



# THE REVOLUTION WILL BE TWEETED

The Story of Digital Activism in Egypt

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What happened in January 2011 in Egypt did not start in January 2011. It began at least ten years earlier, and it's not over yet. The revolution was joined by people of all walks of life, Internet users and non-users alike. It gained momentum once it was joined by hundreds of thousands of workers, many of whom have been demonstrating for years. Why was this particular round of demonstrations so successful? Much of the organization and mobilization occurred through the Internet, particularly on social media such as Facebook and Twitter. But social media also played a vital role as a democratic model. Its inclusive space indirectly taught lessons in democracy to a wide sector of Egyptian youth that was not necessarily politically inclined. When the right moment arrived, they were ready to join the revolt.

The main catalyst for the January 25 revolution was the Internet, so it may be accurate to describe this as an Internet-based revolution. Not that the Internet was the only factor involved, or that Internet users were the only ones protesting. But the Internet was the tool that showed every dissident voice in Egypt that he or she is not alone, and is indeed joined by at least hundreds of thousands who seek change.

Facebook did not go to Tahrir Square. The people did. Twitter did not go to Al-Qaied Ibrahim Square. The people did. More than one-third of Egypt's population of eighty million remains illiterate, and just 25 percent of Egyptians use the Internet. However, Facebook and Twitter were instrumental in organizing, motivating, and directing these crowds as to where to go and what to do. Egypt's revolution was created as an event on Facebook eleven days in advance. People clicked "I'm attending." Certainly, this was a people's revolution, yet one based on and accelerated in many ways by the Internet. What happened in Tahrir and every square in Egypt was the accumulation of years and years of activism, including Internet activism. Social media prepared

◁ Egyptian blogger  
Wael Abbas, Cairo,  
Feb. 14, 2010.  
*Anastasia Taylor-Lind/  
VII/Corbis*

Egyptians for the revolution and enabled them to capitalize on an opportunity for change when the time came.

The Internet, by definition, is a democratic medium, at least in the sense that anyone with Internet access is a potential publisher of information. The average person may not have a chance to publish a newspaper article, or even a letter to the editor, and may not have a chance to appear on television, or to call in to a program. But they can readily design a website, publish a blog, or have a page on the numerous social networking sites, whereby they can make their views public. The mere presence of the Internet as a source of information helps open up a freer space for public debate, and makes it much more difficult for governments to censor information. When regimes censor an article in a magazine or an entire edition of a newspaper, that article or newspaper will find its way on to the Internet and in people's email boxes.

Internet activism started in Egypt with the appearance of Web 2.0 technology in the country around 2003. The new generation of interactive applications that took over the Internet since then has enabled and empowered the Internet user to do with the tools what was never possible before. This started with very simple tools, such as enabling readers to leave comments on a news story, and soon proliferated to include applications that changed the face of the Internet through making it much easier to have user-generated content. Blogging was the first valuable brainchild of Web 2.0 technologies. A blog, short for 'Web log,' is an Internet personalized space where someone can 'blog' or write their own thoughts about anything they please. The Internet has always been a user-based platform. But before Web 2.0, the options were very limited. One had to learn HTML (Web design language) to be able to build a website. The on-line services that enabled a user to create a 'page' from some templates were very limited both in size and in design options. Blogging changed that forever.

### **From Off-line to On-line Activism**

The phenomenon exploded in the Arab world, with Egyptian bloggers pioneering and leading the scene. Blogger numbers in the region approached half a million by the beginning of 2009, the great majority of them coming from Egypt. Although Egyptian bloggers constitute under 0.5 percent of the total blogs available on-line, they managed to show that they can act as elements of change in their society. Political blogging in particular became more popular, as users felt that they could remain anonymous if they so wished. Nevertheless, most Egyptian political bloggers choose to blog under their real names, which frequently got them in trouble with the regime. The state security crackdown on bloggers was testimony to their potential impact.

