

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2011

INTERNET RIGHTS AND DEMOCRATISATION

Focus on freedom of expression and association online



The internet and social movements in North Africa

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Creating free space

Many taboos and “red lines” are imposed on offline spaces like newspapers and TV channels in several states in North Africa, as well as many limits on freedom of expression and the right to assembly. It is not easy to establish a newspaper in Libya or a human rights organisation in Algeria or to call for a march in Bahrain.

Cyberspace is almost the only free space for many groups and individuals to practise not only their right to freedom of expression and speech but also to practise their right to assembly and to form associations and groups with common interests.

Since 2004, Egyptian netizens and bloggers have been able to utilise online platforms for different causes effectively. Many taboos were broken by online spaces, empowering offline media to address several topics that they considered “red line”. These topics included torture in police stations, sexual harassment issues, religious minorities, violations committed by Mubarak supporters, etc.

Human rights NGOs, bloggers and journalists played complementary roles at that time – and still do – confronting violations and providing immediate help to victims and those in need. Journalists used to share information and pass multimedia recordings of torture to bloggers so that they could post them online when their editors refused to publish details of the cases in newspapers. This fear was due to local laws or the response from security authorities or even that a publication would lose advertisements.

During the revolution, the Egyptian cyberspace erupted in extremely rich content, which took different forms – text, videos and pictures. Two main things affected the content in cyberspace: the first was what happened on the ground and the second was the accessibility of communications platforms.

From 14 January to 24 January 2011, netizens kept sending invitations to demonstrate on 25 January – National Police Day in Egypt – against corruption, unemployment and torture. In order to motivate participation, netizens posted human rights reports and statements on the status of

human rights in the country online, as well as video clips of different torture cases, and pictures and footage from previous peaceful assemblies. Practical information was also provided, such as legal and medical tips for participants taking part in peaceful assemblies, tactics for using online platforms and mobile phones to organise, the locations and timings of demonstrations on 25 January, and hotline numbers for immediate legal and medical help from human rights NGOs.

From 25 January to 6 February 2011 Egyptians experienced a series of crackdowns on communications platforms. Activists’ mobile lines and hotline numbers were shut down and social media websites (including Twitter, Facebook and Bambuser) and newspaper websites were blocked, while landlines did not work in some areas in Cairo. Later, when communications were restored, netizens gradually posted what had happened when communications were shut down, including content showing violations and violence committed against peaceful demonstrators. The timeline of the communications shutdown by the Egyptian authorities is shown in Figure 1.¹

Before the internet was totally blocked, some activists were able to post information, videos and pictures from demonstrations and to cover what was happening offline. This was very important: besides offering concrete evidence to the world of the clampdown, it proved the government was just spreading rumours and false information of the security situation. There had been, until now, a big gap between what individuals posted and circulated online and what the state-run media broadcasted and published. At times this gap was extreme. For example, when netizens and activists posted pictures online of hundreds of thousands of demonstrators in Tahrir Square, the state media was showing a picture of an almost empty square which it called “live” footage!

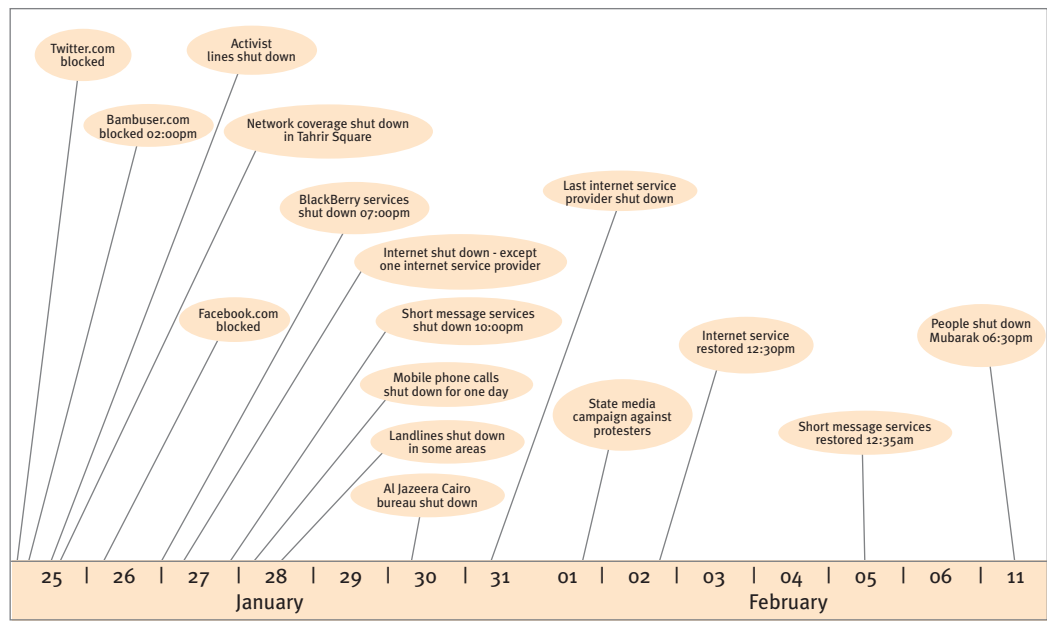
Although some downplay the role that the internet played in the revolution, during the uprising online platforms were the only space where Egyptians could share what they really faced and went through.

