem likely to be beneficiary to a political deliberation.

And if we assume that raising the transfer cost of information in the blogosphere leads to a higher quality (i.e. less deceiving information) it seems a higher cost could be beneficial to the political deliberation.

It is this idea that caused me to reconsider my view of the situation for political bloggers in Egypt. As I will show in the coming chapter, the political blogosphere has gained a lot of attention from the government and bloggers are being persecuted and imprisoned for their running their blogs. My hypothesis is that the Egyptian government’s actions have had a positive effect on the blogosphere’s quality as an aggregator of political views for the public to access.

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<sup>28</sup> Drezner, Daniel W; Farrell, Henry (2008) p. 17

<sup>29</sup> Drezner, Daniel W; Farrell, Henry (2008) p. 2

<sup>30</sup> Munger, Michael C. (2008) p. 5

## 4 The Case

My initial interest for Egypt as a study object came from the realization that the Egyptian political blogosphere was quite impressive. They provided very sharp critique and commentary on recent events and political situations. At a first glance I was impressed by their sharp criticism and complete lack of self-censoring in the face of an authoritarian and oppressive regime. And when asking myself why the Egyptian blogosphere was so potentially potent when it came to the political deliberation I came to the intuitive conclusion that living in an authoritarian state would lead to bloggers only blogging if they very strongly felt the need to publish information known to offend the government. Or in other words, higher costs of transferring information discourage less convinced bloggers.

So my question is this: *Have the authoritarian aspect of the Egyptian regime had a positive effect on the blogosphere's properties as a forum for deliberation?*

I will begin to answer the question with a description of the political context in Egypt and how the government's low tolerance towards expressed dissent is raising the cost for bloggers. Later follows a more extensive part where I will present data on the Egyptian political blogosphere which I believe support my hypothesis and shows how the costs have affected the blogosphere's numbers, and presumably it's ability to provide information for the deliberation.

### 4.1 The Context

When the period of constitutional monarchy ended after the 1952 revolution, the political milieu favoured a centralized economic and social regime. Over time the benefits of economic liberalization has led to an increasingly open market, but the reform of the public space has lagged behind this liberalization process.<sup>31</sup>

The civic society still remains under control of the old authoritarian and bureaucratic regime led by President Hosni Mubarak. Mubarak is the president of the Egyptian Republic and has been since the assassination of his predecessor in 1981. One of the first major events after Mubarak rose to power was the implementation of the state of emergency that has resided over the country ever since.

According to the Emergency Law the regime has the right to take "take any

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<sup>31</sup> Arab Human Development Report 2008

measures ‘required by the circumstances’ including the suspension of the constitutional rights of citizens”<sup>32</sup>. The Emergency Law also grants the president “the right to censor newspapers, periodicals, publications and all kinds of expression and advertisement before publication, and to confiscate it and closing it down”<sup>33</sup>.

The Arabic Network for Human Rights Information has also stated that 2008 witnessed “a great expansion in the use of the Emergency Law by the Egyptian Authorities against a large number of journalists and bloggers”.

. This is in contrast with articles 47-48 in the Egyptian constitution that guarantees the freedom of press and opinion. It states that every individual has the right to express his opinion and publicize it through press or any other means within the limits of the law. It also guarantees the freedom of press, printing, publication and mass media against censorship.<sup>34</sup>

Even though “The Emergency Law is considered the main source for violations against human rights” there are several other legislations that hinder the freedom of opinion. Law number 96/1996 says that the Supreme Press Council, controlled and created by the government, is the only authority for licensing newspaper issuance. It is also restricted to political parties (which in turn are heavily regulated by law 40/1977) and public figures under severe conditions.<sup>35</sup>

This in turn restricts the membership in the Journalist Syndicate since only journalists with a contract to a licensed Egyptian newspaper can join and officially be recognized as a journalist and enjoy the legal protection. The number of non-syndicate journalists is said to be eight thousand compared to the five thousand that are recognized by the syndicate. There are also three laws specifically aimed at preventing the dissemination of information pertaining to official documents, demographic statistics and information about the army.<sup>36</sup>

And the laws that criminalize the spread of certain information are broadly and vaguely expressed, some examples of criminal activity are: Encouraging or tempting a coup or changing the fundamental principles of the constitution, disturbing public peace, harming the social decorum, deforming the state reputation and bringing out unsuitable manifestations, humiliating state president, defaming the parliament or any other state authority, defaming a public- or parliamentary personality and humiliating a judge. All of these offences are punishable with imprisonment.

