

**Revealing the "Agenda-Cutting" through Egyptian Blogs:
An Empirical Study.**

By

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Abstract

Blogging in Egypt is an evolving phenomenon, and it is considered a weapon against the restricted flow of information enforced by the government. This empirical study aims to help better understand blogs role in reporting stories that were cut from traditional media outlets. It applied the agenda-cutting approach and focuses on blogs tools to express news credibility and exclusivity. It is based on an analysis of *Al Wa'y Al Masri* blog during 2009. The findings suggest that the Egyptian blogosphere plays an effective role in reporting news stories not reported elsewhere. Those exclusive stories were related to government abuse, as the blogs are considered the main source of such information.

Keywords: Egyptian Blogosphere, Agenda-Cutting, New media, news exclusivity.

Introduction

The speed and complexity of the Web 2 evolution has opened the door, for Egyptian activists, to the arena of new social movements. This provides them with the opportunity to express their opinions and to be heard by a large number of internet users despite the low level of democracy in their country. The active Egyptian Internet user has started to benefit from this technology, and is blogging about all aspects of Egyptian life.

The blogging movement in Egypt has been growing since 2004, when active political groups began to express their opposition to government reforms. They organize demonstrations and boycotts as well as criticize governmental policies and corruption.

Blogging is an evolving phenomenon in Egypt and is considered a weapon against the restricted flow of information enforced by the state, to control the mass media. This expresses a shift in the media's influence in society, as people now take information from alternative sources rather than the traditional ones. Political blogs reflect what people on the street are saying and suffering from.

According to a 2009 official report issued by IDSC (Information Decision Support Cabinet), about 16% of the population uses the internet (14.5 million people). In addition to this, the report states that there was 160,000 Egyptian blogs, which represent 30% of the Arab World blogs (SIS,2010). From these the 160,000 Egyptian blogs, about 48.3% are considered "active" and most of the bloggers are between the ages of 20 to 35 years old (Etling et al., 2009). Nowadays the Egyptian blogosphere is more than a news source; it represents an alternative public space and acts as a bridge between events on the streets and Internet (Fahmi, 2009).

Egypt has been ruled by an Emergency Law since 1981 until now, 2010 and has been viewed as "one of the enemies of Internet" according to the Paris-based Press Freedom Watchdog. Egypt has been labeled this way because many bloggers have been jailed indefinitely and a special court prolongs such detentions every fifteen days (RWB, 2009). Given the rapid rise of blogs, it is important to understand their role and explain the motivation for using them. This empirical study aims to help better understand Egyptian bloggers and their role in an authoritarian regime.

In this paper I will explore the role of blogs in reporting stories that were "cut" or ignored by traditional media outlets as bloggers are largely motivated by the desire to tell news stories which were overlooked by mainstream media. In this paper the main objective is to explore how blogs report the news ignored by mainstream media, and also investigate how Egyptian Internet users comment on blogs. This research was also undertaken to determine how blogs report stories in a different style than the traditional media outlets. In order to do this I will provide an in-depth case study and analysis of recent posts in an Egyptian blog.

Literature review:

The constant growth of literature on agenda-setting research began with a study by McCombs and Shaw for the 1968 U.S. presidential election, which drew a link between the media and formation of public policy.

(Tai, 2009) This research shows that the news media coverage, or agenda, was beginning to have a significant influence on the public policy. Writing about the 2004 U.S. Presidential election, Jae Kook Lee (2007) found that political blogs had influence similar to that of the mainstream media. A similar finding was reported in Reese et al. (2007) research when they describe the relationship between weblogs and traditional journalism as complementary. Other researchers have reported a complex, symbiotic relationship between mainstream media coverage and political blogs as each tends to have an immediate impact on the other (Wallsten, 2007). Meanwhile, the study by Kulikova and Perlmutter (2007) on Kyrgyzstan's "Tulip Revolution" found that bloggers were a rich source of information not available from the traditional media outlets. However, this finding could be explained by the political climate in which the bloggers' are living, and the authors predict that bloggers play a more significant role in a dictatorship.

Agenda-setting research usually accepts the media agenda as a given without considering the process by which the agenda is constructed. A variety of factors, including individual personalities of those involved in or reporting a story, news values, the organizational culture of a media outlet, or other external political or economic or social influences, affect the decision to broadcast news stories. (Dearing & Rogers, (1996) p:17)

These factors set the news agenda and keep certain issues off the national agenda by ignoring them or cutting them from the news.

