



**New Media: The Press Freedom Dimension
Challenges and Opportunities of New Media for Press Freedom
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**CITIZEN MEDIA
EGYPTIAN BLOGGERS: PRACTICES AND CHALLENGES
by
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Two years ago, the number of Egyptian blogs was very meager. There were a few million Egyptian Internet users, but most of them had not heard of the term "blogs" in the first place. At that time we were preparing to republish Al-Dostour weekly newspaper after a seven-year suspension imposed by Egyptian authorities, we thought of allocating a weekly page to publish selected content of different blogs. We saw that blogs, few as they were, introduce some young and fresh voices which are very different from what readers would get in the traditional media.

I was the editor of this page, which did not last long for different reasons. During that time, however, it attracted more attention to this new phenomenon, especially that we used to published the Web address of the selected blogs so that the reader could log on to the ones he/she liked and read more. In a few months, this led to an increased traffic for the blogs and prompted the readers to launch their own sites. Thus the print journalism played a role in pushing Egyptian blogging forward in its early stages before the blogs started flourishing and turning into a medium of its own.

To have a quick look at the situation in Egypt we will review a few figures. Egyptians are around 78 millions now. The illiteracy rate is around 40% according to the latest estimates, a very high percentage indeed. Still, the number of Internet users in Egypt is around 6 million, a very large number when taken illiteracy and harsh economic conditions into consideration. Basically, this is because of the various state-sponsored initiatives to promote the Internet, with the aim of attracting foreign investment more than achieving any other "social development" goals.

The number of Egyptian blogs does not exceed 4000, according to the most optimistic estimates, only a few hundred of them can be called "active". Though the mere figures are low, a group of bloggers has managed to occupy

a good spotlight in the Egyptian media in the last two years, by writing about and following up on certain events, which the traditional media cover briefly or in a biased manner, or even totally ignore.

The number of exclusive stories covered by bloggers in the last two years has been few, and was mainly confined to political news. The reason is very simple: these two years saw unprecedented events in the modern history of Egypt, starting with the first multi-candidate presidential elections. The Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt's biggest opposition group despite being officially banned, also won nearly one-fifth of the seats of the parliament and the judges of Egypt staged an uprising demanding real independence from the executive branch. Add to that many demonstrations which the state, more often than not, handled with an iron grip. In all these events the Egyptian bloggers were there to convey what happened in words and images.

Like elsewhere, blogs in Egypt cover different issues and have different media messages. Most of the blogs are not interested in politics at all, and very few can be considered *media* outlets. The majority of blogs are very personal, telling everyday life stories. The blogs which have gained fame, however, and which introduced what we call "alternative media", are the ones which focused on politics.

One of the most prominent achievements of the blogs in the Egyptian society may have been introducing a new means of expression for certain social, political, and religious groups and minorities whose causes hardly, or never, find their way in traditional media. We can say that blogs were the first window through which many Egyptians saw some of these groups and minorities in the first place.

One example is the Baha'is who filed a lawsuit against the Egyptian government demanding that their religion be recognized in official documents. While the case was in court, many Egyptian blogs supported the rights of the Baha'is. Some Baha'is started their own blogs to defend their viewpoint and explain their faith, which could never have appeared in even the most liberal traditional media.

Another example is the blogs edited by gay women who reveal their feelings, desires, and personal lives in a society too conservative to accept these relationships. It was the first time for such an explicit bold speech to appear in an Egyptian media outlet. Moreover, blogging has given a chance for some people to talk about, defend and discuss their secular thoughts, which are difficult to discuss in the traditional media, given the rising religious trend in politics and society.

Most of Egyptian bloggers use Arabic as blogging language, making the effect of their blogs limited only to Arabic-speaking audience. But there are tens of English-language blogs run by Egyptians, which present an opportunity to communicate with wider audience. These blogs attract visitors from all around the world, and introduce an effective alternative media outlet, giving a lively image of the life of average Egyptians.

Despite their short life, Egyptian blogs managed to take a notable place outside Egypt. In 2005, Manal and Alaa blog (www.manalaa.net), which include an aggregation of Egyptian blogs, won an award from the Deutsche Welle's for the best human rights blog worldwide. In the same year, another Egyptian blog *Alhawliyat* (<http://gharbeia.net/ar/node>) won an award for the best Arabic blog. And in 2006, Jar Elkamar blog (<http://jarelkamar.manalaa.net>) won the Deutsche Welle award for the best Arabic blog.

