

Social Media

By ALBRECHT HOFHEINZ

“If a single story surfaces on a new torture case inside an Egyptian prison, it is quickly buried under piles of entries and clicks on the new shapes of Kim Kardashian’s butt.” This is how writer **Aḥmad Nāḡī** sums up his view on the effects of social media as Egypt is about to enter the “Year of Youth”. The virtual space that could have been the last bastion of freedom for hard-pressed young people, he argues, has been turned into a mega shopping mall. What is trending there is the product of social media companies liberally funded by Gulf shaykhs who act as agents of their “Western gods”, supporting the coalition of the military and forces of the old regime that had crushed the revolution on the streets and deprived “the young of all spaces, even virtual reality. The internet has been subjected to surveillance, and a single tweet can get you in jail” (NAJI) [[↗Voice vs. Silence](#)].

As if to confirm this picture, the administrators of 23 Facebook pages are arrested the same day **Aḥmad Nāḡī**’s text is published to an international audience (NAJI); simultaneously, Facebook’s “Free Basics” service, which offers rudimentary mobile internet for free to lower-income people, is being terminated by the authorities since the company, according to insider sources, “would not allow the government to circumvent the service’s security to conduct surveillance” (ABUTALEB & MENN) [[↗Mobile Phones](#)]. Commentators generally see this in the context of a wider crackdown on potentially oppositional voices ahead of the fifth anniversary of the 25 January uprising [[↗Commemoration / Memorial Days](#)]. On the streets, police continue to randomly check people’s Facebook accounts, arresting anyone suspected of having pro-revolutionary sympathies (ATEF).

Voices of dissent, however, persevere. When a leading member of the Doctors’ Syndicate is detained and the prosecutor asks him if he had taken part in “the violent events of 25 January 2011”, there is a backlash as the hashtag *#Anā_shārakt_fī_thawrit_yanāyir* (“I participated in the January Revolution”) is launched on Twitter. Hours later, it has been used over 10000 times, “with public persons, political figures and average pro-revolution citizens expressing pride” in their involvement (EL-GUNDY). Soon, the hashtag spreads also to Facebook where a dedicated page is created under this title. The following day, a new hashtag, *#Awqifū_Nāḡī_Shahḥāta* (“Stop Nāḡī Shahḥāta”), attempts to rally support for the removal of the regime’s most notorious judge, nicknamed “The Butcher” for issuing mass death sentences and other extremely harsh verdicts against political opponents, often after only a few minutes of hearing (*Mada Masr* [a]) [[↗Court Trials](#)].

Given the persistence of critical voices and their repeated success in raising issues of concern to the public eye—sometimes to the point where they influence decision making (such as when Justice Minister **Aḥmad al-Zind** is dismissed from office over his remark, widely lambasted on social media, that he would arrest the Prophet himself were he to agitate against the state)—regime supporters are increasingly concerned that they no longer live in a “state where law and justice reign and where real work is appreciated”, but in a “Facebook state” directed by “social media brigades” spreading false rumours and extremist propaganda (*al-Jazīra Mubāshir*). This is described as “a real burden” to progress, destroying society

from within by keeping users “mentally retarded” and busy with gossip and trivialities, unable to develop proper thinking. Even ageing pop star Muḥammad Munīr chimes in, lecturing a concert audience on how Americans and Europeans “used to be infatuated with social media, but [...] have now overcome this” [↗**Inferiority vs. Superiority**], and urging young people to go “read and study” instead (*ibid.*).

