Between the Hammer and the Anvil: Blogs, Bloggers, and the Public Sphere in Egypt

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August 2010

A Thesis submitted to
the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

This dissertation uses Habermas’s concept of the public sphere to explore the impact of alternative and citizen media, especially blogs, in Egypt. It examines the dynamic relationship between politics and media in Egypt to better understand the role of new media and blogs in this process. In interviews conducted in Egypt, I asked bloggers, human rights activists, and journalists about their motivations for blogging, their identities as bloggers and activists, the nature of the relationship between blogging and traditional media practitioners, and the challenges that hinder the efficacy of blogging as a social and political force. These interviews revealed that Internet access is no longer a barrier to the political use of the Internet. Instead, the responses of my participants suggest that the existing challenges include cultural norms (for example, gender bias), economic factors (for example, poverty), and the widespread perception that the Internet is not a legitimate means for political change. Aside from the common motivation for blogging—self-expression—blogs in Egypt are used to criticize the political order and mobilize public opinion against the regime. An in-depth case study and textual analysis of one of Egypt’s and the Middle East’s most popular political blogs—Al-Wa‘i al-Masry—shows that political blogging in Egypt is a main form of political activism.

My interviews with bloggers, human rights activists, and journalists, as well as the case-study and textual analysis of Al-Wa‘i al-Masry show that blogging in Egypt has succeeded in breaking down political and social taboos in Egypt (often ignored by the traditional media) and has played an important role in the current debate about political reform in Egypt. However, despite these successes, one of the major conclusions of this dissertation is that the very language used in blogs undermines the possibility of
achieving the rational-critical discourse necessary to meet one of the most fundamental conditions of the Habermasian public sphere, and further that this language raises doubts about the civility and ethics of blogging in general.

Résumé

Cette thèse utilise le concept de Habermas de la sphère publique pour étudier l'impact des médias alternatifs et de ceux créés par des citoyens, notamment les blogues, en Égypte. Il examine la relation dynamique entre la politique et les médias en Égypte afin de mieux comprendre le rôle des nouveaux médias et des blogues dans ce processus. Dans des entrevues réalisées en Égypte, j'ai posé des questions à des blogueurs, des activistes des droits humains et des journalistes, sur leurs motivations pour les blogues, leur identité en tant que blogueurs et activistes, la nature de la relation entre le blogage et les professionnels des médias traditionnels ainsi que les défis qui entravent l'efficacité des blogues comme force sociale et politique. Ces entretiens ont révélé que l'accès à Internet n'est plus un obstacle à l'utilisation politique du Web. Au lieu de cela, les réponses de mes participants suggèrent que les problèmes existants comprennent, entre autres, des normes culturelles (par exemple, le sexisme), les facteurs économiques (par exemple, la pauvreté), et la perception largement répandue que l'Internet n'est pas un moyen légitime pour des changements politiques. Outre la motivation commune pour le blogage, les blogues «d’expression de soi» en Égypte sont utilisés pour critiquer l'ordre politique et mobiliser l'opinion publique contre le régime. Une étude de cas approfondie et l'analyse textuelle de l'un des blogues politiques les plus populaires d'Égypte et du Moyen-Orient,
Al-Waî al-Masry, montre que les blogues politiques sont une des principales formes de l'activisme politique en Égypte.

Mes entrevues avec des blogueurs, des activistes des droits humains et des journalistes, ainsi que l'étude de cas et l'analyse textuelle de l'émission Al-Waî al-Masry démontrent que les blogues égyptiens ont réussi à briser les tabous politiques et sociaux dans cette région (souvent ignorée par les médias traditionnels) et ont joué un rôle important dans le débat actuel sur la réforme politique en Égypte. Toutefois, malgré ces succès, l'une des conclusions majeures de cette thèse est que, le langage même, utilisé dans les blogues sape la possibilité d'atteindre les discours rationnels critiques nécessaires pour répondre à l'une des conditions les plus fondamentales de la sphère publique de Habermas. En outre, ce langage soulève des doutes quant à la civilité et de l'éthique des blogues en général.
Acknowledgements

Praise is, first and foremost, to God who has created the very means to reach this moment, and yet, according to a Prophetic saying, “Whoever does not thank people has not thanked God.” Thus, I find myself obliged to thank the many people who have supported me throughout my program of study.

First of all, I would like to thank my supervisor Professor Darin Barney. To fully enumerate the debts that I have accumulated over my six years of study with him would be a task too lengthy for this small space. Certainly, and without exaggeration, my sense of gratitude for his unwavering support and his undying good humour and ready encouragement are debts that can never be repaid with mere words. Yet, I hope these few admittedly insufficient remarks can stand as a humble token of my eternal gratitude and thanks for Professor Barney’s many, many kindnesses. Without his support throughout my doctoral journey, his confidence in me, and his encouraging positive attitude, this dissertation would likely never have reached completion. I can tell you, Professor Barney, that I have learned from you not just a discipline or a discourse, but even more importantly, important values and an attitude toward life. The way you have sustained our advisor-advisee relationship over the last six years is an example that will be a challenge to follow. Thank you so much, and it has been a privilege to have you as a professor and mentor.

Many professors, colleagues, and departmental staff have all contributed in myriad ways to facilitating my progress through this degree and to making life as a graduate student easier. All members of the department have encouraged me to think more critically about the field of communication studies. Many thanks go to the faculty,
staff, and graduate students of the Department of Art History and Communication Studies who made the department feel like a second home. Perhaps most important of all, I have learned from all of them about what communication is on a more intimate, more human level.

I want to thank Professors Will Straw, Jonathan Sterne, Jenny Burman, and Becky Lentz for their kind words and generous offers of support and encouragement. They always were available to lend a hand or, in many cases, an ear. I want to thank my thesis committee, Professors Marc Raboy and Carrie Rentschler for graciously participating in evaluating my proposal and comprehensive exam. Having them in the committee greatly enriched this study, and they provided insightful suggestions during the preparation of my proposal. They always made a point to keep their doors open.

My acknowledgment is also extended to the government of Egypt and the University of Assiut for giving me this opportunity and the financial support to make it a reality. I also would like to single out for special mention my Egyptian Professors, Dr. Mohamed Sayed Mohamed and Dr. Adly Reda, to whom I am wholly indebted. Their pioneering work has been a crucial source of inspiration for this dissertation.

Many thanks to my departmental colleagues, especially my fellows at the study space provided by the Canada Research Chair in Technology and Citizenship. I would like to mention particularly my colleagues and friends Everett Wilson and Andrew Gibson for their help and support. Jorge Frozzini also has been a special person in this journey. I stand indebted to him and his girlfriend Marie for their warm friendship. They always were supportive of me and my family throughout the years of study.
I would like to extend my thanks to my close friend Kamran Karimullah at the Institute of Islamic Studies at McGill for his help, especially in this dissertation’s proverbial “eleventh hour.”

My friendship with Dr. Wayne Egers has been a close one and deserves special acknowledgment. I am indebted to him for editing my work, giving constructive feedback, and also for his enthusiastic encouragement for my writing and my research. Dr. Egers has not been just an editor. I have benefited from his telephone conversations, advice, and inspirational discussion on different issues on my research. Thank you so much Wayne for your support and friendship over the years of study. Mine is a debt of gratitude that perhaps can never be repaid.

Generous financial support has come from Professor Darin Barney, the Canada Research Chair in Technology and Citizenship, and the Beaverbrook Canadian Foundation/Media@McGill. Each has provided substantial financial support toward the completion of my dissertation. Profuse thanks for monetary support and resources are due to both.

Finally, I would like to thank my wife Fayza and my children Mohamed, Omnia, and Karim. They all have born so much through the hard times and have done so with love, support, and patience. My deep gratitude to my parents in Egypt whose prayers I heard throughout. The completion of this degree is an honour in which they all share.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

In recent years, one of the most remarkable changes in the Middle East has been the diffusion of digital and network technologies. As Thomas Friedman, a columnist for *The New York Times*, puts it: “The Internet, blogs, YouTube and text messaging via cellphones, particularly among the young... is giving Middle Easterners cheap tools to communicate horizontally, to mobilize politically and to criticize their leaders acerbically, outside of state control” (*The New York Times*, June 14, 2009).

In the contemporary age, media and communication technologies are embedded in our everyday lives, and those who are interested in the emerging shape of politics and culture should be aware of the important role of the new public spheres facilitated by these technologies (Kellner, 1998). Over the past decade, accelerating changes related to the emergence of new information and communication technologies have occurred in the media landscape of the Arab world. By the early 1990s, satellite broadcasting and the Internet had begun to be diffused throughout Arab countries, leading to changes in political communication and media coverage of public affairs. As a result, the mainstream media—or specifically, the state-controlled mainstream media—are no longer the “only player on the block.”

Online journalism and the blogosphere in the Arab world are providing a major forum for voices from outside the mainstream discourse. Since they provide an avenue for the expression of dissent, they can be categorized as an alternative public sphere. Much of this online journalism and blogosphere deals with political, cultural, and social issues and other matters of importance to the Arab people. However, the impact of blogs...
in the Arab world, particularly in Egypt, and their role in political change is debatable and described as a “vulnerable potential,” similar to the broad evaluation of the Internet and computer-mediated communication in other parts of the world. Investigation of this issue in the Arab context has mostly been confined to the realm of conflicting opinions without the benefit of evidence, and many anecdotal accounts exist concerning the impact of blogs (both positive and negative) on Arab society.

Nevertheless, new voices and progressive movements in the Arab world have employed the Internet to express and disseminate their political opinions and programs. Like the other new emerging political and social movements across the world that attribute their success to the availability of computer and communication technology, these new and progressive Arab voices—for example, the Kefaya movement and bloggers for change in Egypt—to a large extent, are not part of any established political parties and usually associate the experiences of everyday life with a normative vision that is translated into political action, which results in the emergence of what Dahlgren calls in a different context a “plurality of alternative public spheres” (Dahlgren, 1991, p. 14). Moreover, these alternative public spheres seek to spread the view that the existing social and political system does not serve the goals and ambitions of Egyptian society.

Historically, almost all the traditional Arab media have been instruments of the state, especially the broadcast media, which has been instituted as a government monopoly devoted to the activities of the political leaders, and the print media, which has suffered from direct state censorship and self-censorship by both editors and publishers (Ayish, 2002; Amin, 2002; Ghareeb, 2000 p. 397). To spread freedom of expression and democracy to Arab societies in which authoritarian rule has long been predominant, hope
has been focused on emerging information and communication technologies, exemplified by the Internet (Kalathil & Boas, 2003). As McNair (2006) argues, a correlation exists between the evolution of New Information and Communication Technologies (NICTs) and a growing determination to sever totalitarian and authoritarian regimes across the world, ushering in a new era of democratization and facilitating the reemergence of an Arab public sphere, or more accurately, the emergence of various Arab public spheres (p. 162).

With the growing diffusion and popularity of the Internet in the Arab world since the mid-1990s, along with other transformations in the media landscape locally and globally, it has become important to assess the different aspects of the influence of the Internet in terms of how well it is helping to build and sustain alternative or new public spheres. The new modes of political communication, as represented by individuals and social groups using new media, have become resources for political debate and action, and consequently, an important constituent of the public sphere. Although emerging alternative media in the Arab world utilize new communication technologies such as the Internet, as of yet, this phenomenon has not received much attention from Arab researchers. Despite the critical importance of understanding the ways in which relevant social actors utilize new technology in a political and historic context, most of the research literature has not addressed this issue.

My dissertation examines the potentials and implications of online journalism in general and blogging in particular, for constituting alternative Arab public spheres different than, or parallel to, the official public sphere. Thus, I explore the various electronic forms of the Arab alternative media associated with the Internet, especially
weblogging in Egypt, as an emerging practice and a form of alternative media. Blogs fall within the concept of “citizens’ media,” which describes “a complex interaction between people’s attempts to democratize the mediascape and their contextual circumstances” (Rodriguez, 2001). Atton’s (2002) concept of the “alternative media” draws on similar ideas and offers a similar rationale: alternative media as a process that is central to the dissemination of views and opinions in the formation of “counter-publics.” Such a process facilitates not only interpretation of events but also offers participants access to other participants’ lived experiences, sometimes incorporating these “as part of a network of socio-cultural and sociopolitical projects” (Atton, 2002, p. 153). From Singer’s (2005) perceptive, blogs also are a complementary form of “participatory media” (p. 173).

These alternative outlets are opinion dailies that in just a few years have become a new and significant factor in the Arab public sphere. Dahlberg (2001) argues that these alternative media are attractive to people due to their approach to everyday lived reality and their focus on discussions about the real political problems faced by those who use them. Significantly, the Internet has the potential to facilitate an agenda of public discussion not only with respect to the opinions of the public at large but also among the cultural and political elites, and traditional journalists in general. The central focus of my dissertation is an examination of the extent to which blogs redefine and actualize the concept of the public sphere, along the lines developed by Jurgen Habermas. In addition, my project reassesses the notion of the Internet as a democratic medium in the context of quasi-democratic countries like Egypt. Specifically, I conduct semi-structured interviews with bloggers, human rights activists and journalists to derive qualitative data concerning the practice and impact of emerging media in Egypt. In addition, I perform a case study
of one of the most famous politically-oriented Egyptian blogs—Al-Wa‘i al-Masri (Egyptian Awareness)—by the outspoken blogger and political activist Wael Abbas.

Hypothesis and Research Questions

My hypothesis is that the Internet and online journalism as practiced in Egypt over the past decade has helped to create a different type of public sphere in Egypt and, as a result, has facilitated a dialogue about democracy. This hypothesis raises some specific concerns: Do the new modes of political communication over the Internet, especially the blogging phenomenon, serve as sites for free public discussion? Does the Internet help to produce a functioning alternative public sphere? What is the current state of Internet development in Egypt? What is the extent of online participation in the alternative public sphere in Egypt? The main question is whether blogs and the new forms of online journalism facilitated by the Internet constitute an emerging public sphere or, on the other hand, whether they are a source of “noise” rather than information that, if not necessarily always rational, is of some value in the processes of democratization (McNair, 2006, p. 135).

Following are related questions that helped to guide my investigation into the blogging phenomenon in Egypt:

1) Does the use of blogs in Egypt help journalists to avoid government censorship? If so, how?
2) Does the use of blogs in Egypt put pressure on the government to shift their policies towards a more democratic friendly perspective?

3) Do traditional media, such as newspapers, incorporate the more uncensored ideas expressed in blogs into their own news reporting? Do blogs help to determine what is actually reported in the news media?

4) What motivates political bloggers to risk their reputation and freedom to express their views? How important is the interactive nature of the Internet to the continued risk taking of bloggers in a non-democratic context?

5) How do bloggers perceive their audience and to what degree is this perception impacted by the new media technology? How important is feedback from the audience to the blogger?

6) Does limited access to the Internet in Egypt impact on the nature of pro-democratic blogging and the level of governmental response?

7) In terms of education, class, gender etc., what are the characteristics of the blogging community in Egypt?
8) Is a code of ethics (for example, with respect to credibility) developing in the blogging community in Egypt, and if so, what are its positive contributions to expanding pro-democratic ideals? What are its pitfalls?

9) How do bloggers collect and process their information? What is the general level of journalistic experience of bloggers? What is the blogging community’s perspective on the traditional notion of a journalist’s role?

10) Is the outcome of Internet and alternative media use in Egypt identical to the use of the same technology in democratic countries?

11) Why do bloggers do what they do, since blogging is such an investment in time, energy, and money? What is the “pay-off” for bloggers?

Two main factors reflect the proper functioning of the public sphere and democracy: the quantity of participation and the quality of discourse (Calhoun, 1992, p. 1). Accordingly, with respect to my research, the question is: to what extent does blogging as practiced in Egypt meet the criteria defined by Habermas’s (1989) concept of public sphere and subsequent others’ interpretations of this concept? How large must the body of users be to generate opinion-formation and expression that could be recognized as a full-fledged alternative public sphere? Do these new modes of political communication enlarge the quantity of participation at the expense of the quality of discourse (one of Habermas’s reservations about the transformation of the bourgeois
public sphere) (Calhoun, 1992, p. 3)? In addition, to what extent do the social conditions in Egypt facilitate the conditions for constituting a democratic public sphere made possible by the Internet? In other words, is the outcome of the Internet and alternative media use in Egypt identical to the use of the same technology in democratic countries?

**Theoretical Framework**

In Chapter 2 of this study, I discuss the critical debates surrounding the theoretical and methodological foundations of arguments concerning the Internet and its relation to the public sphere and democracy. In my study of the Internet and a potential alternative public sphere in Egypt, I use the relevant theories and methodologies developed in the Western literature on the media and public sphere. While situating and adapting these approaches to a different social, political, and cultural context, I maintain a constant awareness of the differences and similarities between these two worlds. The principal framework of this study depends on Habermas’s notion of the normative public sphere (Habermas, 1989). In addition, I anchor the study in a theoretical framework that draws concepts from related fields of inquiry such as studies of virtual community, citizens media, democracy, and interactive journalism.

Since Habermas developed his theory of the public sphere in the context of the liberal model of Western Europe, some may argue that it is not relevant to the context of Arab societies because of their governments’ authoritarian control of the media and public discourse. However, with the current transformations brought about by emerging information and communication technologies, the concept of the public sphere has become essential for investigating the democratic status of non-western countries and
non-liberal polities. Moreover, online deliberation is not confined to the context of Western democracies, since examples exist of deliberative democratic projects conducted in quasi-democratic countries—such as the project of Malaysia.Net—which operate effectively despite media censorship of political issues (Dahlberg, 2001).

McNair (2006) argues that what has been true for advanced capitalism has also come to be accepted as true for the developing world, and for those countries now in transition from various forms of authoritarian government to more democratic polities (p. 136). Specifically, McNair points out that: “The evolution of a public sphere is... part of the process by which democracy evolves within nation-states. The public sphere can come into being without democracy... but democracy cannot come into being without a public sphere” (p. 140). The theory of the public sphere suggests that a free and independent media functions to facilitate public political debate and the formation of civil society (McNair, 2006, p. 162).

Realizing the importance of contextualizing debates about the public sphere and democracy in the Arab world, Lynch (2003) argues that the model of the public sphere still offers a uniquely useful way to think about non-Western and even non-democratic societies. Thus, in Chapter 3, I will explore the relationship of the Egyptian political system and its interaction with the media system. This chapter will serve as a contextualization of the political environment in which blogging journalism has emerged in Egypt and how it has influenced debate about political concepts like freedom of expression and civil society. As Lynch has pointed out, the concept of the public sphere can be used to analyze the complex formation and articulation of public opinion even under conditions of state repression common in the Arab world. He argues that in
contrast to the relative closure of domestic public spheres in the Arab world, Arabs have long turned to the transnational level for political debate, transcending state borders and thus constituting a unique transnational dimension of the Arab public sphere (Lynch, pp. 58-59). Even in spite of strict censorship laws in Arab countries, elite Arab public opinion has been engaged in political discourse in a transnational Arab public sphere through a “migrating Arab press” that emerged in the 1980s (Miladi, 2003, p. 153). With respect to this phenomenon, McNair (2006) argues that: “If the Habermasian ideal public sphere cannot exist where democratic institutions are absent or undeveloped, it is not unreasonable to predict that the emergence of the latter will be assisted rather than constrained by the existence of the embryonic public sphere made up of Al Jazeera and other independent Middle East media” (p. 149). Although actual public decision-making in the Arab world has been largely influenced by government-based news media, successive transformations of public spheres—from the radical pan-Arabist radio broadcasting of the 1950s, to the Saudi-dominated conservative television and newspaper public sphere of the 1980s, to the new media of the late 1990s—have shaped the context of Arab politics (Lynch, 2003, p. 61). The new Arab media have created a rich information environment that directly challenges the state-controlled domestic media. Specifically, the phenomenon of Internet encourages Arab regimes to reconsider their decisions to stop newspapers at the border, since people can read them online. In addition the Internet enlarges the readership of newspapers and gives them a far greater reach than ever before (Lynch, 2003, p. 62). Importantly, as Lynch (2003) suggests, this new Arab media environment seems to point to the existence of multiple public spheres rather than a single one (p. 58).
As McNair (2006) argues, the blogosphere and the new formats of political debate provided by private satellite channels (such as Al-Jazeera) with their high degree of freedom and professionalism can be characterized according to Habermas’s public sphere as a “‘defeudalisation’ of the public sphere, with the citizenry constituted not just as spectators of power, but as participants in deliberative democratic process” (p. 67). Chapter 4 of this study will focus on Egyptian political blogs, as well as journalists and human rights activists who use weblogs as a new journalistic medium that serves as a potentially powerful alternative to traditional media. After all, McNair has convincingly argued that the public sphere in the Arab world can be characterized as being composed of three kinds of media: national media, transnational satellite news, and the Internet, which includes millions of independent home pages and blogs that make up a blogosphere. Moreover, these three tiers of media also embody the characteristics of a normative public sphere: accessibility, independence, and influence (McNair, 2006, pp. 140-143).

The promises and communication possibilities offered by the Internet—especially its hypertext structure, archival search processes that provide accessible data banks of previously published materials, interactive capabilities, empowerment of individuals to customize their own favourite news, and provision of anonymity—prove that it has a capacity to enhance the public sphere (both locally and globally) by enabling new communicative spaces and alternative public spheres to develop (Dahlgren, 2001; Sparks, 2001). These characteristics expand the narrative boundaries of traditional journalism, and combine the two critical communicative functions of the public sphere, which include the collection and dissemination of information and the provision of a forum for
public debate (Friedland, 1996, p. 202). Interestingly, many of the current arguments that address the democratic potential of new communications technologies are still grounded in Habermas’s model of the public sphere, and whether the Internet can constitute a public sphere remains a matter of great debate that ranges from the optimism of those who argue that the Internet can strengthen deliberative democracy and is an ideal medium for producing a pluralistically constituted public realm to the pessimism of those who contend that the Internet merely reproduces the undemocratic conditions of the mass media systems that preceded it (Gimmler, 2001). This dissertation will attempt to engage these debates in the specific empirical context of the emerging public sphere in Egypt.

**Blogs and the Public Sphere**

Many forms of electronic discussion groups on the Internet offer templates that users can use to post messages to engage with the ideas and events of common-interest communities. These blogs range from the primitive to the sophisticated, depending on the software application used, the skill of user, and the rules that govern them (Kawamato, 2003; Imfeld & Scott, 2005). A “Weblog” can be defined as “an online diary, a page of small entries chronologically organized down from the latest entry. It is also characteristically rich in hypertext links to other sites” (Matheson, 2004, p. 448). In another definition, Weblogs are defined as “diary-style Websites that generally offer observations and news listed chronologically on the site as well as commentary and recommended links” (Johnson & Kaye, 2004, p. 622). Weblogs are run mostly by individuals or groups who update them regularly by using content management software
that allows a relatively quick and easy addition of fresh information and links to other Web sites (Kawamato, 2003; Matheson, 2004b).

Many view blogs as the application that most incarnates the democratization of communication promised by the Internet and related technologies, arguing that all social actors’ voices may be heard, and all audiences can become active publics. Some news organizations have created segments for blogs in their news programs to enhance their coverage of politics and civil affairs, and many journalists use blogs as trustworthy sources of information, relying on them for new ideas and information (Singer, 2005; Johnson, 2005). Singer’s (2005) study explores how journalists are incorporating blogs into their coverage of politics and civil affairs. She shows that journalists, especially those from the national media outlets, are moulding blogs to fit and enhance traditional professional journalistic norms and practices (Singer, 2005).

McNair (2006) argues that the blog is the electronic version of the coffee houses and salons of early modern Europe, but they are larger in scale and much more accessible (p. 154). The greatest potential impact of blogs on the public sphere might be from those that identify themselves as journalistic in nature and provide access to information in the form of news and commentary, and usually have links to other online sources. Moreover, those blogs that deal with issues in the political domain of the public sphere also have been characterized as sources for news and information—often read and often cited—by journalists in the mainstream media, organizations, and individuals (McNair, 2006, p. 126). As such, Chapter 5 of this dissertation serves as a case study of Al-Wa’i Al-Masry (Egyptian Awareness), a highly influential political Egyptian weblog. This case study is intended to measure to what extent and in what way these blogs act as a public sphere for
political activism. Questions remain about whether political blogging can play a critical role in creating a virtual public sphere in which participants come together and engage in meaningful deliberation. Chapter 5 will try to gauge the exact modality of this role and its limits.

The online journal *Arab Media & Society* devoted its February 2007 issue to these themes. In one of its articles, Lynch points to the potential of Arab blogs to transform Arab public opinion and thus to function as a catalyst for political mobilization and political activism. In addition, he argues that blogs have the potential to teach people how to engage with politics, and the argumentative and analytic art, a function that the media and political parties in the Arab world have failed to successfully achieve. Moreover, blogs could be the best way of enhancing political accountability and transparency. Even so, Lynch puts forward three main reasons why we should not overestimate the impact of blogs in the Arab world and their potential to bring about political change. First, he points out that blogging remains the activity of a tiny elite. Second, he argues that once bloggers have been recognized as politically influential, Arab regimes, more often than not, crackdown on them. Third, the publicity of blogs and their audience is still very small. Nevertheless, he states: “If blogs cannot constitute a genuine public sphere without reaching a mass audience, they still might form a counter-public, an incubator of new ideas and new identities which evolves alongside and slowly reshapes the mainstream public from below” (Lynch, 2007, p. 5). This is the prospect this dissertation sets out to investigate.
Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

With the declining role of traditional political institutions, political communication, and the public sphere, politics increasingly has been mediated by new media and communication technologies. Additionally, the range of political discourse in the mainstream media has diminished, paralleled by an increasing tendency towards the commercialization of the traditional media and its decreasing role in democracy. At the same time, the increasing proliferation of the Internet has given rise to expectations about its potential as a kind of an idealized participatory model of the public sphere, and to the idea that it might help to facilitate the emergence of a new form of alternative counter public sphere. Moreover, Arab countries have not escaped the influence of the international trends of globalization and the current transformations of the media landscape due to the evolution of new media technologies.

In considering the implications of the Internet for political discussion and democracy, and its relationship to politics, the concept of the public sphere must be at the heart of any discussion. Thus, the diverse theories and concepts of Internet studies and studies of the public sphere are employed in this chapter to address the political consequences of the Internet. Over the years, a great deal of research has examined whether the Internet is a public sphere in terms of Habermas’s theory of the public sphere, and the role that the Internet plays in deliberative democracy. So, the first part of this chapter begins with the definition and history of the Habermasian public sphere, mapping its emergence as a space outside the state in which private persons held public
conversations on topics of public relevance. Then, the decline of the Habermasian public sphere in Western Europe is examined, highlighting the criticism levelled at Habermas’s ideal of the bourgeois public sphere, particularly with respect to the changing role of new media. The chapter then proceeds to map the literature on the role of the Internet in political communication and its potential for deliberative democracy and a deliberative public sphere.

Finally, the chapter draws on concepts from related fields of inquiry, such as studies of online and interactive journalism, and grassroots citizen’s media. The emergence of blogs and their proliferation as a popular form of online communication, especially political blogging, is put forward as an example of how the Internet as a medium is much more participatory and democratic than the traditional media, since it encourages public conversation and debate by expanding and renewing the concept of the public sphere, especially as a space for the political activism, organizing, and mobilizing of marginalized voices.

The Habermasian Public Sphere: Definition and History

Since the English translation and dissemination of Jurgen Habermas’s *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* in 1989, the concept of the public sphere has been a theoretical and normative foundation for debates about the changing role of the mass media in public life and for media theory in general. In addition, with the emergence of new media technologies and their diverse applications, the concept of the public sphere has been recurrent and reinvigorated.
In his historical analysis, Habermas (1962/1989) traces the structural causes of the emergence of the liberal democratic bourgeois public sphere in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in the West, and its decline in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Habermas’s theory of the public sphere grew out of “the project of Enlightenment” by reconstructing the public sphere as a domain of uncoerced conversation. For Habermas, the public sphere is a domain in which the critical reason that represents the essence of the democratic tradition is central, rather than the instrumental reason characteristic of much of modern state and economic practice (Poster, 1997, p. 207). This new public sphere offered citizens the possibility to discuss matters of common interest through using their own critical reason. According to Habermas (1989), the public sphere is “made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state” (p. 176). Within this context, citizens can assemble and unite freely, and express and publicize their opinions freely. Habermas (1991) elaborates on the notion of the public sphere as:

a domain of our social life in which such a thing as public opinion can be formed. Access to the public sphere is open in principle to all citizens… Citizens act as a public when they deal with matters of general interest without being subject to coercion (p. 398).

In that public sphere, the new principle of publicness has nothing to do with what Habermas refers to as the “representative publicness” of the European Middle Ages during which the power of the ruling nobility and the feudal powers represent their authority “before” the people rather than for the people (Habermas, 1991, p. 340). The publicness of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in Europe does not reflect the interests of the populace—being more like a status attribute of kings and lords—and thus, this representative publicness achieved its most elaborate expression in the arena of the
courts, and thereafter its significance declined (Thompson, 1993, p. 175). As Peters (1993, p. 545) explains, the sense of “public” in “representative publicity” does not support access for citizens’ participation and discussion. Rather, it suggests the display of prestige not critical discussion, spectacle not debate, and appearance before the people, as on a stage, not for them. In other words, Peters (1993) argues that representative publicity is tied to persons rather than principles.

With the demise of feudalism and the development of new institutional forms of political power, and with the development of commercial capitalism and its wide circulation of commodities and information, a new kind of public sphere was created in early modern Europe—the bourgeois public sphere. Representative publicness, which existed as an arena for the spectacle and display of authority, gave way to the new sphere of “public power.” According to Habermas (1991), “‘Public’ no longer refers to the representative court of a person vested with authority; instead, it now refers to the competence-regulated activity of an apparatus furnished with a monopoly on the legitimate use of force” (p. 400). In other words, this public power or “public authority” began to refer less to the domain of courtly life and increasingly to the activities of an emerging system that had legally defined spheres of jurisdiction and a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence (Thompson, 1993, p. 176). Between the realm of public authority or the state and the private realm of civil society, a new sphere of “the public,” which Habermas calls the “bourgeois public sphere,” was constituted by private individuals who came together to create a public and join in the debate of matters of general interest, including discussions about the regulation of civil society and the conduct of the state (Thompson, 1993, p. 176; Habermas, 1991, p. 401). Curran (1991)
argues that, according to classical liberal theory, the public sphere is “the space between government and society in which private individuals exercise formal and informal control over the state” (p. 29).

Based on Habermas’s concept of the public sphere, Calhoun (1992, pp. 12-13) defines four main concepts that govern institutions that practice the public sphere: 1) the notion of common interest that presupposes the equality of status and the “bracketing” of status differences, 2) the sole arbiter of any issue is the best rational argument and not the identity of the speaker, 3) all sorts of topics are open to discussion as long as their discourse is defined by the public as a common concern, 4) and the principal of inclusivity. In addition, Nancy Fraser (1992) explains Habermas’s concept of the public sphere as follows:

The idea of ‘the public sphere’… designates a theatre in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk. It is the space in which citizens deliberate about their common affairs, and hence an institutionalized arena of discursive interaction. This arena is conceptually distinct from the state; it is a site for the production and circulation of discourses that can in principle be critical of the state. The public sphere in Habermas’s sense is also conceptually distinct from the official economy; it is not an arena of market relations but rather one of discursive relations, a theatre for debating and deliberating rather than for buying and selling. Thus this concept of the public sphere permits us to keep in view the distinctions among state apparatuses, economic markets, and democratic associations, distinctions that are essential to democratic theory (pp. 110-11).

Thus, Calhoun’s focus on the necessary inclusivity and rationality of Habermas’s public sphere and Fraser’s focus on its intrinsic discursive nature together articulate a clearer picture of what the public sphere, at its best, can be.

One of the main media developments that facilitated and brought into existence the bourgeois public sphere was the rise of the periodical press, which began to appear in some parts of Europe in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and which
represented a main resource for the discursive foundation of the public sphere. In addition, the rise of a variety of new hubs of sociability and culture in urban centers of early modern Europe, such as coffeehouses, salons, and reading and language societies, was also an important development. These centers of sociability became new cultural institutions in which private individuals gathered together to engage in critical discussion about the activities of the Parliament and Crown (Thompson, 1993, pp. 176-177). These new sites that prevailed in the eighteenth century and helped to produce “the Age of Conversation” gave birth to an ideal of free communication that is at the core of Habermas’s project. With this transformation, the press becomes the site of publicity—instead of the court—in which a critical audience from the middle classes begins to take shape. Critical discussion becomes the normative mode of public communication in which equality is the norm and status is formally set aside, and in which persuasion and the best argument is favoured (Peters, 1993, p. 552).

Habermas (1991) pays particular attention to the important role played by the politically-critical press that was central to the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere. He argues that newspapers transformed from merely collecting and disseminating the news to become vehicles for, and guides of, public opinion. He adds that the press remained an institution of the public itself, operating to provide a site for, and to intensify, public discussion (Habermas, 1991, p. 402).

**Decline of the Public Sphere**

By the second half of the nineteenth century, the conditions and foundations on which the bourgeois public sphere of the seventeenth and eighteenth century had been
established had undergone a transformation that resulted in, or helped to bring about, the decline of the bourgeois public sphere in its classical form. The separation between the state and civil society, or the frontiers between the public and the private sphere, began to blur. The state began to assume an increasingly interventionist character and took on more responsibility for managing the welfare of its citizenry (Thompson, 1993, p. 177), which also blurred the boundaries between the state and civil society and transformed the relationship between citizens and the public authority of the state from one of antagonism to collaboration (Peters, 1993, p. 558). The salons and coffee houses witnessed a decline in significance, and journalism lost its critical function, as it became more commercial and focused on entertainment (Thompson, 1993, p. 177).

By the mid–nineteenth century, the organs of publicity had become a platform for public relations and advertising. For example, the press had transformed from a press engaged in the public use of reason and diverse viewpoints to a mass press focused on the commercialization of the participation in the public sphere. Habermas (1989) argues that in this consumerist culture, the organs of publicity tended to refocus their concern on the maximization of sales and the depoliticization of content. As a result, the press lost its influence as a central institution of the critical public sphere: “Editorial opinions recede behind information from press agencies and reports from correspondents; critical debate disappears behind the veil of internal decisions concerning the selection and presentation of the material” (Habermas, 1989, p. 169). Simply put, Habermas found that the quality of the discourse, in which the bourgeois public sphere of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was constituted, was diminishing, whereas, at the same time, the quantity of participation was expanding to include more and more participants (Calhoun, 1992, pp.
However, with respect to Habermas’s public sphere, the quality of the discourse is crucial: “not only does participation need to be widespread, but it must be rational” (Schudson, 1992, p. 147).

Also, among the changes related to the transformation of the press was a shift away from prioritizing political and politically-relevant news towards favouring soft news and human interest topics. As a result, Habermas (1989) argues that the press with its new content “has a tendency to present a substitute more palatable for consumption and more likely to give rise to an impersonal indulgence in stimulating relaxation than to a public use of reason” (p. 170). Habermas holds an even more negative view of the electronic media, such as radio, film, and television, arguing that these new media have changed the form of communications and that their impact is more penetrating than was ever possible for the press. Their format excludes the reactions of their recipients, depriving them of the opportunity to respond or to disagree. Habermas (1989) points out that: “The critical discussion of a reading public tends to give way to ‘exchanges about tastes and preferences’ between consumers…. The world fashioned by the mass media is a public sphere in appearance only” (p. 171).

The commercialization of the press and the transformation of the communication environment transmuted the public sphere into a field for advertising. The media was invaded by consumer advertising and the public relations industry, as the competition among class interests entered the arena of the public realm, and new publicity techniques went further than mere advertising and performed what has been called “opinion management.” Unlike advertisers that direct their messages to private people as consumers, the practitioners of public relations distinguished themselves from advertising
by laying claim to the public sphere and directing their messages to “public opinion” or private citizens as the public not as consumers (Habermas, 1989, p. 193). According to Habermas (1989, p. 194), “opinion management” appropriates and exploits the news events that attract attention; its central task is the “reorientation of public opinion” and the “engineering of consent” by creating a staged “public opinion” and a false consciousness among people.

For Habermas, the consequences of these developments is a kind of “refeudalization” of the public sphere: the public sphere transformed into a “managed show,” its function to legitimate the acts and self-interest of public authority and other political and economic elites seeking the assent of a depoliticized population, which is excluded from public discussion and the decision-making processes (Thompson, 1993, p. 178). Moreover, as a result of the transformation of “the public sphere’s preeminent institution, the press” and the employment of sophisticated new media techniques, the function of the principle of publicity changed. Instead of functioning as a site for nurturing critical reasoning among citizens, publicity was transformed into an instrument for implementing the policies of interest groups. The public sphere no longer functioned as a public of private persons acting as individuals; instead, it had been replaced by “a public of organized private people” (Habermas, 1989, p. 232; Habermas, 1991, pp. 403-404). As Peters (1993) suggests, “representation” now takes place through the media rather than through the king’s body. An emergence of new commercial actors of media power, and diminishing access to public communication result in a change in the essence of publicity “from a principle of political truth-seeking to a principle of commercial promotion; public relations replaced public opinion as the basis of industrial legitimacy”
(Peters, 1993, p. 560). In other words, Peters argues that a public sphere that is dominated by commercial media is not a realm in which all can find access and in which arguments clash freely, but an arena for competitive claims to power (p. 560).

**Criticism of Habermas’s Ideal Public Sphere**

Habermas’s ideal of the bourgeois public sphere presented in his *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* has been subjected to analysis and criticism to the extent that this ideal has been said to exist in theory alone (McLaughlin, 1993) or merely in the imagination (Taylor, 2004, p. 85), and its discourse is retained as a model or a vision that has never been fully realized at the high level of reasoned discourse characterized by Habermas (Dahlgren, 1991, p. 5). Most critics argue that Habermas’s public sphere is a single, unified, and homogeneous public space that restricts participation to the dominant rhetoric, usually “white, male, literate, and propertied,” and thus, it should be abandoned so to accommodate a multiplicity of voices, which unfold in a public space made up of heterogeneous and contestatory subject positions (Knapp, 1997).

An extensive challenge to Habermas’s account of the rise of the public sphere comes from feminist scholarship that addresses the essentially gendered nature of the public sphere itself. The “official” bourgeois political public sphere was limited to propertied, educated men and a few literate, elite women—most often the wives of bourgeois family heads—whereas women and servants took an active role in the literary public sphere that formed around discussions of literature (McLaughlin, 1993, p. 602).
The “official” bourgeois political public sphere also excluded other forms of “competing counterpublics, including nationalist publics, popular peasant publics, elite women’s publics, and working-class publics” (Fraser, 1992, p. 116). Fraser (1992) questions Habermas’s conception of a single public sphere, arguing that it does not reflect accurately the “actually existing” democracies full of inequalities and subordinate groups. She refutes the claim that the bourgeois public sphere was open and accessible to all, arguing that full accessibility was not realized. Fraser (1992) disagrees with Habermas’s claim for the “bracketing of social inequalities in deliberation” and argues that this is a misleading assumption that:

> usually works to the advantage of dominant groups in society and to the disadvantage of subordinates…. [For all members in society to achieve ‘participatory parity’] it is not sufficient merely to bracket social inequality. Instead, a necessary condition… is that systemic social inequalities be eliminated (pp. 120-121).

Besides the dominant public sphere, Fraser (1992) argues that throughout history, “subordinated social groups” have constituted alternative publics or “subaltern counterpublics.” In stratified societies or egalitarian, multicultural societies, “the ideal of participatory parity is better achieved by a multiplicity of publics than by a single public” (Fraser, 1992, p. 127). Some theorists also have highlighted the significance of a variety of popular social and political movements in the early modern period, which were characterized by conflictual relations that helped to shape the formation and development of the bourgeois public sphere (Thompson, 1993, p. 180).

As Calhoun (1992) explains, Habermas’s *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* drew criticism from leftists “for focusing on the bourgeois public sphere to the exclusion of the proletarian one, for an inadequate grasp of everyday life (including mass media) in advanced capitalism, and for exaggerating the emancipatory potential in the
idealized bourgeois public sphere” (p. 5). In other words, Habermas has been criticized for idealizing the rational discourse of the bourgeois public sphere, neglecting “the extent to which its institutions were founded on sectionalism, exclusiveness, and repression” (Eley, 1992, p. 321). Habermas has admitted to the relevancy of these arguments and acknowledged the need for a more flexible approach to popular social movements and popular cultural forms, which allows for the possibility that they may have a shape and dynamic of their own (Thompson, 1993, p. 181).

Habermas’s concept of the public sphere has had significant impact in debates about the changing role of mass media in public life, and the democratic role of mass media in the public sphere. In attempts to apply the notion of the public sphere to an analysis of the media, a number of arguments and criticisms have been directed at Habermas’s narrative and approach to the communication media and its role. Critics have turned to the mass media, which Habermas blames for the destruction of the bourgeois public sphere, and to the press, which was a key factor in Habermas’s account of the emergence and decline of the bourgeois public sphere. Habermas’s historical account has been attacked for its over-optimistic and idealized view of the role of the media in early capitalism (Golding, 1995, p. 26). Thus, McLaughlin (1993) argues that the emergence and demise of Habermas’ ideal public sphere and its connection to the development of the press invites us to examine how new media developments can contribute to the transformation of modern society beyond the impact of print media and face-to-face discussions (p. 600).

Thompson (1993) argues that Habermas overestimates the extent of the decline of the bourgeois public sphere when he interprets the transformations of the bourgeois
public, assuming that the rational and critical public sphere of debating citizens has collapsed and transformed into enthralled consumers manipulated by media techniques. In other words, Thompson argues that Habermas exaggerates the passivity of individuals, and that he needs to give more attention to the recent work on the reception of media products based on the concept of active audiences that are plural, critical, and active in their interpretations of what they receive (Thompson, 1993, pp. 182-183). Moreover, Habermas’s account of the refeudalization of the public sphere exaggerates the similarity of the commercialization of the mass press to the representative publicness of courtly life. Thompson argues (1993) that the profound impact on the modern world of mass media and emerging electronic mediated communication—as well as the complicated new forms of social interactions that they help to create—differs greatly from the theatrical practices of feudal courts based on face-to-face interactions in a single physical space (p. 183). Thompson (1993) further suggests that Habermas’s negative perception of the impact of newer communication media, such as radio and television, may be partly justified by the fact that the media has become more commercialized and concerned with particular interests. In addition, his obsession with the dialogical model—based on the idea that individuals come together in a shared locale and engage in dialogue with one another as equal participants in face-to-face conversation—also lends credibility to his negative perception that this new media creates a communication situation different from those that occurred among individuals who gathered together in the clubs and coffee houses of early modern Europe.

As Thompson (1993) points out, in principle, Habermas was not interested in print itself; rather, he was concerned with a model of communication based on the spoken
word that was simulated by the print medium (pp. 186-187). Hence, Thompson (1993) argues:

We shall not arrive at a satisfactory understanding of the nature of public life in the modern world if we remain wedded to a conception of publicness which is essentially dialogical in character, and which obliges us to interpret the ever-growing role of mediated communication as an historical fall from grace. We should, instead, recognize from the outset that the development of communication media—beginning with print, but including the more recent forms of electronic communication—has created a new kind of publicness which cannot be accommodated within the traditional model (p. 187).

Accordingly, Habermas’s conception of the bourgeois public sphere should be rethought to reflect and account for the actuality of new media developments, and to accommodate other emerging media forms and other types of discourses based on them. The sites that served in the past as organizing centers for political discussion and action have been replaced by the media. That is, the media are the public sphere (Poster, 1997, p. 207).

Habermas has been criticized for focusing on and overvaluing politics, and thus neglecting the other modes and functions of most media communications. Some have argued that these modes of communication not overtly concerned with politics have an important role to play in democracy and the public sphere, and in the political culture in general. For example, this view has been adopted and supported by many media scholars and researchers who have taken a radical democratic approach to conceiving entertainment as a source of discussion in the space of the public sphere (Curran, 1991; Carpini & Williams, 2001; Tumber, 2001). As Garnham (1992) argues, “the entertainment content of the media is clearly the primary tool we use to handle the relationship between the systems world and the lifeworld” (p. 374). In general, popular culture has an important impact on the constitution of the public sphere with respect to how the public is represented and public opinion formed (Hermes, 2006).
Even though Habermas was aware of the weakness of the concept of a historically embedded bourgeois public sphere, and despite the other criticisms of his conceptualization of the public sphere (which he himself acknowledged), he argues that: “The Liberal model of the public sphere remains instructive in regard to the normative claim embodied in institutionalized requirements of publicness” (Habermas, 1991, p. 403). Although ongoing developments have transformed the nature of public life since 1962, the concept of the bourgeois public sphere still contains ideas and principles that have validity and relevance, for example, the “critical principle of publicity” as distinct from “publicity” as it is understood in the more modern sense of product promotion or advertising (Thompson, 1993, p. 178). For Habermas, the critical principle of publicity retains its value as a normative ideal, and functions as a critical yardstick by which practices of existing institutions can be assessed. In addition, the critical principle of publicity, which could be used to guide institutional change, is a major concept for theorizing democracy (Thompson, 1993, p.178). Furthermore, Peters argues (1993) that the central concept of “representative publicity” in Habermas’s public sphere “forms the historical background for modern forms of public communication” and is important for understanding the social sphere that the contemporary mass media establishes, and the debates about the role of the audience (pp. 545, 547). Moreover, Garnham (1992) argues that Habermas’s public sphere still has profound virtues that are “perhaps of even greater relevance now than when the book originally appeared” because of the ongoing developments of the media landscape (p. 361).

In the age of new media and within the context of the prevailing new forms of electronically mediated discourse, the concept of the public sphere cannot be limited to
the traditional arenas that served in the past as organizing centers for political communication and discussion that was characterized by small circles of people sitting in cafés and salons, or table societies using face-to-face communication (Poster, 1997, p. 209; Dahlgren, 1991, p. 8). Rather, the mass media has become the dominant arena of the public sphere. Today, to an extent, the public sphere is usually used as a synonym for the news media, especially in its journalistic role of helping citizens to learn about the world and to provide opportunities for them to debate their opinions and reach informed decisions about politics (Dahlgren, 1991, p. 1). The role of the mass media, namely the press, in the public sphere and its connection to publicity was conceived by liberal political theorists. For example, Peters (1993) suggests that Jeremy Bentham and his associate James Mill perceived the role of the press as follows:

The press, as an invisible omnipresence, was to function as a social superego, a moral regulator, a check on all irrational action, not only for public officials, but for all members of the social body…. Its job in the public sphere was not just the provision of information, but the coordination of the social body. Inasmuch as all acts were potentially under the watchful gaze of the press (p. 550).

Accordingly, Dahlgren (1991) argues that Habermas’s concept of the public sphere must undergo some changes to better reflect contemporary conditions. This kind of reassessment necessitates an understanding and a theoretical development beyond the traditions of liberal democratic theory. Dahlgren (1991) points out that:

The public sphere is a concept which in the context of today’s society points to the issues of how and to what extent the mass media, especially in their journalistic role, can help citizens learn about the world, debate their responses to it and reach informed decisions about what courses of action to adopt (p. 1).

Similarly, Curran (1991) suggests that the mass media today are the principal institutions of the public sphere and thus central to the informal control exercised by public opinion over the state. Through distributing information to citizens and providing an independent
forum of debate, the media facilitates the formation of public opinion (Curran, 1991, p. 29).

In her review essay, which explores feminism, the public sphere, and media and democracy, McLaughlin (1993) also points to the central role of the media with respect to the public sphere. Thus, she calls on feminist scholars to consider the potential and problems of mass media as a part of their investigations about feminist movements in relation to the real status of the public sphere. In addition to focusing on the masculine liberal limitations of Habermas’s idea of public sphere, McLaughlin (1993) cautions that:

a persistent trend in feminist media studies converges with that in feminist reconstructions of the public sphere: a tendency to focus on internal, oppositional identity at the expense of a consideration of the media’s role in hindering the establishment of representative space necessary for democracy in late capitalism (p. 614).

As Curran (1991) argues, a truly democratic media is expected to represent all interests in society, and a central role of this media should be defined as “assisting the equitable negotiation of competing interests through democratic process” (p. 30).

The Internet, the Public Sphere, and Democracy

The idea of the public sphere has been reinvigorated by the emergence of new communication technologies, and some have argued that the future of Habermas’s public sphere is with the digital media, which have the potential to enhance and change social structures (Boeder, 2005). Habermas’s (1989) concept of the “public sphere” has triggered much debate with respect to the Internet and its potential for creating new public spheres and democracy. The emergence of interactive communications has reinvigorated the search for virtual public space, especially in light of the decrease in
physical public space in modern urban design, and the establishment of an ideal public space or sphere through a reshaping of emerging online forms of political communication, which function as public deliberative forums (Davis, 1999).

Currently, discussions about the Internet as a medium of mass communication ultimately involve both criticism and praise for its potential both to provide arenas where the public can express their views and to constitute a public sphere. One of the major characteristics of the Internet that enhances its role in reviving the public sphere is interactivity: the reader or viewer of media is no longer a passive recipient. Rather, they are in a dialogic relation with the communicator of the message, for example, a journalist or politician. Hence, the reader or viewer becomes a partner in defining the news agenda. Unlike past forms of communications technology based on a one-to-many interaction, the Internet is characterized by a many-to-many model of communication in which every participant can be both a receiver and a producer of information. The Internet also has lowered the costs of the production and distribution of information, and the costs of interaction with an indefinite and potentially large audience (Bohman, 2004, p. 135). In addition, the Internet provides more freedom of speech than any other media, since all participants can respond to each other’s messages without intermediaries, and they can print, reproduce, and pass on these messages to others with or without commentary and alteration (Knapp, 1997, p. 191). Lister, Dovey, Giddings, Grant, and Kelly (2003) point out that the argument over the Internet as a public sphere and as a new public communication space solidifies around two positions. First, the Internet, through democratizing the means of media production, revives the participatory nature of the idealized public sphere and encourages participants to take part in a debate by “talking
back” to the media and creating dialogue instead of passivity. Second, the “public sphere” position extends access to the media to the construction of the Internet as a new public sphere capable of representing new subjectivities (p. 177).

