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'Seeing Each Other for the First Time': Politics and Social Media in Middle-Class Cairo

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Abstract:

The present study addresses the use of social media by middle-class Cairo residents, contributing to understandings of its political role during a time of upheaval and broad social change surrounding the 2011 Egyptian revolution. Based on in-depth interviews and extended fieldwork, local ways of making sense of social media and its attendant functions are explored, as are its political uses and multifaceted role in individual political trajectories.

The study contributes to a literature on the politics of social media which is highly contradictory, with its potential to function as a site of autonomy and participation at odds with accounts emphasizing its apparently depoliticizing nature. Despite extensive scholarly attention there are significant unknowns regarding various processes surrounding the 2011 Egyptian uprisings, in particular the way that social media might be implicated in the puncturing of what have been conceptualized as 'preference falsification' dynamics, whereby regimes are said to be maintained by a self-perpetuating unwillingness to express dissent. A related issue concerns the cultural politics of post-revolutionary Cairo, which witnessed a marked rise in activities often framed as socially or politically subversive. While social media appears to have functioned as an important site for the latter, there is a lack of hard evidence as to its role regarding these activities.

Addressing these gaps in the literature as well as other concerns, the present study presents illuminating evidence, grounded in user accounts, to argue that the politics of social media are not ahistorical, but rather depend profoundly on a complex interaction between technological affordances, culture, and individual agency. In the process, the distinct spatialities of social media are investigated and issues of visibility, presence, and sociality in social media are established as especially important dimensions of its impact on political life.

'Seeing Each Other for the First Time': Politics and Social Media in Middle-Class Cairo

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Thesis submitted for the degree of PhD in Geography

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To Mum, who would have been worried sick.

I. Introduction

'This is not how revolutions happen! It's not an event on Facebook!'

On January 25th, 2011, Egypt was due to celebrate 'police day', it being the anniversary of the British attack on an Ismailia police station in 1952. Yet, while the tradition had begun with genuine popular support for the police, many of whom were vital to the struggle against the occupying power, of late it had begun to attract less enthusiastic participation. Despite regime efforts to encourage Egyptians to join the celebrations, recent years had seen an uptick in subversive attitudes towards the police, which had started to tarnish their official holiday (Shenker, 2010).

A good deal of this was due to the increasing space occupied by police abuses in the public consciousness, in part publicised by a strikingly popular Facebook page called *Kullena Khaled Saied*[1]. The latter was established in the wake of the death of an Alexandrian businessman in police custody following his exposure, via a Youtube video, of police corruption. Moreover, dissent in general had been on the rise for a period of years, including labour strikes and latterly a growing number of young Cairenes attending protests. In fact, despite the received wisdom that Egyptians were essentially apolitical, protests had increasingly become directed towards systemic goals, rather than merely local or associational issues (Radsch, 2011). Such activities were especially significant given the risk of violence, arrest, and death which attended them. Facing down these risks, a minority of Egyptians were staking a small but significant claim of resistance.

A number of established radical organizations, despite serious ideological differences, had therefore decided to capitalize on modest gains by organizing an inverted celebration of the 25th of January, designed to show opposition to the police in a way that might reach the public consciousness. Among other strategies, an event had been created on Facebook for the protests – publicised on *Kullena Khaled Saied* - which had drawn significant popular

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[1] The Arabic words and phrases represented in this dissertation are typically Egyptian colloquial, which is generally considered to be a spoken rather than written language, although it was often rendered in writing by participants in both Arabic script as well as a combination of Roman characters as well as (Arabic) numerals. Rather than adopting a strict transliteration system (which may be confusing to readers unfamiliar with Arabic), or using the combination of letters and numbers adopted by the participants themselves, I have elected to transcribe Arabic words in a way which is most likely to be accurately readable by a general audience, and in a manner which best reflects Egyptian pronunciation rather than the standard spelling. Vigilant readers will note that in this system an apostrophe can refer to either a glottal stop or the sound made by the letter *'ayn*; given that rendering an accurate pronunciation to a non-speaker of Arabic is impractical at best, and that the words used are likely to be familiar to anyone who can pronounce them, this was thought to be a tolerable obfuscation.

support. Meanwhile, the organizations involved held a series of face-to-face meetings over a period of months in order to establish common ground and develop a co-ordinated strategy: groups such as April 6th, Kefaya, and members of the Muslim Brotherhood youth were gearing up to make a more public and visible challenge than Cairo had seen in a long time.

When I spoke to one of the participants in many of these meetings, she emphasized the limits of their ambitions. "The idea was 'let's celebrate police day'", she explained. "We really wanted this to be huge, and when we said 'huge' we were thinking ten thousand [participants]". Indeed, the idea that they were planning a *revolution* was not just inaccurate or overblown – it was often the subject of both caution and ridicule. While the word '*thawra*' seemed to be on the lips of some of the newcomers, many of whom had discovered the movement on Facebook and were now attending public workshops on what to do if arrested, this attitude struck established organizers as naïve.

> I was so frustrated I ran out and I told [my friend], somebody needs to tell these kids 'this is not how revolutions happen! It's not an event on Facebook! We are [just] organizing demonstrations, they have to understand this!' and [my friend] was laughing because to him it sounded ridiculous.

But the security services, too, seemed to be thinking in dramatic terms. As police and other officials stepped up monitoring and intimidation tactics in the build-up to January 25th, a youth who was participating in the talks had an encounter with a government official, who had been loitering around the site of the meeting.

> We did not, we seriously did not realise the size of this. There were police all around us. We didn't care, we thought that was normal, they were intimidating us. They really didn't know what was happening and they were - it freaked them out. And I think they were getting a vibe from the street that even we didn't get [...] the Thursday before the 25th of January, one of our members, his name was [Sameh], he was 16 at the time I think. And he was coming down from the headquarters and [...] the head of the office, counter-communism office, was there personally. He was actually there every time the police was outside our headquarters in those last few weeks [...] he held him up, he sort of stopped him and actually held him, and he told him uhm, 'what's happening upstairs?' and [Sameh] said 'it's a meeting'. And [the official] said 'is it a meeting about the revolution?' and [Sameh] was like 'huh?' [laughs] because we, this, we intend – *ya'ani*, we were very weary of people calling it a revolution. And [Sameh]'s like, and he said 'yeah yeah yeah, it's about the revolution'. He said at that moment he thought 'this guy is ridiculous'. So, um, [the official] let him go, he was so shocked he let him go. And he said 'who is in the meeting?' and uhh, and um, [Sameh] said uh 'the, er, the guiding council

of the revolution!' [laughs]. And [the official] said 'what are you guys doing on the 25th?' and [Sameh] said 'we're going to fuck you up!' and started running! [laughs] and that was all - to us it was a joke, it was [Sameh] joking, us listening to him and cracking up laughing…

Despite the relatively modest initial aims of the organizers, the 25th of January was of course bigger than they expected, possibly owing partly to the success of the Tunisian Revolution. Remarking on the scene at Tahrir on the 25th of January, in which a crowd composed of vastly different sectors of Egyptian society had formed, my interlocutor struggled to convey her profound sense of shock at encountering the diverse multitude who had assembled at the square. Other sites around Egypt were also party to the movement, and, within days, police stations had been burned down all over Egypt. Eighteen days later Mubarak had resigned, with the remnants of the regime going into a period of calculated retreat.

Social Media and Revolution

For better or worse, the 2011 uprisings in Egypt have become a spectre haunting debates about the political potentials of social media. Proponents (Vargas, 2012) of the centrality of social media to the revolution[2] point to the purported influence of various Facebook pages (in particular *Kullena Khaled Saied*), not to mention the fact that the initial gambit heavily featured a Facebook event (which had spread virally in the weeks leading up to the first day of protest). The notion that Facebook had enabled the co-ordination of popular involvement in what came to be known as a revolution seemed to justify those who saw information and communication technologies generally as providing a source of political change. The Egyptian case was therefore seen to augment existing theoretical emphases, such as the rapid mobilization which seemed to be enabled by social media (Shirky, 2008; Rheingold, 2003); their potential to circumvent media control strategies in authoritarian countries (Faris, 2010; Lynch, 2011; Zuckerman, 2013); their provision of a means of popular co-ordination independent of hierarchical organizations (Allagui and Kuebler, 2011; Castells, 2012; Shirky, 2008); their capacity to facilitate important political

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[2] While participants in the present study differed in their understanding of the January 25th uprisings, two of the more popular views were that it constituted a revolution in itself and that it was merely a 'first wave' of a revolution still in progress, the use of the Arabic word *thawra* to describe the events is so well-ingrained in Egyptian life that the term 'revolution' will be used in this dissertation despite significant theoretical issues as to how and when this term should be applied. I further note that, however the idea of revolution might be theorized, the English term also (inadvertently) captures quite succinctly what many participant accounts emphasized about that period of their lives, which is a sense of their world and its familiar ordering principles palpably being turned upside down.

conversation (Howard et al, 2011), including 'informational cascades' based on viral sharing of suppressed information and points of view (Lynch, 2011); and their potential to influence public spheres and mediate transformative conversation (Shirky, 2011; Faris, 2010; Zuckerman, 2013). By such effects, social media could even be seen as fundamentally altering the co-ordinates of political possibility.

This idea has met with considerable resistance, however, with critics declaring that the sheer range of factors and tools involved in the uprisings leaves social media as the "least interesting" aspect of what was occurring (Gladwell, 2011). Indeed, it is important to note that face-to-face organization, activist networks (Morozov, 2011a), printed flyers, cleverly-engineered taxi driver gossip (Lim, 2012), disinformation practices depending on face-to-face and SMS-mediated communications (El-Ghobashy, 2011), spatially-aware strategizing (Levinson & Coker, 2011), and more old-fashioned activism in poor neighbourhoods (Levinson & Coker, 2011; El-Ghobashy, 2011) were central to the revolution, and that techno-utopian accounts sometimes elided their influence, dramatically overplaying the role of social media. Other factors which were sometimes lacking in technologically-inspired accounts were the key role of worker strikes, the growing disenfranchisement of Egypt's lynchpin military (which owns huge swathes of property, has business investments which account for a substantial chunk of Egypt's GDP, and benefits from mass conscription), and also the clear socio-economic imperatives which went a long way toward driving protest and enabling a coalition of various disenfranchised class actors (Austin Holmes, 2012). Indeed, the latter factor is particularly significant in its capacity to frustrate the life opportunities of the educated middle-class, creating what Bayat, 2011, calls the 'middle class poor', which many see as having been a critical factor in the uprisings. Furthermore, the approach of the state to these socio-economic issues seemed to defy the norm that the state must protect its citizens from the harshness of extreme poverty. These agonies no doubt gave a bitter taste to the stories of corruption and kickbacks regarding Mubarak and his establishment, causing people to perceive themselves as victims of humiliation who were without dignity (Ismail, 2011; Singerman, 2013).

As Barrons (2012) has explored, those sceptical of the 'Facebook revolution' narrative have also pointed out that the revolution continued, apparently unabated, beyond the point at which the internet was "switched off" (or, more technically, the point at which Egypt's five largest internet service providers deleted their DNS entries, depriving most Egyptian internet users in practice of any access to the internet). Gerbaudo (2013) has even

suggested that it was the communications blackout which was responsible for the sense of openness to strangers which appears to have characterised Tahrir, and has provided evidence which suggests that many took to the squares in the wake of the blackout in order to make contact with cut-off relatives and keep up with what was happening. That being said, the communications blackout can also be read as indicating the centrality of communications media to mobilization and, given that significant momentum had already been achieved, can be read as a case of closing the door after the horse has bolted. In any case, there is reason to be very sceptical about the assumption that Mubarak's action in taking the internet away was tantamount to removing the internet from the political calculus – rather, given the sense of disruption it caused to those accustomed to using the internet, it can be regarded as weighing heavily by its absence[3].

Also relevant are various arguments which suggest that the internet may in various ways be deleterious to functional politics, or at least ill-equipped to the uses imagined for it. Gladwell (2010), for example, suggests that social media is a "weak tie phenomenon", therefore unable to facilitate the strong ties required for risky activism. At best, sites such as Facebook may be well positioned to smooth the way for established organizations, but not to in-themselves be the medium of either revolutionary organization or the entrenchment of revolutionary political trajectories. Gerbaudo, meanwhile, argues that so-called "leaderless revolutions" are an oversimplified category, masking the influence of those occupying key positions in the diffusion of information (2012a), and that the looseness of co-ordination which they do enable may be implicated in the failure of the revolutionary movement to achieve its aims in the wake of the revolution (2012b).

Other relevant conceptions of social media include the proposed tendency towards the trivial and fragmented brought about by the capitalist priorities of social media (Miller, 2008); the tendency for easier, virtual forms of action to supplant actual change rather than expedite it (Dean, 2005; Gladwell, 2010; Morozov, 2011b); and the capacity of authoritarian governments to turn the proliferation of social media to their advantage by easily identifying their opponents and allowing them to monitor activist networks (Morozov, 2011b). If social media really can be entirely summed up as depoliticizing, trivializing, and unable to surmount authoritarian threats, then it stands to reason that,

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[3] Similarly, it has been argued that the infamous decoy protest information circulated via Facebook shouldn't necessarily register as an indicator of irrelevance, but should instead complicate our understanding of the way that disinformation and secrecy form one aspect of politicised visibility in social networks (El Hibri, 2014).

despite their capacity to facilitate networks of weak ties, they should not have played any serious role in the Egyptian revolution. Furthermore, maintaining otherwise could be positively dangerous, encouraging activists and other interested people to invest time and resources in a limited tool which exposes them to retribution from the state.

