

**Facebook and Communicative Action:
The Power of Social Media during the 2011 Egyptian Revolution**

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Abstract

Social media had an impactful role in the 2011 Egyptian Revolution. Facebook as a public sphere space was used as a powerful tool to enhance communicative action among Egyptians, dissidents, and global observers. Drawing on the philosophical and theoretical notions of individuality and the responsibilities of the state of John Locke (1689; 1690), Jean Jacques Rousseau (1762); the public sphere and communicative action of Jürgen Habermas (1981; 1989); and Manuel Castells network society and new public sphere (2004; 2006; 2008), this thesis empirically investigates the role of social media, specifically Facebook, during the 2011 Egyptian Revolution. Theories and concepts including the strength of weak ties, social movement theory, and Internet and organizational theory, a discussion of recent writings from both sides of the spectrum—those believing social media to hold power and those with the opposite view—inform the theoretical foundation of this thesis. The primary purpose of this thesis is to better understand what power lies in Facebook as used during the Egyptian Revolution. Using a qualitative approach, a methodological frame is employed to examine both the form and content of Facebook posts. This study concludes three major findings regarding the social power of Facebook during the 2011 Egyptian Revolution: the power of attention and momentum, the power of cooperation, and the creation of a repository of information and communication.

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Chapter1

Introduction

Preamble

Khaled Said was a young Egyptian who was slain by police under suspicious circumstances in Alexandria on June 6th, 2010. According to witness accounts, two police detectives confronted him on the second floor of a cyber café and proceeded to beat him and hit him against objects in the café while dragging him into the street where their vehicle was parked (Egypt Independent, 2010). The two officers then proceeded to, according to the owner of the café, beat Said in the doorway of an adjacent building (Khalil, 2010). He lost his life in that doorway.

According to police, Said suffocated to death while trying to swallow a packet of hashish contraband. However, Said's family claims he was targeted for sharing video online showing police dividing the spoils of a drug seizure amongst themselves¹.

Though police abuse was not uncommon in Egypt at the time, thanks in part to Egypt's Emergency Law, Said's case attracted widespread attention among Egyptians and human rights observers, partly because of a picture his brother took of his corpse in the morgue while identifying the body. Khaled Said's face was horribly disfigured. His chin hung to one side due to a severely broken jaw, one eye was swollen shut while the other remained open, and his head rested in a pool of blood, the result of several lacerations to

¹ This theory is contested by some, though ample evidence is insufficient to confirm or deny it, for a discussion, see: Khalil, 2012.

his face and head.

The grim details of this photo accomplished two things. Firstly, they exemplified the imbalance between police powers and individual justice—clearly these disturbing injuries were not the result of attempting to swallow a packet of hashish. The power held in such an image conveyed the feeling of helplessness felt by many Egyptians, as well as the injustice they faced under the rule of Hosni Mubarak and the brutality they faced at the hands of the police, who were granted special powers under the Emergency Law.

Secondly, the image of Said's mutilated face was captured in a fixed medium, a picture taken by a cellphone camera, which had the power to show the reality of the conditions many Egyptians faced daily. This image was shared online, eliciting a visceral response from those who saw it and understood what it meant for them—that at any moment they too could be subject to dehumanizing treatment without any legitimate outlets for recourse. This image acted as a symbol for the frustration felt by the Egyptian people. The inability to respond in kind to the injustices thrust upon them by their rulers and police was imbued into an image representing one tragic example of the hopelessness felt by many Egyptians, especially youth.

After seeing this photo and hearing Said's story, Wael Ghonim, a Google marketing executive, was inspired to create a Facebook page dedicated to Khaled Said. This Facebook page soon became heavily populated by Egyptian Facebook users and visited by tens of thousands of users from within Egypt and around the world, bringing wider attention to Said's tragic tale than one would expect from an abuse that was not uncommon at the time (Preston, 2011). This page attracted a widespread following in Egypt and many Egyptian Facebook users changed their profile picture to that of Said to

show their solidarity.

Said, in many ways, was not special. He was not an activist or a revolutionary, but a relatively ordinary young Egyptian. The injustices that brought his life to an end were not some rare and special case, but rather, indicative of a corrupt system that oppressed many of his fellow Egyptians. What is unique about his story is that had his brother not smuggled the picture of his lifeless face out of the morgue, and had it not been used as a symbol for the oppression under which so many Egyptians lived, Said would likely have faded from history as another casualty to circumstances that were out of his control. What we see instead, is a tragic case that contributed to the momentum that led to the deposition of a dictator and the changing history for the world's oldest nation. Khaled Said is the 2011 Egyptian Revolution². Egypt, as the country with the largest population in the region and with the second longest ruling president in the Arab World³, as well as being one of the most advanced Arab nations, was seen as critical and an example for surrounding nations. Egypt also led other Arab countries in Internet access and mobile phone penetration rates, two factors that may have played an important role in how events unfolded in early 2011.

Asmaa Mahfouz, who was an Internet activist and blogger since 2008, and is credited as being a key initiator of the April 6th Youth Movement, posted a video to Facebook on January 18th, 2011 in which she called on Egyptians to demand human rights reforms and voice their disapproval of President Hosni Mubarak. The video went

² This thesis is only concerned with the 2011 Egyptian Revolution. At any point in this text when the term "Egyptian Revolution" is employed, it is in reference to the 2011 Egyptian Revolution, not the Egyptian Revolution of 1952.

³ Muammar Gaddafi ruled Libya for over four decades

viral⁴ and after herself and four other young Egyptians were forced out of Tahrir Square, by police forces, Mahfouz posted a second video urging mass protest in Tahrir Square on January 25th, a national Egyptian holiday. The ensuing response by Egyptians in Tahrir Square marked the beginning of an uprising that resulted in the deposition of President Hosni Mubarak after thirty years in power. Though labelling such a dynamic and contested event is problematized for a variety of reasons; here, the events between January 25th and February 11th, 2011 will be referred to as the Egyptian Revolution.

Facebook and the Egyptian Youth

Mahfouz's call to protest was posted on the social media site Facebook. Facebook's users numbered over six hundred million in January 2011 (Facebook.com), a total of nearly 30% of the total global Internet population⁵. The site, which is free to use by anyone with an Internet connection⁶, is accessed daily by more than half of its registered users. The site is especially popular among young Internet users and can be accessed via computer or cellular phone. This free site allows users to communicate with other users, join groups, and post media to the site, including images, videos, and URL links. Facebook was the medium initially used by Mahfouz to share her video online⁷. It is retrospectively recognized that what is now being called the Egyptian Revolution began on January 25th,

⁴ It was shared rapidly online, attracting a massive audience through Facebook and YouTube.

⁵ The Internet World Stats database reports a total of 2,095 million Internet users worldwide in 2011 (Internet World Stats, 2011a).

⁶ Facebook does impose some limited restrictions on use, such as denying account to registered sex offenders, but the service remains free to virtually any individual with Internet access (Facebook.com).

⁷ It was later added to YouTube, a video sharing social media service, and further disseminated over the Internet.

2011, in Tahrir Square when thousands of Egyptians met to demand reform. For many in the Square, the only thing they held in common with their co-dissidents was their nationality and the fact that they watched or heard about the same video online encouraging them to take to the streets.

Mafouz's call to protest in Tahrir Square is not the only place Facebook appears during the Egyptian Revolution. As we can also see from the example of Wael Ghonim's We Are All Khaled Said Facebook group page, this new medium was present and in some ways significant to the genesis of the Egyptian Revolution.

Facebook is used most heavily by youth (Social Bakers, 2012), the same demographic that faced the most challenges in Egypt at the time. The youth were especially hard hit by poor economic conditions, as rising rates of education⁸ and an increasingly young population⁹ created a large pool of young Egyptians with an education, but no job prospects, who perceived the government as doing little to improve their condition. Though the Egyptian unemployment rate in 2011 was 9.8%, nearly a quarter (24.8%) of Egyptians age 15-24 were unemployed (CIA World Factbook).

The mixture of a young populace, poor economic conditions, a corrupt government, and a violent and abusive police force led to a populace that had had enough of their leadership; particularly in light of accusations of election fraud levied against President Mubarak during his time in power. These conditions were not new in 2011; rather, they had been ongoing for decades. Major protest movements, notably the Kefaya

⁸ In 1981, laws were extended to require compulsory education from ages 6 through 15.

⁹ Estimated median age of Egyptian citizens was 24.3 in 2011 (CIA World Factbook: Egypt).

and April 6th Movements,¹⁰ had attempted to pressure the government for reform in the past; however, these protest accomplished little. The Kefaya Movement attracted some attention in 2005 when it protested the national referendum on allowing open presidential elections and the elections themselves, which were widely criticized for being a foregone conclusion that Mubarak would “win” in a landslide.

Facebook and social media in general have been widely associated with the Egyptian Revolution since its genesis. Popular media took to calling the Egyptian Revolution “The Facebook Revolution”, and attributing many of the successes of the Revolution to social media. This idea became hotly contested, as many were quick to claim that social media either had no role to play or played a critical role in the unrest in Egypt. One fact is clear: Facebook and other social media sites were present during the Egyptian Revolution and used by Egyptians and Netizens¹¹ around the globe to report events, share information, and communicate with each other on a variety of levels. In light of the debate surrounding the role social media may or may not have played during the Arab Spring, it is important to examine what was being communicated during this time and attempt to assess what impact this communication may have had.

Research Problem and Objectives

There is an ongoing debate surrounding the effect of technology on society. Though technological determinism on a societal level has fallen from popularity, experts in

¹⁰ Beginning in 2000, 2004, and 2008, respectively.

¹¹ A netizen is an individual or group actively involved in online communities (Hauben & Hauben, 1997).

academia and the media continue to debate the effects of technology on social issues. The Arab Spring thrust this debate into a new light, as widespread media coverage of the events in the Arab World led to widespread speculation regarding the role the Internet and social media have come to play in popular protest movements. This trend has been ongoing for decades and over the years many global protest and resistance movements have been associated with the Internet and social media, such as: the 1999 Battle of Seattle, the Zapatistas movement, Egypt's Kefaya movement, the 2009 Iranian protest, the Moldova revolution, the Thai 'red-shirt' protests, and others (Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2010).

Jürgen Habermas' (1981) public sphere theory describes an environment in which individuals are able to critically discuss relevant issues and reach consensus regarding public matters. Much has been written regarding the evolution of the public sphere and its modern profile and function. When formulating his thesis, Habermas recognized that the public sphere was being expressed and manifested in coffee houses, table societies, salons, and other public places. This thesis explores how the public sphere has been manifested in the online community, utilizing sites such as Facebook group pages, in which many individuals exchange information and opinions and discuss relevant matters.

Through examining Facebook and the Egyptian Revolution and exploring the relationship between the two, this thesis focuses on one portion of the larger debate on social media and the Arab Spring, as well as the more broad debate surrounding the impact of the Internet on society. By examining the communication that took place between the beginning of the protests in Egypt on January 25th, 2011 and the stepping down of Hosni Mubarak on February 11th, 2011, this thesis draws conclusions regarding

the role that Facebook has played in the Revolution itself. This thesis looks into how virtual spaces like Facebook act as an extension of the public sphere in the context of a networked society and how various kinds of communication have been used.

Facebook provides users with tools to communicate with each other, share media, and store information including news stories, pictures, and videos. It is also accessible from virtually any place in the world via computer or mobile phone. Facebook is also a free service that allows individuals and groups to coordinate essentially free of charge¹².

Thesis Overview

The analysis undergone in this thesis is based within a critical review of literature, beginning with a foundation of Locke and Rousseau's Liberalism and the role of the individual in society. This review continues by examining Habermas' public sphere (1962) and communicative action (1981) theories, and Castell's network society (2004; 2006) and new public sphere (2008; 2011) theories. This thesis also explores and considers the work of a variety of scholars and prominent writers on issues including social networking (Grandouvetter, 1978; Shirkey, 2010), social movements (Tilly, 1985; Tourain; Eyerman & Jamison, 1991), and the future of the Internet (Shirky, 2008; 2009; 2011; Morozov, 2009; Gladwell, 2010). Additionally, several recent studies that examined similar subject matters from an empirical perspective are considered and factored into the analysis. Key ideas from these scholars inform and guide the analysis of the data and

¹² Clearly there are entrance costs, such as access to a mobile phone or computer with Internet access. Internet access is also widely available in schools, restaurants, cafes, hotels, and airports in Egypt.

situate this thesis in the tradition of the schools of critical communication. This study examines the publicly available content posted to Facebook Group pages between January 25th 2011, when the protesters first took to Tahrir Square to demand reform, and February 11th, 2011, when Hosni Mubarak formally stepped down as President of Egypt.

Chapter 2, Literature Review, outlines a theoretical base that situates the discussion that takes place thereafter. This literature review considers broad theoretical discussions surrounding individuals in society, the public sphere, the impact of ICT (Internet communication technologies) on society, social movement theory, weak tie theory, examines discussions surrounding the use of social media to affect social change, and reviews empirical research conducted on social media vis-à-vis social movements and activism.

Chapter 3, Methodology, outlines the main research question and sub research questions, and outlines major concepts, data collection methods, and the research design of this study. This study draws its data from three prominent Facebook pages that were active during the 18 day period under study: Groups One (We are all Khaled Said, English version), Group Two (Egypt's protest Jan-25), and Group Three (Support Protests in Egypt). An analysis of post frequencies and trend identified in the dataset are followed by an in-depth analysis of the content of the pages. User and administrator posts are examined for form, themes and theme frequency, content, and nature.

Chapter 4, Findings, details the analysis of the data and discusses the results and findings that emanate from the data in an attempt to address the research questions. This section identifies patterns and themes present in the data and utilizes the theoretical framework laid out in Chapter 2 to construct a critical assessment of the communication

and its possible outcomes regarding Facebook and the Egyptian Revolution.

Chapter 5, Conclusion, identifies the most significant findings of this study. Though this thesis sheds light on important areas regarding the use of social media in society, it fits in a larger research context that will shape how we approach these topics going forward. The concluding chapter of this thesis outlines the three significant findings identified from the research and discussion, and outlines the implications and limitations of this study. This chapter is followed only by the reference list.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

This literature review outlines and discusses relevant theories that frame the context around which the empirical results are later discussed. Beginning with broad philosophical theories and sharpening the focus to recent ideas relevant to the discussion at hand, this literature review draws on the traditions of critical theory and recent developments in the field of communication and other disciplines, sociology, for example. This thesis is relevant as it examines a recent social phenomenon and explores the communication practices during the events that unfolded in Egypt between January 25th, 2011 and February 11th, 2011. The ideas presented below are selectively drawn from larger bodies of work and interwoven to facilitate the discussion that follows the analysis of the collected data.

This thesis benefits from the ideas of a variety of influential thinkers. This thesis draws, firstly, upon John Locke's (1689; 1690) treatises of liberalism and the relationship between governments and individuals. Secondly, this thesis draws from Jean Jacques Rousseau's (1762) examination of freedom, individuality, and the individual in society. Examining both of these thinkers' ideas on individuality, freedom, and the relationship between states and individuals informs this thesis regarding the nature of a conflict between a state and its citizens. Thirdly, Jürgen Habermas' (1981; 1989) public sphere theory and theory of communicative action are examined to help better understand how individuals interact and reach consensus, culminating in action. Finally, Manuel Castells' (2004; 2006; 2008) network society theory and conception of the new public sphere is

considered to help anchor the analysis in the networked world within which the Egyptian Revolution took place.

Contributions from more recent theoretical developments are drawn upon to frame the exploration undertaken throughout this thesis. This thesis benefits from the contributions of: Clay Shirkey (2008; 2009; 2011), Eyerman and Jamieson (1991), Sidney Tarrow (2011), Charles Tilly (2008), Mark Ganouvetter (1973, 1982), and Evgeny Morozov (2011). This discussion acts as a launching point for the exploration of the complex relationship of the social networking tool Facebook vis-à-vis the Egyptian Revolution, creating a frame through which to examine the communication that took place and the power it exerted.

Liberalism and the Individual

Liberalism, as outlined by philosophers John Locke (1689; 1690) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1762), is the idea that the freedom and liberty of individuals in civil society are the responsibilities of both citizens and governments. In the liberal tradition, it is the role of the state to provide its citizenry with the conditions to pursue their own choices, as well as both liberating individuals to do as they will while also restricting their actions as to ensure the freedom for others within society. It is this duality—freedom through restriction—that summarizes the role of the individual and the state in civil society. The responsibility of governments and citizens, the supremacy of the individual and the powers of the state, alongside the legitimacy of a government—which, when called into question may lead to revolt or even revolution—are used as the base of this literature

review. In examining the relationship between governments and citizens as individuals, a better understanding of their relationship will be established.

John Locke's Second Treatise

To understand the origins of individuality one must understand its origins within the liberal tradition, which can be traced to the second book of John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* (1689). Locke identified two possible, and mutually exclusive, states in which individuals could exist: the state of nature and civil society (Locke, 1689). The former state being one of "equality of men by nature" (Ibid: sect. 5) where men are likened to wild animals in their lack of rank and total freedom to do as they will; all individuals are completely independent in the state of nature and strictly reliant on their own means to survive (Ibid). Conversely, individuals in civil society come together for their mutual protection and for the "protection of private property" (Ibid: sect. 85, 222). These two conditions require that individuals relinquish perfect equality as certain individuals will necessarily have to hold political power over others. The formation of civil society necessitates a governing body that is able to enforce laws that protect the individuals' freedoms. This duality of freedom through restrictions is a central tenet of liberalism. In restricting what citizens can do (e.g., kill each other, steal property), governments are able to afford citizens more freedom by protecting individuals and their property.

As outlined above, Locke identifies how citizens are restricted by the governing body to enable them the freedom to pursue their own life journey; this also implies that

government have a responsibility to their citizenry. In examining the Second Treaties (1689), Thomas (1995) identifies the following five principles of Locke's liberalism:

1. Citizens within a state are all of equal standing, despite varying levels of status, authority, and wealth.
2. Each citizen is also equal in their rights which limit what they may do to other citizens. This also applies to what the state can do to its citizens
3. Those who hold political authority hold it so that they may "further the good of their fellow citizen" and not for personal gain.
4. Governments exist to ensure the rights of all citizens are promoted and upheld.
5. As governments are institutions that exist for the benefit of the citizens, it is justified (though morally a last resort) for citizens to overthrow governments if they no longer consent to how they are being governed.

(Thomas, 1995)

Though the above principles are perhaps reflective of the revolutionary time when they were written, they underscore Locke's notion of legitimate political authority under which citizens and governments are afforded certain rights—just as citizens may be punished for disregarding their commitment to other citizens and their government (principle 2), governments may be punished if they disregard their responsibilities to citizens (principle 5). As such, part of Locke's liberal doctrine states that it is justifiable for citizens to overthrow and replace their government if their governors fail to uphold their responsibility to the citizenry (Locke, 1689).

Locke believed that when a government violated their contract with the citizenry, rebellion and revolution were justified. Governments lose their legitimacy without the consent of the people, which is often lost through "great mistakes" on the part of the ruling powers (Locke, 1689: sect. 225). Thus we come to two conclusions: the duality of freedom through restriction and the conditions imposed on governments in order to make their power legitimate. In the absence of consent, governments lose their legitimacy and, according to Locke, revolution is justified and inevitable. Individuals in society

relinquish certain natural rights but gain protection for themselves and their property. In this compact between citizens and governments, both parties have responsibilities to the other. These concepts are further developed in the 18th century by philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau.

Rousseau and the Social Contract

Many of Locke's philosophical sentiments are reflected through the work of Jean Jacques Rousseau. Like Locke, Rousseau (1762) begins by examining man's state of nature. Rousseau opens his Magnum opus, *On the Social Contract*, with the oft quoted words "Man is born free, and everywhere else he is in chains" (Rousseau, 1762: Ch. 1). This statement builds upon Locke's position of freedom in the state of nature with the metaphorical chains, which represent the restrictions civil society places on individuals. This sentiment also reflects the fact that Rousseau believed that most—if not all—societies were exploitative and unjust in nature (Rousseau, 1762; Simpson, 2006). Rousseau continues, however, with the following line: "One who believes himself the master of other is nonetheless a greater slave than they" (Rousseau, 1762: Ch. 1). This statement implies that it is not only the governed, but also the governors that are restricted in their actions—both citizens and governments are privy to the responsibilities of the social contract. Rousseau extends his examination of the state of nature by writing: "In the state of nature, where everything is common, I owe nothing to him whom I have promised nothing; I recognise as belonging to others only what is of no use to me" and continues "In the state of society all rights are fixed by law, and the case becomes different" (Ibid: 27). As is the case with Locke's liberalism, Rousseau views individuals

in society as a fundamentally different and oppositional state with those in the state of nature. This bifurcation is the result of the social contract.

It is the social contract that allows for the existence of political life and the advent of law (Rousseau, 1762). The social contract in general regards legitimacy (*légitime*) of power. In the opening of *The Social Contract*, Rousseau uses the analogy of one person instructing another, weaker person what to do. Rousseau believes that the weaker person has no moral obligation to obey the stronger person, and that any obligation could only come from consent which would legitimize the authority (Simpson, 2008; Rousseau, 1762). Thus, as with individuals and governments, force alone does not create legitimacy; without consent, authority is not legitimated. This falls in line with Lockean reasoning that without legitimacy—on the part of the governors—is it morally justified for citizens to revolt and overthrow their government. We can conclude that without legitimacy—or more specifically when legitimacy is lost—revolution is justified (Locke, 1689).