Accordingly, some research adopts an optimistic view that the Internet can help to promote democracy and extend the public sphere. These researchers specifically argue that the Internet has the potential to enhance deliberative democracy and expand the public sphere of rational-critical discourse. Dahlberg (2001) derives a set of requirements for the public sphere from Habermas’s theory of democratic communication in order to determine the extent to which online deliberations—everyday communications within cyberspace performed by Usenet groups, e-mail lists, Web forums, and chat groups—are facilitating rational critical discourse, and to identify any factors that are inhibiting an extension of such communications. The conditions or requirements that Dahlberg (2001) identifies are: exchange and critique of reasoned moral-practical validity claims, reflexivity, ideal role taking, sincerity, discursive inclusion and equality, and autonomy from state and economic power. Dahlberg (2001) concludes that the online political discussions that run through many deliberative forums fail to meet these requirements in the following ways:

First, reflexivity is often a very minimal part of cyber-deliberations. Second, many online forums fail to achieve a reasonable level of respectful listening or commitment to working with difference. Third, it is difficult to verify identity claims and information put forward. Fourth, discourse tends to be quantitatively and qualitatively dominated by certain individuals and groups. Fifth, extensive exclusions from online forums occur as a result of social inequality. Finally, the expansion of economic interests into more and more areas of online life is leading to the displacement of rational deliberation by instrumental rationality in many online forums (p. 623).

However, Dahlberg suggests that the case study of the Minnesota E-Democracy deliberations proves that these limitations could be overcome and the conditions for a
fully-functioning and democratic public sphere could be established. Therefore, Dahlberg (2001) argues that online public discourse can foster a public sphere and help to develop rational-critical deliberation.

Knapp (1997) shows how the Internet can shift the public/private dichotomy by opening up a new public space in which all voices can be heard, and the formerly private realm can come into the public sphere. He argues that Internet public discussion groups and bulletin boards are spaces in which the division between the public-political and the private-personal seems to be breaking down. Knapp (1997) suggests that the personal messages presented and posted in these online discussions are essays that fulfill all of the general requirements of the essay form—being personal, voiced, and reflective—and they gain their authority from personal experience. Knapp (1997) argues that despite their specificity, these online arguments give personal experience a formal representation, which is ultimately intended for public presentation, and they participate in the spirit of collective discussion (p. 183). Knapp also recognizes that although the electronic essay-writing creates a freedom for participants that is unavailable with other traditional media, including a freedom from some of the constraints of traditional public discourse, the organizational structure and the “netiquette” of newsgroups and online discussion forums—including guidelines for behaviour, specification of topics, and subscription costs—which can ultimately confine communication to specific categories and sub-categories, raises questions about the extent of the publicness of these online spaces, and thus limits the scope of discussion on the Internet. As Knapp puts it: “Though the essay form as it is manifested on the Internet has the potential to open up a space for diverse discourses, the effect of its location in a complex of specific categories is to
compartmentalize differences, thereby dramatically limiting their public status” (p. 193). However, Knapp (1997) does not give in to pessimism, since he argues the following:

Still, the space opened up by the Internet does seem to represent an example of a public sphere that is not confined to a single voice… And although the specificity of discussion sites may tend to isolate the various discourses, vastly divergent subjectivities coexist in the larger community that is the network as a whole (p. 193).

In conclusion, he posits:

If, in the name of diversity, the users of the Internet can justify their essayistic forum as one that serves the public interest in concrete and demonstrable ways, it would represent a step in the direction of an egalitarian public sphere (p. 194). Moreover, online public spaces can do much more than create public opinion, as is suggested by some public sphere theories. For example, according to Tanner’s (2001) study of an online forum in which Chilean participants debated the issues surrounding Augusto Pinochet’s detention, this forum represents a significant part of Chile’s political public sphere as a place for forming popular or collective memories in which the participants do not just send letters to the editor but debate topics among themselves and create standards of civil debate.

Conspicuously, the greatest potential benefit of the Internet is its ability to empower marginalized groups that traditionally were silenced and not able to speak for themselves. For example, Mitra’s (2004) study of a Website dealing with issues important to the women of South Asia argues that: “the speaking capital needed to have a voice on the Internet is less than the capital needed when speaking in the more traditional public sphere created by mass media” (p. 501). In considering the importance of having a voice on the Internet, whether that voice is heard or not, Mitra (2004) assumes that:

having the ability to speak is often more important than considering whether the voice is heard…. on the Internet, where personal voices operate within the public
sphere, it is possible to get beyond the desire of being “heard” and focus on being “able to speak” (p. 502).

From a similar perspective, Kellner (1998) argues that the Internet is an increasingly important medium that helps to create new and alternative public spheres of debate and spaces for the exchange of information by providing critical-oppositional actors with an opportunity to speak for themselves, especially within environments controlled by the state or private corporations. Specifically, he argues that forms of cyber-democracy, such as bulletin boards or chat rooms, constitute a new form of public dialogue and interaction, which occurs in new public spheres (Kellner, 1998). An increasingly important domain of current political struggles is Internet activism, which becomes essential and effective when used by oppositional cultural and political movements to promote democracy and social justice on both the local and global levels. For example, prominent examples of anti-globalization, anti-war, and anti-capitalism movements, as well as some recent election campaigns show that the Internet:

could generate political enthusiasm amongst the youth, connect people around issues and articulate with struggles in the real world…. [and] that Internet politics was not just a matter of circulating discourse in a self-contained cybersphere but that it was a force that could intervene in the political battles of the contemporary era of media culture (Khan & Kellner, 2005, p. 79).

Distinguishable from the narrow political discourse of mainstream journalism’s coverage of media events, Internet chatrooms, email lists, blogs, and other discussion forums help to produce quite a different dynamic of media event coverage.

As a part of a larger project to examine the implications of the new media environment for American democracy, Williams (2003) analyzes chatroom discussions that occurred on eleven sites on 11 September, 2001. He identifies five ways in which chatroom discussions provided a space for the development of a much broader and more
critical perspective than that available in the mainstream coverage of the terrorist attacks: interactivity, availability and use of diverse sources of information, critical and collective examination of mainstream media texts, insularity of conversation, and civility. Williams (2003) argues that chatrooms in particular allow the collective interrogation of mainstream media by enabling groups of like-minded individuals to develop a collective and social perspective on the events of the day. He adds that chatrooms provide a new opportunity for a form of collective and critical resistance to hegemonic messages. Moreover, Williams (2003) argues that the new media environment opens up the possibility for critical discourse, which, as always, demands far more of individual citizens than do more elite-driven approaches to politics.

In another study that explored the potential of civil discourse in cyberspace to enhance democratic conversation and revive the public sphere, Papacharissi (2004) examines the level of civility in the discussion threads containing political content in a set of Usenet newsgroups. She approaches civility in a broad sense, which is more than interpersonal politeness. Papacharissi’s (2004) study reveals that most messages posted on the political newsgroups were civil, and further, because of the absence of face-to-face communication, they fostered more heated discussion. Therefore, this study supports the argument that the Internet is helping to revive the public sphere. Addressing those who suggest that politeness standards undermine the impact of online discussion forums that help to produce democracy and revive the public sphere, Papacharissi (2004) argues that:

It is challenging to establish politeness standards that all public discussion can measure up to, without sacrificing some of the irascibility of discussion. This highlights the reason why civility should be redefined as a construct that encompasses, but also goes beyond, politeness (p. 266).
This study found that most participants in the discussion groups that were studied managed to express their political viewpoints in a civil and polite manner. In other words, incivility and impoliteness did not dominate these online political discussions. In addition, this study also demonstrated how conversations can be impolite without being uncivil. Interestingly, Papacharissi (2004) concludes that the anonymity of cyberspace leads to more heated discussion, which consequently, helps to promote the exchange of ideas.

The Internet has much promise and enormous potential for enhancing deliberative democracy and public communication among citizens because it helps to dismantle many restrictive barriers. However, Habermas’s (1989) assumptions about the equality of status among participants of the communicative action domain and the rationality of speech raise concerns when applied to the context of the Internet. For example, the potential impact of the Internet on politics and participatory democracy is undermined when access is not available to all, most of the discussions on online forums are irrational, conversations do not focus on a specific topic until group consensus is reached, and so on. Hence, Internet use is still far from providing a solid democratic foundation for the public sphere. Some studies have pointed to the lack of accessibility that makes Internet use far from universal, and also to the lack of regulation of its use that makes it far from being a civil and reliable site for participatory democracy.

Lister, Dovey, Giddings, Grant, and Kelly (2003) raise concerns that contribute to the critique of the Internet as a public sphere. They argue that access to cyberspace remains a scarce resource that is determined by economic and social power. Even assuming that Internet access could become universal, a potential differential would still
exist with respect to the degree of the speed and quality of the computer software, and the
speed of the Internet connection, for example, broadband or narrowband, and so on.
Moreover, the authors raise the issues of flaming and obscenity in chat rooms or multi-
oriented objects (MOOS), which make the Internet an unsafe space for many users. (pp.
180-181). Economics and cultural competencies still privilege affluent males with high
education, and this group remains the dominant category of current Internet users.
Davis’s (2005) study of a sample of online discussion groups concludes that online
discussion communities, and their content, do not fulfill the requirements of Habermas’s
public sphere. He argues that the environment in which online discussion occurs does not
encourage effective political discussion because it lacks a moderating role,
accountability, and engagement. Moreover, those who post opinions on these sites do not
represent the general public. Instead, they are the young, well-educated, and affluent—not
the representatives of a more diverse generalized public. In addition, since a
moderator’s role and its accountability are absent, these participants lack a sense of
community, or a sense of belongingness, and so online political discussion is fraught with
offensive behaviour and filled with personal comments (Davis, 2005).

In a similar vein, after analyzing the flow of political discussion in several Usenet
groups, Davis (1999) argues that Usenet groups have certain disadvantages as forums for
the public discussion of political issues, since they are demographically unrepresentative
of the electorate in terms of gender and ideology, and with respect to civility and
decency, they are filled with “flaming,” “name calling,” and insults. In other words,
Usenet groups represent chaos, and according to Davis (1999), they are a “cacophony
rather than wisdom, a form of expression that follows not parliamentary principles but the
Hobbesian law of the boring dinner party: it belongs, that is, to the person who talks loudest, logs on most often" (p. 153).

Davis (1999) also argues that the Internet reflects the offline American political landscape: those people who are already politically motivated and politically interested are the same people who use the Internet for politics and political participation. In other words, the actors who dominate the traditional media and information sources are the same actors who migrate to the Internet, and once there, they are still the ones to whom people rely on for their information. This phenomenon suggests that the setting of the agenda and the framing of its issues will remain in the hands of these actors, and so the traditional media will continue to be the most common source of news on the Internet. Davis (1999) also points to other impediments related to political participation on the Internet, such as technological literacy and competence, financial resources, and free time. In conclusion, he suggests that the Internet may be contributing to the fragmentation and atomization of society (Davis, 1999).

In a similar analysis of the impact of the Internet on American politics and democracy, Bimber’s (1998) article “The Internet and Political Transformation: Populism, Community, and Accelerated Pluralism” has reservations about the populist and community-building claims associated with the Internet. Instead, he proposes an alternative theoretical model called “accelerated pluralism.” Although he agrees that the Internet facilitates grass-roots mobilization and organization through its unlimited communication flow, he also argues that the anticipated effects of the Internet depend on the willingness and capacity of humans to engage in a complex political life. In other
words, he argues that the potential positive effects that can be achieved through using the Internet depend on motivation, interest, and cognitive capacity (p. 136).

Communication and participation alone do not mean much with respect to the quality and the value of content. Noveck (2000) highlights some paradoxes of the Internet, arguing that although the Internet provides us with limitless information and unlimited outlets for communication and the possibility for every individual to communicate their own ideas, this activity does not necessarily develop into a participatory and deliberative democratic life. Rather, Noveck (2000) argues that this is information without knowledge, and that the Internet with its hypertext links and multimedia options that allow each person to “do his own thing” reinforces the privatization, individualism, and fragmentation of public interests. As a result, the Internet contributes to an evacuation of community and a destruction of privacy and intimacy. In addition, with so many voices talking and so few listening to others, “the Internet seems to be creating a hyper-speed cacophony of dissonant shouting voices” (Noveck, 2000, p. 19). Moreover, Schultz (2000) argues that while forum debates are expected to revitalize public discussions, reader forums for newspapers are often dominated by dogmatists and extremists.

As a result, a new consideration of potential rules for Internet communication seems vital to preserve the civility of public electronic forums, and hence, to strengthen their democratic potential. To avoid the negative potential impact of the Internet and to enhance its potential for deliberative democracy, some are calling for the intervention of legal and public policy regulations (Noveck, 2000; Gimmler, 2001). Blumler and Gurevitch (2001) also are calling for the creation of a “civic commons” in cyberspace.
They argue that the desirable effect of the Internet with respect to democracy should not be left to conflicting cross-interests and influences. Instead, they propose that an independent public authority should be created that is responsible for arranging, gathering, coordinating, and publicizing any online deliberative initiatives issued either from citizens or public bodies (Blumler & Gurevitch, 2001).

Many different theoretical perspectives have been used to address the relationship of the democratic potential of new communications technologies and the significance of the public sphere for democracy. For example, apart from the deliberative modes of the public sphere and an imagined cyberdemocracy, Friedland (1996) addresses the democratic potential of new communication technologies by focusing on the actual social uses of these technologies by citizens’ social movements and local communities. His perspective is organized around the concept of citizen participation in the public sphere, simply asking the following question: “Under what conditions might existing and near-term configurations of communications technology be used to extend democratic practices and lead to a broadened public sphere?” (p. 186). Friedland (1996) adopts the standpoint of democratic communication that gives priority to social and community orientation more than to technology itself (p.196). His argument links the dynamics of real social movements and the democratic traditions that underpin them, and examines how they can benefit from computer networks to revitalize the public sphere. He argues that “by treating communities as social capital networks, rather than strictly as discourse communities, we can begin to ground the connective elements of new information technologies in social life and social structure” (Friedland, 1996, p. 189).
Dahlgren (1991) argues that the concept of the public sphere can be used in a general and common-sense manner as an analytical category to help analyze and research the emerging realities of today. However, Habermas’s work on the public sphere is frequently attacked by post-modernists who question the emancipatory potentials of its model of consensus through rational debate (Boeder, 2005). Poster (1997) points to the limitations of modern theory and the existing theoretical approaches for addressing and assessing the “postmodern” possibilities of the Internet, and the relation of the Internet to democracy. He argues that the focus on some issues, such as commodification, restricts the discussion of the politics of the Internet to economic aspects. Poster (1997) argues that the possible long-term political effects of the Internet and the ways in which it institutes new social functions are just as important:

In the absence of a coherent alternative political program the best one can do is to examine phenomena such as the Internet in relation to new forms of the old democracy, while holding open the possibility that what emerges might be something other than democracy in any shape that we can conceive given our embeddedness in the present (p. 204).

Since the characteristics and structure of Internet technology makes it a decentralized communication system, Poster argues that it poses challenges to the old assumptions of technological determinism, and thus to the arguments about the negative social and political effects of technology. Moreover, Internet technology imposes “a dematerialization of communication and in many of its aspects a transformation of the subject position of the individual who engages within it” (Poster, 1997, p. 205). As Poster argues, the Internet is not just a tool of communication; rather, it is “more like a social space than a thing” in which new forms of interaction can be represented and new kinds of relations of power between participants might emerge. The question that needs to be asked about the relation of the Internet to democracy is, as Poster puts it: Are new kinds
of power relations occurring between communicating individuals? In other words, is a new politics occurring on the Internet? Poster argues that one way to approach answering this question is to put aside the issue of technology, and raise once again the question of a public sphere. He wonders: Does a public sphere exist on the Internet; who populates it; and how? In particular, Poster argues that we must ask what kinds of beings exchange information in this public sphere? (Poster, 1997, p. 206).

Poster (1997) also argues that the nature of political discussion on the Internet does not provide the public sphere model of Habermas. However, he argues that some areas of the Internet might constitute a new public sphere, and invites a reassessment of the political aspects of the Internet (p. 209). He contends that these areas are not sites of validity claims or rational argument and critical reason because within these sites—such as Usenet newsgroups and socially oriented MUDs and MOOs—identities are reshaped and constituted differentially. Within these sites, identities are fluid and mobile, invented and changeable: “On the Internet, individuals construct their identities in relation to ongoing dialogues, not as acts of pure consciousness” (Poster, 1997, p. 211). Poster also argues that although some studies point out that the marks of power relations that emerge from face-to-face communications or print and broadcast communications still appear within the virtual communities of the Internet, “the salient characteristic of the Internet community is the diminution of prevailing hierarchies of race, class and especially gender” (p. 213). Poster concludes that the Internet has the potential for an unprecedented transformation of the political environment to the extent that the nature of authority will change drastically in Internet communities. For example, he argues that the aura that once was attached to traditional political authority will become more difficult to sustain.
Similarly, Poster argues that the scholarly authority of the traditional text is seriously challenged and undermined by the electronic nature of texts: “Texts become ‘hypertexts’ that are reconstructed in the act of reading, rendering the reader an author and disrupting the stability of experts or ‘authorities’” (Poster, 1997, p. 214).

In the same vein, Bohman (2004) discusses the issue of the public sphere and democracy within the Internet. He argues that the Internet can provide the basis for a new and effective form of public sphere, but this is a necessarily different form of public. Bohman argues against any type of technological determinism, suggesting that the capacity of the Internet to support a public sphere cannot be judged in terms of intrinsic features. Rather, the social context in which the Internet is embedded constructs and shapes the context of communication. In other words, Bohman argues that the “hardware” of the Internet must be reshaped by the “software” in a much broader sense, which not only includes software programmes but also human uses of technology and all the modes of their organization. As Bohman (2004) argues, the issue of whether or not the Internet can support public spheres:

depends not only on which institutions shape its framework but also on how participants contest and change these institutions and on how they interpret the Internet as a public space. It depends on the mediation of agency, not on technology (p. 139).

Bohman (2004) also stresses the normative features of publicity and public sphere that might judge the Internet to become a public sphere or not. He argues that the requirements of Habermas’s notion of publicity demand not only to be directed at an indefinite audience, but also necessitate some degree of responsiveness and reflexivity—not just the expectation of a response but also the consideration of its quality and accountability to others. The other thing that characterizes the audience of the Internet is
that it is more likely to be “anonymous” in the sense that the members of this audience do not recognize each other, and it also remains indefinite to the producers of its publicly conveyed messages. In other words, with respect to communication on the Internet, we do not know who is speaking or whom we expect to respond. Thus, Bohman argues that “while anonymity promotes freedom of expression under certain circumstances, it changes the expectation of communication by making speaker and audience not only indefinite but also indeterminate in its many-to-many form” (p. 138).

For these reasons, Bohman (2004) argues that the Internet becomes a public sphere only through agents who engage in reflexive and democratic activity, and through those people whose interactions exhibit the features of dialogue and who are concerned with its publicity. To this extent, the Internet at least can provide “a space for publics but not itself a public sphere. It can, however, enable such a public of publics to emerge” (p. 140). Bohman also argues that the space opened up by computer-mediated communication supports a new sort of “distributive” rather than unified public sphere with new forms of interaction. The argument that the growth of commercialization and economic enterprises on the Internet, and their negative impact on its discourse and potential for free speech in a public space, has preoccupied a significant area of Internet research. For example, Bohman (2004) argues that it is not just the power of the state that may inhibit the transformation of the Internet into a public sphere but also the presence of powerful social institutions, such as corporations and other market actors, that increasingly design and control the Internet architecture (pp. 135-137).

Recently, a group of studies about the potential of the Internet for politics recommended maintaining a cautious perspective when giving credit to its role in
potentially enhancing democracy and the public sphere, arguing that the structural features of the Internet do more for businesses and consumers than for citizens, politics, and the public sphere. In other words, the promises of the Internet for democracy is being threatened by the increasing power of commercial corporations to control the Internet. With particular attention to the United States, Dahlberg (2004) investigates the increasing corporate ownership and control of cyberspace by a few corporate giants of integrated media. He argues that these powerful corporations are being supported by the policies of neo-liberals that provide the basis for their control of online communications, and that these corporations are developing the Internet into an arena where critical voices and practices will be marginalized, where users will be constituted as consumers rather than as critical citizens. Barney (2003) contends that the actual relationships and processes mediated by digital technology do not constitute a public sphere in which individuals routinely practice citizenship and real political and democratic discourse. Instead, he argues that the digital sphere with its characteristics of personalization and customization, and its economically oriented uses that have been colonized by private interests have undermined its possibility to produce an integrated public sphere. In light of these current conditions pervasive to digital technologies, Barney (2003) argues that “the public sphere is transformed from a site for rational critical debate into a vast, self-generating data mine, and its distinctly political function recedes into increasingly sophisticated systems of control” (p. 116).

Dean (2005) argues that what people do within their communicative interactions and their activities on the Internet is reduced to just “the circulation of content” without actual political debate. She argues that new communication technologies of the Internet
are increasingly fetishized, and this fetishism has enabled users to remain politically passive while having the false perception that they are active (Dean, 2005, p. 60). She argues that the excess of information and the circulation of communication on the Internet, or what she calls “the fantasy of abundance,” facilitates global capitalism and functions in the service of “communicative capitalism,” which she explains as follows:

The more decentralized, inclusive, and accessible the networks of communication are, the greater is the consolidation of wealth and power in corporations, on the one hand, and the lesser is the worth, impact, and authority of noncommercial voices and associations, on the other (Dean, 2002, p. 80).

Dean argues that the ideology of publicity materialized by the Internet is producing communicative capitalism. She argues that the notion of the public sphere is not applicable to the Internet and is damaging to practices of democracy under conditions of contemporary technoculture (Dean, 2002, 2003, 2005).

In lending support to the arguments of Dean and others, Barney (2008) also laments about the deleterious effects that emerging media technologies have on publicity and the public sphere. He emphasizes that the normative framework of publicity ceases to be critical under the material conditions of emerging media technologies. He argues that the narcotic of communication and information supplied by emerging information technologies is immobilizing and prevents any meaningful action because people experience the false feeling that they are active when they are informed. As Barney argues, “[People] are immobilized because they are informed, and thereby relieved of the need to judge and to act. In this way, information, one of the key principles of publicity, becomes simultaneously a principle of depoliticization” (p. 96, emphasis in original). Barney (2008) also points out that even the most exalted characteristic of emerging media—interactivity—has been exploited and turned into:
a model in which the distribution and exercise of power is authorized and legitimated not by political judgment and action but, rather, by an excess of participatory activity that provides an alibi for their effective absence…. With the degeneration of action into interactivity, the collapse of the normative framework of publicity under the auspices of emerging technologies of information, communication and participation appears complete (p. 101).

Barney’s arguments echo Habermas’s analysis of the transformation of the bourgeois public sphere when he lamented the loss of the publicist function of the public sphere and the rise of the technologically-mediated discourse of modern media, which had demoted critical debate to fulfill social-psychological functions, and so was becoming “a tranquilizing substitute for action” (Habermas, 1989, p. 164). Further, Habermas (1989) argued that: “The world fashioned by the mass media is a public sphere in appearance only” (p. 171). However, the transformation of the function of critical publicity is not limited to the Internet and emerging new media, since this is the case with all contemporary journalism under the limitations of the professional model and corporate control, which presents significant problems for democracy (McChesney, 2004).

According to James Carey:

> It is a journalism of fact without regard to understanding through which the public is immobilized and demobilized and merely ratifies the judgments of experts delivered from on high. It is, above all, a journalism that justifies itself in the public’s name but in which the public plays no role, except as an audience; it is a receptacle to be informed by experts and an excuse for the practice of publicity” (as cited in McChesney, 2004, p. 67).

Dahlgren (2001) and Sparks (2001) contend that the structural features of the Internet do more for businesses and consumers than for citizens, politics, and the public sphere. However, they also argue that the Internet has much promise for democratic life and the public sphere, since it helps to dismantle many restrictive barriers.

In light of the preceding arguments, it can be concluded that researchers agree that the Internet has the potential to empower and motivate citizens to participate and
deliberate within online communities. The new communication forms of the Internet are socially constructed, and their optimal use for building democratic participation is still far from reality, at least, until a few significant barriers have been overcome. New online forums are helping to build communities and establish public “sphericules,” but not a public sphere. The consensus is that the new electronic forms of communication have provided public “spaces” for public use, and that the utilization of these spaces for politics and for building democracy depends on the willingness of public officials and all concerned actors to overcome the barriers that still make these spaces exclusive. Moreover, the online world is a reflection of the offline world: since many people today suffer from a kind of political alienation, and since political participation declines as a result of a general loss of confidence in political institutions, a similar pattern is expected within online discussion groups. In summary, the pessimistic perspective on the impact of the Internet on democracy building contends that there is nothing inherently democratizing about this medium, and that only the actions of governments policymakers and those who use the medium will determine the extent to which the Internet becomes a public sphere.

**Online Journalism: An Overview**

The Internet provides a whole new medium of political communication for use by various publics and actors in various forms that constitute what is called the “grassroots journalism” phenomena. These forms have unique characteristics that distinguish digital journalism and the Internet as a news medium. The Internet and its potential applications
are a rich source of news locally and globally, and it has become a significant provider of news for online versions of mainstream journalism, independent news-based Web sites, and the blogging phenomenon. In addition, McNair (2006) points out that two kinds of online journalism exist: an established professional journalism with its ethics and standards of the traditional news media, and amateur journalism that is “founded on alternative principles having less to do with the values of objectivity and reliability than with subjectivity, immediacy, and independence” (p. 119). Personal Web sites or Weblogs have become important sources for news and information. For example, Americans ranked Matt Drudge’s Web site the 20th most popular destination on the Internet for getting information the week following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (William, 2003, p. 176).

Although the debate about the Internet has been widespread with respect to its ownership, governance, model of communication, and relationship to democracy and the public sphere, a renewed discussion has arisen around the potential of the Internet to create new communications resources that can be used to challenge corporate control (Kidd, 2003; Strangelove, 2005). Strangelove (2005) suggests that the number of people who participate in the production of online news, in one way or another, outside of the corporate sector exceeds the number of professional journalists. He argues that “non-corporate news” systems within the Internet have more freedom to produce their own news, without the constraints of the business relations with advertisers that circumscribe the production of news within the commercial news sector. Taking an optimistic view, he suggests that the Internet will be the panacea of all the current problems experienced within the commercial news sector. Not just this, but the Internet will erode the
legitimacy and credibility of commercial news (Strangelove, 2005, pp. 166-174). Moreover, it can be said that one of the most socially significant aspects of the Internet is its potential to enable ordinary people to participate in the production and dissemination of news.

Many researchers and practitioners regard online journalism as the future of journalism. It is predicated that online journalism will bring the audience back to news and political affairs, and they will be more involved than ever before. John Pavlik (2001) points to potential of online journalism to “reengage an increasingly distrusting and alienated audience” (p. xi). The transformation from the traditional journalism environment to the online environment is a transformation to a new culture that will reshape the conventional practices of journalism: “This new media system embraces all forms of human communication in a digital format where the rules and constraints of the analog world no longer apply” (Pavlik, 2001, p. xii).

The Internet provides news in an advantageous way not available in traditional journalism. The flaws of traditional journalism, especially its lack of contextualization (McChesney, 2004), can be bypassed by engaging the potential of the Internet. Pavlik (2001) argues that the best way to describe online news is as a “contextualized journalism.” Online journalism opens up new ways of storytelling, primarily through a wider range of communication modalities, such as text, audio, video, graphics, animation, and 360-degree video, all of which enable online journalists to tell a story in a way that is more contextualized and navigable (almost impossible in any other medium), and that offers an audience news in a way that is much richer in regards to historical, political, and
cultural context (Pavlik, 2001; Harper, 2003). Rupert Murdoch, the chairman and chief executive of News Corporation, argues that:

newspapers have already created a large audience for their content online and have provided readers with added value features such as email alerts, blogs, interactive debate, and podcasts. Content is being repurposed to suit the needs of a contemporary audience (Murdoch, 2006, p. 11).

But not all news sites utilize the potential of this new media. Many news sites are still in the phase of what is called “shovelware,” that is, migrating print content online by recasting or “repurposing” content from their established traditional counterparts. Some sites are in between: they repurpose the print content and incorporate some interactive capabilities. A small number of sites offer original news content designed specifically for the Web, and thus, exploit all of the unique potential of the Internet. These online news sites contribute to the marketplace of ideas and have an independent editorial perspective that is represented through a new medium of communication (Boczkowski, 2004; Pavlik, 2001; Salwen, 2005). Some have said that most of the Arab printed newspapers are still in the phase of “shovelware.” Some migrate only part of their printed materials, while others repurpose their whole printed content in the same optical format as in the printed version (Alshehri, 2000).

Central to both Internet communication and online journalism is interactivity, which is usually thought about in terms of empowering an audience. Salwen et al. (2005) argue that interactivity is evidence of the success or failure of a Web site, an essential component in its design. It motivates the audience to initiate two-way and group discussions and to be active participants. Interactivity redefines the concept of news from a hierarchical one-way usually top-down communication that assumes a relatively passive audience to a non-hierarchical two-way and many-to-many non-mediated
communication within a highly active community (Salwen et al., 2005, p. 133; Strangelove, 2005, p. 172; Boczkowski, 2004, p. 129).

With this new interactive media, the news audience is no longer powerless, and professional journalists are no longer the only gatekeepers who can define what is news. Traditional gatekeeping shifts to an editorial function that centers on the facilitation and circulation of knowledge produced by a vast network of users-turned-producers. With hyperlinks and the nonlinear nature of online news, the editorial gatekeeping process of modern professional journalists is challenged (Dibean & Garrison, 2005; Boczkowski, 2004; Harper, 2003; Hume, 1996). By enabling readers to assume some of the roles of authors, hypertext challenges the traditional tasks of reporting and writing: “Readers are viewed more as collaborators than as consumers” (Huesca & Dervin, 2003, p. 283). Newhagen and Rafael (1996) also argue that within the context of hypertext: “Neither the authors nor the structure holds that much authority any more” (p. 5). The Web’s unique hypertextuality, used interchangeably with the term intertextuality, characterizes the World Wide Web text and raises analytical and methodological challenges (Mitra & Cohen, 1999) that have transformed audience studies (Livingstone, 2004). Through the use of hypertext, Friedland (1996) argues:

> a story can be layered vertically, with a journalist’s topical narrative account that attempts to synthesize the multiple sources of a story in a more or less traditional manner…. [In this way,] the reader is able to read a ‘simple’ narrative account, but also to pick it apart to investigate both its veracity and its underlying narrative and ideological construction (p. 202).

Online journalism has the potential to change the way an audience learns about and processes the news. Users can customize or personalize news from original and alternative sources at their convenience in ways not possible with other media. They can exercise more control over the news they read, and they can select from a virtually
unlimited number of news sites. With new communication modalities and convergence, the personalized nature of online journalism potentially offers audiences a view of the world that is much more contextualized, textured, and multidimensional, especially when compared to the stories told about the world by traditional media (Pavlik, 2001, p. 22; Salwen, 2005, p. 74). Pavlik (2005) identifies four areas in which the new media are impacting and transforming the world of journalism: production tools and techniques; content; distribution channels and industry structure; and relationships between and among broadcasters and their many publics (Pavlik, 2005, pp. 254-260).

**Grassroots Journalism**

As the production and distribution of news in the new environment of communication is hindered less by structural constraints and becomes deinstitutionalized, new forms of deprofessionalized journalism emerge. Moreover, the environment in which the traditional news is produced is subject to more challenges concerning its claims to authority, credibility, and legitimacy. After grassroots citizens produce their own content in the new media environment, nothing is quite the same (Strangelove, 2005, pp. 187-188).

New media technology and the Internet have enabled a variety of new forms of political communication so that citizens of any political stripe can establish their own news and communicate directly to a public. The Web is particularly beneficial for non-profit and grassroots media that do not have large financial reserves to fund a global media. Large commercial news media are no longer the only ones taking advantage of digital media technologies; the Internet facilitates political communication for citizens
who cannot get their messages into traditional news channels (Bennett, 2005; Kawamato, 2003; Tumber, 2001).

The emerging media environment, namely the Internet, provides citizen activists and new social movements with opportunities to mobilize and organize their own activities, and to examine topics and issues in ways that would be impossible with the mainstream media. Many contemporary social movements owe their very existence to the Internet, to the extent that D’Annibale & Chehade (2004) call them “internet worked social movements.” Atton’s (2002) study of news culture and new social movements emphasizes that the radical media of new social movements is a set of deprofessionalized practices that privilege grassroots “native reporting,” which is a distinctive feature of “alternative journalism.” The social construction of radical media news is based on alternative values and frameworks of news gathering and access different from the social construction of mainstream media news (Atton, 2002, p. 495). Thanks to the Internet, activists can “be the media” as they put it. Wall (2003) draws out a set of attributes to distinguish digital activist journalism from mainstream practices. She categorizes activist news outfits as three types: professional news services, sponsored news services, and grassroots news services (Wall, 2003, p. 116).

Wall (2003) also argues that activist news outfits and social movements are able to create an alternative information sphere that provides news in a way that redefines the traditional concept of news—news with different values and a new concept. News is no longer a daily report of events produced by trained, “objective,” and professional journalists within a news organization; instead, news is produced by reporters who are
also movement members. In this sphere, news is not a commodity; it is a public good to be used freely by citizens and then redistributed (Wall, 2003, p. 121-122).

Online journalism characterized by interactive forums brings a variety of potential benefits to citizens and to democracy as a whole because stories are told with greater depth and wider breadth, and include more engaging reporting, more complete information, and news that better reflects the complexities of an increasingly diverse and pluralistic society. Moreover, these forums bypass not only the limitations of the space and time of traditional news but also the censorship of news and information by governments and others who control the traditional communication media (Pavlik, 2001).

Another concern linked to online journalism is journalistic ethics, which is a primary concern of media ethicists. McNair (2006) argues that online journalism and the proliferation of blogs raise concerns about the ethics and credibility of a journalism that is free from the traditional codes, conventions, and constraints of established professional journalism (p. 12). Significantly, new communication technology makes the manipulation of the news easier than ever before. As Pavlik (2005) suggests: “In many cases, new ethical problems are arising or old ethical concerns take on new meaning. For instance, digital imaging not only makes it possible to manipulate photographs, but it also makes it far simpler and harder to detect” (p. 245).

Overall, the combination of competition and new technology in the current media environment have helped to create an accelerated news coverage process in which the timely verification of the accuracy of information becomes a challenge. In light of this and related challenges, the ethical reliability and credibility of news coverage has been called into question. However, one could also argue that these same media dynamics
make the act of concealing or obscuring the truth from the public much more difficult and, thus, increase the transparency and accountability of public authority

**Blogs**

Another digital journalism phenomenon, and one of the most powerful new forms of communication, is the online self-publishing application known as blogs. Weblogs, which emerged around 1998 and flourished after the events of 11 September, 2001, have become a striking phenomenon with an astonishing daily growth rate. The number of blogs is growing rapidly, and audience reliance on them as an alternative media for news is increasing. In the United States in 2004, blog readers were estimated at 32 million, with about 11 million exposed to political news blogs during the presidential campaign (Mintz, 2005). Hence, McNair (2006) argues that blogging was recognized as an important new factor in public opinion-formation (p. 134).

Johnson’s and Kay’s (2004) analysis of the credibility that Weblog users give to blogs as compared to the traditional media and other online sources shows that Weblog users judge blogs as highly credible and more credible than traditional sources, especially with regard to the depth of information. However, the discourse of Weblogs as journalism is organized around the idea of challenging mainstream journalism. Many hold some reservations, claiming that blogs do not adhere to professional journalistic norms, such as editing or the news values or principals of traditional journalism (Johnson, 2005; Mintz, 2005). Thus, a growing debate has arisen concerning the authority and legitimacy of blogs, since they often are run by individuals who are not professional
journalists and who do not follow the professional rules of writing and reporting. On the other hand, blogs challenge the legitimacy of mainstream journalism and the idea that news attains its authority from within institutional journalistic contexts (Kawamato, 2003; Matheson 2004).

Singer (2005) also argues that blogs represent a set of challenges to the professional norms and practices of journalism, especially since they question the traditional gatekeeper role of journalists. In addition, blogs highlight issues of accountability and transparency, in the sense that they popularize the profession of journalism (Singer, 2005, pp. 177-179). As McNair (2006) argues, the blogosphere and bloggers impose themselves into the domain of the mainstream media through their critical scrutiny of elites, and by spotlighting the errors of print and broadcast journalists (p. 147).

McNair (2006) identifies three characteristics that distinguish blogs from the traditional media outlets. First, blogs are personal, subjective, and prone to discursive risk-taking. With their freedom from the professional obligations of those who engage in journalism for a living, bloggers can say what they like without fear of being sacked. The second distinctive feature of blogs is their interactivity, which allows communication in both directions to an extent unmatched by any traditional media. Third, blogs are often used as gateways, or portals, into other Web sites, linking users to related information elsewhere on the Internet. In short, McNair argues that blogs are a uniquely dialogic form of online journalism (McNair, 2006, pp. 122-124).

Strangelove (2005) points to the three effects of the blogging phenomenon on commercial news: the ability of any Internet user to participate in uncontrolled news
production; the sudden expansion in participation in news production; and the ability of the online community to dissect the work of professional journalists. He lauds the blogging phenomenon as “an enormous school of journalism [in which] amateurs learn how professionals work, critique their work, and sometimes end up joining their ranks” (pp. 174-175).

**Blogs as Alternative and Citizens’ Media**

Blogs and other forms of communications over the Internet, such as bulletin boards and discussion forums in which citizens have an opportunity to create and produce their own messages, can also be understood in terms of the theories of alternative media. As Downing (2003) states, the Internet “represents the very apotheosis of the ‘alternative’ in its dizzying range and in its interactivity…. The Internet’s diversity tremendously complicates the issue of ‘What is alternative’” (Downing, 2003, p. 627). The various forms of blogs and discussion forums can also be understood in terms of what Rodriguez (2001) calls a “citizens’ media,” which she perceives to be a social, political, and cultural phenomenon broader than the concept of “alternative media.” However, Rodriguez also warns that analyzing alternative media within the binary opposition of domination and subordination between the powerful and the powerless does not address the real complexity and fluidity of alternative media. Instead, Rodriguez defines “citizens’ media” as “one more site in the realm of quotidian politics, as part of fluid, fragmented, and long-term processes whereby men and women shape their social and cultural environments” (Rodriguez, 2001, p. xiv). The concept of citizens’ media, Rodriguez argues, is appropriate to capture all the diversity of activities that occur in the realm of
Rodriguez also points out that due to the short life cycles that sometimes characterize citizens’ media, their role in the construction of democracy will produce more potential positive effects if we do not confine building democracy to the traditional thinking about political action and social movements that run in a linear and continuous process. Instead, Rodriguez states that:

What we find is a multitude of small forces that surface and burst like bubbles in a swamp. But in the same way that these bubbles are a clear sign that the swamp is alive, we should approach democratic communication as a live creature that contracts and expands with its own very vital rhythms—rhythms which often have very little to do with the linear, preplanned, and rational processes that inform our scholarly inquiries (p. 22).

Hence, the way that we perceive blogs or discussion forums on the Internet should be viewed through the perspective of “citizens’ media,” which stresses the concept of the quotidian rather than the traditional approach of the politics of dissidence (Rodriguez, 2001). Rodriguez’s concept of “citizens’ media” provides us with a powerful analytical tool to examine the role that blogs play in the Arab world in particular.

Bloggers have had some undeniable impact on the actions of some Arab governments toward their citizens. For example, in Egypt, during presidential and parliamentary elections in 2005, a coalition of bloggers organized themselves as the Kefaya National Movement for Change. Moreover, Al Malky (2007) argues that blogs have institutionalized the discourse of diversity and pluralism in Egypt, especially when contrasted to the constraints on political, religious, and ethnic plurality in the mainstream news media. In addition, blogs are being integrated into the independent media in Egypt, since their content often appears in independent Egyptian newspapers, such as Al Masry-Alyoum and Al-Dostour (Al Malky, 2007). However, political blogs have not attracted all the attention; personal blogs that reflect individuals’ direct experience or thoughts also
have the potential to challenge the dominant discourses in society, as they publicly discuss the most controversial social issues, such as religion and the relations between the sexes (Weyman, 2007).

Eltahawy (2007) declares her optimism about the role of blogs in exposing and disturbing the Arab regimes, for example, with offline demonstrations, such as the Kefaya movement, that focus on corruption and issues like presidential inheritance. Eltahawy argues that bloggers “were the electronic pamphleteers for the street activists.” Moreover, evidence exists that blogs can set the media agenda and force issues onto the national agenda. For example, bloggers’ exposed the sexual assaults of women in downtown Cairo by gangs of men during a religious holiday in October 2006, and assaults in May 2005 when many female protestors and journalists were sexually assaulted by security forces and pro-government thugs (Eltahawy, 2007). These two salient examples show to what degree blogs can play a role in setting the media agenda and in framing important issues. In summary, as Martin (2007) argues, the importance of blogs is hard to ignore in an Arab world characterized by a traditional media loyal to the regime: “Blogs have become one of the most effective means of expression for the Egyptian opposition recently.”
Chapter 3: The Shifting Terrain of Governmental Regulation, Politics, and the Media in Egypt

Introduction

This chapter provides essential information concerning the context in which blogging journalism has emerged in Egypt. The issues discussed in this chapter are reshaping contemporary debates about the electronic public space, a phenomenon that is pertinent to an analysis of the dynamics between the media system and the political system in Egypt, and the impact of this relationship on the Egyptian public sphere. One of the major characteristics of this context that must be understood before an accurate evaluation of the emerging media technologies can be achieved is that Egypt is undergoing a democratic transition from an authoritarian political model to a relatively more liberal one. In the past, the major governmental attitude towards the media was one of control as a powerful means to produce propaganda to enhance authority and power; however, starting with the emergence of the new media, exemplified by the Internet, the iron hand of state authority has softened and, thus, new democratic possibilities are on the horizon in Egypt.

According to Yassine (2008), this transitional phase in Egypt can be described as a period of political reform. The first salient feature of this democratic transition in Egypt is the constitutional amendments. The second feature is the unprecedented press freedom that has created a new wave of journalists who are practicing freedom of expression and criticizing governmental politics. The third feature of this democratic transition is the
wide-ranging critique by journalists, political parties, and civil society organizations of the application of emergency laws in Egypt that have led to human rights violations. The fourth feature is the huge wave of protests against the privatization of state-owned enterprises in Egypt, the laying off of thousands of workers, the imposition of early retirement laws, and the general decline in job security, all of which have led to accusations of governmental corruption due to a lack of transparency in dealings with private corporations. The fifth feature is the increasing number of unauthorized strikes and protests by people from different social categories—workers, employees, journalists, members of the kefaya (meaning “enough”) movement, civil society activists, and of course bloggers and online activists. Finally, the sixth feature is the growing dissatisfaction with the government policies that have hiked the price of food, housing, and all the necessities of life; and with the increasing unemployment and inflation rates, and generalized low wages, all of which create an increasing disparity among the social classes as reflected in the growth of a new wealthy class at the expense of a deteriorating middle class and an impoverished and expanding poor class.

The current context in which Egyptian blogs have evolved is characterized by a sharp polarization between the proponents of the regime and government—comprised of members of the National Democratic Party who usually vote for and agree with any proposal put forward by the government—and opposition political forces and ordinary citizens who feel that governmental policies threaten human existence itself, and that concern for social justice is not part of the economic reform plans of the government. The negative aspects of this political environment are accompanied by a phenomenon of degenerating values; that is, an absence of any agreed-upon ethical standards for
evaluating different kinds of behaviours. In other words, a kind of uncertainty currently prevails among the citizens of Egypt. One symptom of which is that its youth have become alienated and desperate. In part, this uncertainty helps to explain why the content of the discourse of many Egyptian blogs are replete with frivolous writings and curses or indignation with everything in society, while at the same time, a number of political blogs are providing an articulate social critique of the negative political, social, and economic practices of Egyptian society today (Yassine, 2008).

As discussed in Chapter 2, Habermas’ concept of the public sphere of bourgeois European society was based on a small scale public sphere generated through coffeehouses, salons, and small political journals in which rational-critical reason, rather than the instrumental reason characteristic of much of the modern state and economic practice, became a new basis for authority. However, since then, the scale and scope of political communication has acutely shifted away from its foundation in face-to-face interaction and small scale communication towards increasingly commercialized and large-scale professionalized mass media organizations. New institutionalized forms of political power expressed through political parties, the state, and other powerful social organizations have used their control to dominate the public arena of communication. In addition, the new public sphere that has been created by some of the emerging media technologies has become a substitute for the authentic public debate envisioned by Habermas’ small scale public sphere.

As Garnham (1992) argues, one of the great virtues of the public sphere envisioned by Habermas is that it weds politics and media to each other, so rather than focusing on the study of mass media as a separate entity, it avoids being “simply too
media-centric.” Habermas’ public sphere focuses “upon the indissoluble link between the institutions and practices of mass public communication and the institutions and practices of democratic politics” (Garnham, 1992, p. 360). Another important corrective to the “media-centric” approach is the comparative analysis of media systems and their relation to political systems conducted by Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm (1956) in their remarkable book *Four Theories of the Press* in which they argue that:

> the press always takes on the form and coloration of the social and political structures within it operates. Especially, it reflects the system of social control whereby the relations of individuals and institutions are adjusted. We believe that an understanding of these aspects of society is basic to any systematic understanding of the press (pp.1-2).

Also, in *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics*, Hallin and Mancini (2004) argue that “one cannot understand the news media without understanding the nature of the state, the system of political parties, the pattern of relations between economic and political interests, and the development of civil society, among other elements of social structure” (p. 8). These authors critique the earlier argument of proposed by Siebert, Peterson, and Shramm (1956) that the media always will be the “dependent variable” in relation to the “system of social control,” which it “reflects.” Instead, Hallin and Mancini (2004) discuss the reciprocal influences of the media and the political system, arguing that:

> it may be reasonable to assume that the media system essentially ‘reflects’ other aspects of social structure—the party system, for example. But there is good evidence that media institutions have an impact of their own on other social structures (p. 8).

Bourdieu’s field theory is another recent model that provides a more adequate approach for mapping our contemporary mediascape through its relation to other fields, in particular, politics and the economy. Bourdieu stresses that society is differentiated by
a number of semi-autonomous fields (e.g., the fields of politics, economics, religion, cultural production, etc.) governed by their own “rules of the game.” He also differentiates these fields into what he calls “heteronomous” and “autonomous” poles. These fields are impacted by the ongoing conflictual relations between the dominant and dominated classes, and are characterized by the “capital” that each field generates, usually economic or cultural. Each field is structured around the opposition between the “heteronomous” pole representing the economic and political fields (forces external to the field) and the “autonomous” pole representing the specific capital unique to the field (e.g., artistic or scientific skills or other species of cultural capital). Thus, fields can be differentiated according to the specific kinds of capital they value and by their degree of relative autonomy from each other, and in particular from the dominant economic and political fields (Benson, 1999, p. 464). Bourdieu (2005) argues that like most fields, the media field or the journalistic filed, is increasingly heteronomous today, and is losing more of its autonomy because of the constraints of the economy and of politics. The media field “is structured on the basis of an opposition between these two poles, between those who are ‘purest,’ most independent of state power, political power, and economic power, and those who are most dependent on these powers and commercial powers” (Bourdieu, 2005, p. 41). However, at the same time, Bourdieu (2005) hypothesizes that the journalistic field shapes and imposes its constraints on all other fields, particularly the fields of cultural production and the political field (p. 41).

From the outset, I argue that Egypt fits roughly into Hallin and Mancini’s (2004) Polarized Pluralist Model (one of their three media system models) that is characterized by an integration of the media into party politics, a weaker historical development of the
commercial media, and a strong state role in the management of the media (p. 11). In Egypt, as elsewhere, political factors shape the media context.

Thus, in this chapter, I primarily focus on the relation between the media system and the political system, emphasizing the various forms of state coercive power over the media, and exploring the forces of change that are currently transforming this relationship; also, to a somewhat lesser extent, I analyze media policy and law. Hence, this chapter begins by providing a historical overview of the political system in Egypt and its evolution over different periods. In addition, I consider how political parties are important organs in the public sphere in Egypt. Then, I focus on the relationship between the so-called print media and the political authority that includes the state regulatory and direct censoring power exerted on the media, and in particular, over the state-regulated broadcasting system. Moreover, this chapter discusses the issue of freedom of expression, since it is central to the public sphere and to the formation of public opinion.

The Egyptian Political System: A Historical Overview

The Egyptian political system is a presidential parliamentary system. The Permanent Constitution of the Arab Republic of Egypt—issued on September 11, 1971 and amended on May 22, 1980, May 25, 2005, and March 26, 2007—organizes the political system of the state and defines the role of public authorities and their terms of reference. Hence, the constitution establishes the principle of citizenship as the main pillar of the Egyptian democratic parliamentary system, and affirms the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary as the basis for democratic rule. Moreover, the constitution emphasizes the Islamic Sharia as the main foundation for legislation, and the
Arabic language as the official language of the state. The Egyptian political system consists of legislative, executive, and judicial authorities, as well as the press, political parties, local administration, and civil society organizations.

The legislative authority is based on a bicameral system consisting in part of the People’s Assembly, which serves for a term of five years and exercises legislative authority, approving the overall policy of the state, including the socio-economic development plan and the public budget of the state. The People’s Assembly is composed of 454 members, including ten members appointed by a presidential decree; fifty percent of its members are workers and peasants. The other wing of the legislative authority is the Shura (Consultative) Council established in 1980 by virtue of a constitutional amendment agreed upon by the Egyptian people through a public referendum conducted on May 22, 1980 and approved by the People’s Assembly. After first taking on a consultative role, the Shura Council was assigned a legislative responsibility by the Constitutional Amendments (Articles 194, 195) agreed upon on March 26, 2007. The Shura Council is composed of 264 members, whose term of membership lasts six years, although 50 percent of the members are re-elected or re-appointed after three years into their six year term (State Information Service Yearbook, 2007, pp. 45-48).