Of course, many taboos are broken in offline spaces, but still – even now – online platforms are in some cases the only space where Egyptians can address topics that offline platforms cannot. These include human rights violations committed by

¹ Online version of the diagram: flic.kr/p/9RNhpz

FIGURE 1.

Timeline of the communications shutdown in Egypt during the revolution



military officers and other topics related to the army. These online spaces continue to put pressure on the authorities to address issues in the offline world.

Nevertheless, it is important not to magnify the role of the internet during the revolutions and uprisings; the Egyptian revolution is not a “Facebook revolution” or “Web 2.0 revolution” or similar meaningless terms. But online platforms were the media arm for Egyptians during the revolution, a space for Egyptians to share their experiences and thoughts and to show the truth of what happened.

Circumventing repressive regimes

Online spaces are frequently utilised to expose human rights violations that governments try hard to keep unknown. Videos published online showing particular violations taking place create a strong wave of resistance over time in different online and offline platforms – like the videos exposing police corruption in Morocco² and torture in police stations and violence in Egypt.³

During the revolution in Tunisia, the Tunisian cyberspace in general – and blogosphere in particular – was almost the only source of information,

pictures and videos of what was happening on the ground. Offline platforms did not pick up on what happened in Tunisia in the beginning and even when coverage took place it was limited.

In Libya, Tunisia and Syria, where there is excessive control on offline media platforms, the internet was the place where individuals could share what was happening.

Media tent in Tahrir Square

One of the first media tents set up in January in Tahrir Square was organised by a group of friends (including bloggers, human rights defenders, political activists) using their personal laptops, cameras, memory sticks, hard disks, cables and other devices that might be needed. We also put up a sign⁴ that said “Point to upload pictures and videos”. The main thing we did was gather all kinds of multimedia from demonstrators in Tahrir Square, then made the content available online.

For me, doing this was very important because I believed that making those pictures and videos public would help everyone to really understand what was happening on the ground. It would allow them to follow the situation and be able to assess it, as well as have an overview of what happened

2 Video from July 2007: youtu.be/K6FCsv8RhsM and October 2008: youtu.be/4XpMmyUVdLo

3 Video from November 2006: youtu.be/HMeXkZX9_E8 and youtu.be/YVxeyq_KD4

4 flic.kr/p/geEabY

in different cities in Egypt, given that those people who had pictures or videos were not only from Cairo.

Providing the content⁵ also helped to prove that the government at that time was just spreading lies and rumours and manufacturing fake images of the protests. The content that we uploaded proved that violations were taking place, whether a video showing police shooting at peaceful demonstrators, or a picture showing a sniper pointing his gun at someone.

Challenges facing online communities

There are several challenges facing online communities and activists. These frequently relate to the violation of an individual's privacy and legal threats that any netizen could face based on their online activity.

These threats have become more intense due to international companies providing technical surveillance and monitoring systems to governments around the world. These companies simply develop programmes that enable governments and security agencies in the ruling regimes to violate anyone's privacy, monitor anyone's activity and impose censorship. Consequently, they are helping governments to fabricate cases against political activists and human rights defenders on charges like "destabilising order", "defaming state leaders", "spreading rumours to overthrow the regime" and many other charges that regimes set to minimise the work of civil societies and activists towards securing human rights.