Government authority is established based on consent, not through force alone; however, Rousseau also views one of the main roles of society as the protection of individuals, their property, and that general well-being through the adoption of laws that promote self-preservation and well-being. Rousseau termed this the “general will” of the people (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2012). Rousseau’s general will is primarily concerned with freedom and individuality and restrictions based on laws and the protection of property. This contract based on mutual responsibilities on the part of the governors and the governed is the basis of a liberal society and serves as a justification when citizens revolt.

The Public Sphere and Communicative Action

Much of this thesis is shaped by the theoretical work of Jürgen Habermas. Habermas' historic documentation of the rise and fall of the public sphere in bourgeois society and his definition of an ideal public sphere are considered when examining the role discursive spaces like Facebook played in the Egyptian Revolution. Habermas' ideal public sphere emphasizes the individual. Free individuals undertake the discussion, argumentation, and the achievement of consensus that makes up the public sphere, the realm where "practical reason [is] institutionalized through norms of reasoned discourse in which argument, not statuses or traditions, [are] to be decisive" (Calhoun 1992: 2). Discussion, argumentation, and consensus are steps toward achieving action. Habermas' theory of communicative action focuses on reason and rational critical discourse based around linguistic communication.

The Public Sphere

Habermas' public sphere must first be understood as an ideal type in the Weberian sense. Though Habermas historically chronicles the rise and fall of the bourgeois public sphere, his public sphere theory is based around an ideal that may have never and may never actually exist. The ideal public sphere, Habermas writes, is:

The sphere of private people [coming] together as a public ... the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labour.

(Habermas, 1989: 27)

The public sphere is a space where individuals exchange ideas, debate, and ideally reach some consensus on issues of political relevance. Habermas chronicled the rise of the bourgeois public sphere in the 17th and 18th centuries, and its decline in the 20th century (Ibid). He uses the examples of France's salons, England's coffee houses, and Germany's Tischgesellschaften (table societies) as spaces where this discussion occurred (Habermas, 1989)). These spaces existed between the private realm and the "sphere of public authority" and were independent of government and market forces (Ibid: 30). Habermas was attempting to identify a specific historic phenomenon and what he ultimately ended up describing was a public sphere in which discussion, agreement, and decision making could occur (Habermas, 1989; Papacharissi, 2002) through a network of citizens exchanging opinions and information (Castells, 2008).

Habermas identified three core elements of the public sphere: universality, accessibility, and rational/critical discourse. Firstly, universality is described in the sense of "presupposing the equality of status" so that all could potentially participate in an equal manner, regardless of titles, social standings, or other defining characteristics (Habermas, 1989: 36). Habermas is describing a space with a culture of equality, one in which individuals' contributions are not based on the status or social standing of the individual, but rather on the weight of their argumentation. Habermas goes further than simply viewing all as equal and forwards the position that status must be disregarded altogether. This could perhaps be seen as a break from the liberal tradition of individuality, but the distinction of disregarding the *individual* stems from the inherent inequality between individuals in society. When arguments are weighed more or less based on the individual presenting them, the best argument may not be those agreed

upon. In this regard it is of paramount importance that individuals' social standing not affect the validity of their claims, otherwise the dialogue is perverted; thus, individuals are not simply regarded as equal, but status is completely disregarded and all citizens are viewed as part of a common group.

Secondly, access must be inclusive and discussion could “never close itself off entirely” to any member of society (Habermas, 1989: 37). Though it is impossible to include every member of a society in a discussion, the potential must be there for any individual to choose to participate in the public sphere. Habermas is describing a space where the general concerns of all are discussed and all are allowed to—and ideally all that desire to do so are able to—participate. Though the public sphere is not a tangible thing, it is often exercised in physical location, and though there is no doubt that rational critical discussion still occurs in physical locations, significant discourse now occurs in online spaces (Cammaerts & Van Audengove, 2005; Dahlberg, 2001; Papacharissi, 2002), which increase accessibility as participants are less restricted by physical space.

The final core element of the public sphere is rational critical discourse, which is characterized by discussions that are verbalized and in the “domain of ‘common concern’”—Habermas (1989) places a high value on language in his model. These discussions must be substantive and critical, concerning topics that are common to other individuals in society (Ibid). Habermas views rational critical debate as having been pushed out by sensation and trivialization, mainly through the commercialization of the media. Habermas attributes a shift towards profit motives as the source of the decline in quality of newspapers: “the history of the big daily newspaper in the second half of the 19th century proves that the press itself became manipulable to the extent that it became

commercialized” (Ibid: 185) and goes on to claim that “it became a gate through which privileged private interests invaded the public sphere” (Ibid: 185). The commercialization of the press resulted in a trivialization of the news which reduced its rationality, resulting in a less informed public who were less capable of rational critical debate. For rational critical discussion to occur, the participants must be well informed and debate issues of some public importance. For debate to be critical it must be a dialogue between participants whereby views and ideas are exchanged through the medium of conversation. If matters are trivial and sensational, they are not rational; if discussions are representational—where one party is active and one is passive—they are not critical. (Ibid)

The public sphere is essentially a communication network where citizens can interact and share information and opinions that can have an influence over the state and its rulers (Habermas, 1996). The sharing of information and exchange of opinions in the bourgeois society that Habermas examined took place in the salons, coffee houses, and table societies, though in modern society this exchange occurs in a variety of locales. A variety of spheres, including mass media, the Internet, and a multitude of social networks intersect and overlap to form a global, multimodal communication space, what Castells terms “the new global public sphere” (2012: 89-90). The public sphere in contemporary society has been shaped by the conditions in which modern society is situated. Much in the same way that citizens have changed how they communicate and obtain information, so has the environment in which they discuss and critique change.

Habermas’ notion of the public sphere is grounded in discussion, rationality, and debate. Conversation and linguistic communication occupy a central position in his

theory. The core elements of the public sphere—universality, accessibility, and rational critical discourse—focus on the dialogue which takes place between individuals in an open and accessible manner. Almost since its inception, Facebook has been discussed in terms of the formulation of a new public sphere. As the bourgeois public sphere of the 17th and 18th centuries are viewed as spaces where the exchange of ideas was separate from government and market forces, the Internet gave rise to the potential of returning to this “pure state” (Van Dijck, 2012: 163), where commercial forces are less able to penetrate the debate. The commercialization of the media which altered the public sphere for the worse (Habermas, 1981), makes it apparent that it is not something to be taken for granted, or something that will always be there. According to Peter Dahlgren, “the public sphere is not a given fact, but rather an accomplishment, to be defended and in need of expansion” (2001: 42). It is, however, unclear at this time whether technologies like Facebook should be considered rational “tools” that will be useful in this defence and expansion of the public sphere or trivial pieces of technology that contribute little to the debate.

Communicative Action

Habermas’ (1981; 1989) two volume *The Theory of Communicative Action* represents his attempt to develop a critical theory of contemporary society (Postone, 1990) whereby communication is key to emancipation and social functioning. This extensive study engages with a vast number of philosophical thinkers and social critics, including Hobbes, Marx, Weber, Kant, and Durkheim. Habermas’ study attempts to create a theory of modern society in which rationality is based in communication (Honneth & Joas,

1991). From Habermas' extensive work, his theory of communicative action is drawn out and incorporated in the exploration of social communicative phenomenon in this thesis.

Habermas' notion of rationality is situated within the medium of linguistic communication (Habermas, 1981; Postone, 1990). Teleologically, the purpose of human speech is for the "participants in communication [to come to] an understanding about something in the world" (1981: 387) and the understanding reached through communication, which allows coordination of social activity, is a key element for the survival of the human species (Ibid). Habermas places paramount importance on speech to achieve anything in a social setting. Communication, however, must not be confused with communicative action, as Habermas points out: "the communicative model of action does not equate action with communication. Language is a medium of communication that serves understanding" (Ibid: 1100); communication is the means through which communicative action is achieved. Furthermore, through communication, social actors "come to an understanding ... to coordinate their action [and] pursue their particular aims" (Ibid: 101). In this model it is through communication that action is achieved; without reaching some common understanding, there can be no coordination of action. Action is dependent on communication and cooperation: "success in action is also dependent on other actions" (Ibid: 87-8). Within this model, communication is required for action and meaningful action cannot be effected on a social scale without cooperation. Communicative action begins with actors forwarding reasoned arguments, reaching some consensus, and finally, coordinating action through cooperation.

In contrast to communicative action, Habermas identifies strategic action, in which actors simply pursue their own goals without agreement and joint effort (1981).

Strategic action occurs when goals are achieved through influence and manipulation of others. Though both modes may achieve an end, communicative action is derived from consensus, which in the liberal tradition, gives legitimacy to the action. Communicative action can also be achieved without central leadership or guidance, something that strategic action requires (Ibid). Communicative action reduces institutional costs of organizing large groups, which as illustrated later in this section, can be highly beneficial for social movements.

The public sphere by definition connotes the idea of citizenship in the open, accessible to all (Habermas, 1981; Papacharissi, 2002); however, various limits are often imposed on the communication process. Habermas' coffee houses, salons, and table societies were physical spaces, and though his notion of the public sphere is abstracted from the physical locations themselves, individuals were restricted by those with which they had access to communicate. Various barriers, including location, language, and social status—for example, women were largely excluded from the 18th century bourgeois public sphere—hampered universal participations. The Internet provides a medium that resolved many of these problems. Instant access to individuals across the globe breaks down many physical restrictions. Though language is still a barrier, English has come to dominate the content of the Internet¹³. Furthermore, the Internet and its pervasiveness across the globe—though not equally in all places—has changed the nature of the public sphere, imbruing it with a global quality.

¹³Though there are only slightly more English speaking users of the Internet than Chinese (27% and 25% of the total users, respectively) the content is dominated by English, at 57% with no other single language accounting for more than 7% of the total content (W3Tech, 2012; Internet world Stats, 2012a).

Network Society and the New Public Sphere

Manuel Castells examines society in the modern age as one characterized by the networks that connect individuals and organizations within and across national borders. These networks have become so important and so pervasive that they have come to alter the material conditions of society and affect nearly every aspect of human life: modern society is a *network society*. The public sphere is no exception and has taken on new characteristics as a result of the networking of virtually everything. Castells calls this the new public sphere or the new global public sphere (2008). For the purposes of this thesis the former term will be used.

Network Society

Manuel Castells identifies that modern society is a highly connected one whose social structure is “made up of networks powered by microelectronic-based information and communication technologies” (2004: 3); Castells calls this the “network society”. A network society is an open, evolving structure comprised of a series of interconnected nodes, bearing no centre (2004; 2006). Society is by its very nature composed of overlapping social networks; however, the distinction here is that a network society is mediated by Information Communication Technologies (ICT) and Internet access, which facilitates a social structure based on these modern technologies. Egypt leading up to the

Egyptian Revolution is here viewed as a network society¹⁴, as its vast networks were comprised of smart phones, Internet cafes, and Internet access in major urban centres, as well as the usual networks of individuals—families, friends, etc. Castells defines a network society as one containing:

A social structure based on networks operated by information and communication technologies based in microelectronics and digital computer networks that generate, process, and distribute information on the basis of the knowledge accumulated in the nodes of the networks.

(Castells, 2006: 7)

Castells stresses the importance of the interaction between networks within a society. The networked society is not one connected by a single all-encompassing network, but rather one connected by a series of networks communicating in common codes through multiple nodes. A network society is an open evolving structure that is not tied to a center or any central institution (Castells, 2004; 2006) with global reaches (Castells, 2008). The networks that make up the structure of network society are not bound by national borders (Castells, 2004; 2006; 2008); this cross border dimension of the network society implies that globalization has major implications on the public sphere. In a network society, the public sphere, the space for debate on public affairs, has shifted from the national to the global level and is increasingly constructed around global communication networks (Castells, 2008), thus elevating relevant discussion from the national to the international level.

¹⁴ In February 2011 Egypt had an estimated 24 million internet users, representing over 30 percent of the population and boasted a mobile phone penetration rate of 93 percent (ICT Indicators Brief, Egyptian Ministry of Communication and Information Technology, 2012). This rate is up from less than 1% a decade prior and only 20% two years prior.

Though explored in further depth later in this chapter, it is important to note that Castells' interpretation of the network society is not one that is determined by technology that facilitates these series of networks. Though modern society is characterized by a multitude of networks based on ICTs, it is not the product of the technology itself; rather it:

was on the foundations of informationalism that the network society gradually emerged as a new form of social organization of human activity in the last lap of the twentieth century. Without the capacity provided by this new technological paradigm, the network society would not be able to operate, just as industrial society could not fully expand without the use of electricity. *But the network society was not the consequence of the technological revolution.* Rather, it was the serendipitous coincidence, in a particular time and space, of economic, social, political, and cultural factors that led to the emergence of new forms of social organization.

(Castells, 2004: 13, *emphasis added*)

Castells refers to this shift in the technological paradigm as informationalism. Informationalism began in the last quarter of the 20th century and “replaced and subsumed the industrialism as the dominant technological paradigm” (Castells, 2004: 8) establishing the necessary conditions of the current state—the network society. This is a state of social organization that has advanced communication technologies as its material base. Castells does not mean to say that advanced communications technologies are the teleological origins of the present state of social organization, but simply that they made up the environment in which said state arose.

The network society is, therefore, characterized by ICT mediation, decentralization, and the series of interconnected and overlapping networks that transcend national borders that is at the same time based on the technology, but not simply a result of it. As Habermas chronicled the changes in the public sphere through the

17th, 18th, and 19th century Europe, it become obvious that changes in context, culture, and technology result in changes in the public sphere. Much as the advent of the newspaper, the lowering costs of print, and the removal British Licencing act¹⁵ laid the foundation for the bourgeois public sphere, the communication technology of any society will have an impact on how its citizens achieve a public sphere. Castells identifies the self-evident fact that a modern expression of the public sphere is “certainly different from the ideal type of 18th century bourgeois public sphere around which Habermas formulated his theory” (2008: 79) and outlines what he viewed as the *new public sphere*. The public sphere that Habermas chronicled, and the ideal type he described—and perhaps harked for—was based in a society with a different organization and material base than the present one. In that light, any notion of the public sphere that is to be applied to modern circumstances must be examined in this new context. The bourgeois public sphere was shaped partly—though not determined—by the material conditions in which it had its genesis. As the material conditions and the organization of the social system are distinct in the present, it follows that the public sphere will also take a different shape: the new public sphere.

The New Public Sphere: Three Defining Characteristics

In the context of a network society, the public sphere has undergone transformations that distinguish it from the ideal of the bourgeois public sphere that Habermas initially described; it has become what Castells refers to as the new public sphere. The new public

¹⁵ The British License act required the Queen’s approval for printing a newspaper or pamphlet, the repeal of which largely liberated the possible content of newspapers.

sphere reflects that social system in which it exists and has three distinct characteristics: it expands past national borders, it is characterized by the duality of being simultaneously local and global, and it is decentralized.

Firstly, the new public sphere has grown past national borders, mainly through the advent of global media-systems, which, for Castells, includes:

Mass self-communication networks ... that is, networks of communication that relate many-to-many in the sending and receiving of messages in a multimodal form of communication that bypasses mass media and often escapes government control.

(Castells, 2008: 90)

This ability to communicate individual-to-individual on a mass basis allows participants in large movements to create the type of global communication network that in the past was only available to governments, major international organizations, and the global media complex. Furthermore, this type of communication can now be accomplished by individuals that can completely subvert major global institutions, such as government and the mass media system (Castells, 2008). This represents a significant transformation in how individuals and groups communicate. The introduction of a many-to-many communication platform that eliminates most of the cost barriers traditionally associated with bringing something to the public on a large scale¹⁶ enables individuals and groups that in the past would have never had that ability to reach countless others around the world. In the context of the network society, a global public sphere can emerge without the need for a third, mediating party; individuals across large geographical spaces can

¹⁶ For a discussion on the lowered cost of organizing and publishing facilitated by the Internet, (Shirkey, 2008: Chs. 2-3). The Internet also reduces the costs associated with organizing individuals (Hampton, 2008).

connect with relative ease. Participants in the overlapping, cross border networks are generally free to communicate and coordinate of their own accord.

Secondly, a network society is both local and global at the same time (Castells 2004; 2008); it is an environment in which local and global connections intertwine to link individuals to their society and the global population. This result is an integration of national and international interests and a “sharing of values between global civil society and the global network state” (Castells, 2008: 89) which facilitates communication and the sharing of information within and across national borders. This is a key characteristic of modern society: the ability to communicate internationally in an unrestricted manner. This thesis explores the phenomenon of the international interest and interaction within and beyond the Egyptian border via the Facebook platform. Not only are individuals and groups able to communicate locally and globally, but they are able to share and access information as well as form interest groups. The nature of the Internet also allows this information to be stored for later access, creating a “repository of the ideas and projects that feed public debate” (Castells, 2008: 79). Facebook and other social media tools are chronicling a history on the Internet that can be accessed and used from virtually anywhere in the world by anyone with a smartphone or Internet connection. These stores of information are useful at the local and global level and are representative of the informationalism of the network society¹⁷.

Thirdly, the new public sphere is decentralized. Castells views the decentralization of communication as a component of the rise of the network society

¹⁷ These stores of information will also likely provide invaluable information for the study of society in the future, provided they are still accessible.

(2004). Though it is true that in the context of this thesis the communication was central in the sense that the examined case is communication that occurred on the single platform of Facebook, the communication on the Internet are decentralized by their nature as a many-to-many platform and bypass media organizations and subvert government control (Castells, 2008). There is no switch to shut down these communication platforms. If a government wanted to block access to Facebook, they would need the cooperation of all the Internet service providers (ISP), which in itself would likely not be enough (Cowie, 2011). Furthermore, Habermas identified the commercialization of the media as a main reason for the decline of the public sphere. This commercialization resulted in a trivialization of the content, removing rationality from the dialogue. Though platforms like Facebook are often accused of being used for mostly trivial purposes, users are free to create their own content. There are some who would argue that Facebook is a space where corporate interests are served, particularly through advertising (Van Dijck, 2012) and the collection of personal information (Pariser, 2011); however, users who are creating the content are not restricted by any bottom line. Facebook is a free service that generally does not restrict content¹⁸ and allows individuals to generate content in a decentralized manner without any restrictions based on financial obligations. Though, similar to Habermas' critique of newspapers in the 20th century, Facebook is still seen to be used primarily for trivial purposes, there are no financial obligations that cause users to be less critical.

¹⁸Though Facebook does not censor content some exceptions exist, such as the removal of anything deemed pornographic or abusive. Facebook also prohibit convicted sex offenders from using the service. The restriction of content, however, is done at Facebook's discretion, not that of a government body (Facebook.com, 2012).

The network society connects individuals and allows them to share and store information with a local and global audience in a highly decentralized manner. Habermas identified the public sphere as “a network for communicating information and points of view” (1996: 360); interestingly, the same sentiment can describe the Internet and even Facebook itself. Both of these entities are networks that facilitate the flow of information and points of view between individuals across the globe¹⁹. As the public sphere can be viewed as a communication network, a network society organizes this network on the basis of mass communication and the Internet (Castells, 2008), and Egypt at the time of the revolution was highly networked. It is possible that platforms like Facebook enhanced the communicatory capacity of protestors and observers and should be considered part of the new public sphere. As a modern networked society, Egypt is part of the new global public sphere which connects individuals within and beyond their national borders. Networks are a source of power in society (Castells, 2004). Simply by providing a population with more and more efficient ways to create networks the balance of power is altered.

Strong Weak Ties

Each individual has a social network that contains the people they are tied to in some social way. Social networks are collections of relationships ranging from family to casual acquaintances that cut across large geographic spaces (Kadushin, 2012). Social networks

¹⁹ Though some have called the Internet and Facebook itself public spheres that distinction is avoided here. This is made clearer in Chapter 3.

can be perceived as a vast network of networks²⁰ that expand far beyond the immediate area where one lives (Ibid). Having access to others in a broad context increases social capital—“the resources derived from the relationships among people in varying social contexts” (Stanfield et al., 2009: sect. 2). Social networks are composed of strong and weak ties (Granovetter, 1983). Weak ties are viewed in comparison to strong ties. The strength of an interpersonal tie is defined mathematically by Granovetter as the “combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy, and the reciprocal services” that exist between individuals (1973: 1361). Individuals with strong ties are socially close and more dependent on one another. This leads to the assumption that those included in individuals’ extended social network that are less strongly tied constitute the weak ties. Mark Granovetter outlined his theory of weak ties in his 1973 paper, *The Strength of Weak Ties*.