In Egypt, as in other Arab countries, the political styles of government are often characterized by a complex hybridity. As Nafaa (2005) argues, the complication of the current Egyptian political system is that it is part totalitarian, part authoritarian, and part democratic; and so it includes philosophical concepts from each of these political styles. Thus, it seems accurate to describe the Egyptian political system as including quasi-totalitarian, quasi-authoritarian, and quasi-democratic tendencies. For example, the
current constitution states that Egypt is a “democratic socialism system” and “an alliance of the working forces,” although the reality on the ground suggests that the system is closer to capitalism than socialism, and to authoritarianism rather than democracy. Even with respect to the economy and social issues, the Egyptian system cannot be described as capitalistic, socialistic, or a mix of the two, since it also includes the characteristics of various other economic, social, and political systems. Although formidable transformations have occurred in Egyptian society in all fields—political, economical, cultural, intellectual, ideological, and sociological—the basic political characteristics of the current Egyptian system retain the same authoritarian features of the Egyptian Revolution of 1952 (Nafaa, 2005).

During the Nasser period (1956-1970), a number of temporary constitutions were issued to reflect the different phases of the evolution of the Egyptian Revolution of 1952, and the elimination of all aspects of liberal action and thought. Moreover, during the time of the 1952 revolution, its military rulers abrogated the Egyptian Constitution of 1923. When Egypt declared its independence from Britain in February 1922, it hastened to enshrine its liberal nationalist faith in the Egyptian Constitution of 1923, which was later replaced by the Egyptian Constitution of 1953 granting strong executive authority to the president. According to Baker (1990), the power of the Egyptian state was expanded after 1952 in ways that restricted the arena for independent political action (p. 54), and in 1956, the Nasser regime created the first of a series of one-party organizations to replace the multiparty system. The Egyptian Constitution of 1956 was quickly replaced by the Union Constitution of 1958 to coincide with the entrance of Egypt into a federal union with Syria to become the United Arab Republic. However, Syria’s secession from
the United Arab Republic in 1961-1962 made necessary new constitutional amendments to the Union Constitution of 1958, which were instituted in the temporary Egyptian constitution of 1964.

When Sadat took power in Egypt in 1970, he indicated a new direction for Egypt that crystallized in the mid-1970s in an Open Door Policy that shaped the tone of political and economic life for the duration of the 1970s, and prepared the way for the re-installation of a multiparty system. During this period, the Constitution of 1971 was issued, and it was first amended in 1980. Advocates of constitutional reform in Egypt have criticized the 1971 Constitution for concentrating excessive authority in the hands of the president, for not providing a solid protection for human rights, and for robbing the democratic elements of the then existing political system of any meaning. These advocates have pressed for a transference of the president’s authority to parliament, an entrenchment of judicial independence, a strengthening of the human rights provisions, and a building of firmer guarantees that democratic practices will be followed. Political parties, professional syndicates, trade unions, university students associations, university professors’ clubs, human rights organizations, and other civil society organizations have repeatedly called for, and demanded, the reform of Egypt’s political system.

In 2005, President Mubarak initiated the constitutional change that the People’s Assembly demanded by amending Article 76 of the constitution, which regulates the candidacy for the presidency, so to allow the country’s first multi-candidate presidential elections in which the president of the republic is chosen through a direct free election from a number of candidates rather than by a referendum. However, the 2005 amendment stipulated that only a political party that holds at least five percent of the total number of
seats in both chambers of parliament (the People’s Assembly and the Shura Council) may nominate a candidate for the presidency from its senior leadership. In 2007, the parliamentary majority of the National Democratic Party (NDP) passed another amendment to Article 76 of the constitution, which reduced the previous threshold to three percent of the seats in each chamber, or the equivalent number of seats in one chamber, and made an exception for any registered party that holds at least one seat in any of the chambers to nominate a candidate for the presidency from its senior leadership for the presidential elections that will occur during the next ten years. Thus, due to this additional amendment, it is possible for an independent to run for the presidential election, but the candidate would need a large number of endorsements from 250 elected officials from various levels of government (including 65 from the People’s Assembly, 25 from the Shura Council, and from local popular councils in at least 14 governorates). This amendment was part of a package of amendments drafted and promoted by the NDP to thirty-four articles of the Constitution. In late December 2006, President Mubarak heralded these amendments as an important step towards democratization and political reform in Egypt, and on March 19, 2007, they were approved by the People’s Assembly. Some have claimed that these amendments will increase the powers of the elected parliament and the appearance of a greater balance among the branches of government, as well as expunging much of the socialist language of an earlier era and introducing instead a new discourse of “citizenship” (Brown, Dunne, & Hamzawy, 2007).

Although the amendment of Article 76 allows for multi-candidate presidential elections, the conditions it establishes put enormous obstacles in the path of prospective future opposition presidential candidates. The conditions regulating the candidacy of
independents for the presidency that require signatures from elected officials in Parliament or other elected bodies mostly controlled by the NDP may be impossible to obtain by any opposition independents, and are specifically targeted at the Muslim Brotherhood. In addition, the opposition and reformers have argued that the amendment of Article 76 was not enough, and that the 1980 amendment of Article 77 is even more important, since the original article should stand as it was without this amendment. Article 77 of the constitution, prior to the 1980 amendment, used to prohibit the nomination of the same person to more than two constitutive terms (each term being six years), but in 1980, Sadat amended Article 77 so that the same person could be nominated an unlimited number of times; although, as fate would have it, he personally did not benefit from this amendment. The reformers argue that the 2007 amendments do not do a lot, even if they seemed to offer some form of liberalizing reform, but with virtually none of the substance. As long as the constitution still allows for excessive authority to remain in the hands of the president, and the opportunity of the opposition parties to participate in the presidential elections is still limited in the absence of necessary guarantees, these amendments are basically impotent with respect to real democratic reform. Moreover, and perhaps most disturbingly, the 2007 package of amendments may also potentially increase the capability of the governing party to secure its monopoly on power.

The present decline of the role of political parties in the political life of Egypt casts doubt on their ability to provide capable candidates for presidential elections and to have at least three percent of the seats in Parliament that would be necessary for running their own candidate. Although the number of political parties in Egypt reached 24 in
2009, this number does not reflect a plurality of characteristics, since nearly 18 of these parties have no significance in the public sphere (Alshobky, 2009). The parliamentary election, in which the NDP gains the lion’s share of seats in every election, is clear evidence of the deep weakness of political parties in Egypt. For example, in the 2005 parliamentary election, the liberal Wafd and Ghab parties, the leftist Tagammu party, and the Arab Nasserite party—the most significant legal political opposition parties in Egypt—could not secure more than a combined 5 percent of the seats (Broun, Dunne, & Hamzawy, 2007). In tandem with the fragile life of all political parties in Egypt, these opposition parties are unable to respond or react to changing events and challenges. Moreover, they are unable to undertake their political functions, such as producing political cadres to represent the social and political interests of citizens, or promoting the political culture, mobilizing citizens, and enhancing political participation, etc. Elmoslemany (2005) argues that since Egyptian political parties have abandoned their role and functions, non-political institutions such as professional syndicates, university professors’ clubs, and illegal movements have assumed their role, and at the same time, neglected their own functions, and thus, the professional environment as well as the political arena have deteriorated. Conscious of their weaknesses and their inability to pose a challenge to the regime, opposition parties have come to rely on the regime to ensure their survival (Brown, Dunne, & Hamzawy, 2007).

To summarize, the political opposition and civil society activists argue that the 2007 amendments also infringe dangerously on human rights protections and close off the possibilities for peaceful political activities, particularly by the Muslim Brotherhood. The sharpest debate has been over the amendments to Article 179 that would ultimately
allow broad powers to monitor and detain people accused of terrorist activities while not specifically defining terrorism; importantly, these amendments run counter to the constitutional guarantees for personal freedoms and individual rights, and thus undermine human rights protection in Egypt. Another problematic amendment changes Article 88—which originally limited the role of judges in the monitoring of elections that often are mired in accusations of fraud—by completely removing the provision for judicial supervision, and transferring this monitoring responsibility to an electoral commission. The third problematic amendment revises Article 5 to prohibit not only the creation of political parties based on religion, but also any political activity within any religious frame of reference. This amendment completely closes the door to the political representation of the Muslim Brotherhood or any other political group that derives its programs from a religious institution or civil organization involved in a religiously-inspired political activity (Brown, Dunne, & Hamzawy, 2007).

As a result of the restrictions imposed on the opposition political parties and movements, and the gap between theory and practice, citizens are becoming more alienated from political life in Egypt, especially as they experience a general sense of frustration and fear of an unpredictable future. Recent public opinion has been occupied with two issues related to the political structure in Egypt and the future of the country. The first is Mubarak’s refusal to nominate a vice president since his accession to the presidency in 1981, and the second is the growing role of President Mubarak’s son Gamal Mubarak in the public life of the country, especially his appointment as the Assistant Secretary-General of the NDP and also as head of the “policies committee” within the party, which has become its main active committee, marginalizing its other
committees and activities. As a result, rumours have started to spread about the succession of power to Mubarak’s son Gamal (Naafa, 2005). In addition to these two pressing concerns, the current difficult economic situation also has become a source of great worry and stress for the Egyptian people. Elmoslemany (2005) argues that economic matters are the main cause of resentment for the broad sector of the Egyptian public, whereas issues related to freedoms, human rights, the rotation of power, and so on are the main source of resentment for a much narrower sector of the public. This split in public opinion related to current resentments does not mean that those who are unsatisfied politically are satisfied economically or that those who are unsatisfied economically are satisfied politically; rather, this split suggests that the anger percolating in Egypt at the present time is basically economic not political, and that the ultimate goal of the broad sector of the population is to improve their living conditions (Elmoslemany, 2005).

Mapping the Political Opposition in Egypt

The bureaucratic elite is re-asserting itself in power against both Islamic and secular oppositions (Said, 2000, p. 5). Abu-Taleb (2005) argues that the Egyptian opposition consists of three main elements. First are the legal oppositional political parties, and as has been discussed previously, their impact is still very limited. Second are the legally-unrecognized groups and movements, effectively *fait accompli*, especially the Muslim Brotherhood, which is Egypt’s largest opposition movement—a banned but tolerated organization with wide public support that has established a network of social services throughout the country (Abu-Taleb, 2005). Recently, the Muslim Brotherhood
won 88 seats in the 2005 People’s Assembly elections, and it is the dominant opposition group of both Islamist and secularist movements. As Wickham (1994) argues, it is the only vibrant group challenging the regime, and it functions effectively in the public sphere in Egypt as a dominant voice in intellectual and political life. In addition, the Muslim Brotherhood is the most representative and the most powerful actor in civil society in Egypt (Al-Sayyid, 1993, p. 239).

Third is the popular secular opposition movement established during the 2005 electoral season, forged from coalitions and mobilizing diverse supporters—including independent cultural and political activists (partisan and non-partisan alike) and the Egyptian Movement for Change (Kefaya), which uses the Arabic-language slogan *kefaya… la leltamdeed… la leltawreeth* (which means in English *enough… no to extension … no to heredity*). This slogan indicates the complete opposition to the continuance of the political regime that has ruled Egypt for the last 25 years—*this is enough*. *No to extended* means no to the re-election of Mubarak to another term, which began in 2005. *No to hereditary* means no to any efforts that enable President Mubarak’s son Gamal to replace his father. Elmoslemony (2005) argues that the Kefaya movement has exploited the present economic deterioration by enhancing their political discourse with an ethical position that suggests they have no ambition to gain power, and they do not accept any governmental or external subsidy; in addition, this movement opposes American capitalism and globalization. Moreover, the Kefaya movement is occupied with grand issues, such as standing against America or Israel, and tends to address these complicated issues with simple slogans. Elmoslemony (2005) also points out that Kefaya has neither received an angry response from the government nor a broad acceptance from
the general population, and thus, it cannot be considered as a viable player that could gain an authority role in the political future of Egypt. In addition, this movement is not as strong as it was during the 2005 electoral season, since it now is suffering from a growing internal dissent relating to both the power of minority members within the movement and the tensions between some Islamist and secular members (Sullivan and Jones, 2007). Also, among the effective secular agents demanding change and reform in Egypt are what Said (2005) calls the “civil activists,” especially the human rights organizations that oppose any violations to individual freedoms. Importantly, these civil activists have reshaped the heart of the current social movements for political reform, especially the Kefaya movement (Said, 2005).

**Political Parties**

The emergence of political parties in Egypt dates back to the last two decades of the nineteenth century during the British occupation of Egypt. Thus, the party system in Egypt basically materialized with the national movement against the British occupation and foreign domination. In addition, important transformations occurred in the last twenty-five years of the nineteenth century, which ushered in a new era of intellectual history in modern Egypt. During this transformative time, modernists and followers of the Enlightenment underground for cultural pluralism in Egypt raised a lot of debates about historically significant issues by using a rationalist approach against the traditionalists. These intellectual reformers had been influenced by Western civilization and displayed an affinity with the Enlightenment, which was a powerful inspiration for them. The Egyptian press at the time became a medium for these public debates about
socio-economic and political issues, and also engaged in religious disputations over heated issues, such as the relationship between the rational and Islamic sciences, the liberation of women, the nature of Western civilization, and the nature of the political authority of Islam.

As a result of the breakdown of state monopolies, these secular, intellectual middle class groups and a wealthy class of proprietors grew in economic and political power. It is clear that Egypt moved towards the beginning of modernity during the reign of Khedive Ismail who established the Consultative Assembly of the Delegates in 1866. The Enlightenment was the dominant discourse during that time due to other historical factors, such as the breakdown of traditional order, the emergence of new social classes, and the role of the state in providing initiatives for modernization and the necessary social space for cultural production. The expansion of these classes provided a social basis for the rise of modern culture in Egypt and led to more participation in social and political life, as Moaddel (2002) elaborates:

This transformation not only involved the expansion of commerce, the decline of the old and the emergence of new social classes, and changes in the structure and politics of the state, but also the decline of the traditional Islamic discourse and the emergence of competing ideologies (p. 4).

The favourable political conditions in Egypt at that time—as contrasted to the severe wave of oppression by the Ottomans during the last quarter of the nineteenth century—encouraged a number of Syrian and Lebanese journalists to come and live in Egypt, and they played a prominent role in the emergence of modern Egyptian journalism and the cultural changes that would overtake the country. The relative personal freedoms that Egyptians enjoyed prior to and during the British occupation, which had started in 1882, enhanced the flourishing of journalism in Egypt. According to Saeed (2006), the
first intellectual conception of modern journalism in Egypt started to appear during the 1860s and 1870s amid the political and ideological upheavals that sought a means to confront Western colonialism and revive Arab civilization (p. 30). As a result, a group of active journalists published the daily papers *al-Muqattam* (issued in 1889 in opposition to the *Al-Moa’yed* nationalist newspaper edited by its owner Sheikh Ali Yousuf, a pioneer of the Egyptian press) and *al-Ahram* (1875), and the monthlies *al-Hillal* (1892) and *al-Muqtataf* (1884) (Moaddel, 2002, p. 5). At that time and in that atmosphere, Saghiya (2006) argues that the seeds of the liberal era were sown, and the Arab press gained an expanding capacity to attract an audience, with a widening base of educated people who had adopted new Western styles of living (p. 558). The relatively liberal media in Egypt at that time—before the Free Officers seized power in the revolution of 1952—have been characterized as part of a civil society structure that represented different segments of society, including all the political parties with their political programs and social demands (Al-Jarallah, 2006, p. 587). Three political parties were established at the time and played an important role in the political process until the revolution of 1952—the *Al-Watany Party* (the National Party), the *Umma Party* (the Community Party, which included the wealthiest proprietors and those who cooperated with the occupation authority), and the *Esslah Party* (the Reform Party, which reflected Khedive Ismail’s opinions and interests) (Hilal, 1977, p. 57).

For many, 1907 is considered to be the year of the birth of the real political party system in contemporary Egypt, when the first political party, the National Party, was established by Mustafa Kamel. The political party system in Egypt can be categorized from the beginning until the present as evolving through four periods or stages. First, the
multi-party period existed from 1907 to 1914, and in this period, the parties were concerned about and focused on the issue of the British occupation; however, they did not practice authority in any way or participate in the parliament. During this period, the political parties did not manage to establish real and effective party organizing (Harb, 1985, pp. 245, 254). Significantly, these parties emerged from newspapers that had been established for long or short times before their formation. For example, the Islaah Party (the Reform Party) grew out of the Al-Moa’yed newspaper, which had been established in 1889, twenty years before the actual formation of the party. Also, the Al-Watany Party (the National Party) grew out of the Al-Lewa’a newspaper, which had been established in 1900, eight years before the emergence of the party. Finally, the Umma Party grew out of the Al-Gareeda newspaper, which had been established in 1907, six months before the formation of the party (Rezq, 1995, p. 26).

Second, the multi-party period existed from 1919-1953, the period between the 1919 revolution and the 1952 revolution. In addition to a set of minority parties, this period also included the Wafd Party, considered to be the main and largest political party of this period, and the first party with a popularity base in the region of the Middle East. Throughout this period, the Wafd Party, through its leader Sa’ad Zaghloul, led the liberal movement’s campaign for national independence, which culminated in the 1919 revolution. In this period, especially during the 1920s, these parties contributed to promoting the political conscience that led to a national struggle against the British occupation, and that also helped to establish real limits on the exercise of arbitrary power. Party intellectuals from this period represented the vantage point of the Egyptian middle class and played a significant role in the political culture and in the promotion of a feeling
of national loyalty (Shuman & Khawaga, 1994). Saghiya (2006) argues that the press operating in Egypt during the liberal era, which began after the 1919 revolution, provided a model training ground for the Arab press (p. 546).

The third party period that existed from 1953 to 1976 was the stage of the single political party organization, the dissolution of the Wafd Party and other historic political parties, and the creation of a series of one-party organizations that replaced the multiparty system. President Gamal Abdul-Nasser, the leader of the July 1952 revolution, perceived the multiparty system negatively, and associated its multiple parties with self-interest and corruption. He believed that multiple political parties were a source of fragmentation between citizens, and claimed that these parties collaborated with the British occupation and its exploitation of the Egyptian people. Nassar replaced political parties with political organizations. The first, the Liberation Organization, was established on 23 January, 1953; the second, the National Union, was established in accordance with Article 192 of the Egyptian Constitution of 1956; and the third, the Arabic Socialist Union, was started in 1962 and remained the only political organization in Egypt until the beginning of the third multiparty period that began in 1976 (Mustafa, 2000). In Nasser’s view, these organizations did not represent any specific social class; rather, according to him, all Egyptians were members of the National Union and its successor the Arab Socialist Union, since these organizations reflected the best interests of all Egyptians and the forward drive for economic development and justice in Egypt (Hilal, 1997).

Nasser epitomized the philosophy of the National Union when he said: “The National Union is based on the individual liberation from economic, social, and political exploitation. It is national organizing… the whole people protect its unity” (Hilal, 1997,
p. 162). In general, scholars have argued that during the Nasser regime, all political authority was concentrated in the hands of the military elite without any real participation from citizens. The pseudo-participation performed by the National Union and its successor the Arab Socialist Union did not include any political opposition against the regime, which managed to control society through the propagation of the illusion that each member of Egyptian society was the owner of the national project. Even though at the time these organizations were largely successful in preventing the emergence of an organized political opposition, the citizenship in large measure perceived this system of a single political entity as just another agent of authoritarianism with a top-to-bottom power base, and thus, as a tool of control and censorship. Moreover, these political organizations under different names did not transform into avenues for real political participation, for the expression of opinion, or for the representation of different political views (Hilal, 1997, pp. 187-190). On the contrary, the practices of these pseudo-participatory organizations had negative consequences on citizens’ political values and their political participation (Kandil, 1991, p. 11).

In August 1974, President Anwar al-Sadat began to direct criticism towards the Arabic Socialist Union in a paper he published. In this paper, Sadat claimed he was providing a space for dissenting opinions by allowing the creation of three minbars (pulpits—center, right-wing, and left-wing) inside the Arabic Socialist Union, which by late 1977, had transformed into three political parties—Sadat’s Center Party, the rightist Liberal Party, and the leftist National Progressive Unionist Party. Hence, the political system in Egypt was transformed once again into a multiparty system. Then, Law No. 40 of 1977 concerning political parties was issued, and the number of political parties
increased to five during the Sadat era (Hilal, 1997). It also is worth noting that the re-
transformation of Egypt into a multiparty system was possible at this time because of the
willingness of then President Anwar al-Sadat, which suggests that from the outset, the
transformation into a multiparty system was perceived as a grant from the president who
would determine its rules and terms (Kandil, 1991, p. 14). The party system under the
rule of president Sadat was criticized for its extensive restrictions on the right to form
political parties; its determination of the form and the extent of permitted opposition
inside the parliament; its restrictions on political participation in oppositional parties; its
restrictions on publishing and distributing party newspapers, which were enforced
through suspending and confiscating them; and its unjustified raids on the gathering
places of oppositional parties (Yassine, 1986).

Some researchers have argued that the multiparty system under the reign of
President Anwar al-Sadat was insignificant and only was allowed to exist to make the
regime more palatable and to divert public attention away from an authoritarian agenda.
The multiparty system was not only fettered by the restricted number of parties that were
allowed to be established, but also in terms of the restrictions on their activities,
programs, and ideologies. The events that followed the issuing of the political party law
revealed the narrow band of what was actually permissible with respect to oppositional
political participation, and thus, belied Sadat’s real intention. After Sadat signed the
peace treaty with Israel, his regime was highly criticized by the party press and by many
intellectuals and journalists at home and abroad. At this time, Sadat issued a set of laws
to narrow individual freedom and curtail dissent and opposition. In addition to Law No.
33 of 1978 concerning the Protection of the Internal Front and Social Peace, which
provided sanctions against those who questioned the principles of the revolution, Sadat urged the People’s Assembly to adopt ethics legislation—Law No. 95 of 1980, known as the “Law of Shame”—to curb critics who criticized his policies, a law which would explicitly forbid public criticism of his peace initiative with Israel, and be directed at those “who were exploiting freedom and democracy” and “to protect the basic values of society from shameful conduct” (Nasser, 1990, p. 18). The “Law of Shame” states that: “citizens advocating opposition to, hatred of contempt for the state’s political, social or economic systems will be held accountable” (Nasser, 1990, p. 18). Journalists “publishing false or misleading information which could inflame public opinion, generate envy or hatred or threaten national unity or social peace” will be liable for prosecution. Those found guilty under the law could be deprived of all avenues of political expression for up to five years (Nasser, 1990, p. 18).

The opposition parties staged strong protest against the “Law of Shame,” arguing that it would threaten freedom of expression. However, the government put a freeze on all their activities, and their newspapers were confiscated to the extent that the Wafd Party dissolved itself, and the leftist Tagammu Party (the National Progressive Unionist Party) suspended its activities and closed its leftist newspaper Al-Ahaly (The Masses) after several of its editions were confiscated by the government. The party newspapers had to endure restrictive procedures and confiscations, and the Sadat regime also put pressure on other political-expression channels in the professional unions, and accused those who criticized and opposed it as being traitors and faithless, and then it put them on trial (Hilal, 1997, pp. 220-23). As a result, the outlets for political participation became limited, which spurred the growth of illegitimate organizations, such as the Communists,
Nasserites, and Islamists movements (Al-Sayyid & El-Menoufy, 1996, p. 82). By the end of 1980, just a month before his assassination on October 6, 1981, Sadat carried out his most aggressive crackdown on opposition parties and the press. He banned a number of publications and ordered the arrest of a large number of people, including opposition leaders, journalists, lawyers, and professors who were accused of criticizing his policies (Nasser, 1990, p. 19).

Following the assassination of Sadat, President Mubarak took power under very critical circumstances. Mubarak was inclined to create calmness and stability, and he adopted important procedures to achieve these goals, such as releasing political detainees, restoring the newspapers that had been shut down by the Sadat regime, and establishing relations with all the existing opposition parties (Hilal, 1997) to the extent that Said (2000) argues that “the true spring of democracy in the recent history of Egypt took place immediately after the assassination of President Sadat at the hands of Islamic militants and during President Mubarak’s first term in office (1981-1987)” (p. 6). During the presidency of Mubarak, the party system has stabilized, and the number of legalized political parties has grown to twenty-two; although some of them have failed to receive official approval from the Political Party Affairs Committee, most were supported by judicial decisions. However, this increasing number of political parties does not reflect a parallel increase in the effectiveness of party life and their role in the political life of Egypt, a phenomenon which will be further discussed later in this chapter. Most of these parties have not participated in parliamentary elections, with the exception of a few salient opposition parties, which usually are represented by a few seats. In the 2005 parliamentary elections, the ruling NDP won 311 seats, independent candidates won 112
seats (including 88 seats by Muslim Brotherhood members), the liberal Wafd Party won 6 seats, the leftist Al-Tagammu Party won 2 seats, and Ayman Nour’s new Al-Ghad Party won 1 seat (Sullivan & Jones, 2007). The NDP always wins the highest number of parliamentary seats. Perry (2004) argues that the huge disparity between the number of parliamentary seats won by NDP candidates in the election of the People’s Assembly during the Mubarak period and those few seats won by the candidates of opposition parties or independents would:

make any observer skeptical of claims that these elections are seriously contested... In fact, the huge NDP majorities are maintained by a combination of its having access to the bulk of the state’s (i.e., the president’s) patronage and to various kinds of fraud and coercion (p. 94).

Although Mubarak adopted the multiparty system, its effects were limited due to the regime’s domination of the parliamentary seats and the mainstream mass media, and also because Mubarak put many restraints on the activities of these multiple parties in an attempt to marginalize their political impact on the public. Not only did the Mubarak regime crack down on dissenting and opposition movements, but also modified Party Law No. 40 of 1977 and Party Law No. 177 of 2005, which tended to narrow the political scope rather than enlarge it. One of the most criticized defects of Law No. 177 is how it forms and structures the Political Party Affairs Committee, which is composed exclusively of members from the NDP (the ruling party) and is led by the chair of the Shura Council (the upper house of Parliament), which makes this committee a governmental agency that ironically is supposed to be politically neutral, but in reality represents a specific political party. This committee is responsible for determining whether political parties can be established, and it also has the power to approve the registration of all political parties. It can prohibit the formation of parties based on racial,
class, or religious affiliations. Other restraints limit the roles of political parties in Egypt, which can be exemplified by a set of actual practices rather than solely by the legislative restrictions themselves. For example, the political party that controls the state can use all of the available governmental powers at its disposal to serve its own party interests by infiltrating opposition party memberships and creating false accusations about them; by harassing opposition party members with all kinds of quasi-legal attacks; and by not guaranteeing free and democratic elections (Murad, 1989). Shawky Al-Sayed (1999) comments on the weaknesses of the political party system in Egypt when he argues that the issue is not the law governing the political parties itself, but the absence of any real competition among the existing political parties. Al-Sayed attributes the parties’ deficiency to the nature of the electoral system in Egypt. He argues that the electoral system should be reformed so that it can provide all parties with a free election environment that facilitates competition and represents the reality of current Egyptian public opinion and the will of the citizens. In addition, Al-Sayed (1999) also argues that the internal structure of the parties needs reform.

Legal restrictions concerning the establishment of political parties, and restrictions that government puts on already-established political parties by exploiting emergency laws, seriously undermine the viability and effectiveness of opposition parties in Egypt. However, opposition political parties themselves bear some responsibility for their ineffectiveness in raising the level of political discourse concerning the important issues and problems of Egyptian society. In many cases, the opposition political parties are satisfied to criticize government policies without proposing any pragmatic policy changes in areas such as job creation, the health-care system, housing, or education.
(Yassine, 2008). Most parties of the multiparty system can be fairly characterized as being too focused on empty rhetoric and superficial antagonism. Their role in the Egyptian political system is primarily decorative. A few parties play an important role in the political life of the Egyptian people, but the remainder, which could be called the “marginal parties” or the “paper parties,” are actually considered absent in the political landscape to the extent that they are not even able to run candidates in their different constituencies. Mustafa and Norton (2007) argue that:

Egypt exhibits no more than a superficial multiparty system. Outside of the hegemonic National Democratic Party (NDP), the 19 approved political parties are small, docile, and not influential. The regime permits them to play no more than a cosmetic role. Even new parties typically offer policies similar to those of the NDP, as is the case with the ‘opposition’ kefaya (‘Enough’) movement, which favors a blend of Islamism and socialism. Not only is all political life under surveillance and control, but the regime also controls approval of new parties. The generically named Political Party Committee, actually an organ of the NDP, routinely disapproves applications for party registration (p. 40).

The actual presence of the opposition parties in the perception of the Egyptian public is limited to a great extent, and the majority of people—even within the circle of intellectuals—do not know or have not heard about most of the parties or, needless to say, their programs and ideologies. Opposition political parties in Egypt have been reduced to their newspapers, which are the only indications of the existence of these parties, and so they have invested more in their newspapers than in building grassroots support (Mamoun, 2000, p. 389). Thus, most evidence suggests that political party affiliation is weak in Egypt and that political parties have no real effect in Egyptian political life. This phenomenon has been evaluated by a body of studies conducted to examine the relationship of political parties to their audience, and the influence of these parties on the Egyptian public. Most of these studies conclude that the mere increase in the number of political parties in Egypt does not go hand in hand with the expected
influence of these parties on their Egyptian audience or the political life of the country. For example, A recent 2008 poll conducted by the Egyptian Cabinet think tank—Information and Decision Support (IDSC)—shows that only one percent of Egyptian youth knew the exact number of political parties currently existing in Egypt, and that only seven percent of the Egyptian public old enough to vote are affiliated with political parties, most of them with the ruling NDP party (Almasry-alyoum, 2008). A national poll conducted by the National Center for Social and Criminal Research in 1991 on a sample of 1,378 subjects investigated what people knew about the political parties in Egypt and the issues associated with them, and how they evaluated the Egyptian political party system and its effectiveness. The findings of this poll showed that 33% of the total sample was not familiar with the existence of any political parties in Egypt. Moreover, even those who were familiar with the presence of political parties did not know most of their names, except for the major parties such as the NDP, Al Wafd, Tagammu (Progressive) Party, and al-Ahrar. This lack of knowledge suggests that a huge gap exists between the general awareness of citizens about political parties in Egypt and the political reality (Al-Amry, 1993, pp. 1353-1380). Another study conducted in 1991 by the National Center for Social and Criminal Research on a specialized sample of 488 subjects who were concerned about political affairs and associations—clerks, university professors, and media experts—showed that most of the subjects participating in the study did not have an affiliation with any party because they were not convinced of their effectiveness, and so they preferred to participate in public affairs without belonging to a specific party. The study also showed that participants agreed that the change to the Political Parties Law of 1977 was necessary to open the door to diverse political interests.
and ideologies, so that all Egyptian citizens could potentially get involved in the political process. However, most of the subjects of the sample believed that Egyptian citizens choose not to be concerned about the affairs of political parties because of their perception of the ineffectiveness of those parties. In addition, the subjects believed that the political parties themselves lack internal democracy and reliability in their management. Moreover, currently, Egyptian citizens are overwhelmed by their social and economic concerns and consequently disengage from partisan activity (Kandil, 1991, pp. 1-32).

El-Menoufy and Abdul Rahman’s (1996) study examines the decline of political participation among people living in the rural areas of Egypt, and attributes the reluctance of the Egyptian people to affiliate with political parties to the following: their ignorance of the actual political party system, their perception of political parties as luxuries and wastes of time, and their basic refusal to trust Egyptian political parties in general (pp. 117-140). Even a study conducted with members of parliament (Shuman, 1998) with different affiliations than the NDP—members of parliament from the opposition parties and independents—showed that most of the respondents were not satisfied with the actual party system because it did not achieve its goals. Moreover, they identified some of the most salient problems facing the political parties, such as the lack of citizens’ participation in the parties, the conflicts about party leadership, the absence of internal democracy within the parties, the fragile organizing structure of the parties, the fragile nature of party journalism, and the inadequacy of political party law (Shuman, 1998).

The party system in Egypt is dominated by the NDP ruling party, which does not leave much room for the opposition parties to compete. Unlike the NDP, the opposition
parties find it difficult to get permission to hold gatherings, and their members and candidates are under severe restrictions and observation from the government. It also should be mentioned that the real political opposition in Egypt is the Muslim Brothers who are not allowed to be recognized and legalized as a political party, so in the parliamentary elections, they must run as independents. As a result, the oppositional political parties have no real effect, and thus, cannot accomplish what they are expected to in society. Some justify these severe restrictions on the political opposition by claiming that since Egyptian society, like other developing countries, is in a transition period with respect to economic, social, and political development, this kind of caution is necessary to prevent a fragile democracy from being transformed into anarchy (Abdel-Maqsoud, 1995, p. 270). In addition, a belief exists among the rulers of Egypt, from President Nasser to the present, that Egyptians are not yet ready for democracy (Hilal, 1997, p. 159). Therefore, a lot of apathy exists among citizens who prefer not to affiliate with political parties, and who also may abandon their right to vote in Egyptian elections because their difficult economic circumstances consume all their time and energy, and because they may believe that Egyptian elections do not offer a real political choice.

The declining role of political parties in Egypt has led to a peculiar political situation. The political multiplicity framed in the constitution has been in reality transformed into a political totalitarianism; that is, the ruling NDP has the upper hand in establishing policies and proposing laws in every field without needing to take seriously the concerns of other political orientations. As Yassine argues, Egypt is in dire need of a social dialogue that includes conflicting visions and strategies, which could lead to outcomes not biased in support of the upper class at the expense the middle and poor
classes. Diverse civil society organizations must be included in this social dialogue—not just in the field of human rights, but also in other fields and with respect to other issues facing Egyptian society, including economic development, unemployment, pollution, housing, and so on. In addition, it also should be noted that Egyptian civil society has suffered from restrictions imposed through the state, and from the adoption of narrow religious views at times that seek to impose this religious orientation on every other field, or on the other hand, from the adoption of a strict secular view that seeks to separate religion from the state (Yassine, 2008).

It also might be argued that the failure of political parties in Egypt, the clogging of the legal avenues of expression, the absence of traditional mediating institutions between the public and the state, and the difficult living conditions that the majority of Egyptians must endure have led to a remarkable wave of demonstrations and protests recently in Egypt led by professional syndicates, trade unions, university students associations, faculty clubs, and a diversity of citizens. These street-level protests in different governorates demanding fair and equal treatment for all Egyptian people have gained emotional sympathy among the broad sector of citizens, and have been supported and promoted by independent newspapers, the new information communication technologies, blogs, and online discussion groups (AbdelKhaleq, 2009).

Print Media and Political Authority

The political situation in Egypt before the 1952 July revolution added to the potency of the Egyptian press because the great national goal of gaining independence from British occupation had united most Egyptians. Hence, all types of journalists (party
and individual) seemed to have agreed to work toward achieving that goal (Hafez, 1990, p. 17). By being mobilized around the cause of liberty, journalism was a politically powerful voice before the 1952 July revolution, especially in the absence of an efficient broadcasting system. Television broadcasting in Egypt did not begin until 1960. On other hand, before the 1952 July revolution and during the two multiparty periods in Egypt (from 1907 to 1914 and from 1922 to 1953), the relationship between journalism and Egypt’s political parties was powerful; so much so, that newspapers were one of the most important factors leading to the emergence of Egypt’s political parties, and the most important and effective tool to express and explain their principles. Helped by the national independence movement, journalism defied the political authority of the time (Negida, 1988, p. 406). Just as the political parties in Egypt were established as a result of journalism—the National Party through the Al-Lowaa Newspaper, the Omma Party through the Al Garida Paper, and the Al-Esslah Party through the Al Moaied Newspaper—Egyptian journalism benefited from and flourished in the presence of political parties in Egypt (Abu Zeid, 1977, p. 129)—each was dependent on the other. The legislation which regulated the relationship between journalism and the political authority in Egypt at that time was represented by the Law of Printed Material issued in 1881 and Law No. 20 of 1936 (and its modifications) (Abdel-Megid, 2001, p. 73).

With the advent of the 1952 July revolution, the political authority realized from the outset the great importance and the political power of the press. The authorities in power led by President Nasser dissolved all political parties, cancelled the Royal constitution, shut down party and independent newspapers, and took actions against dissident journalists. Consequently, the government established and purchased a number
of newspapers, which became channels for the new revolutionary thought (Ibrahim, 1994, p. 241). Law No. 156 of 1960 was issued to organize and nationalize all privately-owned press organizations in Egypt. Thus, the ownership of the newspapers of Al-Ahram, Dar Akhbar Al-Yom, Dar-Rose Al-Youssef, and Dar Al-Hilal, which were controlled by political parties or by foreign entities, was transferred to the National Union, which was the only political entity at that time (Abdel-Megid, 2001, p. 76). Under the Press Organization Law of 1960, the National Union had the power to license newspapers, establish press institutions, and designate boards of directors to manage the publishing houses and appoint newspaper editors. In addition, Nasser started a daily newspaper, Al-Gomhuria, in 1952 to serve as a new voice for the military regime. He justified his policies towards the press by claiming that: “His aim was to stop what he called ‘the capitalists’ from controlling the press and to restore press ownership to the people” (Nasser, 1990, p. 3). Due to the Law of Nationalization, journalism suffered in Nasser’s era from strict crackdowns and fell prey to bureaucracy, and, at the same time, became a chattel of the political system, an instrument to justify, support, and promote Nasser’s socialist programs, policies, and state goals (Hafez, 1990, p. 23). Journalism was reduced to an instrument of “mobilization,” and as a result, some argue that Nasser’s era marked the end of press freedom, professionalism, and excellence. Criticism of the president and the regime remained taboo, and journalists practiced the highest degree of self-censorship when commenting on domestic issues. After 1967, the credibility of the Egyptian media, especially the Voice of Arabs Radio, had dropped drastically among Egyptian and Arab listeners because of the false information provided during the war with Israel (Nasser, 1990, p. 4).
In the 1970s, the Egyptian press entered a new phase as President Anwar Al-Sadat radically changed the political, economic, social, and media environment of the preceding period. By passing the 1977 Parties’ Law, Sadat adopted a multi-party system in Egypt. Even though with the passing of this law, three political parties came into existence—which were allowed to produce their own newspapers to speak on their behalf, and had the freedom to criticize and debate public issues—press censorship continued and any criticism of Sadat’s policies remained taboo. Although some controversy existed regarding the issue of the relationship between journalism and political authority, President Sadat ended the debate by announcing that journalism must follow the directives of this authority. Moreover, even though political plurality was a fact at the time, the political authority in power imposed organizational restrictions on journalism to make it conform to the ruling regime’s ideas and philosophy. These restrictions were enforced by the Supreme Press Council (March 11, 1975) established by the Socialist Union, which had the power to approve the publication of newspapers and the licensing of journalists. In addition, the Supreme Press Council had the authority to draw up a code of ethics for journalism, to impose organizational charts that would require journalistic institutions to support political authority, to control the misuse of the freedom of the press, and to investigate the violations of the journalistic code of ethics.

The second important legislation passed by Sadat’s ruling party after the establishment of the Supreme Press Council was the Law of Press Authority No. 148 of 1980, which conceived the press as “a fourth power of the people” and on equal footing with the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government. According to this law, the ownership of the national press institutions was transferred from the Arab
Socialist Union to the Consultative Council “Al-Shura”; moreover, a new article to the Constitution of 1979 abolished the Arab Socialist Union and replaced it with the Al-Shura council. According to the Law of Press Authority No. 148 of 1980, the publishing of newspapers would be limited to political parties and corporations in the public and private sectors. Corporations should be either joint-stock companies comprised of public or private legal entities, or cooperative bodies. To establish a newspaper, an application would be submitted to the Supreme Press Council, which was required to make a decision within forty days. This law also stipulates that the financial capital of a company must be not be less than L.E 250,000 to establish a daily newspaper, and not less than L.E 100,000 to establish a weekly publication (Abdul-Meguid, 2001, pp. 78-80). This law also includes specific articles indicating the rights and duties of journalists, and the formation and functions of the Supreme Press Council. Although this press law guarantees freedom of the press, critics of the law argue that freedom of the press will never be guaranteed as long as the press is incorporated into the state. Additionally, the Law of Press Authority No. 148 of 1980 prohibits individuals from ownership of the press, which also represents a restriction on the freedom of the press (Nasser, 1990, p. 17). Although Sadat opened the door to the establishment of political parties (which were given the right to issue newspapers) and theoretically ended censorship, the government still maintained control of the media (Amin & Napoli, 2000, p. 179). When the criticism of state policies grew bolder and sharper in Egypt, the regime announced its real intentions by taking steps to silence its critics. For example, one month before his assassination, Sadat arrested 3,000 dissident journalists, intellectuals, and opposition leaders in the most severe crackdown of his eleven years in power (Nasser, 1990, p. 2).
After the assassination of Sadat on October 6, 1981, an emergency law was declared in Egypt, which gave the state the authority to detain suspects without charge, try civilians in military courts, prevent public gatherings, and monitor private communications. This emergency law, which remains in effect to the present day, also authorizes the state to censor mail, newspapers, bulletins, publications, written materials, and all other means of expression, advertisement, and publicity prior to printing; and to confiscate publications, stop their distribution, and close down the publisher. The President or the official designated by him has the authority to transfer the case of any newspaper charged with violating this emergency law from the jurisdiction of the common law to the National Security courts (Saab, 2006, p. 524). However, President Hosni Mubarak’s policy towards journalism and journalists has been characterized from the beginning with calmness, rationalism, and tolerance. Importantly, in contrast to the actions of the previous regime, no newspaper has been confiscated or banned since Mubarak came into power (Hafez, 1990, pp. 33-34). President Mubarak has moved towards more freedom of the press and expression than his two predecessors Al-Sadat and Nasser, and as a result, Egyptian journalism has experienced more freedom than the majority of third world countries (Amin & Napoli, 2000, p. 179).

However, this positive relationship between the government and the press has not been entirely consistent, with persistent conflict surfacing especially during elections of the board of the Press Syndicate in which the government intervenes to supports its favoured candidates. Moreover, although presently direct censorship of the press does not occur in Egypt, critics point to the self-censorship of journalists themselves, whether conscious or unconscious, as much worse than any direct government censorship. On
May 27, 1995, the People’s Assembly of Egypt passed Press Law No. 93 of 1995 which amends the Press Law and Penal Code to narrow the margin of freedom within which Egyptian journalists can manoeuvre; and to impose a penalty of imprisonment on journalists for publishing offences, which aims at restricting any publications that point to the misbehaviour and corruption of state officials. This legislative action provoked aggressive criticism and thoughtful response from the professional press syndicate, human rights organizations, and all those who were concerned with the issue of freedom of expression and the press. These groups escalated the criticism against this law by describing it as the “Press Assassination Law.” The press syndicate led a comprehensive campaign, backed by its President Ibrahim Nafa’ who was close to and trusted by President Mubarak. Moreover, the press syndicate were prepared to declare a strike and suspend all newspapers, and they communicated their demands to President Mubarak to ask him to stop this law before it came into effect. As a result, Mubarak intervened and supported the position of the press syndicate, which led to the abrogation of Law No. 93 of 1995 and its replacement by Law No. 96 of 1996 (Norton, 2003, pp. 24-26).

Law No. 96 of 1996 presently organizes the relationship between the Egyptian press and state authority, and regulates the press. Beyond ownership requirements, it is also concerned with the duties and rights of journalists and the rules of practicing journalism. By taking into account the current changes in economic conditions, this law stipulates that to establish a newspaper, a company must have access to financial capital in the amount of L.E million to establish a daily newspaper, L.E 250,000 to establish a weekly publication, and L.E 100,000 to establish a monthly newspaper; these funds must be deposited at the bank before the publication is first issued. The newspaper shares
owned by any individual and his relatives should not exceed 10% of the capital of the newspaper company (Abdul-Meguid, 2001, p. 80). It could be argued that this law alleviates the conditions and constrictions of Law 148 of 1980 regarding the establishment of private newspapers in Egypt because it increases the permissible shares of any individual and his siblings from L.E 500 in the previous law to the percentage of 10% in the current law. This law has been a huge leap towards establishing a number of private newspapers in Egypt that belong to privately-owned publishing companies. Also, Law No. 96 of 1996 prohibits the censorship of newspapers, although censorship can be imposed in exceptional cases, such as during a state of emergency or time of war, which should be limited to matters relating to public safety and national security. This law also stipulates that confiscation, suspension or cancellation of newspaper licenses proceed by due legal process rather than purely administrative or executive means (Abdel-Meguid, 2001, pp. 90-91).

The development of a more positive relationship between the political authorities and journalism in Egypt does not guarantee that the press will transform into a powerful force for affecting political decision-making, or for setting the public agenda in Egypt. The government in Egypt, as in other Arab countries, continues to set the media agenda (Amin, 2002, p. 126). Even Al-Ahram, the most influential newspaper in Egypt, has not succeeded in setting the public agenda, since it still adopts, and gives top priority to, the opinions of political authority. Hamad’s study (1991) investigating the agenda-setting role of the media in Egypt found that the correlation between the national newspaper Al-Ahram’s agenda and that of the public is not very significant. Conversely, the correlation
between the agenda of opposition party newspapers and that of the public is strongly significant (Hamada, 1991).

Although a wave of privatization has occurred in Egypt on many economic and social fronts, the state still insists on maintaining what has been called the “national press” (governmental newspapers), in addition to its monopoly on radio and television. The other factor that ostensibly undermines the freedom of the press in Egypt is the huge disparity between the state-controlled newspapers and opposition party newspapers with respect to their access to economic resources. Current laws that govern the media in Egypt guarantee political parties the right to issue newspapers. Yet, these party papers do not have the facilities or finances to cope and compete with the rapid technological developments in the world today. This lack of financial resources and infrastructure facilities negatively influences the capacity of these newspapers to shape public opinion and affect political decision-making. The opposition party newspapers that are owned by political parties and express party policy must use the printing facilities of the national press that are influenced by government, which also means that the content of these opposition party newspapers is usually known in advance by the government before the newspapers are published.

Another factor that puts additional financial pressure on the opposition newspapers is that they are deprived of most of the large corporate and government advertising contracts. As a result, the influence and quality of the party press is rather limited (Nasser, 1990, pp. 21-23). Moreover, the state-controlled newspapers, or what have been called the “national newspapers” that are owned by the state and supervised by the Al-Shura Council (dominated by the ruling national party) provide their journalists
and editors with more freedom to contact news sources, which usually are state officials, and also the freedom to obtain information from specialists and celebrities who are more eager to be shown on the state-controlled media because they are convinced that this media represents the official voice of the country. These advantages help the national newspapers to grow continuously and to develop in number and quality, and to have the capability to issue a variety of daily, morning, and evening newspapers, and newspapers that are published weekly, monthly, and quarterly both for general and specialized audiences. These advantages also give the national newspapers more flexibility to cover the diverse interests of the Egyptian audience. However, it is worthwhile to note that the political party newspapers also are differentiated in terms of their capabilities, which cover the political spectrum from the daily Al-Wafd newspaper—which represents the Right and has managed to position itself in the press market in Egypt—to the Leftist Ummah newspaper that is published intermittently whenever the Ummah Party has the necessary financial resources. In addition, the party newspapers, which represent different ideologies, vary in terms of their content and discourse, which in some cases, could be close to the official discourse of the state (for example, the Al-Wafd newspaper) or far from it (for example, the Al-Ahaly newspaper) (Khalil & Abdel Maqsoud, 2008, p. 27).

In addition to the state-run media, which maintain high professional standards and enjoy the privilege of government support and huge financial resources, and the party newspapers that are characterized by low professional standards and a lack of financial resources, the Egyptian press environment also includes a growing number of private and independent newspapers (exceeding two hundred) that are distributed in daily, weekly,
and monthly formats. Starting up in the 1990s, these recently emergent newspapers have distanced themselves from the government, ideologies, and party constraints, and belong to joint-stock media companies. Examples of these new newspapers are *Al-Masry-alyoum* (which is published by the Al Masry Institution for Press, Publishing, Advertising & Distribution) and *Elaosboa* (which is published by the Al Osbo’a Company for Press Publishing & Distribution). Some of these newspapers have helped to create a more competitive press environment in Egypt and to expand the freedom of the press, since they are more committed to professionalism in their work, to playing an important role in the reshaping of public opinion in Egypt, to achieving a broad popularity and a good distribution, as well as to making a good profit. These characteristics apply to newspapers such as the *Al-dostour, Al-Badeel, Elaosboa, Nahdat Misr, Al-Fagr, Sout Al-Umma, Al-Karama, and Alyoum Alsabea*. However, not all private newspapers are the same, since a number of them were established mainly for commercial profit purposes, and are driven only by market logic and the demands of their audience. Therefore, some have argued that these private newspapers are degrading rather than serving the culture and values of society, especially since in general their financial success depends on sensationalism and the publishing of erotic photos, rumours, and unconfirmed stories of corruption, not to mention that their media discourse does not address the main social axes of economic development and culture. This critique can be applied especially to the foreign-licensed newspapers—commonly known as the “Cyprus newspapers”—that have obtained their publishing licenses usually from Cyprus, so they can circumvent the press regulations that hinder the rights of individuals to establish newspapers, although in reality, these newspapers remain subject to Egyptian Publishing Law. Moreover, the press landscape in
Egypt also includes the presence of a number of local or regional newspapers that are suffering numerous problems, which hinder them from making any real impact in this environment.

In conclusion, media freedom always has been a matter of concern for the ruling regime, which already has permitted a certain margin of freedom. However, freedom of expression and communication is constrained in Egypt by appeals to cultural preservation, national traditions and values, civic responsibility, and the threat of defamation “libel and slander” charges (Amin, 2002, p. 129). At times, the state has imposed censorship on the content of the print media when the press has implied or reported criticism of the government, criticized the President or his family or the military, and when the media has included offensive or negative statements about Islam or religious beliefs. According to Egyptian penal codes, “[j]ournalists can be fined or imprisoned for insulting the president of the state or top government officials, for negative portrayals of the armed forces, or for criticism of a president of a foreign country” (Amin, 2002, p. 129).

The Broadcasting System and Political Authority

The traditional terrestrial broadcast media in the Arab world (excluding emerging private satellite broadcasters) are subject to even more strict control by the government than the press, perhaps because the oral culture that characterizes the Arab region transcends the obstacles of illiteracy and reaches a widespread illiterate and semi-illiterate audience. Governments in the Arab world monopolize the ownership, operation,
and supervision of broadcast institutions (Amin, 2002, p. 126). Ayish (2002) describes how Arab governments assure their monopoly of the broadcast media:

Arab governments in newly independent states instituted television as a governmental monopoly. The television monopoly model traditionally derives from the notion of broadcasting as a government operation harnessed mainly to serve national development goals. Drawing on public service and centralized broadcast systems dominant in former colonial nations, strong governments leverage over television organizations virtually stripped broadcasters of much of their editorial autonomy. Operating within ministries of information, television organizations for the most part, were funded exclusively from national budgetary allocations, and their employees were viewed as part of public sector bureaucracy (p. 138).