In an article published in the Times a Cairo based activist said 2006 that “Intimidation has reached a really serious level”<sup>37</sup>. In 2007 a blogger by the name Muhammed Yakut had his home searched by the police without a legal warrant and had his computer and personal belongings confiscated. A day later fellow blogger Omar El Sharqawi was arrested and detained without formal charges. And

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<sup>32</sup> Sundell, Anna (2006)

<sup>33</sup> Arabic Network for Human Rights Information Annual Report 2007

<sup>34</sup> <http://www.egypt.gov.eg/english/laws/Constitution/default.aspx>

<sup>35</sup> The Initiative For an Open Arab Internet

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1199896,00.html>

the following month blogger Ahmad Sa'd Doma was arrested by three plain clothes police officers and was taken blindfolded by car to an unknown location for interrogation. Both El Sharqawi and Sa'd Doma reported physical abuse and humiliation. Again, in July 2007 Mo'taz Adel, also a blogger, was detained and interrogated. The list goes on, bloggers Hosam Al Hendi, Ahmed El Gizawi, Ahmed Mohzen, Abdul Rahman Faris have all been arrested and interrogated for their online activities.<sup>38</sup>

Bloggers interviewed for an article in Arab Media and Society all report that their phones have been tapped and in the same article prominent blogger Wael Abbas (who himself have been imprisoned) describes how an official Interior Ministry spokesman libelled him on TV claiming he was "a dubious source with a police record". The article also reports that many bloggers have experience of official intimidation and that officials are campaigning to discredit them.<sup>39</sup>

The authoritarian regime's message to bloggers became even clearer as the independent newspaper Al Masri Al Youm published a leaked document describing a draft for a new law on audio-visual media<sup>40</sup>. Regarding this new draft the managing editor of Al Masri Al youm said that "Bloggers, who have become equally troubling to the Egyptian government in the last few years, are widely believed to be the main target of the new law (...)"<sup>41</sup>.

I have for the sake of argument perhaps painted an unnecessarily dark picture of the political context in Egypt, but as The Initiative for An Open Arab Internet writes in their introduction to a report on Freedom of Opinion and Expression in Egypt: Bloggers pay a high price on behalf of the Egyptian citizens, the price of being sent behind bars or being threatened.

## 4.2 The Empirical study

We have now seen that in the Egyptian context, the cost for blogging can be regarded as substantially higher than the cost associated with the actual transfer of information. However, there are, to my knowledge, no reports that study the effect of this on the blogosphere. In the previous chapter we asked the question if the authoritarian aspects, i.e. the cracking down on bloggers, have had a positive effect on the blogosphere's ability to serve as a good forum for political deliberation. Talking about a positive effect may sound a bit ambiguous but with it I simply mean to ask whether or not the blogosphere, by increasing the costs of blogging, have experienced a drop in numbers that could turn out to be positive for the quality of information available for the public deliberation.

So how can we measure a blogosphere? How do we collect the data?

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<sup>38</sup> The Initiative For an Open Arab Internet

<sup>39</sup> Al Malky, Rania (2007)

<sup>40</sup> <http://www.almasry-alyoum.com/article2.aspx?ArticleID=112635> (English translation)

<sup>41</sup> [http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas\\_16233-544-1-30.pdf](http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_16233-544-1-30.pdf)

First of all maybe we should question if the studying of the blogosphere on a national level is fruitful at all. The nature of the internet is extremely border-less and it could be argued that it should not be limited to a national framework<sup>42</sup>. But I contend to this notion and claim that there exists a blogosphere with an explicit Egyptian focus, it may be available to most parts of the internets but that is just a bi-product of the IT being used to send the information and not an explicit goal sought after by Egyptian political bloggers. I can make this claim as my data shows that there exists a blogosphere with a strong Egyptian focus and also on the fact that much is written in Arabic, and in the Egyptian dialect of Arabic, which is to most of the outside world, hard to understand.