Upon revisiting the issue in 1983, Granovetter identifies that individuals with few weak ties “will be deprived of information from distant parts of the social system” (1983: 202). Granovetter reasons that individuals with many strong ties but few weak ties will have few connections to other social groups. An individual’s group of strong ties are more likely to have more strong ties between them—if an individual has two close friends, those two friends are more likely to also be close friends. An individual’s weak ties, however, are less likely to be close friends with each other—that is to have strong ties between them. Therefore individuals with many strong ties but few weak ties are more likely to have a smaller social network and individuals with more weak ties are

²⁰ For a discussion on how society is arranged by networks of networks as opposed to some bounded hierarchy, see: Wellman (1979) “The Community Question”.

more likely to have access to more diverse individuals in their social network; therefore weak ties broaden one's potential social network. (Granovetter, 1973; 1983). Weak ties expose individuals to larger and more diverse groups from which they draw their social capital.

Granovetter (1973; 1983) argued that individuals with many weak ties have more potential social capital—though he never uses the actual term—than those without. For this thesis Bourdieu's definition of social capital will be employed: "Social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition - or in other words, to membership in a group" (1986: 51). Weak ties give individuals access to information from distant parts of a social system (Granovetter, 1974; 1983; Kadushin, 2012). By being connected to more individuals that are less likely to be within one's close tie network, greater opportunity exists for sharing information and collaborating en masse.

What Facebook facilitates is an expansion of the number of individuals in a given social network. Public Facebook groups allow any interested individuals to join the group, access information, and participate in discussions with others in the group. A user has instant access to vast numbers of potential weak ties through overlapping "friend" networks²¹ as well as by accessing groups that are often primarily composed of users that are not already a "friend"²². By simply joining a group on Facebook, people from all over

²¹ Here "friend" specifically refers to a Facebook user that has been "friended", that is, both users have agreed to be in each other's personal networks and can more easily access each other's user generated content (UGC) and personal information.

²² Same as above.

the world can join the conversation, share ideas and information, and begin to collaborate. The increase in weak tie networks through Facebook potentially increases an individual's social capital. Expanding weak ties in a social network through the medium of the Internet, which as outlined above contains all other communication mediums, allows for a serendipitous interaction between individuals that may have very little in common.

One of the problems with social networks that they are dominated by strong ties is that they tend to be occupied by similar individuals. When an individual is only exposed to others with similar opinions and ideas they are less likely to encounter new ideas. Without the chance intersection of independent ideas, creativity is stunted. Elisa Pariser, in discussing the filtering effect of Internet customization—what he calls the “Filter Bubble”—examines the “evolutionary view of innovation” (2011: 96). This theory asserts that when random bits of information come together they can form something new and different, the idea being that humans selectively combine ideas that they are familiar with, creating familiar outcomes. When unfamiliar ideas are combined the results tend to be more creative (Ibid). Though the application is argued by Pariser in the negative—that is, constantly being surrounded by the familiar hinders creativity—it can be applied to the sharing of information in social media spaces with large networks of weak ties in which individuals may be very dissimilar. Facebook, as of 2011, connected 629 million individual users, of which the average user was connected to 80 community pages, groups, and events (Burbary, 2011). This vast web of networked connection affords individuals the opportunity to connect with a multitude of different ideas, individuals, values, and masses of information.

When accessing a group—like those examined in this thesis—that is composed of a highly diverse set of individuals, users are exposed to various types of content: ideas, arguments, information, and points of view that they may not have encountered in their strong tie network. This type of diversification of information produces a vast weak tie network of individuals that have little in common but share in a single cause. Granovetter has the following to say of individuals without many weak ties:

Such individuals may be difficult to organize or integrate into political movements of any kind, since membership in movements or goal-oriented organizations typically results from being recruited by friends. While members of one or two cliques may be efficiently recruited, the problem is that, without weak ties, any momentum generated in this way does not spread beyond the clique. As a result, most of the population will be untouched.

(Granovetter, 1983: 202)

Granovetter argued that individuals are more likely to be involved in social movements or causes if they know someone who is already involved, and expanding one's social network through weak ties results in a greater likelihood of being "friends" with someone beyond a close knit clique. Facebook is one tool on the Internet that allows individuals to expand their weak tie network.

Social Movements, the Internet, and Organization

Social Movements

Throughout this thesis the Egyptian Revolution is framed as a social movement. Charles Tilly describes social movements as analogous to political campaigns, as opposed to parties or unions that engage in collective action "in terms of the pursuit of common interests" (1985: 78). Tourain characterized social movements by a "self-conscious

awareness that the very foundations of society are at stake or in contest” (Cited in: Eyerman & Jamison, 1991: 27). When examining the Egyptian Revolution, which took place over the 18 day period between January 25th, 2011 and February 11th, 2011, both of these characteristics can be identified. The common cause was reform and the ousting of President Hosni Mubarak, which was well articulated by the participants in the movement. Though the greater political crisis surrounding the Egyptian Revolution did not end on February 11th, 2011, the main goal of the movement was accomplished. Through the symbol for need of reform was the thirty year dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak, the Egyptian people would only be satisfied once they were allowed to hold free and fair elections that would allow for democratic representation. This goal was achieved through the collective action of mass demonstrations. By these definitions it becomes clear that the events that unfolded in January and February of 2011 in Egypt fall into the category of a social movement. Though commonly referred to as a revolution (by the media, academics, and this very thesis²³) the Revolution was the result of the social movement in the greater context of the Egyptian political crisis beginning at the start of 2011.

Eyerman and Jamison state that a social movement is “what it does and how it does it” (1991: 46), which in this case is what the Egyptian Revolution accomplished via mass protest, leading to the ousting of Mubarak and setting the stage for national elections the following year. A social movement has three basic components: an available political opportunity, a social problem or social problems, and a “context of

²³ For this section we revolution and social movement will be used relatively interchangeably, unless otherwise specified. For consistency sake, the remainder of this thesis will refer simply to the Egyptian Revolution.

communication” (Ibid: 56). In this thesis one context of communication is examined as one component of the larger social movement. The context of communication examined here, Facebook group communication, allowed for the dissemination of knowledge and the accumulation of information about the movement. Indeed, one of the defining characteristics of the Internet and Facebook specifically is its permanence²⁴. This gathering of information allowed individuals to inform themselves of the general opinion and the conditions of the mass protests. This was facilitated by the coordination of action through group formation.

Internet as a Communication Platform

As the Internet is the platform on which social media communication is based and where it exists, it is useful to examine the nature of the Internet and why it came to dominate global communications. There certainly has been a global communication revolution partly as a result of the mass adoption of the Internet; however, the Internet is not the first technology that dramatically revolutionized communication. There have been several developments in recent centuries that have completely changed how individuals and organizations communicated. Gutenberg’s printing press and the advent of moveable type brought about the first true mass communication system. For the first time in history a message could be copied exactly and disseminated en mass. In the following century books and pamphlets began to circulate, spreading ideas and even establishing vernacular languages across large geographical areas. Along with the milieus of salons, coffee

²⁴ Though users are free to delete content *they* post, for the most part information posted online remains online; this is further discussed in the following chapter.

houses, and table societies, the medium of print and mass literacy formed the institutional basis for the emergence of the public sphere of the 18th century Habermas described (Habermas, 1989; Dahlgren, 2001). Following the printing press the telegraph and then the telephone again altered the communication environment of the world. These advances shrank the world and allowed individuals to communicate directly with one another in real time over vast expanses. This was followed—and overlapped—by the ability to record still and moving images and sounds, and finally the true broadcast mediums of radio and television. Each of these technologies represented a significant advance in communication. These technologies were either a one-to-many medium (printing, recorded sounds, images, and videos, and radio and television) or a one-to-one format (telegraph, telephone, and radio), but none enabled individuals to communicate in a many-to-many way that the Internet does (Castells, 2008; Shirky, 2009). These digital electronic technologies allow for both a vast increase in the capacity to create and store information (Castells, 2004), a dramatic lowering of the cost to process and store information (Ibid), and a migration of all previous forms of mass communication onto the Internet (Shirky, 2009).

The Internet allows individuals to not only communicate with one another, but also collaborate and share information. Shirky (2011) identifies that all the above forms of communication have migrated to the Internet. This produced a “denser, more complex, and more participatory media population” (Ibid: 2) creating the conditions for a better informed, more discursive, and more inclusive environment. Within the broader context of the Internet, Facebook exemplifies this interaction of differing mediums. Through Facebook users can share text, images, videos, and URL links with one another and as

groups. These expanded communication abilities, facilitated through tools like Facebook, provide a variety of media through which to communicate on a one-to-one, one-to-many, and—for the first time—a many-to-many fashion. Though these advances in communication technology have certainly provided more variety in how individuals and groups communicate, it is important to understand that they are by no means the cause of any social change, merely the material base present during social changes. The Internet and social media may have provided the *conditions* for a more universal, accessible, and rational critical environment; this thesis explores how these tools are practically used.

Determinism

Indeed, it is tempting to proclaim that technology in itself has the power to cause social, political, and economic change. There are numerous instances in history where rapid advances in technology have seemingly led to real world changes²⁵. This assumption is often made by those who claim that the Arab Spring and the Egyptian Revolution were *caused* by social media. Though technological determinism—the reductionist theory in which technology acts as an agent of social change, extreme views placing it as the “prime mover” of social change throughout history (Chandler, 2000)—may seem to offer an explanation for how such large and diverse groups of individuals mobilized themselves, causality must be employed with great caution. Though the above analysis of the impact of various media technologies may seem to imply causality, it is simply meant

²⁵ For example, many viewed the holocaust as a being impossible without the advanced technology of the Nazis, particularly gas chambers and railroads; however, this theory is now refuted by pointing to the fact that most victims of the holocaust were killed by guns or starvation and that more recent genocides were perpetrated with basic tools, such as the Rwandan case (Goldhagen, 2009).

to illustrate how technology *facilitates* changes in communication patterns and the environment in which individuals and groups communicate, not that it *causes* changes.

Though once popular among some academics, notably media theorist Marshall McLuhan²⁶, technological determinism is explicitly supported by few academics today (Woolgar, 2001). This view has evolved with social sciences over time and is presently used with great caution or avoided altogether. Attributing causality to one factor usually ignores a plurality of variables that are acting in concert. For example, calling on those in one's social network through social media to protest in the streets cannot be said to be the cause of the protest. Rather, the cause of the protest was the individual making the call and those who answered the call by getting to the protest site—though other factors are also at work. The technology—in this example, social media—simply facilitates that call. If social media is removed from the equation, perhaps fewer individuals would have initially heard the call and joined the protest, but by removing the initial actor and the network surrounding them, there can be no protest. It is in this way that social media must be conceived: as a tool, an amplifier, not a cause.

Popular media tends to either decree that social media caused the Revolution—or rather imply that it could not have taken place without it—or the contraposition, that social media had no significant role to play. Any objective analysis of the effects of advanced communication technologies must be conducted free of assumptions. This thesis examines the communication facilitated through the technology but makes no claims that the technology itself caused anything. The communicative action that led to the mass demonstrations is viewed as the result of successful communication, and the

²⁶ Though perhaps he could be best described as a media determinist, see: McLuhan, 1964.

question at hand is how the communication present on Facebook reflected the action taken place during the Revolution, which will be explored by examining the types of communication that occurred in these spaces. This thesis treats social media as a communication tool that simply facilitates communication, sharing, and conversation. It may be the case that the certain events would still have unfolded without the presence of social media, a position forwarded by Evgeni Morozov (2009) and journalist Malcom Gladwell (2010); however, it seems unlikely that they would have unfolded *as they did* without the extra layer of communication, sharing, and collaboration facilitated by tools, such as Facebook. This position cannot be explicitly proven without an examination and analysis of this extra layer of communication, one of the aims of this research. Communication technologies change how the game is played, not the game itself. The effects of social media are not deterministic, but may have played some role; any power they hold lies with how individuals and groups choose to use them. One thing social media has done is increase the number of weak ties in the social networks of those that use them and created an open public space to communicate, share, and store information, potentially connecting more individuals and ideas.

Coordinating Action / Networks

In January 2011 an Egyptian named Asmaa Mahfouz announced via her vlog (video weblog) that she planned on protesting in Tahrir Square on January 25th, 2011 (“MEMRI TV”, 2011). The video soon went viral—quickly spreading across individuals’ social networks primarily through the use of social media—and thousands eventually joined Mahfouz in the square. In this case an individual took an initial action, and thousands of

others proceeded to share her video and discuss the possibility of protesting in Tahrir Square on the 25th. When the 25th came, tens of thousands of protestors gathered in the square, marking the beginning of the Egyptian Revolution. Mahfouz was not leading or managing a major group, she made a call to meet at a place and time and through the actions of thousands of individuals viewing and sharing her video over the Internet, largely through social media, resulting in a massive group that marched on Tahrir Square.

To organize a group of tens of thousands in a traditional manner would require large numbers of volunteers and organizers. Mobilizing large groups takes great planning, focus, and central leadership; however, in this case it evolved out of the actions of one individual creating a video and thousands collaborating through sharing the video and taking to the streets. This represents what social scientist Seb Paquet calls “ridiculously easy group-forming” (Shirky, 2009: 54). This type of group formation allows groups that could otherwise never have formed due to the cost of organizing weighted against the willingness to form. The fact that through little effort on the part of many participants, tens of thousands of Egyptians organized a major demonstration is indicative of the power of this type of group forming possesses. Social media and weak tie networks achieved something on the scale that would, through traditional organizational means, have required enormous effort and management. This also exemplifies the strength of communicative action over strategic action.

One of the most prominent and vocal proponents of the organizing power of social media tools is Clay Shirky (2008; 2009; 2011). Shirky believes that these tools empower groups by allowing them to coordinate action in a more efficient manner and that “as with everything that involves coordinating action, social tools have changed the

balance of power” (2008: 164). Indeed one of the most significant barriers to organizing in groups large enough to pressure a government as large and organized as the Egyptian government is the cost of organization. Organizing and managing tens of thousands of people is a difficult task with high institutional costs.

Shirky (2008) discusses the institutional dilemma of transaction costs. When organized and managed centrally, transaction costs grow (Ibid). When for example, a large group of organizers attempt to come to a common decision, agreement is more difficult due to multiple interest. However, when many coordinate in an decentralized manner, each individual is capable of contribution, thus a synergetic collaboration can occur, allowing individuals to derive consensus through common contribution instead of collective agreement. In this way, events such as rallies and demonstrations can occur without the need for a clear leader or management group. The contrast between collective agreement and contributive consensus has much in common with Habermas’ conceptualized strategic action and communicative action and their differences. Strategic action is associated with higher institutional transaction costs, whereas communicative action can occur without central leadership and the associated costs of organization (Habermas, 1981; Shirky, 2008).

Like strategic action, collective agreement involves individuals attempting to achieve their own end (Habermas, 1989). In an organization, for example, when a group or committee is attempting to make some decision each member has their own aims, which can conflict with those of others in the decision making process. By requiring each member to coerce the others to their own point of view they are not truly cooperating and decision making becomes more difficult. When each member collaborates and

contributes through rational critical discourse, action is more reflective of the group, as opposed to individual members, and thus easier to achieve. Communicative action is achieved when individuals successfully communicate and coordinate action (Ibid).

Power of Social Media?

There is certainly a vibrant debate surrounding the role social media played during popular uprisings in Egypt. Some scholars and public commentators, including Clay Shirky (2011), argue that these tools enhanced communicative capacity and changed the dynamic of these movements, whereas others, including Evgeni Morozov (2011) and Malcom Gladwell (2011), view these social media technologies as simply having been present during these crises and not having actually been impactful in a meaningful (positive) way²⁷.

In an article that both attempts to debunk the idea of social media being a tool of activism as well as a response to Clay Shirky's presented position in *Here Comes Everybody* (2008), author Malcom Gladwell compares the American civil rights movement to other social movements. Gladwell concludes his article by stating that "These events in the early sixties became a civil-rights war that engulfed the South for the rest of the decade—and it happened without e-mail, texting, Facebook, or Twitter" (Gladwell, 2010). Gladwell's argument is that there was no problem for social media to solve, and thus they were simply present and not an active part of the movement.

²⁷Morozov (2011) has been a vocal proponent for how social media is used by authoritarian states to counter popular uprisings and argues that they can result in negative responses to popular social movements.

Gladwell's criticism of social media can be simplified to the fact that social media does not resolve a specific problem, and therefore they have no major role to play. Writer and academic Evgeny Morozov is critical of social media for an entirely different reason. Morozov (2011) argues that oppressive totalitarian regimes use the Internet and social media against their own citizens, for example, as a tool of mass-surveillance. Though Morozov's observation that authoritarian regimes use social media against dissidents may be valid—for one example how the Egyptian government detained Wael Ghonim for his role in the uprising, particularly for helping create the popular Facebook Group “We Are All Khaled Said”—however, it overlooks the potential uses of social media by dissidents. In adding an extra layer to the ability of people to communicate, social media may have enhanced what Castells calls network power (2006). If power lies in the networks that connect individuals, increasing the capacity to network while also decreasing the costs of organization the individuals are afforded—potentially—more power.

In response to Gladwell's criticism of the power some have attributed to social media in popular movements, Clay Shirky (2011) assessed the issue of the role of social media by posing two questions: Do social media allow for the adoption of new strategies by the protagonists of social movements? And have those strategies become critical to the outcome of any such movements? (Gladwell & Shirky, 2011: 2). These two questions are critical when examining the role Facebook may have played during the Egyptian Revolution. Shirky (2011) argues that the answer to both is a resounding yes, by providing several historic examples from the preceding decade. This thesis explores the first question by attempting to assess the strategies and communication patterns present in Facebook communication. As a communication tool, Facebook enhances the ability of

participants and observers to network, share and store information, communicate, and cooperate. Though there is no question that social media adds an extra layer of communication, as any new and available communication tool would; however, the question being explored here is to what end were these communication tools used. This thesis explores the communication that took place to attempt to identify patterns and relationships in the discussion and draw conclusions regarding the power that Facebook may hold in achieving communicative action through rational critical debate, if such debate exists.

Social Media and the Arab Spring

Though in its infancy, the extant research on the role social media came to play during the Arab Spring, as well as research pertaining to social media and dissent in a more general sense²⁸, have led to some preliminary observations. Firstly, it has been noted that causality cannot be determined when examining social media and social movements. Though it is tempting to do so, and many media outlets and even some states have done so (e.g., Christensen, 2011), attributing causality between the Arab Spring and social media, or more specifically the Egyptian Revolution and Facebook, ignores a myriad of significant factors and makes multiple assumptions that cannot be substantiated. Secondly, the ability of social media, notably Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, to disseminate information over vast networks aided the cause of the Egyptian people in several ways, both nationally and internationally. This international sharing of

²⁸ Though some does exist, such are the Battle of Seattle, there are no clear examples outside of the Arab Spring that saw successful Revolutions.

information leads to the third observation, that the role of social media in the Arab Spring in many ways validates Castells' theory of a Network Society. Finally, the presence and popular use of social media under an authoritarian rule leads to the Dictator's Dilemma: the attempted suppression of traditional and social media contribute to the breakdown of a ruler's legitimacy and the alienation of the local and international community (Francisco, 2001).

Though perhaps somewhat self-evident, social media are not the only factors involved in social movements. This is most clearly evidenced by the fact that not all the states involved in the Arab Spring also saw revolutions. Social media communication was certainly present in Jordan, Bahrain, Syria, and other Arab Nations; however, they did not (as of time of writing) see regime changes or major political and social reforms²⁹. El-Nawawy and Khamis (2012) examine the 2011 Egyptian "Facebook Revolution" and the 2009 Iranian "Twitter Revolution" and draw conclusions about the use of social media and the outcomes of both social movements³⁰. El-Nawawy and Khamis identify four main differences between the Egyptian and Iranian Revolutions—size of initial uprisings and protest, ability to mobilize large groups, sophistication of oppression techniques by the ruling bodies, and legitimacy of the respective regimes—that they believed to have played a major role in determining the significantly different outcomes. El-Nawawy and Khamis (2012) caution against the attribution of causality to social media vis-à-vis the Arab Spring as clearly there is a plurality of contributing factors that must be considered when examining a nation that falls into a political crisis as Egypt did in early 2011. El-

²⁹ Though some saw concessions, such as Jordan and some saw nothing, such as Bahrain, Syria.

³⁰ Though the latter is referred to as a "Revolution" is a misnomer, as it was completely unsuccessful as Ahmadinejad remained in power.

Nawawy and Khamis' study cautions the readers against assuming causality and they are explicit in their stance that "social media, particularly Facebook and Twitter, played a critical role in the political upheavals that have been taking place in the Middle East" (Ibid.) and conclude that "At the end of the day, the success or failure of political movements depends primarily on political activism in the real world, rather than *merely* cyberactivism in the virtual world" (Ibid, *emphasis added*). As El-Nawawy and Khamis point out, the use of social media can be examined alongside the actual event that took place in the "real world", but they cannot be seen as a substitute for action, merely a compliment.

Different social media platforms result in different types of interaction between actors. This premise exemplifies the need for empirical research into specific cases, such as the use of Facebook in Egypt, as this thesis does. Each social media platform has its own unique means of facilitating communication. Facebook, for example, has a tremendous capacity to spread information over vast local and global networks as well as act as a repository for news, media, and information that can be accessed from virtually anywhere, whereas Twitter more effectively facilitates the transmission of short bits of information over similarly vast networks in real-time (El-Nawawy & Khamis, 2012). It is in this capacity to draw international attention that led to pressure being exerted on the Mubarak Regime that much of the power of social media plays.