In Egypt, during Nasser’s era, the radio played a significant role in spreading his ideology throughout Egypt and Arab world, and helped him to export his revolutionary thought. Egypt’s political position of Pan-Arabism and anti-imperialism, which appealed to millions of Arabs, encouraged Nasser to use the radio to its utmost to successfully spread his ideology by way of his radio speeches to millions of Egyptians and Arabs. The political and cultural standing of Egypt in the Arab world makes Egyptian radio a primary resource for listeners throughout the Arab region. Egypt has been a pioneer in producing and distributing Arab film, music, songs, live theatre, journalism, literature, and various other art forms. During Nasser’s era, Egyptian songs and music were very popular with Arab listeners, and thus were exploited as a political tool to support the regime. All of these factors made Egyptian radio a powerful tool for the Nasser revolutionaries to rally the Egyptian people and Arab masses to support their political ends (Nasser, 1990, pp. 6-7).

During the 1950s and 1960s, the “Voice of the Arabs” radio station broadcast from Cairo was the most popular radio service in the entire middle East. It was characterized by its revolutionary approach to programming, and was the most powerful
and effective tool for the regime to promote its Pan-Arabism ideology in Arab and third world countries; in addition, it was used in the development process, especially in rural areas in Egypt. From that time to the present, the Egyptian radio and broadcasting system has been controlled by the political authority of the Ministry of Information, which administers broadcasting activity, appoints staff, and determines the work policies of radio and television (Ibrahim, 1994, p. 76).

Today, broadcasting activity in Egypt is organized by the Law of Broadcasting Media No. 13 (1979), which was modified by law No. 223 of 1989. According to this law, broadcasting affairs are the concern of a public agency known as the Radio and Television Union. Although administratively autonomous, this agency follows the direction of the state and is under its dominance. In addition, it is supervised by the Minister of Information, and importantly, the Radio and Television Union has the sole right to establish and own broadcasting stations in Egypt. The Law of Broadcasting Media states that the goal of the Radio and Television Union is to convey the message of radio and television within the framework of the general policies of society and its informative requirements (El-Halawani & El-Abd, 1987, pp. 363-364).

The Law of Broadcasting Media No. 13 (1979) and its modifications are intended mainly to ensure that all programs and broadcasting activities both serve political authority by creating public support for the political system, and manage public opinion. At the same time, this law restricts the freedom of the political opposition to express its views. Opposition parties are forbidden to establish private broadcasting stations, and are not commonly to appear and express their views on broadcast media programs, except for specific times of crisis when the government needs to appear as if it is acting
democratically (Ibrahim, 1994, p. 76). Therefore, the opposition party activity in Egypt depends on only one public medium—the print press.

Unlike the relationship of the communication system to the state in the West and the rest of the developed world, the communication system of Arab countries and the Third World is still a state-controlled instrument for directing public opinion, and for promoting state political propaganda. In Egypt, communication policy still is implemented by the government and political authority either through a control of publishing facilities and finance, or by domination of media content. Print and broadcast media in Egypt are directly under the strict control of the state. The government monitors and censors directly or indirectly all the communication materials offered to the public. Indirect censorship is implemented through the self-censorship of the chief editors, who are appointed by the Shura Council, and through the control of information sources. Also, the political culture of the Arab world has been based on a censorial culture that for many years has promoted an ideology of “self-censorship” among journalists and other media professionals (Amin, 2002, p. 128). In addition, professionals and other workers in the communication field recognize that their continued employment and promotion depend on their commitment to the agenda of the political authorities (Ibrahim, 1994, p. 792).

Civil Society

Due to the key role that civil society can play in contributing to democratization in any public sphere, it is important to shed some light on civil society in Egypt—the “third sector” alongside the state and the private sector. By using the common agreed-
upon definition of *civil society* put forward by various intellectual schools, Al-Sayyid (1993) argues that civil society in Egypt:

> encompasses the presence of a considerable number of formal associations catering to the varied interests of citizens in several areas of their social activities; state-society relations in which the former respects a reasonable measure of autonomy for the latter; and acceptance of intellectual and political dissention as a legitimate right for minorities so long as it is bound by peaceful methods of individual and collective action (p. 230).

In this definition, Al-Sayyid argues that three minimal conditions should be met to establish and maintain a vibrant civil society: the presence of formal social organizations, an ethic of tolerance and acceptance by the majority of legitimate minority rights, and limitations on the arbitrary exercise of state authority. Al-Sayyid also suggests that while a large number of active formal associations are operating in Egypt, the two other conditions are lacking (p. 239). Kandil (2007) also points out that a general agreement exists concerning the common features that characterize a civil society, which are the following: that civil society organizations are voluntary organizations; they occupy the public space between the family, market, and the state; they are not-for-profit; they seek to achieve the “collective benefit” of society as a whole; and they represent their members’ interests. Egypt’s civil society may be characterized as non-governmental organizations (social care and development organizations); businessmen associations; advocacy organizations (mainly human rights organizations), and professional associations (Kandil, 2007). Al-Sayyid (1993) also includes political parties as part of civil society, whereas Kandil does not, contending that political parties seek political power, and according to Egyptian law, civil society organizations are forbidden to participate in political activism. The second reason that Kandil does not include political parties as part of civil society is that she suggests that most political parties—when
seeking power—do not follow the ethical values of civic culture, an omission which casts doubt on their civil character. Likewise, Kandil (2007) indicates that according to the opinion of some intellectuals, professional associations, such as the associations of medical doctors, engineers, teachers, and the Bar Association of Egypt should be treated as special cases, since acquiring membership in these associations is a prerequisite for practicing these professions. Moreover, professional organizations and trade unions in Egypt are vulnerable to substantial state interference, and as a result, they lose their independence (Kandil, 2007), and Elbayar (2005) argues that: “Because of their deep association with the government, these groups cannot be considered part of the private, non-governmental ‘third sector’” (p. 4). Also, Al-Sayyid (1993) contends that any examination of civil society in Egypt should include traditional institutions, such as the mosque and church-based associations, which have continued to be centers of social and political activities (p. 233).

Civil society in Egypt is governed by the provisions of the Association Law on Non-Governmental Societies and Organizations No. 84 of 2002, which requires any “group whose purpose includes or that carries out any of the activities of associations and institutions, even if it assumes a legal form other than that of associations and institutions” to operate with a license from the Ministry of Insurance and Social Affairs representing the State (Elbayar, 2005, p. 8). The 2008 Human Development Report indicates that about 21,000 registered nongovernmental organizations exist in Egypt, apart from the thousands of community development associations. According to Kandil (2007), the percentage of the associations aimed at citizen empowerment are about 25% of the total of the associations operating in Egypt in 2007. In addition, there has been a
remarkable increase in the number of associations that empower and support women’s issues, rising from 19 civil society organizations in the mid-1980s to more than 2000 at present. In 2007, 61 advocacy groups were operating in the human rights field, observing and monitoring human rights violations, promoting human rights culture, and providing direct legal assistance to victims of human rights violations. In addition many charitable organizations operate in Egypt. (Kandil, 2007).

Kandil (2007) points to challenges that face civil society organizations in Egypt that can be characterized as social and cultural challenges, which include the following: the political dominance of a centrist-authoritarian regime, which creates a sense of apathy among its citizens and low citizen participation in the political process; and civil society organizations concentrated mostly on the educated and more prosperous elite in the great cities such as Cairo and Alexandria. Traditional cultural and social mores still dominate the activities of civil society organizations in which philanthropy work dominates development and politics. Other challenges include gender disparity and the problem of finance (Kandil, 2007).

In addition, to the restrictions on the external activities of Non Governmental Organizations, internal challenges exist in these civil society organizations, such as inadequate internal organization, a lack of internal democracy, and weak technical management skills. Also, problems have occurred related to Law 84/2002 that prohibits NGOs from making many of their internal decisions without first obtaining government approval. NGOs are not allowed to expand their work into any new “project areas” that were not a part of their original charter, and they are prohibited from collecting funds from abroad or affiliating with foreign or domestic groups or unions without the
permission of the Ministry of Insurance and Social Affairs. The Ministry of Insurance and Social Affairs does not allow NGOs (and other civil society groups) to engage in political activities, including “advocating the program of one of the parties,” contributing money to support an electoral campaign, spending money in support of a party activity or a candidate, or endorsing or “putting forward candidates in the name of the society.” This ministry also has the authority to prevent the licensing of any group it perceives as a threat to the government by simply grounding its decision in the language of morality or security (Elbayar, 2005, pp. 9-10).

Due to the challenges previously mentioned and the government restrictions on civil society organizations, the role of civil society organizations in empowering the public sphere with democratic discursive dialogue concerning government policies is limited, as is their role in public policy debates, the monitoring of state affairs, and in shifting the imbalance of the economic market away from its advantage to the wealthy at the expense of the middle and poor classes. As they avoid or reduce their political conflict with the state, civil society organizations tend to focus on the social and economic problems in which they are active in the fields of social services, welfare, community development and relief work, charities and philanthropic work, literary and environmental services, rather than politics. Egypt Human Development for 2008 argues that civil society, whether in its philanthropic, advocacy, or interest group manifestation has become critical to any integrated and sustainable process of development.

In my interview with Amany Kandil on March 25, 2009, she suggests that the proliferation of information and communication technologies invites us to reconsider the concept of civil society and raise questions. She also posits that a number of virtual
groups and communities on the Internet play an active and important role in civil society that may now be more effective than traditional civil society groups. Among the Internet groups Kandil mentions, Group of April 6 (a group set up on Facebook calling for Egyptians to strike on April 6 to protest rising prices and poverty) succeeded to mobilize 77,000 for the April 6 strike, which was joined by Kefaya movement and the Muslim Brotherhood. Another example Kandil mentions is Internet Consumer Protection Groups, which have gone beyond the ability of traditional civil society groups to protect consumers. Kandil argues that bloggers and Internet activists are now considered as an effective part of civil society, although they criticize traditional civil society and seek to revitalize it (A. Kandil, Interview on March 25, 2009).
Freedom of Expression

In Egypt, as in all other Arab countries, traditional press and broadcast media is governed and run by governments that use it as a tool to serve their political objectives, though the degree of censorship applied varies from one country to another. Al-Jarallah (2006) succinctly describes the situation:

When addressing the issue of the impact of Arab governments on the Arab media, it must be said at the outset that it was the Arab governments that created and supported the Arab media as an industry and a field of activity. At the same time, they enacted the unfair, restrictive laws that regulate media functions and prevent it from overstepping the limits set by governments. Not content with controlling their domestic media organizations, some of these governments also sought to interfere and influence the media organizations of other Arab countries through bribery and other corrupt practices (p. 587).

Although the Egyptian Constitution and the Law of the Press posits freedom of expression and prohibits censorship, the reality on the ground is different. Amin and Napoli (2000) point out that:

In theory, there is no press censorship, but in fact censorship permeates every aspect of expression in Egypt—not just newspapers, but broadcasting, theater, movies, magazines, and books. The principal censoring organization is the office of censorship in the ministry of culture, but other organizations that exercise censoring authority include the ministry of the interior, ministry of information, Al Azhar University, the state information service, the office of the president, and even the Egyptian post office (p. 186).

The Egyptian Constitution assures freedom of opinion and expression and freedom of the press, similar to other constitutions in Arab countries, and provides a long list of civil and political rights. For example, Article (48) of the Egyptian Constitution states that:

Freedom of the press, printing, publications and mass media shall be guaranteed. Censorship on newspapers is forbidden as well as notifying, suspending or canceling them by administrative methods. In a state of emergency or in time of war a limited censorship may be imposed on the newspapers, publications and
mass media in matters related to public safety or purposes of national security in accordance with the law.

Also, Egypt has signed and ratified the United Nations (UN) Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which emphasizes freedom of opinion and expression. Despite the assurances of these major legal documents, many details concerning freedom of opinion and expression and freedom of the press are left to be decided by laws and regulations that contain many restrictions on the freedom of publishing and freedom of the press. The government rhetorically supports freedom of the press while quashing it in practice through detentions, criminal charges, physical harassment, and media closure. Also the Egyptian Constitution recognizes the right to assembly, but in practice, the government and security forces crack down on opposition demonstrations, arresting participants and physically abusing them (Sullivan & Jones, 2007).

The US-based Freedom House Organization, in its 2007 annual report on Freedom of the Press in the world (which rates each country’s media as “Free,” “Partly Free,” and “Not Free”), stated that Egypt’s status improved from Not Free in 2007 to Partly Free in 2008 due to the courage of Egyptian journalists to cross the “red lines” that had previously restricted their work, and due to the greater range of viewpoints represented in the Egyptian media and blogosphere (Freedom House, 2009). The French organization “Reporters Without Borders,” in its latest worldwide Press Freedom Index 2009 ranks countries according to their respect for press freedom, and Egypt occupies position 146 out of 173 countries. However, the report also comments that, despite a state of emergency and restrictive laws, Egyptian journalists do their utmost to roll back the limits imposed on them, especially through privately-owned opposition newspapers and the independent press that compete for readers’ attention with the official government.
press; and despite these legal, administrative, and financial pressures, these opposition newspapers and journalists hold their own (Reporters Without Borders, 2009).

Apart from the restrictive laws and other censorial actions taken by the political authorities, it is worth pointing out that other societal forces and cultural trends may help to undermine the freedom of the media and expression in the Arab world. For example, as Saab (2006) argues, freedom of expression can be violated:

by influential people from both financial and political circles and even from the media sector… It is useless to talk about freedom of expression if there is not a level of independence which can protect journalism from the ruling authorities, money and influential parties and even from the owners of the papers themselves (p. 539).

In addition, religious institutions in the Arab world and religious fundamentalists often put pressure on freedom of opinion and expression, whether at the level of legislation or in practice in the community. That is, when a religious authority deems any cultural work—newspaper article, book, movie, play, etc.—as offensive to religion, specifically Islam, they are effectively prohibiting it. This kind of censorship is supported publicly by some writers who consider themselves to be advocates of Islamic teachings (Al-Sayyid, 1992, pp. 234-235). Interestingly, the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information describes several factors that affected freedom of expression and opinion in Egypt during 2007 and 2008. The first factor was the excessive use of libel and defamation Articles of the Penal Code against journalists and men of letters, Articles which were used by the government and many lawyers to undermine the legal rights of journalists and citizens to criticize political authority. The second factor contributing to the loss of freedom of expression and opinion during these years was the strong return of political and religious “Hesba” cases as many religious fanatics seized the opportunity to spread an atmosphere of fanaticism and fear among writers and journalists. The third
factor was the professional restraints placed on non-syndicate journalists, and the exclusion of journalists from membership in the syndicate. In Egypt, no one is allowed to work in journalism unless his/her name is on the Journalists Syndicate membership list, and strict regulations imposed by law and the syndicate itself complicate the process of acquiring syndicate membership. A journalist can be a syndicate member only when he/she has a contract with a licensed Egyptian newspaper, which is usually difficult, since newspapers often procrastinate when completing a contract, and impose difficult job conditions like low salaries—or no salary at all—or treat their journalists badly in other ways, and as a result, many journalists are obliged to bear these unfair conditions just to position themselves to become syndicate members. The fourth factor was that many newspapers belonging to the state, or those with close ties to the government, actually work against freedom. Often, these newspapers create false conflicts with the oppositional newspapers and their journalists, so they will be chastened by the state, and then the state uses these false charges as an excuse to justify a culture of suppression and to restrict press freedom. In addition, the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information report suggests that when the Journalists Syndicate holds elections, the state often intervenes in favour of the candidate who is closest to the government (The Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, Freedom of Opinion and Expression in Egypt: Annual report 2007).

In addition to the impact of the state, other socio-cultural trends such as poverty and unrestrained population growth affect the freedom of expression of a broad sector of the population. For example, due to the stresses produced by overpopulation, most people must focus on fulfilling their basic human needs, and so they do not have the time or
energy needed to address the issues related to freedom of expression. Although human power is important for economic production, the overpopulation in Egypt is considered one of the main obstacles for future development. Egypt is the most populous country in the Middle East, and in May 2008, the population reached 78,733,641; 43 percent lives in urban areas, and 56.91 percent lives in rural areas. Unemployment also is a huge challenge facing the Egyptian political system, and in 2000-2001, unemployment reached 9.72 percent (Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics, 2006 census). Also, one of the most important and difficult challenges confronting the Egyptian media, the democratic political movement, and freedom of expression is the widespread illiteracy in the general population. While the ratio of combined gross school enrolment was 76.9 percent in 2005, the adult illiteracy rate in 2006 was 28.6 percent. Also, among the factors that aggravate the effectiveness of the media in promoting freedom of expression and opinion is the difficult economic situation in Egypt, since 43.9 percent of the population is living on less than $2 a day, and 16.7 percent of the population is living below the national poverty line (United Nation Development Programme, 2007/2008 Human Development Report). Needless to say, the illiteracy rate and newspaper readership and circulation is correlated. As Saghiya (2006) puts it: “In a state of population explosion and educational deterioration, the national environment for the growth of freedom, including the freedom of the press, seems akin to an oasis surrounded by vast stretches of sand” (p. 559). In other words, Saghiya (2006) argues that:

we cannot conceive of the popularity of the press, or its move to gain larger margins of freedom, in the absence of an educated and reading-oriented environment. This weakness of learning leads to the mounting power of despotism which capitalizes on the shortage in gender equality, receding tolerance and lack of religious renewal (p. 562).
Unfortunately, journalists themselves also can undermine the case for freedom of expression when their professionalism decreases and when they lack ethical reliability. With the increase in competition in the Egyptian media landscape, the independent and private newspapers often focus their coverage on scandalous events and murder or violence. Ahmed Salama, a well-known journalist for the Al-Ahram newspaper, argues that these independent and private newspapers reflect a retreat in professional standards when they publish inaccurate news and comments, blur the news with opinion, and use filthy language, and thus deviate from the norms of the professional Egyptian press (Al-Ahram, December 16, 2008). In addition, Abdul Magiud argues that this regression in the traditions of the professional press and the violations of the press code of ethics by journalists and newspapers are representative of a general regression in all professions in Egyptian society due to a deterioration in all aspects of life in Egypt, including education, the economy, ethical traditions, and the culture in general (Al-Ahram, December, 16, 2008)

Even though laws and legislation have been passed to control media organizations and to guarantee that they are committed to the policies and orientations of the state, the development of democracy in the world today—its influence appearing in Arab countries as well—coupled with the information technology revolution occurring across the world including the Arab region are helping to create a prevailing climate of optimism for the future of the Arab media. In addition to the privatization strategy that prevails in most Arab countries, which is beginning to extend to different media, all of these developments previously mentioned have undermined the agenda of the political authorities of authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes, and thus have also reduced
the impact and influence of the state-run media. In the wake of the information revolution, Arabs can easily obtain whatever the state-run media censors, and thus this once-effective censorship is now quite meaningless.

However, as Mamoun (2002) argues, the public sphere in an authoritarian context, unlike in liberal democratic societies, is structured by the state, and so the rules of the game can be changed by its intrusion at any time. Mamoun also contends that the uncritical approach to the study of the assumed relationship between the new media and the emergence of the public space and civil society in the Arab world—a study often grounded in an explanation of technological determinism—is unacceptable. Instead, he emphasizes the importance of considering the local social, economic, and cultural context, which determines the capacity of the influence of the new media in the Arab world. Among the factors that affect the influence of the modern means of mass communication in the Arab world is the notion of trust. Mamoun (2002) argues that the main problem is in not the diffusion of new information technologies; rather, the main issue is the trust that is missing between citizens and the state-owned media in Egypt, a problem that also is pervasive in almost all Arab states. In the Arab world, important traits should be taken into account when studying the impact of the media effects, including the fact that in Arab and Islamic cultures, oral sources of information can have more validity and credibility than written sources, due to the traditional importance of oral and unofficial means of communications, which are exemplified in the mosques, the coffeehouses, and marketplaces of Egypt (Mamoun, 2002, pp. 389-394).
Chapter 4: Egyptian Bloggers, Journalists, and Human Rights Activists on the Emerging Media and Alternative Journalism in Egypt

“This is one of the healthiest media developments in a long time. We are hearing new voices—not necessarily the voices of people who want to make a living by speaking out, but who want to say what they think and be heard, even if only by relatively few people” (Gillmor, 2006, p. 139).

As discussed in the previous chapter, the authorities in Egypt and the Arab world still perceive the mass media as an instrument to enhance their legitimacy and to mobilize the masses for their own political interests. The regimes that dominate the media through media ownership have the power to approve press licenses, appoint journalists and fire them, and in general exploit the media for their own economic gains. Thus, they expect journalists and the media to praise their achievements, their every work and policy, and to promote or produce propaganda. At the same time, the Arab public expects its journalists and media to undertake the responsibility to reveal corruption, to defend human rights, and to champion their interests and concerns. Hence, in most of the Arab world, the relationship between political authority and journalists is tainted by uncertainty and distrust. In short, the Arabic media is caught between the hammer of government and the anvil of professional responsibility. Freedom of the press, one of the controversial issues that inspires much debate in the Arab world, is framed by the tension between political systems and authority and the permissible freedom granted to journalists and intellectuals. Thus, even though the legislatures of most Arab countries support freedom
of expression, most Arab constitutions include articles (often misinterpreted) that indicate that this freedom must fall within the framework of the national interest and national security.

Often, press freedom in the Arab world is considered as a kind of endowment bestowed by political leaders on those journalists they support, and withheld from those not trusted for one reason or another. As Gamal Fahmy, a member of the Egyptian Press Syndication, said on the occasion of the celebration of World Press Freedom Day in Egypt: “We are sure that if the [Egyptian] regime wants to imprison us, it will do so immediately” (Almasry-Alyoum, May 4, 2007). When Egyptian journalists take on their responsibility to criticize and investigate political transgressions and corruption, they are susceptible to the anger and resentment of the regime. Moreover, journalists will continue to find it difficult to obtain information that is monopolized by the state’s official sources, at least until efforts succeed in passing a freedom of information act, which can establish the right to access information. Although more than 500 newspapers and magazines and other publications are produced in Egypt, this variety does not conceal the role of the government as the major owner, and the largest subsidy provider to, the media (Freedom House, 2009). Even though the number of independent satellite channels in Egypt is increasing, these channels are not allowed to broadcast news; instead, they concentrate on music and entertainment.

The previous chapter discussed how the public sphere in Egypt has been permanently blockaded due to the domination of restrictive laws, for example, the emergency law on freedom of expression; laws that hinder or restrict the establishment of political parties and civil society organizations; and other security, bureaucratic, and
administrative restrictions. Moreover, the civil society that is such a basic component of Habermas’ account of the public sphere has been restricted in Egypt to providing charity and social services, and thus has not been able to influence public affairs or politics. In other words, as Hazem Hassan, a political science professor at Cairo University, suggests:

The largest part of civil society in Egypt is “fake,” and most representatives of civil society organizations here practice a kind of public relations with the state officials, and their main concern is how to benefit economically on a personal level (H. Hassan, personal interview, March 31, 2009).

Amany Kandil, Director of the Arab Network of NGOs, agrees that in general, civil society in the Arab world is weak; however, she also argues that the Internet has helped to increase the value and effectiveness of some civil society organizations, especially human rights organizations, by extending their voices to the international community. In addition, she argues that many civil society groups that use the virtual space of the Internet are more active and play a more effective role than traditional civil society groups (Kandil, Interview on March 25, 2009).

In part, the previous chapter provides an answer to a question proposed by Khalil Alanany in the Egyptian Al-Ahram newspaper on June 4, 2008, when he wondered: Why do Egyptian youth go online with such unprecedented intensity, and at the same time, do not practice politics through traditional means such as political parties and civil society organizations? (Alanany, Al-Ahram newspaper, June 4, 2008). Blogger Wael Abbas puts it this way:

Absolutely, blogs developed and gained momentum due to the absence of an effective civil society in Egypt. In Egypt, we are living under emergency laws that have led to violations of human rights, the right to organize, and the right to form a political party. You cannot organize protests or demonstrations. Blogs have challenged all of these violations and created an alternative to the dysfunctional
mainstream media, civil society, and political parties. Now you can feel the impact of blogs on the public sphere when you go to the streets and hear people talking and commenting on the issues raised on blogs, or when you see the discussions in the newspapers and on television stations about issues once taboo (W. Abbas, personal interview, March 11, 2009).

Many people in Egypt now expect the Internet to enhance the public sphere, and to break down all barriers, so during the parliamentary elections and the protests that have prevailed in Egypt from 2004 until the present, people have conspicuously appropriated the emerging new media—including blogs, Facebook, and mobile phones—to mobilize politically and exchange information. The online public sphere is helping to break down the political and religious taboos about controversial issues and is highlighting issues rarely spoken about.

The purpose of this chapter is to describe in general how emerging media including the Internet, blogs, Facebook, and social media are helping people to circumvent imposed restrictions on the political public sphere in Egypt. The Internet and all kinds of emerging media represent a beacon of hope for the Arab public against many obstacles that undermine freedom and democracy, and for ordinary people and opposition groups who are marginalized and restricted from freely expressing their voices (Kalathil & Boas, 2003). The prevalence of Web journalism has become a fact, and certainly is the most independent of all media mechanisms in the Arab region, and the main catalyst for change. For example, Saeed (2006) argues that we are witnessing a recent political mobility in Egypt and elsewhere, which basically can be attributed to the advances in information and communication technologies, rather than to the socio-political development process (p. 32).

I limit the scope of my research field to blogs and bloggers in Egypt, while also considering the interaction and overlap of other emerging media technologies, which I
sometimes describe, depending on their relevance to the blogging phenomenon in Egypt.

My main body of data derives from the empirical data I gathered in Egypt in the spring of 2009 when I conducted face-to-face in-depth interviews with 15 bloggers and journalists, as well as a variety of civil society and human rights activists. The purpose of these interviews was to discuss the use and the role of blogging in Egypt, and how bloggers as citizen journalists in Egypt help to produce political engagement in a substantial way that contributes to facilitating a dialogue about democracy and a new kind of public sphere. The analysis of the interviews yields important data about bloggers’ perceptions about the Internet and what they are doing with these new media platforms for free expression and social activism. These interviews included questions about the participants’ motivations and backgrounds, their perceptions of their role in helping to create a public sphere that has opened the door to a dialog about democracy, and the challenges and the opportunities for blogging in Egypt (see Appendices at the end of the dissertation). I also discuss how traditional journalists and other media theorists in Egypt view new media and its implications for emerging democracy and social change. The content analysis complements the individual face-to-face in-depth interviews for purposes of confirmation and comparison.

I conducted the interviews in Arabic using a tape recorder, and then transcribed and translated them myself. I use the participants’ real names, since they were comfortable with revealing their real identity. Conducting the field work and meeting with the study participants was difficult with respect to scheduling and meeting places. Moreover, the arrangements for the interviews with the bloggers were the most difficult. Before travelling to Egypt, I sent emails to some of the bloggers, but they did not reply,
except for one. Therefore, I had to make a huge effort to reach them and convince them to meet me; finally, I reached many of them through the snowball method. I understand that their reluctance may have been caused by the personal risk issue and their concerns that I could be someone from state security, especially since in the past, some of these bloggers frequently had been detained and arrested in Egypt.

In the first part of this chapter, I outline the evolution of the Internet in Egypt, and extensively analyze its uses in Egypt. I develop this analysis by using the extensive qualitative and quantitative data that I collected from various secondary sources such as academic journals, government reports, and press articles, as well as the primary data from my interviewees.

The Evolution of the Internet in Egypt

Information communication technologies—including the remarkable development of mobile phones, the Internet, and multimedia—have become so widespread throughout the world that Egypt and other Arab countries were obliged to take steps toward integrating their own information technologies (Amin & Napoli, 2000, pp. 185-187). The efforts of the Egyptian government to enlarge and enhance the use of the Internet are undeniable. To begin to describe this evolution, I provide a quick historical account of the growth of the Internet in Egypt. Internet services first were introduced to Egypt in October 1993 by a link between the Egyptian Universities Network (EUN) of the Supreme Council of Egyptian Universities and France at a connectivity speed of 9.6 Kbps. The Egyptian Internet community at that time is estimated to have been about 2000 users. In 1994, the Egyptian domain was divided into three main sub-domains: the
academic sub-domain, which was served by EUN (eun.eg); the commercial sub-domain (com.eg); and the governmental sub-domain (gov.eg), which was served by a partnership between the Egyptian Cabinet, Information and Decision Support Center (IDSC) and the Regional Information Technology and Software Engineering Center (RITSC).

The landmark event that raised the awareness of the Egyptian government with respect to the potential of the Internet was the International Conference on Population and Development held in Cairo on September, 1994. One of the conditions for hosting this conference was that the Egyptian government had to provide a 64 Kbps Internet connection to serve the press and organizers during the conference. Thus, the connectivity to France was increased to 64 Kbps in cooperation with IDSC, the EUN, and Egypt Telecom\(^1\) (Kamel, 1997). After this event, in an attempt to promote awareness about the Internet, the government decided to retain the 64 Kbps Internet connection, and allow the IDSC and the RITSC to offer free Internet accounts to government agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and private and public sector companies (Kelly et al., 2001; Hashem & Ismail, 1998).

This free access helped to increase the rate of growth of Internet users during the first two years of its introduction in Egypt. Many organizations, especially small and medium size enterprises, benefited from the service, and many professionals in various sectors including trade, manufacturing, healthcare, tourism, and social services started utilizing the Internet (Hashem & Kamel, 1999). Consequently, since 1994, the Internet in Egypt has become a public service not only for the educational sector, but also for the

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\(^1\) Telecom Egypt (TE) was established by Law 19 (March 26, 1998) as a joint-stock company that inherited the monopoly of the Arab Republic of Egypt Telecommunication Organization (ARENTO). It is by far the largest company in the Egyptian telecom market, and it enjoys a monopoly over all fixed-line domestic voice and basic communication services in the country.
commercial community and Egyptian corporations. As a result, the number of users increased from 2000 in 1994 to more than 25,000 in early 1997 (Kamel, 1997). In 1996, the free Internet access policy was replaced by an open access policy: Internet access provided to the commercial domain was privatized, and more than twelve private Internet Service Providers (ISPs) started operation for the first time (Hashem & Ismail, 1998).

In 1996, Internet connectivity was improved by the provision of digital access, and Internet services were extended beyond the Greater Cairo region to include rural areas in southern Egypt. Also, in 1998, the first Egyptian satellite—NileSat 101—was launched to provide support for digital connectivity and communication technology, and to facilitate access in remote and rural areas (Hashem & Ismail, 1998). Both the number of Internet users and ISPs are continuously increasing. In 1998, the number of users was estimated at 100,000, and the number of ISPs had reached about thirty six, operating in 16 out of 26 Egyptian governorates (Hashem & Ismail, 1998). In 2000, Egypt had the fourth largest number of Internet users in the Arab region, following the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Lebanon. In 2000, the number of Internet users in Egypt was estimated at 220,000, most of them residing in Cairo; as well, about 60 ISPs were operating in Egypt, most of them in Cairo followed by Alexandria, with only one or two providing service outside of these cities. The largest ISPs are LINKdotNET, GegaNet, and Internet Egypt (Kelly et al., 2001, pp. 12-13). When the number of Internet users at that time is compared with the total population of Egypt, a conclusion can be drawn that the majority of people did not have access to the Internet. That is, Internet access was too expensive for the average Egyptian, costing around US$30 per month and requiring the purchase of expensive hardware. The number of users is still very small compared to the
total population—as of 2001, the number reached 560,000, constituting 0.8 percent of the population (Kalathil & Boas, 2003, p. 122).

Coinciding with the global economic transformation and the remarkable development of information communication technologies, mobile phones, the Internet, and multimedia throughout the world, Egypt has taken steps to integrate these new information technologies into its economy and join the information age. In his address to the national conference on Information Technology Development in 1999, President Mubarak introduced the national project for technological development. This project aims at making Egypt a producer of sophisticated technological components and a main base for the information industry. As a result, a new specialized Ministry of Communications and Information Technology was established in 1999 to be responsible for integrating Egypt into the age of the information revolution (State Information Service Yearbook, 2007, p. 169), and thus a well-developed information technology infrastructure has been established.

When Arab governments first adopted information communication technologies (ICTs), their main drive was economic and commercial, to create jobs and establish new investments, which would strengthen local economies. The Egyptian government, represented by the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology (MCIT), has developed and implemented, with the help of other government agencies and the private sector, a large number of projects to leverage the power of ICT to improve service delivery in education, health, culture, and government. Thus, the MCIT has focused on the importance of extending ICT access to all Egyptian citizens so to overcome the barriers of income and geographic location and to narrow the digital divide. Since 1994,
the government has adopted a national plan for the technological development of education in governmental schools, and under the supervision of the Ministry of Education, has established a national Technology Development Center (TDC). The TDC has established multimedia rooms with one or two computers with Internet connections in all primary, preparatory, and secondary schools (Warschauer, 2003, p. 139). In addition, the IDSC has established a program to introduce the Internet to more than three hundred villages throughout Egypt, and the MCIT, in cooperation with Internet service provider RITSEC, are building 21st century clubs—more than 2,000 in poor Egyptian neighbourhoods (Warschaur, 2003, p. 633). Another project, sponsored by the United Nations Development Program, seeks to provide technology community centers with free Internet access, training, and education (Kalathil & Boas, 2003, p. 122). Telecom Egypt, the major telecom provider, launched the PC for Every Home initiative by offering low cost locally-assembled personal computers and financing facilities for up to three years. Purchasers used their ownership of a telephone landline as loan collateral. Anyone with a Telecom Egypt telephone line could obtain a computer on a hire-purchase basis, and their periodic loan repayments were included in their telephone bill. Various extensions of this program have been implemented, facilitating easier access to computer technology and targeting other specific groups.

The MCIT together with its public and private sector partners have also introduced new projects in response to the continued growth and interest in ICT. The newest phase of the initiative focuses on expanding ownership of PCs particularly in the more remote and lower income areas of Egypt. Launched in November 2006, Egypt’s PC 2010-Nation Online offers both locally-assembled and internationally-branded personal
computers, including models that vary from the simple family PC for beginners to high-end desktop and laptop computers. This new program no longer requires someone to own a Telecom Egypt telephone line as a condition of their eligibility for the extended payment terms, since banks now offer the required loans through retail banking procedures. Under the new scheme, anyone can purchase a computer on an instalment basis for as little as LE 48 (around $9 CAD) per month, thus putting computer ownership within reach of a larger segment of the population. This program was expanded further in August 2008 to focus on diversifying PC distribution and increasing outreach to underprivileged areas. This expansion has occurred through a well-structured public-private partnership model that enables civil society organizations to work hand-in-hand with the private sector PC companies and Internet Service Providers (ISPs). Egypt’s public policy supports and promotes the growth of the Internet to the whole of society through establishing Internet and information technology (IT) clubs at community centers, social clubs, public libraries, public schools, universities, cultural palaces, and the headquarters of civil society. These clubs are equipped with computers and Internet access so to provide these services to all cities and villages. At the end of the first quarter of 2009, these clubs numbered 1,846, which were distributed throughout all the governorates of Egypt (Ministry of Communications and Information Technology Yearbook, 2008).

MCIT perceives the expansion of broadband access as a key driver for sustained growth and development in the telecommunications sector. In July 2006, MCIT restructured the Broadband Initiative that it introduced in 2004 with an aim to increase awareness, reduce costs, and simplify the process of applying for and installing...
broadband services. To overcome the problem of multiple households needing to share DSL lines—a phenomenon identified by ISPs as severely damaging the perceived quality of broadband service as well as compromising its security—the MCIT launched an awareness campaign on television and in the newspapers, and introduced schemes in cooperation with the National Telecommunication Regulatory Authority (NTRA) to encourage ISPs to offer nationwide coverage through reductions in the cost of unbundled local loop and leased lines. These efforts led to an increase in the broadband installation rate during the last quarter of 2006 by almost five times its average throughout 2005 and 2006 to nearly 50,000 lines with a basic monthly subscription fee of LE 95 (around $18 CAD) for a 256 Kbps service. By the end of 2006, Egypt had 168,000 broadband users, due to the average monthly increase in users growing from 5% to 18%.

Within the context of these technological advancements, free-of-charge Internet services were launched in January 2007. Thus, in the first quarter of 2009, Internet users increased to 13 million compared to 10.92 million in the first quarter of 2008, which is more than 17 percent of the population, representing an annual growth rate of 20 to 30 percent. At this level, some argue that the critical mass of Internet users has been achieved, and that this number of users situates the Internet to be a mass medium that can impact the whole social system (Morris & Ogan, 1996, p. 45). ADSL subscribers increased to 787,638 thousand in 2009, which represents an annual growth rate of 63.24%. In 2009, ADSL was the mode of access for 42% of all Internet users. Dial-up subscribers accounted for another 42% of Internet subscribers in 2009.

Figure 1 shows the increase in the number of Internet users in Egypt from 1999 to 2009 (source: http://www.egyptictindicators.gov.eg/ar/default.htm).
Fig 1: Increase in the number of Internet users in Egypt from 1999 to 2009.

In Egypt today, the availability of basic Internet services is sufficient to facilitate the development of a computer-literate society. Egypt has made a huge infrastructure investment in fixed-line, mobile, and broadband networks. In 2009, fixed-line subscribers have increased to 11.8 million, representing an annual growth rate of 4.42%. Mobile telephones have become extremely popular in Egypt with cell phone services spreading at a globally unprecedented rate, which reached 53.5 million in 2009 (about 22% of the total population), representing an annual growth rate of 38.5%.

Table 1 provides an overview of the ICT indicators in Egypt (Source: http://www.mcit.gov.eg/Indicators.aspx).

Table 1: ICT indicators in Egypt 2008 and 2009.
The Egyptian government launched a Website (www.egypt.gov.eg) in January 2004 to provide a number of services to its citizens, including extensive public information, and electronic forms for making submissions and completing transactions that citizens can use to carry out certain transactions with the government without having to deal with bureaucratic obstacles, such as retrieving and paying their phone and electricity bills, and being issued official documents, for example, birth certificates and
national IDs. Yet, the social effect of these online services is still unrealized by the grassroots population, since one fifth of them live below the poverty line (Kelly et al., 2001, p. 40). Only a very small number of people have credit cards, or any credit at all, to pay online.

Egypt, represented by the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, has succeeded in achieving tangible technological development by making a huge leap forward in the field of communications. Now, even the standard Internet user demographic—young, wealthy, educated, urban males—is shifting to reflect a more diverse online population. The factors and challenges that used to be questioned, such as a lack of individual awareness and educational achievement (El-Nawawy, 2000) or poverty and other economic factors (Warschaur, 2003; Kelly et al., 2002; Wheeler, 2003), are no longer prioritized as obstacles that affect the use of the Internet in Egypt. However, it can be argued that challenges to Internet use pointed to by Kamel (1997) are still relevant, including the outright shortage of Arabic information content, and a lack of content that has a direct relevance to the everyday interests of the general public, e.g., legislative issues, a code of ethics, Internet security, and the protection of individual privacy. All of these matters represent problematic issues with respect to Internet use in Egypt (Kamel, 1997). The following personal interview quote from Sharif Hashem (Executive Vice President of the Information Technology Industry Development Agency in Egypt) supports Kamel’s concerns; Hashem suggests that the real barrier to the use of the Internet in Egypt is the unavailability of local content and citizen participation:

The issue of accessibility to communication technology and its availability to people has been our goal, since we started the ministry in 1999. We began by establishing more than one thousand ‘Technology Centers’ at government centers and local administration headquarters. Since 1998-1999, we have established
Information Technology Clubs, similar to technology centers, in youth centers, civil society organizations, and various governmental organizations. People can use these technology centers and clubs to access the Internet for a low cost of one Egyptian pound per hour ($0.18 CAD). Today, about 1,400 of these centers and clubs are in operation. In 2002, we started the Free Internet initiative, which means that a citizen who has a landline telephone (landline telephones in Egypt have reached 12 million) can use their computer via the telephone line without cost by using announced number. Accordingly, all homes with a landline telephone can use dialup Internet (64 kbps) free of charge. When we conducted a census, we found that one million families use this method to access the Internet. Other initiatives provide high speed Internet at a low cost approximately 45 Egyptian pounds (9 $CAD) with a speed of 256 kbps. New initiatives are always being tried to spread technology. In addition, you can find cybercafés throughout Egypt. In fact, access to the Internet is not a barrier; rather, the real barriers are the issues surrounding content and citizen participation (S. Hashem, personal interview, April 2, 2009).

However, the free Internet initiative that Hashem mentions as facilitating Internet access for a broad sector of people is not exactly free-of-charge. Simply, this term means that an Internet user does not deal with an ISP; however, they still must pay for their Internet usage as a telephone usage charge paid to their telephone company. After someone obtains a landline telephone, they can access the Internet without subscribing to an ISP. For example, a user is charged ten piasters ($0.025 CAN) per 6 minutes, meaning that he or she pays a higher telephone usage charge but does not pay an ISP access charge.

Hashem emphasizes the efforts made by the Egyptian government to integrate communication technologies into the everyday life of the Egyptian people with an aim to make Internet access more affordable. He also underscores how the scarcity of content in the Arabic language poses many obstacles that hinder the penetration of the Internet to large segments of the population who exclusively speak Arabic. Compared with the dominance of English content on the Internet, Arabic language e-content is significantly lacking, accounting for less than 0.5 percent of the overall content. The relative lack of Arabic-language content on the Internet clearly limits the medium’s utility for this
demographic. However, Egypt has made it a national priority to develop a strong Arabic-language presence on the web and to promote online Arabic content. In 2005, the Arabic e-content initiative was launched with an objective to create and promote an Arabic portal, which facilitated the production of 2,000 books and 300 software programs in its first two years. Since then, the availability of Arabic language e-content has continued to increase in Egypt and the Arab region (Kamel, 2006; Abdullah, 2005).

Recently in May 2010, and for the first time in the history of the Internet, the Arabic language became the first non-Latin script to be used in URLs. The Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) chose Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates as the first three regions to implement top-level domains (TLDs) tailored to specific country-codes. As more websites take advantage of the new top-level domains, Internet users will no longer need to switch from Arabic to Latin characters when entering the last part of a domain name, since they will have the option to enter URLs in their native language. Egypt was the first country in the world to create a domain name using Arabic characters. The new domain name .misr is the Arabic word for Egypt.

In a press release on May 6, 2010, Tarek Kamel, the Egyptian Minister of Communications and Information Technology, celebrated the inclusion of the Arabic alphabet as a sign of welcomed diversification on the Internet:

Introducing Arabic Domain Names is a milestone in Internet history. This great step will open up new horizons for e-services in Egypt. It will boost the number of online users in the country and will enable Internet services to penetrate new market segments by eliminating language barriers (Kamel 2010, n.p.).

Still, such enthusiasm about technological transformation should probably be tempered somewhat. Even though Egypt may benefit from enhanced access to Arabic content,
finding techniques for breaking down language barriers on the Internet will not necessarily resolve the socio-economic disparities in the Arab world. Moreover, as Jodi Dean has argued, information societies suffer from an overabundance of content (Dean, 2005). While the chief complaint today might be the underrepresentation of the Arabic language on the Internet, the struggle to achieve a democratic society in a digital age should not stop at simply calling for more media production, but should be concerned with building a culture that remains sensitive and committed to improving the well-being of Egyptian society.

The issue of Internet accessibility no longer seems to be a problem in Egypt. All of the bloggers and journalists I interviewed argue that Internet access is not a barrier to the positive role that the Internet can play in Egyptian society or for blogging and online journalism. Mina Zekri, a blogger and a program coordinator at the Arabic Human Rights Information Network, emphasizes that: “I do not think that there are economic challenges to blogging in Egypt. Internet access is affordable for everybody, and there are many alternative ways to get access” (personal interview, March 17, 2009). Another blogger, Shahinaz Abdel-Salam, agrees with Zekri, emphasizing that “the blogger Abdelkarim Amer who was sentenced to four years in prison did not own a computer or have an Internet connection at home. He blogs from a cybercafé” (S. Abdel-Salam, personal interview, March 16, 2009).

Ahmed Abdel-Hady, the Shabab Misr Party leader and a journalist, comments on the challenges that face bloggers and online journalists in Egypt by saying that:

The issue of Internet accessibility does not represent a real challenge anymore with respect to the public doing their own citizen journalism. Accessibility may have been a problem in the past, but now just one Egyptian pound ($0.18 CAD) will give you access to the Internet and a large audience. And generally speaking,
the public gets access to the Internet in one way or another (A. Abdel-Hady, personal interview, March 3, 2009).

Also, in discussing the challenges facing bloggers and the use of the Internet for political activism in Egypt, Wael Abbas—an internationally renowned blogger of *Al-Wa’i Al-Masri* (Egyptian Awareness) who is considered to be the most popular blogger in Egypt (www.misrdigital.blogspot.com)—says:

I do not think that Internet access or computer literacy are huge barriers. If we assume that 20 million Egyptians have access to the Internet, out of a total population of about 80 million, 1 in 4 people have access. In comparison, the audience of traditional newspapers is only about 100,000, at maximum 150,000. Some blogs reach more than one million people (W. Abbas, personal interview, March 11, 2009).

In the context of a discussion about the challenges that undermine the blogging phenomenon in Egypt, Noha Atef—blogger and journalist for the *Al-Dostor* newspaper—asserts that Internet access is no longer a significant barrier:

I don’t see any particular challenges for blogging that are different from those challenges facing other media. The Internet has more users and audiences than any other media. Internet access doesn’t represent any barriers to the proliferation of blogs in Egypt. Anybody who is willing can blog and participate online because they can access all the facilities they need (N. Atef, personal interview, March, 2009).

Also, Mohamed Adel (a blogger) says: “I don’t see any economic or technological challenges for blogging in Egypt, just the ordinary problems that face society as a whole, such as a lack of political awareness and illiteracy”

It seems clear that Egypt’s growing initiatives and large investments in technology infrastructure that provide low and affordable prices for Internet access has not hindered the use of the Internet for blogging, for creating an effective virtual public sphere, and for influencing political attitudes and behaviours. As Saeed Elmasry, Head of
the Social Issues Program affiliated with the Egyptian Cabinet, Information and Decision Support Center (IDSC) puts it:

I don’t see that the digital divide or the issue of Internet access is a barrier because what we are witnessing on the Internet is a kind of active agent, and not actors or individuals; that is, active agents who have effective communication skills that can mobilize people. Moreover, the active agents with a quality education and social mobility are increasing, and accordingly, these are the people who are expected to be the effective part of the public sphere in society. Yet, the number of Internet users is huge while the number of active agents is small, and not all of them are effective in the public sphere (S. Elmasry, personal interview, March 5, 2009).

Attention should be directed to other barriers that originate from the traditional, hierarchical structure of the Arabic culture, and to other corollary social and cultural factors, such as increasing unemployment and poor-quality education and social services that produce a wide divide throughout the Egyptian population. Hazem Hassan, a professor in the Faculty of Economic and Political Science at Cairo University, critically emphasizes that what is important is not just hardware and technological infrastructure; what is most important is to what extent the state believes in, and is willing to create, an information society:

Unfortunately, we deal with technology without understanding it and without realizing its dimensions. Even the government, with all its resources, has been unable to be effectively present in cyberspace. This situation has been part of the misunderstanding that we had imagined that we had entered the Information age just because the Ministry of Information and Communication Technologies provided the technological infrastructure. Digital culture is a social responsibility; it is the responsibility of all of the diverse institutions that are accountable for the formation of the mind, and not just the responsibility of the institutions concerned with technology. To be honest with ourselves, ordinary people, either online or offline, are not taking this responsibility seriously because the factors that facilitate their participation do not exist. I believe that the political regime in Egypt does not want their participation. The educational system is not capable of producing citizens who can assume this responsibility. The present culture and media are also a hindrance. The Internet is an instrument, and as long as the institutions responsible for its use are ineffective, its use will remain superficial. For example, the class that should be the backbone for any real social change, the
class that is capable of creating reform—the middle class—is marginalized, and the state wants it to remain marginalized because the regime realizes that the middle class represents a danger to its future survival. The middle class in Egypt has not yet made the transfer to the Information age, and as long as it is marginalized, the Information age in Egypt will remain caught within the superficial limits of the technological infrastructure provided by the Ministry of Information and Communication Technologies, and Internet use will have little social impact…. When a state is willing to create a new culture based on information technology and the Information age, it must rely primarily on the activities of the middle class across society so that in a broad sense, in time, this new age and digital culture will become part of the culture of society (H. Hassan, personal interview, March 31, 2009).

In other words, Hassan wonders if the Egyptian government is ready to withstand the potential offered by the Internet. Additionally, Hassan questions whether Arab society can choose to become a culture that can accept the potential of this technology.

Gamal Ghietas (IT editor of Al-Ahram, and Editor-in-Chief of Loghat El-Aasr [The Language of the Present] Magazine) echoes Hassan’s argument when he says:

The answer to the question about to what extent Egyptians have become mature in their use of the Internet and information communication technology is still vague. An electronic government could succeed very well if the traditional government changed and adopted the characteristics of the Internet, which are based on the value of speed and time, transparency, and the citizen’s right to know. More than 80% of governmental institutions use the Internet as a cupboard for storing files that are soon forgotten. Even the civil society that should be the liaison between the producers of technology and the grassroots does not exist, except for a few remarkable attempts. Political parties are absent from any discussion, and do not care! (G. Ghietas, personal interview, March 10, 2009).

Ghietas’ observation supports remarks by Blumler and Gurevitch (2001) about the potential of new media for enhancing political communication and democracy. They attribute to new media technology a “vulnerable potential,” which is to say that it might be capable of enriching the quality of public communication, but only if it is supported by appropriate policy and institutional provisions: “Otherwise, it could be compromised and co-opted by forces with their own axes to grind, relegated to tricky sidelines, or just
submerged by other games,” and “nothing is pre-ordained about the impact of new media in politics” (p. 2). Indeed, as both Hassan and Ghietas emphasize in their interviews, in Egyptian society, a host of deep-seated social problems, political changes, and ethical constraints have frustrated the ability of the Egyptian people to orient new technologies toward democratic ends and ideals.

Gamal Eid (Executive Director of the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information) points to a social barrier, which is the perception that some people hold about the Internet with respect to its moral implications:

Primarily, they associate it with harmful and pornographic materials. This perception associates Internet use with the bad-mannered. For example, recently an Internet activist was arrested, and his family didn’t know where he was detained. When we talked with his father, he said: ‘My son is polite, and he has nothing to do with the Internet.’ In fact, his son was arrested due to his activism on the Internet (G. Eid, personal interview, March 23, 2009).