Those who were more pessimistic about the internet might even have been forgiven for a feeling of *déjà vu*, as a similar wave of international acclaim for social media had greeted the 2009 'Twitter revolution', the name given to the protests in Iran which were purportedly driven by twitter use (e.g. Leyne, 2010; Grossman, 2009). While the imagination of global media seemed to be captivated by the idea that the internet was a vital tool for organizers and protesters, more sober voices pointed out that the vast majority of twitter activity concerning Iran was in fact coming from Iranians based abroad, tweeting in English to a mainly-international audience with little influence in Iran itself (Esfandiari, 2010). Far more vital for co-ordination and activism on the ground was face-to-face communication, while Twitter, not without some usefulness within Iran, appears to have mainly served to provide a link to international media.

For Gladwell (2010, 2011), many commentators on the events in both Egypt and Iran were guilty of a basic error of emphasizing a communication medium (which in his view had no discernible impact on events) at the expense of the human actions which led to the overthrow of Mubarak. They had emphasized what was, to him, the least interesting aspect of the complex web of events and made it central to the narrative. It may also be noted that not only can such an error be regarded as fetishizing technology (in the sense of attributing human powers to objects); it can be seen as supportive of, and based on, orientalist ways of making sense of the Middle East (Aouragh, 2012), which regard the region as essentially timeless and passive (Said, 1991). In the popular narrative, that is, the significant actors did not always seem to be the protesters or the Egyptian people (and let alone less glamorous developments such as the internal fractures in the Mubarak regime or the trade union movement), but the Western technologies which had unshackled people from their oppressive conditions.

With solid reasons for caution about technology-centric discourses, then, it is nonetheless important to note that within Egypt, too, social media was linked with the revolution in the minds of many – in that sense distinguishing Egypt from the Iranian case. Not only did ordinary protesters point to the centrality of social media (as acknowledged in El-Ghobashy's thorough and contextualised 2011 account of the uprisings, for example), and

the term *shabab-el-Facebook* (or 'Facebook youth') gain currency in Egyptian news discourse[4], but Kassem's study of the perceptions of activists, conducted before the uprisings, has noted that their assessment, too, was that social media had played an important role in their activities (Kassem, 2013), even if this role was more limited than the one attributed to them in the wake of January 25th. For them, social media had facilitated their attempts to disseminate key frames in the popular consciousness (eventually including established media), to encourage low-risk supporters to adopt activist identities (and therefore to subsequently take higher risks), and had played a limited but significant role in protest mobilization, findings which are echoed by Lim (2012). Kassem suggests that these networks of supporters may have been important to the development of a critical mass of activity in the 2011 uprisings even though this seems to have required significant offline activism.

A large survey of those attending Tahrir protests during the eighteen days (N=1050) has also provided important evidence, indicating an important role for social media in the protests (Tufekci & Wilson, 2013; Wilson & Dunn, 2011). While the fact that over half of the protesters surveyed both had Facebook and used it politically (in a country with relatively low Facebook penetration) might be ascribed to potential sampling bias, a particularly important finding was that social media use was strongly associated with protest attendance on the first day of protests. In contrast, access to satellite television coverage returned a *negative* correlation (as though exposure to satellite coverage somehow made one less likely to protest). This suggests that those using social media were more likely than others to surmount the especially high sense of risk and inertia of challenging the regime at a time at which, to many, there seemed to be little grounds for hope. This is despite the fact that the sampling was snowballed out from NGO and activist organizations, meaning that participants may have been more likely to be exposed to revolutionary and subversive ideas and networks in their daily lives, and therefore arguably less dependent on social media to gain access to such ideas and networks. Tufekci and Wilson drive the point home as follows:

> social media use, especially for political purposes, was associated with significantly higher
> odds of protest participation on that crucial first day. The courage and the determination
> required to attend the first day of the protests on January 25 should be interpreted in light of

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[4] Sallam (2013) astutely observes that the term serves vested interests within Egyptian society, yet it was clearly adopted in part based on its intuitive plausibility to the audience.

the fact that nearly two thirds of the sample had not previously attended a protest of any
kind. These women and men left their previous lives behind, risking death, torture, exile,
injury, unemployment, and more, and showed up at Tahrir Square on January 25, 2011

Furthermore, Wilson and Dunn's (2011) analysis (of the same dataset) suggests that,
although the number of protesters who used social media was lower than the number
using more established media, social media sites such as Facebook ranked very highly for
perceived effect on motivation when lowered uptake was accounted for. The overall
impression generated by the dataset leads the authors to suggest that both utopian and
pessimistic slants on social media use during the protests had been significantly
undermined. Furthermore, the events in Tahrir, in a country with relatively low Facebook
penetration, are more interesting for their indication of the future potentials of social
media than because of its present influence (Wilson & Dunn, 2011).

While care should be taken not to exaggerate the significance of these findings, then, or to
finger social media as some kind of underlying agent of the revolution, it is clear that
questions are raised by such results. For one thing, they constitute cause to scrutinize
some of the dismissals of the political potentials of social media more carefully (which will
be carried out in the next chapter). The disparity between results relating to satellite
television and those relating to social media may suggest, in line with Shirky's (2011)
contention, that conversations, much more so than information alone, are
transformational. This may also be supported by Hochheimer and Al Emad's (2013)
assertion that a 'spiral of voice' effect was occurring on social media, in which people
became progressively more emboldened by the communications of others. Yet much
remains unknown about exactly how social media were being used by those who ended up
at Tahrir Square (especially those who were not key nodes in activist networks), and
exactly how the transformational nature of social media should be conceptualised.
Furthermore, it is not clear exactly why social media might be more suited to a 'spiral of
voice' phenomenon than in-person conversations. Hochheimer and Al Emad (2013) draw
usefully on the concept of a 'dense atmosphere', perhaps hinting at the political potentials
for social media to reconfigure spatiality in bringing multiple voices together at once. Yet a
proliferation of questions seem to so far remain unanswered. After all, communications on
social media are usually not anonymous, typically shared before a large audience, and
leave traces which are potentially permanent and reproducible - even if a user deletes her
status, it is possible for another user to have taken a screenshot. Why, then, should
Facebook and Twitter have become settings for some Egyptians to test the waters when it

came to denouncing corruption and criticizing Mubarak? In general, there is reason to develop our understanding of political expression on social media and to begin to delineate the factors distinguishing it from face-to-face conversation. Furthermore, it is unclear where the various studies on social media in Egypt leave the notion that social media is a medium of weak ties and therefore weak commitment. It is therefore germane to ask to what extent the salience of relationships with (and communications of) others are a factor in expressions of political dissent, including protest. Were such relationships really critical to the political trajectories of ordinary protesters (Gladwell, 2010)?

Striking a similar note, Tufekci and Wilson, authors of the above study, also highlight the need to better understand the potential for social media to resolve "collective action problems", in particular the capacity for such tools to impact the dynamic of preference falsification which is characteristic of authoritarian societies. They also draw attention to the extremely widespread use of social media in documenting the protests, a practice which may have impacted protest attendance, yet whose political impact has not been fully researched. While Tufekci and Wilson's quantitative study has provided an important platform for further research, it is unlikely that we will understand these impacts without acknowledging and investigating the complex interrelationships which users and their political decision-making have to social media sites. It appears that what we may be looking for is what former US Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld would call an "unknown unknown", in that existing conceptualizations of social media seem to provide only scant clues as to how to make sense of the role of social media in enabling or disabling mass revolt. This is perhaps unsurprising given the emphasis in much existing research on the sheer complexity of interrelated factors which it comes to discerning the role of the internet in politics and society. Indeed, outcomes of social media use are likely to depend not just on the multiple, particular, and shifting technological affordances which are regularly introduced and elaborated on by social media sites (Ellison & boyd, 2013), but on their (perhaps locally-salient) interpretation by users (Hine, 2000; Miller & Slater, 2000), as well as the complex interrelations between online and offline practices (boyd, 2015; Miller & Slater, 2000). In fact, taking these observations seriously necessitates being extremely careful about any models which propose a coherent and simple effect on the part of either "social media" in general or one site in particular, as well as those which abstract out the local in their generalizations. What is needed, as Tufekci and Wilson themselves seem to hint at, is an open research programme, incorporating careful attention to political uses of social media actually extant among users. In view of the

multifactorial and local nature of social media use, this means a careful process of inquiry, constituted by multiple studies, whose design is oriented towards developing new theorizations exploring the role of new technologies in political discourse and trajectories. As I will argue later on, a core element in such an inquiry will involve listening carefully and openly to the experiences, understandings, and insights of users, creating opportunities for dialogue between various accounts.

Importantly, the question here is no longer whether or not social media were actually critical to the downfall of Mubarak. That is, even if it were a certainty that the revolution would have proceeded smoothly without social media, further study would still provide an important opportunity to deepen understanding of the relationship between social media and politics. A more productive line of questioning, then, might eschew the proposed binary of revolutionary causality in favour of discerning the ways that social media sites have contributed to (or detracted from) the story of revolution (Hands, 2011; Lynch, 2011; Barrons, 2012; Lim, 2012). In Hands' memorable phrase, it is important to ask to what extent the "terrain of struggle" in revolutions is affected by such technologies, understanding the latter as just one more factor in revolutionary processes (Barrons, 2012; Austin Holmes, 2012), whose influence will be dependent on the overall context (as well as, presumably, the strategies with which they are used). Or, to use Lim's terminology, this can involve looking at the extent to which social media provides "tools and spaces" for politics (2012). Whether or not social media were decisive to this particular uprising, further investigation stands to deepen our understanding of how social media alters, or might alter, this terrain. This is especially the case given the lack of qualitative research of non-activist users of social media in Cairo, many of whom, according to current evidence, seem to have been swayed in part by their social media use into taking huge, previously uncharacteristic risks for what they saw as the greater good.

In summary, then, a proliferation of uncertainties attend the relationship between social media and politics, as exemplified by the literature on the 2011 Egyptian uprisings, which must be addressed by careful empirical study. The purpose of the present thesis is to provide a contribution to this overarching investigation by asking how social media has been implicated in the everyday politics of Egyptians in the period surrounding and following the Egyptian revolution. Given the expansive scope of this investigation, a partial

strategy is adopted, emphasizing the practices and pursuits of individual[5] users of social media, as seen largely through their own accounts of social media use. Such a strategy is designed not to pick up all of the revolutionary features of the technology, but to closely investigate the political import of social media use in daily life. As a result of this investigative strategy, evidence is provided in later chapters which enables us to better understand the results documented in Tufekci and Wilson (2013) as well as the role of social media in political trajectories, enabling the development of hypotheses which can be tested in future studies. The need to understand the importance of social media in potentially dissolving collective action problems, noted above, as well as the potential to understand more about the widespread documentation of politics online (Alterman, 2011; Tufekci and Wilson, 2013) will be addressed, along with theories which view social media as depoliticizing (or politically corrosive), for example through a diminished sense of presence (Dreyfus, 2001; Suler, 2004) and diminished relationships of solidarity (Gladwell, 2010).

A Social Revolution?

A further aspect of the Egyptian revolution has been its varied social and cultural impact, which has been seized upon by a variety of observers. New ways of relating to state and society which appear to have been associated with revolutionary transition include a qualified ('reflexive') individualism (Hanafi, 2012; and see also Sabry, 2012), a revivification of "the people" (*el-sha'ab*) as a category in political thought (Challand, 2011), a new level of involvement of youth in public life (e.g. Abu Lughod, 2012), transformed approaches to public space (Abaza, 2014; Kimmelman, 2013), a tendency for individuals to resist established societal norms (Debeuf and Abdelmeguid, 2015), and a flourishing of cultural and artistic initiatives (Zakzouk, 2013; Lindsey, 2012), often themselves having a sharpened political edge. Indeed, the process of revolution itself has been identified as deeply linked with wider social issues, for example in Sabry's (2012) observation that Tahrir, for the period of the protests, embodied a radical acceptance of the other. Clearly,

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[5] Importantly, adopting a research strategy which is oriented around individual accounts does not mean endorsing an individual-centric model of how either revolutions happen or society functions. Whatever the merits or otherwise of such approaches elsewhere, they are clearly inadequate to describe the complex web of events leading to the Egyptian uprisings (Aouragh, 2012; El-Ghobashy, 2011). The approach adopted here acknowledges that important insights can be gleaned by paying attention to individual experiences and understandings of social media, including political trajectories which led to Tahrir, without thereby hoping to reduce all understandings to this level of analysis.

an approach which aims to uncover everyday politics must be familiar with and open to these patterns and developments.

The crisis of institutions, especially concerning the police, has been critical to many of these changes. Indeed, the relationship between the police and society appeared to shift in the initial post-revolutionary period from one of comprehensive domination by the former (El-Ghobashy, 2011) to, at least in the initial post-revolutionary period, a period of police retreat and something of a reclamation of the streets on the part of ordinary people. Not only did a surge in informal settlements follow the revolution, but more quotidian transgressions occurred – men were more inclined to use women-only metro cars, ordinary people spontaneously took on traffic direction duties, and a wave of protests were held concerning a huge range of issues, from the pay of medical personnel to the explosion of coffee shops in Zamalek.

A related development in the wake of the revolution was a surge in the creation of various kinds of political organization, which represented a new level of involvement in politics and in some cases seem to have been imbued with a new sense of openness with regard to what might be termed the big questions of society, politics, and life. The new organizations included new parties, independent unions, citizen groups, and "people's committees" (Austin Holmes, 2012), the last of which, according to the blogger Mahmoud Salem (2011), were

> formed [during the revolution] to protect their areas, but during the referendum they started evolving into a civil force that help campaigns and did their best to monitor the elections. Now those committees are getting in contact with each other and forming coalitions. I have met representatives who have formed coalitions of 40 or 50 such committees all over Egypt, and they are organizing a conference for all of Egypt's committee reps this June. Already, right now, there are 220 such committees covering 220 districts of Egypt's 280, and that's besides the independent unions and citizen groups that are getting formed everywhere every day. They are not waiting on us to save them or guide them, they already took matters into their own hands and we are the ones who are trying to catch up. And the way they operate, and their strategies for organization are impressive. A bunch of them asked for experts on capitalist, socialist and Islamic economies to come to their neighborhoods and give lectures to educate people on their differences.