The ability for social media to draw international attention, causing many to rally to the side of the Egyptian people and pressure their respective governments to oppose the Mubarak Regime acts as a partial confirmation of Castells' theory of a network society. This attention also drew criticism from private interests within and beyond

Egypt's borders, particularly the attempt to shut down the Internet in the country, which resulted in a negative response by business interests. When Mubarak went to extremes to suppress the network technology being used by the protestors he:

alienated the business community in Egypt, disproportionately impacted apolitical citizens, and inadvertently increased international diplomatic attention on the crisis as a result of the government's own response.

(Dunn, 2011: 21)

This elicited negative response placed pressure on the Mubarak regime and further diminished its legitimacy in Egypt and in the eyes of the international political and economic community. This inability to balance the economic need for communication technology and the regime's desire to suppress the dissident voices of Egyptians is referred to as the Dictator's Dilemma.

The Dictator's Dilemma can be viewed in this sense as the tension created when an authoritarian ruler must consider the political, social, and economic consequences, both locally and globally, of taking harsh action against popular opposition (Dunn, 2011). This is exemplified by the consequences for the Mubarak Regime when the crackdown on protesters resulted in high levels of international media attention, pressure from foreign governments, and major economic disruptions domestically and internationally. The ability of social media to disseminate information quickly, particularly to those outside Egypt, not only generated pressure on the Egyptian Government but also made it impossible for Mubarak to suppress the spread of information about the situation in Egypt. The fact that messages posted on Facebook would be shared and accessed outside Egypt and reproduced on satellite television meant that even when the Egyptian Government attempted to shut down the Internet Egyptians' messages were being spread

around the globe and non-Egyptians were encouraging the protesters and pressuring their own governments. This highlights the local and global aspect of the New Public Sphere and serves to, in some ways, validate Castells' Network Society Theory. Mubarak's response to this dilemma was to attempt to blackout Internet based media communication; however, the result was a loss "of credibility with the international community" (Ibid: 22).

Chapter 3

Research Design and Methodology

This thesis explores communication that took place on the Facebook platform during the 2011 Egyptian Revolution. As outlined in the previous two Chapters, many groups have claimed the Egyptian Revolution as a product of social media or, conversely, owing nothing to social media—some even outlining what they see as the inherent harm social media can cause individuals under authoritarian regimes. The role social media may have played in the Egyptian political crisis is hotly contested and must be further examined in order to draw any conclusions regarding how Facebook may have altered the course of the Egyptian Revolution.

The Arab Spring has to date deposed four authoritarian heads of state and civil uprisings and major social movements have erupted in over a dozen Arab states³¹. This wave of social movements and political upheaval has changed the political climate of the region and seems poised to play a significant role in the area for decades to come. Though it is perhaps naïve to declare that we can predict the significance these events will have on the region in the long term³², it seems certain that these events hold great

³¹Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen have deposed leaders; civil uprisings have broken out in Bahrain and Syria; major and minor protest and demonstrations have occurred in Kuwait, Jordan, Iraq, Iran, Algeria, Morocco, Sudan, Lebanon, Oman, Mauritania, and Saudi Arabia (Khouri, 2011).

³² Commentators have compared the events to the popular uprisings that took place in Europe in the spring and summer of 1848, a comparison from which the Arab Spring derives its name (Steinberg, 2011).

regional and international significance and that their full effect may not be felt for some time.

In light of the events that unfolded, and are still unfolding³³, if sites like Facebook had a role to play within the broader context of the Arab Spring, it is important to examine this role empirically and explore the possible connection between Facebook and the Egyptian Revolution

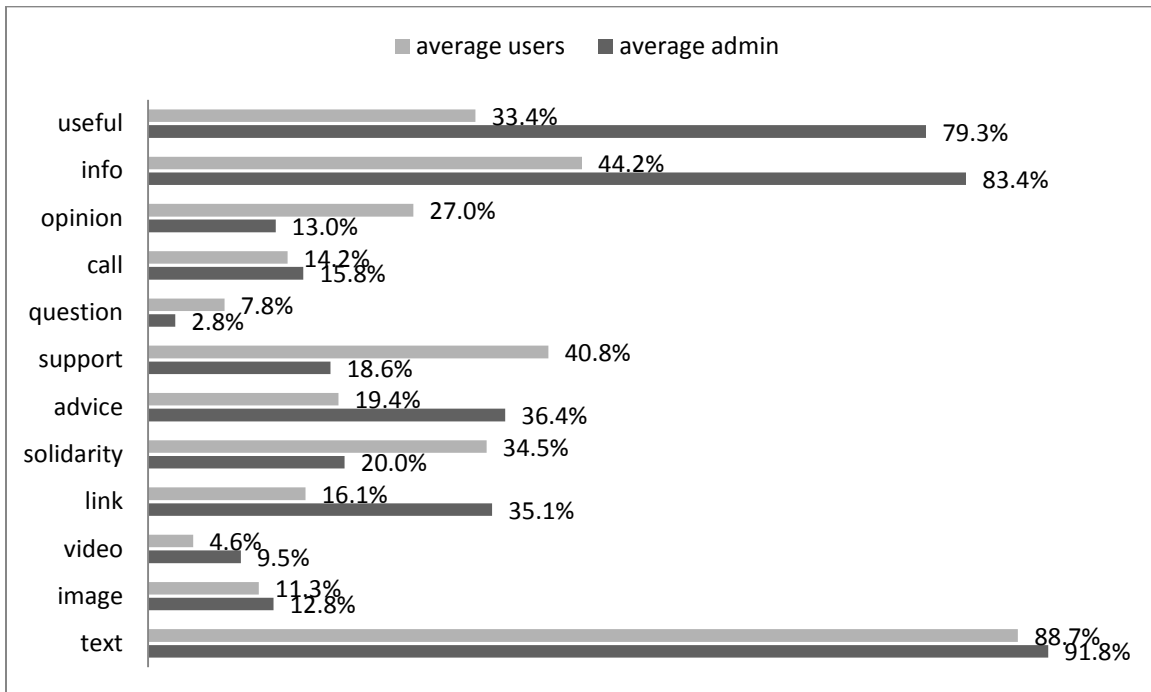
Drawing on liberalism and individuality (Locke, 1689; 1690; Rousseau, 1762), public sphere theory and The Theory of Communicative Action (Habermas, 1981; 1984; 1989) and Castells' (2006; 2008; 2011) network society and notions of the new public sphere, this thesis examines the communication patterns and practices that took place on the Facebook platform during the Egyptian Revolution. These theories are employed alongside concepts of universality, accessibility, and rational critical discourse as well as contemporary thinking about how the Internet and social media affect communication, particularly in political crises similar to the case at hand.

In order to explore the communication present on one social media platform, Facebook, and make empirical observations, the above mentioned theories and concepts will be applied in the analysis of data collected using a precise methodology. A qualitative design using in-depth content analysis of the texts contained within three prominent Facebook pages is employed by the researcher. The methodology is designed to allow the researcher to—as objectively as possible—examine the data and draw conclusions about the purported power of social media through analysis of Facebook

³³For example, at the time of writing Syria is engaged in a bloody civil war that has consumed much of the nation, sparked by the refusal of Ruler Bashar al-Assad to step down from power (Watson & Razeq, 2012).

communication. Ultimately this thesis addresses the below outlined research questions and sub-questions in reference to several specific outlined concepts. A summary of the breakdown of post by frequency percentage is illustrated in figure, 1 below.

Figure 1: Administrator and User Codes



Concepts and Conceptualizations

This thesis examines Facebook communication. This represents the exchange between individuals on one specific social media platform. Though there are many that may have been relevant during the Egyptian Revolution (Twitter, YouTube, etc.) Facebook was selected over the other available platforms for three main reasons. Firstly, as this thesis is limited in length, the exploration and discussion of a single platform allows the researcher to be more thorough. Secondly, as these platforms vary in the style, form, and types of content they produce, the types of analysis conducted in this thesis are better

suited for a single platform. Finally, the Facebook group pages remain intact and available to the public³⁴. Other platforms may not have records dating back to the period in question and are less reliable. Finally, of the over twenty one million Egyptian Internet users (2011 figures) over eleven million of them have a Facebook account, slightly over 50% of the Egyptian population using the Internet. Furthermore, nearly two thirds of these accounts belong to young Egyptians between 18 and 34 years of age. (Internet World Stats, 2012a; Social Bakers, 2012)

Facebook is referred to in this thesis as a social media platform, or tool. It is important to examine what social media encompasses to understand how Facebook is placed in the world of social media. Social media is at its most basic component a means of communication via the Internet. Many use the term Web 2.0 when discussing social media, and indeed the two terms are in many way closely related. Web 2.0 refers to the ability for users to generate content on the Internet and share information—it allows for interaction and collaboration. It is contrasted with earlier uses of the Internet where users were seen simply as consumers in that they were limited to viewing what was offered to them. (Barrons, 2012). Though users today still primarily consume, they are able to produce as well. The ability to produce and consume at the same time is at the core of social media. Social media allows individuals to communicate, share, and collaborate over the Internet (Shirkey, 2011) with few restrictions.

As identified in Chapter 2, there are three distinct types of communication: one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many. As the Internet is the first medium that truly

³⁴Admittedly some content may be missing; however, this is further addressed in the limitations section.

allowed for many-to-many communication, as well as the other types, the focus is narrowed in this thesis to the many-to-many format. Many-to-many communication occurs when multiple individuals are able to communicate to an audience. (Shirky, 2009). Facebook enable users to achieve all three kinds of communication³⁵; however, this thesis examines specific group pages that facilitate mainly many-to-many communication. By accessing group pages, individual users are able to view the content of previous posts and joint conversations by posting their own content and engaging other users. This format allows groups of individuals who may have never interacted in any other way directly communicate and share information. The unique platform that the Internet and social media provide has transformed how communication networks operate and how individuals communicate, share, and collaborate.

As examined in Chapter 2, the Egyptian Revolution is characterized as a social movement within a political crisis. When referring to the Egyptian Revolution, what is meant is the social movement that began on January 25th and ended February 11th, 2011 with the stepping down of Hosni Mubarak. Though the Egyptian political crisis continued long after Mubarak stepped down, for the purposes of this thesis, the Egyptian Revolution refers to this limited time period.

In order to align the analysis with the ideas and theories discussed in the above literature review four major concepts will be discussed: Facebook, the public sphere, network society, and the new public sphere. Six sub concepts are also conceptualized: universality, accessibility, rational critical discourse, many-to-many communication,

³⁵For example, a user can send a private message to another user (one-to-one) and a user could create a group that others users could access but not comment on (one-to-many) as well as engage in discussions on a users' 'wall' on in a group page (many-to-many).

local/global, and decentralization. Finally, five Facebook elements are identified which are employed in the analysis.

Habermas' idea type of the public sphere has guided much of the discussion in this thesis thus far. Achieving an ideal public sphere, as Habermas conceives it, is essentially impossible. However, it is possible that a society is able to strive towards an ideal that improves rational critical discourse and leads to a more democratic and egalitarian society. The motive behind studying Facebook as a new public sphere is to explore how, if at all, it added to the capacity for individuals to communicate in times of political crisis and if so, what power this capacity invests in users. Habermas' ideal public sphere contains three basic elements: universality, accessibility, and rational critical discourse. These three concepts will be examined in reference to Facebook groups in the analysis.

The first major element of the public sphere is universality. Universality presupposes equality among participants (Habermas, 1989). When the status of participants elevates them over others, their arguments are elevated with them, removing the ability for consensus to be reached through discussion and argumentation and preventing any agreement reached from reflecting the group. The Internet has proven to be a space that is highly conducive to this type of universality, as individuals can much more easily hide their identities. The only indicators of an individual's social status on Facebook are their user name—not necessarily their real name—and profile picture—should they choose to use one. Furthermore, the manner in which content is posted to Facebook—limited to text, images, videos, and URL links—standardizes the

communication to some degree, creating an environment conducive the equality of participants.

The second major element of the public sphere is accessibility. In the context of this thesis accessibility refers to the openness of the participation. Though as shown in Chapter 3, Internet access is not universal in Egypt, the potential ability to access the Internet is widespread. Furthermore, the barriers to participation are relatively low as there are no costs associated with a Facebook account, beyond the obvious entry cost of the Internet, and even non-users can access the information. If certain members are barred from the conversation, then it is not a true public sphere as all interests are not represented. Facebook gives the potential to virtually anyone to participate in a discussion. The only barriers to access the Facebook pages examined in this thesis are connectivity and membership to Facebook—anyone with Internet access and basic computer literacy skills, as well as access to the Internet—via cell phone, home computer, Internet café, or educational institution—can participate in the discussion.

The final major element of the public sphere is rational critical discourse. As outlined in the previous chapter, rational critical discourse is contained within the domain of common concern that advances what is right or wrong through argumentation and debate with the goal of reaching consensus (Habermas, 1981). Creating an environment that accommodates rational critical discourse through linguistic communication is critical for a public sphere to achieve some communicative end. This is primarily what is being explored in this thesis. Through the examination of the conversations that took place and assessing whether and to what degree they were rational critical discourse, conclusions are reached about the potential power Facebook may hold as a communication tool. This

thesis also takes into account the frivolous nature of the communication under examination. Information being conveyed will not only be assessed as critical or not, but also as simply being useful or not, as one can share information or media and be rational while perhaps not being critical.

There may be some confusion as to the difference between the public sphere and Facebook. Firstly, for the purposes of this thesis, Facebook is framed as a public sphere; however, not the ideal that Habermas describes, but a modern iteration of the new public sphere, as outlined by Castells; Facebook acts as an extra layer of communication that adds to the public sphere. Secondly, the public sphere refers broadly to all the many overlapping public spheres. Much like the series of nodes that connect various and often overlapping networks in Castell's network society (2004), the public sphere consists of many overlapping and intersecting spheres. To avoid confusion, the individual spheres will be referred to as new public spheres and the overall structure as simply the public sphere. For the purpose of conceptual clarity, the public sphere is broken down in to the three core elements outlined above which will be investigated.

Three main features of the Internet is that it offers a unique means of communication, characterized by decentralized, cross-border, and many-to-many communication. The decentralized nature of this type of communication is reflected by both the decentralization of the Internet, and relative decentralization of Facebook, both of which may have made it an ideal medium for revolutionary communication. Decentralization in this context also refers to how the Internet and Facebook cannot be easily controlled. An example of this can be seen when examining the attempts of the

Egyptian government to first shut down social media sites including Facebook and eventually trying to shut down the Internet altogether.

As identified in Chapter 2, many-to-many communication is unique to the Internet medium and the primary type of communication that is analyzed by this thesis. This unique way of communicating information between large groups created a unique public space of discussion and sharing. This type of communication, coupled with the ability of Facebook groups to store information for later access meant that these groups act as a sort of database of information punctuated with ideas, opinions, and firsthand accounts.

In addition to the concepts outlined above, it is important to clearly define the features of Facebook that will be discussed in the analysis.

Facebook Groups: are pages dedicated to an individual, a cause, an idea, or other theme. They commonly take the form of a main wall, which acts as a forum for users to post content. Users may join groups³⁶, allowing them to participate in discussion on the wall. Groups allow individuals to post comments, share images, videos and links, and engage in conversations through posts.

Facebook users: these are everyone with a Facebook profile. Anyone over the age of 13 may create a Facebook account. This is a free service and there are virtually no restrictions³⁷. This factors into the accessibility of Facebook; essentially anyone with the ability to connect to the Internet and basic Internet literacy skills can join the community free of charge. Furthermore, though the administrator of group pages does have the ability to make a page private and force users to join the group in order to comment and

³⁶Group administrators may create private groups that are accessible by invitation only; however, these types of groups are not under investigation in this thesis.

³⁷ One of Facebook's slogans is "It's free and always will be" (Facebook.com).

join the conversation, all the pages examined in this thesis are open to the public, anyone with a user account can comment and post and anyone with Internet access can view the pages' content.

Wall: it refers to essentially a message board or forum for posting content. Individual users can have a wall on their profile, as well as group pages, which are examined here. Users can post text messages, images, videos, and URL links to walls. They can also interact with the wall content by commenting on posts, liking posts, and sharing posts with their friend list. Wall posts are the main many-to-many communication medium available on Facebook groups. Facebook walls create discussion spaces, group communication, and a bank of information that can be accessed at a later date, as is the case with this thesis.

Wall posts: these are the messages posted to a Facebook group wall that may contain text, images, videos, and URL links. The wall acts as a forum, the posts are the main mechanism for conveying information in the group. Wall posts act as a forum in which users can consume and share information as well as engage in dialogue through comments. There are two distinct types of wall posts: those posted by the Facebook group and those posted by users. The latter are done by the administrator(s) of each group, while the former are specifically posts from individual users. This distinction becomes important in the data analysis.

Page likes/post likes: users can choose to “like” something on Facebook, whether a wall post, a group, or a user status. Liking simply signifies that a user agrees with or enjoys some content. Number of likes, along with number of posts and participants were used in selecting the most prominent groups for analysis in this thesis. The groups with

the most likes, it can be assumed, were the most popular as more users not only flocked to them, but also approved of them by choosing to “like” them.

The main concepts dealt with in the previous chapter are universality, accessibility, rational critical discourse, many-to-many, local/global, and decentralized. These themes must be operationalized within the context of Facebook.

Universality: as discussed above, Facebook allows nearly anyone to access its content without any major barriers to entry beyond Internet access and basic computer literacy. Universality will be measured by how individuals are treated within discussions. Are there signs of discrimination or opinion based on the poster? Is more weight given to a specific type of post? What types of posts (e.g. pictures, videos, etc.) garner the most attention?

Accessibility: is inherently part of the process of creating and managing a public Facebook group page. Administrators can set limits on who can view and join the debate as well as what type of content is allowed to be posted. This will be examined by looking at the nature of the pages. Are there any restrictions (privacy levels) on the pages that allow for more or less accessibility? Are users restricted in their ability to participate in the discussion contained within these pages?

Rational critical discourse: is a dialogue regarding matters of common concern that are not trivial. When participants are informed and active in debate they are engaging in rational critical discourse. Discussion of public concerns that are informed and critical are one of the core elements of the new public sphere. When actors engage, inform, and assist each other through a dialogue and the sharing of information they are acting rationally and critically. Rational critical debate is an important element in achieving

communicative action. Rational critical discourse is not, here, used in opposition of the term frivolous, as they are not mutually exclusive.

Many-to-many: referring to the ability for individual users to communicate with larger groups through a specific medium. Individual users are able to communicate with group members and any other users that may view a group page. This type of communication is unique to the Internet and allows for a type of conversation that has not been seen in other media. This, however, poses some challenges to the researcher as it is a more chaotic and less predictable mode of communicating. Because of these challenges, the research will focus on general themes of posts as well as specific conversations between multiple participants, as well as the form of the posts.

Local/global: the conversations that occurred took on a local and global nature, one characteristic of the new public sphere. This represents an overlapping of spheres in which Egyptians, non-Egyptians, and Egyptians not in Egypt at the time are able to interact. Though it will be difficult to determine where individuals hail from their posts, some effort will be made to characterize supporters from participants.

Decentralized: as discussed in Chapter Two, decentralization is a key element of the new public sphere. In this case, though one could argue that the data being examined is central in the sense of it being contained within Facebook, an organization with a clear structure and hierarchy, the groups being studied themselves are not so well defined. In examining decentralization, the researcher will look for clues of strong moderation and involvement on the part of the page administrators. (Van Dijck, 2012)

Research Questions

This thesis seeks to explore the data collected and analyze it in an attempt to answer one main research question and five sub-questions.

The central research question of this thesis is:

1. In a networked society, do Facebook groups act as an extension of the new public sphere; if so, do they represent communicative action in political crises?

This thesis also seeks to answer the following five sub-questions:

2. In what ways do individuals communicate within the Facebook network?
3. Do these groups represent the three major aspects of the New Public Sphere (decentralized, cross-border, and many-to-many communication)?
4. Does Facebook act as a repository of information available directly to participants in the Egyptian Revolution?
5. Do these groups foster and encourage cross border solidarity; if so, does this solidarity externalize pressure on the Egyptian Government?
6. How have these Facebook groups been used for meaningful, non-trivial discussions?

Research Design

This thesis employs inductive reasoning and qualitative a research design focusing on one social media site: Facebook. It employs the research method of content analysis of Facebook communication during a specified time period. Qualitative research is employed to a particular problem in a specific context relying on text and images

(Creswell, 2007). Creswell specifies that qualitative research begins with a theoretical lens applied to a research problem and inquiries into the activities of “individuals or groups” (2007: 37). The goal of qualitative research is to examine a particular phenomenon based on the individuals and groups involved, often focusing on the communication that took place. As a research technique, content analysis is used for “making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their uses” (Krippendorff, 2004: 18) through the careful examination of texts.

In order to interpret the types of messages being communicated in the group pages examined, the types of speech are coded according to an index. This process will simplify the language and allow the researcher to draw conclusions from the data. Simplifying the language, according to Krippendorff, involves “developing an index [which] maps a set of variables into one, the index, whose variability is a function of the various original data it represents” (2004: 155), the application of which “reduces the great diversity of expressions to fewer and more relevant kinds” (Ibid: 155). In this way the texts observed can be placed into a limited number of categories through the coding process that will assist in identifying patterns and trends in the data. This process will be applied to both the forum of the message—what kind of media it contains—and the content—what the message communicates.