Similar observations have been made with regards to China, Greece, South Korea and Iran. In all these countries have a strong nationally bound blogosphere been found written in the native language, suggesting quite a national focus in their content.<sup>43</sup>

Various methods for analysing the blogosphere (and note that none of them attempt to even touch upon the entirety of The Blogosphere) have been proposed and I will give a short overview and a motivation to my chosen method of data gathering.

Since one of the more prominent features of the blogosphere is the sheer number of blogs readily accessible on the internet most of the research I have read have favoured a more quantitative research design. Qu, La Pietra and Poon experimented with a natural language processing script that interpreted a corpus of manually selected blogs divided into 4 categories. From anchor texts and incoming hyperlinks the algorithms tried to categorize the blogs but failed miserably to correctly label the blogs.<sup>44</sup>

Another more successful attempt at this was the Blogizer, designed by Zafarani R, Jashki MA, Baghi H, et al. They constructed a bot and gathered a corpus significantly larger than the above experiment and succeeded in designing a novel approach not only capable of fairly accurately label blogs correctly but also perform a social network analysis (SNA) of the inter-linking within the blogosphere<sup>45</sup>. Note that the Blogizer obviously favours only blogs written in English, and the corpus selected by the bot is gathered only from blogs indexed by Google Blog Search. This is not a problem in itself, but it shows the need of developing better tools to study the blogosphere.

The field of SNA hold many interesting keys to unravel potentially hidden relationships within the blogosphere. Hugo Zanghi et al constructed an original online algorithm for graph clustering and demonstrates its efficiency in a case study of the French political blogosphere.

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<sup>42</sup> Gustafsson, Nils (Work in progress 2008)

<sup>43</sup> Zafropoulos, K, Vrana, V (2008), Esarey, A, Qiang, X (2008), Kelly, J; Etling, B (2008), Park, Han Woo (2008)

<sup>44</sup> Qu, H, La Pietra, A, Poon, Sarah (unkown)

<sup>45</sup> Zafarani, R, Jashki, MA, Baghi, H et al. (2008)

The algorithm looks like this

$$L_C^m(\mathbf{X}^m, \mathbf{Z}^m(\Phi^{m-1}), \Phi) = L_C^{m-1}(\mathbf{X}^{m-1}, \mathbf{Z}^{m-1}, \Phi) \\ + \underbrace{\sum_q z_{mq} \left( \log \alpha_q + \sum_l \sum_{j \neq m} z_{jl} \log(\pi_{ql}^{x_{mj}} (1 - \pi_{ql})^{1-x_{mj}}) \right)}_{L_C(\mathbf{X}_m, \mathbf{Z}^m, \Phi)}.$$

The resulting graph clustering after running the algorithm is presented like this<sup>46</sup>:

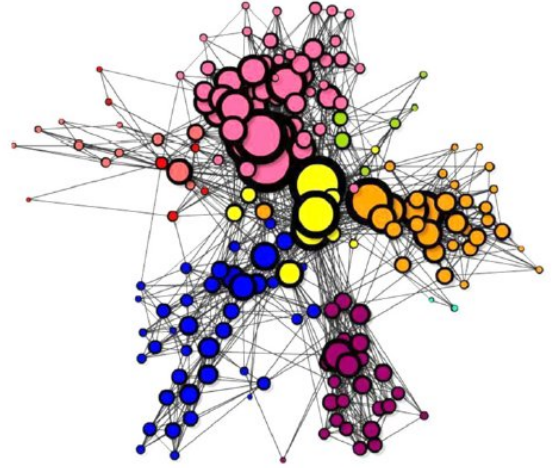


Fig. 1. Network of the blogopole [www.blogopole.fr](http://www.blogopole.fr).