Undoubtedly, blogging created a space for the voiceless in Egypt. It was the first time individuals felt they could make themselves heard. That in itself was important,

whether or not the content was political, and whether or not anyone was reading the blogs. The phenomenon created a venting space for people who had long gone unheard. Some made very good use of the opportunity. Within a few years, star bloggers appeared in Egypt. They created names for themselves by blogging constantly and credibly. Soon, they started being internationally recognized, and more Egyptians in turn took notice. Early on, Alaa Abdel Fattah and Manal Hassan were awarded the Special Award from Reporters Without Borders in the international Deutsche Welle's 2005 Weblog Awards (Best of Blogs) contest, where their blog was cited as an instrumental information source for the country's human rights and democratic reform movement. The husband-and-wife team had created one of Egypt's earliest blogs, "Manal and Alaa's Bit Bucket," where they documented their off-line activism and posted credible information on protests and political movements, election monitoring and rigging, and police brutality.

Another award-winning blogger was Wael Abbas. He received several honors, including the 2007 Knight International Journalism Award of the International Center for Journalists for "raising the standards of media excellence" in his country. This was the first time that a blogger, rather than a traditional journalist, won the prestigious journalism award, a testament to the important work such bloggers were doing. In the same year, CNN named Abbas Middle East Person of the Year. He has been instrumental in bringing to light videos of police brutality in Egypt, a topic that was taboo before he and other bloggers ventured into it. As a result of these efforts, the Egyptian government at one point brought three police officers to justice on charges of police brutality for the first time in Egypt's history; they were convicted and sentenced to three years in jail.

As blogging was becoming a phenomenon in Egypt, some political movements started having a strong on-line presence, and taking to the streets based on their on-line organization. The most important was probably the Kefaya movement, whose formal name is The Egyptian Movement for Change. The movement was established in 2004 by a coalition of political forces, and became better known by its Arabic slogan. The word *kefaya* is Arabic for 'enough,' and as the name implies, the movement called for an end to the decades-old Mubarak regime, and for guarantees that his son would not succeed him as president. Kefaya was instrumental in taking people to the streets, thus bridging the gap between the on-line and the off-line worlds. Many of its supporters were bloggers, and many of the street protesters started blogging. So, increasingly, reports on the demonstrations found their way into blogs and were provided media coverage even when the traditional media ignored them or were afraid to cover them. One result was that many more Egyptians gained the courage to write blogs that openly criticized the authoritarian system and crossed the 'red line' of challenging their president.

Internet applications such as the video-sharing platform YouTube, which appeared in 2005, took blogging to a higher level. Not only were activists such as the Kefaya protesters able to document their demonstrations through articles on their blogs, now they were also capable of videotaping street protests and uploading the clips on YouTube. Watching people chanting “Down with Hosni Mubarak” in the mid-2000s was a totally new, riveting experience, which led many other brave Egyptians to join these demonstrations. Internet activists and blogger stars such as Wael Abbas, Alaa Abdel Fattah, Manal Hassan, Hossam El-Hamalawy, Malek Mostafa, and others uploaded hundreds of videos of police brutality, election rigging, and different violations of human and civic rights.

### **“The Federal Democratic Republic of Facebook”**

The next important development came with the introduction of what is typically known as social media, the platforms that allow for wider user discussions and user-generated content such as MySpace, Facebook, and Twitter. Social networks of this sort were a welcome addition to Egyptian cyberspace and to the on-line activism circles for several reasons, and I believe their structure indirectly taught Egyptians several lessons in democracy.

In my analysis of the use of these social networks in Egypt, it is important to note that they have had a greater effect on previously apolitical Internet users rather than on core on-line activists. The latter, after all, tended to carry their activism to the street with or without social media, although of course social media helped them disseminate their activism to a much wider audience.