The posts were coded according to two groups of categories: forum and content. The forum indicates the type of message and what kinds of media each message included. This first group identifies if the post in question contained ASCII text, images, videos, and URL links. A post could contain just one or all of these types. The second group of indices classified the content and meaning of the message. These categories were

determined during the initial data collection process and were applied to the sample during the coding process. These categories include Solidarity/Support, Advice, Questions, Calls to Action, Opinions, and Information. Finally, each post was coded as being either 'useful' or not. This final category was determined by making a judgement about the information being shared and whether it had any practical use for those reading it. Examples of useful posts are those that share pertinent information, such as recent developments, practical advice, critical and rational opinions, or anything else that was deemed more than simple commentary or the sharing of trivial information or advice. Examples are given in Chapter 4.

The group communication will be divided into types of communication: Solidarity/Support, Advice, Questions, Calls to Action, Opinion, and Information. These categories form the first level of analysis and help draw broad conclusions. Solidarity/Support is expected to come primarily from those outside Egypt in the form of individuals showing their support for the cause. Information/updates will be characterized by new information or updates; this may include but is not limited to locations of demonstrations, information about the actions of pro and anti-Mubarak forces, news updates regarding the position of the regime, and any other relevant posts pertaining to information and updates. Advice will include any practical information regarding the protest, including where to coordinate, what to do in certain circumstances, and any other practical advice. Questions are simply any questions asked of the group. Calls to action refer specifically to individuals identifying action taken, action to be taken, or identification of some future action, including when and where to go to protest and what individuals are doing and can do. The opinion category is populated by any information

that is not factually based, including comments about the future, musing present events, and banal comments not based on or backed up with facts. Information, the most broadly applicable category, simply means any posts containing non-opinion based information, including links to news articles, first hand reports, and user images and videos. This method of data exploration allows the researcher to identify trends in patterns that arise in the data.

The coding process was done using NVivo 9, allowing the researcher to organize and examine the large quantities of data. From the created data set, patterns and trends are identified and specific posts are examined in the context of the larger sample. A rudimentary analysis of the frequency of the codes is used to identify trends and patterns that emerge out of the data set. This look is limited to overall post frequencies over the 18 day period (Figures 2, 3, and 4), differences between administrator and user posting patterns (Figure 5), and index code frequencies (Figure 1).

Figure 2: Daily Posts (Group One)

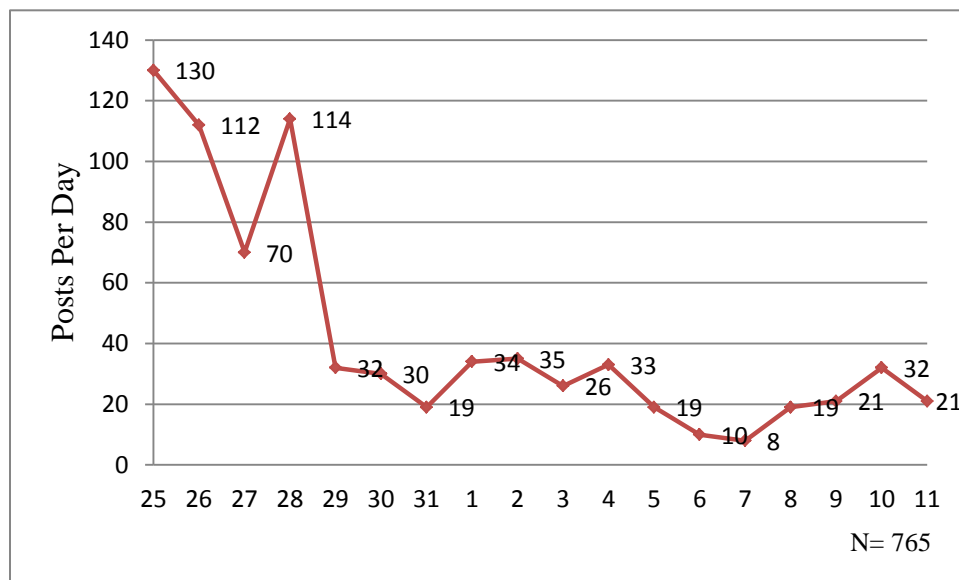


Figure 3: Daily Posts (Group Two)

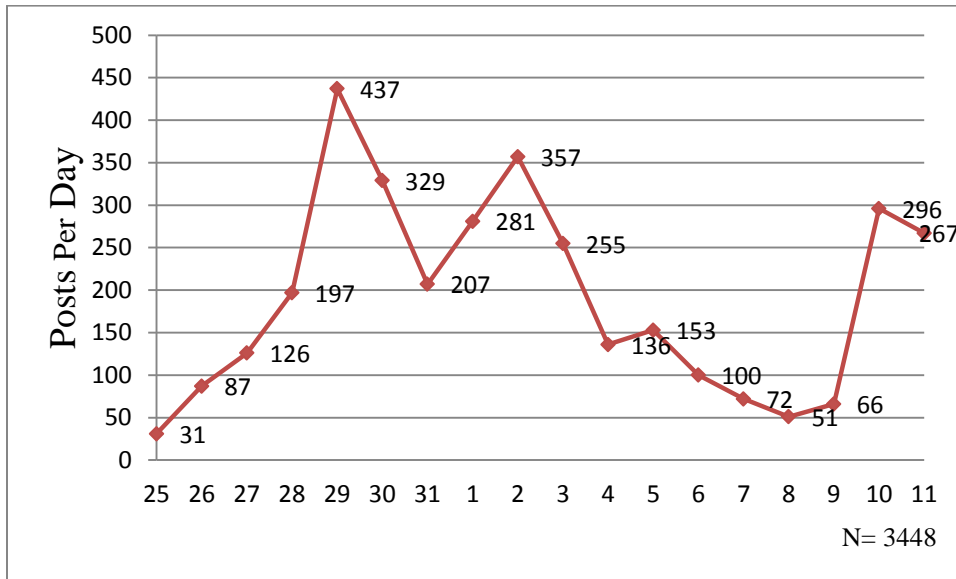
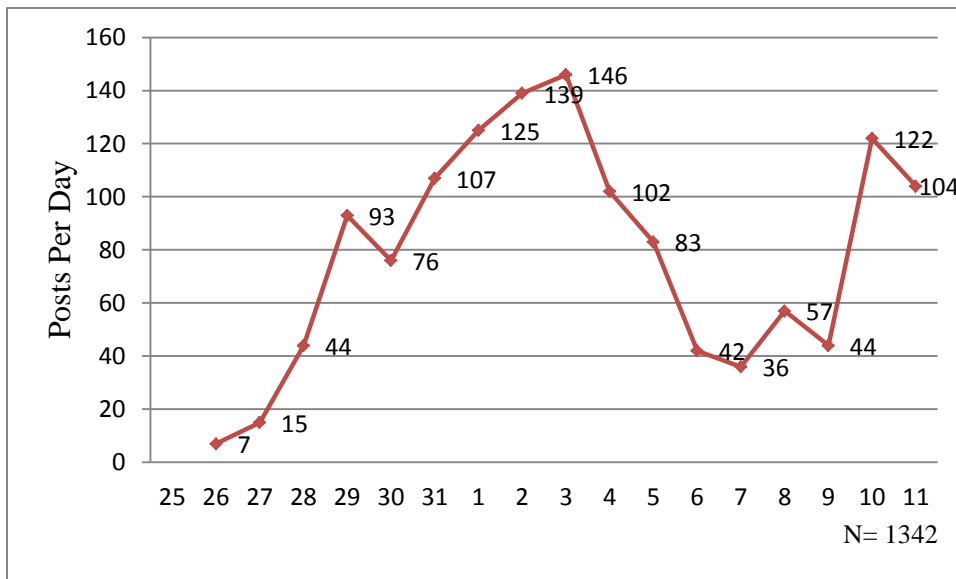


Figure 4: Daily Posts (Group Three)



Though many social media platforms exited during the Egyptian Revolution, the research here focuses strictly on Facebook. Facebook was selected because of four main factors. Firstly, and what partly inspired this thesis, many participants in the revolution and media outlets have attributed much power to Facebook for the role it putatively played in the

Egyptian Revolution³⁸. Claims that the Revolution was sparked, accelerated, or even caused by Facebook are commonplace in the media. Academics tend to take a less extreme stance on the issue, as discussed in the previous chapter, but many attribute real power to Facebook during the Egyptian Revolution. This attention to Facebook makes it worthy of exploration with the goal of better understanding exactly what role it may have played.

Secondly, Facebook proves to be quite useful for researchers as the public data is fully available dating back to before the Revolution began. Though there are portions of Facebook that are not available to the public, including private messages and private profiles that require friending to view, the focus here is the publicly available group pages. These pages are available in full, complete with images, videos, links, and other original media. Here it must be noted that users have the ability to remove their own posts. Users cannot affect others' posts, and only the page administrator has the ability to remove posts if they have been flagged³⁹. Unfortunately there is no way to determine if some users decided to remove their posts anytime during or after the period being examined. As such, the content of the pages from which the data has been collected were all copied in full in December, 2011. This is the oldest known copy available. Again, though it is possible that some users deleted their own content *ex post facto*, this concern is mitigated by two factors. Firstly, as Evgeny Morozov (2011) argues, states may use information posted freely online against the citizens posting it, for identification or evidence in trials. As evidenced by the data, many of the users of these pages were not

³⁸ For some examples, see: (Gustin, 2011); (Smith, 2011); (Vargas, 2012).

³⁹ A Facebook policy to avoid the posting of obscene or offensive material (Facebook.com).

Egyptian, and though the military remained in a position of power, Mubarak's regime was overthrown expeditiously and the threat to individuals' safety seems greatly diminished. Secondly, the sheer number of posts available per day makes some withdrawn comments a minor concern. Because of the sampling strategy employed, it would require a mass removal of postings to affect the results of this research.

Thirdly, Facebook is easily accessible. Facebook users within and beyond the borders of Egypt can access these groups without significant restriction. This allows for better access to potentially all individuals. Facebook can be accessed via computer, laptop, or cell phone. This speaks directly to one of the three key elements of the public sphere: accessibility. When the barriers to access are reduced, more individuals are able to participate in the discussion, share, and collaborate.

Finally, Facebook is widely used in Egypt. As discussed in the first chapter, Egypt's number of regular Internet users is rapidly growing, particularly among the youth and urban demographics. Furthermore, Egypt at the time of the 2011 Revolution boasted nearly a 100% mobile phone saturation rate. Of the roughly 30% of the Egyptian population that regularly uses the Internet, 64% have a Facebook account (Social Bakers, 2012). This widespread use among Egyptians makes it the most suitable social medium to examine in relation to actual use.

Facebook also represent the best example of a new public sphere. Other social media platforms are more conducive to one-to-one or one-to-many communication⁴⁰ whereas Facebook, particularly the group pages examined in this thesis, allows a many-

⁴⁰ Twitter, for example. One-to-one in that individuals can have conversations with each other over twitter and one-to-many, though in a limited way, as users can broadcast tweets to their followers and have them re-tweeted to other group of followers.

to-many conversation with a highly diverse audience. This thesis uses a qualitative approach to the research placing emphasis on the meaning and context of the data. Firstly, the data will be analyzed for general themes and patterns of communication. Secondly, specific posts will be analyzed in accordance with the theories about the new public sphere and communicative action outlined in Chapter 2. Finally, the data will be analyzed to attempt to draw conclusions about the potential communicative power Facebook communication possesses and the conclusions will attempt to answer the outlined research questions.

A qualitative study of this nature must be both reliable and valid to ensure consistency and accuracy of results. Krippendorff equates reliability to “stability, reproducibility, and accuracy” (211) which are functions of the interaction among “observers, coders, judges, or measuring instrument” (Ibid). Having a stable, reproducible, and accurate study ensures that the data are trustable as a basis for the discussion of findings.

Reliability is considered here as a means to ensure the study can be replicated. Validity, in contrast to reliability, concerns truth. Balancing reliability and validity is important because a high degree of one does not ensure the presence of the other (Krippendorff, 2004). To avoid inaccuracies and increase the level of reliability, this research is based on a loose theoretical framework which was amended after the data collection to ensure a contribution to knowledge and avoid simply confirming what is already known.

Data Collection and Analysis

Method

The wall posts from the selected group pages, taken from the outlined timeframe, will be collected and processed using NVivo 9. Due to the large quantity of content, NVivo will be employed to process the text, images, video, and links into useful data by arranging them by themes, quantity, and popularity. To understand the flow of information through Facebook correspondence, the number of posts, comments, and likes will be processed to determine what types of communication were common and what types of posts garnered the most attention and spurred the most activity. Furthermore, by determining what themes of discussion were trending and at what times it will become evident what types of discussion may have led individuals to act. In regards to group solidarity, it is obvious what major cause brought so many Egyptians together: the call for Hosni Mubarak to step down. What is less clear is what events or stories present in the dialogue motivated individuals on a day-to-day basis. One of the objectives of the collection and grouping of the dialogue within Facebook will be to uncover what was being discussed and when.

Sampling and Sampling Strategy

This thesis examines the 18 day period between January 25th and February 11th, 2011. This period was selected because the popular social movement is seen to have begun on the 25th—the Day of Revolt—and ended with the stepping down of Mubarak on the 11th—the Day of Departure. Though the origins of the Revolution have their roots deep in Egyptian and world history, and the political crisis by no means came to an end on the

11th, this period is widely recognized as representing the peak of the political crisis in Egypt and allows for a concise and highly active period of time to be examined.

Though there are many Facebook group pages related to the Egyptian Revolution that were active during the 18 day period under examination here, three groups were selected for examination: Group One (the English version of We Are All Khaled Said), Group Two (Egypt's protests Jan-25), and Group Three (Support protest in Egypt). These three groups were identified because of their popularity and diversity of content. They were by far the most prolific groups of those available and also garnered the most attention on Facebook measured by number of 'likes', each having between 10,000 and 100,000 page likes when the data was collected.

In selecting both the Facebook pages from which to collect data and the data itself a non-random selection strategy will be employed. Though there are many other extant Facebook groups pertaining to the crisis being studied, none were as large or textually well populated as the above mentioned three. Furthermore many group pages were only accessed by a relatively small number of individuals, making them less useful for this particular study, as they may not have represented a diversity of opinion. To ensure the best representative sample, only the largest and most prominent groups were included. Within the pages themselves the main feature to be examined is the form and content of wall posts. Only posts ranging from January 25th to February 11th will be examined. Due to the sheer number of posts⁴¹ a sampling strategy will be employed to reflect the content of the pages for each of the 18 days examined.

⁴¹The posts from all three pages resulted in a document of over 3000 pages in length excluding post comments, which can number in the hundreds per post.

Because there were thousands of posts during the period in question, including over 500 per day in many cases, a systemic sample is used. As each page contained two main types of posts, posts by the page administrators and posts by users (all other posts), each group was sampled separately. The total number of posts for each category and each day were added up then divided by ten, to give k . beginning with the first posts of each day, every k th⁴² posts was selected, giving a total of ten or less, depending on the total number of posts that day. In total, out of 5822 total posts, 604 were sampled, 259 from the administrator category and 345 from the user category. Similar to a study by Sergerberg and Bennett (2011), this method allows the researcher to maintain the ordinal chronology of the posts while still sufficiently collecting a representative sample. This sampling strategy also corrected for the fact that in two of the pages there were periods containing “burst” of posts by one or a small number of users. By drawing the sample from every k th post, chronologically, the sample represents the diversity present in the groups, as well as reflecting how events unfolded chronologically (Krippendorf, 2004). Ideally it may have been useful to do the analysis across the entire population of posts and include more than three group pages. Due to the costs associated with this broad approach it was necessary to take a representative sample from the larger population. This type of sampling has proven useful in the past in similar analysis of social media content (Seegerberg & Bennett, 2011).

Once the coding is completed, relevance sampling will be employed to further analyze some posts. Relevance sampling is employed to examine textuality with a deeper

⁴² k represents the population size / sample size and was calculated for each day (see: Krippendorf, 2004: 115).

lens by “selecting all textual units that contribute to answering [the] given research questions” (Krippendorf, 2004: 119).

Once the data were reviewed during the collection and sampling process, four categories were selected to typify the form of each post and seven categories were selected to categorize the content of the posts. This gave in total eleven nodes to code each post under. The four form categories were based on what kind of media the post contained and included one or more of the following: text, image or images, video or videos, and one or more URL links. Many of the posts contained more than one of these categories. Nearly all posts contained text (90.3% of all posts), a quarter of all posts contained one or more links (25.2%), 12.1% of all posts contained images, and 7% of all posts contained videos. The seven content codes used are identified and discussed in the following section (see: Figure 1).

Data Analysis

The analysis of the data is a two-fold process. First, the posts are coded and analyzed according to the common themes, which allowed the researcher to establish what themes are most prevalent and at what times across the three group pages during the 18 day period. This analysis highlights the nature of what was being posted and helps address the main research question and the sub-questions. Following the general themes and patterns, the posts are examined and their content analyzed.

The two fold strategy of coding the posts and examining the conversations contained therein allows the researcher to accomplish two major aims of the thesis. Firstly, the analysis of the coded data sampled from the groups will enable the researcher

to sketch an outline of what types of dialogues were contained within the groups and how that may have changed over time. This will be used to estimate any significance that the dialogue on these pages may have had. Secondly, through a close analysis of the content of the posts, the researcher will be able to evaluate the level of rational critical discourse that occurred during the Revolution. This analysis represents a type of ethnographic content analysis. This approach allows for theory driven approaches to the analysis of the data as well as an analytical process that is tied to the research subjects: the communicators (Krippendorff, 2004: 21). This type of analysis also allows the researcher to be flexible in their analysis and allow “accounts to emerge from reading of texts” (Ibid: 16), resulting in a more representative analysis of the text.

Qualitative data analysis methods are theme analysis. According to Krippendorff (2004), theme analyses are conducted to identify patterns in the data and establish relationships among the participants and between their communication patterns. These patterns and relationships will be used to attempt to answer the research questions and determine what power Facebook may have in acting as a new public sphere that facilitates communicative action.

A methodological framework serves three main purposes: prescriptive, analytical, and methodological (Krippendorff, 2004). The prescriptive purpose of a methodological framework is to guide the design of the research project according to its purpose. The analytic purpose is to facilitate the critical examination and comparison of the results. The methodological purpose is to ensure replicability. The chronological sampling of the posts from the available content allow this study to be easily replicated by independent researchers and would theoretically yield similar results.

Posts are referred to in the following chapter by a code that designated the type of post, the date of the posts, and which group they originate from. The code takes the following form: 1A12501. The first number designated which of the three group pages the posts originates in (1, 2, or 3). The letter designates whether it was a user post or an administrator posts (A or U). The following three letters designate the date; the first letter representing January or February (1 or 2) and the following two the day (1-31), and the final two numbers designate the chronological order in which they appear each day (1-10). The above example, 1A12501 refers to an administrator post from Group One on January 25th and was the earliest post selected. All quotes will be referred to by this code in lieu of using the individual users' names, page, and date. Finally, all quotes are reported exactly as they appear in the pages. The text is only altered if necessary to understand what information the author intended to convey, provided it is clear.

Once the sample was collected, the content of each post was coded according to ten general categories that defined the posts. Three of these categories simply identified the forum of the posts. They were assigned a code depending on what was present in the post. These three codes are text, images and videos, and links (URLs). Any given post could contain one, two, or all three of these codes, depending on the post's content.

The seven content categories are all posts that the researcher perceived as containing the one or more of the following: solidarity/support, advice, question, calls to action, and opinions. Finally, any posts containing advice, questions, information or opinions were classified as either useful or not. Each of the above eight categories are characterized as containing the following:

Solidarity/Support: posts coded as containing a message of solidarity were any

posts that offered solidarity from either users that were present or comments from those abroad. Though it is impossible to know exactly who was present or abroad it is often made clear by the comments themselves. These posts could take the simple form of “we are with you” or some variant, or be more specific and offer to write to a domestic government or offer an opinion that shows support and solidarity for the Egyptian people.

Advice: posts containing advice to protestors or would-be protestors are any messages that gave practical advice, including where to find medical treatment, where security forces were, or how to access pertinent information. These posts took many forms but coding was restricted to those that were practical. Posts such as “drag that criminal, Mubarak, into the street” are not considered advice, as they seem to be strictly hyperbolic.

Question: posts containing questions are those that requested information, photos, videos, or accounts of those protesting and covering the events. These frequently took the form of queries about the protest themselves and how individuals and groups could get involved. Questions also include hypotheticals regarding the future of Egypt once Mubarak stepped down, and questions regarding the transition process.

Calls to action: post coded as calls to action were any content that urged others to take some action or participate in some way. These generally fell into one of two categories, calls to participate in the protest in Egypt and calls to pressure other governments. Many calls to action requested that people join protests at specific locations or assist in a specific way as well as calls on non-Egyptians to take some specific action, such as share information or write their government in protest.