It has been argued that a key factor in the myriad changes has been a shifted relationship to public space (e.g. Abaza, 2014; Kimmelman, 2013). Many of the protesters who had assembled Downtown were breaking their normal relation to the city, one which was

hemmed in by gated communities and middle-class enclaves; and those with experience of Cairo's more *sha'abi* or "popular" (with the connotation of being 'lower' class) areas were appropriating public space as a venue to express themselves. Other traditional norms of spatial division were also undermined, as women who had participated in protest for social values have felt empowered to seek increased independence from the family unit in daily life (Gamal, 2015).

In general, the sense of political opening which was abroad in the wake of the revolution appears to have been accompanied by an equivalent social opening – albeit one which seems to have been less pronounced and in some ways more restricted to the middle class, although it has possibly proven to be more durable (Debouef and Abdelmeguid, 2015). Much of this appears to have taken the form of individually-centred challenges to traditional norms. For example, not only does there appear to have been a large increase in the rise of self-declared atheists (despite official government figures surreally putting the number at a very precise 866; Kingsley, 2014; Adib, 2013), signs of a new willingness to acknowledge such beliefs – often even in public - also multiplied. Regarding atheism, for example, public debates were held on its merits (one such is documented by Deasy, 2013), Facebook groups were set up to promote atheist beliefs, and there are general indications that people began to feel more willing to discuss and share such views (Debouef and Abdelmeguid, 2015). A similar challenge to traditional norms has occurred with regard to the status of women in society as well as homosexuality. Regarding the former, women's rights protests have been held in Tahrir, and an increasing number of women have rethought their decision to wear the *higaab*[6]. Regarding the latter, thousands in Cairo have uploaded their real pictures to lesbian and gay dating apps Grindr and Wapa (Debeuf and Abdelmeguid, 2015), a remarkably bold stand in a society which is still hostile to homosexuality.

None of this is to imply that a smooth transition to an open, liberal society is taking place. That Cairo is not morphing into Amsterdam can be witnessed in the recent police raids against a purported 'atheist café' in Cairo (Mezzofiore, 2014b), as well the creation of the special task force to combat atheism in Alexandria. Yet there is a clear link between such documented shifts and the post-revolutionary climate, partly summated in Sabry's

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[6] While the non-wearing of *higaab* in itself is not a shocking decision, the decision to *stop* wearing it is often one which requires significant courage. The relevance of this is not that wearing the *higaab* is at odds with women's rights, but that mass removal is further evidence of a challenge to norms.

formulation of 'freedom' (which gives due reference to the importance of institutions, it must be said) in his analysis of the 2011 revolution:

> freedom to be different in the world, to be an individual, to think and walk freely; the freedom to scream j'accuse whenever and wherever!

Figuring heavily in the various accounts of purportedly-immoral behaviour is social media, with the latter being cited as providing ways for atheists to "find each other" (Hamed, 2014; Debeuf and Abdelmeguid, 2015; Mada Masr, 2014) and therefore further develop and cement their unconventional views (Darwish, 2015), as well as providing an enhanced environment for access to information and freedom of expression. That being said, in many newspaper articles covering the state crackdown on various forms of perceived immorality, it is almost a cliché that the pivotal moment in the story is the sharing of one's views on Facebook, which of course prompts subsequent arrest. This can either be read as indicating that Facebook is not quite as free as one might suppose, or as a sign that people are frequently using Facebook to share controversial views with their wider circle of friends (with only a minority of such instances leading to repercussions). Whether or not social media plays a critical role regarding these tendencies – and there is clearly insufficient existing evidence to make a determination either way - there are important questions regarding the use of social media during such social upheaval. Again, returning to the concept of "terrain" advanced in the previous section, it might be asked how social media alters the landscape for those seeking to challenge and resist both social and political norms. Does Facebook, for example, enable and encourage people to discuss taboo issues in front of friends and family? Or might the heightened visibility of the newsfeed, and the potentially lasting nature of the timeline, act to discourage Facebook users from approaching such a challenge?

In general, Cairo promises to be an important site in which to study the potentials and pitfalls of social media. Not only is there reason to suspect it may have been implicated in users' involvement in protest politics, it is also associated with more quotidian politics, too. In order to contribute to a wider understanding of the politics of social media. I have undertaken semi-structured, open-ended interviews with middle-class Cairenes (a total of twenty-seven interviews conducted), with the aim of understanding user experiences on these platforms, exploring the evolving ways that users approach and make sense of social media sites and their various affordances, as well as exploring the way such sites figure in political life trajectories. Interviews shed light on critical issues pertaining to politics as well

as the societal changes which have followed the revolution. Decisions to participate in Tahrir, for example, are explored in terms of both social media use as well as the wider environments in which participants find themselves. Furthermore, a key finding of the present study is that social media appears to have facilitated both taboo-breaking behaviour as well as freer political speech for some participants, in a climate in which participants found both of those activities difficult. At the same time, the heady combination of visibility issues and social pitfalls represent discouraging features for many, with this issue emerging as significantly gendered.

Technology and Society

As will be explored more fully in chapter three, the basis of the present study is that technology and society are fundamentally interconnected but that neither one can be viewed as determining the other, a view which is integral to a number of studies and approaches, including those found in Miller and Slater (2000), Hine (2000), Latour (1990), Ellison & boyd (2013), Bennett (2005), Anderson (1983), and so on. On this broad view, one cannot fully understand social media in a way which is abstracted from the society in which it is deployed; and the various technologies which mediate communication in turn play a critical role in that society. The aim, then, is not to produce an account which reveals the inherent, timeless properties of social media, but to look for the way technological affordances are imbricated in the lives of users in order to better understand their (dynamic and multifaceted) politics.

The general implications for revolutionary causality of this view are clear. Technologically determinist approaches – whether they champion social media as inherently liberating or insist unreflexively that social media is inimical to revolutions based on one-to-one mappings of design onto usage – are to be rejected.

What it means to eschew both extremes with regard to the influence of technology on society is manifold. One key aspect of this position is that ways of understanding a technology inform how that technology is used. This is potentially applicable both to social media and the internet in in general as well individual sites and specific affordances. The concept of technological closure is especially relevant here, in its implication that new technologies are subject to the onset of inertia: uses and understandings of a technology gradually become settled and static. An important issue for the present study is that documents (including academic discourses) which elaborate the meanings of technology can form part of this technological closure. For example, if activists are discouraged from

appropriating social media in new ways on account of the settled understandings put forward by Gladwell and others, they may be more limited in their thinking and activities than is necessary. In general, the phenomenon of technological closure heightens the need for cross-cultural study, as results in one locality may open up a sense of potential in another.

At the same time, it should not be assumed that results from one locality will be directly applicable to another. Local ways of using and making sense of technology (which are not assumed to be uniform) have the potential to be critical to its use, and therefore local understandings of social media are vital objects of study in the present dissertation. This means understanding how individual affordances are understood by its users, and indeed *how users understand each other to understand them*. Given that social media is effectively a platform for conducting relationships, among other things, affordances are likely to take on distinct characteristics depending on wider local and social norms. Approached in the right way, the potential is there for encounters with social media to be revealing about cultural differences, as unanticipated capacities and deficiencies come to light.

This is politically relevant because to use Facebook politically is to like posts, comment on statuses and articles, and share observations among those in one's network; that is, using Facebook politically involves the very same actions by which Facebook brings its users into relation with one another - users who, perhaps not insignificantly, are encouraged to think of each other as "friends". In general, there is clearly more to Facebook interactions than is immediately apparent– users are exchanging affective charges (Dean, 2010), maintaining relationships (Miller, 2007), and furthermore framing and reframing contexts as well as their relationships with one another (cf Bateson, 2000). The extent to which the social/phatic and political functions of social media are mutually reinforcing or mutually destructive is extremely unclear – for example, they can be seen as embodying the potential for strengthening (political and other) ties (Tufekci, 2010), as enabling the diffusion of novel ideas and perspectives that would otherwise be ignored in more impersonal situations[7], or as leading to a trivialisation of communication in which

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[7] This would appear to be a direct consequence of Katz and Lazarsfeld's 1955 contention that a sense of personally-salient verification of a particular idea or opportunity, provided by one's personal network, is critical to uptake (Granovetter, 1973). While Shirky (2011) seizes on Katz and Lazarsfeld's broad thrust, he seems to miss this aspect of its significance, instead choosing to emphasize the role of conversation (a conceptualization which risks eliding the distinction between stranger and established tie, and thereby missing part of the distinctiveness of social media).

meaningful politics suffers (Dean, 2005, 2010; Miller, 2007). To bring these concerns down to Earth in the form of concrete examples, those seeking to use social media for political purposes can be discouraged from sharing and becoming involved in debates precisely because of how they feel this action would be understood; conversely, they may depend upon 'likes' and comments as forms of salient encouragement which propels their political interactions. Only by carefully exploring the imbrication of the political and the social with actual users can these dynamics be better understood.

Throughout the interviews, the critical task then has been to develop understandings, grounded in user experiences, which yield insight into the various ways that the changing technological affordances of social media have been used to varying effects to create meaningful outcomes for participants. As I will argue throughout the dissertation, there are clear advantages to treating the outright politics of protest and the social politics of, for example, declaring oneself an atheist - as linked. Firstly, social values proved during the course of conducting the study to be inseparable from the politics of the revolution for many. Participants not only seamlessly spoke of revolutionary and social goals, but often explicitly identified social issues as key barriers to the revolution, elaborated on the tolerant spirit of Tahrir, and often seemed to see their upholding particular social norms on Facebook through revolutionary eyes. Secondly, both issues depend heavily on the willingness of users to share risky content which may attract disapprobation from loved ones and even harassment by the state, and therefore both may be mutually illuminating when it comes to understanding practices of sharing and openness on social media. Finally, as will be returned to later, there is a need to be careful to understand the local context of social media in the process of gauging its impact on politics. To set out a position in advance which disregards this important social context is to risk reifying the technology and abstracting it from the wider issues which shape its use.

Structure

In the next chapter, I explore important existing ways of conceiving of the relationship between social media and politics, a task which involves elaborating on perspectives touched on in the present chapter, as well as introducing new theorizations. I identify questions surrounding freedom and openness, interactivity and participation, and affect and sociality as particularly crucial themes, while noting that radically distinctive ways of approaching such questions abound in the literature.

Following this, I set out the methodological approach of the study, siding with those theorists who advocate careful, locally-embedded approaches to social media. In particular, I argue that emphasis must be placed on user experience and interaction on social media, a move which has been critical to shaping the direction and results of the study. The concepts and approaches of interpretive phenomenological analysis are suggested as an important methodological resource, given their emphasis on sense-making practices, user co-construction of accounts, practical flexibility, and their facilitation of both idiographic and generalizing ways of understanding. The approach taken not only enables us to address important issues of affect which are identified in existing theorizations of social media, but to better gauge the importance of cultural differences in shaping interactions online.

In chapter four, I explore participant accounts of Facebook use, showing how interactions on Facebook are informed by various concerns. This is important for contextualizing the remainder of the dissertation, in that it reveals some of the salient ways affordances interact with local culture to frame discussion and the transmission of political information. In keeping with the importance of perceptions of a technology in informing its usage (Hine, 2000), this involves exploring popular understandings of social media – Facebook, for example, is variously considered to be a political site, a site for the cosmopolitan elite, and a site of immorality. Friending practices are also explored, as are norms regarding commenting and discussion, as well as the multifaceted, and often awkward, imbrication of social and political on social media.

Of particular importance is the conundrum of visibility – indeed, social media provides the occasion for many-to-many communications on a scale which is relatively novel and easy. Participant approaches to and understandings of the opportunities and pitfalls of visibility are explored. Of particular interest on this score is the ethical distinction between the timeline and newsfeed as portals to access material shared by others. Whereas the newsfeed, which is felt to be a source of accidental encounter, is seen by participants as a legitimate starting point for interaction, many of those interviewed are uncomfortable with the perceived deliberate voyeurism represented by of others' perusal of their timelines– a potentially permanent record of sharing by a single user - which is felt to have occurred when old material is interacted with.

This distinction provides a way in to deeper understandings of how visibility and the gaze influence users and paves the way towards an understanding of how the critical

affordance of complex privacy settings on Facebook sets the scene for social media sharing among participants. Because privacy settings provide powerful ways to lock out unwanted forms of attention, users are (relatively) free to engage and push boundaries with those who they do wish to involve (a phenomenon which is explored in chapters five and six, and which appeared to have significant repercussions in the lives of some participants). Such settings are partly responsible for a general environment of freedom of interaction, with participants feeling normally free to participate on each other's statuses, even where ties are weak - provided such participation appears to be not too deliberate and does not lead to confusion regarding the relationships of the parties involved.

However, this is not a universal and outright freedom, and has significant gender dimensions. More at risk of policing from relatives, and potential embarrassment, there are appear to be more barriers to female users when it comes to Facebook use, with many finding it more practical to use the site in an extremely reserved way. The gender issue itself also implicates social class, given the role of the latter in norms and practices surrounding visibility. Hence, not only do the issues discussed in this chapter provide an important basis for understanding the visibility issues discussed in later chapters, they help us to understand the barriers to social media participation.

In chapter five, I turn to the issues surrounding Facebook's relationship to outright political protest. I begin with an exploration of participants' experiences of conducting politics on Facebook at a time when it seemed to many that the Mubarak regime was invulnerable, exploring the role of social media in facilitating their political development. I then move on to participants' use of Facebook during the period of protest, and document the ways Facebook use evolved in the wake of the revolution.

In various ways, participant accounts point to the genuine potency of social media in the political realm. Regardless of questions of their decisiveness for the revolution, an understanding of the specific strengths offered is important in terms of further enhancing such strengths. On the one hand, participant accounts seemed to show that Facebook use provided an important means of hope at a time when it was often difficult for individuals sceptical of the regime to find common ground with others. Furthermore, while information was in principle available on the internet already, social media seemed to offer ways of making salient connections (either with strangers or with those in one's existing network whose political views would otherwise have been unknown) and provided information in compelling, regularized, and accessible ways.