Unfortunately I have to agree with Drezner and Farrell's observation that gathering data on the blogosphere "requires skills and expert knowledge of a kind that social scientists frequently don't have—the ability to write and understand scripts and other automated tools to gather and collate data, as well as the ability to recognize the limits of these tools."

I lack the ability of constructing automated tools, and even begin to understand how the algorithm paint such a pretty picture, so obviously my empirical study will be on a smaller scale due to the time-consuming manual data mining. I decided that a number of 100 blogs was sufficient for creating a sample population of the political blogosphere. Although my manual labour was inefficient compared to a script it had other positive properties.

One of the first obstacles in creating the sample population was to limit my data, i.e. the blogs, to the Egyptian political blogosphere. This is where a manual process of data gathering has its advantages. I was able to perform a smaller textual study of every blog, reading as many blog posts as necessary until a proper classification could be done. Every blog was thoroughly read until I could with a satisfactory assuredness decide whether a blog was Egyptian *and* political and thusly should belong to the population.

Instead of relying on blunt algorithms based on, for example, automated keyword analysis and edge degree (weight of incoming links) I could create a population with a good correlation to my chosen category.

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<sup>46</sup> Zanghi, H, et al. (2008)

However, in spite of my pride in the hard work invested in the classification of the blogs I must humbly admit that my grasp of the Arabic language (approximately 60% of the population was written in Arabic.) does not permit a *perfectly* accurate textual analysis. Should a blogger for example choose to express his political opinions poetically, chances are very high that this blog was excluded from the population. It is my opinion that in spite of my short comings I have managed to create a population representing the Egyptian political blogosphere.

The sample population was extracted by exploring the edges connecting nodes (links between blogs). Although I have used an original approach to gather my population, using edges to gather data has support in other social network analyses of the blogosphere<sup>47</sup>.

I started by arbitrarily choosing one blog (node) as my starting position. From this node I extracted all links to other blogs (outbound edges) and manually selected all that were deemed to be both Egyptian and political. Being classified as Egyptian did not necessarily mean that the author was Egyptian, but only that the issues discussed had a direct connection to Egypt.

The selected Egyptian political nodes were added to a new list consisting of the selected nodes plus the original starting node with whom they were connected. I then proceeded to number the list and use a random number generator to decide what node to analyse next. From the randomized node I repeated the procedure of following all edges and again manually selected the nodes deemed to fit my classification.

The new nodes were added to the list and numbered and then a new random node was chosen for analysis. I repeated this procedure until I had a number of 100 egyptian political blogs, all of them indirectly, or directly, connected with each other to make sure the blogosphere was justly represented.

I now ran into the obstacle of finding a software tool for social network analysis that had a suitable learning curve and still powerful enough for performing interesting analysis. After many hours of trial and error I decided to use a graphical editor for social networks called yEd.

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<sup>47</sup> Park, HW, Thelwall, M (2008); Zanghi, H, et al. (2008)

## 5 The Analysis

I entered my sample population of the blogosphere into the yEd editor as nodes and edges and weighted the degree of inbound edges and projected them as a circle, to more easily show the “spherical” nature of the blogosphere.