The view that social media (usually identified with Facebook and Twitter) are a major factor threatening public order is widespread in Egypt and not uncommon in Tunisia either. “Some of the young circulate information of unknown origin, most often completely devoid of any truth, and this can cause crises and problems in the street and in public opinion” and “incite people to violence and terrorism” (‘ABD AL-MAĠĪD). In Tunisia, such anxieties are linked not only to general concerns regarding the uncontrolled spread of jihadist propaganda but are also due to the fact that the use of Facebook by groups and individuals fighting to change the status and improve the rights of marginalised members of society (LGBT, racial and religious minorities, atheists, etc.) is attracting particular public attention (BIL’ID; *Shams*; YASMINE; *Freedom House*; *AsTuSoMi*). While the Tunisian government, however, at least occasionally takes a progressive stance on such matters, Egyptian authorities react with a much heavier hand (*Tekiano*). President Sisi himself has the problem high on the agenda when he gives a widely televised speech to the nation in April (*al-Waṭan News*). Of the sixteen issues he addresses, three have to do with social media. As calls rise there for street demonstrations denouncing Egypt’s ceding of two ↗**Red Sea Islands** to Saudi Arabia, and against the backdrop of continued media interest in the murder of Giulio Regeni [↗**The Suspect Foreigner**], Sisi sounds the alarm against organised campaigns on the internet (“electronic brigades”) aiming at undermining the security and stability of the state (*Mada Masr* [b]; RASHWĀN); rebukes journalists and the public in general for uncritically relying on social media sources; and warns citizens to be careful in what they post (YT “Lā ta’tamid ‘alā shabakāt al-tawāṣul al-iḡtimā’ī”). “You don’t know the harm of disclosing everything without limits. [...] There are evil people among us doing this work and questioning the state in everything it does. [...] There have been attempts to shake confidence in everything good, which may lead us to national suicide” (*Mada Masr* [b]). This cannot be tolerated, he thunders. “I can go on the net with two web brigades [...], take over those pages and turn them into my own” (*Infirād*; ELHADIDI).

“Electronic brigades” is a label cast about by both sides of the political divide against their respective ideological opponents. News one does not like is “false news”, disseminated by organised ‘brigades’ taking orders, depending on your stance, either from the regime or from the Muslim Brotherhood and their Qatari backers (ABDEL SALAM) [↗**True vs. False**]. In November, Facebook posts are leaked by insiders confirming that there indeed are coordinated efforts to engineer public opinion through targeted campaigns on social media, campaigns that are then taken up by pro-government newspapers such as *al-Yawm al-Sābi‘* (SALEH). “They have sold their conscience”, scoff critics (al-MAGHRIBĪ). No—“no one should be surprised that I’m a supporter of this regime”, retorts prominent journalist and social media star Ibrāhīm al-Ġārḥī who is identified as the leading voice of the closed Facebook group *Ittiḥād Mu’ayyidī ‘l-Dawla* (“Union of Supporters of the State”) that attempts to coordinate such social media campaigns.

“I work for the sake of my country. [...] Put simply, I’m a ‘part’ of this regime. I participated in rallying support for the June 30 Revolution, and I continue to work for what I believe in with all the means at my disposal. What I do to support this regime publicly is the same as what I am doing clandestinely.” (al-HINDĪ)

The debate about the nature and real influence of such ‘electronic committees’ rages throughout the year but remains inconclusive (*ibid.*). “Egyptian satirist Muhammad Zugshbi said he does not believe that the satirical social media pages were shut down because of the ‘web brigades,’ indicating that Sisi has a large number of supporters who can pressure and block the pages without receiving any direction from the regime” (ELHADIDI). Certainly, pro-regime voices supporting the State (*Dawlaḡī Dawlaḡiyya bi-kulli fakhr* “State minion and proud” is the slogan of one such page), the Army, the Police, My Country and the Great Egyptian People abound on social media. A page such as *Ḍidd al-Ikhwān* (“Against the Brotherhood”), which holds that **nothing is as bad for Egypt as the Muslim Brotherhood**: not the inflation, not the dollar crisis, not corruption, has over a million followers on Facebook (*Ḍidd al-Ikhwān*).

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Such figures, however, are not enough to unsettle the entrenched opinion that social media are dominated by negative critique. Right after a ↗**Tuk-tuk** driver’s rant about the failure of the state to secure a decent living for its citizens turns into the year’s most viral video, pro-regime voices are therefore eager to grasp the opportunity to dress down the clamorous critics. “‘The son of the skilled plumber’ eclipses social media ‘pessimists’”, headlines *al-Yawm al-Sābi‘* when the following Facebook post by a 12-year old appears on the net (al-MASRĪ):

“Dad’s a highly skilled plumber. He has accrediting certificates in his field. Dad is not expensive. Dad really loves his job and can do all the new stuff. Dad gives you a guarantee on what he does, so no maintenance worries! Dad travels wherever in Egypt, any province. This is dad’s number 01003697189. Dad’s the best!”