The evidence presented in this chapter provides an opportunity to further address Gladwell's (2010) claim regarding social media, which is that the weakness of ties prohibits it from drawing individuals into high-risk protest action. Such claims do not seem to be supportable on the basis of the evidence provided, for one thing because social media appeared to be critical in drawing out the political potential of existing ties of various strengths through a generally increased sense of political visibility, as well as a virtuous cycle of involvement in online dissent and increased political consciousness. Furthermore, social media also figured highly in the trajectories of several individuals who ended up at Tahrir on the January 28th despite their relative lack of ties to other protesters.

Of particular importance was the phenomenon whereby users became gradually empowered to share their political views with friends, even when doing so felt out of bounds in face-to-face conduct. While of course many Egyptians during this period were making anti-Mubarak statements in the public sphere, or at least did not feel inhibited from sharing such views among friends, various participants admitted to engaging in acts of self-suppression regarding politics, and such suppression was viewed by many as a normal part of existence. However this self-suppression is to be understood, Facebook appears to have been an environment which was conducive towards enabling people to challenge this perceived need to suppress their political engagement, not only because extensive networks provided (socially salient) examples of individuals making politically daring statements (and receiving no repercussions), but also because of perceptions that Facebook was a relatively safe space, for reasons which are explored.

This phenomenon of socially-salient issue sharing was also relevant once the revolution had got underway, as exposure to protests via newsfeeds enabled many to see that their friends were there, and that, rather than being an environment of constant and dramatic danger, there were often humorous and festival-like aspects to the protest. As some participants pointed out, there was a marked contrast here between Facebook coverage and televised news coverage, with the latter emphasising the more violent, dangerous, and dramatic elements. As with other forms of political sharing documented in the chapter, there is much here that echoes Katz and Lazarsfeld's assertion that interpersonal social networks are especially politically salient (Granovetter, 1973), indicating that social media may have more political potential than is currently harnessed by existing designs and dominant uses.

In chapter six I take a more expansive view of politics, including participants' approaches to the politics of everyday life which abound on many of their newsfeeds. Challenges to dominant conceptions of gender and religion, among other things, figure prominently, and I use participant accounts on the subject to home in on the way technological affordances are implicated in decisions to challenge existing taboos and advocate various forms of social progress. The discussion here also sheds light on the phenomenon of risky political sharing documented in chapter five. Material is discussed whereby participants explored and made sense of their own decision-making practices, explaining the impact of the encouragement of others provided by social media's many-to-many structure, as well as exploring the potential relevance of Suler's "online disinhibition effect" (2004). I argue that participant accounts also reveal the importance of an underemphasized aspect of social media – namely the capacity it introduces for messages to be *undirected*, meaning that issues can be raised without creating the social tension of forced and necessary acknowledgement. While tagging now gives users the option to include a specific other person if desired, an untagged status may allow conversations to be explored that otherwise may prove awkward if the interlocutor(s) are placed in the position of having to acknowledge that they have witnessed the communication in question.

To conclude the study, I provide a recap and discussion of the evidence presented and arguments made, and return to the overarching question of how best to understand the political potentials provided by social media as well as think through the impact of particular technological affordances. A recurring theme throughout the study has been that of visibility, not least the way participants negotiate the challenges and opportunities that the reconfigured stage of visibility offered by Facebook and other sites present. Not only have concerns over visibility discouraged some from participating and facilitated the finding of like minds, the experience of visibility and spatiality on Facebook has shown the potential to be politically transformative as participants redefine their understandings of the wider society based on social media's reworked spatiality. The varied importance of these factors has meant that technological affordances, in particular the highly customizable privacy settings, have been critical, emphasizing that political participation on social media is often dependent on, and vulnerable to, decisions made in San Francisco or other locations of corporate headquarters.

II. Theorizing Social Media and Politics

When we look to existing literature for ways to conceive of the relation between social media and politics, we find myriad relevant approaches. While a broad generalization can be made in terms of optimistic versus pessimistic accounts, their diversity suggests that the ways in which technology and human agency are interlinked requires a careful attentiveness, meaning that moving too quickly towards an essential dichotomy in the literature may be unhelpful. The current review therefore proceeds by identifying several key questions at work in the existing literature, which are answered in radically different ways by diverse theorists. Each theme, and, indeed, each take on the theme, implicates media in politics in different ways. The chapter will proceed as follows.

The first section reviews key theorizations of the impact of social media on authoritarian dynamics, in particular the suggestion that informational openness is frustrating to regimes which regulate the flow of information via censorship and other means. The idea that cyberspace can puncture closed media environments, and thus function as a 'liberation technology' (Diamond, 2010), is certainly compelling, yet there is certainly a question surrounding whether or not some accounts are guilty of over-hyping the significance of information technology, such as in the so-called 'twitter protests' in Iran (see Esfandiari, 2010). Furthermore, too much significance is arguably afforded to the potency of information *per se*. That is, information about the regime is often less potent than the more subjective matter of information about society's *relation* to this regime. On this score, Faris (2010) argues for the importance not of objective facts but of the insight into subjective orientations of one's neighbours, arguing that authoritarian regimes may be weakened if they can no longer convince internally-dissenting citizens that they are in the minority. This invites interesting questions regarding the new potentials for widespread and systematic visibility on social media in shaping the relations of users and their societies.

I will then move onto the theme of interactivity and participation. Whereas theorists such as Alterman (2010) and Shirky (2008) emphasize, in different ways, the potential for cyberspace to facilitate genuinely participatory approaches to media, this approach has been critiqued as masking an essentially passive relation to politics, in which internet activism often merely substitutes for more substantive forms of engagement in political life. While this critique certainly appears to be relevant to the issues surrounding mediated politics, however, it may be misleading to assume that it is a full and accurate account of

online political participation. In particular, it must be recognized that activism can function in a transformative way, leading to new senses of identity. It is therefore unclear whether online activism should be treated as dampening participation or as a 'gateway' to increased involvement in politics.

A further important theme regarding social media is the extent to which it affords spaces of autonomy. Castells (2012), for example, argues that networked communications provide critical infrastructure for personal autonomy, encouraging and enabling people to access global discourses as well as to interact with, modify, and relay their own ideas in a space of freedom. It has also been noted that social media sites provide opportunities for individuals to reframe the discourses of established media, expressing and relaying a critical disposition with regards to hegemonic discourses (Peterson, 2012). Even as it functions as a site of apparent freedom and heterogeneity, however, algorithms which govern exposure to content online are often oriented around homophily, meaning that even exposure to difference cannot be taken for granted as a fundamental feature of internet use.

A further challenge to the view of social media as an autonomous space concerns affect, a keyword which often indexes perspectives which are more sceptical about the internet's potential role as a site of meaningful politics. Important here is the sense in which social media is part of an overall system of distraction and hyperconnectedness, which is argued to detracts from the capacity to be an effective political subject, as well as the apparent tendency towards the trivial and the phatic with which social media use is often associated. Notably, these arguments not only call into question the capacity of the internet to undermine both action and reflection, but are conceived of in terms which marginalize the individual agent in favour of an emphasis on contagion and virality. A further question concerns the potency of social ties and feelings of connectedness, with divergent views on whether feelings of togetherness online enable powerful affective transformation (Castells, 2012; see also Hochheimer & Al-Emad, 2013) or are illusory, lacking the meaningfulness to constitute a genuine connection to political movements (Gladwell, 2010). Yet studies are emerging (Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliveira, 2012; Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013) which indicate that social media is implicated in recurring rhythms of affect, leading arguably to a more powerful and temporally concentrated collective focus during particular events. This is a question which directly implicates the embodied relation(s) to cyberspace, and the affective possibilities it contains, as well as the practices of everyday interaction and networking in which social media is utilized. While this is not a

matter of clear and uniform outcomes, it indicates that what might be termed the 'sociality' of social media can be seen in the diverse literature to function in various ways – as enabling politics to take on new salience, imbuing it with new affective charges, or indeed hollowing out the political and transforming it into a meaningless façade.

Information, Space, Authoritarianism

One of the ways in which social media sites appear to offer an important point of departure for protest movements in various ways is their frustration of the control of information which authoritarian regimes are thought to depend on. The mechanics of this are quite diverse (and not consistently in favour of people power: states, too, are empowered by technological means, as argued by Morozov, 2011b), but primarily derive from an increased capacity for informational transmission in a way which subverts the control over established media which authoritarian (and, in a sense, non-authoritarian) states exercise.

Whereas television channels (and, indeed civil society organizations) are easily censured and either directly controlled by the state or dependent on licensing in order to be financially viable, social media threatens to take at least some of the informational power out of the hands of such organizations and devolve them to a more difficult-to-control individual level. In such an environment, it is more difficult to control public opinion, disseminate hegemonic narratives, and keep inflammatory occurrences out of the public eye. Hence the familiar pattern across diverse contexts (see for example Lim, 2003; Froehling, 1999) has been one of cyberspace being utilized to open up contentious issues (such as regime abuses) to a wider public, often subsequently forcing its way onto mainstream news agendas.

For Diamond (2010), this capacity to circumvent media closure enables the internet to function as "accountability technology", in which individual communication and civil society are strengthened and governments can more readily be held to account. This potency is further compounded by the centrality of the internet to economic development: to shut out this potentiality often means to interfere with business interests – a difficult option for authoritarian regimes. Regarding social media specifically, the 'cute cat theory' was put forward as a somewhat tongue-in-cheek observation that it meshes innocuous communications with politically potent speech, making it difficult for states to curtail expressions of dissent on media which might be derisively thought of as existing for the dissemination of cat pictures (Zuckerman, 2013). When such technologies are put to

political uses by a minority of citizens, state interference will only serve to amplify dissent and signal to the citizenry that something is wrong, as the daily communications of the majority are disrupted. Also relevant here is the 'Streisand effect' (Barrons, 2012), in which the attempt to suppress information merely advertises its existence. For these reasons, blocking social media can be extremely counterproductive for regimes. Furthermore, as Zuckerman (2013) has noted, the multifunctionality of social media sites also makes them relatively inconspicuous for those wishing to engage in activism.

Furthermore, social media sites, in particular Facebook, are informed by an ethos of 'radical transparency' (Lim, 2013), which can function as a vehicle for the diffusion of dissent, even in authoritarian conditions. All actions are transformed into potential points of social connectivity, which lends social media inadvertently to the rapid dissemination of political information. One way to formulate this is to continue with the visual metaphor implicit in the notion of transparency, and to suggest that social media constitutes a reworked (and shifting) structure of visibility, as new information and personal actions alike are transmitted across networks as well as occulted from specific individuals and groups via privacy settings. For Lim (2013), the downside of this is the oversimplification which seems to result when complex issues are formatted for consumption and viral dissemination via social media platforms. Issues are compressed into clear frames which often belie their true complexity. This is often done self-consciously by social media activists wishing to work with the medium effectively, making concessions to its constraints.

Crucially, informational openness is not simply about the transmission of shocking or otherwise salient knowledge about the regime, but information about the citizenry themselves. Shirky's (2011) emphasis on the potential for "shared awareness" of popular discontent to result from social media use is relevant here, not least because it is suggestive of the potential for the socially connective function of social media to be disruptive of dynamics of 'preference falsification' in authoritarian regimes, whereby individuals do not act against the regime not out of approval, but due to a (potentially erroneous) sense that others in fact support it (Faris, 2010). That is, while Shirky's emphasis is on the puncturing of regime discourses and control of information, the more salient issue may turn out to lie in the management of the relationship between the individual and society in a different sense. By discouraging, penalizing, censoring, and marginalizing expressions of dissent, regimes can convince dissatisfied citizens that they are in the minority – or at least that others are not willing to take the risks of mobilization

(Faris, 2010; Wedeen, 1999). There is a resonance here with Zizek's (1997) invocation of 'the subject supposed to', which observes the importance of imaginary others in the functioning of power. Here, the state-citizen relationship can be viewed as not based on actual belief and consent, but on the supposition that there is a generalized (and often completely imaginary) citizen who *does* consent. As long as this citizen remains intact in an imaginary sense, the dissent of actual citizens can be forestalled, as individuals engage in a vicious cycle of 'preference falsification'.

Shirky's (2011) suggestion that "shared awareness" can make internet participation resonant in authoritarian regimes can be fleshed out further with reference to other theorists on social media. As Faris has argued (2010), social media appears peculiarly well-placed to distribute information to a broader range of recipients than would otherwise occur, as large networks of (presumed) weak ties are kept updated on a range of activities and opinions based on network default settings. This renders social media a likely source of cascade effects in which the preferences of fellow citizens become reciprocally exposed in a rapidly-growing snowball effect. As Tufekci and Wilson (2013) emphasize, however, questions surrounding the preference falsification dynamic and social media during the 2011 Egyptian revolution remain largely unaddressed by existing literature.

However, to understand the issue in terms of 'preference falsification' may be to inadequately theorize the political realities of at least some authoritarian regimes. In Wedeen's (1999) study of Syrian politics, the pressures of conforming to regime discourses were seen to result in a sense of profound internal political disorientation regarding national political life. This factor arguably renders regime strategy more intelligible; for example, the dissemination of facts which are understood by all to be false does not seem to make sense if the goal is for citizens to *convincingly* fabricate their own preferences in public life (Wedeen, 1999). For Wedeen, regime control of the public sphere is in some cases directed towards undermining an individual's understanding of *themselves* as a political being, rather than falsifying the preferences of the majority. This is significant because it suggests that attempts to theorize politics solely in terms of rational agents may be misleading when it comes to registering the potential impact of expression (via social media or otherwise) on political life.

Also relevant is Markham's (2014) critique of existing scholarship on social media, specifically the way that it seems to misapprehend the relationship between state and subject. In Markham's view, to attribute efficacy to online forums (of various kinds) as

spaces of freedom is to risk reifying political subjectivity as well as norms (civic or otherwise), rather than seeing them as part of a dynamic process which implicates the state itself (in fact, for Markham, state and subject are seen as mutually constituted). Echoing Foucault's critique of the repressive hypothesis (1978), his point is that political repression should be seen as productive, rather than simply as an obstacle to full expression.