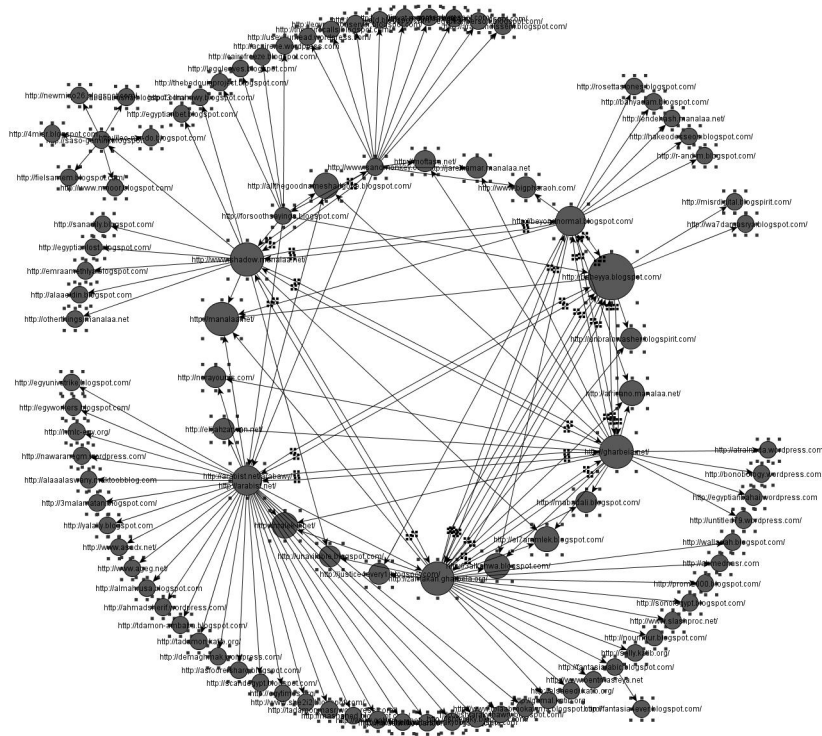


Fig 2. Network of the sample population of Egyptian political blogs

As figure 2 shows, the blogs exist in an inter-linked “sphere” with a fairly low centrality closeness, also known as degree of separation. This also shows the existence of “elite bloggers” which are the nodes with a higher degree represented by larger circles.

Unfortunately I did not manage to convince the yEd editor to calculate the centrality closeness but my intuitive estimation says that the average degree of separation is approximately 3 edges.

It should be noted that figure 2 is not to be taken as an exact graphical representation of the Egyptian blogosphere since my method for gathering my sample population greatly skew the distribution of edges. Since only a few nodes have been fully mapped, a more complete mapping of the entirety of the blogosphere would likely provide quite a different graph.

Now that we can actually see that there exist such a thing as an Egyptian political blogosphere we can move on to see if there is any visible downfall in the numbers of blogs. I did this by checking the starting date of every blog. In the case of the blog being inactive I also registered the ending date of the last blog post. A surprisingly high number of the sample population was found be inactive (i.e. not posting anything for 3 months). 37 out the 100 sample blogs are no longer updated; something that perhaps could provide some support for our hypothesis. Figure 3 shows the number of active blogs, which incidentally also is the active percentage of the sample population, at any given month within the sample population's lifespan.