The process of "agenda-cutting" has been raised by few scholars due to the difficulties inherent in any study that aims to uncover news stories that went unreported, despite the fact that they had all the elements that make them newsworthy (Colistra, 2008). In Colistra's (2006) article she confirms, "There are difficulties with studying and theorizing the agenda-cutting approach, as it is a challenge to examine and measure instances of agenda-cutting because this means to measure something not presented in the mainstream news media."

Most media researchers investigate factors affecting agenda-setting, agenda-building and agenda-framing, but few studies have revealed the reverse phenomenon when media ignore some news because of external influences, which is known as the concept of "agenda-cutting" (Colistra, 2008).

Agenda-cutting may occur when people within or outside the news organization do their best to hide or camouflage stories. This is established by either "placing an item low on the news agenda or removing it from the agenda once it is there or completely ignoring it so it never makes it onto the news agenda in the first place" (Colistra, 2006).

Moving ignored and devalued information from margins to the

mainstream news media became available in networked information societies as Rutigliano (2008) argued in his study. He found that bloggers with small audiences can generate widespread attention for the ignored information and help creating public sphere.

In addition to this, the paper will explore blog's role as promoting digital democracy and defending human rights, with implication on developing the public sphere. As Mckee (2005) argues that Internet availability everyday for everyone in society made it a vital way to communicate information and ideas, so it can be used as a virtual space where people can be informed and interact.

Moreover Cunha (2009) in her study supports some aspects of the internet role in post-modern societies. Since it can empower political movements and provide a good foundation for a battle of ideas.

A contradictory finding by Rang (2009) study, he considers online discussion in an authoritarian regime as a kind of verbal conflict, and still can't encourage citizens to participate into public issues as they are talking to their peers, so their voice was not heard by policy-maker.

Applying Public Sphere theory in a networked environment form sub-systems of communication loops and have much more fluidity and increasingly greater mutuality of influence (Friedlang et al, 2006). This concept makes us think about the role of blogs in creating public

awareness and involvement in local issues, that can mobilize ordinary citizens and therefore push their community towards democratization.

Egyptian Bloggers:

The first decade of the 21st century was characterized by increased internet usage in Egypt where Internet access is approximately 5\$ per month, which is much cheaper than internet access in any other Arab country, or developed nation (Arab Knowledge Report, 2009). In Egypt 16% of the population accesses the internet (14.5 million people) (SIS, 2009), and as of 2009, there were 160,000 bloggers, 20% of whom have a political orientation. Significantly, 68% of these blogs use Arabic language and 20% use both Arabic and English (Michael,2009). On these blogs, Egyptian Internet users can freely express their comments on everyday life and current events in Egypt. Some of these blogs have become well-known and an influential part of the political scene. They create an interactive community by posting news updates and asking for user comments. They also benefit from the fact that there is no law that governs bloggers.

New Social Movements theorists argue that activists depending on Information Communication Technology (ICT) are usually earlier adopters of the new technologies and use it to share messages and express their opinions (Huyang,2009). New Media suggests, El Gody (2009), will

allow the common man in Arab countries to actively participate in live discussions and debate issues that concern his daily life, therefore, breaking all traditional political taboos.

For the Egyptian case, New Social Movement activists are moving their oppositions online where they focus on politics, economics, human rights and social issues that have been overlooked for decades by Egypt's mainstream media, such as torture in police stations and harassment of women in the streets. Bloggers provide detailed descriptions of street protests and even post video footages of incidents. They have started a new Egyptian battle for democracy and political reform using blogs as a way to engage new concerned internet users in social movements. These blogs are used to generate public interest and reinforce citizen power and democracy.

This interactive, electronic citizen-journalism is considered by internet users to be more truthful, reliable and revealing than the mainstream media. Nowadays, the Egyptian blogosphere is more than a news resource, Fahmi (2009) agrees with this theory, and says that it is "An alternative urban hub and acting as an interface between events in the streets and the Internet", thereby, facilitating a sense of community.

In her early study about blogs interested in current events, Gill (2004) found that blogs used "reverse chronological journalism" with most recent postings listed first, followed by an archive of previous postings. Most blogs also provided links to related news articles and other blogs. Gill also examines the intellectual influence of blogs by tracing how their influence shapes news stories and the news agenda. Other research suggest that blogs portray the social and psychological characteristics of their authors, as they tend to express their identity, share their own experiences and voice their thoughts, while they interact with others and create an online community by using 21st century digital communication technology (Guark & Antonijevic, 2008).