While this is doubtless an important point, Markham's critique risks occluding important aspects of social media's impact on politics. Clearly, there is at least an initial case here for the practices of social media to enable individuals to rework their relationship with state and society by shifting their notions of what others believe (Faris, 2010), and may have unpredictable effects on the depoliticizing aspects of authoritarian life, as might be inferred from Wedeen's take on authoritarian politics (1999). On these grounds, it may not be a misreading to suggest that online spaces are ones in which dissent can be 'galvanized' (a verb which Markham objects to), if it is the case that they enable individuals to receive salient encouragement and provide a space in which communication is governed by rehashed logics. Yet what this critique (as well as Wedeen's insights) does put into question is whether this can be theorized as a simple matter of the liberation of a politics which pre-existed, and lurks intact within, a repressed citizen. The suggestion here is that the more 'liberated' engagements which seem to have been witnessed online may be more productively (and cautiously) analysed in terms of how they enable a reworking of the relationship between the individual and the state, rather than simply reading them as expressions of an innate, secret opposition which was always-already conceptually intact.

This chimes with Lim's emphasis (2014) on Scott's notion of 'hidden transcripts', a concept which emphasizes not the exposure and enticement of true preferences, but the accumulation of counter-hegemonic ideas and sentiment through casual, low-key encounters in safe(r) spaces, which potentially manifests outright in demonstrations. As more traditional structures of resistance lose their grip, social media becomes a key site in which subaltern counterpublics can be formed and nurtured, and in which resistance appears to be largely "invisible" to power. Crucially, for Lim, the apparent invisibility of social media resistance is complemented by the very visible staging of protest in public spaces, with each of the two corresponding to the different needs of social movements – an observation which is especially salient in the wake of those who seem to formulate the virtual and the physical as opposing categories at odds with one another. Lim also acknowledges that other sites (she specifically cites coffee shops and information

networking via taxis) are also important for the accumulation of hidden transcripts. However, Lim's argument that social media has enabled first time protestors to attend high-risk protests points to a significant relationship between social media and the streets, one which challenges those who conceive of the former as not conducive to protest (see Gladwell, 2010, to be explored below).

A further twist of this reworking of visibility, and spatiality more generally, is the rapidity with which protests have emerged at various sites around the world (Shirky, 2011). This is not simply a matter of speeding up what would have happened anyway: 'smart mobs' (Rheingold, 2002) are argued to operate without reliance on the hierarchical structures and formal organizations which are the hallmark of traditional social movements, and which are often easily co-opted and constrained by authoritarian states. This requires some qualification, however. The popular narrative of the leaderless movement, which often frames instances of protest mediated by networked communication technologies, has been carefully undermined by Gerbaudo's (2012a) research, gleaned from protest networks in various countries (including Egypt). In practice, key nodes do retain structurally-enshrined power, albeit in the form of the capacity to "choreograph" movements, guiding the co-ordination, form, and tone of protest activities, as well as stimulating and shaping conversations. Furthermore, while 'networked gatekeeping' (Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliveira, 2012) appears to enable crowdsourcing of communicative elites, this process is hardly transparent. It also implies that international news-hungry audiences have the potential to shape local communication networks, as they amplify, and attach markers of esteem to, local voices. There is also a suggestion that hierarchical organizations have distinct, difficult-to-replace functions in political life, not least the capacity to make pacts and co-ordinate dissent, arguably paving the way towards constructive political action (see for example Gerbaudo, 2013).

Interpassivity and Participation

A key debate regarding social media as a site for political participation surrounds the issue of 'content production' online, and the related capacity for social media to enable political participation in the form of discussion as well as other practices. It has been widely noted (see for example Dahlgren, 2012), that the internet affords greater opportunities for collaboration, sharing, support, and co-ordination between individuals as well as institutions, and thereby can be seen to increase democratic participation. The question here concerns whether or not the participation facilitated should be considered as in some

ways deficient, the suggestion being that the ease of social media engagement renders it less meaningful, and therefore not simply overhyped (Gladwell, 2010) but potentially even depoliticizing (Dean, 2005; 2009; Morozov, 2011b). On the latter view, even if social media does provide the logistical means for more effective co-ordination between activists, its general effect is to fundamentally undermine their wider aims (Dean, 2005). While the critique appears to be especially applicable to liberal democracies, in which communication appears not to be disruptive to the status quo but rather an ideological imperative (Dean, 2009), there is also a suggestion that even in authoritarian societies communication online might function as a safety valve, diffusing political energies in a manner which is not conducive to social change. A key concept here is that of 'interpassivity' (Zizek, 1996; Dean, 2005), in which the oft-hailed 'interactive' features of social media are subtly inverted. Rather than enabling genuine engagement and democratic participation, social media offers merely the illusion of engagement by enabling action which is largely symbolic at the expense of genuine action. In an illustrative example of interpassivity (Zizek, 1996), one compulsively records films that one does not have the time to watch, coming to take the activity of recording as a substitute for watching. In a sense, the recording device has come to take the place of the active subject. Thus, the virtual attendance of protests and the signing of e-petitions can be read as the onset of a dangerous interpassivity, in which symbolic action does not supplement genuine engagement, but replaces it.

While this critique should not be jettisoned entirely, it should be borne in mind that participation is often itself transformative for those who participate, which raises the possibility that this transformation can open up new possibilities for action rather than merely replacing them. Indeed, the interpassivity critique is one which functions based on a sense of duality between action and representation (or indeed real and virtual), which does not appear to fully capture the intricate relationship between communication and political agency. For example, Shirky notes that the work of Katz and Lazarsfeld (Shirky, 2011; Granovetter, 1973) shows that it is through conversations in everyday life – rather than absorption of one-way information and opinion from television and newspapers - that opinions are formed. This is intriguing because it suggests that discussion online, even if potentially misleading as an indicator of individual commitment or public feeling, could have significant political repercussions if it affords more opportunities for opinion formation through discussion. Contra Dean, Zizek, and Morozov, then, this approach suggests, with equal credibility, that in addition to the potential to give rise to 'shared

awareness', discussed above, mediated politics offers the potential to strengthen public spheres as well as enable and stimulate critical debates. *Prima facie*, it also raises the prospect of social media being transformative in individual life trajectories, as it enables the development of political opinions which are critical to committed activism. While acknowledging that the uses of social media are multiple and conflicting, and that the empirical record so far is patchy and inconclusive, Shirky points up the possibility that the low-cost, quasi-participation frowned upon by Gladwell might be regarded as a proliferation of opinion-forming activities, effectively politicising users who may otherwise find themselves more easily disconnected from matters of activism and national life. Rather than replacing real life participation, then, online life is argued to supplement and strengthen civil society, potentially fundamentally altering the state's strategic position vis-à-vis its citizens.

Particularly important here is the notion that online participation gives rise to activist identities, as social media sharing involves implicating oneself in struggle before a salient audience. Alterman's (2011) suggestion is that if the production of 'content' online can be regarded as shifting the relation between users and events into one of activity rather than passivity, then social media can enable the development of activist identities and a feeling of involvement in anti-regime movements. On this view, the lowered bar to participation can be considered a stepping stone to more meaningful action. Speaking with regard to the Arab spring, Alterman explains:

> [social media] allowed a large number of people to see themselves as activists because they were creating content. That is to say, while there has been considerable concentration on the role social media played in allowing people to receive content, analysts have not placed enough emphasis on the importance of social media's enabling people to send content, transforming them from observers of activism to activists themselves with a greater stake as leaders, not just followers, of unfolding events (2011: 104).

Alterman's reading is interesting because it locates the impact of social media in a very specific and limited way. Despite being willing to attribute a key function to social media, Alterman consistently downplays the impact of Facebook and Twitter in favour of that of television, in particular transnational stations such as Al Jazeera, who operated largely outside of the control of Mubarak regime. For Alterman, television was vital to the revolutionary project, as it conveyed not just news of the protests throughout the country, but affecting images and sounds as well, which powerfully illustrated the strength of the movement to a very large audience. Most importantly, television played a critical role in

framing the events and portraying them with an air of legitimacy: "al Jazeera and many of the other stations sanctified and validated those protests as revolutionary when they were still in their early days," effectively "legitimizing public participation and giving it an air of support that it did not yet enjoy" (Alterman, 2011: 110-111).

Here, the emphasis on television sets the stage for deepening our understanding of the impact of social media as a participatory component of a revolutionary media ecology. While television provides a sense of immediacy and involves viewers in a strong storyline, social media provides a direct complement in enabling people then to become involved in that storyline. In part, this involved supplying content via social media to television networks, which disseminated it to public in general at a time when their reporters had difficulty operating in the country. Indeed, as this material confirmed that the revolution was occurring throughout Egypt, Alterman suggests that people in outlying areas were increasingly encouraged to become informal reporters themselves, and hypothesizes that this may have contributed to the increased involvement of the labour movement at a critical phase. While Alterman's suggestions are compelling – in the sense that it potentially illuminates the curious and unexpected event of the 2011 Egyptian uprisings – they have not yet been fully grounded in empirical research, and his hypothesis serves to further illustrate the need for qualitative, in-depth attention to the experiences of users themselves.

It is also important to recognise that the discourse which emphasizes participation often carries subtle theoretical baggage which needs to be questioned. Dean (2009) argues, for example, that the very concept of 'participation', as well as the meaningfulness attributed to electronic communications, are implicated in fetishistic tendencies, in which democratic symbolism figures as more important than emancipatory political agendas themselves. On this view, it may be deemed that the concrete reasons offered for social media's importance can be regarded as symptoms, perhaps of a general social valorisation of debate and a vague, liberal ideology which prizes 'democratic participation' above, for example, an end to exploitative systems which further injustice on national and global scales. While this may be the case, it is important to realise that, while various aspects of the discourse around technology can be regarded *themselves* as depoliticizing, this does not of itself neutralize the claims made therein. If Alterman (2011) and Shirky's (2011) theorizations are upheld by continued research, we may find that social media itself holds profound politicizing potential, even as various discourses surrounding it in many societies work counter to that tendency. Moreover, if the discourse of participation is relevant for

the participants themselves, then it may lead to more concrete political consequences. What it does indicate, however, is a need to continue to push the discourse of 'enabling participation' towards a more careful theorization of the way that technologies are implicated in political action (along with an empirical attention to the way this is implicated in actual practices).

Networked Communications and the Space of Autonomy

In addition to providing spaces for participation, and enabling the spread of information and salient forms of political awareness, social media haas also been argued to be conducive to a more 'autonomous' relationship to wider social and political life. The point has been put forward in various ways (and with varying implications), focusing not only on the utilization of safe spaces for communication and exploration and on access to information and global discourses, but the capacity and inducement to "remix" digital content as well as reframe viral material and share one's own opinions. This goes beyond merely facilitating participation in politics, or indeed the production of content enabling activist identities, in that it is suggestive of a reformulated relationship to society, to power, and to received wisdom.

Perhaps the most influential view here is provided by Castells (2007; 2012), who emphasizes the internet and social media as material support for "mass self-communication", a concept which seeks to capture the sense of a profound shift in mediation between self and society. While the broad reach of traditional media is retained, communication is (in principle) oriented between distinct nodes, such that not only do messages originate from individuals, but their receipt and re-transmission is also individualized. Castells views this as the source of various outcomes, including the difficulty for governments to exercise control over communications, as well as increased access to global sources of meaning, which can be "remixed" by the individual in his communications.

The significance of this is profound and multi-faceted. Not least, it means that social media forms a key part of "the technological platform for the construction of the autonomy of the social actor, be it individual or collective, vis-à-vis the institutions of society" (Castells, 2012: 7). It's important to register here that Castells is not simply talking about spaces in which individuals can express themselves outside of (some of the) existing constraints, but is referring to autonomy in a deeper, and often personal, sense. Autonomy, for Castells,

refers to the capacity of a social actor to become a subject by defining its action around projects constructed independently of the institutions of society, according to the values and interests of the social actor. The transition from individuation to autonomy is operated through networking, which allows individual actors to build their autonomy in with like-minded people in the networks of their choice (Castells, 2012: 230-231).

In the sense of bolstering autonomous communications, then, social media sites figure in Castells' account as a "free space" (2012: 222), which plays a vital role in networked social movements. Castells also makes clear that the impact of online space depends not only on the capacity for autonomous communication provided by the internet, but on symbolic sites of visibility in urban public space. Citing commonalities between various movements worldwide, Castells is generally convincing regarding the sense in which these different forms of space are mutually implicated in a co-dependent relationship which is critical to the success and character of networked social movements. Crucial here is the extent to which collective 'construction of meaning' is the key vector by which power can be challenged and movements galvanized. By creating new spaces in which meaning can be developed in a way which frustrates, or at least dilutes, corporate and bureaucratic control, social media can function as a site of resistance to the dominant discourses which constrain politics. To say that the internet is a free space, then, means that this process can unfold in way which radically re-empowers the public vis-à-vis traditional media and existing power structures. Castells is clear that "the way people think" (2012: 5) is the decisive factor in how societies unfold, which he sees, perhaps optimistically, as straightforwardly trumping repressive capabilities.

Not only does it provide the capacity for counter-power movements to flourish, it also allows these movements themselves to function in a de-centralized and anti-hierarchical way (although, as discussed above, Gerbaudo has qualified these claims; 2012b). Castells believes this restructuring was expressed in the global popular movements of 2011, including the Egyptian uprisings:

> In all cases the movements ignored political parties, distrusted the media, did not recognise any leadership and rejected all formal organization, relying on the Internet and local assemblies for collective decision-making.