Picture yourself in the middle of a circle of ‘friends’ or ‘followers’ who follow your every move on their news feeds or timelines. That circle is your social networking page, be it on Facebook or Twitter. Whenever you are on that page, you are in the middle of the circle, you are the center of attention. Those people on the outside of the circle are all gathered around you. They have their eyes on you, they watch your every move, they listen to (or read) your every comment or post, and they reply or comment back if you allow them. In that space, you are king or queen. You have the power to befriend whoever you want, or block whoever you want. You have the power and the freedom to say whatever you want, post comments as you please, post links to videos or articles that you deem interesting, because you can. This is your space, and everyone on the outside of the circle is expected to play by your rules.

There is a catch: the moment you click on someone else’s name from the people on the outside of the circle, you immediately move into their space, where they become the center of attention, and you become one of the many people forming the circle. Literally, at the click of a mouse, the center of the circle has changed, and you

are now on the periphery rather than in the center. You know you can easily go back to the center with another click of the mouse, but you know you have to play that role interchangeably if you want to be part of a ‘social network.’

The structure of social media taught Egyptians that space exists that you can call your own, your space, where you can speak your mind. To many in the West, this is probably no big deal. There are countless venues where they can express their opinions relatively freely. But for people in Egypt, and in the Arab world in general, this was a new phenomenon, and one I believe to be of profound importance.

The second valuable lesson it taught Egyptians was a lesson in what I call ‘horizontal communication.’ Before social networks, Egyptian youth were accustomed to being talked at, rather than talked to or spoken with. Communication was mostly vertical, coming from the regime down to everyone else. The youth had several layers of that vertical communication imposed on them, sometimes with even their own families forming one such layer. Authoritarian patterns of communication do not allow for much horizontal interaction. But social networks do, and eventually their existence on the Internet taught Egyptian youths a few lessons in democratic communication, even if the essence of the conversations carried out was not necessarily political in nature.

The bulk of those that I believe were affected by these lessons in democratic expression were clusters of the population that were not previously politically oriented. These form a good sector of those who took to the streets on January 25, and were joined by millions who held their ground in Tahrir Square and in every square in Egypt until Mubarak was toppled. The majority of these millions, including myself, were people who had never participated in a demonstration before. They were not political activists before January 25, but they saw or heard the call for action, and it touched a nerve as they found safety in numbers. Which brings me back to another function that social networks served: making you realize that you’re not alone.

Perhaps the first time Egyptians learned about the power of social networks was on April 6, 2008. Workers in the Egyptian city of Al-Mahalla Al-Kobra planned a demonstration to demand higher wages. Esraa Abdel Fattah, an activist then twenty eight years old, felt for the workers and wanted to help them. She formed a group on Facebook and called it ‘April 6 Strike’ to rally support for the workers. She knew it was too much to ask people to join in the protest, so she simply asked them to participate in spirit by staying home that day, not going to work, and not engaging in any monetary transactions such as buying or selling. The group was brought to the attention of the traditional media and was featured on one of Egypt’s popular talk shows, thus getting more exposure. What ensued surpassed all expectations. To Abdel Fattah’s own surprise (and everyone else’s), the Facebook group immediately attracted some seventy three thousand members. Many of these, and others who got

the message through traditional media, decided to stay home in solidarity with the workers. Others were encouraged to stay home by a bad sandstorm that swept across parts of Egypt that day, and yet others stayed home for fear of the strong police presence on the streets. The overall outcome made political activists realize that social networks could be a vital tool in generating support for a political cause, and in encouraging people to join a call for action. The April 6 Youth movement that grew out of that Facebook effort became a notable opposition force, and was quite active in the January 25 revolution. Abdel Fattah, who was detained for two weeks immediately after the April 6 action, became known in the media as the ‘Facebook girl.’

The April 6 event was meaningful because it provided a sense that people were actually willing to take an action, to do something beyond clicking a mouse. Yet, doubts remained about the potential of social media as a tool of protest, as some argued that calling on people to stay within the safe confinement of their homes is different from calling on them to go out and demonstrate in a high-risk situation.