Moreover, the association of the Internet and the emerging media technologies with decadent and trivial behaviour is a common perception held by people living in conservative societies, particularly among families living in rural regions. Anxieties about the harmful impacts of the Internet often prompt the concerns of parents and guardians about their dependents’ use of Internet technology.

A preoccupation with broadening Internet access is no longer the main concern of most Internet activists, since other barriers seem to have caught their attention. Many of my participants expressed a lack of concern about accessibility, since they do not perceive it as a hindrance to the effectiveness of blogging or as a barrier to effective political participation on the Internet. However, it could be argued that such confident claims assume that Egyptian users of the Internet have already reached the required “critical mass” for the Internet in Egypt to thrive as a mass medium. By critical mass, I
mean the specific size that an audience must be for the communication medium to penetrate the social system. Morris and Ogan (1996) argue that the Internet itself could be considered a mass medium, since it is composed of a collection of electronic communication services, such as electronic bulletin boards, Usenet groups, e-mail, Internet Relay Chats, home pages, and so forth. The concept of critical mass works from the assumption that even if only a relatively small audience (e.g., 10 or 20 percent of the population) uses these applications on the Internet, they are nevertheless in a position to generate large volumes of content across all of these services (Morris & Ogan, 1996, p. 45).

**Internet Use and Impact on Egyptian Society**

A number of studies have examined the uses of the Internet and its effects on the Arab world and Egypt, especially on young people. Since the majority of Internet users are university students, the younger generation or “net generation,” most Internet studies in Egypt are based primarily on samples from university-age students (Abdel Salam, 1998; Shaheen, 2006; Gnaid, 2003; Tayei, 2000). However, a few studies also have been done on samples of young children and their parents (AlSemry, 2003) or young children only (Altokhy, 2002). In addition, some studies of Internet use have been conducted on special-category samples, such as the business sector (El Husseini, 2005), professional journalists (Abdel Bary, 2005), and university students studying communications and journalism (Bakhit, 2000).
A large portion of the growing and substantial body of Internet studies in Egypt are based principally on surveys and empirical studies that use the “uses and gratification approach,” an approach that regards members of the audience as engaging in active, goal-oriented media behaviour, and an approach that focuses on the gratifications that attract audiences to a specific media. Uses and gratification theory suggests that media messages gratify cognitive, affective, social, and psychological needs that an audience seeks to obtain from the media it uses and depends on (Ruggiero, 2000). Researchers use this approach to discover the motives for using a specific media, and the functions of some specific content or the medium itself. A number of academic studies published in Arabic language journals indicate that a dependence on the Internet as an important source for news and political information is increasingly growing among the Egyptian public.

In her search to discover the patterns of use of the Internet among Egyptian youth, and their motives for using the Internet, Abdel-Salam (1998) conducted a study with 149 Internet users aged between 18 to 35 years. She found that young Egyptians use the Internet primarily to gratify their cognitive needs, which include getting the news and information (72.5%), entertainment (47%), and as a communication medium for personal relationships and friendships (42.3%). Abdel-Salam (1998) found that gender has no significance on patterns of Internet use and the motivation to use the Internet, but the following variables do impact use: age, education level, area of professional specialization, access to workshops on computers and technology, and knowledge of the English language.
Hamed’s (2000) study shows that among university students in Egypt, the Internet surpasses satellite television as a source for getting information about the performance of the government. Information gathering and news are among the most important motives for using the Internet, and Tayei’s (2000) study about Internet use in the Arab world and Egypt shows that 91.5% of the respondents use the Internet for getting news and information, and then respectively, entertainment, filling free time, communication, and shopping. In an investigation of the effectiveness and applicability of internet-based training for organizations in Egypt, Ibrahim and Kamel (2002) sent a questionnaire to 1,878 individuals (representing the “users” category), and their data showed that Internet usage is mainly for gathering information and searching (85%), email (78%), chatting (31%), shopping (25%), and E-Learning (13%). Gnaid’s (2003) study of Internet use and its relation to the level of political awareness among Egyptian university students found that their use of the Internet increased their awareness of international political issues. This study shows the importance of the Internet as a main source of political information about international issues, and political information in general.

Of course, the Internet—through online versions of newspapers, radio, and television (broadcasting locally or internationally)—provides people with alternatives to obtain news and information at less cost than obtaining it from offline sources such as newspapers; that is, for most Egyptians, the cost of accessing the Internet is cheaper than buying a newspaper. The cost of using the Internet is very competitive in Egypt, since according to the World Bank, the monthly cost of using the internet in Egypt does not exceed $5 US (Ministry of Communication and Information Technology, 2008). In her study of university students’ exposure to Arabic radio and television Websites and their
dependence on them to obtain political information, Shaheen (2006) found that a growing number of Egyptian youth depend on broadcasting Websites, which they consider as being a main source for obtaining political information and for news, especially during times of crises and conflict. Her study indicates that young people benefit from the interactivity of the broadcasting Websites. They contact the producers of these sites, request information, participate in opinion polls and discussion forums, download songs and specific programs, and so on.

On the other hand, user gratification sought through the Internet differs according to various criteria. In cyber cafés, chatting is the dominant use of the Internet. Wheeler (2004) conducted a survey on Internet café users by way of a series of informal conversations in five different locations throughout Cairo. The results show that cyber café users utilized the Internet to help them meet new people, stay in touch with family and friends (especially those who are abroad), learn new things such as typing and English language skills (from global chatting), freely express thoughts and opinions, look for jobs, check agricultural prices, and arrange new business opportunities (Wheeler (2004).

In addition to these examples from the academic literature on the Internet in Egypt, a current body of reports and opinion polls that focus on the use of the Internet and its impact on Egyptian society are produced by the Information and Decision Support Center (IDSC), which is affiliated with the governmental Egyptian Cabinet’s Think Tank. In 2005, the IDSC conducted a survey of 709 respondents from eight Egyptian governorates who represented different economic categories (low, middle, and high) to examine to what extent, from a parent’s point of view, the Internet effects Egyptian
youth. The study shows that 48% of Egyptian families spend less than fifty pounds ($10 CAD) per month on Internet access. The study also found that from the parent’s point of view (84%), the most positive impact of the Internet on their children is the easy access to information. The most negative effect of the Internet is the easy access to sex and pornography sites, and other inappropriate internet content (57% of the sample). Sixty-seven per cent of the sample believes that the Internet has a positive impact on their children by providing them with the information they need, whereas 40% of the respondents said that the Internet impacts their children negatively because they are so preoccupied with it that they neglect their studies. In another survey that the IDSC conducted in 2007 to examine citizens’ opinions about different mass media (television, radio, newspapers, and the Internet) with respect to how much they use them, their motivations for use, and the credibility of these different media, 24% of the sample said that the Internet is much more credible than the other media because it provides more freedom, live news and real events, numerous sites for news, and visual multimedia.

In 2008, the IDSC conducted another survey on a sample of 1,338 subjects aged 18 to 35 to discover the positives and negatives of Internet use by Egyptian youth, and to understand to what extent they know about blogs, whether they interact with them, and what kind of blogs they prefer. The findings show that the patterns of Internet use by young people are only slightly affected by their place of residence or the economic status of their family, which might be attributable to the efforts of the Egyptian government to provide Internet services to the whole country. The whole sample agrees that the Internet facilitates information gathering and saves time, and 82% said that some relations and friendships over the Internet might be unreliable. 72% of the sample concur that the
Internet has some bad effects on youth and children. 58% of the sample agrees that the Internet influences social relations among family members and leads to social isolation. 92% of the sample trusts the Internet as a source of information. 39% of the sample knew about blogs, and 49% indicated that blogs have both positive and negative aspects. 23% of the sample who knew about blogs read blogs and post comments. Only three people from the sample had their own blogs. Young people prefer, read, and post comments about blogs that focus on computer and communications technology, and on political issues. The results of the IDSC survey show that 74% of the sample use the Internet to get news and information; 68% use it for entertainment—to download videos, songs, and movies; 63% use it to send and receive emails; 39% use the Internet daily; and 31% use it weekly.

Although the IDSC surveys show that the respondents use the Internet for information-seeking activities, reservations about the results of these kinds of surveys always exist. For example, Gamal Ghietas (IT editor of Al-Ahram and Editor-in-Chief of Loghat El-Aasr [the Language of the Present] Magazine) conducted a pilot study on Egyptians and keyword searching on the popular search engine Google to examine their research behaviour and what they normally were looking for. The results of this study show that the number of searches for political issues did not reach a level to make it statistically important. This study also found that pornography was the most researched topic on the Internet, which might be consistent with what usually has been observed in studies of young people who spend their nights in Internet cafes using the Internet for entertainment rather than for political or educational information, for example, they use it for chatting, playing, and dating. Ghietas argues that Internet users in Egypt can be
classified into three categories: first, those who use the Internet for consuming entertainment and sex, and for chatting; second, those who do not have any associations with politics, who do not trust any political reform, and who use the Internet without any goal; and third, a small number of people—not surpassing one-third of all Internet users—who are willing to participate and express their voices and engage in the public sphere through the Internet (G. Ghietas, personal interview, March 10, 2009).

Some Internet studies examine credibility and ethics, such as Abdel Bary (2005) who interviewed Egyptians who use the Internet to investigate the credibility of Arab and foreign news websites compared to the printing press. This study shows that users of news websites view these sites as more credible than print newspapers, and as a result, they consider news websites more credible and tend to be increasingly exposed to online journalism and thus depend on it to obtain and follow the news. The respondents mainly attribute the credibility of these news websites to the interactivity and the freedom that characterizes online journalism, which permit them to express their views freely without any of the restrictions of the Egyptian and Arab print newspapers in general. Bary (2005) raises questions about the future of the print media in Egypt in the wake of the new freedom of expression, credibility, interactivity, and other positive advantages of online journalism and online forums provided through the Internet.

With the exception of a few studies that examine online journalism in Egypt, the Egyptian Internet studies literature uses mainly empirical and quantitative approaches to investigate the patterns and motivations of Egyptian users of the Internet, and its effects. For example, by conducting interviews with journalists who are responsible for the electronic versions of 12 Egyptian print newspapers, Ibrahim (1999) investigated how the
Egyptian press uses the Internet and its impact on journalistic performance. Conducted in 1999, this study found a lack of electronic websites produced by print newspapers and magazines, and a lack of journalists who used the Internet. The interest of Egyptian newspapers in new technology developments grew out of personal initiatives of a few number of journalists, which reflect the absence of constitutional view of the challenges of the information revolution. The use of the Internet by print newspapers was limited to using it as a publication medium, a communication medium, a source of photos and information, but no attempts were made to use its interactive features and commercial services. On February 1996, three years and four months after the Internet was introduced to Egypt, the Egyptian Al-Gomhuria newspaper was the first newspaper in Egypt to launch its own electronic version on the Internet. In 1997, Al-Siyssa Al-Dawlia Magazine established its own electronic Website, and in 1998, the Al-Ahram Daily newspaper, Egypt’s most widely distributed daily, launched the electronic version of its content. By March 1999, 10 electronic versions of Egyptian newspapers were operating on the Internet, representing 10% of the total number of print presses in Egypt (120 newspapers and magazines) (Ibrahim, 1999, p. 121). Now, according to the most recent information report issued by the Egyptian Cabinet, Information and Decision Support Center (IDSC) in February, 2010, the number of newspapers that have electronic version on the Internet reached 63 out of 156 newspapers and magazines, representing 40.4 % of the total number of the Egyptian printed newspapers and magazines.

In her study of the Al-Ahram newspaper Website, Alsafty (2000) shows that this online version of the print newspaper lacks the interactive sensibility of online journalism. Except for the use of internal hypertext, the Al-Ahram online version does not
exploit the potential of this new media (AlSafty, 2000). Many news sites are still in the phase of what is called “shovelware,” plain print content that is just recast or “repurposed” from the traditional print counterpart.

However, in 2010, most Egyptian print newspapers—including *Al-Masry-alyoum, Al-Ahram, Al-dostour, Alyoum Alsabea*, and *Alshorouk*—are incorporating to a great extent the features of online journalism in the electronic versions of their newspapers. Whether offline or online, independent newspapers provide the most communication flexibility and freedom for their readers to comment and express their voices. As Ahmed Abdel-Hady, a journalist and the *Shabab Misr* Party leader, says:

There is a relationship between adopting the online features of journalism and the extent of freedom of expression; that is, we find that newspapers that enjoy a broader margin of freedom make use of the online features of journalism more than the newspapers with restricted freedom. For example, the national newspapers such as *Al-Akhbar, Al-Ahram*, and *Al-Gomhouria* do not include any interactive features to allow their audience to participate in the online versions of their newspapers (A. Abdel-Hady, personal interview, March 3, 2009).

According to Abdel-Hady, state-run and independent newspapers take a different approach to the migration from print to online journalism. The websites of national or state-run newspapers continue to emulate the offline environment, essentially providing audiences with what is called “shovelware”—basically repurposed content from their printed counterparts. Only recently have they started to integrate features that are unique to the web. By contrast, independent newspapers were the first to incorporate interactive capabilities, and to open up a wide range of communication modalities that allow readers to comment and participate.

As mentioned previously, the Internet has captured popular attention as a communication and information medium, and the majority of researchers doing Internet
studies have examined how people use the Internet and what gratifications they seek and obtain. However, researchers in the Arab world and Egypt have not considered the potential of the Internet to enhance the Egyptian democratic process and to contribute to an Egyptian public sphere. Although many researchers in the Western world have considered how the Internet impacts democracy and the public sphere, my dissertation is the first to examine the relationship between new media and the public sphere in Egypt. Thus, my investigation into the ways in which the Internet, particularly as materialized through the blogging phenomenon, can meaningfully contribute to the evolution of a new public sphere and democracy in Egypt is a first step towards this analysis.

The Blogosphere Community: Emerging Public Spheres

The recent political protests and demonstrations in the Egyptian streets can be associated in one way or another with a growing digital protest on the Internet represented by a number of political blogs that have succeeded in recruiting and mobilizing a broad sector of Egyptian youth. Consequently, in recent years, Egyptian blogs have begun to shape an influential virtual community that is having a political, social, and cultural impact on the ground. In the Egyptian Al-Ahram newspaper on June 4, 2008, Khalil Alanany argues that a new generation is emerging in Egypt that seems different from previous generations in all respects: in its culture, its tools, and its demands. The characteristics of this new generation have emerged through its interactions with electronic communication. Egypt is swimming in a vast sea of virtual democracy over the Internet, especially on blogs, Facebook, and chatrooms. Moreover,
this virtual community extends to human relationships, electronic friendships, and political practices.

Egypt is awash in an undeniable youth movement that can be characterized by certain features. First, it is a non-partisan movement that has not been coloured by the Egyptian party system and its political ideologies. It is not leftist, Islamist, Marxist, or even Liberalist. Second, this movement is clearly oriented to progressive political and social change in Egypt. Third, it is a “smart”, self-sufficient movement that depends on its powerful ability to use technological tools to overcome any barriers in its way. Fourth, it is an ongoing movement that transcends the personalized leadership of specific actors, and it is gaining new proponents every day. Finally, this is movement that is open to the world, a movement has an open mind about other perspectives, thoughts, and technologies (Al-Ahram newspaper, June 4, 2008). Egyptian blogs have become a window for expression of opinion, a characteristic which has attracted a new generation of political activists, especially those who are oriented towards journalism and literature.

In describing the blogging community in Egypt, Wael Abbas argues that the number of blogs in Egypt is increasing: at present, about 180,000 blogs are operating in Egypt. Although few reliable metrics exist for assessing the size and growth of the Egyptian blogosphere, Abbas’ rough estimate appears to be consistent with the numbers provided by The Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, which has identified about 200,000 blogs in the country. Additionally, in 2008, the Egyptian Cabinet, Information and Decision Support Center (IDSC) conducted an exploratory study to examine the importance and extent of the blogging phenomenon in Egypt. Despite the difficulty of estimating the number of Egyptian blogs, since statistics about them do not
exist, the IDSC research group tried to estimate their number by searching directories, Website hosting company information, and aggregator Websites that include Egyptian blogs, and found that in April 2008, about 160,000 blogs were operating in Egypt—30.7 percent of the total number of Arab blogs, which was estimated at 490,000 at that time. Most people operating blogs live in Cairo, the capital of Egypt, and in other Egyptian cities. The majority of bloggers fall in the age category of 20 to 30 years, which also matches the dominant model for bloggers elsewhere in the world. Bloggers range from those with middle levels of education to those who are highly educated, and most of them are from the middle class. The IDSC report indicates that the number of blogs in Egypt remained limited until 2004, and then their number mushroomed in a growing trend, and blossomed to great extent, especially during 2005 and 2006. It is no accident that blogs proliferated during 2005 and 2006 and began to play a key role in the political life in Egypt, since this period was the beginning of an ongoing political mobilization in Egypt that continues to this day. In recent years, Egypt has been the stage for many political events, such as constitutional amendments, presidential and parliamentary elections, and sectarian arguments between Muslims and Christians in some areas, as well as other significant local issues. As Saeed Elamsry, the head of the social issues program in the IDSC and the supervisor of this report, says:

From 2005 to 2007, blogs were used effectively in the political sphere during the presidential elections and constitutional amendments, and during the parliamentary elections. Bloggers tried to provide information that was not available in the traditional media. In this period, blogs succeeded in reflecting what was going on in the Egyptian streets, so the highest rate of blogging occurred during 2005 and 2006. Also, one of the best examples of the significance of blogs is the April 6th protests, and how bloggers effectively used the social networking site Facebook to organize these protests (S.Elmasry, personal interview, March 5, 2009).
According to the 2008 IDSC report, blogs are categorized by six different types of content: 1) blogs that are interested in a wide variety of topics and are not dedicated to a specific field or area (30.7%); 2) blogs that are interested in political issues (18.9%); blogs that are personal and often tell personal stories, which are concerned with impressions, love, and emotions (15.5%); 3) blogs that are interested in culture and the arts, and are intellectually-oriented (14.4%); 4) blogs that are religion-oriented (7%); and 5) blogs that are interested in social topics, such as the relation between men and women, marriage and divorce, and violence against women, etc. (4.8%); and 6) technology blogs that are interested in science and computer and communication technology (4%). Most Egyptian bloggers write in the Arabic language, either in a colloquial style or classical Arabic language, and a small percentage write in English or in a mixture of Arabic and English (Information and Decision Support Center, 2008).

Mina Zekri argues that political bloggers are mainly from the middle class and are highly educated and culturally aware (M.Zekri, personal interview, March 17, 2009). This observation contrasts with the claim that Abbas makes in an interview in which he appears to give less weight to the importance of class in the online environment:

There are bloggers from all classes and different provinces in Egypt. Bloggers are not from any specific class. I know bloggers who are quasi-homeless, do not even have their own computers; they go to cyber cafés, and by paying just one Egyptian pound (20 cents), he/she can blog. Commentary on the issues is no longer restricted to a specific class (W. Abbas, personal interview, March 11, 2009).

Over time, people from differing socio-economic levels have entered the blogging domain. Amani Kandil, the director of the Arab Network of NGOs, appears to support the Abbas’s claim as well when she argues that bloggers represent all classes of society: the son of my driver is not well educated, but he goes on the Internet and participates and shares his comments with others. Even people without computers
at home can access the Internet through cyber cafés or thorough the projects of the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology. Access to the Internet is not a barrier at all (A. Kandil, personal interview, March 25, 2009).

By virtue of the openness of the Internet to a diversity of opinions, thanks in part to the absence of traditional barriers to access, the Internet and blogging community create and enable a dialogue that is missing offline. People are in a better position to at least engage with the thoughts of others, and potentially, to respect what they are saying. As Eman Abdelrahman, a female blogger, states:

Blogging is a non-traditional medium that allows us to know more about what the hidden segments of society—or the segments perceived as deviant or those who are marked by dominant cultural norms as Other (woman, homosexuals, etc.)—are thinking about. Blogging opens the door for communicating with the Other, and provides us with a space to encounter the diverse human perspectives on life (E. Abdelrahman, personal interview, March 24, 2009).

Abdelrahman stresses the potential for blogging to dissolve the traditional distinctions and conventional assumptions about the Other, which would otherwise limit opportunities for dialogue among people from different cultures, genders, and religions. In addition, Mina Zekri argues that the perception of people and society in general about homosexuals is different on the Internet than it is on the ground:

The virtual space helps to create a dialogue between homosexual bloggers and the rest of society through their blogs, which is extended to issues and topics that are not necessarily limited to sexual issues. It could be argued that the new media of virtual space and blogs undermines the homophobia that exists on the ground about those people, and is creating a mobility and some kind of tolerance for homosexuals, and has helped to change some of the stereotypes already existing in society. Also, we saw bloggers from the Muslim Brotherhood sympathize with AbdelKarim Amer, the blogger who criticized the religion of Islam (M. Zekri, personal interview, March 17, 2009).

Blogging reflects the presence of a new generation whose thoughts differ from the previous generation. Even those who affiliate with conventional ideologies are not like the older adherents of those ideologies.
Bloggers who affiliate with the Muslim Brotherhood have reservations and criticize the so-called old guard or senior leadership of the movement. The new generation of the Muslim Brotherhood, of which bloggers are a part, are open to other points of view, and they have conversations with other secularist and communist bloggers about different issues. Muslim Brotherhood bloggers represent a new strain of thought within the Muslim brothers without conflicting with the Muslim Brotherhood as a movement. As Mohamed Adel and AbdelMoneim Mahmoud, bloggers affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, explain: “These changes are about refashioning the movement in a language understandable to new generations throughout the world, and in a new way that goes along with the contemporary developments in the world” (M. Adel, personal interview, March 26, 2009).

Of course, any judgment on or answers to questions about the impact of blogs can vary and depend largely on the expectations about the purpose that blogs serve. For example, two of my interviewees expressed divergent opinions on the extent to which blogging and the Internet makes a difference. On the one hand, Amr Ezzat (a blogger and journalist) argues that blogs in Egypt contribute to political mobility:

Even if you don’t notice real action on the ground, you get a feeling that people’s thinking has started to change, and they are beginning to be aware of different issues. Through blogging, in Egypt, we have embarked on using the Internet in a political way (A. Ezzat, personal interview, April 6, 2009).

On the other hand, Gamal Ghietas (IT editor of Al-Ahram and Editor-in-Chief of Loghat El Aasr Magazine) holds a different opinion about the political use of the Internet in Egypt, and the role of blogging in helping to create a well-functioning public sphere in Egypt or in the Arab world in general:

The limitation of blogs in Egypt is that they are still individual attempts at change, and we cannot assume that they have reshaped public opinion. I can
argue that the influence of Facebook might be having more impact than blogs in Egypt. For example, Facebook played an important role in organizing the demonstrations of April 6th and in preparing for the protests of May 2, 2009… However, we still can argue that the impact or role of blogs in Egypt is like a flash in a dark room that has not yet transformed into a permanent light to guide the public to a specific goal. To date, blogs are not yet considered a reliable source of information (G. Ghietas, personal interview, March 10, 2009).

The divergence in the perception of the impact of blogging reflects similar debates in the scholarship. As Khan and Kellner (2004) argue, the impact of blogs and their success should not be judged solely on whether they generate obvious political effects because they also are a part of the surrounding environment (p. 92). Blogs definitely have an impact on Egyptian society in terms of how they can inspire people to rise up and discuss issues that used to be considered taboo, and how they can provide a safe window through which marginalized segments of society can express their voices. However, as Malek Mostafa (a blogger) argues, “blogging doesn’t work alone, and the impact of blogs doesn’t occur in isolation”. Amani Kandil, the director of the Arab Network of NCOs, suggests that “a set of internal and external factors are responsible even if we claim that blogging leads to change and political mobility or increases freedom of expression in Egypt” (A. Kandil, personal interview, March 25, 2009).

In addition, Gamal Eid, Executive Director of the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, argues that the Internet has become a main instrument used by protest movements for recruitment, networking, and mobilization:

It is a new medium that bridges the generations who are moving beyond the cloak of corruption and repression, and also beyond the conventional boundaries identified by liberals and the left. The Internet helps to increase the communication between generations accustomed to using traditional media, and the younger generation depends on it. Young people and political activists struggling with the censorship imposed on the traditional media now use the Internet to express their views, ideas that they cannot express elsewhere in other media (G. Eid, personal interview, March 23, 2009).
In a time of strife, political agitation, and a sense of injustice and discontent over many public issues, Egyptian blogs and Internet use have increased. Together with a lack of freedom of expression and the emergence of protest movements, individuals and groups have been inspired to find media that they can use to express their views and experience and to become communicators in their own right. These individuals and groups found blogs to be a forum for their voices and for debate beyond the dominant public sphere, which suggests that blogs are a part of an alternative public sphere.

Many blogs deal with a wide range of political and social issues, providing a channel for the expression of dissident views on all matters of importance to the Egyptian people. Shahinaz Abdul-Salam suggests that “blogging breaks down the barriers of fear and silence that isolate people. Hence, blogging widens the margin of freedom of expression in Egypt, and encourages ordinary people to go to the streets and participate in protests and demonstrations” (S. Abdel-Salam, personal interview, March 16, 2009).

Through the following revealing anecdote, Abdul-Salam illustrates how blogging provides a space for airing the often-silenced perspectives of disenfranchised groups, and thus functions as a source of inspiration for activism on the ground:

Once, a man approached me at a demonstration and asked me: ‘Are you Shahinaz, the blogger of “wa7da masreya” (an Egyptian woman)?’ I said, ‘Yes, it’s me,’ and he replied, ‘You are the reason I am in the streets today participating in this demonstration.’ He went on to say, ‘I thought, why would a woman demonstrate in the streets, and a man like me not take any action. The least I could do is to demonstrate too.’ I heard the same response from more than one man. This example is significant in two ways. First, it shows us how the perception of women is still dominated by the view that sees her place in the home, and how men are surprised when they see women participating publicly in political activism. Second, it shows us how blogging has the potential to affect people and change society (S. Abdel-Salam, personal interview, March 16, 2009).

The role of blogs in Egyptian society is constituted by the degree to which they succeed in engaging people to contribute to a parallel public sphere, which can be either
alternative or oppositional. The preceding anecdote is evidence of an emerging space for women in which it is possible to contest some of the cultural conventions that ascribe fixed roles according to gender. What is most revealing about Abdel-Salam’s narrative is that this process of “breaking down barriers” relies on the combined efforts of mutually supportive forms of offline and online activism.

The Internet and Blogosphere in Mainstream Journalism

Some Egyptian newspapers such as Almasry-Alyoum, Aldostor, and Alshouruk have a segment or a page devoted to covering blogs—they cover what is going on in the blogging community in Egypt and cite excerpts from different blogs (which include the bloggers’ names) that raise specific public issues. Makram Ahmed, the current President of the Egyptian Press Syndicate, argues that although the online newspapers in the Arab world are still limited, blogging journalism and the sheer number of bloggers in the tens of thousands represent a striking phenomenon (Al-Ahram newspaper, May 24, 2009). Seymour Hersh claims that blogs in Egypt play a more important role in the Egyptian society than print newspapers (Almasry-Alyoum newspaper, May 14, 2009).

Alarabiya television’s reporter (October 18, 2007) suggests that the use of a “short messages service” (SMS), which is characterized by its low cost, has become especially popular in the Arab world. In Egypt, mobile phone users are sending SMS text messages via their mobile phones to express their criticism and sarcasm regarding the ruling regime. Safwat Al-Allem, an Egyptian political communication scholar at the Cairo University, comments that: “This new mode of political expression and communication is an alternative mode of political satire to replace the historic political
satire which has always characterized the Egyptian people” (Alarabiya, net, October 18, 2007). Al-Aalem further argues that these short messages function as an instrument of expression of public opinion that reveals prevailing attitudes about government officials and the ruling party. In their content, SMSs resemble political caricature, but they differ from it in their spontaneity and how they can bypass censorship. Moreover, in the Almasry-alyoum newspaper, Alhabib Ali Zain Alabdin comments about the growing phenomenon of the SMS and its use for exchanging greetings and mediating social relations. He considers the SMS to be a reflection of a new culture in the Arab world in the age of new communication technology and globalization, and considers it as an alternative to face-to-face communication (Almasry-Alyoum newspaper, October 12, 2007). Hofheinz (2007) argues that the SMS also has been used for political mobilization because it has a wider reach than the Internet. For example, he says that in Egypt in March 2003, SMS messages helped to organize protests against the US-led invasion of Iraq in an unprecedented way, and SMS also played a major role in the Lebanese demonstrations in the spring of 2005 (Hofheinz, 2007, p. 71).

The Muslim Brotherhood has effectively used the Internet to spread its thought, beginning in 1998 when it established two separate Websites. In addition, it also used the Internet and SMS to mobilize the electorate during the 2005 parliamentary election campaign in Egypt on a scale not seen before to the extent that “secular commentators agreed that these online efforts put campaigns by other political forces in Egypt, including the government, ‘to shame’” (Hofheinz, 2007, p. 73).

On Sunday, the sixth of April, 2008 in Egypt, a widespread call went out for a general strike over corruption, rising prices, stagnant salaries, and an unprecedented gap
between the rich and the poor in Egypt. As a result, thousands of demonstrators in the northern industrial town of Mahalla el-Kubra torched the largest textile factory in Egypt, looted shops, and hurled bricks at police, who responded with tear gas. About 150 people were arrested and 80 wounded within the city, and nearly 100 others were arrested elsewhere across Egypt. This tragedy was to become the first demonstration, the first virtual strike ever mobilized and organized by the new media exemplified by Facebook and Egyptian blogs, a virtual strike which became a real strike and demonstration in the streets of Egypt. Hamdy Rezk, a columnist for *Almasry-Alyoum* newspaper, makes an ironic comparison between what he called the “Facebook Party” on the one side and the National Democratic ruling party and other political oppositional parties in Egypt on the other side. (H. Rezk, *Almasry-Alyoum* newspaper, 2008, April 14). Magdy Al-Galad, the editor-in-chief of the independent newspaper *Almasry-Alyoum*, argues that with respect to April 6th, the political parties in Egypt have been rendered useless. Furthermore, he suggests that no one can assume that oppositional parties have played a role in mobilizing the Egyptian youth to go the streets. He argues that a new political party has emerged in Egypt, which has played a major role in the call for a nationwide strike, and convincingly so—this party is the “Internet party” or the “Facebook party.” (Al-Galad, *Almasry-Alyoum* newspaper, 2008, April 8).

Mailing lists and groups also have become common modes of communication in Egypt. These mailing lists go back to the early introduction of the Internet in Egypt in 1994, and vary in their topics and interests. Sayed Sadek, a professor of political sociology at the American University in Cairo, argues that mailing lists along with chat rooms and blogs have engendered a revolution in public awareness and have a growing
influence in broad sectors of society. He calls for the establishment of committees or associations to take on the task of defending and protecting electronic activists, especially with respect to legal protection (*Al-Ahram* newspaper, 2007, October 22).

Blogs have gained the attention of famous writers and journalists such as Muhammad Hassanein Heikal—a well-known Egyptian journalist and writer—who once famously admitted in an interview with Al-Jazeera that he reads an anonymous blogger who goes by the pseudonym “Baheyya.” Heikal reports:

I do not know who he or she is. Nevertheless, I ask my office to send me all this person’s articles. I read these articles constantly respecting and contemplating her/his opinion. I read this person more regularly than I read a journalist of any newspaper (Aljazeera.net, 2006, May 28).

Also, in an article in the New York Times entitled “Why the Muslim World Can’t Hear Obama,” Alaa Al-Aswany, a famous Egyptian novelist, talks about President Obama’s promises and his failure to do justice to the Palestinian issue. He extols Egyptian bloggers and their engagement with serious political issues:

…through the world of Egyptian blogs, where young Egyptian men and women can express themselves with relative freedom. There I found a combination of glowing enthusiasm for Mr. Obama, a comparison between the democratic system in America and the tyranny in Egypt, the expectation of a fair American policy in the Middle East, and then severe disappointment after Mr. Obama’s failure to intercede in Gaza…. Young Egyptians’ admiration for America is offset by frustration with American foreign policy. Perhaps the most eloquent expression of this came from one Egyptian blogger: ‘I love America. It’s the country of dreams… but I wonder if I will ever be able someday to declare my love’ (The New York Times, February 8, 2009, p. wk 11).

Amany Kandil identifies two important dimensions of Egyptian blogs and Arab blogs in general: first, blogs are a free space where young people can freely express and voice their opinions; second, blogs are an escape from the frustration of the political and social life, and a response to the lack of other communication outlets within Egyptian society (*Kandil, Almasry-Alyoum* newspaper, 2007, May 23).
Ashraf Shehax, a journalist for the Al-Ahaly newspaper, says: “Blogs play an important role in raising awareness about different issues in Egypt, and the interaction among bloggers and these issues have led to a kind of political mobility.” However, he adds: “I think that contrary to what appears to be the case, the Internet has not had substantial impact on the attitudes and behaviours of citizens because Internet culture is still limited to specific categories of people” (A. Shehab, personal interview, March 30, 2009). Perhaps, due to a mischaracterization of blogs as personal diaries formally distinct from the nature of news or political journalism, some have prematurely predicted a marginal future for blogs. For example, Mohamed Gamal (a blogger and Website Editor in Chief for the Al-Dostor newspaper) concurs with Saeed Elmasry (a sociology professor and head of the Social Issues Program affiliated with the Egyptian Cabinet, Information and Decision Support Center [IDSC]) that some bloggers in Egypt use blogging as a means to an end. Some use blogging as a rehearsal for other projects, such as the literary-oriented bloggers who transform their blogs into printed books when they become better known; then, they abandon blogging. Elmasry suggests that “when a blogger feels that their impact on the ground is real, they might decide to move to a large online newspaper and perhaps take on a role like editor-in-chief” (S. Elamsry, personal interview, March 5, 2009).

The preceding comments suggest that the general perception of the blogging phenomenon in Egyptian society is ambivalent. It could be argued that this ambiguity is the result of a general confusion over the difference between political blogging on the one hand, which is mainly concerned with current affairs, and personal blogs on the other, which focus on the blogger’s own experiences and reflections in a writing style that
approximates a diary or journal. In addition, a tendency seems to exist that dismisses the blog platform as nothing more than a technologically advanced personal diary. However, even these online diaries, not normally thought to be of public interest, have the potential to push boundaries in a political sense, and to possibly change the perspectives of their readers by introducing new discourses, even personal speech, into the arena of public opinion. As Gal Beckerman argues, even a blog that contributes only mundane musings can have an impact and significance in Arab societies. He states: “Bloggers are writing about their lives. But those lives are taking place in environments in which politics and history cannot be perceived as mere elements on the margins” (cited in Wheeler 2009, p. 315). Another explanation for the ambivalent status of blogs could be the high expectations ascribed to the Internet as a technological novelty with revolutionary potential, a position that overlooks how online media realistically fits in with the rest of society as a whole, including all of its imperfections and limitations. Of course, the recognition that weblogs assume many forms contributes to a better understanding of their implications for political change and democracy in Arab societies.

The Impact of Blogs on Journalists and Traditional Journalism

With respect to the influence that blogs are having on traditional media, Anwar Abd-Elatif, senior editor at the Al-Ahram newspaper, points to a set of indicators that are undermining the national newspapers in Egypt. He argues that one of these indicators is the stunning growth of online journalism and blogs or what is called “citizen’s
journalism” (Al-Ahram, June 7, 2007). Ahmed Abdel Hady, the Shabab Misr Party and editor in chief of the Shabab Misr newspaper, says:

Bloggers have forced the traditional media to increase freedom of expression and to adopt issues that were taboo for the traditional media in Egypt in the past. Bloggers are setting the agenda and are imposing most of the heated issues that have been raised recently in the newspapers (A. Abdel Hady, personal interview, March 3, 2009).

Similar to the ability of mainstream media journalists to set the agenda for the issues discussed in their media, bloggers also can succeed in imposing their agenda by choosing specific topics to raise and comment on (Cooper, 2006, p. 129). Two salient issues that Egyptian bloggers have succeeded in putting on the public agenda are sexual harassment and torture and human rights. Sexual harassment always has existed in Egypt, but the traditional media never reported on it because they considered the subject taboo. In 2006, several bloggers including Wael Abbas, Alaa Seif, and Malek Mustafa were sitting in a café in downtown Cairo, and they overheard that a number of girls were being sexually abused by a mob of young people. Immediately, they ran to the place where this abuse was occurring and took videos and photos, and posted them on their blogs. The number of visitors to these blogs was estimated at million per day. In the beginning, the traditional media, especially the national outlets, denied that the event had occurred, but soon found that they were swimming against the current, so they had no choice but to admit that this terrible abuse had occurred. Two years after the mob sexual harassment in 2006, another mob sexual harassment occurred at the Eid Al-Fitr in downtown Cairo, and the Al-Ahram newspaper was the first media to cover it.

The second salient issue that bloggers in Egypt have played an important role in bringing to public attention is torture and human rights. Wael Abbas has been the main blogger who broadcasts videos of police brutality, an action which has led to convictions
of police officers for torture. For example, on his blog, Abbas once broadcasted a video that shows a police officer hitting someone in his custody on the back of the head; a journalist from an independent newspaper saw this video and identified the victim and did an interview with him. This case, which is widely known as the “Emad Elkabeer [the victim’s name] issue” was extensively covered by other bloggers during the trial, and the police officer was sentenced to one year in prison. Mina Zekri (a blogger) emphasizes that:

Bloggers covered the trial proceedings daily and mobilized people by posting the torture video again and again to incite public opinion, and generally to remind people about the whole issue. Bloggers covered the numerous details of each court session (details that the traditional media did not have the resources to cover), to the extent that people told us that they felt like they were attending the trial themselves. The significance of this turnaround is that Egyptian citizens, once accustomed to insults and torture from the police in their daily lives, have realized for the first time that this kind of police abuse is criminal and a violation of their rights, and for the first time, they have the ability to sue the police for this kind of criminal behaviour (M. Zekri, personal interview, March 17, 2009).

According to Zekri, the significance of the impact of blogging on society is how the medium creates the conditions for changing the attitudes and behaviour of citizens. Blogs have opened a forum not only for discussing police brutality and other violations to human dignity, but also for discovering for the first time that all citizens possess human rights of which they may not have been previously aware. Thus, it is plausible to suggest that increased exposure to the kind of critical reporting found on blogs indirectly contributes to raising political consciousness.

In response to the achievements of Egyptian bloggers with respect to exposing torture in Egypt (as mentioned by Mina Zekri), Dr. Aida Seif Al-dawla, a psychiatrist and an activist in the Nadim Center for Psychological Management & Rehabilitation, said: “What bloggers did in a year to expose the issue of torture in Egypt, we did not succeed
in doing in ten years”. Respectively, Gamal Eid, the Executive Director of the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, emphasizes that:

Bloggers take the risk to cover sensitive issues and taboos, making the government verdicts to ban their publications meaningless. I have worked on human rights for twenty years, but the impact of bloggers on exposing police torture exceeds the impact of our twenty years of work. We spent twenty years calling for human rights and condemning torture, but the blogs of Emad Elkabeer put the issue of torture at the forefront on the social/political table (G. Eid, personal interview, March 23, 2009).

Eid’s commentary draws attention to the ability of Egyptian blogs to counteract the prevalence of censorship in authoritarian societies, by which the state tends to suppress specific kinds of stories from reaching the public. With the expanding presence of the Internet, the practice of censorship has become very difficult to sustain and can now be circumvented in many ways. By using relatively cheap and effortless means of distributing online content, bloggers capitalize on these new freedoms in ways that effectively undermine the monopoly of control that the state and established news organizations once enjoyed over the communications system. Eid emphasizes that bloggers play an active role in disclosing the repression practiced by authoritarian regimes, and that they have succeeded in highlighting government corruption and repression of freedom of expression.

Noha Atef, a female blogger, dedicates her blog exclusively to issues of torture. She publishes the reports of local and international human rights organizations, and diverse materials concerning torture produced by other media. She also provides a forum for the views of human rights activists and the victims of torture. Her blog has been cited by traditional print and broadcast media, yet she told me that “the most important thing for me is that my opinion reaches and spreads through different media, even if they do not mention my name”.

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The role of blogs on exposing the issues of sexual harassment and torture is undeniable. Therefore, Ashraf Shehab, a journalist for *Al-Ahaly* newspaper, acknowledges that role, especially when bloggers document their coverage with videos and eyewitnesses accounts:

Bloggers succeeded to get these thorny issues heard by an international audience. They forced traditional journalists to open their eyes to these unspoken issues, which now are difficult for journalists to ignore unless they want to lose their credibility with their audience (A. Shehab, personal interview, March 30, 2009).

Shehab provides another account of the pressure that blogging exerts on the traditional media when bloggers demonstrate their influence in the public sphere, when they successfully introduce an alternative agenda, and when traditional journalists begin to respect the work of their online counterparts in the blogosphere. This is a good example of the influence of the blogosphere in agenda-setting. Both in the interviews for this dissertation and in the literature review, many observers have attested to the success of the Egyptian blogosphere for priming readers to consider issues that fall outside the narrow scope of concerns pursued by the mainstream media.

Moreover, many marginalized groups have benefited from using blogs to empower themselves and express their opinions. At the top of the list are women who use blogging to break through the repression of the conservative society in which they live. As blogger Shahinaz Abdel-Salam points out:

Our culture has taught us to blindly say yes when we are asked to do something by our parents or any high-ranking person. Otherwise, if we say no and oppose a specific point of view, we are perceived as impolite and decadent. For women, it is even worse, since we are more oppressed in general than men. So this is why the Internet and blogging have a special significance for women in Egyptian society (S. Abdel-Salam, personal interview, March 16, 2009).

Abdel-Salam’s comments effectively capture how blogs open a space for women to express themselves, and to make a distinctive contribution to the kinds of discussions in
the public sphere from which they normally would be excluded. Nevertheless, the opportunity for women to share their thoughts with a potential audience in the millions poses a challenge to the stability of traditional societies.

Since the Internet provides the possibility for anonymity, it encourages women to freely express themselves, even if they just want to vent, in a language that they could not even use in their daily life. For example, the blog “A’wez Atgawaz” (the Arabic phrase for “I want to marry”) includes posts and writing that could not be uttered publicly before the Internet and blogging. Some say that this blog will be turned into a book and a TV series. The political implications of the personal and social expression facilitated by blogs are evident. Amani Kandil, the director of the Arab Network of NGOs, argues that most blogs are political even if they seem non-political. For example, the blog “A’wez Atgawaz” is considered to be a political blog because it talks about unemployment among women, the levels of their education, the causes that lead to delaying the age of marriage, and the increasing percentage of unmarried women. Blogs have opened many taboo topics for discussion. For example, although Egyptian society includes homosexuals who face particular challenges in relation to the public sphere, their lives and experiences were never openly discussed, or even publicly acknowledged, before blogging.

Although their number is not exactly known, female bloggers are quite common in the Middle East and Egypt, since the blogs that address women’s issues are numerous. One prominent women’s collective blog is called “Kolena Laila” (“We are all Laila”) at http://kolenalaila.com/. The word Laila is derived from the movie Albab Almaftouh (the open door) in which Laila is a character who is beaten so that she will agree to marry
against her will. This collective blog is an opportunity for Arab women to finally speak out against the injustices that females face daily in oppressive societies in the Arab World, and to express their opinions about all the issues important to women in general in Egyptian society. All the female bloggers who participate in this collective blog write about their personal experiences, for example, with respect to sexual harassment, marriage, divorce, and all kinds of discrimination against women in Arab culture. This blog also is open to women from other countries to express their views on these important issues.

Even though these female bloggers live in a patriarchal society that expects women to work within the boundaries of the norms ascribed to them, the degree of anonymity on the Internet allows for an open and crucial discussion of gender issues, which otherwise would be taboo topics.

**Mainstream Journalists and Bloggers**

A considerable debate exists in the literature about the status of blogging, and how it compares with traditional journalistic practices. On the one hand, some argue that blogging constitutes a *new* or *alternative* form of journalism, which augments or improves on the offerings of mainstream media by adding a “participatory” and “citizen” focus to the reporting (Blood 2003; Lasica, 2003; Gillmor 2003) as well as an enhanced gate-keeping function (Andrews, 2003). Proponents of this position also tend to stress the potential for a collegial partnership between bloggers and journalists in which each draws on the other’s strengths. For example, Albritton (2003) maintains that the blogging
community could enhance its reputation and legitimacy as a trustworthy source, by emulating the same professional standards that govern journalism: “if blogs are ever going to be taken seriously as a journalistic medium, their authors will have to be as conscientious in their reporting conducts as any mainstream outlet” (p. 84). Meanwhile, as Lasica (2003) has noted, the mainstream media could benefit from a closer alliance with the blogosphere because it allows for more “participatory journalism, grassroots reporting, annotative reporting, commentary and fact-checking,” which the mainstream media could then productively incorporate into its coverage by “developing them as a pool of tips, sources and story ideas” (Lasica, 2003, p. 71). Instead of looking at blogs and mainstream media as binary opposites and rivals, and rather than dwell on the question of whether blogging is similar to journalism, Lasica believes that weblogs should be considered part of an emerging new media ecosystem in which both are included and respected.

On the other hand, some media practitioners and critical scholars have argued that blogs are merely self-publishing tools that cannot be treated on an equal footing with journalism because they lack a professional code to guide their activities. In other words, the openness of the blogging platform and the fact that almost anyone can participate in the making of news is precisely the problem. These critics see this flexibility and inclusivity as a vice rather than a virtue. Generally, journalists perceive bloggers in a way that could be described as suspect and biased in favour of the profession of journalism itself. That is, according to the conventional meaning of a journalist, bloggers are not journalists. No laws exist to regulate blogging, and no code of ethics (similar to the journalistic profession) guides blogging practice. These critics tend to describe bloggers
as self-interested and unskilled amateurs whose work suffers from an undisciplined writing style and an intolerable looseness with facts. They are stereotyped as youngsters who express their personal thoughts in place of hard news, and do so without any commitment to professional norms or regulations. To be fair, however, it is worth remembering that bloggers can be just as cynical about journalists and may perceive them as not telling the truth, and their newspapers as belonging to and expressing the interests of the state and government. So, the relationship is problematic and full of suspicion on both sides.

With respect to bloggers’ perceptions of the interaction and relationship between journalists and bloggers, Wael Abbas provides the following insight:

In the beginning, the mainstream newspapers took our stories and photos and published them without mentioning us as their source. Then, to show us respect, they started to mention us as the source of this information. Sometimes we cooperated closely with them, for example, in the case of Emad Elkabeer. When I posted the first video of his torture at the police station on my blog, a mainstream journalist recognized both the victim and the police officer personally, and so confirmed the facts of the torture. I believe that our role is to push the mainstream media to be more free because we acknowledge that we cannot make any changes if we do not have a free media deliver news without any restrictions or self-censorship, or any fear (W. Abbas, personal interview, March 11, 2009).

As Abbas assesses the situation, after the bloggers proved their effectiveness to mainstream news outlets, their contributions were recognized. Additionally, they left a mark on the media ecosystem in Egypt by gradually loosening the barriers to freedom of expression.

With respect to the issue of torture in Egypt, Mina Zekri also illustrates the success of a maturing relationship between bloggers and traditional media journalists:

When a decision was taken to evacuate the inhabitants of an Island in the Nile River from their homes so the island could be utilized as a tourist resort, and we received news that the army had reached the island to carry out the eviction, a number of traditional journalists covered and photographed this event, but their
newspapers received orders to not publish their work because of the law banning the publication of any information regarding the Egyptian army. So, the journalists gave their photos and written coverage of the event to bloggers, and asked them to post them on their blogs. On my blog, I published a post titled ‘Does the army intrude on the Island?’ I titled it as a question to be objective and professional, and also as strategy to protect myself. Later, I received a video from a specific source that showed marine forces encroaching on the citizens of the island, and this coverage encouraged me create a post that I titled ‘The Egyptian army intrudes on the Island and encroaches upon its citizens’ (M. Zekri, personal interview, March 17, 2009).

This story helps to illustrate the way in which the relationship between blogging and journalism could be construed as complementary as opposed to rivalry or conflictual. In the interests of quality journalism in the service of society, reporters seem more than willing to share their own resources with bloggers with an aim of working towards the common goal of supplementing the shortcomings of traditional media.

Blogs often are a source of news and information for the traditional media, although they are not always given credit. For example, blogger and journalist Amr Ezzat says:

Once the Al-Ahram newspaper covered ‘Egypt’s Omar Afandi Stores,’ basing their coverage on what I wrote in my blog about this issue. However, they didn’t directly cite my blog; rather, they just said ‘discussion on the Internet.’ In another situation, while I was working as a journalist for the Elbadeel newspaper, the publication of its second daily edition was forbidden for political and security reasons. I posted the proclamation on my blog and mentioned that the second edition of the Elabdeel newspaper had been banned, and the reasons for the ban. All the other Egyptian print newspapers copied the proclamation from my blog and published it, giving my blog a direct credit as the source. The newspaper Al-youn Al-Mabaa also copied a lot of photos from my blog that referred to the Engineering Syndicate of Egypt crisis. In my capacity as an engineer, I attended the meetings of the Egyptian engineers group known as the Engineers Against Guard, and I took photographs. However, Al-youn Alsabaa didn’t credit my blog as the source for the photos it published (A. Ezzat, personal interview, April 6, 2009).

This response is an example of the supplementary relation between the blogs and traditional journalism. However, as described, bloggers do not always receive their due
recognition from established media organizations. Overall, the relation between traditional journalism and bloggers is coloured by different forms of conflict, competition, and cooperation. On some certain issues, a competition exists between political bloggers and the traditional media, in which the intellectual propriety rights of bloggers are violated by traditional newspapers that quote from blogs without citing the name of the blog or the blogger. Accordingly, readers attribute the breaking news coverage to the newspaper and not the blog. Likewise, to a great extent, bloggers also violate the intellectual property rights of journalists working for the traditional media. However, both sides believe that the relation between them should be a necessary and complementary relationship that improves the work of each and makes possible working together side by side for the sake of the public good. Although some journalists perceive bloggers negatively, especially those who work for national or government newspapers that rarely mention or cite bloggers, the independent newspaper journalists give more attention to the news of bloggers, and use them as eye-witnesses. In addition, these newspapers open their doors to bloggers and regularly publish their photos and news information; some independents even provide a special segment in their papers for bloggers.