Over several months, the boy publishes numerous copies of this post to a wide variety of Facebook groups where he receives a number of heartfelt likes and shares in the double-digit range. The post spreads beyond his immediate network, however, and allegedly reaches over 50 000 people. At any rate, to those who want to see a more ‘positive’ internet, the significance of this example exceeds simple statistics, so the boy does not only get a newspaper article but is invited to the country’s leading talk-show “10 P.M.” on **prime time TV** where he is **held up** as a shining example of filial affection and sense of responsibility, in contrast to all those “who we are used to see throwing Molotov cocktails, exchanging insults, cheating in school [...], spreading false rumours, and using social media in a bad way.” “We’d hope to see such purity (*naqā*) and decorum (*adab*) in everyone!” (AL-DEMIRDĀSH; YT “Bi-barā’at al-aṭfāl aṣḥā’la mawāqī’ al-tawāṣul al-iḡtimā’ī”) [↗**Father Figures**, ↗High School Exams].

Pending a change in people’s conduct, meanwhile, lawmakers in Egypt try to curb the “Facebook chaos” by pushing forward the longstanding parliamentary debate on a cybercrime bill. Social media, so the rationale, “need to be subject to some regulation”, and “the affiliations of every Facebook page admin and his political orientation should be made known”. The bill is **passed** in September but by the end of the year is still awaiting Cabinet

approval (HAMAMA). In Tunisia, on the other hand, efforts to introduce a new cybercrime law to replace provisions from the Ben Ali-era face criticism from rights groups for not going far enough to protect the constitutionally enshrined freedom of expression (*Freedom House*).

Their controversial evaluation notwithstanding, Facebook and Twitter are constantly used by print and broadcast media in both countries as sources for what is being debated, what is buzzing, what is ‘hot’ in the public sphere. Trending hashtags as well as journalists’ own impressions from following social media serve as indicators. The expression *tadawala / ‘allaqa ruwwād (ṣafahāt) mawāqī’ al-tawāṣul al-ijtimā’ī* (“social media leaders circulated / commented on”) appears very commonly in the media. These *ruwwād* are thereby stylised as a force of their own, an impression strengthened by the fact that they often remain anonymous in the reports. For all his criticism, President Sisi himself admits that social media do provide a means to gauge the mood of the population and that he is following them closely (*Sawt al-Masīhī al-Hurr*). And like many other prominent people and institutions who regularly choose their social media accounts as the first channel to publish statements, comments and opinions, Sisi uses Facebook in the same way: his announcement that he plans to run for a second term “if the will of the Egyptian people requires me to do so” is first made known on his official Facebook page. Pro-regime TV host Aḥmad Mūsā then launches a Twitter poll “Do you support the candidacy of President Sisi for a second term?” To his consternation, the poll quickly reaches 81% for a no, so he shuts it down after 48 hours and blames Muslim Brotherhood supporters residing in Qatar and Turkey (“traitors and foreign agents”) for this “deceptive” result. “Elections in Egypt are not run from Facebook or Twitter”, he grumbles. “The typical Egyptian citizen and the large majority of Egyptians are those who cast their votes at ballot boxes. Social media users only represent 1% of those who actually go to the ballot, and the 97% of voters are a broad base that really loves the Egyptian flag” (AL-TAWĀNISĪ; HASSAN).

The climate of mutual suspicion between supporters and opponents of the regime is conducive to people assuming the worst of their opponents, suspecting them of all kinds of misdeeds, and easily judging news and reports according to whether they conform to this preconceived image. The architecture and the dynamics of social media help to entrench this tendency. Thus, when a medical student is reported to have died jumping out of the window of a brothel (masked as a ‘health studio’) to escape a morality police raid, social media are abuzz with treating the story as a cover-up for the police having murdered a suspected member of the Muslim Brotherhood (QURĀ‘A) [[↗Clash](#), [↗The Policeman Criminal](#)].

Social media are thus both *denounced* and *embraced* with equal fervour according to one’s own interest and perspective—sometimes, as Aḥmad Mūsā demonstrates, almost simultaneously. They are denounced as a “new nuclear bomb” eroding the fabric of society and undermining the state; as being ineffective in bringing about a revolution or at least real political change; as mere entertainment and a waste of time; as a luring temptation corrupting morality; as a big shopping mall steered by commercial interests (*al-Jazīra Mubāshir*). And they are *embraced* as the prime outlet for spreading information, used by the weak and the powerful alike; as an important source of news for both journalists and the networked public; and as the last bastion of free expression valiantly defended by the few.