For example, in 2009 – and maybe even earlier – a European-based company with its headquarters in the United Kingdom called Gamma Group International offered the State Security Intelligence (SSI) in Egypt security software. SSI units describe this software in their internal communications in August 2009 as a "high-level security system that has capabilities not provided in other systems. Its most prominent capabilities include hacking into personal Skype accounts, hacking email accounts associated with Hotmail, Yahoo and Gmail, and allowing the complete control of targeted computers." In December 2010 the SSI reported that the software can "record audio and video chats, record activity taking place around hacked computers with cameras and make copies of their content."

This is just what we knew after Egyptians stormed SSI headquarters, discovering the documentation.

Even without the use of such programmes, netizens might face trial due to content posted online. This happened to human rights activist Nabeel Rajab, director of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights. Rajab was criminally charged in April 2011 for publishing images on his personal account on Twitter.⁶

Twitter and Facebook usage in North Africa

The Dubai School of Government issued a report in May 2011 on social media in the Arab region; the statistics on Twitter and Facebook usage in North Africa are presented in Table 1.⁷

From the numbers in the table, it is clear that the percentage of Twitter and Facebook users is not high compared to the population sizes. Consequently, online content does not have a high, direct impact on offline communities. Instead it can be said to influence offline activist platforms, which in turn may influence offline communities.

Conclusion

Each space used to share information and knowledge has its own key players, target groups, and positive and negative points. There are differences, not gaps, between the press and radio stations. There are also differences between online and offline tools and communities, and these differences are normal – the "gap" should not be the main concern.

Individuals and groups use online tools to complement their offline work in mobilising people for events, and online tools are used to provide coverage of and document what is happening offline. The relationship between both online and offline communities can be complementary.

"Crossposting" is the main way that online communities help spread information and create a wave or buzz on particular incidents. Bloggers from Syria, Bahrain, Morocco and other states played an important role by crossposting the content coming out of Tunisia and Egypt. This pushed offline media to use online content in their work, enabling more people to become aware of what was happening and helping the content reach more and more communities.

The internet is a free space that enables individuals and groups to practice their rights in a different way when they have no space offline. Online tools

⁵ Content available online through torrent links: is.gd/bAFmHg and is.gd/SaZJVZ and pictures available at: flic.kr/s/aHsjtogRvz

⁶ www.anhri.net/en/?p=2412

⁷ www.dsg.ae/NEWSANDEVENTS/UpcomingEvents/ASMROverview2.aspx

TABLE 1.

Twitter and Facebook users in North Africa

Country	Population	Twitter users (average between 1 Jan and 30 Mar)	Facebook users (4 May)
Algeria	35,953,989	13,235	1,947,900
Egypt	85,950,300	131,204	6,586,260
Libya	6,670,928	63,919	71,840
Morocco	32,770,852	17,384	3,203,440
Sudan	44,103,535	9,459	443,623
Tunisia	10,476,355	35,746	2,356,520

help social movements to better communicate, share their ideas and achieve impact and improvements. Building movements and improving human rights and political situations can only be done offline with the mobilisation of people, using all available tools, including the internet.

I joined the street demonstrations in Egypt on 28 January. Before that, together with my colleagues, I was providing legal and medical assistance as well as documenting violations. In the beginning, for me, the day was just another demonstration that might continue for several days and end up in a brutal clampdown by the police.

On 2 February I realised it was a revolution, and people would not leave the streets until Mubarak was brought down.

During the revolutionary events, and on a daily basis, it was clear that we went through a wide range of feelings. You get angry, upset, aggressive, afraid, feel courage and fear and suddenly happiness and hope.

The most important thing that made me feel comfortable and believe that anything is possible was that I was not alone in the streets. Many people were around helping, showing support and solidarity. This would not be possible on the internet alone. ■

In the year of the Arab uprisings **GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2011** investigates how governments and internet and mobile phone companies are trying to restrict freedom online – and how citizens are responding to this using the very same technologies.

Everyone is familiar with the stories of Egypt and Tunisia. **GISWATCH** authors tell these and other lesser-known stories from more than 60 countries. Stories about:

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GISWATCH also includes thematic reports and an introduction from Frank La Rue, UN special rapporteur.

GISWATCH 2011 is the fifth in a series of yearly reports that critically cover the state of the information society from the perspectives of civil society organisations across the world.

GISWATCH is a joint initiative of the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) and the Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries (Hivos).

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