According to my interviewees responses, the overall perception of bloggers by journalists and traditional media and the relationship between them fluctuates. Some journalists, mostly those of the younger generation, are interested in blogging, and appreciate bloggers and what they are doing, and they also depend on blogs as sources of information on many issues. However, most older journalists do not take blogs seriously and perceive bloggers with ridicule. The misunderstanding between traditional media
journalist and bloggers in Egypt is due to the fact that the two media platforms are
different, as Mina Zekri succinctly argues:

Until now, the traditional media have not been able to assimilate the concepts and
characteristics of blogging or online journalism in general. The nature of the
Internet and its virtual environment encourages/necessitates a different kind of
writing and language not only because of the freedom allowed but also because of
the nature of the platform itself, which encourages the use of vocabularies and
expressions that do not fit the processes of the traditional media. Hence, in Egypt,
a misunderstanding always occurs between the two media. The blogger owns his
own media; he is editor in chief of himself; he is proud of what he writes and of
his readers who in number may surpass the number of readers of a print
newspaper (M. Zekri, personal interview, March 17, 2009).

As Zekri suggests, bloggers seem aware of the distinction between blogging as a self-
publishing tool and the established print and broadcast system, given how the former is
not subject to the restrictions that govern the latter in terms of what is “publishable” and
“acceptable” within the cultural frameworks of conservative societies.

Realizing that distinction, most of my blogger respondents choose not to identify
themselves as journalists; instead, they prefer the concept “citizen journalist.” For
example, Naha Atef identifies herself as a journalist while she is working as a journalist
for the Al-dostor newspaper, and as a blogger while she is blogging:

I consider myself just a blogger and not a journalist. I am aware that I am writing
in a different medium and to a different audience. Each has a different style of
writing. If a journalist uses the same style of writing while he/she is blogging,
readers might find this boring and nothing new will be added. While I am
blogging, I assume that I am writing to an audience that has no idea about the
torture issue, so I try to convince people that torture exists, and to a large extent
how it impacts different categories of people living in different parts of Egypt (N.
Atef, personal interview, March 17, 2009).

Both of the preceding bloggers recognize the idiosyncrasy of the blogging medium in that
bloggers are less likely to use a formal style of writing, and that their choices of
expression may not always be applicable or relevant to the guidelines of conventional
forms of writing. For example, in blog writing, it is common to see sentence fragments,
abbreviations, and acronyms. Moreover, these characteristics could define online language in general. Furthermore, most bloggers are aware of the distinctions between the types of audiences of the traditional and blogging media.

In the same vein, Malek Mostafa (a blogger) chooses not to be identified as a journalist, arguing that “bloggers are not journalists in the conventional sense. Rather, bloggers might be called citizen journalists, who don’t compete or conflict with traditional journalists. Blogs are a different media that is characteristically independent and available to anyone” (M. Mostafa, personal interview, March 16, 2009).

Many bloggers engage in activities traditionally associated with the practice of journalism. Sometimes the boundaries are blurred between bloggers and journalists. Thus blogger Shahinaz Abdel-Salam expresses the view that the work that journalists do is not that much different from what bloggers do. Everybody writes their personal opinions from their own point of view. However, she also says: “I think what bloggers are doing is citizen journalism. I prefer to be called a blogger rather than a journalist, and when I am writing, I identify myself as a blogger” (S. Abdel-Salam, personal interview, March 16, 2009).

Amr Ezzat, also a blogger and a journalist, describes his view of the differences between bloggers and journalists based on his own practical experience:

As a journalist, I have more restrictions, and I must follow professional rules and editorial policy. Other problems also exist with respect to working conditions. Regarding the newspaper where I work, I cannot express my opinions directly or freely about issues, but as a blogger, I am free to state my opinions and declare them directly. Blogging is different from journalism in that it offers an unprecedented amount of space for writing and expression, as long as you have the ability and are willing, and as long as you have a message or opinion to express. The blogging medium is more interactive. When I write on my blog, I usually get feedback and comments, and my readers often pay attention to a
different aspect of an issue that I didn’t talk about. My blogging experience is a benefit to my journalism experience (A. Ezzat, personal interview, April 6, 2009).

As Ezzat’s response shows, bloggers’ status outside the mainstream is perceived as a privilege in the sense that blogging gives individuals the capacity to enjoy free expression online and to be autonomous—free of the limits and constraints of the affiliation of traditional journalists to news media organizations. In addition, since blogs are a highly interactive medium, bloggers have an opportunity to make a more personal connection with their audiences.

In general, my respondents were not willing to define themselves as journalists; instead, they seemed more willing to be defined as bloggers and Internet activists, even though many of their activities are almost identical to the work of journalists: e.g. producing original reporting and encouraging discussion of politics and current affairs.

**Blogs and Activism**

The Internet is playing a central role in political activism, and blogging is a part of this phenomenon (Kahn & Kellner, 2004). In Egypt, blogging and digital activism is proliferating and increasing, especially in light of decreasing freedom offline. For the most part, bloggers can be identified as political activists: those who previously were activists and employ the Internet and blogging to practice their activism, and those who have become activists thanks to the Internet, which can provide a broad sector of people with attractive tools to move from passivity to activity in the political sphere. Gamal Ghietas suggests that in Egypt and the Middle East: “It is highly probable that the Internet creates activists, and being an Internet activist is much easier than being a
traditional activist, which necessitates more sacrifice and risk”. So that is why Gamal Eid, the Executive Director of the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, argues that “the Internet has become the main space of conflict between government and activists. Increasingly, activists are inclined to use this new medium for free expression, and more and more Arabic governments are attempting to limit and control this space”.

Examples of using the Internet, including blogs and social networks, to mobilize and network with political activists are numerous. Most of my respondents who are political bloggers identified themselves as Internet activists. When I asked Malek Mostafa (a blogger) whether he considers himself to be a journalist or a blogger, he replied:

Absolutely, I don’t consider myself to be a journalist. I am a political activist and an activist on the Internet. The Internet facilitates my political activism. The Internet makes it easy for me to know other bloggers and networks, and to reach them online, rather than having to go to the streets and search for them. The Internet also allows me to be free from political party attachments or from any formal association, and to be a political activist without commitments and loyalties to a particular party. The Internet is an instrument for networking in a way that is dynamic, rapid, and smooth (M. Mostafa, personal interview, March 16, 2009).

Consistent with the general identification of Egyptian bloggers as political and Internet activists, Malek Mostafa also emphasizes that he is a political activist on the Internet, highlighting the role of blogging and the Internet as networking tools for mobilization and organization.

Bloggers have publicized protests and generated public and media interest about issues that are ignored by the mainstream media. Increasingly, bloggers are not writing
just virtually; they also are going to streets to practice their political activism, and they could make a real change offline. As Wael Abbas\(^2\) argues:

> The blogging experience in my region, especially in Egypt, involves having one foot in the Internet and one foot in the street. So it is not only virtual, and as you know, most bloggers in Egypt are using their real names while they are blogging.

Abbas’s comment is a response to those who have reservations about electronic activism offering little more than a risk-free space for venting cathartic emotions. For example, Abbas would likely disagree with the position of Ashraf Shehab, a journalist for *Al-Ahaly* newspaper who maintains:

> In my opinion, the use of Facebook and blogs is a kind of electronic activism, an activism from the office or home. However, I consider this kind of activism to be a negative phenomenon unless it’s accompanied by the kind of offline activism that aims to transform the real world. Unfortunately, people get involved with online activism without participating in the real activism in the streets with other people. By posting a comment or a call for participation on Facebook or a blog, they feel as if they are active and have done their civic duty to participate in social issues (A. Shehab, personal interview, March 30, 2009).

At this point, it is worth noting the tension between Shehab’s claim (as a journalist) and Abbas’ claim (as a blogger). The journalist questions the legitimacy of online activism, based on the assumption that its activities are detached from real-world actions on the ground. Meanwhile, Abbas couches his claims about the authenticity of online activism in assumptions about how the debates and clashes within the blogosphere are inextricably linked to protests on the streets. Indeed, while it might be true that blogs themselves do not single-handedly create an oppositional popular movement, their contributions in the virtual space should not be seen as isolated from the rest.

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\(^2\) Abbas made this comment during a panel discussion called “New Media vs Repressive Regimes: Democratic Development and the Freedom of Expression,” which was part of the Cross-Canada Dialogue Series sponsored by Rights & Democracy, Ottawa, Canada on October 7, 2009.
However, as a result of the tightening control of the Egyptian state on the political activism of the Egyptian people, it still is unclear whether Internet activism is a substitute for political activism on the ground, or whether it is a supplementary means that could be integrated to maximize an overall political activism on the ground. Ahmad Maher, blogger and activist and one of the founders of April 6th movement on Facebook, provides some insight:

In 2006, I was one of those political activists who preferred going online, especially after I was arrested and imprisoned for two months. I established my own blog in 2006, which became my medium to express my political views including my analyses and criticism of political parties in Egypt, and to put forward the positions of the political opposition and the Kefaya movement of which I am a member… For me, blogging is a means and an important medium to enhance the political efficacy among youth, and hence to contribute to the change and reform process in Egypt (A. Maher, personal interview, March 15, 2009).

To further explore the question of bloggers as political activists or vice versa, I asked my interviewees about their beginnings and whether they were activists who began to blog or non-activists who were influenced by blogging to become more politically active. Most identified themselves as Internet activists and political activists. Mohamed Gamal, blogger and Website editor in chief for the Al Dostor newspaper, says that “blogs are cadres for oppositional movements, such as Kefaya and Youth for Change. Originally, some bloggers were political activists, and others, due to their experience with the Internet and blogging, have transformed to become political activists” (M. Gamal, personal interview, March 17, 2009). Increasingly, bloggers are playing a central part in large political events, for example, in the virtual strike mentioned earlier that was promoted and mobilized by Facebook and Egyptian blogs, and which transformed into a real strike and demonstration in the streets of Egypt on April 6, 2007. The original call for the strike came from the workers of the largest textile factory in Egypt located in
Mahalla el-Kubra, and Internet and Kefaya movement activists used this occasion to call for a general strike. This call for a strike by Internet activists (bloggers and Facebookers) soon became an electronic campaign on Facebook, which attracted about 70,000 people who joined the group. This successful mobilization through the Internet made the state and other concerned organizations start to think deeply about the impact of Internet activists, bloggers, and Facebookers. So, in reaction, the police arrested Israa Abdel Fattah, a young female activist and founder of the group, and later her colleague Ahmed Maher for allegedly calling for a strike on the Internet and a national strike and civil disobedience through Facebook.

In March 2009, Shabab 6th April held a solidarity march in the name of “Egypt against Terrorism.” The protestors marched to the popular headquarters of Alhussein in Cairo, and they advertised this march beforehand through Facebook and on their blogs. Traditional media journalists, including those who work for the state-controlled media, followed them to cover this event, especially since it had popular support among the Egyptian population. Wael Abbas argues that bloggers publicize protests and generate public and media interest about issues that are ignored by the mainstream media:

In our region, blogging is needed because there is no real free media. All mainstream media is controlled or censored, and real news will never make it to the public without blogs. What we are trying to do here is to push the envelope, break some taboos, and make small changes that will lead to larger changes in the traditional media. We are not aiming to replace traditional media, but we want it to become more active (W. Abbas, personal interview, March 11, 2009).

Most often, bloggers convene together to plan a mobilization to promote a specific campaign or issue, to constitute solidarity groups and launch campaigns in support of public issues, or to support other bloggers who have been arrested or detained. Each blogger uses their individual blog, or they establish a collective blog. One example
of such a campaign was “bloggers for terrorism.” Some bloggers published pictures of themselves on their blogs holding toy plastic machine guns. Also, bloggers organized another campaign to free Karim Amer (a blogger) by establishing a collective blog called the “prison blog” on which they posted a petition entitled “Why talking is taken to the court.” Another example of a collective blog is the “April 6 blog” that was established during the April 6th strike when bloggers covered the protests and demonstrations, and were a source of information and news for a number of traditional media. Amr Ezzat recounts another kind of blogger activism that occurred when the Center for Trade Union and Workers Services (CTUWS)—an Egyptian non-governmental organization established in March 1990 by some labour leaders and activists experienced in the Egyptian labour movement to support the needs of workers—was shut down by the government. The CTUWS labour leaders and activists asked bloggers to back their demands, and bloggers established a blog in the name of the center itself “CTUWS” on which bloggers wrote news about the workers and publicized their issues until they succeeded in getting the center reopened.

Why Do Bloggers Blog?

The motivations for blogging in the Middle East—where authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes dominate and where freedom of expression is in doubt—might differ from those for blogging in the Western world. The motivations of my informants seemed to show a tendency to identify with a counter-public that opposes and distrusts everything under state authority. As Wael Abbas says:
I have been interested in journalism, especially oppositional journalism, and politics, since I was a child. I am interested in corruption, elections, democracy, freedom of expression, freedom of speech, and also in human rights. I always have been interested in delivering the right message to the people, whether it be counter to the accepted state version or to supplement some missing information not provided through the traditional media. So, I am keen to deliver the whole picture to the people. I also noticed that the oppositional newspapers, whatever their degree of freedom of expression, are governed by certain policies, and so they cannot speak about everything. When they surpass these policy limits, they are subject to oppression and closing. So, I noticed that the Internet was a medium that people could use to communicate with each other and express their views and opinions both locally and globally. Moreover, you can hide your real personality and speak freely on any issue. So, I started to participate in the chat rooms about politics, religion, reform, and the criticism of corruption, and then joined the mailing lists until blogging and other social networking forms emerged (W. Abbas, personal interview, March 11, 2009).

Even though opposition to and suspicion of the authorities pervades throughout Abbas’s response, he seems to describe the dominant motivation for blogging as free self-expression. Moreover, he regards one of the chief benefits of blogging to be its flexibility and seemingly endless options of style to project a unique voice.

Mina Zekri, a blogger and a program coordinator at the Arabic Human Rights Information Network, admits that the political mobility experienced by the Egyptian people in 2005 and 2006, and the role played by his colleague bloggers in these events, made him more interested in politics and blogging:

Before becoming interested in blogging, my political interest was present but at the level of my conscience and culture. I paid attention to politics, and followed what was going on in society. In August 2006, I started my own blog, which gave me the possibility of commenting on political events, and I found that the advantage of blogging was that you already have pre-existing readers who are your colleague bloggers and the blogging circles in general. Through blogging, I engaged in human rights activity and transformed my job as a medical doctor to a media specialist in human rights. I am not a traditional journalist or an online journalist; I am a human rights activist, and you also could describe me as an Internet activist (M. Zekri, personal interview, March 17, 2009).

Zekri’s statement about the transformative potential of blogging calls into question where bloggers find their inspiration. Are they already committed to a political cause prior to
their online engagement? Or do they discover and identify their political leanings as they participate in blogging practices? It seems that in the case of Zekri, latent identification with political ideals already existed, but were only expressed publicly and nurtured to fruition once he seized the potential of the new medium.

Noha Atef, a female blogger and journalist for the Aldostor newspaper, started to blog in 2006. She shares a similar experience:

When I became more concerned about the torture issue, I started to learn about blogs. I found that I could easily, and without any cost, establish a blog on blogspot. At the time, I didn’t have any experience with this technology, but I learned that experience wasn’t necessary to blog and express my views on the important issues that have concerned me for a long time. My blog is exclusively dedicated to the torture issue and how to mobilize an anti-torture culture in Egypt. Using the Internet and blogging makes me even more enthusiastic about public issues, and I continue to participate in the public sphere more and more (N. Atef, personal interview, March 11, 2009).

After Atef incorporated blogging into her life, she became more interested in the public issues that always piqued her interest, and was encouraged by how easy it was to blog her ideas. This process of discovering the possibilities of a new technology, in turn, had the effect of further harnessing her drive to make a difference politically.

Amr Ezzat, a blogger and a journalist for the Alshourok newspaper, recounts his first experience with blogging:

I am a political activist, and I am a member of the Kefaya movement. I write about religious freedom issues, human rights issues, and sometimes personal matters. I do not restrict myself to one goal; I write about whatever seems interesting to me, and that’s why I named my blog “Mabdaly” (the Arabic word for “whatever it seems to me”). Before blogging, I used to write opinion articles, but often, I couldn’t find a publisher who was willing to publish them, and when I did find a publisher, they would only agree to publish my articles under certain conditions. For example, I wrote a commentary about a journalistic article about Baha’is that was published in the Almasry-alyoum newspaper, and when I approached the editor in chief of this same newspaper to publish my commentary, he said that ‘my comment is very long and I don’t want to further discuss this topic in the newspaper.’ So, I posted my commentary on my blog, and I received a lot of feedback, more than three hundred comments. My commentary stimulated
a strong dialogue and discussion among Baha’is. In general, the topics I write about on my blog are hotly controversial, topics that the traditional media does not raise or discuss (A. Ezzat, personal interview, April 6, 2009).

What is worth highlighting in the preceding passage is how Ezzat uses blogging as an alternative venue for publishing articles that he originally wrote for the mainstream press, but were rejected because they failed to adhere to the fixed standards of the older media.

When Malek Mostafa describes what motivated him to choose to blog, he echoes a similar desire to liberate his work from the institutional constraints of traditional media:

I started to blog in 2004, and I have been interested in online writing since 1998 when I was 16 years old. The main aspect of blogging is freedom. You write whatever you want whenever you want without having to worry that someone will change or repress your writing, especially when it opposes religion or politics or whatever. Nobody monitors you or has the right to hold you accountable for what you write (M. Mostafa, personal interview, March 16, 2009).

As is shown by the responses of my interviewees, bloggers and Internet activists find in this virtual space an unlimited freedom, and although most of them are politically interested, they show a tendency to opt out of any dogma or commitments to the traditional institutions of politics.

Shahinaz Abdel-Salam started blogging in 2005 to express her opinions about the regime and to label the Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak as a dictator. She blogs using the nickname “Wahda Masrya” (the Arabic word for an “Egyptian woman”). For her, the revelation of her real name was not a problem: “For me, it is not because I am afraid to use my real name; rather, it is an identity—I want to suggest that I am an Egyptian woman... that I represent any Egyptian woman regardless of her religion or any kind of affiliation” (S. Abdel-Salam, personal interview, March 16, 2009). She then continues:

I was politically interested, and I started blogging in 2005. I found blogging to be a suitable medium to express my opinions, especially since I hadn’t found a place
that satisfied my political ambitions or that suited my interests. The present political currents limit us to either the Islamist or the ruling National Democratic Party. Moreover, the opposition parties are sleepwalking. Also, I don’t want to be committed to a party or any regulations. Blogging is where I found my freedom, where I found people who share my thoughts and desire for action. Blogging is my instrument to help change Egyptian society. I write about anything that I think will spur public opinion, even if only one or two of my readers are inspired by what I am writing about; for me, that is satisfying. When I feel that I have something to express, I go to my blog wherever I am, at home or at work!! (S. Abdel-Salam, personal interview, March 16, 2009).

Unlike most of the preceding interviewee responses, this interviewee describes her motivations for blogging not so much in terms of liberation from news-making standards, but in the language of political freedom.

Mohamed Adel, a 20 year old blogger, describes his beginnings with blogging:

I was interested in online forums on the Internet, but these forums didn’t allow me to write everything that I wanted. At that time, I heard about blogging, and I decided to establish my own blog. I started blogging in 2005 during the parliamentary elections in Egypt, which was the main topic of my blog in addition to Muslim Brotherhood activities and events. I am mainly interested in political issues, and blogging provides me with an opportunity to move within a higher political arena than ever before. My blog is like a part of my body, I couldn’t live without it (M. Adel, personal interview, March 26, 2009).

In this case, what seems to attract Adel to the blogosphere are the opportunities to explore the issues that interest him at a deeper level. The concluding comment about blogs being inseparable from his body attests to the strength of his attachment to an activity that appears to be enriching his life.

Eman Abdelrahman, a 24 year old female blogger and a graduate from a faculty of engineering, identifies herself as a citizen journalist and a commentator on events. She writes and contributes on the global voices website. She describes her motivations for blogging: “I blog to freely express myself and to explore and experience new styles of thinking. I also blog to get to know myself better and to explore my internal world by
expressing that world in a public way to others” (E. Abdelrahman, personal interview, March 24, 2009). Like Mohamed Adel in the previous example, this woman also ascribes to blogging practices the potential for expanding one’s consciousness. However, whereas Eman Abdelrahman hopes to enrich her self-understanding through online writing, Mohamed Adel appears to be invested in broadening his grasp of the outside world of politics.

Avoiding Government Censorship

In June 2006, the Egyptian High Administration Court declared that the Information Ministry and the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology had the authority to block, suspend, or shut down Websites that they considered a threat to “national security” (Freedom House, 2007). This decision was made even though in Egypt, laws do not exist to regulate the censorship of the Internet, or to put clear controls on the Websites that are deemed to be more in need of censorship or blocking. Gamal Eid, the executive director of the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, emphasizes that “it is not well known that the government blocks or shuts down Websites on the Internet, but this lack of knowledge does not negate the fact that the government is notorious for repressing, harassing, and chasing Internet activists”.

From time to time, the security police selectively censor specific Websites, blogs, and cybercafés, and various kinds of online journalism. For example, they put restrictions and controls on the users of cybercafés, such as asking them for their IDs and other personal information. In addition, the government has investigated and arrested some
bloggers. For example, Abdel-Karim Amer, a 22 year old Egyptian blogger, was the first blogger to be jailed (for four years beginning in 2007), after being convicted on several counts of offending President Mubarak and some of the country’s powerful Islamic clerics. In addition, other bloggers are being illegally detained for days or months by orders of the Minister of the Interior (tens of bloggers were arrested during their set-in with the Judges’ movement in 2006). For these reasons, some organizations such as “Reporters without Borders” and “The Committee to Protect Journalists” consider Egypt to be one of the countries that disrespect electronic publishing and the international conventions that prevent the censorship of electronic Websites.

My interviewees concur regarding the issue of censorship over the Internet, emphasizing that pre-emptive technical or legal censorship of the Internet does not occur in Egypt. The real censorship follows or comes after, as Ghietas argues: “You can say whatever you want, but there is no guarantee that you will not be chased by the police” (G. Ghietas, personal interview, March 10, 2009).

Blogger Mina Zekri echoes the same words, even though he and some of his colleague bloggers were arrested on March 20, 2007 in the demonstrations in which they participated as political activists to protest the constitutional amendments: “Ultimately, we can write what we want, but we have no guarantee that we will not be subject to arrest at any time. Who gets arrested and who does not is another issue”. Also, when a blogger touches on a heated social issue, and when they are viewed as influential and that their influence will prevail in the streets, they are subject to arrest and harassment, as blogger Ahmad Maher suggests: “When we prepared to march on the occasion of President Mubarak’s birthday on May 4th, I was kidnapped on the street after I called for a general
strike on Facebook” (A. Maher, personal interview, March 15, 2009). Definitely, the possibility of arrest increases with a blogger’s participation in a demonstration on the ground.

Saeed Elmasry argues that although some arrests occur from time to time, no explicit evidence exists on the ground of any laws and regulations that allow the censorship or shutting down of any blogs. He argues that bloggers have the freedom to say whatever they like, even though some blogger activists have been arrested for their political activities offline. He points to the attention that the Egyptian government pays to blogging in Egypt as a healthy phenomenon. The authorities’ attitude, which refers to how the government views the online community, has been positive, for example, the Prime Minister is a regular reader of blogs and blogs often deal with issues that the government should be considering. As a ratification of Elmasry’s claim, the blogger Mostafa Mahmoud, who is identified as a leftist, mentioned to me that once he was criticizing government policy about education, and Prime Minister Dr. Ahmad Nazif visited his blog and posted a comment on his post about the privatization of education in Egypt. Mostafa Mahmoud said “this gave me an indication that the government is interested in this new medium, and they are reading what we write and are taking our writing seriously” (M. Mahmoud, personal interview, April 1, 2009). Elmasry contends that human rights organization’s reports exaggerate claims regarding violations of Egyptian bloggers’ freedom of expression (S. Elamsry, personal interview, March 5, 2009).

Amr Ezzat (a blogger and journalist) emphasizes that his blogging is not censored:
I don’t feel any restrictions on my blogging or that I’m being monitored while I blog, but bloggers who are political activists and known to the state security force might be under scrutiny. I don’t believe that there are any special procedures in place or threats against bloggers on the part of the Egyptian government. But if there is any monitoring, it would happen in a different context apart from just blogging (A. Ezzat, personal interview, April 6, 2009).

Although blogs and social networks enjoy more freedom of expression because they are not so easily controlled by the government, they still have some challenges. Wael Abbas describes some of these challenges:

In Egypt, we do not really have censorship. Since 2005, no Websites are being blocked. Now, they are adopting a new technique. They go after a blogger offline, kidnap him from his home or from the street, and force him to shut down his blog or remove a specific post or entry. My Website was attacked and shut down for three days in 2005. Bloggers are facing arrests and harassment by the police because of their writings or because they are accused of liable or slander. And in 2006, when we organized the Judge’s Club set-in, in solidarity with judges who demanded independence, dozens of bloggers were detained for two months. One blogger was sentenced to pay a fine of 40,000 Egyptian pounds because he published a photograph of a company dumping dangerous chemicals into a lake. So, blogging in Egypt is tough and not that easy. There are a lot of attempts to silence bloggers and to undermine our credibility. The government tried to tarnish my reputation by spreading rumours that I converted to Christianity and that I am homosexual and have a criminal past (W. Abbas, personal interview, March 11, 2009).

In general, the above-mentioned bloggers speak to the level of confidence in the Egyptian blogosphere as an open space that is more or less free from censorship. Concerns about the persecution of online writers arise mainly in cases where bloggers are known by the authorities to be actual street protesters or those who deliberately incite uprisings.

Abbas argues that nothing will stop bloggers from blogging or reading what they want to read on the Internet: “As long as there is an Internet, there is a way to go around censorship and around barriers; they can block a Website, but you can establish another one.” What Abbas says is true according to Gamal Eid, the executive director of the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information; since 2007, the Arabic Network has
stopped counting oppositional blogging sites because they number in the hundreds: “The security police cannot monitor all of them, but they try to arrest some bloggers and torture them to send a message to the others to be silent.”

Other challenges come from the politicians who speak negatively about blogs. For example, Refaat AlSaeed, the leader of Tagamooa Party and a writer for the Al-Ahram newspaper, said that bloggers are “mentally deficient or insane,” even though a number of bloggers are affiliated with his party. This particular example is indicative of a crisis in the political interactions between the old generation and the new one within one political institution. Blogs give the younger generation a new freedom and mobility, which could undermine the structural hierarchy that exists offline within political institutions, and thus blogs can stimulate some conflict within the traditional political process. Both Saeed Elmasry and Wael Abbas argue that the leaders of political parties use bloggers to air grievances that they cannot necessarily express in the official political discourse of their newspapers. In other words, some political organizations have attempted to penetrate blogs and use them as instruments to achieve their own private purposes.

Weal Abbas suggests that traditional journalism, especially the state-controlled newspapers, also sometimes encourages an unhealthy relationship between journalists and bloggers:

When we covered the mob sexual harassment in 2006, the state newspapers accused us of being liars and that we had fabricated the issues because the Egyptian youth are good and bloggers are defective, and that I had homosexual hallucinations, and so on. In 2008, when the sexual harassment was repeated at the Eid festival, Al-Ahram, the state newspaper which ridiculed us and called us liars in 2006, covered this issue on their front page (W. Abbas, personal interview, March 11, 2009).

Abbas adds that even when the relationship between traditional journalists and bloggers is a collaboration, “the security institutions tried to stop that interaction, and signalled the
different media organizations to stop bloggers from participating in their programs or having any contact or collaboration with them.” Abbas also indicates that another challenge that bloggers face is financial.

The harassment by the state is not limited to male bloggers and activists, but also includes women bloggers and activists. Women activist bloggers also have been detained and arrested, especially those who participate in demonstrations on the ground. For example, Noha Atef, a female blogger who writes about torture, has been chased and harassed by the state:

I blog using the nickname ‘torture’ because I don’t feel that I am safe, and I don’t think that freedom of expression exists in Egypt. I have been threatened, and my father and I were summoned to the state security agency where a state security officer warned me to stop writing torture stories on my blog. These threats made my father depressed, and he asked me to stop for the sake of both our lives (N. Atef, personal interview, March, 2009).

As is shown in this case, despite the appearance of widespread confidence in the quality of freedom of expression in the online world, not everyone necessarily shares this sentiment. The decision to hide behind a pseudonym such as “torture” could be read as an indication of the still-prevailing anxieties not only about what can be said or not said on a blog, but also about the consequences of speaking out.

In conclusion, I offer the response of Ashraf Shehab, a journalist, to a question about the reaction of the Egyptian government and society to bloggers and the role of the Internet and its political impact:

The problem is the perception of the government and the intellectuals in Egypt towards the nature of the Internet and its political and cultural role in society. A sort of misconception persists about the role of the Internet, and accordingly, the reactions range between two extreme views. Either they exaggerate the impact of bloggers and Internet activists and maximize their danger, and thus deal out punishment by arresting and harassing them; or they welcome them as if they are an alternative and effective political party, as some described the April 6th movement on blogs and Facebook. In my opinion, none of them is right. We
shouldn’t overestimate the negative impacts of the Internet and its emerging new media on society. Actually, the Internet provides a space that might be used as a democratic space for discussion and dialogue, and if the dialogue on the Internet is done in a democratic way, democracy might be transmitted to the rest of society by those who use the Internet. However, fear and anti-democratic attitudes make the regime and government obsessed with uprooting every democratic impulse, imagining that bloggers and Internet activists will revolutionize society, and hence the arrests and harassment. This behaviour is a misunderstanding and misjudgement of the limitations of, and the barriers against, the online opposition in Egypt (A. Shehab, personal interview, March 30, 2009).

This passage highlights a significant disjunction in the understanding of the relationship of blogging to politics in Egypt, and whether the Internet in general can deliver on its promise of a renewal or change within the fabric of the political culture. However, the crucial questions to ask are the following: Will this change merely stop at the level of technological enhancements—e.g., better and different ways to publish views and express oneself as a political subject? What are the implications of this innovation for the stability of a conservative society? In the wake of the development of blogging in Egypt, will change be possible at the political level? As will become clearer in the next chapter, it seems that blogging in Egypt has had, thus far, the cumulative effect of “casting a giant stone in still water.” Ripples, but not necessarily waves, are being felt. More controversies have arisen. More voices have entered the field. More taboos, conventions and norms have been either challenged or broken. However, the question remains: Will the existing political system be able and willing to ride these ripples with a meaningful change in mind.
Chapter 5: The Political Discourse of Egyptian Blogs:

A Case Study of the Egyptian Awareness Blog

Introduction

In this chapter, guided by the normative criteria of the Habermasian model of the public sphere, I assess the potential impact of weblogs on the Egyptian public sphere. Based on Jurgen Habermas’s idea of the ideal public sphere, Baoill (2004) identifies a set of criteria to measure the efficacy of weblogs as a medium that supports the creation of a public sphere. He argues that deliberative conversation should be inclusive in which participation is open to all, all participants are considered equal, and any discussion should be based on a rational-critical debate. In the same context and according to the commonly known definitions of the public sphere, some researchers have identified four issues associated with online public spaces that include 1) the issue of access to the space (inclusivity), 2) the freedom that individuals have to communicate in that space, 3) the structure of the deliberation based on this access and freedom, and 4) the quality of the discourse produced, which also is related to the preceding variables. According to the ideal theory of the public sphere, this discourse should entail rational-critical discussion or the public use of reason (Tanner, 2001). Drawing on the work of Habermas and other studies regarding the Internet and the public sphere, Lee (2006) identifies four requirements: inclusivity, equality, rationality, and autonomy from state and economic power. There is considerable debate over whether the Internet qualifies as a public
sphere in the Habermasian sense, but many have argued that the public sphere is still a useful concept to understand and critique online spaces, in particular those enabled and formed by, political blogs. The Habermasian concept of the public sphere represents a set of normative ideals to which most actually existing liberal democratic societies aspire but which few, if any, perfectly attain. As Lee (2006) has argued, the same is true of the blogosphere, which perhaps strives towards the public sphere that Habermas idealized, but also exhibits both the potentials and limits of the broader public sphere offline.

In the previous chapter, I touched on the question of access to Internet technology in Egypt and on the question of who participates in the new forms of communication it enables, especially those who are younger, wealthier, and more educated. An objection could be raised from the outset that the criterion of inclusivity is not fulfilled due to the presence of economic and educational barriers, and also due to the fact that the total number of Internet users and those who have direct or indirect experience with the Internet in Egypt is still only about 17 percent of the total population. Notwithstanding the availability of public utilities that provide Internet access and the large growth of Internet users annually, the potential for exclusion is evident as large numbers of Egyptians still cannot take advantage of Internet use. Nevertheless, the potential of the Internet and blogging should not be devalued in terms of inclusivity: the Internet has been integrated into the landscape of Egypt’s forms of mass communication and has become essential to its social infrastructure, and blogging has become recognized as an important part of the media ecology. As described in the previous chapter, blogging is open: the problem of Internet access no longer constitutes a barrier to blogging in Egypt as is shown by my interviews with Egyptian bloggers and human rights activists. The
blogosphere enhances inclusivity because of its low barriers to entry relative to traditional, established mass media. Any individual with access to the Internet can easily and at no cost establish a blog, even if he or she has not had previous experience with blogging technology. This suggests that blogs are inclined towards equality, since people are now able to participate in blogging regardless of their socio-economic status. Since the cost of blogging is almost negligible, Egyptian bloggers represent all classes, not just the highly educated or the wealthy. Even if Egyptian blogging started with bloggers from the middle class and the highly educated and culturally-aware, over time, people from different socio-economic levels have begun to blog or to read and post their own comments. As Keren (2006) puts it: “The blogosphere… has broken some of monopolies that constrained the public sphere in the past. It has overcome the hegemonic voice of the rich and powerful and allowed anybody with access to the Internet to have voice” (p. 16).

The effect of blogs is not only limited to the people who have access to Internet. The stories about issues that have been raised and published on blogs have reached beyond the boundaries of the Internet; even those people who do not have access to these Internet blog stories are aware of them through those who have access or from independent and oppositional media outlets. Contrary to what is commonly assumed concerning the lack of women bloggers, Herring, Kouper, et al. (2004) found that the number of males (52%) and females (48%), and the number of adults and teens are roughly equal, which indicates a close gender balance. In Egypt, many bloggers are women who write about their life experiences on their own blogs, sometimes as political activist bloggers and sometimes as personal bloggers.
The public sphere model requires that public spaces exist in which people are free to communicate, and which are autonomous from state and economic power. Despite a few government crackdowns on some bloggers in Egypt, blogs and the Internet, as was discussed in the previous chapter, are not subject to direct, highly-invasive censorship or blocking. Most of the blogosphere is visible inside Egypt, and given the restrictions on traditional news media environment in Egypt, blogs may represent the most open public communication platform for political discourse in the country, even taking into account the existence of independent and oppositional traditional media outlets. The blogosphere and other forms of communication available on the Internet have been by far more resistant to state control than the traditional media.

In terms of rationality or rational-critical discourse, which is a fundamental requirement for the ideal form of the public sphere, it could be argued that blogs exhibit several features that facilitate and enhance this sort of discourse. Through postings and hyperlinks, users are able to construct meaning by expressing and exchanging their ideas, and by searching for relevant knowledge through the entire network of the blogosphere (Lee, 2006). However, for proper, rational conversation to occur reason-giving must be present—logical relationships must exist between opinions that are supported by arguments, and which employ evidence and citations. In his study of Howard Dean’s candidate blog, Meraz (2007) called a post “reason-giving” “if it cited substantive reasons for its opinion as opposed to nonfact-based, purely emotional reasoning”; moreover, he conceptualizes emotional reasoning as that which is “based on personal, selfish reasons or simple affective statements” (Meraz, 2007, p. 68).
In this chapter, I examine the discussions in the Egyptian political blogosphere in which different common political and social issues are raised and discussed. I seek to discover whether or not political blogging plays a role in creating a virtual public sphere in which participants come together and engage in meaningful deliberation. I do this by specifically examining the nature of the discourse and the quality of citizen political conversation and active deliberation. More specifically, I examine the use of interactive communication features that bloggers choose to incorporate in their blogs, the blog authors’ entries, and their readers’ comments. Thus, this present chapter helps to gauge the true impact of Egyptian political blogging on the online political debate. It concludes with a suggestion about how to conceptualize this impact in an alternative way. Thus, even if the Egyptian blogosphere might fail to fulfill the Habermasian ideal of the public sphere on several counts, these blogs nevertheless leave a mark on the political landscape as forms of activist media.

As was indicated in the previous chapter, the Egyptian blogosphere is indeed a large discussion space that features a rich and varied mix of bloggers. Among them are those affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, those dedicated to feminist issues, and numerous personal blogs in which people share their experiences, thoughts, and feelings. Since it is quite impossible to present a comprehensive statistical analysis of the Egyptian blogging activity concerned with public issues in Egypt, a case study of a single blog seems the most reasonable means of providing precise, yet tentative conclusions about the nature of contemporary trends in the Egyptian blogosphere. Thus, I restrict my examination to a case study of Al-Wa’i Al-Masry (Egyptian Awareness), the blog of the renowned Egyptian blogger and activist Wael Abbas who is considered to be the most
popular blogger in Egypt and who has garnered national and international publicity in the traditional and Internet media for the effectiveness of his blog (see http://misrdigital.blogspot.com/).\(^3\) *Egyptian Awareness* deals with politics and current affairs and often is cited by the traditional media in Egypt or the international media; moreover, its creator is often hosted by mainstream media nationally and internationally.

Wael Abbas is a freelance journalist, blogger, and human rights activist who has earned many awards including the following: the Egyptian Against Corruption Award 2005/2006, the journalism award by the International Center for Journalists in 2007, and the Human Rights Watch’s Hellman/Hammett Award in 2008. In 2006, the BBC considered him as one of the most influential people in the Arab world, and CNN recognized him as the Middle East Person of the year in 2007. In 2010, he also has been chosen by *Arabian Business*—in their annual listing of the world’s most influential Arabs—as one of the most influential Arabs in the world. Thus, I have chosen *Egyptian Awareness* as my case study for the following seven reasons:

(1) Wael Abbas’s blog is arguably the most well-known Egyptian blog in the Middle East and in the West, and is highly influential in the Arabic-speaking world. The Aljazeera English channel described him as “…a thorn inside the Mubarak government in Cairo and its security forces through his blog ‘misrdigital’ or ‘Egyptian Awareness.’” Abbas is as influential as any political blogger anywhere” (embedded video, post of October 11, 2009).

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\(^3\) Henceforth, all citations in this chapter that refer to *Al-Wa‘i al-Masri* at http://misrdigital.blogspot.com/ are cited only by their date of post.
(2) *Egyptian Awareness* is continuously updated and visited by thousands or millions of readers daily/weekly.

(3) *Egyptian Awareness* is considered by traditional news organs as a reliable source of information and opinion.

(4) Unlike the great number of blogs that depend on the mainstream media to provide content, Wael Abbas has his own sources, and produces original work when covering the issues that he is concerned about. He reports first-hand on these issues rather than relying on reports from traditional journalism.

(5) Due to its popularity, Abbas’s blog must be considered a trend-setter; that is, other Arabic bloggers model their blog-structure and discourse on *Egyptian Awareness*.

(6) Through its variety and intensity of coverage of the public debate in Egypt and elsewhere, Abbas’ blog is a blogging hub to which thousands of other blogs link.

(7) In 2008, *Egyptian Awareness* included 253 videos and 2977 permanent subscribers on its YouTube channel; and the total number of viewers of his videos on YouTube reached 19,845,331 (post of November 19, 2008)

I choose three years (2007, 2008, and 2009) as the period for my analysis, since this was as a period full of transformative events and a political mobility that included more demonstrations and protests on the Egyptian street than ever before, including the April 6th movement and much more.
The Appearance of *Egyptian Awareness*

I will begin by describing the general appearance and layout of *Egyptian Awareness*, which is hosted by Blogspot.com. The blog’s appearance is simple (see Fig 1). The blog layout is divided into three columns: the largest middle column is reserved for the main content—the posts—and the two narrower columns are for links to other blogs that Abbas reads, links to the previous months’ and years’ archived posts, the identity of the blogger, links within the blog, and ads. A somewhat ambiguous anti-government image of a police barricade is placed at the head of the page. Below the header image is the title of the blog *Al-Wa’i al-Masri*, beneath which is the subtitle “Writes of his [Abbas’s] own will, without working for anybody else.” Readers encounter Abbas’s name in English as “Blogger-in-chief” and in Arabic as “Editor-in-chief (*ra’is al-tahrir)*.” Abbas’s posts appear in the middle column. His blog contains banner ads that straddle either side of the main column with a Twitter feed on the right side bar. On the left side bar are a list of awards that his blog has won accompanied by the logos of the awarding organizations. A skull and crossbones graphic placed on the top of the left side bar reads: “This blog may contain language that you find offensive.” He also has a political graphic in the right side bar.
Fig 2: Screenshot of Wael Abbas’s blog post of August 13, 2008.

The language of *Egyptian Awareness* is informal, meaning that it does not use the formal modern standard Arabic; rather, Abbas’ posts and his readers’ comments are
almost entirely written in informal Egyptian slang, which is more or less identical to the Cairean Arabic dialect. Abbas’s posts and comments reflect the demographic bias of his audience: the dialect of Egyptian used by Abbas and those who post their comments on his blog is primarily a youthful dialect of Egyptian Arabic that uses slang, which is not characteristic of the elder generation of Egyptians.

An analysis of the manner in which readers post their written comments reveals an audience whose forms of communication are bound tightly to digital media, such as the Internet, and perhaps even more commonly, cell phone text messaging (SMS). In some sense then, we could talk about how Arabic blog discourse and blog comments constitute a particular mix of genres, discourses, and styles in the context of the linguistic structure of the text (Fairclough, 2003, p. 67). For example, many readers use a Latin script to informally transliterate massages in Arabic. Although users do not follow any systematic transliteration scheme, phonetic spelling is common. Another technique that Abbas and his readers commonly use is a form of symbolization in which sounds that have no written equivalent in the Latin script are symbolized using Arabic numerals that resemble the corresponding letter in the Arabic script. Bloggers are quite creative in using these kinds of shortcuts. For example, the Arabic numeral 3 is commonly used for the Arabic letter “ع (‘ayn),” and 7 symbolizes the Arabic letter “ح (ha)” because their shapes closely resemble the corresponding Arabic letters.

The linguistic structure of Al-Wa’i al-Masri shares the general structure of computer-mediated language, which is perceived as “less correct, complex, and coherent than standard written language” (Herring, 2003, n.p.). Since Al-Wa’i al-Masri is a blog and therefore constitutes a type of “computer-mediated discourse,” its language, both in
Abbas’s posts and his readers’ comments, naturally lends itself to the use of an informal Egyptian spoken vernacular Arabic rather than its formal Modern Standard written counterpart.

*Al-Wa‘i al-Masri* is a journalistic-style blog featuring news and commentary, which avoids any discourse that can be characterized as personal. It focuses on politics and current affairs, and depends to great extent on the information sources provided by its audience; its readers send their real stories to Abbas, along with videos and photographs usually taken with their mobile phone cameras. In this vein, *Al-Wa‘i al-Masri* could be classified in some sense as a kind of citizen journalism that provides an opportunity for the voices and thoughts of ordinary citizens to be heard by a public audience that at times numbers in the millions (Erjavec & Kovacic, 2009). Usually in his posts, Abbas mentions his sources by saying “this video arrived to me from an individual” without mentioning the name of the person.

In general, the climate and tone of discourse in the blog can be characterized as denunciatory; in other words, the blog denunciates and expresses a critique in a derogatory way about the police, the corruption of public officials, the political system, and the regime. Abbas expresses his intense contempt for even the mainstream or state-run media that is intended to engender a certain scepticism about their content. His blog has been consistently associated with controversies involving violence, torture, police brutality, corruption, forgery, bribery, sexual harassment, and so on.
Textual Analysis of *Egyptian Awareness*

In this section, I use textual analysis to examine the discourse of *Egyptian Awareness*. As Mitra and Cohen (1999) explain, an analysis of text on the World Wide Web (WWW) not only examines the written word but also includes an analysis of its accompanying multimedia images, an analysis that considers both the content and implications of the text and also how the text is visually or graphically produced (p. 181). Mitra and Cohen also emphasize that critical textual analysis focuses not only on the content of the text but also on the way in which the content is presented and the significance of this presentation: “The objective of critical textual analysis is to move beyond an analysis of the volume of text and its content to the level of understanding the affectivity of the text and what it says of the community of people who produce and consume the texts” (p. 181). Mitra and Cohen identify three factors that critical textual analysis considers: the formal aspects of the text and its signifying strategies (semiotic analysis and structural analysis); the way in which a single text is connected with other similar texts (intertextuality); and the role of the various readers of the text who, through their reading, make the text meaningful (pp. 181-182). Researchers also study various types of discourse on the Web by using the concept of genre as a lens for analysis.

As Kwasnik and Crowston (2005) argue, genre as a mode of textual analysis seeks to go beyond the meaning of a particular word or phrase as such by emphasizing the importance of the context in which the language event occurs so to correctly understand both the author’s intended meaning and the implications of what is being said (p. 81). Fairclough (2003) defines genres as “the specifically discoursal aspect of ways of acting and interacting in the course of social events” (p. 65). Genre, which originally is a
literary and rhetorical concept used to describe socially recognized types of discourse, can be extended to the study of various types of communication that are socially embedded and accepted, and based on content, form, and purpose.

In the environment of the WWW, genres also are characterized by structural, linguistic, and substantive conventions (Yates & Orlikowski, 1992, p. 300). Yates and Orlikowski (1992) define genres as “typified communicative actions characterized by similar substance and form and taken in response to recurrent situations” (p. 299). The similarities in the substance and form of discourses of the same type define genre (Miller, 1984, pp. 151-153). As Fairclough (2003) argues, even though genres can be defined by their form or their content and theme, it also is common for them to be defined in terms of the purposes of their activity (Fairclough, 2003, p.71). He also argues that a particular genre may have a number of purposes, which can be “hierarchically ordered” (p. 71). Fairclough associates purpose-driven genres with his view of genre analysis as being “primarily concerned with ‘staging’, differentiating genres in terms of their generic structure” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 72). Fairclough argues that a particular text may involve a combination of different genres, and these assemblages of genres refer to what he calls “formats” (p. 69) For example, a weblog, which is usually defined as “a frequently updated Website consisting of dated entries arranged in reverse chronological order so the most recent post appears first” (Rettberg, 2008, p. 19), shares certain common properties with all weblogs. In general, all weblogs have many similarities in layout and contain many of the same elements that make them easy to formally define as a genre, which has a socially recognized form and purpose (Rettberg, 2008, p. 18). However, these similarities tend to be at the level of formats, which bring together a variety of
different genres, including the diary-style blog, the filter blog, and the political blog. Moreover, the genre of blogs can contribute to the shaping of other genres, for example, when blogs transform to represent a new genre of news or journalism (Wall, 2005).

As a result of the developments in communication technologies and social change, the format may bring together new genres that are borrowed from other technologies, and manifest a “chain” of different genres (Fairclough, 2003, p. 216). Fairclough identifies genre chains as “different genres which are regularly linked together, involving systematic transformations from genre to genre” (p. 216). Nevertheless, understanding blogs as a genre does not exclude them from also being a medium, which includes different genres and sub-genres. Moreover, some overlap exists between the concept of medium and the concept of genre. Yates and Orlikowski (1992) recognize this kind of interaction, arguing that medium can play a role in both the recurrent situation and the form of a genre, and so a medium can be conceived as an aspect of the form of a genre (p. 310). In addition, one genre can include components that represent other subgenres (Kwasnik & Crowston, 2005, p. 82). As to the debate about whether blogs are an emergent genre or a reproduced genre, the analyses of Herring, Scheidt, Wright, and Bonus (2005) suggest that blogs are a bridging genre—neither unique nor reproduced entirely from offline genres—but rather constituting a hybrid genre that draws from multiple sources, including other Internet communication genres.

A discourse analysis of the Al-Wa’i al-Masri blog may yield insight into the process of social change in Egyptian society, as well as into the construction of identity in relation to the bloggers and their readers. Candlin (1997) argues that since discourse is more than spoken or written language, discourse analysis must understand the social
context and the situation in which the discourse appears and occurs. Discourse analysis perceives language as “a process which is socially situated” (p. viii). In this context, an analysis of the discourse of Al-Wa’i al-Masri is helpful for understanding the discursive construction of blogs in Egypt, and to what extent, blogging in Egypt can create spaces for dialogues about democracy, a new public sphere in which political and social issues can be discussed outside of the established traditional media.

My analysis is guided by the following questions:

- What are the major themes that the Al-Wa’i al-Masri blog discusses?
- How does Abbas utilize technological and stylistic features in his blogging?
- By examining the kind and form of argumentation that the blog uses, what is the quality of the discussions? What kind of vocabulary and style are used in these discussions?
- What discourse orientations does Abbas use to deal with the issues discussed in his blog? When attempting to explain the relationship of these discourses to the political and social reality that they reflect, what are significance of these orientations?
- What information sources does Al-Wa’i al-Masri use to present public issues, and what is the significance of the nature of these sources?
- What kind of hyperlinks (internal or external), pictures, photographs, caricatures, and so on does Abbas use in his blog, and what is their significance to the discourse of the blog?
• What is the nature and significance of the discussions that occur between readers as is reflected by their comments on the posts?

• What are the main actors that Al-Wa’i al-Masri includes in its discourse, and how does Abbas present their roles and symptoms to shape his position towards them.