Do social media deserve such an accolade? Is Facebook really “the main motor of public opinion in Egypt”, as many seem to believe (‘ABD al-MAĠĪD)? “Most Egyptians now no longer follow the huge number of satellite channels (over 400 now) but keep up with news

and important updates through Facebook only”, a parliamentarian sighs. This is at odds with statistical research showing that “63% of Arab youth claim they get their news from television”, 45% from curated online news-channels, and only 32% from social media—on a par with “family and friends” (30%), but ahead of the really old media, newspapers and radio (17% each) (*ASDA’A Burson-Marsteller*; RADCLIFFE). It is, however, certain that social media have a large user base: overall internet penetration in Egypt has reached 60%, in Tunisia 50%, and almost all of them are on social media, primarily Facebook and YouTube, but also WhatsApp, Instagram, and Twitter (DENNIS et al.). The main purposes for using social media remain, however, communication with others and entertainment. News and sports trail behind. Many people refrain from engaging in political issues on the social web; 75% of Egyptians and 63% of Tunisians admit to having modified their internet behaviour due to concerns over privacy and government monitoring (RADCLIFFE). Any quantitative conclusions based on social media trends must therefore be regarded with caution. When the Egyptian Center for Public Opinion Research (Baseera) unveils *Nes’alak*, an app “to allow smartphone users to ask questions, respond to polls or solicit responses”, it makes sure to caution that online polls cannot be regarded as representative but that they may be “an indicator of the citizen’s feelings about some of the questions he is asked” (MOSTAFA).

Even when staying aloof from big politics, however, social media users risk running afoul of ruling sensitivities. Tunisians may have come to enjoy the highest degree of freedom of expression among all Arab countries, but conservative sectors of civil society often try to whip up public indignation against what they consider promulgation of immorality (*Réalités Online*) [↗LGBT]. In Egypt, authorities regularly claim that freedom of expression is a guaranteed right and that surveillance measures only aim at stopping terrorism; in practice, however, any criticism of authorities, at any level, may run one into trouble. Repeatedly, “people working in various state-owned and private institutions have been penalized for expressing their personal views on Facebook”. Hilwān University warns students and staff not to write negatively about the university on Facebook, threatening them with exclusion from the exams and other disciplinary measures. At the University of al-Manṣūra, a professor faces interrogation for criticising the quality of education. “I didn’t use insulting words and never incited violence. The problem is that my post got thousands of likes and shares, and was viewed mostly by the student community, which angered the administration.” A student at the same university falls victim to a Facebook prank and has to apologize to the disciplinary committee “for something I didn’t do” before being readmitted to the exams (El DIN). An Egyptian poet is jailed for three years over a tweet criticising the cruel methods of slaughtering sheep on the highest of Islamic holidays (FRENKEL & ATEF). These are just a few examples for how social media postings are getting people in trouble. “If you live in Egypt, anything you post can get you arrested”, a twenty-year-old university student describes the situation. NGOs have lost count of the number of people arrested and often disappeared based on statements they made on social media (*ibid.*) [↗Disappearances]. Is the authorities’ memory of the 2011 “Facebook revolution” to blame? The cybercrime law proposed by parliament would make “a call for protests on Facebook punishable by immediate imprisonment”. And “if you accuse anyone in a post without solid proof of that accusation, you can also be sent to jail”. Facebook is regarded as a “conspiracy from the West”, allowing “any loser” to rally support for a protest against the rightful authorities, thus sowing strife and “damaging the country”. Families often concur. “Damn Facebook and

Twitter and all these social media sites that bring us nothing but trouble,” explodes a relative of the admin of one of these contested pages. “I hope that the government just closes it all down.” So while the twenty-year-old student believes that “it just feels out of touch for a government to say that they want people [...] not [to] have discussions on Facebook or whatever. It’s become part of our culture”, she is under family pressure after having published a post criticising careless renovation measures at a local historical building. “My aunt saw the post and called my mom and told her, ‘You better get your daughter to take it down right away. People might get the wrong idea. [...] Welcome to today’s Egypt.’”

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CODES – Inferiority vs. Superiority ♦ True vs. False ♦ Voice vs. Silence

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