Thus, Castells cites not just the potential for information and communication technologies to restructure social networks around autonomous projects, but access to global discourses as well as the affordance of freer communicative expression as key infrastructure for autonomous living. What is convincing here is the idea that networked

technologies do provide affordances for individuals to develop their personal projects in less constrained ways than previously (although the extent to which this is true may depend greatly on personal linguistic resources), and to access and incorporate a wider repertoire of ways of thinking. This is a point which he supports empirically (citing a co-authored study which has shown an association between internet use and autonomous lifestyles), yet the exuberance with which the point is relayed is sometimes suggestive of a determinist relationship in which a specific technological form maps directly onto a particular social outcome. Here, Fuchs' (2012) counter is worth relaying, as he advocates for an approach in which social media is understood as expressive of society as a whole:

> The media – social media, the Internet and all other media – are contradictory because we live in a contradictory society. As a consequence, their effects are actually contradictory, they can dampen/forestall or amplify/advance protest or have not much effect at all. Also different media (e.g. alternative media and commercial media) stand in a contradictory relation and power struggle with each other. The media are not the only factors that influence the conditions of protest – they stand in contradictory relations with politics and ideology/culture that also influence the conditions of protest. So whether protest emerges or not is shaped by multiple factors that are so complex that it cannot be calculated or forecast if protest will emerge as result of a certain crisis or not. Once protests have emerged, media, politics and culture continue to have permanent contradictory influences on them and it is undetermined if these factors have rather neutral, amplifying or dampening effects on protest. Protests in antagonistic societies often call forth policing and police action. In this case, the state reacts to social movements with its organised form of violence. State violence against protests and ideological violence against movements (in the form of attacks of delegitimization conducted by the media, politicians and others) can again have amplifying, dampening or insignificant effects on protests (2012: 786-787).

So, for Fuchs, the influence of media on protest is contradictory and reflective of the society at large; any generalizing rule about the democratizing or autonomy-inducing potential of social media is likely to be misguided on the grounds that such accounts necessarily bracket out important contextualizing factors. Furthermore, as Lim notes, social media appears equally disposed to function as a "pseudo-heterotopia of consumerism" (2014: 69) as to afford autonomous meaning-making. If online spaces of any kind do function as a site of autonomy, this must be taken as an effect which is particular, contingent, and local, and therefore should be understood in a contextualised way. Regarding autonomy specifically, relevant factors can include existing regimes of media control, the extent to which the state adapts to and seizes on the opportunities and

challenges of social media, and the ways in which economic structures create, dissolve, and reshape civic and participatory spaces (Lim, 2014). Two issues in particular are worth elaborating here.

Firstly, when we speak of global communications technologies, especially those which are operative in societies geographically removed from those in which they originated, the notion that media expresses society becomes further complicated by the question of what constitutes a 'society' and the extent to which such distinctions are undercut by the global interconnectedness involved at several levels.

Secondly, there is an inarguably local dimension regarding the impact of social media. To recognise this is not to imply a homogeneity of use in a given locality, and nor does it involve eschewing the idiographic. Rather, it is to acknowledge that shared understandings and ways of engaging with media – which often have local dimensions (and on multiple scales) – are relevant in shaping use (Miller & Slater, 2000; Miller, 2011).

So determinist accounts are certainly questionable, but the extent to which Castells is here providing one is perhaps best regarded as unclear – for example, the concept of 'culture' is regularly invoked as an explanatory factor, but he conceives of this culture as having a very broad geographical scope (including at least North America, Europe, and the Middle East). At the same time, he views this culture as being instantiated in the technologies themselves, which can be regarded as indicating that society and technology are not viewed as separate, but as mutually constitutive. Yet he does suggest that the social media site "transforms culture by inducing the culture of sharing" (Castells, 2012: 232), going on to add that "networked social movements came to life in a *natural* [emphasis added] transition for many individuals, from sharing their sociability to sharing their outrage, their hope, and their struggle". Whether or not this is technological determinism, this certainly emphasizes the agency of affordances at the apparent expense of that of the user, and in a way which often elides the particularities of its embeddedness in existing societies, localities, and networks (Miller and Slater, 2000).

Here, Castells is on difficult terrain: ultimately, it is difficult to disagree with Fuchs and others that whether or not social media promotes or discourages what Castells refers to as 'autonomy' is ultimately an empirical question and is contingent on its features as well as how they are used by people in practice. Yet, although it is wise to be careful about accounts of autonomy as an inevitable consequence of social media use, independent of its embeddedness (Miller and Slater, 2000), Castells is convincing when he is taken as

suggesting that autonomy is a *relevant modality* of the instantiation of social media in users lives. Not only his own readings of society, but empirical work engaged in by diverse researchers (see for example Marolt, 2013; Cockain, 2014), is suggestive of this phenomenon.

On this suggested reading of Castells, networked communications are not an inevitable haven of autonomous subjects, but rather a general, and unpredictable, means of disruption to existing, complex, socio-technical mechanisms for restricting autonomy based on monologic media. Particularly important points of reference here are Marolt's interventions (2012, 2013), which evoke the familiar notion of the internet as a less inhibited space (e.g. Lim, 2003), and argue that online spaces can function as 'aspirational' spaces in which hegemonic control fails to prevent the expression of values which are successfully marginalised in other contexts, going beyond the status of mere dissent to one of autonomy. There is significant overlap with Castells' thinking, for example in his contention that, while the Chinese internet is far from an unregulated, government-free zone, it has provided scope for 'netizens' to move away from both authoritarian control and state-centred ideology. Yet Marolt's emphasis on autonomy is more clearly grounded in the empirical realities uncovered by his own research into the Chinese context:

> a variety of efforts indicative of a fleeing from and ignoring the state and of an active seeking and fighting for a 'more intense mode of existence' have long become a Chinese reality. Many early adopters and practitioners corroborate that actively engaging (with) the Internet has become their "exit" from a closet of conformity (2013: 73-74).

The internet affords autonomy for his participants in that it represents a diverse space which affords greater resource for people to fashion their own interpretations of events and in general 'remix' their own relation to reality (2013). This is part of a wider potential for 'aspiration and inspiration' to give rise to possibilities for social and political novelty which are difficult to anticipate; a further key is that it functions as a site of exposure to, and (in practice) often acceptance of, difference. For Marolt, this is not as much a matter of locating key moments of transformation as it is of everyday, gradual shifts in mindset which accrue through online practices.

Most importantly, this is not a matter of a one-to-one mapping of internet to autonomy, so much as a complex and contradictory interaction between multiple forms of space at multiple levels of spatiality. Theorizing this is not so much a matter of simple overarching processes, but an adaptability to local ways of making sense of internet affordances and,

critically, individual feelings, projects, and understandings. Thus, room is made for the embeddedness of internet use (Miller and Slater, 2000; Miller, 2011), and, in contrast to Castells, emphasis is placed on user intentionality. Here, inspiration is taken from a particular reading (Paras, 2006) of Foucault's later intellectual project, in which the intentional subject is revived as a crucial figure in understanding the history of systems of thought. Autonomy, then, is viewed as an attribute of intentional subjects, who are able to make use of internet technologies to expand the scope of their thinking, develop solidaristic relations with others, and create and participate in spaces in which difference is encountered, accepted, and perhaps embraced.

Yet, while autonomy may be recognised as an important modality of social media, it is far from being the only one. Furthermore, appearances of heterogeneity may in some cases be deceptive. This can be seen, for example, in its potential to function as an 'echo chamber', in which homophilous algorithms map like to like, giving the appearance of broad engagement even as its scope is increasingly restricted. Also important here is the concept of the spectacle (Debord, 1994; Jappe, 1999), which suggests that modern societies are characterized by alienation (in the Marxist sense), in which a generalized spectatorship, and a related orientation towards non-productive representations, replaces the active engagement with life which is seen to be a fundamental aspect of human existence. Understood in these terms, social media can be viewed not just a site of faux-participation, but more generally as exemplifying and extending a ubiquitous passivity. On this view, social media would be a space of autonomy only in the sense that its logics could be subverted for such purposes, through *detournement.* However, this would always be vulnerable to the reverse move: *recouperation* by the spectacular logics at work in modern societies.

Affect, Sociality, and Togetherness

Emphases on social media as a site of autonomy face an additional challenge from accounts which view networked communications as mobilizing affective capacities in a way which disrupt coherent reflection and decision-making. Dean's pessimistic view here (2010) stresses the 'circulation' of affect due to its function as a mediator for social life, a circulation which seems to glue the user to cyberspace. Indeed, as a vector of connection to one's social circle, social media calls forth the frustrations, satisfactions, joys and sorrows of human connection – or, indeed, of lack of human connection. These affective nuggets are presented in an addictive form which is closer to subverting than enabling

purposeful action. Summarizing the political upshot of this, Dean she draws upon the work of Berlant (2007), who characterizes twitter feeds as constant attempts to 'eventalize' the moment, Terranova's (2004) observations of informational overload, and Zaitchik's (2009) critique of a "constant contact media addiction" to portray a distracted, unfocused comportment as characteristic of modern mediated politics, an observation which also chimes well with Licoppe and Smoreda's (2006) contention that social media has collapsed presence and absence into 'connected presence'. All of this offers up civic weak-spots to those who would exploit them. For Dean, the Bush Administration's success in manipulating the information environment in the run-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq relied on exactly this sort distracting abundance of information. The subsequent proliferation of social media, on this analysis, therefore is conducive to a more vulnerable citizenry, rather than a more engaged and adaptable one. While new communications technologies may allow protestors to assemble, this underlying and ubiquitous informational overload can ultimately neutralize the meaning of protest in the public sphere (Dean, 2005).

A further issue regarding social media's primary use as an affective conduit for social life is that it becomes a distinctly phatic space (Miller, 2008). Indeed, the suggestion is that dialogic and even informational uses are thwarted by these phatic tendencies (Miller, 2008; Dean, 2010), which constantly places the agenda on the trivial and disrupts more involved modes of communication. For Dean, this is an instance of Agamben's (1993) notion of 'communication without communicability' (which Agamben interestingly ties to the notion of spectacle, seen here not in materialist terms but as a timeless function inherent in language itself). Miller ascribes this tendency in part to 'database culture', in which narrative is eschewed in favour of self-contained bits of content. The result is that, as communication is harnessed for the development, extension, and demonstration of personal connections, the sharing of information and the conduct of dialogue become irrelevant, or at least marginal. As Miller puts it:

> The point of the social networking profile is blatantly to establish (and demonstrate) linkages and connections, rather than dialogic communication. Thus, what is seen here is a shift in emphasis from blogging technology which encouraged the creation of substantive text along with networking, to social networking profiles which emphasize networking over substantive text, thus shifting digital culture one step further from the substantive text and dialogue of the blog further into a realm of new media culture which I refer to as the phatic.

For Miller, phatic communication is encouraged by social media platforms through technical affordances and site design – for example, the character limit on twitter is

(according to Miller) an attempt to limit non-phatic communicative capacities. The argument is perhaps more convincing where Facebook is concerned: indeed, this can be read as part of the culture of 'radical transparency' which Lim (2013) emphasizes as being characteristic of the platform. Where actions, games, likes, check-ins, are communicated to a wide audience, everything is transformed into an opportunity for phatic communion, and the bi-product is goldmine of analysable data. Whereas narrative and dialogic communications are hard to break down and aggregate, the phatic communications of Facebook are easily chunkable and are more readily transformed into profit.

Both Miller's and Dean's arguments, while convincing and apparently demonstrative of the interaction of cultural phenomena and technical affordances, seem to belie some of the apparently-politicizing effects that social media appears to have had worldwide in various social movements and revolutionary progressions. One way to read this is as an indication that social media may function differently in authoritarian societies. Where speech is relatively free, social media can be understood as merely further diffusing and fragmenting the informational environment, leading to a lack of a coherent framework for action. On the other hand, in closed societies, social media is capable of shattering this closure, opening up space for action where none previously existed.

Furthermore, both accounts arguably overemphasize the novelty of the technology, attributing too much power to technical affordances structuring interactions. This leads to various forms of oversimplification of what are profoundly complex and nuanced processes of interaction. Dean's account of affective networks (2010) in particular is questionable when it comes to the conceptualization of the process of affective networking. While it may be true that social media has affective potency, and that the circulation of affectively potent content is key to this, it may not be the case that it is *affect* which *circulates*. That is, a particular meme which passes between myriad social networks online may not be unproblematically regarded as the circulation of a particular affective state between extended user networks spanning the globe. To assert this is to risk under-problematizing the relation between users and their technologically mediated networks, and is a step towards the elision of the agency of users themselves. Rather, while the image file which is distributed remains (presumably) unchanged, the communicative context and patterns of reading differ subtly and not so subtly between each sender and receiver of the message. Indeed, Jenkins' (2006) argument that modern media culture is fundamentally characterized by the continual repurposing of cultural raw materials is effectively applicable to the micro-level, even if instances of its repurposing are not always

especially dramatic. Furthermore, the affect which is experienced by users is, as Dean suggests, often experienced as a result of the particular interrelations between users – for example the acknowledgement involved in liking and commenting as they form part of the interplay between users and the creation, maintenance, and transformation of relationships. One upshot of which is that the circulation of memes must be seen as, rather than self-propelling, a bi-product of the affective intensities and social relationships involved in social media networking.

While Dean seems to flirt with the erasure of user agency, Miller's (2008) almost entirely negative appreciation of the phatic leads to a very partial account of the potentialities of social media, and fails to appreciate the positive potential of phatic communication. As Tufekci (2010) has pointed out, those processes of apparently-pointless communication are central to the formation of ties. Indeed, the neighbourhood communities which seem to offer an easy point of pre-virtual reference were often sustained in part precisely by phatic communication, which after all only serves to communicate the meta-message: "you are worth communicating with, even if I have nothing to say." This is upheld by empirical studies on the impact of new communication technologies on neighbourhood communities, which broadly suggest that introduction of new media has the potential to facilitate strengthened ties (Hampton & Wellman, 2003; Haythornthwaite, 2002).