My study uses a combination of content and textual analysis to examine the preceding questions. The first step in this discourse analysis is to identify the themes, topics, and sub-topics covered in the blog genre and the linguistic choices that Abbas makes. Abbas’s blog is organized by posts that are time stamped, dated, titled, and separated by a blank space. Usually, Abbas makes one post on one topic per day, but sometimes, he makes multiple posts per day, which take the form of brief articles or journal entries. Typically, most of his posts are distinguished by a headline, followed by a video or photograph or illustrations relating to the topic entry. Each post has an option for his readers to write comments, which can be accessed through a link. Unlike the majority of blogs that depend on the mainstream media to provide content for their commentary about issues in the news (Lanosga, 2008), the Al-Wa’i al-Masri blog has its own sources and produces original work when covering current events. Abbas films his own video clips and provides them as embedded video or hyperlinks to his YouTube account. Abbas also includes on-the-scene footage captured with his own camera. He also clearly states the source of the videos or photos he posts on his blog, describing whether the video or the photos are taken by him or another source. In the five years that he has been writing his blog, Abbas has generated a large archive of articles, which he can use to provide
self-referential hyperlinks, and create a continuous context for his posts. This archive also benefits the readers who can view the historical context of the newer posts. For example, one of the most important advantages of the blog and its archived material is that readers can go back and forth in time, and comment on previous posts that Abbas’s has posted sometimes several years earlier.

**Topics of the Blog Entries**

Table 2 shows the kind of issues that *Al-Wa’i al-Masri* has dealt with over three consecutive years (2007, 2008, 2009) and the number of posts and the number comments that the Abbas’s posts have generated. A topical analysis of the blog posts indicates that the *Al-Wa’i al-Masri* blog has followed current events very closely. Sometimes, Abbas’s posts provide simple briefings on a particular topic or topics, but more often, they reflect Abbas’s personal evaluation and criticism of the play of events and their major protagonists.

**Table 2:** Topics of the blog entries.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Post Topics</th>
<th>Number of Posts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2007 (80 posts)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No. of posts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corruption and the inefficiency of the bureaucracy</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrations and strikes and the authority’s response</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elections</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic</td>
<td>Volume</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instability of the regime</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criticism of governmental policies and officials</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political controversies about previous regimes</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Politics totals</strong></td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The abuse of power (persecution and incarceration, torture and police brutality)</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Street violence and thuggery</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Civil rights totals</strong></td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crackdown on bloggers and Internet activists</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom of expression on the blogosphere</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bloggers’ activities, discussion about blogging, and reports on speaking engagements in other media</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criticism of the mainstream media</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Freedom of expression totals</strong></td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palestine, Gaza events; and Hamas</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egyptian-Arabic relations and their impact on Egyptians</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International news and events</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Foreign affairs totals</strong></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty in Egypt</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workers’ issues and their</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2 shows the seven major themes that *Al-Wa’i al-Masri* raises and discusses, which range from politics and public affairs, and the civil rights of citizens to the debate over freedom of speech both in the traditional and new media. Abbas’s interests also extend to international affairs that affect Egyptian internal conditions and the conditions of Egyptians abroad. The endless controversies between Palestine, Israel, Hamas, and the rest of the Arab world and particularly Egypt’s role in this controversy are all prominent subjects of discussion. Admittedly, the categorization of each post under a single topic cannot be free of some arbitrariness. By its very nature, blog discourse is dynamic and organic and cannot be expected to be held to strict and somewhat arbitrary categorizations, which might suggest that one post belongs exclusively to one topic and not another. Nevertheless, as readers, it is still possible and moreover meaningful to identify themes to which each post belongs. I have followed this strategy by relying on the most important features of every post, and then I created sub-categories to provide a more precise picture for my readers.
Before delving into a detailed description of each of the themes, I will describe the nature of the blog entries in a general way. The topics “Freedom of expression,” “Politics and public affairs,” and “Civil rights” are the three most discussed major topics on Abbas’s blog, receiving over a three year period, 90, 47, and 35 posts respectively. These topics include corruption; bureaucratic inefficiency; elections; new activist movements; and police brutality toward voters, activists, and ordinary citizens. All these phenomenon attract severe and unqualified condemnation by Abbas and his readers. Whenever possible, Abbas concentrates his criticism on areas of corruption and bureaucratic negligence, focusing his attention simultaneously on some of the most momentous events in Egypt’s modern history while also shifting his gaze to comment about the mundane, the everyday. For example, through video posts and live reports on his blog, Abbas gives particular attention in his coverage to the devastating fire at the Shura Council building, which is considered a historical landmark in Cairo. He accuses the government of negligence and inefficiency, as he writes: “at the time of writing these lines, the devastating fire is still raging in the building. It started more than three hours ago. Yet, nobody has made any effort to control it” (post of August 19, 2008). In a related incident, he also posted a video of the fire at the National Theatre that he received in an email from an anonymous reader (post of September 27, 2008). As for the mundane, Abbas complains about the presence of traffic police in inappropriate places, such as ramps, which he claims is responsible for a number of car accidents (post of September 5, 2008). He blames these incidents and their damages to property on the corruption of traffic policemen. Abbas enhances his written posts with pictures and videos sent by his
readers, which serve to reinforce the outrage toward scandals, inefficiency, and corruption within the bureaucracy (post of July 7, 2008).

The topics also include self-reflective comments in which Abbas and other bloggers describe their activities, such as when they give a lecture, attend a conference, participate in television programs, or publish their writings and commentary in newspapers. In addition, statements of solidarity with other bloggers and announcements of awards received also fall under the category of “Freedom of expression.” Generally, with respect to the 90 posts about freedom of expression, nearly half (43) are devoted to discussing the activities listed above. One of the widely recognized threats to freedom of speech over the Internet is the effort of security authorities to censor blogs and to shut down websites. Abbas claims these crackdowns involve collaboration between the authorities in Egypt and multi-national corporations such as Google, YouTube, and Yahoo! in an attempt to disable Internet activists and bloggers from posting certain material online. Content that the authorities deem to be problematic is identified through techniques of flagging or reporting. While Abbas’s claims seem a bit far-fetched, he cites his own blogging experiences as an example of intrusions by corporate entities. He cites as support for his claims the fact that Yahoo! suspended his email account and YouTube removed some videos from his account (Posts of April 23, 2009; November 17, 2008; January 19, 2008; November 29 and 22, 2007).

Another example that Abbas cites is the fact that the administration authorities at Facebook interfered by removing the online campaign solidarity group called “Free-

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4 Abbas made this claim during a panel discussion called “New Media vs Repressive Regimes: Democratic Development and the Freedom of Expression,” which was part of the Cross-Canada Dialogue Series sponsored by Rights & Democracy, Ottawa, Canada on October 7, 2009.
Adel,” claiming that the representations on their webpage were threatening and obscene (post of April, 23, 2009). The Free-Adel solidarity campaign, which attracted media coverage from around the world, involved a group of Egyptian bloggers who launched an online campaign in solidarity with their detained colleague blogger Mohamed Adel by Egyptian authorities. This blogger was arrested by the Egyptian government because he went to Gaza and met representatives from Hamas. Generally, Egyptian bloggers use creative ways to protest. For example, they posted photos of themselves posing with fake machine guns, as a reference to the government’s accusation that Mohamed Adel was engaged in terrorist activities. Usually, Egyptian bloggers create solidarity groups to support each other when one of them faces trial or detainment. Further, these groups also reach out to international human rights organizations for support.

Often, blogging posts present evidence to prove that the Egyptian authorities are openly hostile toward bloggers. These posts are intended to educate readers about the challenges that bloggers and Internet activists face, especially the attempts by government authorities to disrupt their work. For example, Abbas talks about how security agencies violate the privacy of Internet users. In one post, he explains the new conditions for using the wireless Internet network (WiFi): in addition to paying fees, users of WiFi are required to provide their names, phone numbers, and email addresses to which a password and user name is sent (post of June 9, 2008).

Another sub-category included under the major theme of “Freedom of expression” is the criticism of the mainstream media. It has been common for bloggers working as media critics—criticizing the performance of the mainstream media whether it be press journalism or the satellite broadcasting channels—to have occupied a
significant space on Wael Abbas’ blog (11 posts). These posts condemn this performance from the vantage point of different ideological and political affiliations. At the same time, the discourses in these posts attempt to highlight the courage of bloggers who address the unspoken topics and issues ignored by the traditional media that is not doing its job because of self-censorship and many other restrictions. Many Egyptian bloggers claim that they are covering stories that the traditional media does not dare to cover, and that they represent an alternative media for the public. For example, bloggers covered an event in which Egyptian army cadets attacked a police station with stones in a town south of Cairo. At the time, traditional newspapers were forbidden to report the incident due to a law banning the publication of any information regarding the Egyptian army (post of March, 14, 2009).

Many accusations are directed at different mainstream media as to how they repurpose information and material such as photos, videos, and ideas from blogs, but without acknowledging their original source and the bloggers who produced the content. For example, in his post, Abbas accused the Aljazeera channel of stealing one of his videos, which the network used in a promotional video about democracy (post of January, 20, 2009). In another post, he criticizes the Elfagr newspaper for releasing a news story accompanied by a photograph stolen from a blog (post of November 29, 2008). Apart from complaints about the mainstream media violating the intellectual property rights of bloggers, Abbas’s posts emulate the strategies employed by other bloggers in questioning and judging the objectivity and accuracy of mainstream news reports (post of June 7, 2009). For example, these criticisms evaluate the performance of some of the Egyptian satellite television channels (post of December 25, 2007;
September 1 and 4, 2007) and question whether the mainstream media in general covers issues in ways that are free of contradictions (post of September 4, 2008). In another case, bloggers questioned the credibility of a news story published in mainstream media by posting testimonies of eye-witnesses to the events that were reported incorrectly by journalists (post December 16, 2008).

Sometimes the condemnation of the mainstream media comes from readers’ comments. For example, a reader named “Hossam Amer” writes:

I followed your blog [Wael’s blog] two years ago. Your work as an independent journalist is more important than the coverage by state-controlled newspapers. God help you in fulfilling your mission. What you have done has had positive impacts in exposing the corruption and corrupt people (post of May, 26, 2009).

Here Hossam Amer makes a comparison between the discourse of blogs as independent media and the state-run media in which he indicates that blogging is more authentic and trustworthy than traditional journalists in the state mainstream media. In another example, a reader criticizes the Alyoum Alsabea newspaper for taking credit for being the first to cover a story about a citizen being tortured in a police station: “the truth is that you convey material and steal the efforts of bloggers.” Then the reader’s further commentary reiterates how bloggers are courageous, reliable, and trustworthy for having discovered the truth, implying that traditional journalists avoid placing themselves at risk. The post also emphasizes the autonomy of bloggers in Egypt, and stresses how they do not get paid for exposing themselves to the risks and threats they receive from the authorities (post of February 8, 2009).

In general, the coverage of demonstrations, protests, strikes, and the official response by the government authorities has occupied an important place in blogging in Egypt since 2005. At this time, activist groups such as the Kefaya Movement openly
demonstrated against President Mubarak, and bloggers played an important role in mobilizing and covering their rallies, photographing and posting the information about the activist events on their blogs. Abbas’s *Al-Wa’i al-Masri* blog has been the central pioneer in this process. This is particularly true for those years chosen as a research period in this present study. As expected, the posts on *Al-Wa’i al-Masri* reflect this general trend with eight posts addressing this theme. Additionally, four posts present extensive coverage of the elections and referendums—such as the parliamentary and Shura councils elections—along with their concomitant protests and violence (post of June 13, 2007), the precedential elections, and the referendum of constitutional amendments in 2005 and 2007 (post of March 22 and 29, 2007). Although some of the elections occurred before the three year period that this study examines, they still are present within the context of other posts made during this study period.

A famous example of blog coverage of demonstrations, strikes, and the Egyptian regime’s response are the posts related to the Mahalla events (also known as the April 6th strike) for which Abbas provided excellent coverage as the events transpired. The language he used in his blog imitated that used in television news broadcasts. For example, in his coverage, he used expressions like “live news coverage of the strike as it unfolds” (post April 6, 2008) and “more news on the strike will follow” (post of April 8, 2008). From the beginning of strike and the events that followed, Abbas posted seven posts in seven consecutive days. In these posts, Abbas’s coverage was superior to the coverage provided by traditional media, as he delivered live coverage of the events from the street using a Twitter feed and mobile phone video. Embedded documentary video made by Abbas himself (duration 8 minutes) and videos sent by anonymous users
covered the Mahalla events on-site, and also included interviews with the families of detainees and families of people killed during the riots. This coverage also was enhanced by external links to feature articles about the events in the international media to which Abbas himself contributed. Lastly, links to other blogs covering the Mahalla riots also were provided on Abbas’s blog.

The response of government authorities, such as the police and internal security forces, and “news agents” to the Mahalla events was negatively and highly criticized on Abbas’s blog. Abbas not only documents incidents of police brutality, but as his posts insinuate, police forces were responsible for sparking the Mahalla events in the first place. Comments and posts by readers added follow-up coverage of the events and gave additional details from people who participated in the riots. Despite the quality of Abbas’s coverage of the events of April 6th and his desire to appear as an impartial professional news reporter, the tenor of his discourse belies this. Similar to the general tone of the blog, the coverage of these events is consistently accompanied by vitriolic and extremely obscene outpourings of anger about the decline of conditions in Egypt, corruption, poverty, regime instability, and almost anything and everything Egyptian.

Table 2 indicates that Abbas’s blog is also concerned with covering human rights violations in Egypt by exposing incidents of torture and the abuse of suspects who are political activists and ordinary Egyptian citizens. Specifically, Abbas’s blog denounces acts of torture and ill-treatment by Egyptian authorities in various detention centers. On Al-Wa’i al-Masri and his YouTube site, he provides his readers with numerous scandalous videos of police officials involved in brutal acts of torture, videos received from anonymous sources and in some cases shot by the police themselves, depicting the
torture of suspects in police stations. The most notorious example of these videos is the documentary footage of the Imad Al Kabeer incident, a minibus driver who was arrested when he intervened in a dispute between a police officer and another driver. After Abbas posted the video of his torture by the police on his blog, public discussion about police brutality sparked. Abbas’s blog has been characterized as an anti-torture blog, since he has posted many videos revealing such cases of torture. For example, another torture video, which Abbas says he received in an anonymous e-mail, shows a man slapping a woman and forcing her to remove her clothes. Distancing himself from making too strong of a claim, Abbas notes that the anonymous e-mailer alleges that the assailant is a policeman (post of December 20, 2007). Abbas also posted a picture of a detainee cell sent to him under the title “A new scandal from the cells of police stations,” which shows the poor conditions of the cells where people are detained in an inhumane way (post October 13, 2008). Abbas also has interviewed Ahmed Maher, another prominent Internet activist in Egypt and the founder of April 6th Movement. In addition, he posted many photos that display a number of Maher’s tortured body organs, and Maher’s narration of how he was arrested in his car on the street and how he was tortured by police in the police station to force him to reveal the Facebook password of the April 6th Movement (posts of May 9 and 19, 2008).

The benefits of Abbas’s blog and others like it are the light that they shed on behind-closed-doors instances of police abuse and brutality, and how they enable citizens to prompt official investigations in which bloggers and their readers are active participants in the follow-up investigations. In these cases, videos and photographs archived on blogs serve as real sources of evidence for official investigators. Thus, blogs
can function as a “knowledge repository” (Lee, 2006). These kind of blogs also play an informative role in that they act as organs for informing citizens of their rights. Blogs also make their presence felt in the traditional media—whether independent, private, or national—by bringing to light uncommon issues that the traditional media miss but eventually are obliged to cover as a result of blog coverage. In this way, blogs have an important if indirect role in setting the agenda for the traditional media. Thus, it seems that a new public sphere is emerging in which public events never covered by the traditional media are now given prominent and very public exposure through blogs. Blogs like Abbas’s not only serve as a way for Egyptian citizens to demand accountability from their government with respect to the public exposure of abuse by authorities, but also actively document police discipline and brutality with videos, pictures, and eyewitness accounts. For example, in a post sarcastically entitled “Will Al-Adly [the Egyptian minister of the interior] comment on blogs like Nazif [the Egyptian prime minister] has,” Abbas lists most of the torture videos already available on his blog, and concludes with the following accusation:

The comment of Habib Aladly [the Egyptian minister of the interior] is required on many questions, such as, why has he not revealed the identities of the police officers and informants who appeared in their formal uniform in more than twelve videos filmed in police stations that we published on the Al-Wa’i al-Masri? Only three of the implicated police officials have been arrested and indicted. [...] Why has the investigation [into the case of] the clip in which somebody forced a girl to take off her clothes ceased? [...] Why does the ministry of interior threaten those who appear in torture clips? [Mr. Adly’s] comments are required [to explain] the absence of protection from harassment for women in the streets, especially during festivals. [...] Commentary is also required on the relationship between the police and citizenry; on the question of why citizens are not afraid of the burglar but are afraid of the policeman. [Mr. Adly’s] commentary is required [to explain the occurrence of] kidnapping and the torture of Internet activists [...] and police intervention [to] fix elections… (post of August 13, 2008).
The blogger here tries to remind his readers about human rights violations that were publicized on the blog, while insisting that the minister be held to account for allowing security forces to torture detainees.

Street violence and intimidation has escalated in Egypt under conditions of economic disadvantage and the corruption of public authority, especially in the slum areas of major cities. Along with concerns about the violation of the civil rights of citizens, personal security on the street has emerged as a topic of concern for Egyptian bloggers. This issue of street violence and thuggery occupies many discussions on the public space of Al-Wa’i al-Masri through readers’ comments and Abbas’s posts, which usually are accompanied by video clips displaying violence in the streets. Usually, these videos are submitted by the audience. Abbas welcomes these clips and openly acknowledges their contribution to the success of the blog as a form of citizen-journalism. For example, when Abbas introduces the topic of street violence, he proudly thanks his readers:

The issue of this week is the product of your work. Yes, your work, not mine! And all these published materials, you are the ones that got them and provided the pictures and videos, not me. Unlike the traditional media that would be afraid to publish these materials, we are prepared to assume this responsibility. You can count on the bloggers’ reliability to get them published (post of July 7, 2008).

Here the blogger emphasizes two important points often raised in the literature on blogs and the mainstream media. The first concerns how blogs work as a form of citizens’ media, by opening a space where ordinary people may voice their concerns using collaboratively-authored platforms. Through these interactive processes, the lay citizen becomes not just a receiver but also a producer of content. Some theorists assume that the inclusion of active readers as authors is assumed to encourage the demystification of the
media’s authority in ways that break its hegemony (Rodriguez, 2001, p. 153). The second point concerns the influence of blogging in the public sphere in terms of its capacity to cultivate a reputation for credibility. In the passage from the Abbas’ blog cited above, the blogger presents his contemporaries in the Egyptian blogosphere as courageous, credible, trustful and indispensible. This encourages an active participation on the part of audiences to send their own reports and to have these cases published with the goal of opening public discussion.

In line with the prevailing critical discourse adopted by blogs in Egypt, most posts by Abbas and his readers direct their accusations at the police and their absence in the street, accusing them of dedicating all of their time and efforts to the security of the regime. Conversely, some comments on Al-Wa’i al-Masri also criticize Abbas’s and his readers’ views, contending that this kind of violence happens everywhere in the world.

A notorious example of how Egyptian bloggers have connected street violence to corruption and the exploitation of power, is the 2008 incident of a woman who assaulted a man with an electric baton after she rear-ended his car. (It is important to remember that in Egypt the lawful use of this kind of equipment is restricted to the police.) First, she uttered foul language and then threatened to notify her father, who she alleged held a senior position in the police (post of August 25, 2008). This post and its accompanying video clip generated a lot of debate (144 comments), captured the attention of independent newspapers that then covered the story, and sparked a campaign on Facebook demanding that the woman be held accountable for her actions.

Although sexual harassment is not a new issue in Egypt, it has been regarded as a taboo topic, and was rarely discussed in the pages of newspapers or on television
programs. One of the salient issues that blogging in Egypt has succeeded in putting on the public agenda is the sexual harassment of women. In 2006, during the Eid celebration, a number of bloggers witnessed an incident in which sexual harassment occurred in a group situation. They recorded these events with their cameras and posted the videos on their blogs while the traditional media, especially at the national level, denied that the events had occurred. Eventually, when the traditional media realized it was swimming against the current, it had no choice but to acknowledge the abuse. Two years after this incident in 2006, another occurred on Eid AlFetr Day in downtown Cairo; in this case, the Ahram newspaper was the first media to cover it on the front page. Referring to the article in Ahram entitled “32 people that participated in sexual harassment were arrested,” Abbas wondered why they suddenly decided to cover the story even though they denied the previous 2006 event and even ridiculed the bloggers who were the first to report it (post of October 5, 2008).

With respect to the poor conditions of Egyptian workers and the violations of their dignity, Al-Wa’i al-Masri also pays a lot of attention to Egyptian-Arabic relations and their impact on Egyptian workers and the kind of treatment they receive from the citizens and authorities of other Arabic countries. This issue of Egyptian-Arabic relations has engendered a lot of debate among Abbas and his readers through 4 posts that generated (303) readers’ comments, including readers from the wider Arabic world, which helps to create a rich public space for discussion and for the airing of criticism from the citizens of other Arab countries. Three posts in particular illustrate this tendency, all of which show a video clip of a number of Libyan citizens ridiculing and laughing at Egyptians on a fishing ship. In one post, the blogger wonders: “Why do
Libyans seem so smug and pleased to see the Egyptians drown?‖ Then, he adds forcefully: “The Libyan marines opened fire on Egyptian civilians on the fishing ship. But, these people are poor… and the ship has already capsized.” Transcriptions of the insults and swear words uttered by the Libyans in the video, which appear on the blog, foreground the blogger’s conclusion: “We [Egyptians] have become the doormat upon which the Bedouins [vulgar term for people in the Arab gulf], the thugs of Hamas in Rafah, and the Americans from ships in the Suez gulf all wipe their feet.” He then criticizes Egypt’s idle stance and reluctance even to condemn other countries for disrespecting Egyptians. When Abbas added updates and tried to connect the incidences shown in the videos, he sparked a heated debate among his readers. These discussions fuelled nostalgic comparisons between Egypt’s past and present, while drawing out many examples of ongoing violations of Egyptian dignity. At the same time, the comments from Abbas and his readers focused their criticism on the regime, as the entity responsible for allowing these incidences to continue and for creating the conditions that place Egypt at an inferior socio-economic position with respect to other Arab countries (post of August 2, 2009; and posts of June 14 and 18, 2008).

Those posts generated a number of comments from blog readers (47 comments for the first post, and 129 comments for the second two posts) in which Abbas and a number of readers assign blame for Egypt’s perceived poor reputation on the international scene. They all seem to frame the situation as a product of what Egyptian citizens are suffering at home due to the poor care they receive from the government.

The tone of these posts is consistent with the inflammatory language that Abbas directs at Arabs in general when he addresses the topic of Egyptian-Arabic relations in
his blog. For example, in a remark about an embedded video clip featuring an unflattering song about Egyptians, which spread across the Internet and was attributed to Saudi youth, Abbas invoked a comparison between, on the one hand, the honour and esteem that Egypt has historically enjoyed and, on the other hand, the unjustified derision that Egyptians must now suffer. He accomplishes this comparison through appeals to symbols such as the Egyptian flag from the period of Mohammad Ali’s reign, which he displays on his blog as a reminder of what the country has become (post of February 3, 2008).

This issue of Egyptian-Arabic relations has attracted comments not only from both the supporters and critics of Abbas’s position but also from the citizens of other Arabic countries who are concerned about related issues. For example, some readers suggested that it was unfair to draw generalizations about a whole country based on only a few particular cases. Writing in an informal and unpunctuated English, one reader named Saeed remarks:

Dear Wael [Abbas],

I am a Jordanian who is frequently reading your blog, and to be honest i like your way of discussing issues that is related to the hot topics in Egypt, but unfortanlty i found you sometimes generalize the Actions of some people to let include all of their nationality. Yes their is some Jordanian hate Egyptions and vise versa and it is same for any mix of two arab countries but the majority will refuse any humiliation to any arab country regarding its place in the map and i need you to know that All Arabs without strong and prosperate egypt are nothing and man for god sake Egypt is the Arab world (90 Million Arab of 300) so be mercifull with the others and don't blame them for the mistakes of the minority (post of February 3, 2008).

Another reader named Makine comments, also in broken English:

We should be angry and we are but not with all Saudis or all Gulf. Only with those who made that hate song. I do not like sterytyping. A thing that we all suffer from. I am sure you have heard "All arabs are terrorists" or "All Moslems are terrorists" because of what a bunch of people who call themselves moslem did. Let’s not do what we hate when others do to us (post of February 3, 2008).
These are among 129 other postings about the relationship between Egyptians and Arabs as well as the conditions of Egyptian workers in the Arab countries. Posts of this type make a significant contribution to the formation of an enriched public sphere, characterized by heated discussion. These two examples are among many lines of argument that exhibit strong characteristics of rational critical discourse.

On the other hand, the comments contained an excessive amount of inflammatory language, insults, and snide remarks. The responses were littered with defamatory statements, disparaging comments, derogatory names, and defamation. The vulgarity of the content even prompted one reader to write: “Seriously, this is not an appropriate type of dialogue that we should be having because we are ignoring the main issue as we waste our time swearing at each other” (post of August 2, 2009). In general, the discourse of Al-Wa’i al-Masri is explicitly critical, and indulges in a sustained denunciation of the treatment that Egypt has been receiving from other Arab countries. Abbas also sometimes articulates his suspicions about appeals to a universal “Arabic identity” within Egypt. He often contests the discourses of nationalists when he ridicules the policies and personalities of the Nasserites, which include followers of Nasser’s previous regime, and when he derides the Islamists.

Al-Wa’i al-Masri has included coverage of Gaza events and the issue of the Rafah border between Egypt and Gaza. In a featured post, entitled “Al-Wa’i al-Masri meets those who were stranded in Rafah and Al Arish,” Abbas reports on the Palestinian people of Gaza at the border of Rafa who were receiving donations from the Red Cross as they waited for Egypt to reopen the border and allow them passage to and from Gaza. The coverage included interviews with Palestinians about their views on the factions of
Hamas and Fatah (post September 18, 2007). In another post, which was published at the time of the Israeli attacks on Gaza in 2008, Abbas conducts a similar set of interviews, which include photographs and videos, that together attempted to imitate the look and feel of television news reporting. For example, he employs expressions such as, “We will give you more pictures and reports in a bit,” which create the impression that the blog is assuming a journalistic style.

Clearly, throughout his blog, Abbas adopts a critical stance toward Hamas’ policy in which he vehemently opposes any breaches to Egyptian borders regardless of the reasons that some might give for doing so. In a post titled “Al-Wa’i al-Masri in Gaza,” he provides an array of audio-visual materials to document the conditions of everyday life inside Gaza during the Gaza-Israeli war. To contextualize this current event, Abbas often draws on previously archived footage of similar crises, such as the terrorist bombing that occurred in Sinai and Sharm El Sheikh (posts of January 25 and 26, 2008). In another post entitled “No to Hamasan Bullying,” Abbas provides photographs that show two Egyptian soldiers injured by Hamas supporters. These images function rhetorically as a rejoinder not only to those who support Hamas’s efforts to open the Rafah border by force but also to those who accuse Egypt of blockading Gaza.

Although Abbas attempts to incorporate journalistic styles and principles into his reporting, unfortunately, his use of foul language in his coverage of the attack by Hamas supporters on Egyptian soldiers undermines these efforts. He frequently employs expletives when imploring all those who defend Hamas, whether they be Islamists, Nasserites, or certain journalists, to concern themselves instead with the problems facing the impoverished citizenry of Egypt. This particular post generated heated discussion and
deliberation (93 comments), ranging from brief remarks to comments that approximate essays. A large number of these comments passionately support Abbas, whereas others offer either disinterested analyses or oppose his views. The debate included people who are affiliated with Hamas and the Muslim Brothers, and was an exchange among readers which almost transformed to fighting between two contradictory views; for and against Hamas. Unfortunately, this discourse was full of inflammatory language (post of January 29, 2008). In another post entitled “We warned you that this would happen,” which severely criticizes Hamas and its advocates, Abbas parades an image of a news report from the Al Ahram newspaper that states: “Palestinians purchase goods from Egypt with false currency.” Embedded in the blog, this snippet serves as a resource to buttress his views about Hamas (post of February 1, 2008). In addition, in another post entitled “The project of new Gaza…,” Abbas cites an assortment of academic articles and scientific analyses of published international opinion, which he presents as evidence that Hamas has harmed rather than benefited the Palestinian cause (post of February 10, 2008). The strategic inclusion of these authoritative reports from outside sources enables Abbas to lend an aura of objectivity to his strong opinions on current affairs. Ironically, these commentaries employ fragmented prose and offensive language that suggest, at the same time, a lack of concern for professionalism.

The discourse of Al-Wa‘i al-Masri seems to explicitly exploit any chance to criticize and condemn the period of the reign of President Abdel Nasser, the Nasserites, and all those who affiliate with the policies of the late President or defend his policies. Even when describing important political and intellectual personalities, Abbas still avoids exercising restraint in his use of foul language. One such criticized voice is Muhammad
Hassanein Heikal—a well-known Egyptian and Arab journalist and writer who was associated with Nasser’s regime and has written much about him. An internal link in Abbas’s blog leads readers to a special file in which writers with different political ideologies critique Heikal’s aspersions and responses. Throughout his blog, Abbas declares explicitly his admiration for President Sadat and mentions his merits wherever possible (post of January 17, 2008). For example, Abbas takes advantage of the anniversary of the October 6th, 1973 war with Israel to show his support for Sadat and his criticism of those who undermined Egypt’s victory in that war, especially the Nasserites (post of October 6, 2008).

Abbas also gives attention to the poverty and poor conditions of workers and their rights on his blog. For example, he covers the daily lives of the Mahalla workers and their demands. Usually, for these reports, he conducts professional, journalistic-like interviews (post October 23, 2007). In highlighting the widening gap between the rich minority and the poor majority, Abbas comments on the provocative advertisements of resorts and luxuries published in the Al-Ahram newspaper. He notes how these images create an impression of tremendous wealth in the country while concealing the fact that a majority of the population live in poverty (post of May 23, 2008). Another post, entitled “In the age of Mubarak: An Egyptian offers his kidney for selling on the Internet,” further reinforces Abbas’s astonishment about the economic disparity in Egypt. This post in particular sparked a lot of debate about the deteriorating conditions of Egypt’s poorest people (post of December 24, 2008).

Table 1 shows that the author of Al-Wa’i Al-Masri and its readers consistently denounce the Egyptian regime’s corruption and lack of respect for the law. What is
extraordinary about Abbas’s blog and its readers is the dominant attitude of their modes of discourse about politics and public affairs, which is unfailingly and intensely critical, and as such, this discourse could be said to represent a counter public sphere further enhanced by dissidents and political activists mainly from the younger generation. *Al-Wa’i Al-Masri* initiates discussion with its readers about the seven issues described in Table 1 through interactive features which inspire their comments. Abbas’s readers usually are clear about whether they agree or disagree with his viewpoint; they often give more information or provide other facts and eyewitness accounts of the story presented, and at times, they even refute and refuse the veracity of the story. Again, the common attitude of Abbas’s posts and his readers’ comments are predominantly critical in their tone, and the criticism is most often levelled at government policies and officials and their management of Egyptian society.

The category of literary topics in Table 1 includes a limited number of topics (11 posts), which represent less explicitly political interests such as art, literature, and aesthetics; and diaries and personal reflections that rarely are discussed in political blogs generally and on Abbas’s blog in particular. Respectively, four posts cover religious extremism, which address a limited number of incidents scattered across the country, typically involving altercations between Muslims and Christians. Ironically, although *Al-Wa’i Al-Masri* managed to spark interest in the problem of sexual harassment in 2006 while pushing this issue into the mainstream news agenda in Egypt, attention to this issue has fizzled over time. In subsequent years, just one post in 2008 covered this topic.

The types of issues and topics to which Abbas gives special attention are related to current events as they happen. For this coverage of current events, Abbas uses posts,
photographs, and videos to manage and stimulate discussion. Abbas’s posts reflect his opinions and political orientation, and in general, his blog seeks to inculcate in his readers specific attitudes and actions that are in line with his own. The themes that are raised throughout his blog cover a diverse range of current public affairs, and follow a variety of events and issues that concern the Egyptian public in their daily life. Topics pertaining to the civil rights of citizens, issues around freedom of expression, and internet policies in Egypt receive a lot of attention on the blog alongside discussions of socio-economic issues ranging from commentaries on poverty in Egypt to interventions for sexual harassment. Hence, Abbas’s blog acts as a political public sphere in which a diversity of topics, concerns, and ideas are offered for public consideration by citizens. Exposure to a diversity of ideas is a prerequisite to promoting understanding in the course of deliberation (Wilhelm, 1999, p. 156). Readers use Abbas’s blog to wrestle over the significance of anything relevant to political reform, such as concerns about the regime and its instability, including the question of presidential succession, the forging of elections and referendums, civil and human rights, and so on. A number of readers use the comment feature on Abbas’s blog to publicize causes in defense of disenfranchised groups, to expose corruption and torture, and to mobilize people politically. In other cases, readers use the blog to mobilize interest in the political process by advertising opportunities to register as a voter in upcoming elections. These notices sometimes include invitations to spread the word of a specific campaign by reposting the advertisements on other websites and blogs (post October 21, 2008).
Sources of the Posts in *Al-Wa’i Al-Masri*

Blogs share with other types of websites interactive features that characterize the WWW. However, some features are inherent to blogs and are designed to encourage interaction among people, including the archive features, the blog author’s email address, links on the homepage to other blogs, links to websites created by others, and links to news sites and trackbacks.

The provision of links to other websites or blogsites within a blog entry is an additional way to include voices other than those of the blogger. Since weblogs are characterized by briefly formulated thoughts and ideas, links are centrally important to the blog genre. As Mortensen and Walker (2002) argue, “Links are vital to the genre; take the links out of a weblog and you are left with a web diary, a much more introverted and private form of writing” (p. 265). Through links, weblogs enable their audiences to share interconnected information and to participate in discussion (Mortensen & Walker, 2002, p. 265). *Al-Wa’i Al-Masri*, like any other web-based activity, employs hyperlinks successfully whenever possible to enhance the conversation, enrich knowledge, contextualize the issues raised, facilitate the formation of a specific attitude about the issues raised, and encourage people to act upon them. Hyperlinks also increase the authority of a posted story (Gillmor, 2006, p. 119). Table 2 describes the types of links used in the 215 valid blog entries examined by the present study.
Table 3: The type of sources in the posts of *Al-Wa’i Al-Masri*.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Posts Topics</th>
<th>Number of Hyperlinks</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Internal links</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Blogs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Corruption and inefficiency of the bureaucracy</td>
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<td>Demonstrations and strikes and the response of authority</td>
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<tr>
<td>Elections</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Instability of the regime</td>
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<tr>
<td>Criticism of governmental policies and officials</td>
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<tr>
<td>Political controversies about previous regimes</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Abuse of power (persecution and incarceration, torture and police brutality)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Street violence and thuggery on the Egyptian street</td>
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<td>Sexual harassment</td>
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<td>Crackdown on bloggers and Internet activists</td>
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<td>Freedom of expression on the blogosphere and Internet policies</td>
<td>2</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
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<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>11</th>
<th>12</th>
<th>Totals</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bloggers’ activities, discussion about blogging, and reports on speaking engagements in other media</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
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<td>Criticism of the mainstream media</td>
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<td>Palestine, Gaza events, and Hamas</td>
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<td>Religious Extremism</td>
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<td>Egyptian-Arabic relations and their impact on Egyptians</td>
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<td>Poverty in Egypt and workers’ issues and their demands</td>
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<td>International affairs and events</td>
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<tr>
<td>Arts, literature, and cinema</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dairies and personal reflections</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
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<td>38</td>
<td>25</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>16</td>
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<td>303</td>
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As is shown in Table 3, the vast number of external hyperlinks that tend to appear in Abbas’s blog are to YouTube (303), in most cases, connecting to the content of Abbas’s own YouTube account. The extensive deployment of YouTube video is typical for a blog of this nature, given its aim to capture live video that exposes cases of torture and that covers different kinds of demonstrations, protests, and current events. My research has found that Abbas’s blog has been successful in effectively employing hyperlinks to raise certain issues, such as corruption, torture, and the agendas of activists.
by bringing dissenting voices into the spotlight of the international media and the international community.

The second highest number of hyperlinks direct readers to other blogs (56), followed by links to news websites (38), links to independent Egyptian newspaper websites (25), links to international television stations (16), links to international newspapers sites (15), and finally links to human rights organizations (12). The blog also contains 16 internal hyperlinks to its own archive.

It is worth noting that Abbas links mostly to either independent sources or media that associate with oppositional tendencies with respect to government policies in Egypt. These sources include newspapers such as *Almasry-alyoum*, *Al Dostour*, *Al badeel*, *Alyoum Alsaba*, *Alshorouk*, *The Daily Star Egypt*, *The Arab Times* electronic newspaper, as well as independent television operators such as the *Almehwar* channel, the *Alarabiya.net* website, the *Alhurrah* channel, and the *Aljazeera Arabic* and *Aljazeera English* channels.

Links to human rights organizations also appear in the blog, which include the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, the International Journalists’ Network, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Reporters Without Borders, and Global Voices Online. In general, these kinds of organization are the main advocates for bloggers and Internet activists.

*Al-Wa’i Al-Masri* has extensively used links to the international foreign media to highlight reports about the blogging movement featured on these media sites or to draw attention to Abbas’s own contribution to the writing and commentaries on these external sites. Examples of the international news links include the *Menassat* website, the *France*
24 channel, the BBC News website, the Los Angeles Times newspaper, Le Monde, Liberation, the Guardian, the Washington Post, the Al Hayat newspaper website, Slate Magazine, SBS TV- Australia, Radio France International, the Fox News website, and the CNN website.

Even though Abbas generously posts links to media that agree with his position, he rarely refers to the national media or what is known as “state–run” media, except to criticize its level of professionalism or to condemn its stance on specific issues.

**Comments on the Posts of Al-Wa’i Al-Masri**

Drawing on Habermas’ public sphere theory, Bennett et al. (2004) identify three defining requirements for assessing the quality of a mediated public sphere. Among the three are responsiveness, which they conceptualize as a “dialogue or mutual responsiveness between sources with different claims or issue positions” (Bennett, et al., 2004, p. 438). Responsiveness requires that communicants respond to each other. It is the main feature of interactivity that characterizes the quality of communication and deliberation within a public space (Rafaeli, 1988, pp. 118-120). This requirement is fulfilled in the blogosphere whenever exchanges occur between bloggers and readers, and among readers themselves, which can be achieved through the comment feature used in blogs. The comment feature helps participants of these exchanges to facilitate diverse and dynamic discussions, and to promote the perception of involvement because this feature allows bloggers to further the thread of a discussion that they or other participants initiate (Kim, 2007, p. 8).
To assess the degree of dialogue and mutual responsiveness, not only between the blog author and his/her readers, but also among readers themselves, I have randomly chosen the first month in 2008, which consists of 13 posts in total (see Table 3). An analysis of the frequency of user interaction within this sample will enable a determination of whether audience feedback originates from a small group of dedicated readers or from a varied mass of casual readers. It also can provide insight into the nature of the readers who take the time to comment, including whether a reader comments more than once on the same post, which would indicate a certain level of engagement and responsiveness with the author and/or other readers, suggesting that the blog has an ability to create or encourage dialogue about public issues. To identify the number of users who respond to more than one of Abbas’s posts, I compiled a list of all the names (or bylines) attached to each comment. I noted duplicates on the list and then counted to reveal the total of unique usernames as well as the number of users who comment regularly on the website. Completing this type of analysis poses a challenge because Abbas does not require his readers to sign up for an account before making a comment on the blog. Since different users may post comments using the same username or a different byline each time, the identity of the readers who contribute is difficult to establish.

Table 4: The frequency of readers’ comments on *Al-Wa’i Al-Masri*.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January 2008 (total 13 posts)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of comments</td>
<td>343</td>
<td>100 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4 shows that a diversity of readers comment and engage in discussion with the blog posts on *Al-Wa‘i Al-Masri*. From the total number of the readers’ comments (n = 343), 229 constitute the number of unique readers posting comments. I calculated this number by subtracting from the total (n = 343) the number of duplicate posts (114) using the same username. Among the duplicate posts, I noticed that 28 unique readers commented on more than one article. This result indicates that regular users of the site are interested in consulting many blog posts and participating in the discussion. I also noticed that 31 unique readers posted multiple comments about one article, which indicates that these readers are interested in continuing a discussion that they may have started with other readers or possibly the author. These numbers suggest that there could be a potential for diverse opinion sharing in the blogosphere in Egypt, given the relatively low number of comments by frequent users of the blog, coupled with the high volume of contributions from first-time visitors. In other words, for example, we may assume that Abbas’ blog is in a better position to capture an array of viewpoints in the comments section than would be possible if the site were monopolized by a closed circle of participants.

At this point, it may be helpful to assess the extent to which Abbas’s blog fosters civic engagement among his readers, and generates deliberation or critical-rational discussion corresponding to the criteria for the deliberative ideal of a public sphere as
outlined in the literature. For a proper rational conversation to occur, the opinions presented must be logical, relevant, and related to the topic of discussion, all of which are essential parts of the “reason-giving” forms of civic discourse (Meraz, 2007). Blogs with their commentary features are supposed to facilitate deliberative discussion, and so I examine whether Abbas’s blog meets these basic criteria, whether the comments remain on-topic, and whether the comments within a given thread of discussion are connected to each other.

I have chosen the issue of Palestine, Gaza events, and Hamas from among the rest discussed on the blog, which are characterized as the most controversial, and could be classified as opinion posts that express the Abbas’s opinion. These issues are expected to generate conflict and opposing ideological views in ways that encourage political debate. Since these topics were rarely discussed on the blog in 2007 and 2009, it seemed reasonable to analyze the year 2008 when these issues received attention in 6 posts throughout the year, and generated 275 readers’ comments. By using a specific set of categories, Table (4) illustrates the nature of the readers’ comments addressed to the 6 posts regarding the issue of Palestine, Gaza events, and Hamas.
Table 5: Characteristics of readers’ comments concerning selected 2008 blog posts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Post titles</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Agrees with author</th>
<th>Ambiguous</th>
<th>Disagrees with author</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Comment / opinion (on topic)</td>
<td>Interpretation</td>
<td>Factual + Informative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No To Hamasan Bullying</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pictures from Gaza</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Al-Wa’i al-Masri in Gaza</em></td>
<td>19</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We warned you that this would happen</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Gaza project…</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why Egypt not Israel!!!</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>275</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Numbers indicated with an asterisk (*) are excluded from the totals because they merely indicate whether inflammatory language was used in any of the posts.
To contextualize the analysis of the posts and comments about this event, as presented on the blog, some brief background information is necessary. In January 2008, during the Israeli-Gaza war, Egypt was subjected to growing public pressure from home and abroad. Part of the blame and responsibility for the blockade in Gaza was shifted from Israel to Egypt, and Egypt was asked to take action to relieve the suffering in Gaza. Calls for donations and solidarity prevailed across Egypt, especially from members of the Muslim Brotherhood and those sympathetic with pan-Arabic ideologies. During the abovementioned war, Hamas breached the border separating Gaza from Egypt, and a number of Egyptian soldiers were shot and injured by Hamas.

Abbas’s blog provoked a debate about the actions of the Hamas government and its supporters. He claimed that people in Gaza are rich and do not need donations and subsidies from Egypt. He contested the efforts exerted by the Muslim Brotherhood and others to collect money and mobilize demonstrations against Egypt’s position. However, Abbas emphasized that he directs his attack and criticism at Hamas not at the Palestinian people. Abbas also expressed his nationalistic zeal and pride in the primacy of Egyptian identity over other modes of belonging. I have characterized his readers’ comments on this issue in terms of their agreement or disagreement with Abbas’s view.

As Table 5 shows, the majority of readers’ comments (178 or 64.7%) were general comments and merely expressions of opinion. At the same time, the majority of readers’ comments (193 or 70%) expressed agreement with Abbas’s view, and supported others who adopted the same stance. Only 18 comments (6.5%) added information or new facts. Fifty-five comments (20%) presented interpretations that could be characterized as reason-giving. Some readers appeared to draw on their own experiences,
such as personal encounters with the actors featured in some of the posts, either as evidence to confirm the information presented on the blog or to provide additional insight and interpretation. In addition to the Egyptian readership, the nationality of users varied widely, and included representation from Palestine, Hamas, and Saudi Arabia, as well as contributors from the United States, Canada, and Germany. This diversity enriched the breadth of discussion around these controversial topics. Unfortunately, most exchanges among readers digressed into skirmishes that employed derogatory language (45 comments), which hindered their ability to achieve critical rationality and logical dialogue. Most of the time, frequent resorts to *ad hominem* lines of attack and argumentation derailed the focus of a discussion thread, leading to a number of irrelevant comments (24 comments). The preceding observations are consistent with a pattern described by Dailey, Demo and Spillman (2008) in their analysis of comments that appeared in a sample of newspaper political blogs. They noticed how civil discussions of politics soon “degenerated into socially questionable references to scatological functions, procreative activities and lower extremity body parts” (p. 62).

Interestingly, some users of the Abbas’s blog seemed to be aware of the problem just mentioned. Comments that explicitly voiced concerns about the vitriolic tone of the rhetoric not only in the readers’ comments but also in Abbas’ posts became part of the discussion. Even though many participants stressed the importance of the blog, Abbas’s readership (in 22 comments) indignantly expressed their resentment about the language used on the site. These objections often accompanied calls for a more civilized and ethical way of expressing views. It may be reasonably assumed that readers feel compelled to employ derogatory and inflammatory language most likely because Abbas
has set the stage for this type of behaviour through his own writing style. This serious
defect undermines the blog’s status as a forum for deliberative discourse and credible
opinion.

With respect to the extent to which the discussion meets the criteria of rational
critical discourse, Table 5 shows that only 20 percent of readers’ comments moved
beyond merely expressing opinions to using various arguments to convincingly justify
and support their statements. The majority of readers’ postings (64.7%) were merely
comments or expressions of their opinions without valid arguments or reasons. Moreover,
the postings that provided information or new facts were few (6.5%). Thus, the embedded
knowledge and the truth of the readers’ statements were not defended, suggesting that the
overall quality of the conversation on the blog did not support deliberative and
democratic discussion, which is defined as the extent to which the discussion is
“substantive, practical questions debated rationally in contradiction to ad hominem
argumentation not susceptible to criticism and grounding” (Wilhelm, 2999, p. 162).

Although the blog provoked discussion among those who posted comments, the
extent of the contact between Abbas and his readers remained minimal. In fact, I noted
only one reply from Abbas to a reader’s comment, and some mutual responses between
readers, mostly to exchange accusations, which crossed the line between reasoned
argument and personal prejudice. Positions taken by readers were neither rationally
criticized nor evaluated by others who comment on the same post. As a result, it can be
concluded that Abbas’s blog fails to satisfy the basic criteria of a critical rational
discourse. In general, I find that Al-Wa’i Al-Masri fails to foster discussion corresponding
to the criteria of the deliberative ideal and public sphere as outlined in the literature.
An analysis of the comments on Abbas’s posts also shows that they do not remain on-topic. In other words, they are not related to each other in a way that constitutes a continuous and coherent thread or line of thinking. Rather, most responses do not engage in reasoned opinion; instead, most of the comments are based on emotional reasoning and very often decay into simply name-calling. However, the blog succeeded in stimulating discussions among a variety of readers with respect to such controversial issues as Gaza and Hamas, providing space for the exchange of views and opinions even if they do not reach the level of critical rational discourse.

Conclusion: Blogs, Politics, and the Public Sphere in Egypt

Since the scope of the present study is limited to a case study of a famous political blog, I cannot generalize my findings from this case to the whole population of political blogs or to blogs as a whole. However, this case study gives a clear picture of the political discourse of Egyptian political blogging. Thus, the Al-Wa’i Al-Masri case study gives rise to the following conclusions.

First, a relationship exists between the type of sources in the blog posts and the destination of hyperlinks provided within the posts, and another between the tone of the discourses towards the government and the policies of the political regime in Egypt. The blog functions effectively by using these types of sources that resonate with the tone of the blog’s discourse, which has been characterized as oppositional, critical, and denunciatory. Moreover, Abbas’s blog depends on sources that are affiliated with independent and oppositional newspapers, satellite television programs, and the information quoted from human rights organizations’ websites. These sources provide
critical and oppositional views to the Egyptian government, especially with regards to the issue of torture, and the crackdown on Internet and political activists. In contrast, Abbas’s blog rarely incorporates links to the Egyptian national media except when they serve as a condemnation of its position towards some issues or criticism of its content.

Second, another relationship exists between the rates of readers’ participation—through their comments on the blog posts or their participation in providing audio and video materials—and the general topics of discussion. These comments and participation from the public increase when the topics of the posts are mainly about controversial political issues. For example, some of these controversies include the denouncement of the regime’s corruption, its bureaucracy, and its leaders; the lack of respect for the rule of law; criticism of the abuse of power; demonstrations, strikes, and the regime’s subsequent response; and the crackdown on Internet activists. Conversely, readers’ comments decrease when the topics of the posts do not touch on the social and concomitant effects experienced by the general Egyptian population, who ultimately are becoming aware, in part through the unprecedented coverage provided by bloggers, that they are being oppressed.

Third, the discourse on *Al-Wa’i Al-Masri* is overwhelmingly hostile to the government and supportive of empowering the people. Often, government regulations and involvement in society is negatively portrayed. The level of criticism is often so scorching that it moves beyond the borders of civil discourse and debate, especially when critiquing the government and its apparatuses at various levels, including the main political players, i.e., President Mubarak and his son Gamal Mubarak, the Prime Minister, the Minister of Interior, and the security apparatus. However, when the topic of
discussion touches on Internet activists, human rights activists, or the oppression of the common people, comments and posts are generally very positive.

Fourth, Abbas explicitly shows his opposition to the Nasserites, Arab nationalists and pan-Arab ideology, and all things affiliated with Nasserist thought. Usually, this criticism falls on opposition parties, writers, and intellectuals like the well-known writer Muhammad Hassanein Heikal who Abbas criticizes extensively. Additionally, Abbas also criticizes the Islamists, the Muslim Brotherhood, and Hamas in the Gaza strip.

Fifth, Egyptian bloggers have brought matters to public attention that the traditional media have long ignored. This fact is extremely evident with respect to the issues of sexual harassment, torture against detainees, exploitation of power, thuggery in the streets, workers’ civil rights and their protests to improve their economic living conditions, and calls for political change and reform. Within the Egyptian context, bloggers and blogs have set the agenda about important yet undiscussed issues, and have helped to discover unspoken truths not covered by the traditional media.