Opinion: posts coded as containing opinions were those in which individuals

express their thoughts about the protests and events surrounding the protests. These include opinions about what should happen when Mubarak steps down, who should be put in charge, and how the transition of power should take place. These are distinct from the below *information* posts as they offered nothing concrete and simply contained the opinions of posters.

Information: these posts contained information that could be of use to someone viewing these pages as well as general information regarding the protests. These included user generated images and videos, news stories with pertinent information regarding the government's transition and anything else that was not simple opinion.

Useful: posts were deemed useful if the information they contained was useful, as opposed to being simply frivolous in nature. Any posts that offered practical advice, first-hand accounts, legitimate reports, and any new information that were more than frivolous was considered useful. This selection process is subjective and relied primarily on the judgment of the researcher.

Chapter 4

Findings and Analysis

This thesis primarily deals with the types of communication occurring during the 18 day period referred to here as the Egyptian Revolution. The central research question regards how Facebook is being used as and if, given the analysis of the content, it can be clearly viewed as an extension of the public sphere in the network society. The data analysis is conducted in a two-fold manner. Firstly, some general trends and patterns are identified that characterize the data set. What appear to be anomalies in the data are explained and reasons for specific observations are given. Secondly, general trends and patterns that arise from the data set are examined to better understand the evolution of the communication over the 18 day period examined. Finally, individual posts are examined from the general trends in the data set are identified and discussed. The analysis draws out answers to the main and sub research questions while using the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 to place the observations in a theoretical context.

The Use of Facebook during the 2011 Egyptian Revolution

General Trends and Patters

Out of the three Facebook Group pages examined a total of 5822 individual posts were collected for the analysis. These posts fell into two categories: those posted by the page

administrator or administrators⁴³, and those posted by users. Of the three pages, Group One (the English version of We Are All Khaled Said) only contained administrator posts. Group Two (Egypt's protests Jan-25) had an administrator posting initially; however, after the internet was shut down in Egypt on the January 27th, the page was strictly populated by user posts. The final page, Group Three, (Support Protest in Egypt) saw administrator posts nearly every day, though this number did drop off noticeably after the 27th, and saw upwards of 125 user posts per day.

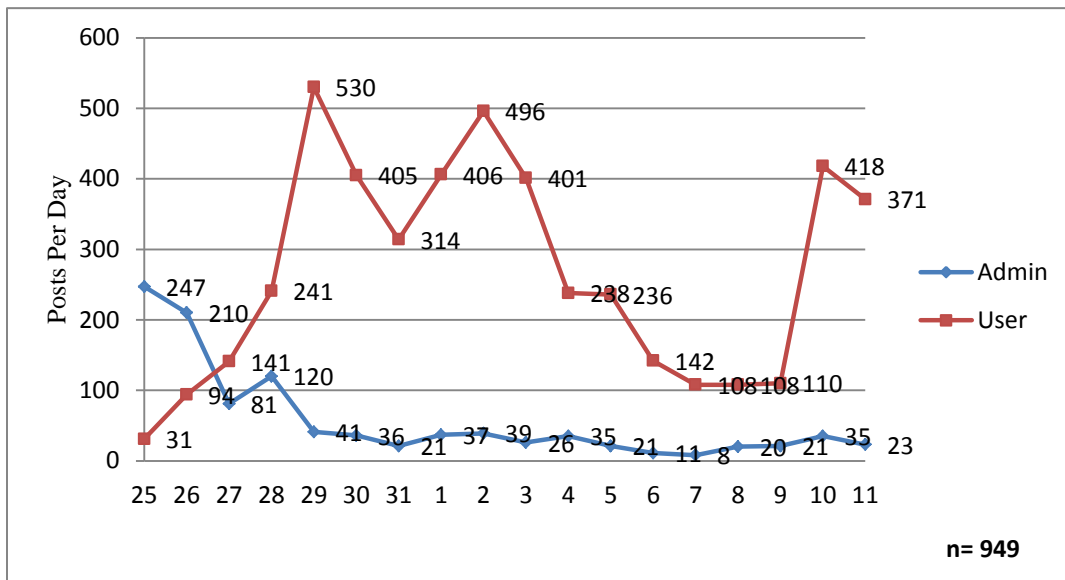
A general trend surrounding the Internet shutdown discussed in Chapter 2 arises in both user and administrator posts. After the Internet was largely shut down by the Egyptian Government on January 27th, administrator posts tended to reduce in frequency. User posts also follow a general trend of increasing frequency from the 25th to 27th before staying consistent until roughly the 5th of February where they declined slightly before returning to peak levels again for the period February 10th to 11th (see figure 5).

The first major anomaly in the data, as briefly discussed above, is the change in frequency of posts, particularly the decline in administrator posts, on and after the 27th of January. This date coincides with the blocking of Facebook and the shutdown of the Internet by the Egyptian government. On the 27th it is reported that Facebook was blocked by the Egyptian Government; however, the site could still be accessed through a proxy server. Later on the 27th, five major ISPs blocked Internet access in Egypt on behalf of the Egyptian government; the only network remaining intact being that used by the Egyptian Stock Exchange and most major banks in Egypt. Though it was technically

⁴³It is difficult to tell if these are one or more individuals per page, though it seems likely that they represent the efforts of several individuals, evidenced by the frequency of posts per day, which were often over 100.

still possible to access the Internet via dial-up Internet services made through international calls from within Egypt, this service was only available to those with access to land lines⁴⁴ that were able to make international calls. The costs of international calls restricted use of these alternatives. As shown in Chapter 2 it was still possible for many Egyptians to access the Internet during this shutdown period, but a majority of the population were unable to do so.

Figure 5: Daily Posts by Users and Administrators (Total)



The second anomaly in the data is the decline of the number of posts, both by administrators and users around the 5th of February stretching to roughly the 9th of February. Friday February 4th, or “Friday of Departure” saw major protests across Egypt following many days of bloodshed and significant action by both anti and pro Mubarak

⁴⁴By the end of 2012, Egypt only had 10% landline penetration rates, contrasted with 115% mobile phone penetration rates, a figure up 15% from the previous year (Bubble Comm).

forces. After February 4th, though there were several important protests⁴⁵, major violent confrontations between security forces and protestors were somewhat stayed. February 8th and 9th were marked by general strikes in Cairo, Alexandria, and Suez followed by renewed clashed between security forces and protestors. Though it is impossible to fully account for the slight but noticeable decline in activity during this time-span, it seems likely that interest online waned as a result of the decrease in dramatic events, only to be renewed in the final days leading up to Mubarak stepping down.

This decline in posts on the Facebook pages reflects the fact that individuals in Egypt and observers around the globe relied on multiple forms of media to collect information about the state of affairs in Egypt. Though the protests in Egypt were highly prevalent in international news, as is the nature of modern reporting, attention is given to stories that may be more sensational or seemingly imminent. Though it is a sad reality, a bloody conflict is likely to garner more attention than a peaceful one. Particularly when considering those outside of Egypt, it seems reasonable to expect more traffic during days that saw conflict between pro and anti-Mubarak forces. This may be one of the driving forces behind the reduced activity between February 4th and 9th. It may also be the case that less Egyptians in Egypt were able to post, meaning an overall decline, coupled with an increasing international interest, staying this decline to some degree. This, however, can only be speculated upon as it is often impossible to determine the country of origin of many posts.

The final anomaly present in the two pages that allowed users to post content is that user posts were significantly more frequent than administrator posts. This is likely

⁴⁵ Notably the Lawyers march, a protest consisting of a majority of the Lawyers in Cairo.

due to the simple fact that there were clearly more users that engaged in discussion on the group pages. Through examination of the data it is evident that users' posts originated both from those in Egypt (either participants or observers) as well as from the international community. Though there is not absolute confirmation, by examining the posts made by administrators it is evident that all the administrators were in Egypt and likely participating in the protests themselves while maintaining the Facebook group pages.

Though there is no definitive evidence of multiple administrators per page, it seems likely that this was the case. Firstly, it was not uncommon for these pages to be populated by over one hundred administrator posts per day. These involved posting links to news article, pictures, and videos from Tahrir Square, accounts of the events around Egypt (particularly from Cairo, Alexandria, and Suez), and other forms of media, opinions, and reports. This volume and variety of content suggests that these pages, particularly Egypt Protest Jan-25 and We Are All Khaled Said, were administered by more than a single individual, though there is no reliable way of knowing exactly how many individuals were behind these posts.

Facebook Posts

In order to analyze the data collected from the posts that were sampled, each post is organized according to a set of codes that described their nature. These basic codes help categorize the information. These codes are also organized by their occurrence frequency compared to the whole data set. This facilitates making general observations regarding

what type of content was present in these pages and makes it possible to characterize the general communication that occurred. The frequency of the post type is compared both to the sample as a whole, as well as to the two groups the sample is broken down into: posts authored by page administrators and posts authored by page users.

Questions

Questions posed to the group page were the least frequent code that appeared in the posts. Among administrator posts the frequency of questions appearing was 2.8%, compared to 7.8% among user posts. Though these questions ranged from hypothetical questions surrounding what will happen once Mubarak steps down to asking how people within Egypt and abroad could offer assistance, all the questions tended to indicate a community of cooperation among those populating the group pages. Post 1A20608 asks “How can [Mubarak] stay?” and continues “He made \$70 billion out of Egypt’s resources . . . 40% of Egyptians are living on less [than] \$2 a day. How can we have him for 8 more months?” This type of hypothetical is indicative of both the uncertainty surrounding the situation in Egypt as well as the disparity between the rhetoric of the Mubarak regime and the Egyptian people. In contrast with this type of hypothetical question, many users asked questions regarding the situation and how they could help, for example: “Dear all, are we losing it? Cairo is bustling today . . . What’s happening on the ground?” (2U20610) and “is there anything [Americans] can do to help? Anything at all?” (3U22706). Another general trend, though more present among administrator posts, was questions regarding pictures and videos from protests both in Egypt and satellite protests occurring around the globe. There seemed to be some effort to gather images and

testimonies from the protests, perhaps to help spread the human nature of the unrest.

Calls

Calls to action represented a dynamic and interesting subset of the sample. These types of posts were present, on average, in 15.8% of administrator posts and 14.2% of user posts. This group of posts included requests for aid and support. For example: “[Facebook], ATTENTION PLEASE: Mohamed Mahmod/Bab El Louq near Tahrir in URGENT need of Alcohol, Betadine (antiseptic), Water (mineral), plastic gloves, garbage gloves, plastic dishes, cotton, any old tshirts, anti-biotics, painkillers, Shaash (gauze). If you have contacts in the area, pls call [phone number omitted]” (2U20210). Though it may be impossible to determine if these calls were heeded and assistance was directed to those calling for it, these types of messages exemplify the ability of a large weak tie network to direct aid using various types of communication (in this case, Facebook and cell phones).

Posts calling for action were populated heavily by requests to join protests both within Egypt and internationally. Posts frequently called on individuals to join the protests, for example: “Please come to us in TahrirSquare” (2U12010) and “We need more people in Suez” (2A12505). These calls to participate were not restricted to participation in Egypt, as many were encouraged through the Facebook group pages to pressure their domestic government to act, including post 1A12710: “Please contact your government officials and representatives. Egyptians will be slaughtered tomorrow morning. Call the Egyptian embassy in your country” which continues “Your actions whatever they are WILL SAVE LIVES. . . Take an action now please”. These types of posts also included more specific examples, such as “Let’s flood the White House with

emails asking for President Obama to put pressure on the Egyptian Military to side with the people and ask Hosni Mubarak to resign. If the military joins the people, it's game over for Mubarak!" (3U20307). These calls to action within Egypt point towards a solidarity among the people under a common cause, but are also an indicator of the level of community felt within these groups. Furthermore, the calls for protests and pressure on governments outside of Egypt evidence the cross border nature of this sphere of communication. It was widely recognized by those within and beyond Egypt's borders that external pressure, particularly from the US, would be critical in forcing Mubarak to step down⁴⁶. Taken to the extreme, some posts attempted to organize Egyptians outside of Egypt to travel to Egypt and join their fellow Egyptians: "If anyone wants to travel to Egypt from UK to join protesters in Tahrir square, please call Assem on [phone number omitted]" (1A20903) and "From Spain, call Ahmed Youness on: [phone number omitted]" (1A20903).

Calls to action, though generally addressed to those participating in and observing the protests also extended to other groups, including the military and the Egyptian media. Many posts attempted to plead with the military to side with the protestors, such as: "APPEAL to the Egyptian army!! Turn your guns on the tyrants. God and the world are watching you. Do what is right. Support your defenseless countrymen! The decision is in YOUR hands now" (3U13005) and ". . . To army do not hurt your people the world is watching" (3U20506). Pleas also went out to local media to side with the protestors and spread the word of what was actually going on, "Please radio stations in Egypt...Spread

⁴⁶ The US Government contributed \$1.3 billion in military aid and \$250 million in economic aid to Egypt in 2010 alone (Aubuchon, 2012).

this message too, please . . . make tomorrow and future protests peaceful” (2U21010). These last examples represent an attempt to use a wide reaching electronic network to spread a message to various individuals. This use of multiple platforms is indicative of the network society that is widely connected through various nodes that cross borders (Castells, 2004; 2006).

Several posts also called on individuals near protests to remove or switch to a specific password for their wifi routers to allow anyone to access them. “To everyone who lives near Tahrir area, [please] remove wifi password for your routers so people can communicate and report what’s happening . . . they cut mobile networks around the area” (2U12503). Again, though it is difficult to assess the success of these attempts, they show how communication through social media via a wide reaching weak tie network has the potential to facilitate action.

Advice

Advice posts, which appear at a frequency of 36.4% in administrator posts and 19.4% of user posts, is an interesting category of posts because, along with calls to action, they represent the most likely group to incite action on the part of participants. Posts containing advice often consisted of warnings, usually pertaining to where police were actively and violently suppressing protestors, and served the purpose of alerting protestors and influencing their movements and perhaps even their actions. One post stated, “A large police car has been destroyed by protestors in Tahrir. Matareya protestors are saying police is attacking so badly now. They say it’s like a massacre” (1A12504). Another poste declared, “Police rounding up beating protestors on Corniche near 6

October bridge . . . burning tires blocking the road” (2A12610). These two examples serve as warnings for protestors and may have influenced where they went and what they did. Though it is difficult if not impossible to determine what real effect these messages had on protestors, particularly early on when their numbers were smaller, they serve as a means of informing those who were perhaps in danger or in need of assistance.

Practical advice was also conveyed regarding how to circumvent attempts by the Egyptian government to shut down the communication lines of the protestors, namely social media and cell phones lines, then the Internet entirely. “18 Ways to Circumvent the Egyptians Governments’ Internet Block [URL]” (3U13004) “Get Free Dialup Internet in Egypt Dial: [phone number omitted]” Login: toto” (2U13002). These types of messages were more frequent among page users, but this may be, in part, explained by the higher frequency of user posts compared to administrator posts as well as the differing nature between user and administrator posts. As discussed below, users were more likely to post more frivolous messages, therefore even though there were far more advice posts from users, these posts represented a lower frequency occurrence of overall posts. In general posts with information on how to avoid censorship took the form of a URL link, which, somewhat ironically, one needed to be connected to the Internet to access. Though Internet access was eventually cut off from an estimated 95% of Egyptians⁴⁷, it was still possible—though more difficult and less feasible for most—to connect to the Internet.

Several websites were linked in these groups that included instructions on how to access the Internet through land lines and how to use Skype to make international calls.

⁴⁷ Though the five major ISP networks in Egypt had been almost completely shut down, the network that was used by the Egyptian Stock Exchange and most major Egyptian banks stayed online (Murphy, 2011).

Examples of this include: “How to avoid censorship if you’re in Egypt: [URL link]” (3A12701) and “You can still Skype (outside Egypt) to mobile phones (inside Egypt) just not mobile to mobile” (2U12804). Once again, some of these techniques, particularly the use of international land lines⁴⁸, were unfeasible for most Egyptians, though it was still possible to do so and the means of doing so were spread through vast weak tie networks, social media being one part of this network.

Solidarity/Support

Messages of solidarity and support for the protestors in Egypt came in a variety of forms. The most common were simple “we stand with you” types of messages, for example: “Solidarity from Seattle!” (2U12510) and “You’re on the verge of victory Egypt. Keep going!” (3A21002) These types of messages were very common and originated from many places across the globe, particularly Europe and the Americas. It is often difficult to tell where these messages originated and, though not the majority, many seemed to come from Egyptians, either in Egypt or abroad, such as: “The Egyptian government has shutdown Al Jazeera in all of its cities. Mubarak still doesn’t understand that he’s going to be removed. Good luck today Egyptians!” (3A13002). Many users also reported what actions they had taken and what solidarity protests were going on globally: “Best of luck to you all . . . I’ve written to my country’s government, asking it to support the democratic movement in Egypt. I urge others to do the same with their own nations”. (2U12704) and “3 Rallies across Canada: Montreal, Ottawa & Toronto on Friday Jan28.

⁴⁸ Roughly 10% of Egyptians had landlines in their households in 2011 (Internet World Stats, 2012c)

Please join them. Support Egypt & Support Egyptians to win their freedom. Invite all your friends. Please make sure you send us videos and photos of the rallies please”. (1A12701). This level of solidarity and evidence of global cooperation are highly indicative of the nature of this example of communication in the new public sphere.

A common message was also of simple encouragement to the Egyptian people supporting their struggle. Many individuals from around the globe populated the group pages with messages of encouragement directed towards the people of Egypt: “Be strong, don’t give up” (3U12704), “Hold on hold on continue don’t give up” (2U20710). These three major types of expressions of solidarity, cooperation, and support, though not exclusive or exhaustive, together represent a global expression of unity that may have played an important role in feeding the momentum of the Egyptian people and helping encourage the protestors despite harsh and violent backlash from the Mubarak regime that often proved fatal⁴⁹.

Information

The most common grouping of posts are those that were generally deemed informative. Though, determining whether the information contained within a post was informative is difficult and subjective, some patterns did arise between the different groups that may suggest continuity. Firstly, administrator posts were much more likely to contain information, particularly useful information than user posts—83.4% compared to 44.2%, respectively. Secondly, across the three pages, administrator posts tended to contain

⁴⁹ Official reports indicate that 846 people—mostly protestors—were killed during the Egyptian Revolution (BBC, 2011)

information varied between approximately 70% and 90% frequency, whereas user posts containing information varied in frequency between varied much more; between approximately 30% and 60%. This disparity may be partly explained again by the fact that user posts tended to contain more messages of support and solidarity, which, in themselves, rarely contained any pertinent information.

Informative posts also carried much overlap with the above categories, particularly advice. This category also varied widely in what kind of advice was included: avoiding police, information released by the government, reports about violence, advice on what to do after coming into contact with tear gas, and much more. Though informative posts were far too varied in nature to examine in exhaustive detail, some typical examples include: “Henchman Suliman just offered an ultimatum to protesters. He stated protesters have a chance for dialog or there will be a Coupe . . . Thanks but no thanks Suliman” (1U20904). “Wikileaks: Isreal wants Omar Suleiman to take power after Mubarak, cable leaked on wikileaks, cable was from 2008 Link can be provided for further information” (2U20805). “Just heard from Al alam tv channel that UAE sent security forces to Egypt, Don’t know more about the story, they could either be there to protect Mubarak, escort Mubarak, capture Mubarak we don’t know” (2U20405). “Ahmed Ragheb of Hisham Mugarak Law Center says military police told him some 10,000 people detained in Cairo alone since Jan 25. Yet there are still millions in the street” (1A20807). These types of posts seem to be intended to simply keep those monitoring these pages informed and spread information to a wide audience. As the media was being

highly censored, both directly and indirectly⁵⁰, it was less likely that much of this information would have been spread through more traditional media in Egypt.

Opinion

One category that was difficult to broadly analyze was posts that contained simple opinions. These were present in 13% of administrator posts and 27% of user posts. Opinions varied greatly but were primarily centred on what was to come. Many speculated on what was going to happen once Mubarak fell and what direction Egypt would go in once the protestors were successful in their aims, particularly concerning the desire for democratic reforms and free elections. For example, one post stated, “VP Omar Sulieman today told some representatives of the opposition that Mubarak’s regime needs 6 more months of emergency law until the next election is done?!?! . . . Free & Fair election under normal law (not emergency) is the solution” (1A20610). Some also expressed misgivings about what democratic elections would lead to in Egypt, for example: “My Egyptian Brothers and Sisters keep fighting I’m sure that you are going to succeed. Just one point from my experience in Iran, a Religious government won’t bring you peace and democracy and even make the things worse” (1U12604). Posts condemning the Military and American support of Mubarak were also somewhat frequent: “The Military holds the key to ending this conflict. This has gone long enough and the people should get what they want. An end to a 30 year regime” (2U20303) and “USA keep your money you will find better uses for it” (2U13004). Once again, this

⁵⁰ Censorship was legislated through the Emergency Law but was also indirectly enforced through police intimidation.

category of posts varied widely and covered a multitude of topics, making it difficult to thoroughly analyze all the different opinions offered.