An especially influential argument, however, has it that it is not so much the affective properties of social media which are the problem, but the lack of them (Gladwell, 2010). The issue here is whether social media ties are affectively potent enough to mobilize protest on a large scale; indeed, accounts which purport to show exactly this often appear to severely downplay the role of street sociability and face-to-face networks in respective manifestations of popular discontent (Gladwell, 2010). Indeed, both critics and advocates of the transformative potential of social media often attest to its role as a facilitator of 'weak ties', and either implicitly or openly suggest that, perhaps due to its virtual nature, sites like Facebook and twitter have little impact regarding the mobilization of 'strong ties' for political purposes. Gladwell, for example, is especially outspoken in explaining exactly how this apparent restricted functionality of social media in day to day life translates into limits on its political and revolutionary use. Facebook, he attests:

> is a tool for efficiently managing your acquaintances, for keeping up with the people you would not otherwise be able to stay in touch with. That's why you can have a thousand "friends" on Facebook, as you never could in real life (2010).

The 'weak ties' represented by one's Facebook network are, for Gladwell, particularly unsuited to tasks such as organizing uprisings. Such ties can, he acknowledges, be useful in resolving 'weak tie problems', typically those involving minimal, no-risk effort by a very large number of people. Sharing employment opportunities, finding a potential bone marrow donor, and even online petitions, then, are objectives which are ideally suited to Facebook (Gladwell, 2010). However, where costs are high and commitment is required, networks of weak ties prove particularly ill-suited to mobilizing the necessary human power.

The point is underscored with evidence from the experience of civil rights activism in the United States, which suggests that the riskiness of civil disobedience required an infrastructure of real friendships to provide the emotional and spiritual resources necessary for participation. A key referent here is McAdam's (1986) research into the relationship between tie strength and participation in protest movements, on the basis of which is offered the decisive (but alarmingly vague) formulation that "high risk activism is a strong-tie phenomenon" (Gladwell, 2010). Referring to McAdam's research on the Freedom Summer Project in Mississippi in 1964, Gladwell notes that 'connection to the movement' (via close friendships), rather than self-described ideological commitment, emerged as the key determinant of participation:

> What mattered more was an applicant's degree of personal connection to the civil-rights movement. All the volunteers were required to provide a list of personal contacts—the people they wanted kept apprised of their activities—and participants were far more likely than dropouts to have close friends who were also going to Mississippi (2010).

Relatedly, Gladwell argues that social media participation, as a non-risky effort which is not grounded in strong ties, is not effective at providing motivation, but instead simply lowers the costs to participation. Thus, Facebook participation appears to be less meaningful than the activities of high-risk activism, and furthermore risks creating the illusion of meaningful participation where none exists.

> Facebook activism succeeds not by motivating people to make a real sacrifice but by motivating them to do the things that people do when they are not motivated enough to make a real sacrifice (2010).

However, much in Gladwell's account remains contentious. Not only is Gladwell's reasoning heavily *a priori*, placing heavy emphasis on a supposed in principle incompatibility between social media and high-risk activism, but his accounts of both social

media and activism can be disputed. Most obviously, McAdam's (1986) findings, which Gladwell relies upon heavily in his account of activism, have been called into question, not least by McAdam himself (McAdam and Paulsen, 1993). Responding to methodological criticisms regarding the need to account for the influence of anti-movement ties as well as pro-movement ties, McAdam and Paulsen performed new statistical analyses on data from the same protest movement, finding that the influence of strong ties no longer explained the dependent variable (movement participation) when key contextual factors were controlled for. The upshot of this is that Gladwell's preferred interpretation of the results – that "high-risk activism is a strong-tie phenomenon" (2010) - has been significantly undermined. Rather, McAdam and Paulsen argue that "neither organizational embeddedness nor strong ties to another volunteer are themselves predictive of high risk activism" (1993: 659). Instead, they endorse an explanatory variable which they refer to as 'recruitment context', a composite firstly of identity-statements gathered through an open-ended survey question regarding the motivations of potential volunteers, and secondly of membership in corresponding organizational groups. For example, those participants assigned to the recruitment context group 'liberal democrat' had to both align themselves with this ideology in their statement, as well as participate in a formal organization of that type. The significance of this variable in explaining movement participation, for McAdam and Paulsen, clearly demonstrates the importance of identity management in determining participation. That is, the authors argue that participants joined the movement in order to express or maintain a particular identity, and that movement organizations, among other factors, perform the role of both strengthening this identity in participants and creating a clear fit between movement and identity. Whether or not McAdam and Paulsen are correct in advancing the notion that identity management was the primary motivation for (rather than simply a critical factor in) protest participation, the role of strong ties appears to be markedly different from that envisaged, and relied upon, by Gladwell. Indeed, the suggestion that identity management issues are at play, and are vulnerable to gatekeepers in the social network of those aligned in the movement, is especially interesting. Given that social media can be regarded as an arena for identity expression, it is furthermore one that may implicate Facebook and twitter as having more relevance for high-risk activism than Gladwell would assume.

Importantly, the notion of 'strong ties' itself is one that is mobilized confusingly in this account. Doubtless, this pertains to an (understandable) inconsistency of use in the relevant literature. Granovetter (1973), for example, envisages the strength of a tie as in

essence a scalar quantity, rather than an inherently dichotomous one, based on a composite of several factors – such as time spent together, emotional intensity, intimacy, and so on. In McAdam's study, however, the concept of a 'strong tie' is operationalized without reference to any of these attributes. Rather, a 'strong tie' is, here, defined as any name which the respondent identified as someone who they would wish to be kept informed of their summer activities. Whether or not this corresponds to what Granovetter and others identify as constituting a 'strong tie' is at best unclear. Rather, this variable records only a specific form of personal salience for the research participant; to assume that this constitutes a Granovetterian strong tie, and then to infer from that that Granovetterian strong ties are critical to movement success, is an exercise in circularity. One possibility here, for example, is that people who are impassioned about a movement identify with others who also have to same passions, and therefore wish to keep them informed about their political activities.

Gladwell seems furthermore to take too rigidly the dichotomization of strong and weak ties. As various authors point out (such as Blau, 2010 and Tufekci, 2010), such ties are not only parts of a continuum, but are complementary to each other, and perform overlapping roles. In Blau's view (one which she attributes to her 2007 interview with McAdam), while strong ties are critical for movement momentum, weak ties are indispensable for allowing the movement to transcend its initial milieu. Thus, Blau offers a range of potential mechanisms whereby social media sites may have positive political applications (which are applicable even if we acknowledge Gladwell's restriction of social media to weak ties). Not only is social media useful for social movement communication in obvious ways, it also adds an experiential element to information sharing and connects participants to one another. In addition to this, they keep the story alive and spread "new forms of participation". Importantly, Tufekci further notes that weak ties are actually indispensable for the formation of strong ones. Rather than implying that the internet, through its mobilization of weak ties, is anathema to strong ties (and strong tie problems), the reverse may be true. Thus, "large pools of weaker ties are crucial to being able to build robust networks of stronger ties – and Internet use is a key to this process." Rather than seeing the triviality of the internet as fatal, Tufekci emphasizes that such triviality is often critical to meaningful connections.

In addition to this, existing scholarship appears to show that weak ties are themselves politically efficacious in a number of ways which are important to social movement concerns and high-risk activism. It is well established that personal ties, including weak

ties, are critical for providing endorsements for political movements and organizations which would otherwise not be taken seriously by potential recruits. This phenomenon is also argued to account for networks of trust between political candidates and their supporters (Granovetter, 1973). Intuitive plausibility here is supported by Romero et al (2011), who, in their studies of topic adoption on twitter, demonstrate the efficacy of weak ties in encouraging users to shift the topic of their tweets. Thus, if weak ties can play a role in legitimizing social movements, and encouraging users to diffuse new information, then it is perfectly possible that social media could play this critical role in movement formation and development. Indeed, Granovetter (1973) explains that marginal people – those with few strong ties – have been found to be more critical for spreading new behaviours in early stages, when such behaviour is perceived to be odd or risky. This is potentially because such people have a tendency to cultivate weaker ties (and therefore have greater weak tie networks), or because they are less invested in their own status.

All of this suggests that the *sociality* of social media may be politically efficacious in ways that have yet to be fully theorized and understood. Indeed, this is perhaps a key novelty of social media: for the first time, media are consumed and broadcast in a way which is dependent on, and completely intertwined with, the personal social lives of users. The concept of mass self-communication advanced by Castells (2012) is relevant here, but does not completely capture the full salience of this phenomenon; also useful is Bimber's (et al, 2005) insight that the structure of internet based communications appears to lend itself readily to the short-circuiting of distinctions between public and private which are critical to collective action (see also Fuchs, 2012, who argues for an approach to media based on its potential to give rise to the consciousness that individual problems are collective issues, and therefore potentially matters of injustice pertaining to the political realm).

The account becomes more complete when we return to Meraz and Papacharissi's (2013) argument that social media, in the ambiguous setting it creates, heightens the political salience of social conventions in information distribution and agenda setting (in ways which have scarcely begun to be understood). Furthermore, the novel personalization of political reportage (and, indeed, activism) which social media brings about means that relaying of 'objective' events is intermixed with subjective interpretations and experiences as well as personal, affectively charged reactions. Meanwhile, social ties play a role in the sharing, distribution, and credibility of information. Given that actors are in their account "crowdsourced to prominence" (Miraz and Papacharissi, 2013: 21), even the framing power of the elite depends on the actions of the non-elite (in a way which is profoundly

distinct from, and more prevalent than, previous configurations of audience-influence in media set-ups). Furthermore, social media can provide particular forms of affective potency which other media generally lack. For example, as Howard (2010) points out, one's reaction and level of engagement is likely to be different when the victim of police abuse is a personal friend or acquaintance. It might be added to this that even individuals whose presence in one's network depends on social media (the childhood friend who moved to another city; one's old work colleague), are likely to prove to be much more evocative of outrage than a complete stranger. We can therefore perceive the sociality of social media as a politically potent variable at the same time as heeding Lim's point that the orientation to social functions may interfere with civic uses.

This indicates that one-dimensional attempts to conceive of the political impact of online sociality are misguided on more fundamental level than might be initially supposed. While the full picture is far from clear, it is surely a more complex question than one of the establishment of relationships of political solidarity based on (conventionally) strong ties (Gladwell, 2010), and perhaps there is a need to take in more broadly the potential for ties of varying kinds of salience to be brought to bear on politics in diverse ways. Thus, tweet formations have been noted to mobilize, stimulate and bind protest movements under conditions of political turmoil (Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliveira, 2012), a property which is at odds with neutralizing accounts of affect and sociality online (Dean, 2010; Gladwell, 2010; Miller, 2008). The suggestion is that the participatory and bite-sized nature of Twitter may add to the sense of a crescendo which, rather than dissipating the inclination to act, actually creates an affective charge in a way that leads to action (Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliveira, 2012). Single tweets can, via being augmented through the power of refrain, come to disrupt the existing discursive closure and promote social transformation.

Further affective logics regarding social media are provided by Castells, who argues that affect was a vital factor in the importance of online spaces. This enabled revolutionary inclinations and dissatisfaction with the present society to be nurtured (Castells, 2012; Lim, 2012).

> It began on the Internet social networks, as these are spaces of autonomy, largely beyond the control of governments and corporations that had monopolized the channels of communication as the foundations of their power, throughout history. By sharing sorrow and hope in the free public space of the internet, by connecting to each other, and by envisioning projects from multiple sources of being, individuals formed networks, regardless of their personal views or organizational attachments. They came together. And their

togetherness helped them to overcome fear, this paralysing emotion on which the powers that be rely in order to prosper and reproduce, by intimidation or discouragement, and when necessary by sheer violence, be it naked or institutionally enforced. From the safety of cyberspace, people from all ages and conditions moved towards occupying urban space, on a blind date with each other and with the destiny they wanted to forge, as they claimed their right to make history - their history – in a display of the self-awareness which has always characterized major social movements (Castells, 2012: 2).

Facebook groups and other internet enclaves, then, functioned as spaces "of outrage and hope", providing antidotes to the fear which characterizes the wider societies of authoritarian regimes. Castells is helpfully specific in suggesting key affective logics which are implicated in social and protest movements, offering a primary duality of fear versus enthusiasm. Other affects are implicated indirectly: anger can dispel fear, anxiety contributes to it, and hope is critical for enthusiasm. Most importantly, online spaces inculcate a sense of togetherness amidst shared oppression; togetherness then functions as an affective catalyst for the transformation of fear into outrage and hope (not to mention a powerful sense of humiliation), emboldening citizens and transforming their embodied relation to politics. This is at its most potent when individual abuses are transformed into moments of identification and collective suffering, such as in the case of Khaled Saied. For Castells, while cyberspace can function in this critically important way, this must feed back into physical space in order for togetherness to achieve fruition, as sites such as Tahrir Square become central to new forms of sociability and togetherness which run counter to the existing society. Cyberspace is thus at the same time conceived of as affectively potent and affectively lacking, affording transformation in this area only as part of a wider assemblage.

Thus, what is being subtly, perhaps not intentionally, problematized in these accounts is the spatiality of cyberspace itself; the senses in which it is affectively efficacious (whether for bonding or distraction), spatially malleable, physically disconnected. In essence, for various authors, it is these spatial ingredients which play a significant role in constituting the affective politics of cyberspace.

There is a lot which remains unknown regarding this issue. The emphasis on the affective provided by Castells (and Marolt, 2013, who also adds the potential for solidarity) is importantly different to other readings of the potency of social media space, which seek to account for the same phenomena. For example, Fuchs (2012) suggests that the critical equation occurs via the capacity to come to see the challenges and hardships of everyday

life as political problems which are the result of oppression, while the 'preference falsification' theory advanced earlier renders the problem of collective action as essentially an informational one, downplaying the embodied sense of the other in favour of estimations of inner inclination. By Castells' (2012) own admission, however, these hypotheses are not based on fine-grained analysis of the accounts (or indeed practices) of users, and seem to be more intuitive stabs at relating social movement and affect theory to cyberspace. In preferring one account to another, we must prioritize the empirical even if it is difficult to lay our hands on solid evidence regarding the relations between users and social media.