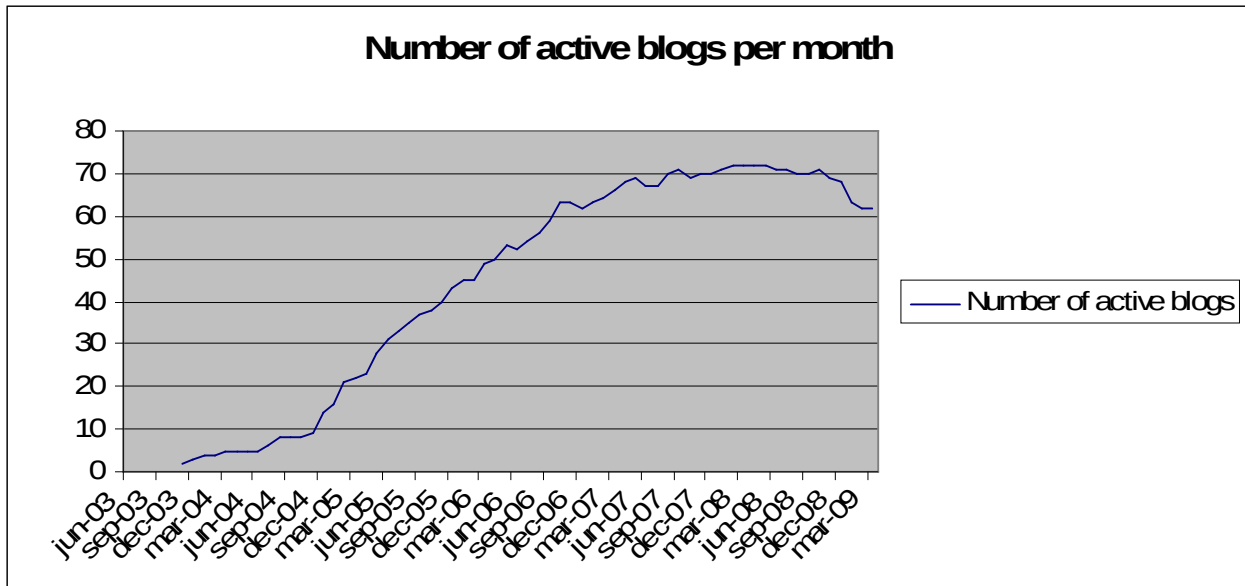


Fig. 3 Number of active blogs per month

Figure 3 clearly shows that within the sample population there has been a drastic decrease of the growth rate around June 2007, which correlates with the high number blogger being arrested. This could be seen as a result of the rising costs of transferring information through the blogosphere.

In figure 4 we can see that the lines representing started blogs and ended blogs intersect around June 2007.

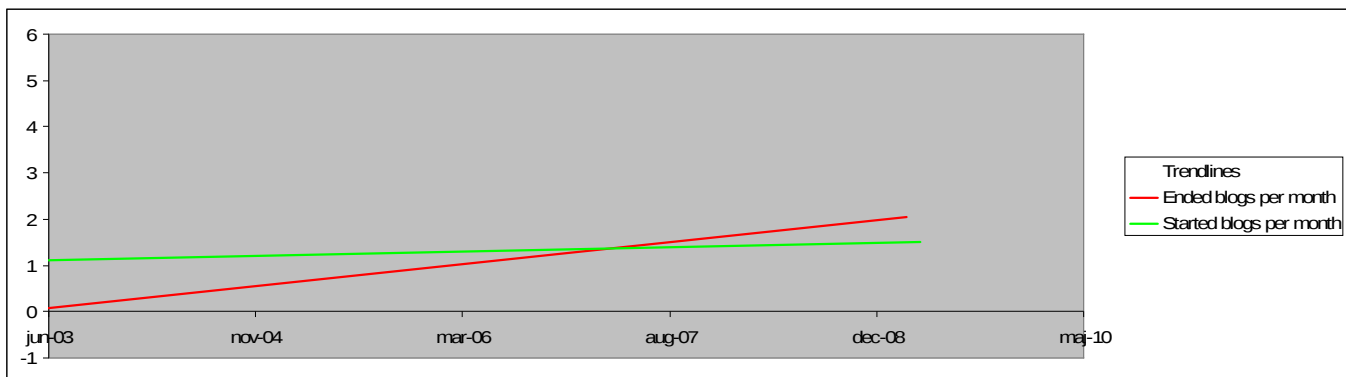


Fig. 4. Trendlines depicting ended and started blogs per month

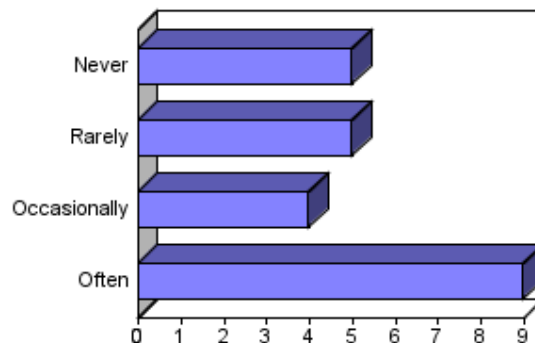
This graph doesn't only show that the diminishing of the active number of political blogs correspond with the increased pressure from the government but also that the number of started blogs is fairly constant. Although the lines are showing tendencies the underlying data confirms that the started blogs over time doesn't decrease after June 2007 but it is the amount of ended blogs that is increasing.

This can be explained by a difference in where the new higher price is being paid. In chapter 2 I stated there was two different costs present for blogging, one was the sender-enabling cost and the other transfer-enabling cost. Considering that it is the prominent "elite" bloggers that command much of the attention one would think that the rising price is not reflected on the sender-enabling of the blog but rather that it is the transfer-enabling cost that is being raised.