Outliers

Due to the qualitative nature of this study, certain posts were difficult to characterize, as they did not fit neatly into one or more of the above discussed categories. Due to their relative infrequency it was deemed unnecessary to create independent categories for each of these posts. Examples of these outliers include posts that were simple expressions and did not convey any information or critical opinion, nor did they advise or incite. For example, post (2U12602), “Drag that criminal Mubarak into the streets”. In this example, one could argue that the poster is making a call to action; however, it is likely that the intent was hyperbolic in nature and simply a general sentiment of negativity against Mubarak. Though there was a self-evident consensus present in these pages regarding where allegiances stood, there were rare posts that ran against this consensus. Post 2U20208, for example—”Enoughhhhhhhhhhhhhhh protesting!!!”—is problematic as it is difficult to determine what the user intended by this message. It is possible that this particular post was meant sarcastically or ironically, or could have been an attempt to elicit a response from others in the page⁵¹. It is equally possible that this individual was genuinely against the protestors and sided with Mubarak, it is impossible to know concretely. Though these “outliers” were present in two of the three pages, they were far too infrequent to warrant their own category or much examination. These posts do,

⁵¹Known as “trolling”—posting an inflammatory often off topic message to simply elicit a negative response and disrupt conversation.

however, underscore the strange environment of communication of the Internet that facilitates all kinds of dialogue that may not likely exist in most other media or communication.

Frivolous Communication

A common criticism of social media when discussed as a legitimate tool for communicating information is that it is often used for frivolous means. This is exemplified by the fact that celebrities garner much more attention than politicians or matters of global importance online—and in other media. It is not the purpose of this thesis to comment on the propensity for social media to be used in a frivolous manner; however, it does bear mentioning as a significant portion of the posts can be said to be of a frivolous nature. Firstly, 35-40 percent of all posts examined were simply messages of support or solidarity, like “Egypt will prosper” (2U20304), “You’re on the verge of victory Egypt. Keep going!” (3A21002), and “Be strong, don’t give up!” (3U12704). Though these messages do convey the support that the protest enjoyed on an international level, these types of messages can hardly be called rational or critical. They show support but fail to provide any useful information that any reasonable actor could use, beyond simply showing international support. These types of messages do reflect the fact that many users outside of Egypt were at least aware of the situation and lending their support. This support may have real consequences if it turns into pressure on the governments of these users to oppose Mubarak and condemn his crackdowns on protestors; however, there is little in the way of evidence to tie positive sentiments expressed online with real pressure being exerted on governments, particularly that of the

U.S. government, as they were a longtime supporter of the Mubarak regime and contributed US\$1.75 billion to Egypt in 2010 alone⁵². What these messages do represent is the momentum gained by the Egyptian people from international solidarity. This momentum may have strengthened the resolve of the demonstrators and made it more difficult to crush the uprising. Though there seems to be some correlation between international solidarity and the Egyptian people's resolve, it cannot be equated with causality. This issue is further discussed below.

Facebook as a Public Sphere

As outlined in Chapter 2, universality, accessibility, and the presence of rational critical discourse are the core pillars of Habermas' public sphere theory. In examining both the nature of Facebook groups as a communication tool, as well as the content populating these pages, a grasp of how universal, accessible, and critical these groups are can be gained.

Universal

Universality presupposes a culture of equality. Facebook groups provide an environment that offers users a unique form of universality. Firstly, all messages are standardized. Though all manner of content can be shared through these groups, there are only three main ways of contributing to these pages: text, media, and links. Text, by its nature, is highly universal in that all users have access to exactly the same means of expression. A

⁵²See note 46 regarding United States financial aid to Egypt.

character set allows individuals to communicate free from many social conventions that are an important factor in other forms of communication, face-to-face, for example. By converting what a user desires to express into text it becomes standardized and is not set apart by volume or speaker. Users are forced to express themselves via text and thus reduce what they can communicate. This standardization means that no one can “yell above the crowd” and afford some means of shouting down other users.

Users may also posts images and videos. This is particularly useful as a means to convey exactly what is happening to others. Many of the images and videos posted to the group pages were coming from the protests in Cairo, Alexandria, and Suez as events unfolded. This has the advantage of offering almost real-time images from the protests, as well as leaving a record of what happened and when. All posts are tagged with the time when were uploaded, allowing an observer to look back at a detailed record of what transpired in Egypt at an exact time and date. Users are also easily able to share images and video across pages and platforms. Users also often uploaded images and video clips that were reported in other media outlets or forms of social media. By reposting news reports, users were able to keep the community informed and create a repository of information and images.

Finally, users are able to post and share links to the group pages. This is perhaps the most versatile option afforded users. A URL link could direct a user to images, videos, news stories, blog posts, forum discussion, and a whole variety of information and discursive resources. This gave users the power to quickly disseminate information to large networks in real-time. As soon as a link was posted to a group page, anyone accessing that page could immediately repost it in another page on their personal page.

Again, this allowed information to spread quickly over vast loose tie networks and created a large repository of information for anyone with Internet access to view.

This restricting and defining characteristic of Facebook makes it an excellently universal medium. Facebook also allows for a great deal of semi-anonymity. Though users are identified by their Facebook account names, these can be real or pseudonyms. Though users may recognize someone they know as posting, there did not seem to be much recognition between users. Though, as discussed briefly below, this gave rise to the potential that authoritarian agents could use Facebook to identify individual users, the nature of the Internet is that there is almost always a means of tracking individual activity. To discount the potential power Facebook holds on this basis would require that the majority of the communication on the Internet be discounted as well.

Accessible

The second foundational pillar of the public sphere is accessibility. As pointed out above, the reduction of commenting to three categories lends universality to Facebook groups, it may also be restrictive. One fact not yet mentioned is the language the pages used. Though there are groups that primarily used Arabic, such as the Arabic version of We Are All Khaled Said, the majority of the dialogue was in English. Though Arabic posts did appear in the three pages examined, they were by far the minority and only two ended up being sampled (both of which were a mixture of English and Arabic). This poses a challenge to the notion of accessibility, as users would need to speak either English or Arabic to access the majority of the content.

Beyond the language barrier there is still a significant gap in technological

accessibility between rich and poor. Though Egypt only had Internet penetration rates of approximately 30% at the beginning of 2011, the cellular phone penetration rate was over 100%. As Facebook could be accessed via mobile phone many were still able to contribute content, particularly images and videos taken by protestors and observers. It is also worth noting that penetration rates in urban areas are commonly higher than rural areas. Internet Cafés in particular played a key role, as more than a quarter of Egyptian Internet users in urban areas access the Internet via these establishments (Internet World Stats, 2012b). Internet access is also available at a variety of other public locations, including airports, hotels, schools, restaurants and shopping centers. Internet access in public places is also available at a relatively low cost, making it affordable for most Egyptians living in urban areas.

The widespread availability of Internet access, high cell phone penetration rates, and relatively low cost in urban centers comes in contrast with the low levels of home access, the divide between urban and rural and the ability of the government to cut off Internet access to 85-95% of the country. Though there are several barriers to Internet access, notably cost and availability, it seems that Internet access was readily available in Egypt at the outset of the Revolution. This represents a major barrier to access when considering Facebook as an extension of the public sphere.

This, however, is complimented by users outside Egypt. As a network society, Egypt is connected to the rest of the world through a variety of ties, particularly communications ties. Many of the posts found in the Facebook pages were seemingly from outside Egypt—between half and two thirds in most cases—meaning that many were still accessing these pages even when doing so in Egypt became a challenge. This

introduces an interesting notion present in the data: Egyptians and non-Egyptians from around the world were involved in the dialogue and sharing of information and ideas. Information and media from the protests, particularly Tahrir Square, were being posted to these pages from inside Egypt, while information and media from protests outside of Egypt were also being shared through the same medium. Individuals outside Egypt offered their solidarity and support and organized hundreds of solidarity protests across the globe that pressured domestic governments to call for a regime change in Egypt (Tadamon!, 2011). These protests were in support of the Egyptian cause as well as to pressure governments to take a stance against Mubarak and pressure him to step down. The three pages examined included accounts, images, videos, and news stories from solidarity protests and demonstrations from all over the Arab World, North and South America, Australia, Asia, and Europe. This level of solidarity for a political crisis that was so new evidences how quickly the Internet allows ideas and opinions to flow internationally. Through media exposure and the spread of images and videos from Egypt, individuals from across the globe rallied to the side of the Egyptian people.

Beyond simply accessing the Internet there are some barriers to accessing the content of Facebook pages. The first major barrier is basic Internet and computer literacy. If an individual is unable to use the Internet they will be unable to access the wealth of content available online. This measure, however, is difficult to estimate and it can only be assumed that those with Internet access in Egypt have a basic literacy and would be able to navigate a platform like Facebook.

A feature of Facebook that grants it a high level of accessibility is the lack of pay barriers. Though individual users would require Internet access or a phone with such

capabilities, which is usually associated with a base cost, Facebook itself is completely free and open to anyone⁵³. Anyone with Internet access is able to view the content of the Facebook pages. To participate—post content or comment—users require a Facebook account. Again, these accounts are free to anyone and easy to set up. The fact that Facebook allows anyone to consume and contribute content from virtually anywhere in the world lends the platform a high level of accessibility.

Language also played a restricting role as the vast majority of the posts were in English or Arabic⁵⁴. Egyptian Arabic is the predominant spoken language in Egypt; however, many educated Egyptians speak English. This represents most often those with higher socioeconomic standing and it is assumed that such individuals would also have higher rates of Internet access, though that exact data is unavailable at this point. This study examines group pages that are predominantly English. These pages featured a heavy influence from users outside of Egypt and users within Egypt with Internet access and the ability to speak English. These pages produced a ménage of outside and inside contributors, creating an environment that factored in many perspectives.

The final major barrier to access is the attempts made by the Egyptian government to block access to Facebook and then the entire Internet. As noted earlier, the blocking of access meant that many Egyptians were unable to access the Internet and thus the content was heavily supplemented by users from other parts of the world. Though it was still possible to access the Internet within Egypt, it had become much more difficult for the average Egyptian to do so after January 27th when the majority of ISPs were shut

⁵³ see note 6 regarding sex offenders

⁵⁴ some posts in French and German, but they made up the vast minority and did not appear in the sample

down at the behest of the Egyptian Government (Kanalley, 2011).

Accessibility, though problematic due to socioeconomic issues, language, and government attempts to block access, is highly prevalent in the group pages themselves. Individuals were able to access up to date information from anywhere. Additionally, these pages remain intact and can still be viewed today. This allowed the protests to not only be updated live, but also provided an accurate record for those wishing to look back at what transpired, such as this thesis.

Rational Critical

In a general sense, Facebook group pages offer an environment in which rational critical debate can easily take place. Users are unrestricted in what they can communicate and are able to easily interact with each other. This platform does not restrict how users interact with each other; however, one of the most common criticisms of social media is that it is used primarily for frivolous ends. Though there is ample evidence that many of the posts examined in this study were completely frivolous, it is not the case that there were no posts of critical use or that the sum of the frivolous communication itself had no use or power.

Though there is some difficulty in defining rational critical communication some of the elements identified in Chapter 2 will serve as a guide in determining if the dialogue was rational critical in nature. Rational critical communication, for the purposes of this thesis, is contrasted with trivial communication. Habermas situates rationality within communication as opposed to being an inherent characteristic of the universe and states that all human speech has a telos, or an end (Habermas, 1981). Though this end may be

frivolous in nature, it is still the reason for the communication. Here the distinction is made between messages that have a non-trivial end, like informing, advising, or opining, as opposed to simply showing support or general comments regarding the state of affairs and both may be viewed as frivolous. Admittedly, this process was subjective and relied on the judgment of the researcher to determine what fell into the category of frivolous and what was considered rational critical, or simply useful.

Examples of some of the most common frivolous messages were those showing support and solidarity with Egyptians. “Canada loves you!!” (2U20710). “You’re on the verge of victory Egypt. Keep going!” (3A21002). Though these kinds of messages have an end, it is not a rational critical one, and is largely achieved in itself. Offering information regarding police activities are more rational in nature as they are able to act as a warning, advice, or incentive to someone, and thus are more likely to affect action. For example: “Protests now in AlMonoufia, Allsmailia & Suez with very harsh cruelty and attacks from the Police on protesters” (1A12704) and “Police rounding up beating protesters on Corniche near 6 October bridge . . . burning tires blocking the road” (2A12610) offer practical information that is not frivolous and can be seen as rational.

One of the most noticeable trends regarding frivolous versus rational critical posts is that administrator posts were much more likely to be rational critical and user posts were much more likely to be frivolous. It seems that those with more of an investment in the group pages were more likely to use it for a practical end. Many of the categories the posts were broken down into were more or less likely to be rational and critical in nature. For example, advice, calls, to action, and informative posts were usually categorized as being “useful” as they offered some information to those populating the group pages.

Though it is difficult to apply the label of rational critical onto much of the material present in these pages, there is clearly some material contained on these group pages that can be classified as such.

Punctuated Diamonds

From the discussion above it becomes clear that though it is by no means a perfect system, Facebook as a platform does fit into the theoretical extension of the public sphere in a networked society. Facebook provides a space that has great potential to act as a means of facilitating critical discussion and provides users with low cost tools that are relatively universally accessible. The teleological question then becomes, how are these tools used? Though in the clear minority, posts offering potentially vital information, facilitating cooperation, and allowing individuals to offer a critical opinion are punctuated throughout the three pages examined. Whether they were questions posed to the groups, advice given to those on the ground, or appeals to individuals to take action, this minority of posts is constantly present throughout the sample and seems to be coming from a variety of sources, both those involved in the conflict, those administering pages, and even those far and abroad. The potential for communicative action to be achieved partly through these pages, though not in the majority when compared to the whole, is clearly present. What, then, can be said of the *rest* of the communication that took place in these pages? Is the remainder of the communication, much of which originated from outside of Egypt simply noise—the rough around the proverbial diamonds—or could the majority of content serve some critical purpose in its own right?

Rough or Worthwhile?

Through examining the content posted to these three Facebook groups pages it has become evident that there is a great deal of “noise” present in the communication exchanges. Much of the information offered by users was of little practical use and simply opinions and messages of support seemed to make up a far greater portion of the communication than critical opinions and practical information. Though the more useful and critical responses were in the minority, they were present throughout all the pages examined and present daily. The ability of users to post massive amounts of information and content to these pages with relative ease is both a weakness and strength with regards to how Facebook is used as a means of affecting communicative action. The ease with which users and administrators can posts is problematic in how it is highly conducive to the trend of useful and critical posts being surrounded by a virtual flood of frivolous messages. Though these frivolous messages may have some useful effect in themselves, they also tend to have a drowning out effect—at least at a casual glance—on the more rational information being conveyed.

When examining this type of mass communication it is tempting to disregard much of what was being said as frivolous and characterize it as noise when compared alongside some of the very critical and informative content being posted through the same medium. This, however, would ignore greater implications regarding the power of momentum and significant amounts of solidarity. When compared one-to-one it becomes evident that posts conveying information or critical opinions to those of simple support and solidarity show the scales are clearly tipped in one direct. When comparing the whole of the content and considering the frequency with which individuals that were seemingly

detached from the situation were weighing in, a different picture begins to appear. When examining the media coming out of the protests there is a strong association, both on the part of the protestors and present in the international media coverage of the protests, between social media and the resolve of the Egyptians in the streets. What Facebook may more accurately represent beyond its ability to share critical and sometimes vital information is a community will that sided with the Egyptian people in their struggle against an oppressive regime. It seems somewhat obvious that the average netizen would side with the protestors; however, up until the events between January 25th and February 11th, 2011 international support was lacking on both a governmental and individual level. A clear example of this is the U.S. backing of Hosni Mubarak. Though they still financially support Egypt, the American Government, in the height of the Revolution, turned their back on Mubarak and called for a peaceful transition of power and called for free, open elections⁵⁵. This about-face in political stance must be, at least in part, attributed to both the international outcry against Mubarak, as well as the internal outcry coming from American citizens. This notion is well illustrated by the comparison between posts that called on Americans to pressure their government and posts of solidarity and support coming from American Facebook users. Though one could argue that an informative post requesting that Americans write their government asking for support complete with a URL link with instructions on how to do so may be seen as more useful and critical than an American showing their support for the Egyptian cause through these Facebook pages, examples of the latter category made up a large portion of

⁵⁵ U.S. President Barrack Obama made a speech on February 1st calling for a peaceful transition and indicating that the “status quo is not sustainable” (CNN, 2011).

the dialogue and accounted for exponentially more posts than the former.

What we begin to see is a picture of a page that is primarily populated by “frivolous” communication and punctuated with useful, critical comments. However, if one steps back and examines the pages as a whole these “frivolous” comments make up a much greater portion of the dialogue and show high levels of support and solidarity. Though one critical post may perhaps be perceived as a diamond in the rough, when taken as a whole, the “rough”—that is the more general trends present in the pages—can be viewed as a powerful example of communicative action. In this sense it seems that, though at a glance more obvious examples can be pointed towards as communication leading to communicative action, when examining these pages as a whole, what often seems to be of little use may have strengthened the resolve of the Egyptian people while indirectly pressuring Mubarak at an international level.

Discussion

Considering the above discussion, the research questions outlined in Chapter 3 can now be addressed. The core research question being: *In a networked society, do Facebook groups act as an extension of the new public sphere; if so, do they represent communicative action in political crises??* The nature of Facebook, as examined through the lens of the new public sphere, provides a platform in which individuals are relatively free to communicate within large groups and in a semi-standardized fashion with few barriers to entry. Though this does not automatically imply the presence of a rational critical dialogue, through the case studies here it has become apparent that, though not representative of the majority of the whole, rational critical discussion is present. It can

thus be concluded that Facebook offers an accessible and universal platform which offers at least the potential for a rational critical discussion, concretely fulfilling two of the three criteria of a public sphere and offering the potential to fulfill the third and final condition. Therefore, yes, Facebook *can* act as an extension of the public sphere in a network society but may not in all instances. It is certainly not a perfect model, but it does meet enough criteria to conclude that it can act as an extension of the public sphere.

The second condition of this question is whether or not Facebook groups represent communicative action in a political crisis. This condition is less clear in the example examined here, as it is more difficult to determine. As Habermas situates communicative action in linguistic communication—mainly argumentation and deliberation—one could argue that the critical discourse examined here consists of communicative action that may have led actual change.

Habermas defines argumentation as, “that type of speech in which participants thematize contested validity claims and attempt to vindicate or criticize them through argumentation”. (1981: 18) Though it is arguably true that the discourse present in these group pages is critical and at times argumentative, and that the forum provided by Facebook group pages creates a space that has the potential to facilitate this type of argumentation, there was little evidence of it actually occurring in the cases presented. This is particularly true of Group One, as only administrators were given the ability to post in the group—clearly the administrators were not arguing with themselves. What can be gathered from these two conclusions is a duality of a strong potential with little empirical evidence to act as evidence of actuality. Therefore, it cannot be said that the core research question is validated as being true, as one hand it is verified, and on the

other it is only potentially verified—and not empirically from the present example. Perhaps through replications of this study as Facebook groups continue to evolve as a communication tool this second condition could be verified empirically, but it has only been done so here theoretically.

Though it is impossible to determine how every individual user utilized Facebook groups pages in the examined time frame, some generalization can be made regarding *what ways individuals communicate within the Facebook network?* Through the analysis given above it is made clear that the majority of the communication present in the pages studied here were of a casual tone and somewhat frivolous in nature. Individuals did, at times, present ideas and arguments as well as critical information in the form of news articles, eye witness accounts, photos and video and a minority used Facebook as a tool to reach out for help. As discussed above, it would be a mistake to discount all the well-wishing and statements of support and solidarity as being of no value, as they may have not only reinforced the resolve of the protestors, but also used international governmental pressure to help force Mubarak to step down. This kind of indirect support of the Egyptian Revolution may be one of the biggest strengths of this new form of communication. This decentralized cross border means of communicating created a sort of global community of concern that acted as a support mechanism for those who were directly involved. This cross border element, a characteristic of Castell's network society and new public sphere theory (2004; 2006; 2008; 2011), though somewhat difficult to measure, seems to have been an active force during the Egyptian Revolution, although mainly in an indirect way. The ways in which Facebook groups facilitated communication in a many-to-many fashion is a new arm of global communication media.

For the first time it is groups of individuals communicating with groups of individuals in a fundamentally holistic manner that is characteristic of communicative action. Habermas' definition of communicative action as being two or more individuals interacting and coordinating action based on communication that is not specifically goal oriented (1981) fits well within the medium of Facebook group pages. Again, however, it must be stressed that there is evidence for communicative action present here; the *potential* for communicative action is more prominent than the empirical results. This inability to concretely identify communicative action present in these pages is both emblematic of the early stages of this specific type of communication—which may act as a model for future studies—and highlights a research gap that will be filled by emulations of this study, both in Arabic and English in this case, and other languages in other cases, as well as a need for other research designs to address the specific question of how individuals use these tools to communicate in times of political crisis.