Indeed, three months before the January 25 revolution, Malcolm Gladwell argued in a much-discussed article in *The New Yorker* under the title “Small Change: Why the revolution will not be tweeted” that social media can’t provide what social change has always required. He said that social media is good when you’re asking people for small-scale, low-risk action, but not for anything more. “Facebook activism succeeds,” he wrote, “not by motivating people to make a real sacrifice but by motivating them to do the things that people do when they are not motivated enough to make a real sacrifice.” He explained that this is because high-risk activism is a “strong-tie phenomenon,” meaning that those who carry out such acts of activism have to personally know each other well and develop strong personal ties before they would risk their lives for each other or for a common cause. Since Facebook and Twitter provide mostly “weak-tie” connections, since users typically have a strong off-line social tie with only a small percentage of their ‘friends’ or ‘followers,’ these social networks were therefore not capable of motivating people for a high-risk cause. He therefore concluded that a social network “makes it easier for activists to express themselves, and harder for that expression to have any impact.”

I’m not sure if Gladwell’s comments make sense within Western culture, but they certainly did not hold true in Egypt. Indeed, there were many times since January 25 when I myself, an inexperienced protester, ventured alone to a demonstration, and couldn’t help but feel absolutely safe in the warmth of people that I did not know personally. I always felt that these fellow Egyptians would protect me with their lives if that was necessary, and that I would do the same for them. And indeed, there are documented cases of Egyptian protesters who died in the line of fire as they tried to protect someone else, someone that they did not know.

The trick, I think, is knowing that you are in the company of many who share your utter belief in the same cause. That is something that social networks delivered. In a 2009 essay entitled “The Federal Democratic Republic of Facebook,” I argued that social network users in the Arab world developed a sense of patriotism to the network (or to certain pages or functions of it) analogous to that which they have for their countries because the social networks afforded them a great deal more democracy than their own countries. I argued that Facebook has a lot to teach Arabs about democracy as it affords users the opportunity to speak their minds with no ‘red lines’, and gives them the freedom to associate with whoever they deem appropriate without direct interference from authority. Unlike Arab governments, Facebook officials do not torture political dissidents and do not jail citizen journalists. I argued, therefore, that the feelings of belonging to the social network might in time create a sense of real community that is not present in the Arab off-line communities, and might help make Arab citizens bolder in their political demands as they learn that they are not alone in these demands.

### **“We Are All Khaled Said”**

One of the Facebook pages that played a major role in this regard was the Khaled Said page. Khaled Said was a young Egyptian who was brutally beaten to death by police informants outside an Internet café in Alexandria in June 2010. He had an innocent face that everyone could identify with. He could be anyone, and anyone could’ve been him. The Facebook page “We Are All Khaled Said” appeared shortly thereafter. It started asking its members, whose numbers increased steadily, to go out on silent standing protests in black shirts with their back to the streets. The demonstrations started in Alexandria and soon spread to every governorate in Egypt. Numbers increased with every protest. More and more people gained a little more courage and tasted the freedom of dissent.

One of the main advantages of the Khaled Said page was how well organized the events were. Protesters were provided with exact times and locations, and given exact instructions on what to wear, what to do, as well as who to contact in the case of any problems with security forces. The page quickly became one of the most popular on Facebook among Egyptian users; and it was the Khaled Said page that eventually posted the ‘event’ for a massive demonstration on January 25, Egypt’s Police Day. It was only several days into the demonstrations when it was revealed that the group was administered primarily by a Google marketing executive, Wael Ghonim, an Egyptian who was detained on January 27 for twelve days by state security police.

The organizational (and democratic) skills of the Khaled Said page administrators played an important role. Over the course of several months, the page gained wide



credibility, partly because the events it posted were always well organized, and the users' opinions were taken into consideration in planning them. The administrators usually polled their users, asking them to vote for their place or time of preference for the next protest. The responses would be in the thousands, sometimes tens of thousands, and the administrators would read them all, and give a breakdown, with exact numbers and percentages, of the votes. By January 25, the Khaled Said page users had developed enough trust in the administrators and in the thousands of fellow users they did not know personally to actually go out and demonstrate.