In his study Kahn & Kellner, (2004) suggest that online activists use blogs to promote their own agenda and interests. They report stories reflecting their community on a wide variety of topics although usually focused on local events. They post photographs of their community, links to survey polls and other outside content (Carpenter, 2007).

Hagan (2009) reports that the positive impact of the blogosphere as a movement is that it transforms passive readers into active users. He also found that the blogosphere movement organized itself in response to what internet users saw as a credibility crisis among mainstream media, whether state or privately-owned.

Blogs written by journalists are more likely to be news digests: short and snappy items calling attention to some aspects of politics or civic affairs, often with links to other more detailed media content (Singer, 2005). Lowrey (2006) also find that most of the content of journalist blogs is commentary on news stories.

On the other hand, political blogs in Egypt are growing exponentially and demonstrate the power they have to affect the news agenda and even events, as at times, bloggers act as freelance, grassroots reporters and fact-checkers. Egyptian blogs are sometimes used to feed stories to the mainstream media (the 2006 case of Emad el Kabir is one well-known example). Bloggers usually reveal alternative views of news stories and events presented by mainstream media. No longer simply observers of events, now they shape how these stories are reported and perceived by the public.

In their recent studies about Arab bloggers researchers found that blogs were able to contribute to shaping public opinion during politically charged moments. As a result, many were subject to retaliation from state police and by the end of 2008 three bloggers had been jailed for their blog activities (Hamdy 2009, Etling et al,2009).

When Otterman (2007) conducted her research on the Egyptian blogosphere, she reports that bloggers are spreading a culture of

disobedience. They also adapt to newer internet technologies such as Facebook, Flickr, Twitter using them to promote their ideas for political changes and reform.

Activist-bloggers consider their blogs a virtual extension of "the street", as they use their blog to mobilize supporters and to demonstrate their opposition. They are considered role models for a generation of young Egyptians who are so impressed with their courage, they have become folk heroes to other young activist. Activists in Egypt rely on blogs to find out the time and place of demonstration and to debate the effectiveness of opposition strategies (Levinson, 2005).

Easy and inexpensive Internet access in Egypt facilitates the development of social movements by reaching people everywhere and making people aware of what is happening and help them make informed decisions. Blogs also discuss and disseminate information on political, economical and social issues. Egyptian bloggers form a well-organized community whose members often meet off-line, forming friendships and networks that go beyond the virtual world. According to Otterman's (2007) study, some have been subjected to police harassment and detention. A Human Rights Watch report described the systematic arrest and harassment of peaceful political activism.

A recent example of this was the arrest of a group of political activist-bloggers who travelled to Nag Hamadi in Upper Egypt to give condolences with the family of a Christian Copt who was killed on Christmas Eve (January 2010). Other examples of such harassment include when activist-blogger, Wael Abbas, sentenced to six months in prison after he was accused of damaging his neighbor's, a police officer, internet cable (ANHRI, 2010). Also, Ahmed Doma was imprisoned for a year after visiting Gaza in 2009 without permission from the authorities and was released in February 2010 (ANHRI, 2010). Another example is that of Karim Amer who has been jailed for four years, starting the 7th of November, 2006, for criticizing Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak and Al-Azhar religious institution (CPJ, 2010). Similarly, blogger Massad abu Fagr, has been in jail since October 3, 2008 for criticizing both Christianity and Islam; he is currently denied visitation. Also, Mohamed Khalaf, a blogger, was sentenced to one year of hard labor in December 2009 for criticizing the Egyptian court system (Egypt News, 2010).

Another incident in this crackdown on internet activism was the arrest of the people who created a Facebook group ("6th of April") calling all workers to go on strike on April 6, 2008, and for a demonstration on Mubarak's birthday in May 2008. Tens of thousands of people joined the group, and the woman who set it up, Esraa Abd al Fattah, was arrested.

This incident demonstrates how Facebook activists transform into street activists in Egypt.

It is obvious that state security and intelligence officials now monitor Internet activism seeking to prevent any potential form of mobilizing people or manifesting opposition online.

From this approach we can ask these questions that address Agenda Cutting in one of Egyptian Blogs were as following:

RQ1: How can Egyptian blogs break the vicious cycle of the authority orders to cut a story from the traditional media agenda in order to inform people?

RQ2: What are the tools bloggers use while reporting their news?