As Egypt has been, here, conceptualized using Castells' network society theory, it is important to ask, *do these groups represent the three major aspects of the New Public Sphere?*: The three fundamental elements of Castell's new public sphere, which build upon Habermas' classical conceptualization—decentralized, cross-border, and many-to-many in nature—identified in Chapter 2 are all present both in form and content in the examined group pages. The decentralization is evidenced by the form of the forum by the fact that Facebook is a global platform⁵⁶ as well as by the content itself. Despite attempts to block access to Facebook and the Internet in general, which were partly successful, the

⁵⁶ Though based in the US, Facebook is active in over 200 countries worldwide (socialbakers.com)

content of the examined group pages remained not only intact, but continues to grow. Decentralization is a defining characteristic of the Internet, as no central body controls the content and the servers that hold the data are scattered around the globe. Facebook's servers, though the exact location is not publicized by Facebook, are commonly known to be located in the U.S. in various locations.

The content consists of posts that seem to originate in Egypt, especially in the early days before the attempts to suppress the Internet and Facebook, as well as countries all over North America, Europe, Africa, Australia, and South Asia. As evidenced by the large number of solidarity and support posts, Facebook groups exhibit a high level of cross border communication. The fact that the Internet is fully decentralized and Facebook itself is partly decentralized, coupled with the evidence from the data that the group pages' content originated from all over the globe, allow the conclusion to be drawn that these groups, acting as a new public sphere, are both highly decentralized and cross border. The final criteria of Castells' new public sphere, as examined here, is that the communication be in the many-to-many form, which is generally not possible with traditional media. One of the pages examined, Groups One, problematizes how Facebook group pages fit into this definition of the new public sphere, as one of the pages only allowed page administrators to post content. This page resembled a more tradition broadcast mode (one-to-many) of communication and should not, on its face, be taken as many-to-many. This, however, is not completely accurate, as the Facebook environment allows for users to share content from group pages on their personal Facebook spaces, as well as "like" posts from this page. Though this is hardly a many-to-many mode of communication, it is somewhat of an approximation, though a one way approximation.

The other two pages, Group Two and Group Three, are excellent examples of many-to-many communication, as users were able to post from freely in these spaces and reach a large audience. From this example it has, again, become evident that Facebook group pages have the potential to fit into this model of the new public sphere, but do not always do so in reality. It can therefore be concluded from this study that Facebook group pages have the potential to, and in two out of three cases examined here, do, follow the characteristics of Castells' new public sphere.

A major component of the dialogue present in these Facebook group pages is the international cross border nature of much of the communication: *Do these groups foster and encourage cross border solidarity and did it externalize pressure on the Egyptian Government?* Though there is no certain way of knowing how many of the posts were coming from outside of Egypt, the majority of the posts offering support and solidarity originated from non-Egyptians⁵⁷. Many international posts asked how they could help the cause, shared information regarding protests supporting the Egyptian people in locations around the globe, and serve to increase circulation of images and videos coming out of Tahrir Square. These international observers that took to Facebook to gather and share information as well as show their support may have contributed to the momentum of the Egyptian cause.

As Castells discussed the new public sphere in terms of the cross border nature of these spheres the Egyptian case here is no exception. Though it would be myopic and uninformed to make any claims of Facebook, or anything other than the Egyptian people,

⁵⁷ This is particularly true of posts after January 27th when the Egyptian government began suppressing Internet access in Egypt.

having “caused” the Revolution, it would also be equally short sighted to attempt to imply that these types of communication tools that were present did not play some role. As Shirky simply conceptualizes it, social media acts as an extra layer of communication, and though it is not a primary mover, its simple presence indicates it has some role to play (2009). In the same way that it would be foolish to claim that this Revolution could not occur without social media, it would be foolish to claim that this Revolution would have occurred as it did without the presence of social media. And a major component of the new public sphere of which Facebook is a part of is the cross border communication and solidarity that characterized much of the content examined in this study as well as the external pressures placed on the Egyptian Government by their close ties to the United States Government as well as the world economy. The Egyptian Revolution was imbued with an international cross-border nature partly because of the presence of Facebook’s facilitation of international observation and in some cases, participation.

.One fact regarding Facebook and the Egyptian Revolution that is worth identifying is its role as a repository of information. To do so the following question is considered: *Does Facebook act as a repository of information available directly to participants as well as for future study of the Egyptian Revolution?* The Facebook pages examined contained a large amount of information including first hand user generated content, including testimonies, images, and videos posted by those present during the protest to news stories and mini documentary style videos that reported what was happening. These sources of information were often simply posted by users and then shared between group pages. This is particularly true of Group One, which contained many posts from the Arabic version of the same page translated into English and reposted

for those who could not read Arabic.

Facebook, in this instance, provides a sort of ethnography of a major social phenomenon through a collection of communication and documentation. The continuing availability of the posts that occurred during the Revolution offers students of history a written record accompanied by images and videos, in great detail, of the timeline of events as well as the reactions of people from around the globe to a major social and political phenomenon. Though, as Morozov (2011) would argue, this information could be put to uses that could be detrimental and negative for the participants, it may also be used by individuals and groups in the future as an example of how these types of phenomena evolve and how individuals interact with them. The group pages examined here are highly characterized by international participation and if current trends continue and society is not likely to revert back to a pre-network society, these pages serve as an example of how individuals interact with the new public sphere and will provide them with information, accounts, and examples of communicative action during a political crisis. At the risk of developing a solipsistic tone, this study would not likely have been possible if Facebook was not such an effective repository of social, cultural, and anthropological information originating from various socioeconomic levels.

Finally, *is there strong evidence that these groups are used for meaningful, non-frivolous discussion?* The final research question posited in this thesis regard the meaningfulness of the communication contained within these pages. As outlined through the analysis of the data, it has become apparent that much of the communication present

in these pages is frivolous in nature⁵⁸. Though a minority of the posts examined here were rational critical in nature, somewhat frivolous seeming posts appeared in a much higher frequency⁵⁹. These more frivolous posts are not, however, useless. The potential to both reinforce the resolve of the protestors, as well as lobbying domestic governments to place increased pressure on the Mubarak regime may have played a role in the Revolution as well. By increasing international awareness through decentralized cross border communication, these groups increased awareness and made it more difficult for foreign governments to ignore the situation in Egypt. This culminated in a speech given by American President Barack Obama urging Mubarak to work with the people to peacefully transition to a democratically elected government. As the largest supporter of Egypt, offering over 1.5 billion dollars U.S. in aid the previous year, U.S. backing was of critical importance not only to the Egyptian economy, but its military as well; a pressure that may have encouraged the army not to side with Mubarak and pressure him to step down.

In examining the research questions that this thesis set out to answer, it becomes apparent that though not all could be confirmed, there is certainly potential for Facebook groups to act as extensions of the public sphere in a network society and exert the power of communicative action during political crises, at least in the case examined. Communicative action is not specifically goal oriented (Habermas, 1981) and involves individuals interacting and coordinating to affect societal level changes. Though these pages did not set out to do anything specific—they lack any kind of manifesto or policy

⁵⁸ It must be noted that frivolous is not used in contrast with critical or rational, but simply as a qualification of a trend in the data.

⁵⁹ See above note.

orientation—they may have been influential in orchestrating events. What can be said more definitively is that the presence of social media acted as an extra layer of communication and global exposure that certainly influence the way the Egyptian Revolution unfolded. We cannot say how the Egyptian political crisis of 2011 would have unfolded in the absence of social media, but what can be said is that it would not have unfolded as it did in their absence.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

This thesis is an examination of communication spaces and how their users interact with social and political phenomena. Beginning with a discussion around theoretical notions of the individual in society and the public sphere, as well as modern theories about networking and social media, many perspectives have been drawn upon. Through the research undertaken, this thesis attempts to better understand the role the social media environment of Facebook group pages played during the Egyptian Revolution of 2011. A time period was laid out and one case was selected for examination; however, they are both situated in larger contexts. Facebook is but one social media application in the sea of new media and communication technologies; likewise, the Egyptian Revolution is but one time period in a long and still ongoing process within Egypt, which itself is but one case within the larger context of the Arab Spring and the history of the region. As such, it would be fruitless to “conclude” a great deal, as the findings within this thesis represent only a small image of a much greater social and communication history within political crises. As such, we will not attempt to conclude as much as summarize the findings while identifying limitations, implications, and highlight a need for future studies that emulate the study conducted here as well as use exploratory study as a launching point for further investigations into the intersecting realms of political crises and emerging forms of media and communication.

Significant Finding

Through this exploratory study, communication made in Facebook groups dedicated to the cause of dissidents during the 18 day period referred to here as the Egyptian Revolution has been examined qualitatively with the aim of gaining a better understanding of the nature of the posts, both through examination of their form and content, as well as what their possible implications may be. Facebook group pages as a communicative tool and resource for information were used by both Egyptians and netizens around the world to draw attention and give momentum to the cause, coordinate action and offer critical information, and create a repository of information that allowed individuals in Egypt and around the world both at the time and looking back, as this study does, to gain a better understanding of the situation and the implications of the uses of social media in political crises. Though due to the nature of the media being examined here, definitive conclusions may be difficult to grasp, three broad findings can be clearly identified.

Attention and Momentum

The first major finding that emerges from this study is how Facebook groups helped keep concerned individuals informed and provided momentum for the movement. The Egyptian Revolution occurred in the midst of the wider context of the Arab Spring. Egypt, though arguably the most influential country in the region, was at the risk of being drowned out by the flutter of daily activity in the Arab World. Though it would be ignorant to claim that any one force beyond the Egyptian dissidents in places like Tahrir Square played a central role in advancing the Egyptian Revolution, a plurality of forces and pressures worked in concert to achieve the final outcome of ousting Hosni Mubarak

and his regime. One of these forces was certainly the global media establishment. The twenty four hour news cycle and constant availability of news media “updates” and the reduction of news to consumable content driven by views make it difficult for the importance of something like the Egyptian Revolution to resonate with audiences. One of the strengths of Facebook is that it is in many ways more personable and relatable than more traditional news media. By engaging individuals in conversations and providing them with up to date content including individual accounts, images, and electronic sources of information, Facebook brought a heightened level of attention to the situation in Egypt. As pointed out above, the key drivers of the Revolution were the Egyptian people; however, the degree of reliance on the global community that globalization of commerce and communication has facilitated makes no nation an island, all are dependent, to varying degrees, on foreign powers. In the case of Egypt, this was most pronounced by their relationship with the United States: billions in yearly economic and military aid made the Egyptian government somewhat reliant on the approval of the United States. This precarious relationship meant that a democratic nation like the United States would eventually pressure the Egyptian government if the American people were strongly opinionated about the crisis. Through the examination of the high level of foreign solidarity and support evidence in the data examined here it has become apparent that the vast majority of those who opined strongly sided with the Egyptian people and against the Mubarak regime. This support and pressure on foreign governments culminated in the majority of western governments voicing their concern and perhaps peaked in a speech given by United States President Barack Obama condemning the use of violence to suppress the uprising and calling on the Mubarak government to negotiate

a peaceful transition and embrace democratic elections.

Facebook was by no means the only medium that thrust the Egyptian political crisis into the minds of individuals around the world, but as the most widely used social media platform to date, it surely played a flagship role. Facebook group pages served to inform those within Egypt and abroad, both bringing attention to the cause and lending momentum to the protestors through passive acts, like showing solidarity and support through Facebook posts, and active support by petitioning foreign governments to pressure the Mubarak régime. Though it is difficult, if not impossible, to quantify the effect these actions may have had, it is certainly qualitatively evident that the attention and momentum boost that Facebook group pages lend the cause had some effect on how history was played out.

Coordination

Facebook group pages played a coordinating role in the Egyptian Revolution, as evidence in the data analyzed, by providing practical information to protestors, organizers, and outside observers. Though much of the content of these pages would appear to be frivolous in nature at first glance, a deeper examination show that not only did this frivolous communication have a role to play, but it was also punctuated by critical information and advice offered to both protestors and observers. Firstly, Facebook was used as a coordinating tool of various ends. As examined in the previous Chapter, individuals organized trips to Egypt using Facebook group pages to disseminate the necessary information; used these pages to communicate needs of the protestors, such as the need for medical supplies; and kept dissident abreast of the situation with examples

including areas that needed more individuals on the ground, when and where Mubarak forces were using violent tactics, and where there was activity. The coordinating effort was stymied by the Internet shutdown and the attempts to suppress social media within Egypt, though these efforts could not be completely suppressed. Though this attempted suppression by the Mubarak régime may have been somewhat effective in Egypt, it only served to further infuriate foreign observers. This second observation is backed by the post trends that arise from the data: when the Internet was shut down in most of Egypt, Egyptian page administrators' post frequency significantly dropped off, and completely stopped in one instance, while the same trend was reversed in user posts, particularly those that originated from non-Egyptians. When the Egyptians netizens could no longer easily access the pages, foreign netizens' posts spiked. This increase in activity seems to align with increased pressure imposed on the Mubarak régime by foreign governments. These vast weak tie networks represented a sort of grass roots coordination and culminated in many world leaders openly condemning Mubarak and the actions of his government and supporters.

We have examined two types of coordination here: one on the part of the Egyptian people using Facebook groups as a means to communicate important information in real-time and vast networks of individuals coordinating to pressure their own governments to act and influence the outcome of the conflict. Though these types of coordination are highly distinct, they both represent non-goal oriented communicative action, in which a body of individuals helped achieve an end without an organization structure or set goals, beyond the ouster of Mubarak and the support of the Egyptian people. The ability of Facebook communication to virtually eliminate barriers to entry and organizational costs,

as well as provide a free and open platform for discussion and organic coordination and cooperation, often in the form of solidarity and support, has proven to be a powerful force indeed. The analysis conducted here identifies how both the form and content of these Facebook groups facilitate communicative action within this extension of the new public sphere. Though only, perhaps, an “extra layer” of communication, the presence and prominence of Facebook communication during the Egyptian Revolution and the coordination that took place through this medium makes it worth historical consideration and academic examination.

Repository

The final major conclusion that can be drawn from this study is also one of the major facilitators of it. Facebook groups, as publicly available content that is free to access from virtually anywhere allow it to act as a repository of information that was both useful at the time and when looking back. By creating what amounts to a loose database of communication between thousands of participants and observers, Facebook group pages provide a record of what occurred and when. This repository provided a place to gather and store information accessible to anyone with an Internet connection and facilitated a great deal of sharing of information. Looking back, as this study does, this repository proves to be an excellent anthropological tool detailing not only the overall struggle and the participants, but also the basic communication and interaction between a substantial and diverse body of users. Facebook records allow us to draw conclusions not only about the struggle that occurred but also a historical account of how and what users communicated. The data collected here serves, in part, to enrich our understanding of the

past and provide future scholars with the opportunity to access an extensive dialogue comprised of participants and observers from across the globe.

In conclusion, the research conducted here leads the author to view Facebook groups within the greater context of social media as an extra layer of communication that builds upon older technologies. Social movements, uprisings, and revolutions are borne on the backs of the people being oppressed and their supporters; these people will wield the tools available to them to organize, communicate, and attempt to accomplish their goals by whatever means available to them. Facebook must be understood as one of many spheres of public discourse within the network society that is used as a means to effectuate an end. Though pundits on both sides of the spectrum have made strong statements regarding the worth of these tools, it would be myopic to discount them entirely and willfully ignorant to attribute any major social or political phenomenon wholly to them.

Implications and Limitations

From the outset the purpose of this study has been to examine a snapshot in time of the communication that took place in specific discursive spaces within the context of the Egyptian Revolution. The lens of examination used in this study has been tightly focused; as such, it will be important for future studies to focus attention on other examples and to broaden the reach to include more case studies and more communicative tools. The methodology has been designed to allow this study to be replicated within different contexts—such as other countries that underwent political upheaval during the Arab Spring—and focus on different tools—like Twitter, YouTube, or other social media

platforms—as well as in different languages and different social phenomena.

This study has been exploratory in nature and would benefit from other types of studies to compliment the findings and continue to further the academic understanding of what social media has to offer within social movements and political crises. Future research that examines this phenomenon comparatively and as a historical departure, as well as further confirmatory studies will increase our collective ability to understand some of the many complex and interwoven factors at play.

Social movements have a storied history of helping to shape societies and cultures. Within these movements we often see innovation, creativity, and the use of cutting edge technology: from the early utilization of mailing lists during the American Civil Rights Movement, to the use of silk screens poster printing during the 1968 Paris Student Uprising, to the pioneering of email networks during the 1999 Battle of Seattle demonstrations, dissidents seem prone to grasping onto whatever new technology or technique they can to advance their cause, and the Egyptian Revolution is no exception.

The relationship between technology and society is an immensely complex one that cannot be easily understood. This thesis examines a case in which a piece of technology—Facebook—and society intersected, likely altering the path down which both would tread. This thesis examines this relationship and puts forward data and analysis to attempt to better understand this relationship in an empirical, scholarly manner. This exploration of a social media in a specific context contributes to the understanding of how these tools are used and what effects they may have.

Thesis Summary

This thesis is an exploratory study with the aim of better understanding the social power of communicative action in times of political crisis using Facebook and the Egyptian Revolution as the example being examined. Using qualitative analysis as a means to draw conclusions for the thousands of individuals' posts collected, this study is an attempt to highlight the importance of social media communication by examining the form and content of a specific set of Facebook group pages within the established timeline referred to as the Egyptian Revolution.

The introduction begins by recounting the story of a young Egyptian who was unjustly murdered. This example is only extraordinary in that it became a symbol for the Revolution, as many before and since had suffered similar fates. The introduction continues by laying out the problematic and the circumstances in which these events took place. Facebook is the most widely used social media platform to date and Egypt is the most connected nation in the Arab world. These factors, coupled with the population demographics and unemployment trends, establish the volatile mixture of factors that led to the mass demonstrations that took place in Egypt at the beginning of 2011.

The analysis conducted is based on a literature review that examines major theories about individuality, society, communication, social movements, and the intersection of technology and society. This theoretical base provides the lens through which the data is interpreted and how the conclusions are situated. Beginning with an examination of some of the seminal works of John Locke (1686; 1690) and Jean Jacques Rousseau and leading into the critical theory of Jürgen Habermas (1981; 1989; 1996), the literature review chapter provides a philosophical and theoretical base to accompany the

analysis and discussion. Much of this work is steeped in the Habermasian conceptions of the public sphere (1981) and communicative action (1989). Departing from more classical theories, the literature review then considers two concepts introduced by Manuel Castells: the network society (2004, 2006, 2008), and the new public sphere (2004, 2008). These theories help situate the overarching review in modern society, which is highly characterized by high levels of ICT penetration and widespread use. Granovetter's weak ties theory (1973; 1982) is incorporated to help understand the dynamics of large groups of people who do not know each other intimately and yet can interact and cooperate. Texts by Eyerman and Jameson (1991), Tilly (1985), and Tourain (1981) dealing with social movements briefly explore the characteristics of social movements and help establish some parameters for studying the Egyptian case. Shirky's (2004, 2008) examination of how the Internet changes how individuals interact and how it facilitates different kinds of organization is considered, as well as dissenting perspectives from Morozov (2009) and Gladwell (2010), which offer criticism of the purported power of social media. Finally, several recent studies on the use of social media during social phenomena are examined to inform the choice of research design and methodology.

The research design and methodology for this thesis was informed by previous exploratory studies into social media use during social movements. Though there are influencing studies, the research design was not modeled after any specific one. Relying on qualitative methods, this study was designed to closely examine the form and content of Facebook group pages. Through the collection and sampling of posts based on daily activity, the design sought to establish post frequency by coding posts according to a criterion that was established while collecting the data. This design allowed the

researcher to become familiarized with the data before determining the categories with which to code the data. Finally, the data was collected chronologically, allowing for an frequency analysis that showed changes in daily activity. This technique was designed to allow the researcher to employ qualitative methods alongside the content analysis.

The data was collected in December 2011 from three prominent Facebook pages active during the above mentioned 18 day period. From a total of nearly 6000 individual posts, 604 were sampled for examination. The data is primarily be examined through a qualitative lens, focusing on the content and meaning of the information posted, though some general trends are also identified and factored into the analysis. Through this analysis, trends and patters are identified and observations are noted regarding the nature of the communication.

The central research question seeks to determine in what ways Facebook was used during the Egyptian Revolution and to determine how they operated as an extension of the public sphere. The research questions are concerned with what was being communicated and how, as well as the critical or frivolous nature of the use of Facebook during the examined timeline.

Chapter 4 outlines the findings and analysis. Beginning with specific observations and moving to more broad trends, the findings and analysis chapter begins with a discussion on trends and the categories the posts were organized into. The use of direct citations of posts allows this chapter to show what was contained in each category and give examples of the types of content that was found in the data set. Following the examination of the categories, a theoretical lens is applied to attempt to understand the data by employing the established theoretical frame found in Chapter 2. Finally, each

research question is addressed, concluding Chapter 4.

The concluding chapter finds that though much information communicated through the examined Facebook pages was trivial in nature there was also evidence of rational critical discourse, though to a limited degree, and a wide repository of useful news and information, ranging to real-time updates to general information that protestors could use. Facebook may also have acted as a source of momentum that helped fortify the resolve of the Egyptian people and pressured foreign governments to take the side of the dissidents and pressure the Mubarak government to give in to the demands of their people. These findings contribute to the collective understanding of what power social media holds evidence by the case examined in this thesis.

The reference list indicated all sources used in the writing of this thesis, as well as when they were accessed and, where applicable, where they may be located online.

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