That would explain why the number of started blogs are fairly constant, when a new blog is created the initial sending-enabling cost is still low and it is only when enough transfers have been made that the transfer-enabling cost rises.

When asked the question whether or not they considered the potential costs, 39% of the Egyptian bloggers said they often did.

Fig. 6  
Do you ever consider the consequences of negative reactions (from the readers) to your posts? E.g. From state security, friends and family, other bloggers etc



Please note that it was only 23 respondents to the question which hardly represents the Egyptian bloggers but perhaps may serve as a piece of anecdotal indication.

Considered together I would claim that there is some support to believe that the increased costs incurred by the government's crackdown on bloggers have led to a decline in the number of active blogs. This may as I have argued before lead to the information still being transferred of being of higher quality as the incentive to provide deceiving information declines as the price rises.

Put differently it would seem to make sense that a blogger facing potential repercussions for publishing certain information would need to have a stronger belief in the need for that certain piece of information to be published in order to face the rising costs. In short, it is more likely that more devoted political bloggers stay longer facing higher costs than the less devoted ones.

# The Discussion

Even though I believe in the proposed hypothesis there are a great many potential errors.

The relationship between the governmental crackdown and the decrease of the number of blogs is only assumed to be related. But the biggest problem is with the sample population, there is nothing that speaks for its validity when it comes to actually representing the Egyptian political blogosphere. Estimations of the actual numbers are always difficult but the number 160,000 blogs was mentioned in a report issued by the Information and Decision Making Center at the cabinet council<sup>48</sup>. If we compare this to the number reported in 2005, by the newspaper Al-Ahram, of 400 bloggers there doesn't seem to be much support for a hypothesis claiming the numbers have diminished.

Another point of criticism is the data gathering process, when striving after finding a blogosphere of inter-connected nodes one might fall into the trap of hearing the echoes of the same voices. Perhaps my sampling never reached a broader part of the blogosphere but stayed within a sub-network within the network. This could explain a seemingly converging diminishing trend that wouldn't necessarily be represented in the entire network. Although while categorizing the blogs I felt like I had representatives from a broad political spectrum, from west-shunning socialists to pro-Israeli market liberals. Nevertheless, the criticism remains important and my results fairly weak.

But as a novice in the field of social network analysis and close to computer illiterate I am fairly content with my effort in proposing a valid hypothesis and trying my hand at performing original research on an area earlier unknown to me.

Hopefully in the future we will see the evolvement of new tools for performing research on blogging and such new media phenomena. One of the major problems is that we so far are unable to analyze the absolutely most important aspect of the internet. The sheer number of citizen participation, in whatever area possible, is too big for us to aggregate and study. This is especially true when it comes to the blogging. I have shown how the high numbers of blogs are an important feature of the blogosphere, but we have yet to seen and studied the blogosphere in full.

Many research papers that have tried out methods were sampling the blogosphere from certain indexing services such as Technorati or Google Blog Search. They all have their short comings and Technorati (widely known as the

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<sup>48</sup> <http://ikhwanweb.com/Article.asp?ID=17350&LevelID=1&SectionID=0>

biggest aggregator for blogs and trackbacks) has received quite verbal criticism for not performing very well<sup>49</sup>.

Perhaps with the way the internets are organized at the moment, where even the major search engines have trouble indexing all the new sites, we might have to settle for always studying smaller representative populations. This is how much of our research is designed and deductive knowledge gained. We assume that when we've reached a big enough number, adding more study objects will not affect performance positively. But the internets are different since the information is already out there, readily available for the inquisitive scholar and taunting us with its legion numbers.

IT entrepreneur and blogging mogul Dave Winer recently suggested what is needed: New protocols on the internet that allows for real time indexing of an ever greater number of websites and blog posts.<sup>50</sup> The future will tell, as it will when it comes to what role the blogosphere will have in the civic society 2.0.

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<sup>49</sup> <http://kottke.org/05/08/so-long-technorati>

<sup>50</sup> <http://www.scripting.com/stories/2009/05/19/takingOffTheTrainingWheels.html>

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