RQ3: How do blog comments reveal the commenter's perceived credibility towards the blog content?

Research Methodology

In my study I conducted qualitative analysis of selected news items that were not reported, or "cut" from the media agenda in 2009. Later the cut news resurfaced on one of the most popular Egyptian blogs, *El Wa'y el Masry* or the "Egyptian Conscious", written by a journalist blogger Wael Abbas.

The aim of this qualitative analysis was to provide a comprehensive analysis of reporting tools, frames, linkage and comments, emerged while covering news stories.

To attain the purpose of the study seven news stories were selected for the analysis, from Al Wa'y Al Masry blog. Those stories were selected according to several criteria: they should be about domestic issues and posted exclusively on this blog.

Finding

Cases Revealing Agenda cutting Cases in Al Wa'y Al Masry Blog:

The data collected for this study comes from Wael Abbas' blog, *Al Wa'y El Masry* (Abbas, 2009). Abbas is an independent blogger and journalist who start blogging in February 2005. At first he published his articles in Modern Standard Arabic, but now he writes in the Egyptian dialect, often using very vulgar and insulting words, especially when referring to the police. Abbas' blog became one of the most well-known Egyptian blogs after he published images of alleged attacks on demonstrators during the 2005 referendum on the constitutional amendment. In 2006, he also published videos of the mass sexual harassment of women in central Cairo during an Islamic holiday.

The most important scandal he disclosed was in 2006 when he posted videos of bus driver, Emad El Kabir, being sexually abused at a police station. The video spread all over the national and international news media (Abbas, 2006)

The overall posts in Al Wa'y El Masry blog during 2009 are listed in table 1. There were a total of 35 posts found on this blog; the number of posts varies from one month to another. Comments on those posts were 1189 comments most of them were pseudonymous. Our primary focus in this study is the focus on political news stories that reveal scandalous remarks on the Egyptian political scene.

Table 1 Al Wa'y El Masry Posts and comments during 2009

Total	December	November	October	September	August	July	June	May	April	March	February	January	month
35	2	1	1	1	6	3	4	3	4	2	4	4	Posts
1189	62	103	39	22	184	93	86	60	138	128	138	136	Comments

The case studies included in my paper were of exclusive news stories published in 2009 on Abbas' blog. These case studies are examples of how stories were "cut" from the agenda of the mainstream media. Torture and police abuse were the main exclusive stories published on *Al Wa'y Al Masri*. On January 23, 2009 footage was posted showing a police officer

violently attacking and arresting a citizen who was then taken away to the police station. The blog posting recorded the day and time of this incident and prompted 36 user comments on this story.

Some comments on this story were excusing the police for the brutality predicting that the victim could be just a thief and deserves to be beaten. While other comments considered it as proof of systematic police violence. (Abbas, 2009)

Another news story which was framed as a torture incident, published on February 8, 2009, was entitled, "*Another Emad El Kabir tragedy in Ain Shams police station*". The 40-second footage portrays a sexual assault on a man and is preceded by a warning that the footage is graphic. The story cites the time and place of the incident, the names of the police officers who ordered the attack, as well as the source of the footage, activist-blogger, Sameh El Arousy. There were 81 comments on this story, including one which stated that this story was picked up and published on February 9th by the Egyptian newspaper "7th Day". Another comment considered this story to be an unbelievable act of violence suggesting that activists should organize demonstration against this kind of violence. This quote was an example of those comments:

"To be honest, i dont know should we be with that victim or against him yes he must be there for a reason, but no matter what the reason is, they cant deal with him that way." (Abbas, 2009)

Then on May 26, 2009, Wael Abbas reported on his blog that Sameh El Arousy had to flee the country as the police were threatening him and his wife for publishing and distributing the video. (Abbas, 2009)

Wael Abbas published another video clip framed as police torture, on August 12, 2009, taking place in a police station in Port-Said. (Abbas, 2009)

Then on March 9, 2009, Abbas published a story about the Egyptian army cadets who organized an attack on a police station seeking revenge for alleged abuse by the police on one of their colleagues. The story was accompanied by seven video clips (ranging from 26 seconds to six minutes). In the videos, the cadets attack the police station and a car which supposedly belongs to the District police chief. Their attacks were with stones and electric guns yelling "Hurray to the Military (hey harbeya)".