By and large, we can say that in a very short period, the Egyptian society witnessed the emerging of a new *alternative media* outlet, though its effect is still limited. In this experiment, the passive receiver of content became an active content provider first time. This new media provider might break the set rules of language, style and subjects, but get some scoops and, equally important, break the taboos imposed on the traditional media.

NEWS BLOGS (PRACTICES)

When first appeared, most of Egyptian news blogs started with copying different reports and articles from various sources. Many bloggers wrote opinion pieces which stirred hot debates.

The next step, though, was that some blogs started to be the original source of news which traditional media outlets later quoted. We will give some examples of the "blogs' journalism" in which bloggers got their own scoops, sparking wide debates, and sometime shocks, across the Egyptian society over the last two years.

1-Mass Sexual Harassment:

This case is considered the most famous practical example for the blogs' press in Egypt, revealed by a number of bloggers who happened to witness some terrible incidents in downtown Cairo in October 2006. It was the Eid el-Fitr feast, in which Muslims celebrate the end of the holy month of Ramadan. Every year, thousands of youth take to the streets, going to cinemas or wondering about aimlessly. Sexual Harassment was not unusual during these times, but what happened that year was totally different.

According to Malek (<http://malek-x.net/node/268>) who was the first to write about the incident, which later became the talk of the city:

"...We saw a girl in her twenties stumbling and falling. A number of young men surrounded her, touching different parts of her body, and tearing her clothes off. I couldn't understand what happened. But the girl stood up fast and tried to run, until she found a restaurant and went in. The young guys stood in front of the restaurant and wouldn't leave until one of them cried: 'there is another girl'. Everybody ran to the

direction, and there was a girl totally surrounded by hundreds of guys trying to touch her body and tearing her clothes off. This time the girl was saved by a taxi driver who let her in his car. Still, the guys didn't leave them. They surrounded the taxi, insisting that the girl get out..."

This was part of a long detailed testimony that shocked the Egyptian society. The shock was even greater when other blogs published some unclear photos and video clips for the incidents taken by mobile phone cameras.

This story was a scoop for the blogs. The authorities denied the incident, and traditional media did not mention it for a few days, until some independent newspapers took the thread and started to follow up the story. This scoop led the state-owned newspapers to launch a campaign undermining the blogs as news outlet and questioning their credibility as a source. But most people believed the blogs, which proved that they were able to get exclusive stories.

2-Bloody Raid of the Sudanese Refugee Strike:

In November 2005, a group of Sudanese refugees in Cairo went on a strike in front of the UN High Commission for Refugees, demanding a final solution to their unstable conditions. The strike attracted an increasing number of refugees day after day until the number exceeded 1,000. It lasted for several weeks in a makeshift camp without reaching any agreement with the Commission. The situation became very embarrassing for both the UN body and the Egyptian government, especially as the strike was held in one of the most famous Cairo squares, in a street known as a commercial hub serving Arab tourists.

On the night of December 30th, 2005, the Egyptian Central Security Forces began an operation to disperse the strike. They chose to raid just before dawn, when the number of witnesses is minimal. But the Egyptian bloggers were there. Nora (<http://norayounis.com/2005/12/30/74>) wrote on her blog (both in English and Arabic):

"At 5 am sharp the 3 water cannons (brought by the security forces) flushed them (the refugees) again and right beside the water line security forces timely attacked the Refugees campus with batons and shields. After 1 minute the water stopped. Soldiers destroyed the rest of their makeshift homes and pulled up their front line of luggage throwing it away as other soldiers made their way in... Sounds of screams, mainly women and children, echoed...Soldiers were brutal. They were just beating anyone anywhere stepping over anyone and anything."

This was only a quote of the detailed testimony published on the blog and supported with tens of photos, which were also a scoop of their own. The campaign ended with a large number of casualties among men, women, and children. The refugees were moved to another temporary camp until the government finds a way to get rid of them. No one wrote about the scary scenes of people beaten to death except the bloggers, while the traditional local media was talking about ending the strike "peacefully".

3-Anti-Torture Campaign:

For many years, there have been reports about torturing detainees for confessions, especially in political cases, but it was nothing compared to the ongoing anti-torture campaign launched by the Egyptian bloggers. This time, blogs used more effective weapon by posting several video clips taken of torture inside police stations. The clips were taken, usually, by the torturers' mobile phone cameras, to humiliate the detainees, or to circulate as a "joke". But the joke became a real problem when these clips were leaked and widely published on the blogs, and later in newspapers. This has embarrassed the police and forced the authorities to launch official investigations in some cases.