Sixth, the blog in Egypt plays an important role in documenting human rights violations in their different aspects and different levels, and also in using multimedia such as audio and video, photographs, caricatures, and so on to encourage people to participate and comment. Indeed, the blog opens the door for citizens to speak their voice and participate effectively through their comments, their roles as eye-witnesses, or by providing materials, for example, videos. Hence, *Al-Wa’i al-Masri* and political blogs in general have been successful in breaking down a psychological barrier for people who have felt that to speak about these issues was forbidden and should not even be considered. Likewise, thanks to *Al-Wa’i al-Masri* in particular and blogging in general in
Egypt, the bar of freedom of expression has been raised for the traditional Egyptian media, especially the independent printing press and broadcast journalism. As a result, and in Keren’s (2006) words, the blogosphere “has opened up the mainstream media to voices from the margins… and formed a complex network of opinion sharing in which personal trust, rather than institutional reputation, becomes the source of opinion formation” (p. 16).

Seventh, blogs also have played an important role in providing story ideas and information for the traditional media to develop and follow. Therefore, blogs are part of the competitive sphere of news gathering and reporting, often providing alternative content to what is presented in the traditional media. For example, in his blog, Abbas has provided elaborate coverage of important issues, acting as a professional investigative journalist, which include in-depth coverage of important events supported by his blog archive, Twitter feed, and hyperlinks to other materials. Specific examples of Abbas’s extensive coverage include the reports about the civil rights of the workers of Mahalla, the event in which Egyptian army cadets attacked a police station with stones in a town south of Cairo, and the people who were left stranded on the Rafah border between Egypt and Gaza. By using Twitter feed services on his blog, Abbas covered the following events as they happened: the devastating fire at the Shura Council building; the April 6th strike and other demonstrations; and the trial of the police officer involved in the notorious torturing of Imad Elkabeer. In five posts in 2007, Abbas provided detailed coverage of the police officer’s trial accompanied by many photos and videos, which enabled his readers to gain a powerful insight into the court proceedings.
It seems that Abbas has been sensitive about the credibility of his blog, since he repeatedly mentions his sources for news and other materials. For example, he may say “this video arrived to me from an anonymous citizen” or when he explicitly mentions that he is not the source of a specific topic, attributing it directly to the original source, or when he sometimes explains the procedures he follows to acquire specific information (post of January 19, 2008). Despite his professionalism in covering issues, Abbas’s language usually degenerated into name-calling and insults, which encourage some readers to use their own acrimonious interchanges and insults. Conversely, many of his readers’ comments contest this kind of inflammatory language, and call for the debate to be civilized and ethical.

Clearly blogs have succeeded in raising issues and the concerns about which the mainstream media rarely speak, while empowering people who otherwise would be without access to the traditional media or the public sphere. Descriptions of blogs as “alternative media” or “citizen’s media” are a commonplace in the literature. Although this may be true, it also can be argued that blogs and mainstream media enjoy a symbiotic relationship. The mainstream media turns to blogs for content, such as story ideas, leads, and confirmations. Media institutions even recruit bloggers, for example, The Guardian newspaper has recruited the famous Iraqi blogger Salam Pax to write a column. In addition, some media outlets host a blogging platform on their own websites with an aim to encourage bloggers to populate their newspapers with user-generated content (Rettberg, 2008, p. 110).

Bloggers also need mainstream media, not only as news sources to support their blogging but also to maximize their publicity. Abbas augmented his social status in the
real world thanks in part to the mainstream media that provided him with opportunities to speak at conferences and receive media attention. Such publicity created the conditions for a wider reception of his blog videos and posts, many of which were reproduced frequently in newspapers and aired on television stations. However, the state-run media rarely, if ever, publicizes the activities of bloggers. On the one hand, the extent of the blogosphere’s penetration of the traditional media is confined to the independent and oppositional media in Egypt, and on the other to international networks. Abbas has published more than forty posts that document his promotional efforts, such as his regular appearances in broadcast and print media, both locally and internationally, whenever he comments on the general practice of blogging in Egypt and the specific issues that he raises on his website.

The symbiotic relationship between blogs and mainstream media is necessary for maximizing the advantages of blogging. Blogs are a new medium with an unprecedented level of freedom that give ordinary people a public space to argue and discuss or deliberate about issues that for a long time were considered taboo. As Al Malky (2007) emphasizes:

The future of political blogging in Egypt greatly depends on its fostering links with mainstream independent media, links which will likely determine whether blogs are seen as enclaves of marginal opinion and hearsay, or rather as venues for news and commentary deeply rooted in Egyptian society and central to its political life (p. 31).

So, if the mainstream independent media collaborate with bloggers, democratic culture and public awareness can only benefit.
Carroll and Hackett (2006) call the communicative network initiatives, which seek to democratize communication and challenge corporate media power, “democratic media activism.” They define the latter as “emergent movement praxis” and as a kind of new social movement: “a movement that sees democratization of communication as a crucial counter-measure against the shifting forms of control and domination that, in collapsing boundaries between public and private, also politicizes the personal” (p. 85, 96). In this form of democratic media activism, civil society or “grassroots” organizations try to cultivate a critical audience through public outreach, and try to push the media practices and strategies of institutions in a “direction that enhances democratic values and subjectivity as well as equal participation in public discourse and social decision-making” (Carroll and Hackett, 2006, p. 84). In this context, political blogging can be evaluated as a form of media democratic activism because bloggers make efforts to promote an enhanced awareness of the unspoken issues that the mainstream media ignore and attempt to stimulate discussion and thought about these silences with the hope of fostering social change.

As a form of activism, political blogging has been counted among the critical social movements that are driving political reforms in Egypt. Political bloggers in Egypt are considered to be activists who are directly involved in politics, using their blogs for political mobilizations and campaigns. As was illustrated in the interviews that I conducted with bloggers and Internet activists, political bloggers take up causes that support the common public good and they are motivated to exploit the blogging medium and all kinds of personal digital media to this end. Political bloggers are positioning themselves within a number of emerging movements in Egypt, such as the Kefaya
Movement, the Egyptian Movement for Change, the April 6th Movement, blogger and youth movements, as well as making inroads with groups of independent-minded judges, journalists, and university professors, and so on. Since 2004, many political protest movements have emerged in Egypt, which have culminated in a recent initiative for change called “The National Front for Change” created by Mohamed ElBaradei in February 2010.

Apart from raising issues that complement the agendas of such movements, which seek genuine democratic reforms and fight corruption, bloggers and their readers help to open a public space for deliberation and discussion about issues of concern that otherwise would be unavailable. Bloggers play an important role in publicizing these movements and in mobilizing the participation of the masses, especially youth, in organized events. As Eltahawy (2007) says when commenting on the role of bloggers in Egypt: “The bloggers were the electronic pamphleteers for the street activists. At times, they were both one and the same—blogger and activist” (p. 2). For example, the blogging community supported Kefaya by posting banners that called for a prohibition against hereditary rule, the release of Kefaya activists, and the enforcement of anti-torture laws (Oweidat et al., 2008, p. 23).

The prominence of blogging can be associated with the rise of these social movements, since the relationship between blogging movements and other forms of conventional activism are mutually sustaining. Carroll and Hackett (2006) describe the relation between media activism and other forms of activism: “Media activism thrives, and can only thrive, in conjunction with other democratic movements. As it thrives, it
facilitates those movements” (p. 92). In a feature article, Al Malky (2007) points to the impact of blogging on the Kefaya initiative:

> If Kifaya has provided the political space for voices of opposition to speak out, blogs have provided the means for Kifaya’s mobilization. Not only have bloggers continued to challenge the official version of events, exposing a wide array of abuses by Egypt’s authorities and monitoring fellow activists’ lives in jail, they have also rallied other activists to the cause by publicizing Kifaya demonstrations often overlooked by mainstream publications (p. 4).

It should be stressed that Al Malky (2007) does not confine the role of blogging to providing the means for Kefaya’s specific political ends; he also notes that bloggers help to secure a public space for voices to speak out on broader, related issues.

Bloggers work as a campaigners and support the activities of solidarity groups that represent powerless and marginalized people who are not just fellow activists detained or jailed (e.g., the “Free Alaa” and “Free Kareem” campaigns) but also anyone who may have been subjected to oppression by the authorities. As has been shown by this present study, bloggers such as Abbas have fulfilled this role by documenting injustices through video and audio recordings of physical and sexual abuses and other violations of human rights.

It is important to remember that political bloggers are not only working on the Internet. They rarely remain glued to their computers or stay tied to their desktops. Rather, they also work in the streets and put themselves at risk, whenever they capture the news beat with their own cameras and deliver reports on current events using their real names. The tumultuousness of their activities and their ability to take risks and generate buzz around political topics is precisely what sets Egyptian bloggers apart from Internet activists in other Arab countries. Moreover, they contribute more to political discussion than mere expression of opinion. For these reasons, even if their tone of
discourse appears to be cynical and sceptical, the assumption should not be made that political bloggers are as melancholic as Michael Keren has argued (Keren, 2006, pp. 12-14). Nevertheless, Keren’s claim about blogging as “emancipatory” does seem to ring true with respect to the situation in Egypt. He suggests that the “blogosphere may be conceptualized as the arena in which the newly emancipated individuals... are defining their particularistic identities vis à vis an ancien régime consisting of traditional politics and the mainstream media” (Keren, 2006, p. 9). However, the Egyptian example does not resonate with his conclusion that the blogosphere constitutes a failed type of emancipation.

From my close observations during my research period, the frequency of posts on Al-Wa’i al-Masri has been decreasing gradually. For example, the number of posts in 2009 is less than in previous years and continues the annual decrease. I also have noticed a growing trend toward an extensive use of Twitter on Abbas’s blog. For example, after he began to use this new micro blogging platform on a regular basis, the frequency of his blog posts decreased significantly. This phenomenon raises doubts about the future of blogging in the long term, especially in light of the un-stoppable emergence of new forms of communication technologies, and in light of the life cycle of bloggers. To a great extent, blogging is done by a specific age group, and no one knows what will happen when the bloggers of today grow old. Will they transform or move to another form? Similar anxieties about technological change have surfaced before in conjunction with other modes of political communication on the Internet that were used enthusiastically and extensively before blogging. Usually, interest in these modes, such as discussion groups, Usenet newsgroups, MUDs (Multi-User Domains) eventually faded as well.
Commenting on this tendency, my interviewee Saeed Elmasry, Head of the Social Issues Program affiliated with the Egyptian Cabinet, Information and Decision Support Center (IDSC) made a similar prediction when we talked about the future of blogging in Egypt:

In the future, young people might gravitate more to platforms that are more interactive and social. In my view, I believe that more young people will be involved with Facebook, which is more functional for networking and mobilizing. However, blogs might transform the practices of online newspapers, especially the political blogs and bloggers who are keen to be more famous and effective. I also am wondering about when the effectiveness of blogging will wither. Moreover, when bloggers feel that their impact on the ground is real, they might decide to move to a large online newspaper and perhaps take on a role like editor-in-chief (S. Elmasry, personal interview, March 5, 2009).

In other words, he argues that blogging could be used as a means to an end, for example, as in a new phenomenon that is beginning to take shape—the publishing of blogs into books. Three literary blogs have been turned into books published by the Dar Elshrouk Publishing House in Egypt. Since the publication, the authors of these blogs have stopped blogging, and their presence in the public sphere outside of blogs has become greater than blogging itself. Elmasry suggests that:

Blogging also is a venue for discovering literary talents, especially in light of the lack of traditional institutions to perform this role. In Egypt, literary talents have come to light through blogging, and otherwise, they would have remained in the back stage (for example, Roz Blaban’s Rice With Milk and Aaiz Atgawaz’s I Want to Marry) (S. Elmasry, personal interview, March 5, 2009).

These reservations and reflections about the future of blogging in Egypt and elsewhere do not detract from the implications of blogging, specifically political blogging for democracy and for change. Many examples exist of how bloggers are influencing the agenda of traditional media coverage, and of how blogs are forcing once silent issues onto the national agenda.

With its casual discussion and informal deliberation over controversial issues normally avoided by the mainstream media, blogging has had an undeniable impact on
the democratic culture and public opinion in Egypt. With the centrality and ubiquitousness of new media technologies, the character of politics and public space is being reconstituted. Hence, it is important to recognize and appreciate how informal political conversations among ordinary people occur in such public spaces, whether online or offline, and how these engagements relate to the formation of democratic culture (Wyatt et al., 2000, p. 72). Clearly, the political blogosphere discourse is dominated by the subjectivity and rhetorical style of the blogger. Unfortunately, this focus on projecting a personality while blogging tends to limit the discussion around the author’s view, and in turn decreases the diversity of space available for participants to debate and discuss. Moreover, this kind of imbalance in the discourse affects the rationality of the public discourse. In other words, it blurs the public with the private sphere.

Even though blogging is unable to fulfill the criteria of a fully rational public sphere in the Habermasian sense, the blogosphere still raises political implications for democracy in Egypt. Drawing on an empirical study, Wyatt et al. (2000) argue that personal conversations or what they call “ordinary political conversation[s]” occur in private spaces, such as at home, work and in civil organizations, and they are a vital component of actual democratic practice and have political consequences. Applying this general insight to the political blogosphere in particular, a conclusion can be drawn that blogging constitutes a continuation of “ordinary political conversations.” However, it is worth adding that blogging in Egypt encourages not merely idle conversation but greater action in the public sphere.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

The balance of the academic literature on blogging tends to present it as inherently progressive, oppositional, and counter-hegemonic; and claims about the emancipatory potential of the blogosphere are often couched in terms of competition and antagonism. Moreover, an assumption exists that bloggers will somehow revolutionize conventional journalistic practices by working against the established norms. However, Lovink (2008) offers a comparatively more sophisticated view of the manner in which blogging leaves its mark on the political landscape. He argues that “blog culture is not, by definition, progressive and cannot be heralded as ‘anti-establishment’” (p. 2), and he believes that blogging lacks an authentically progressive element. In his account of “the nihilist impulse of blogging,” Lovink (2008) distinguishes between cynicism and nihilism, suggesting that cynicism refers to knowledge, whereas nihilism concerns itself with nothingness. In other words, although both might adopt a critical or negative perspective on reality, cynicism still holds out the possibility of uncovering some kind of truth even as it engages in the activity of doubting and criticizing. By contrast, nihilism constitutes an attitude of disbelief in everything: “Nihilism also would be an ethical doctrine where there are no moral absolutes or infallible natural laws, and truth is inescapably subjective” (p. 22).

In the media context, nihilism refers to a growing distrust in the legitimacy and credibility of commercial news media, and hence, a loss of faith in the validity of media as voices of authority. Classifying bloggers as nihilists suggests that they exhibit an unwavering lack of trust in established systems and their discourse (Lovink, 2008, p. 23).
Lovink also argues that the fall of the mass media exemplifies a decline in the “Belief in the Message,” which he calls ‘the nihilist moment;’ and blogs tend to fuel this turn to nihilism (p. 17). According to Lovink (2008), bloggers question the hegemony of mass media, but offer nothing to fill the void created in the wake of their critiques. Rather, they are merely “witnessing and documenting the diminishing power of the mainstream media, but they have consciously not replaced its ideology with an alternative. They zero out [the] old structure but do not claim to be its predecessor” (Lovink, 2008, p. 18). Thus, blogs diminish the centralized meaning structures, which is to say that they do not provide a coherent message or claim to be searching for truth—a value-orientation that is so common to the practices of traditional media. Instead of arguing and analyzing, bloggers focus on personal experiences, putting themselves in “the perversely pleasurable position of media observer” (p. 19). In the process, Lovink (2008) contends, this preoccupation with merely recording the disintegration of the older structures of meaning, while enjoying the role of being witness to the downfall, eclipses any serious concern for revolution or the building of something new. For this reason, Lovink describes bloggers as “‘creative nihilists because they are ‘good for nothing’” (p. 22).

While the above might be arguably true in the Western context, the Egyptian blogosphere and blogging in general outside of the West differs. The disposition of Egyptian bloggers appears to be less nihilistic and more cynical in orientation. They attempt to get to the truth behind the mainstream and official discourse by providing eye-witness and first-hand accounts of events and by scrutinizing what is published in the traditional media. Thus, they attempt to undermine the monopoly of the state media and the traditional media with respect to the claim of truth and the control of information
dissemination. No one can deny the role that bloggers have played in the recent expansion of political mobility in Egypt both as an advocacy voice and by bringing unspoken issues into the public sphere for the first time.

The research presented in this dissertation suggests that the discourse of blogs and bloggers in the Egyptian case are an example of what Goldfarb (2006) describes as “the politics of small things.” This phrase helps to explain the present and potential future impacts of blogs and Internet activism in Arab and Egyptian society. In his concept of “the politics of small things,” Goldfarb discusses how during the 1980s and 1990s, powerless people in Central Europe developed their public spaces—in bookstores, salons, and around kitchen tables—by “acting as if they lived in a free society” (Goldfarb, 2006, p. 15, emphasis mine). Since they felt relatively free to discuss the narratives of their lives in these spaces, Goldfarb (2006) argues that through these small narratives and events, they developed new ways for acting and created an alternative public sphere and politics distinct from the official domain. As Goldfarb suggests, “When people freely meet and talk to each other as equals, reveal their differences, display their distinctions, and develop a capacity to act together, they create power” (p. 4). This power, Goldfarb argues, played a key role in the fall of communism and the concomitant democracy. Moreover, in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, as politics transformed and the new media environment emerged, Goldfarb (2006) argues that the politics of small things yielded to new forms, spaces, and networks in which virtual social interactions among ordinary people “met each other on the Web. They posted their messages and responded to each other, got to know each other and then coordinated their actions” (p. 75). These social interactions facilitated by Internet interconnectivity create the politics of small
things, which result in political power—“the capacity for people to meet, speak, and act in the presence of others, developing a capacity for concerted action” (p. 82).

Blogs in Egypt constitute a form of the politics of small things as they create a space for political freedom, and as bloggers act as if they are living in a free society. The presence of blogs and social networking websites are more important in some ways than what is being said or the message. In other words, just the knowledge that access to blogs exits and that different categories of ordinary people have relative freedom—meaning that they have the capacity to constitute new forms of social interactions and speak their minds—demonstrates the potential of blogs to become an effective power in the social fabric.

Emerging new media technologies have not only opened up new opportunities for journalism but also have empowered audiences and civil society organizations with unprecedented platforms for free expression and social activism around the world. These emerging media technologies or what has been called social media provide a platform for marginalized groups and the voiceless. Blogging, Facebook, YouTube, and other Internet platforms have become part of everyday life, and their impact on social and political change is substantial. To spread freedom of expression and democracy to Arab societies in which authoritarian rule has long been predominant, hope has been placed on the information communication technologies exemplified by the Internet (Kalathil & Boas, 2003). Almost all the traditional Arab media are instruments of the state, basically used to serve the regime, especially the broadcast media, which is monopolized by the government, and the print media, which has suffered from direct state censorship and self-censorship by both editors and publishers (Ayish, 2002; Amin, 2002). Different from
other forms of media or technology, the Internet with its unique applications is regarded as having the potential to enable the free public speech of ordinary citizens and opposition groups by bypassing the restrictions imposed on freedom of expression in the Arab world. Thus, the emerging media technologies also are perceived as having the potential to create a space for an ongoing dialogue about democracy, and ultimately, to create a revitalized form of the public sphere.

Famously, Habermas’ concept of the public sphere has been a theoretical and normative foundation for debates about the changing role of the mass media in public life and for media theory in general. In the attempts to apply the notion of the public sphere to an analysis of the media, a number of arguments and criticisms have been directed at Habermas’ narrative and approach to the communication media and its role, which was a key factor in his account of the emergence and decline of the bourgeois public sphere. With the emergence of new media technologies and their diverse applications, Habermas’ concept of the public sphere has been resurrected and reinvigorated. Conspicuously, the greatest potential benefit of the Internet is its ability to empower marginalized groups that traditionally were silenced and not able to speak for themselves.

The politics of the emerging media have been presented by opposing perspectives. Whether the Internet can constitute a public sphere remains a matter of great debate that ranges from optimism to pessimism. Some research adopts an optimistic view that the Internet can help to promote democracy and extend the public sphere. This research suggests that the emerging media technologies provide arenas in which the public can express their views and practice democratic participation. These studies argue that the Internet has the potential to enhance deliberative democracy and expand the public sphere.
of rational-critical discourse due to the characteristics of the Internet, especially its hypertext structure, archival search processes, interactive capabilities, empowerment of individuals to customize their own favourite news in which every participant can be both a receiver and a producer of information, and provision of anonymity.

A large body of research has focused on determining the extent to which online deliberations—everyday communications within cyberspace performed by Usenet groups, e-mail lists, Web forums, blogs, and chat groups—are facilitating rational-critical discourse, and on identifying any factors that are inhibiting the extension of such communications. Distinguishable from the narrow political discourse of mainstream journalism, Internet chatrooms, email lists, blogs, and other discussion forums help to produce quite a different dynamic of media event coverage. From this angle, the new media environment provides a means to overcome many restrictive barriers. Its ability to bypass censorship opens up the possibility for undermining the capacity of the state to repress and control, since it is no longer the only actor gatekeeper of the flow of information and political communication.

However, this positive and optimistic championing of the democratic potential of emerging media contrasts with a number of concerns that undermine the possibility that the Internet will fulfill the requirements of Habermas’s public sphere. For example, the potential impact of the Internet on politics and participatory democracy is undermined when access is not available to all; most of the discussions on online forums are irrational, and conversations do not focus on a specific topic until group consensus is reached. Hence, Internet use is still far from providing a solid democratic foundation for the public sphere. Some studies have pointed to the lack of accessibility that makes
Internet use far from universal, to the lack of the regulation of its use that makes it far from being a civil and reliable site for participatory democracy, and also to concerns about the issues of flaming and obscenity that make the Internet an unsafe space for many users. Additionally, a group of studies about the potential of the Internet for politics recommends a cautious perspective when giving credit to its role in potentially enhancing democracy and the public sphere, arguing that the structural features of the Internet do more for businesses and consumers than for citizens, politics, and the public sphere. In other words, the Internet is portrayed as a means to continue and extend the powers of the state and the market.

The consensus is that the new electronic forms of communication have provided public “spaces” for public use, and that the utilization of these spaces for politics and for building democracy depends on the willingness of public officials and all concerned actors to overcome the barriers that still make these spaces exclusive. Moreover, the online world is a reflection of the offline world: since many people today suffer from a kind of political alienation, and since political participation declines as a result of a general loss of confidence in political institutions, a similar pattern is expected within online discussion groups. In summary, the pessimistic perspective on the impact of the Internet on democracy building contends that this medium has nothing inherently democratic about it, and that only the actions of government policymakers and those who use the medium will determine the extent to which the Internet becomes a public sphere.

One major aim of this dissertation was to examine the potential and implications of one of the emerging media technologies—the blogging phenomenon—as a form of citizens’ media used to represent new modes of political communications and online politics.
within the Egyptian context. This goal was accomplished by situating and adapting Habermas’ notion of the normative public sphere as a theoretical framework in addition to frameworks that draw on concepts from related fields of inquiry, such as studies of citizen’s media, democracy, and interactive journalism.

My hypothesis is that the emerging media technologies as practiced in Egypt have helped to create a different type of public sphere in Egypt, and as a result, have facilitated a dialogue about democracy. This hypothesis raises some specific concerns: Do the new modes of political communication over the Internet, basically the blogging phenomenon, serve as sites for free public discussion? Does the Internet help to produce a functioning alternative public sphere?

As was discussed in Chapter three, the present decline of the role of political parties in the political life of Egypt suggests that political party affiliation is weak in Egypt and that political parties have no real effect in Egyptian political life. The government restrictions on civil society organizations and its banning participation in political activities have undermined the role of political parties to inject the public sphere with democratic discursive dialogue concerning government policies. In addition, communication policy is still governed by restrictive laws and other censorial actions taken by the political authorities. Although the Egyptian Constitution and the Law of the Press posits freedom of expression and prohibits censorship, the reality on the ground makes a mockery of these laws. Moreover, other societal forces and cultural trends may be undermining freedom of expression in the Arab world. Therefore, it could be argued that the recent remarkable wave of demonstrations and protests in Egypt have been caused by the failure of political parties in Egypt, the clogging of the legal avenues of
expression of opinion, the absence of traditional mediating institutions between the public and the state, and the difficult living conditions endured by the majority of Egyptians.

Under these difficult conditions, bloggers and Internet activists have adopted the new emerging media technologies, which helps to explain why Egyptian youth go online with such unprecedented intensity, especially to use Facebook (the presence of Egyptians on Facebook is higher than any other Arab country, and Egyptians rank second in the Arab world in their use of YouTube) and to blog, representing 30.7% of the total use of blogging in the Arabic world (Egyptian Cabinet, Information and Decision Support Center [IDSC], February 2010); at the same time, these difficult conditions have helped to shape the effects and outcomes of emerging media use. Frequently, blogging has been held up as a positive example of the way in which emerging media technologies have become more promising forms of online politics, political participation, and electronic activism in Egyptian society. Accordingly, in part, it seems that the stampede of youth to cyberspace is a reflection of the absence of any real alternatives to practicing political action or participation on the ground; thus, the cyberspace of the Internet has provided them with a suitable and safe place for effective political involvement. Certainly, the interactive capabilities and anonymity that characterize the Internet provide more opportunities for youth to freely express their personal/public concerns and ambitions, and to directly exchange ideas without intermediaries, restrictions of censorship, or interference from ideology or political leaders.

Over the last decade, many changes have occurred in the Egyptian media landscape, and Egyptian blogs and Facebook are among the main actors on the scene next to the Independent press and private satellite television channels. All of these media,
human rights organizations, and popular social protest are the new actors in a new, dynamic Egyptian political landscape. What gives momentum and influence to these actors is their association and collaboration with the grassroots of society. Egyptian blogs and Internet use have increased political mobility, political agitation, and a sense of injustice and discontent over many public issues. Faced with a lack of freedom of expression and inspired by the emergence of protest movements, individuals and groups have sought out media that they can use to express their views and to become communicators in their own right. Thus, blogs have become a forum for their voices and for debate beyond the dominant public sphere, which suggests that blogs are a part of an alternative public sphere.

The turning point of the influence of the emerging new media in Egypt began with the parliamentary elections and the concomitant protests that have prevailed in Egypt from 2004 until the present. During this period, Egyptians have conspicuously appropriated the new media—including blogs, Facebook, and mobile phones—to mobilize politically and exchange information.

As was made evident in Chapter five—a case study of the Egyptian Awareness blog—Egyptians are using the emerging new media to circumvent the imposed restrictions on the Egyptian political public. Moreover, the use of these new media technologies is no longer restricted to the highly educated or highest socio-economic classes; rather, the less educated and less affluent also have access thanks to the initiatives exerted by the Egyptian government to make Internet access more affordable. Thus, the issue of Internet accessibility no longer seems to be a problem in Egypt. Egyptian bloggers, journalists, and human rights activists express a lack of concern about
accessibility, since they do not perceive it to be a hindrance to the effectiveness of blogging or a barrier to effective political participation in Egyptian society. It seems clear that Egypt’s growing initiatives and large investments in technology infrastructure has assisted rather than hindered the use of the Internet for blogging, for creating an effective virtual public sphere, and for influencing political attitudes and behaviours. Instead, my interviewees directed their attention to other barriers that originate within the traditional, hierarchical structure of Arabic culture and to other corollary social and cultural factors, such as increasing unemployment and poor-quality education and social services that create a wide divide throughout the Egyptian population.

Also my interviews revealed that the recent political protests and demonstrations in the Egyptian streets are associated in one way or another with a growing digital protest on the Internet represented by a number of political blogs that have succeeded in recruiting and mobilizing a broad sector of Egyptian youth. Consequently, in recent years, Egyptian blogs have begun to shape an influential virtual community that is having a political, social, and cultural impact on the ground.

The characteristics of the blogging community in Egypt appear to be consistent with the dominant demographic of bloggers and users of social media. The majority of bloggers fall into the age category of 20 to 30 years, and range from those with middle levels of education to those who are highly educated, and most of them are from the middle class. However, as my interviews show and from my own observations, the class factor has less weight in the community of bloggers. Blogging represents a new generation whose thoughts differ from their predecessors. Even those who align themselves with conventional ideologies are not like the older adherents of those
ideologies. For example, the Muslim Brotherhood officially demands that its members strictly comply with its policies; however, many bloggers affiliated with this organization have used their blogs as an "unofficial" forum to explore other ideologies, question the policies and thoughts of the movement, and even undermine its hierarchy. Muslim Brothers bloggers have been successful in using their blogs as a new and free platform available to the young people of the Brotherhood, and at the same time, as an alternative technique to exert pressure on the current Egyptian regime, and more interestingly, on the old guard of the Muslim Brotherhood movement itself. It can be argued that through critical agitation, Muslim Brotherhood bloggers are instigating a transformation in the Muslim Brotherhood that could usher in much wider structural transformations.

Some of my interviewees’ responses also shed light on the debate that exists in the literature about the status of blogging, and how it compares with traditional journalistic practices. As they described, bloggers do not always receive their due recognition from established media organizations. On some certain issues, a competition exists between political bloggers and the traditional media, and in these cases, the intellectual property rights of bloggers are violated by the traditional newspapers that quote from blogs without citing the names of the blog or the blogger. However, both sides believe that the association between them is a necessary and complementary relationship that improves the work of each and works for the sake of the public good, even though some journalists perceive bloggers negatively, especially those who work for national or government newspapers that rarely mention or cite bloggers. For example, Refaat AlSaeed, the leader of Tagamooa Party and a writer for the Al-Ahram national newspaper, describes bloggers and the Facebook group of April 6th as “mentally deficient
or insane.” However, the independent newspaper journalists give more attention to the news of bloggers, and use them as eye-witnesses. In addition, these newspapers open their doors to bloggers and regularly publish their photos and news information; some independent newspapers even provide a special segment in their papers for bloggers. My interviews also suggest that the overall perception of bloggers by journalists and traditional media, and the relationship between them, fluctuates. Some journalists, mostly those of the younger generation, are interested in blogging, and appreciate bloggers and what they are doing, and they also depend on blogs as sources of information on many issues. Moreover, even though many older journalists do not take blogs seriously and perceive bloggers with ridicule, it also can be argued that blogs and mainstream media enjoy a symbiotic relationship. For example, the mainstream media often turns to blogs for content, such as story ideas, leads, and confirmations.

In my interviews, most political Egyptian bloggers identify themselves as citizen journalists and Internet activists. Their motivations for blogging in the Middle East—where authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes dominate and where freedom of expression is in doubt—differ qualitatively from those blogging in the Western world. For example, most of my informants seemed to identify with a counter-public that opposes and distrusts everything under state authority. They are motivated by desires to practice their freedom and self-expression, and editorial autonomy, and by doing so, they attempt to fight corruption and the repression of the political system, and to change Egyptian society and serve the public good.

Many marginalized groups also have benefited from using blogs to politically empower themselves and express their opinions. At the top of the list are women who use
blogging to break through the repression of the conservative society in which they live, and to contest some of the cultural conventions that ascribe fixed roles according to gender. Through the technology of cyberspace, they are able to make a distinct contribution to discussions from which they normally would be excluded.

Political blogging in Egypt is popular because it has initiated discussions about controversial issues that normally would be considered taboo in Egyptian society. It has been a major player in exposing human rights abuses, corruption, and police torture, and has played an important role in mobilizing and organizing protests, strikes, and demonstrations. Moreover, bloggers have worked in complimentary ways with social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter to initiate the birth of an alternative public sphere in Egypt. This coalition between Facebook and blogging—in terms of generating arguments and exchanging opinions, and mobilizing and recruiting people to issues and campaigns—has further transformed them both into a unique political phenomenon, far beyond the scope of their uses for mundane social and cultural communication. The attraction of large sectors of Egyptian youth to these kinds of social media seems to coincide with the appearance of a new, younger, and more rebellious citizenry.

The case study of the Al-Wa‘i al-Masri blog in Chapter five examined how Egyptian bloggers have brought matters to public attention that the traditional media have long ignored. This fact is extremely evident in Al-Wa‘i al-Masri blog with respect to the issues of sexual harassment, torture against detainees, exploitation of power, thuggery in the streets, workers’ civil rights and their protests to improve their economic living conditions, and calls for political change and reform. Within Al-Wa‘i al-Masri, Wael Abbas, acting as a professional investigative journalist, provides elaborate coverage of
important issues, which include in-depth coverage of important events supported by his blog archive, Twitter feed, and hyperlinks to other materials. The blog also depends, to great extent, on the information sources provided by its audience; its readers send their stories to Abbas along with videos and photographs usually taken with their mobile phone cameras. In this vein, the coverage of Al-Wa’i al-Masri could be classified as a kind of citizen journalism that provides an opportunity for the voices and thoughts of ordinary citizens to be heard by a public audience. Readers use Abbas’s blog to wrestle with the issues relevant to political reform, such as concerns about the regime and its instability, including the question of presidential succession, the forging of elections and referendums, civil and human rights, and so on.

The analysis of the discourse of Al-Wa’i al-Masri is helpful for understanding the discursive construction of blogs in Egypt, and to what extent blogging in Egypt can create spaces for dialogues about democracy, a new public sphere in which political and social issues can be discussed outside of the established traditional media. At the same time, it may yield insight into the process of social change in Egyptian society, as well as into the construction of identity in relation to bloggers and their readers. In general, since 2005, the coverage of demonstrations, protests, strikes, and the official responses by government authorities has occupied an important place in blogging in Egypt. During this time, activist groups such as the Kefaya Movement openly demonstrated against President Mubarak, and bloggers played an important role in mobilizing and covering their rallies, and in photographing and posting information about their activist events on their blogs. Abbas’s Al-Wa’i al-Masri blog is the central pioneer in this process.
Blogs in Egypt play an important role in documenting human rights violations in their different aspects and levels through the use of multimedia such as audio and video, photographs, caricatures, and so on, which serve as real sources of evidence for official investigators. Thus, blogs function as a “knowledge repository” and also play an informative role in that they act as organs for informing citizens of their rights. Indeed, blogs open the door for citizens to speak their minds and to participate effectively through their comments, their roles as eye-witnesses, or by providing materials, for example, videos. Hence, Al-Wa’i al-Masri and political blogs in general have been successful in breaking down psychological barriers for people who felt that speaking about these issues was forbidden and should not even be considered. Likewise, thanks to Al-Wa’i al-Masri in particular and blogging in general in Egypt, the bar of freedom of expression has been raised for the traditional Egyptian media, especially the independent printing press and broadcast journalism. Blogs also make their presence felt in the traditional media—whether independent, private, or national—by bringing to light issues that the traditional media miss but eventually are obliged to cover as a result of blog coverage. Within the Egyptian context, bloggers and blogs have set the agenda about important issues rarely discussed, and thus have helped to discover unspoken truths not covered by the traditional media. For example, in addition to issues of torture and police abuse and brutality, Egyptian bloggers have succeeded in putting the issue of the sexual harassment of women on the public agenda. Although sexual harassment is not a new issue in Egypt, it has been regarded as a taboo topic, and was rarely discussed in the pages of newspapers or on television programs.
Thus, it seems that a new public sphere is emerging in Egypt in which public events never before covered by the traditional media are now given prominent and very public exposure through blogs. Blogs like *Al-Wa’i al-Masri* not only serve as a way for Egyptian citizens to demand accountability from their government with respect to the public exposure of abuse by authorities, but also actively document police discipline and brutality with videos, pictures, and eyewitness accounts.

The discourse on *Al-Wa’i Al-Masri* is overwhelmingly hostile to the government and supportive of empowering the Egyptian people. Often, government regulations and involvement in society is negatively portrayed. The level of criticism is usually so scorching that it moves beyond the borders of civil discourse and debate, beyond rational-critical discourse, by indulging in inflammatory language inclined towards the personal attack. For example, the case study shows that Abbas and his readers mostly direct their attack on the regime and the government without providing any mechanisms or proposing any solutions to resolve the problems in society. As Al Malky (2007) argues, this style of blogging in Egypt, mainly based on antagonistic political activity, cannot succeed as an alternative media for wider public debate and social change. In other words, this style of discourse often exhibits a sort of ethical slippage, whereby the discussions often degenerate into simple name-calling and derogatory language. Thus, the political potential of blogging and the good intentions of the bloggers to expose the crucial problems prevailing in society are undermined. Nevertheless, this line of oppositional, critical, and denunciatory discourse of the *Al-Wa’i Al-Masri* blog functions effectively by using sources that resonate with this kind of tone, sources that are affiliated with independent and oppositional newspapers, satellite television programs, and information
from human rights organizations’ websites that mostly defy the official political discourse.

With the growing impact and readership of blogs, questions arise about bloggers’ ethical responsibilities. Generally, the performance of emerging media has been measured against established ethical standards; however, often, this kind of measurement does not account for the personal ethical dispositions and commitments of these alternative citizen journalists. Some suggest that traditional journalistic ethics should be used to regulate the freedom of expression on the web and of bloggers. My interviews with bloggers and my case study of the Egyptian Awareness blog show that any attempt to establish a code of ethics for bloggers and blogs is difficult. Bloggers were suspicious about any talk about ethics or just the idea of imposing any codes. They unanimously did not see a need for ethics codes or even think about the ethical implications of their use of these new media technologies. Conversely, bloggers consider their credibility and focus on telling the truth as essential, which often extends to using their real names. It has been suggested that the practice of using real names in political weblogs enhances credibility and trust, which significantly influences the willingness of their readership to participate in political issues and support the political projects promoted by the weblog (Yu, Gross, Sheffield, & Anderson, 2007). In Al-Wa’i al-Masri, Abbas also highlights the issue of credibility whenever possible by verifying the information he posts, repeatedly mentioning his sources for news and other materials, and explicitly pointing out that he is not the source a specific topic, which he attributes to the original source.

The case study on Abbas’s blog also illustrates that political bloggers in Egypt avoid posting information from the media outlets controlled by the government or other
official entities because they believe that the state-run media lacks the trust of most Egyptian citizens. The thorny issues presented in the Egyptian blogosphere tend to help create a public space in which bloggers are perceived as courageous, credible, trustful, and indispensable. This encourages their audiences to actively participate in blogging by sending in their own reports and having them published. The credibility of bloggers also can be measured through their readers’ comments about the posted material (video, audio, or text), which often are tied to their eye-witness experience of the events covered in the blog. As Gillmor argues (2006), “they are many, and we [journalists] are often just one. We need to recognize and, in the best sense of the word, use their knowledge” (p. 111).

Despite his professionalism in covering issues, Abbas’s language usually degenerates into name-calling and insults, which encourage some of his readers to use their own acrimonious interchanges and insults. Conversely, many of his readers’ comments contest this kind of inflammatory language, and call for the debate to be civilized and ethical. Noticeably, what characterizes the discussion and comments throughout the Al-Wa’i al-Masri blog might be called “virtual anger.” Instead of engaging with someone’s ideas, criticizing constructively, or adding new facts or correct information, his readers’ comments often are incomplete ideas or full of slander and liable accusation, usually twisting the discussion to voice daily frustrations and economic difficulties, the deterioration of values and corruption of public officials and the political system itself. Moreover, Abbas’s readers’ responses were littered with defamatory statements, disparaging comments, derogatory names, and defamation, which hinder their ability to achieve critical rationality and logical dialogue. Most of the time, frequent
resorts to *ad hominem* lines of attack and argumentation derailed the focus of a discussion thread, leading to a number of irrelevant comments. This pattern of discourse represents chaos rather than freedom of expression in a way similar to Davis’ (1999) conclusion regarding the Usenet groups as forums for the public discussion of political issues in the American context—they are a “cacophony rather than wisdom” (p. 153).

Political blogging is used as a form of media democratic activism as bloggers make efforts to promote an enhanced awareness of the unspoken issues that the mainstream media ignore, and as they attempt to stimulate discussion and thought about these silences with the hope of fostering social change. As a form of activism, political blogging is counted among the critical social movements that are driving political reforms in Egypt. Political bloggers in Egypt are considered to be activists who are directly involved in politics, using their blogs for political mobilizations and campaigns. Significantly, these political bloggers are positioning themselves within a number of emerging movements in Egypt, such as the Kefaya Movement, the Egyptian Movement for Change, the April 6th Movement, blogger and youth movements, and the like. In addition, bloggers work as political campaigners and support the activities of solidarity groups that represent powerless and marginalized people who are not just fellow activists detained or jailed, but also anyone who may have been subjected to oppression by the authorities. Since 2004, many political protest movements have emerged in Egypt, which have culminated in a recent initiative for change called “The National Front for Change” created by Mohamed ElBaradei (former head of the International Atomic Energy Agency) in February 2010.
Apart from raising issues that complement the agendas of such movements, which seek genuine democratic reforms and fight corruption, bloggers and their readers help to open a public space for deliberation and discussion about issues of concern that otherwise would be unavailable. Bloggers play an important role in publicizing these movements and in mobilizing the participation of the masses, especially youth, in organized events. In addition, it is important to remember that political bloggers are not only working on the Internet; rarely do they remain glued to their computers or stay tied to their desktops—rather, they also work in the streets and put themselves personally at risk.

The *Al-Wa’i al-Masri* blog is an important model of how blogs work as a form of citizens’ media by opening a space where ordinary people may voice their concerns using collaboratively-authored platforms. Through these interactive processes, the lay citizen becomes not just a receiver but also a producer of content. Even though blogging is unable to fulfill the criteria of a fully rational public sphere in the Habermasian sense, its casual discussion and informal deliberations over controversial issues normally avoided by the mainstream media have had an undeniable impact on democratic culture and public opinion in Egypt by continuously supporting democratic principles both on the Internet and in the streets.

**Limitations and Future Directions for Studying Blogging**

This dissertation has analyzed the new blogging phenomenon in Egypt, examining whether it has helped to create a new pro-democratic public sphere, and thus opened the door to a dialog about democracy. By doing so, I covered many debates within the literature of the politics of new media and theories of digital politics.
Specifically, my study depends on Habermas’s notion of the normative public sphere as the principal framework to investigate the impact of blogging and its potential as an alternative public sphere in Egypt. In addition, I anchored my study with concepts from related fields of inquiry, such as studies of citizen’s media, democracy, and interactive journalism. This dissertation also elaborates essential information concerning the specific Egyptian context in which blogging journalism exists in Egypt, and from which it has emerged, so to create a better understanding of the discourse of blogging journalism itself. The evidence shows that the iron hand of Egyptian state authority has softened under the impact of the Internet, and thus, new democratic possibilities are on the horizon in Egypt.

Due to the centrality and ubiquitousness of new media technologies in the daily lives of citizens, studying the phenomenon of blogging in the Egyptian context provides insights into how informal political conversations among ordinary people occur in cyberspace, and an awareness of their characteristics, potentials, and the challenges facing these new media. Through in-depth interviews with bloggers, journalists, and human rights activists, I have documented some of the insights that shed light on the research questions mentioned in earlier chapters. Since the scope of the present study is restricted to a limited sample of bloggers and journalists, and a case study of a famous political blog, I cannot easily generalize my findings to the whole of political blogs or to blogs as a whole. However, this case study provides a clear picture of the political discourse of Egyptian political blogging, and the interactions between bloggers and readers through an examination of Wael Abbas’s Al-Wa’i al-Masri blog—its
technological and stylistic features, the kinds of argumentation it uses, its information sources for public issues, and the significance of these sources.

Blogging and online social networking are new types of political practice that have attracted a large sector of Egyptian youth. However, uncertainty still exists as to the level of success of this political online activism as it transforms into life on the streets. Often, social and political reality does not provide a healthy environment for blogs and Internet activists to interact with other social institutions, and political interactions between the old generation and the new generation (to which most bloggers belong) do not exist for the most part. Hence, the political use of the Internet, exemplified in the protests and activism of blogs and Facebook, is not always transformed into generating political reform on the ground. Moreover, the language used in these web platforms often offends some categories of society, especially the elites or even at times the general population. To further investigate and map Egypt’s online public and the blogosphere community, an examination must be carried out with respect to the social, cultural, and political influences of a wide range of Egyptian bloggers. Moreover, a study also is needed to more closely examine the readers of blogs—their social interactions with bloggers and their uses of, and gratifications from, the blogging medium.

The ambivalent status of blogs in the social fabric also necessitates a deeper study of the relationship of the political discourse of blogs to political and social reality, and how the online media realistically fits in with the rest of society as a whole, including all of its imperfections and limitations. The perception that weblogs are a social production, and not just technology, can help researchers to better understand their fuller implications for political change and democracy in Egypt and throughout the Arab world.
Another direction for future research is to investigate blogging ethics, perhaps paying particular attention to the linguistic aspects and standards of writing that identify blogging as an emergent genre. Much research is needed to investigate the full impact of emerging media technologies, specifically their roles in political activism and social change.
Appendix A: Egyptian Bloggers, Journalists, and Human Rights Activists Interviewed

Abbas, Wael; Blogger; Personal interview, March 11, 2009.


Abdelrahman, Eman; Blogger (female); Personal interview March 24, 2009.

Abdel-Salam, Shahinaz, Blogger (female); Personal interview March 16, 2009.

Adel, Mohamed; Blogger affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood; Personal interview March 26, 2009.

Algarhy, Mohamed; Journalist for the *Al-Dostor* newspaper; Personal interview April 3, 2009.

Al-Hendy, Hussam; Journalist and Blogger; Personal interview April 3, 2009.

Atef, Noha; Blogger (female) and journalist for the *Al-Dostor* newspaper; Personal interview March 22, 2009.

Eid, Gamal; Executive Director of the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information; Personal interview March 23, 2009.

Elmasry, Saeed; Head of the Social Issues Program affiliated with the Egyptian Cabinet, Information and Decision Support Center (IDSC); Personal interview March 5, 2009.

Ezzat, Amr; Blogger and journalist; Personal interview April 6, 2009.

Gamal, Mohamed; Blogger and Website Editor in Chief for the *Al-Dostor* newspaper; Personal interview March 17, 2009.

Ghietas, Gamal; Journalist, IT editor of the *Al-Ahram* newspaper, and Editor-in-Chief of the *Loghat El-Aasr* (The Language of the Present) Magazine; Personal interview March 10, 2009.

Hashem, Sharif; Executive Vice President of the Information Technology Industry Development Agency in Egypt; Personal interview April 2, 2009.
Hassan, Hazem; Political science professor at Cairo University; Personal interview March 31, 2009.

Kandil, Amany; Director of the Arab Network of NGOs; Personal Interview March 25, 2009.

Maher, Ahmed; Blogger, activist, and one of the main founders of the April 6th movement on Facebook; Personal interview March 15, 2009.

Mahmoud, Abdel Moneim; Blogger affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood and journalist for the *Al-Dostor* newspaper; Personal interview March 18, 2009.

Mahmoud, Mostafa; Identified as a leftist blogger; Personal interview April 1, 2009.

Mostafa, Malek; Blogger; Personal interview March 16, 2009.

Shehab, Ashraf; Journalist for the *Al-Ahaly* newspaper; Personal interview March 30, 2009.

Zekri, Mina; Blogger and program coordinator for the Arabic Human Rights Information Network; Personal interview March 17, 2009.
Appendix B: Interview Guide for Egyptian Bloggers, Journalists, and Human Rights Activists

For Bloggers

- Your age
- Level of education completed
- Languages you speak/write
- When did you first start using the Internet?
- When did you start to blog?
- How did you learn about blogging?
- What motivates you to blog?
- Were you involved in other activities, such as participating in forum discussions or your own personal Website, before you stared blogging?
- How many hours per day do you spend on the Internet? How many of these hours do you dedicate to blogging?
- From where do you blog: your home, your work, etc.?
- How many daily post do you add to your blog or how frequently do you post: daily, weekly, monthly, etc.?
- What does blogging represent for you?
- Do you think that blogs are having an impact on Egyptian society today, and what do you think their impact could be in the future?
- Are you concerned about your privacy?
- How do you perceive your role in relation to traditional journalism?
- Do you fact-check the work of the traditional news media for its accuracy?
Do you consider yourself to be a journalist?

Since most people are concerned with the credibility, accuracy, and ethics of blogs, how important are these characteristics to you?

Have you received any formal journalism training before or after your involvement with blogging? Do you think bloggers should have journalistic training before they start blogging?

As a blogger, are you concerned with how journalists perceive you?

From where do you get your information for creating your blog?

Do you receive feedback from the readers of your blog? If so, how does this influence your blogging?

When you are blogging, to what extent does your perception of your audience influence what you create? By what means do you know your audience?

How many times has your blog been a source for the mainstream media?

Do you think that:
— blogs accurately inform citizens?
— blogs make government more accountable?
— blogs make politicians more accountable?
— blogs provide a forum for citizens to directly debate important issues of the day with one another?
— blogs present fair and unbiased news analysis?

For Journalists and Human Rights Activists

Could you describe for me your perception of the blogging phenomenon?

In your opinion, how much influence do you think blogs have on journalists?

Do you read blogs, and if so, how often?

Do you think that blogging is an important type of media?

What do you think the influence of blogs has been on mainstream media and political decision makers?

Would you evaluate blogs positively or negatively, or both? What are the positive and negative aspects of blogs?
- Have any blogs caught your attention and affected your decisions about covering a story?

- From your perspective, what are the current challenges for blogs and online journalism in Egypt?

- Do you think that:
  — blogs accurately inform citizens?
  — blogs make government more accountable?
  — blogs make politicians more accountable?
  — blogs provide a forum for citizens to directly debate important issues of the day with one another?
  — blogs present fair and unbiased news analysis?

- Why do you read blogs, how many, and how frequently? Do you interact with bloggers by posting comments?

- Has your organization ever quoted a blog as a news source?

- Do you think new information technologies have changed the levels of political engagement in any substantial way in Egypt and in the Arab region in general? In other words, do you think that blogs are an important part of political change and that bloggers’ observations strengthen democracy? If so, how?

- To what extent do you think bloggers are free to express their opinions on controversial issues without fear of reprisal from the government?

- Do you think that the blogosphere in Egypt has encouraged the mainstream media to rethink its policies about what it censors or considers taboo?

- How would you evaluate the response of the government to blogging and bloggers in Egypt?

- How would you evaluate the response of the mainstream media towards blogging and emerging media technologies, for example, pod casting or social networking (e.g., Facebook)?

- From your point of view, do you think that the blogging and online journalism phenomena have impacted Egyptian public opinion, especially in the last few years?

- Do you think that the Egyptian blogger community represents Egyptian society?

- What do you think the future of blogging will be?
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