Through this story Abbas reveals the state of chaos that dominate relationship between Egyptian Army and Police. The blog also posted links to other news agencies reporting this story (BBC.com, bbc.arabic,

Associated Press, euronews.com and Spanish news agency and others). Abbas' story also included a statement by an anonymous Egyptian news editor who said he received an order not to publish any details of this incident. More than 70 comments from blog readers show their credibility and clear appreciation for the disclosure of this news story. (Abbas, 2009)

On December 24, 2009, Abbas also posted a story, and photocopies of the Interior Ministry documents, ordering the tapping of a key Egyptian political figure's phone, as there was speculation that this person intends to participate in the next Presidential election in 2011. The Interior Minister officially denied the story and started an investigation into the documents that ordered the phone tapping, but the findings of this investigation were never reported. This story attracted 33 comments on the blog and spurred a national discussion on questions of who is authorized to order phone tapping on key Egyptian figures.

Some comments on this news story appreciate publishing those documents and were asking about how can a journalist blogger penetrate into the highly secured Interior Minister's offices and photocopy those documents. While other comments doubt the falsification of those documents. (Abbas, 2009)

Another exclusive news story published on Abbas' blog (17 August 2009) came from an Egyptian writer living in the United States, Omar Afifi. He wrote that during President Mubarak's recent visit to Washington, his son, Gamal and his wife took a shopping tour to a famous jewelry store while two Egyptian ministers waited for them outside.

This story attracted 21 comments that reflect the commenter's belief in the story's credibility. An example of those comments could be found here:

"The most important issue, that his hotel stay cost will not be paid by Egyptian tax victims. To shop at Chanel, it is okay as long as he is rich man ya Wael, but to keep two ministers waiting outside is kind of shameless. The newspaper in Egypt will never dare to publish a single word about him, Do you remember what happened to our friend in Dostoor newspaper :)" (Abbas, 2009)

Those news stories demonstrate how internet blogs counteract the "agenda-cutting" of mainstream media by reporting on stories not reported elsewhere. These stories include human rights violations, and they serve to prompt public discussion and awareness.

Discussion

From a theoretical point of view this study aimed to apply a new approach to the agenda-setting theory. This new approach is Colistra's concept of agenda-cutting, and it was applied to a study of the role of political blogs in an authoritarian state's media system.

In addition, this study focuses on blogs' tools to express news credibility, accuracy and exclusivity; Bloggers use photos, footage, and linkage to other news sites that support their news.

The comments of the blog Al Wa'y Al masri could be seen as a debate. The first party believes the blogs' news is accurate, reliable and trustworthy; while the second party could be consider pro-government citizens who tend to view this blog as inaccurate. The pro-government party sometimes goes far in insulting the blogger and other commentators who they consider as anti-government. This finding supports Etling & al (2009) who conclude that blogs engage public sphere and give significance to debates between blogs commentators.

This research crystallized some important findings about the role of Egyptian blogs in how stories are "cut" from the mainstream media agenda. As well as demonstrating the role of the blogs in supporting public concern toward domestic issues.

Unfiltered Egyptian blogs could be considered according to this study a platform for free discussion about domestics' issues, and they also facilitate information disclosure. Further studies will need to address the blogs contribution in political reform.

It was found that blogs use many strategies to vouch for the credibility of the news they publish. They use video clips, sometimes recorded on mobile phones, and provide links to other sources that confirm their stories.

In addition it was fond that activists or political blogs are a battlefield where bloggers and blog-users tend to utilize a vulgar language style

when they argue and defend their ideas. Further studies are needed to analyze the language used in social discussion on the Internet.

This study demonstrated that the Egyptian blogosphere plays an effective role in reporting news stories not reported elsewhere. They influence public opinion-framing on issues related to government abuse, as the blogs are considered the main source of such information. There was evidence in this study that supports the perceived role of the blogosphere as a primary actor in investigating news events. Further studies should examine how bloggers and mainstream media both act as Agenda-setters.

This study also supports Metzger and Chaffee's findings that New Media enables people to not only set their own media agendas, but also to influence others' agendas by helping them connect with other people who care about similar issues. Nevertheless, blogs seem to hold an uncertain level of credibility among their readers as reflected in their comments. This problematic issue of uncertain credibility should prompt further study.

Despite methodological problems of studying Agenda-Cutting, this study shows that blogs play an important role in the communication systems within an authoritarian state and shows how blogs counteract the cutting of stories from the mainstream media. In this way, blogs represent an alternative media that blog-users rely on for information about real life in their communities.

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