The boldness of these blogs in publishing torture clips and maintaining the campaign for so long inspired several citizens to send the clips they have to active bloggers. Over a few weeks, Egyptian blogs posted nine clips which showed different kinds of torture and physical abuse inside police stations.

The torture issue turned, mostly through the bloggers, to a public opinion issue, especially as the blogs managed to publish what the traditional media could not. An Egyptian girl started a blog (www.torturinegypt.net) specialized in watching and documenting all available torture cases, news, and reports. In a few months this blog became the No. 1 resource for anyone interested in the issue. This courage, though, did not go without punishment. The blogger faced different pressures, and finally was fired from her work.

Once more, the Egyptian blogs reiterate their effective existence as prominent media source in one of the most important fights of the civil society in Egypt.

CHALLENGES:

Active as they are, the Egyptian bloggers came under the spotlight. They stirred many discussions on blogging conditions in Egypt. Some of the experienced bloggers started to educate the beginners. By that time, the term "citizens' press" appeared in Egypt. There were some attempts to regulate blogging, especially in the absence of any legal regulations for electronic publishing in Egypt. The discussions are still ongoing, but the only consensus so far is supporting the new type of media, the citizens' media.

While the world is busy trying to set professional and technical standards for the citizens' journalism, the conditions in Egypt are different. The main

concern among Egyptian bloggers is to maintain a sort of protection to their community, a dream which, probably, will not come true soon.

Egyptian blogs face many problems and challenges. One prominent challenge is the attempts by the traditional media to undermine them by constantly questioning their credibility, especially when it comes to exclusives. Another problem is the pressure from the state, using various freedom-restricting laws to threaten bloggers with jail. At the same time, most bloggers have not received any professional training, neither how to deal with Internet technical problems, nor how to write a proper news story.

The bloggers' campaign against torture forced the Interior Minister, *Habib Al-Adly*, to accuse them in interviews of being part of a non-patriotic campaign aiming at tarnishing the reputation of Egyptian police. He warned the Egyptians of using the Internet in a way that would endanger national security. Such statements, for those who know how things go in Egypt, mean that everyone should be ready for a set of fierce procedures.

The government is preparing a law for E-publishing. The law, parts of which were leaked in the press, will target bloggers in the first place. Like the traditional publishing law, this one will include a set of general articles that could seriously threaten the freedom which bloggers have enjoyed during the last couple of years.

Egyptian blogs recently introduced a practical model for an alternative media in a society where it is most needed. Many bloggers may lack professionalism needed for journalists in terms of language, documentation, and, sometimes, objectivity, but they are for sure not short of courage.

High Price:

Egypt is one of a few countries where a journalist could be jailed for a "publishing crime". While journalists can be supported by their union, bloggers are left in the open without the minimal protection. The hotter the issues they tackle, of course, the higher the danger they face.

Several bloggers faced detention under the Emergency Law applied in Egypt since 1981. Though most of these detentions were promoted by the bloggers' political activism on the streets rather than their blogging, what they wrote online was a top reason for focusing on them. In a unique experience, Mohamed Al-Sharkawy wrote about the details of the sexual abuse he faced in a police station after being held in a demonstration supporting the independence of judiciary. This was a rare report; the victim is the writer without any mediator.

Some of the active bloggers, especially those who lead the anti-torture campaign, faced different types of harassments and pressures, from threats via mobile phones to defamation or losing their jobs. The pressures which were used in the past against political activists are used now against Internet activists.

Hala Al-Masry was the first blogger to be sued for something published on a blog. On her blog *Copts Without Borders* (www.halaelmasry.blogspot.com) Al-Masry accused the state of being involved in the assaults on copts in the village of "Al-Odaysat" near Luxor. The harassment was extended to Hala's family. Her husband was detained and forced to sign a pledge to bring his wife to the prosecution for questioning in June 2006. She was accused of "harming national security and social peace" and "circulating fake information". Hala closed her blog, but the case is not closed yet, and might go forward anytime.

But the case which could set a precedent in the violation of freedom of expression on the Web is Karim Amer's. Amer is a blogger and was student in Al-Azhar University – a body affiliated with the Al-Azhar Sunni Muslim institution – before being dismissed last year. He is on trial now based on charges filed by the university over a set of articles he wrote and published on his blog. He is accused of insulting Islam and insulting the president. The court will issue its verdict on February 22 and he faces up to nine years in jail. His crime is writing some articles which, in any other country, would cause a wide debate, but in Egypt would take their writer, simply, to prison, and for a long time.