The January 25 demonstration was motivated and aided by an important intervening variable, the revolt in Tunisia. When Tunisian protesters succeeded in ousting President Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali on January 14, Egyptians felt that toppling a dictator through demonstrations was finally possible. (I suspect they were a little jealous that it didn't happen in Egypt first.) The Khaled Said page, which by then had about six hundred thousand followers, demonstrated its strong ability to organize. They listed all the major squares in every Egyptian governorate where they expected people to gather, and again gave specific instructions on what to wear, what to take with you, and who to contact in times of trouble. They then alerted the users that the listed venues for demonstration would change at midnight on January 24 to give police forces a lesser chance of mobilizing against them the next day. On the morning of January 25, there were close to half a million people who had clicked "I'm attending" the revolution. Today, the Khaled Said page has more than 1.7 million users, by far more than any other Egyptian Facebook page.

The concept of the power in numbers is important, because it encouraged people who had no experience in demonstrating to actually go out on the streets on January 25. This was the first time that an event created for a demonstration showed so many people intending to attend. If half a million people indicate they are going to demonstrate, chances are you will not end up in the company of a few hundred.

And indeed that was what happened. We witnessed another key moment illustrating the power of the interaction between social media, traditional media, and interpersonal communication. Newspapers, broadcasters, and on-line outlets had been discussing the potential 'Facebook demonstration' for a few days prior to January 25. As groups of demonstrators marched through the streets enroute to main squares chanting "*Ya abalina endamo lina*," ("Friends and family, come join us"), people watching from their balconies and windows heeded the calls and enabled the protests to snowball to unprecedented numbers. People were galvanized by the sight. The core activists, who attended every demonstration for years, were suddenly seeing new faces on January 25, mostly mobilized by the Internet. They came by the thousands, and then by the hundreds of thousands, numbers larger than anyone had expected.

Twitter played an important though slightly different role. Crucial messages relayed in short bursts of one hundred and forty characters or less made protesters ‘cut to the chase.’ Most activists tweeted events live rather than posting them on Facebook. Twitter was mainly used to let people know what was happening on the ground, and alert them to any potential danger. It usually was ahead of Facebook in such efforts. Twitter also enabled activists to keep an eye on each other. Some managed to tweet ‘arrested’ or ‘taken by police’ before their mobile phones were confiscated. Those words were incredibly important in determining what happened to them and in trying to help them. Most activists are, to this day, in the habit of tweeting their whereabouts constantly, even before they go to sleep, because they know that fellow activists worry if they disappear from the Twittersphere.

### **Egyptians Prove Gladwell Wrong**

When the Egyptian regime belatedly realized on January 25 how dangerous social networks could be to its survival, the first thing it did was block Twitter. Internet censorship is a ridiculously ineffective strategy, though. Users were tech-savvy enough to find their way onto proxy servers within minutes, and to post on Facebook how to gain access to Twitter and how to remain on Facebook if the regime blocks it, which indeed happened later. The government felt it didn’t have any other option but to block all Internet access in the country for five days starting January 27 (as well as mobile telephone communications for one day). By then it was too late. People had already found their way to Tahrir and nearly every square in Egypt. Ironically, some were partly motivated by the Internet and communication blockage to take to the streets to find out what was happening and be part of it. And they were joined by workers’ movements in many governorates that expanded the protester numbers into the millions. The major squares of Egypt were full of people of every age, gender, religion, creed, and socio-economic status.

Gladwell, it turned out, was wrong. These people didn’t know each other personally, but the “weak” personal ties had not proved a barrier to high-risk activism. Egyptians discovered the strong tie of belonging to the common cause of ousting a dictator. We have all seen pictures and videos that went viral from Tahrir Square of people who have probably never used a computer crediting Facebook and/or Twitter for some aspect of the revolution. Social network users were not the only ones revolting, and social networks were not the only reason or motivation for revolt. However, the role that social media have played over the years in indirectly preparing sectors of Egyptian youths for this moment, and in enabling them to capitalize on an opportunity for change when the time came, cannot be understated. It can also be said that the role of social networks in Egypt has hardly ended. The revolution is not yet complete.