This suggests that an emphasis on the experiential is necessary in getting at the political impact of social media. This does not escape Castells (2012), despite his inclinations towards the quantitative, who suggests that protest movements must be understood in terms of individual decisions and trajectories. Thus, a critical question he advances is to understand how, why, and when people decide on an individual basis to defy the injunctions of authority at risk to themselves, and to understand how this process becomes collective. Declaring that social movements are "emotional movements", he does provide useful suggestions about where we might start in looking for the affective logics which have underpinned protest. Yet the clear requirement for understanding individual stories is to pay careful attention to individual accounts themselves.

Here, Marolt's (2014a) suggestion is to prioritize the experiential and individual without trying to reduce it in advance to a collective story. That is, he echoes Castells' appreciation of affective power with similar emphases on inspiration, solidarity, and sharing as key moments of the imbrication of physical and virtual sites in everyday life, but he adds to this an inclination to look beyond the headlines of social movements and focus on micro-narratives, which may go beyond what is observable from afar.

This is all the more important, given that a recurring theme of the present chapter has been the potential for social media to enable a restructuring of the user's relationship to herself, in various ways. For example, her online engagement may render her more identified with a particular movement (Alterman, 2011), more firm in her opinions (Shirky, 2011), or indeed emboldened to act on a broader stage. It is perhaps this self-referential circuit which is often the most convincing counter to claims that social media participation is a mere fantasy or distraction from the real business of politics: if social media can forge

new selves and new relations to self, then whatever its pitfalls it should be understood as a site of political possibility.

The present study, then, seeks to assess the use of social media in the context of the lives of users, with a focus on coming to understand their impact on individual trajectories and the novelty of their political possibilities. To do so is to follow a particular instinct: that the radical plurality of accounts of social media is indicative of the perceptiveness of the various theories at the same time as it signifies a short-sightedness. Spaces of new media represent sites in which communicative methods are being radically and rapidly reshaped (Ellison & boyd, 2013) in a way which is unlikely to be easily distillable into an overarching narrative, or a consistent politicizing or depoliticizing effect. The task of theory is to develop our capacity to understand the new potentials of social media, both positive and negative, and the way that such potentials are critically dependent on practices, culture, and wider social and spatial configurations.

III. Methods

Introduction

The present study is based on twelve months of active fieldwork in Cairo, encompassing twenty-seven semi-structured interviews and a range of informal communications and participant observation experiences in workshops, seminars, reading groups, voluntary organizations, coffee shops, homes, and other venues, in addition to interaction via social media with research participants and other Cairenes.

A key methodological issue throughout has been the need to reconcile the idiographic and generalizing requirements of the topic. Social media use involves shared meanings and collective ways of 'making sense' of interactions, as well as the norms and values which come into play as such sites are used. At the same time, interpretations are to an important extent idiosyncratic and variable, an especially relevant consideration given the novelty of the technology and the ever-changing platform. Rather than viewing these twin poles as contradictory, then, the present study seeks to bring them into productive tension: the individual and the social should be regarded as illuminating each other. Bearing in mind this essential requirement, the present study owes a large debt to the insights of interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2008; Pietkowicz & Smith, 2014; Cassidy et al, 2011; Biggerstaffe and Thompson, 2008). While a full discussion of IPA will be undertaken later in the chapter, at present it will be sufficient to note that it is a flexible yet systematic approach, which emphasizes the idiographic without abandoning generalization, values extensive dialogue with participants, and encapsulates both sense-making practices as well as experience, providing a vehicle for researchers and participants to generate new insights.

These were important methodological tenets, in part because they enabled the present study to address an area of opportunity in the present literature on social media. While the politics of social media has been variously theorized as relating to their affective or social potentials, there is still a deficit in our understanding of how these various factors interrelate, and a sense of the unknown as to how new potentials might be theorised and/or anticipated. Indeed, much theorizing has been undertaken with regard to social media in a manner which seems to rest on its apparently self-evident nature, with little explicit grounding in the accounts of users. While different approaches have specific advantages and disadvantages, there is a danger in emphasizing those aspects of experience which are already understood as shared, at the expense of those which are

perceived to be idiosyncratic. The advantage of an IPA-oriented approach is that, in attempting to capture the specificities of individual use, it is well-placed to bring to light new and unanticipated uses of social media (which may later transpire to be more widespread than expected), including those which transcend particular cultures. Furthermore, by paying careful attention to the micro-effects of social media, we can begin to theorize in a way which does not look for smooth overarching stories, but for a sense of the interplay of various factors and their political relevance. This may help to escape a sense that cyberspace should be either treated as though it is an active driver of protest (at the expense of the agency of the human beings involved), or indeed that it occupies a realm outside of that of revolutionary causality. Carefully examining the role of social media in the life trajectories of participants also contributes to this end.

Also important is the extent to which user perspectives and insights are taken into account. This is especially necessary when it comes to addressing the Middle East, an area of the world which is sometimes treated by those working in the social sciences and the humanities as though it is an object which exists for the sake of European understanding. The perspective of IPA is that the participant herself is a source not just of untheorized data, which takes on theoretical import upon entering the mind of the researcher, but herself possesses valid and valuable perspectives on the topic of the research. Indeed, exploring the issues surrounding social media use was a matter of establishing a dialogue with participants, attempting to understand their perspectives, and working together to create an understanding of how they negotiated the novelties and challenges of new spaces for socialization and discussion. Given the arguably critical role that social media was perceived by many to have played in recent political events, this was in fact something that participants often had already begun examining for themselves. Furthermore, this emphasis on participant creativity enables us to begin to capture the sense in which these spaces are appropriated and moulded by the users themselves, enabling us to develop a sense of the ways in which such spaces are subject to *detournement*, if indeed such *detournement* is occurring (Debord, 1994; Jappe, 1999).

The overall methodological approach of the study, then, can be described as a combination of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) with ethnographic methods, as proved to be appropriate given the particular circumstances, limitations, focus, and opportunities involved. These included the challenges of understanding online behaviour through virtual ethnography, the need to engage and work with users in order to understand their experiences and motivations, the ethical and safety-related

constraints of a (post-)revolutionary field site, and the aspiration to understand the elusive subject of the politics of social media. Broadly speaking, virtual methods alone could not bridge the experiential gulf between myself and the participants in our online encounters, as was highlighted frequently in my interviews – for example, I could not experience anxiety as to my extended family's interpretations of my social media use, not least because I do not have an Egyptian extended family. The antidote to this lay again, for the most part, in the methodological insights of IPA (along with ethnography, on which more later), which allowed me to gain insight into participant behaviour online via an approach which emphasizes the value and validity of the participants and their insights themselves. This was furthermore a powerful solution to the problem of finding politics in technology: rather than engaging in this search on the basis of pre-conceived ideas of the latter, finding politics was a matter of beginning from participant experiences and insights themselves, and working outwards from there in order to construct new understandings of how social media can have unanticipated potentials for political action.

Methodological Considerations Regarding Technology and Society

The discussions undertaken in the previous chapter concern the political potentials of cyberspace in various ways. The affective import of social media is particularly key, relating to the social relationships mobilized, developed, and performed online, as well as the variety of ways in which sharing practices implicate users. Questions of autonomy and participation are also relevant, and illustrate the importance of understanding how new information-sharing and debating environments are received and utilized by those who partake in them. Also important were the profound shifts in visibility represented by social media, which open up political actions to wider social networks.

In general, these issues refer simultaneously to what might be called the spatial structure of social media – namely the sense in which interactions are structured by technical affordances (opening up to some, while closing off to others; enabling and legitimizing some gestures while undermining or prohibiting others) – as well as the user experience and interpretation of that spatial structure and the interactions within it. In the latter category might be placed questions of the experience of social media as public or private (or something inbetween), their sense of being visible to others, considerations regarding self-censorship (include fears of government reprisals), and the satisfactions and fears of social media. Such questions are critical to understanding the political uses of social media in myriad ways, not least the questions of who participates and how they are (and are not)

constrained in such participation, and the affective potency of the social relationships involved in social media. In particular, scrutiny of the experiential side of social media is likely to be necessary in order to yield better insight into what role social media might play in encouraging or discouraging people to attend protests. The present study therefore raises questions which implicate technology at the same time as society.

A key reference point is provided by danah boyd (2007a, 2007b, 2009a, 2009b, 2010, 2015), whose work simultaneously emphasizes the importance of user practices as well as the potency of shifting technological affordances, which "can have meaningful impacts on human behaviour" even as a result of small scale changes (Ellison and boyd, 2013). boyd therefore identifies shifts in affordances as being critical to understanding privacy and publicity issues as well as underpinning the separation and fusion of contexts online (2007a, 2010). Far from being techno-determinist, boyd's recurring demonstrations of the interwoven nature of technology and the social arguably echo aspects of the actor-network paradigm, in which technology and society are, in the final analysis, inseparable. This non-duality is also evidenced Miller and Slater (2000), as well as Schull (2012), who attends to machine gambling with much the same emphasis on understanding the role of affordances in shaping addictive behaviours - without obliterating the relevance of human agency and experience. Also thought-provoking is Bennett's (2005) mobilization of the concept of 'shi', borrowed from Taoist philosophy, in which, at least on Bennett's reading, material arrangements have an active, subtle power which is often elusive to the observer. These arrangements, Bennett suggests, can play a critical role in contributing to cultural movements, although she does not provide a fine-grained analysis to substantiate this claim.

Understanding such dynamics will involve neither lurching to an inherent human nature which is logically prior to technology, nor in ceding a deterministic power to technology. One way to render the point is that technology can shape, enhance, and negate the attributes of humans, advancing certain potentialities and perhaps excluding others (Schull, 2012; Bennett, 2005). As Latour puts it, "you are another subject because you hold the gun; the gun is another object because it has entered into a relationship with you" (Latour, 1999: 179; also cited in Schull, 2012: 20). It may be noted, however, that a rendering which is *too* anchored around individual subjects may prove to be overly simplistic. Regarding social media, explicit room may need to be given to the interaction between subjects and the way that these interactional spaces are reworked by the dynamics involved in different platforms. While the formula that conversations are

different because they are on Facebook is perhaps too vague to be useful, it is in important senses the case. Understanding (some of) the senses in which this is true, and gauging the pertinence of this, is the point of this dissertation. On this score, Miller and Slater (2000) offer the intriguing suggestion that, although the internet has no inherent nature, rather local instantiations and appropriations of particular affordances subject to change, we might gain a meaningful understanding of 'the internet' through local-level research. I interpret this to mean that we can become better at understanding and interpreting the possibilities that the internet can bring.

To advocate for the underlying unity of technology and the social, however, should not be taken as an endorsement of generalized symmetry (Latour, 2005), the ANT stance which insists on the in principle equivalence of human and non-human actors. As Marx noted, a human being "raises his [sic] structure in imagination before he erects it in reality" (Marx, 2011: 198). Here, Marolt's approach, carried out with regard to the internet in China (2014), is relevant in its surprising invocation of "free and intentional subjects", which is heavily influenced by Paras's (2006) reading of Foucault's intellectual project. Not only did this reading seem to resonate well with Marolt's explorations – the Chinese internet appearing to offer a critical space of freedom in which users could creatively explore new ways of being, it also seemed to chime at times with the situation I encountered in Cairo, where social media represented sites which offered possibilities for reflexive growth as well as a sort of freedom. Freedom, if we are to use this word in this latter case, was never a final, once-and-for-all state, but a process of pushing back boundaries, which may be discontinuous and admit spurts and reverses, and indeed this process may not be in any sense a permanent state of affairs. A key concern here is the tension between the emancipatory potentials of the internet and its distracting, perhaps spectacular, functions, and indeed the extent to which the two overlap. In any case, the vital methodological move is to identify human intention and agency as legitimate factors for research, without dismissing the role of space and affordances.

The present study therefore treats participant experiences and reflections as critical, an insight which has been mobilized successfully in studies of technology (e.g. Schull, 2012; Miller and Slater, 2000; boyd, 2007b). Not least, the affective components of social media use proved to be indispensable to understanding. Deep participant engagement is necessitated further by the aim of understanding political uses and outcomes - a potentially nebulous category, finding politics in social media is not as simple as targeting practices or features known in advance, or looking for activity that can be labelled under

certain keywords. This becomes more confusing when it is acknowledged that the internet itself can be read methodologically in different ways – even as a medium of communication, for example, it can be treated as a tool, a place, or even a way of being (Markham, 2004). Reading politics into this is therefore best done with a flexible approach, following significance through the users themselves as they interact with technology in their daily lives. It is hoped that the present study will illustrate the value of participant engagement in explorations of the political dimensions of communication technologies, and a methodological approach which carefully considers context and other spaces. Delimiting the revolution to merely bodies on streets (or explicitly anti-regime Facebook posts, the shouting of overtly political slogans, and so on) misses out on the interconnectedness of the revolution with specific ways of thinking and approaching life amongst participants. As an example, for participants in the present study, cultural politics and the revolution were deeply intertwined, and Facebook – while not in any sense being the driver or origin of local political tendencies – had distinctive implications for both.

Research Questions

The underlying question here is one of understanding actions, mediating technology, which are simultaneously individual and social. That is, while a collective understanding is anticipated by the user, this understanding is always in important senses unique to the particular participant. A particular act – such as liking a photograph – may be seen as an expression of affection, a professional compliment, or an unwarranted intrusion based on both the circumstances surrounding the act, the relationship between the people involved and the manner in which the receiving party makes sense of Facebook actions. Understanding this sense-making process is not about revealing a uniform, monolithic cultural code of conduct but about engaging dynamically with the varying sense-making practices of the participants in an open way. This is about attempting to open ground for commonalities while leaving room for the individuality of interpretations.

In part, this involves understanding the various ways metacommunicative signals frame interactions and relationships between users. As Bateson has noted (2000), separating out contextualising signals from signals which are *inherently* textual is certainly not a simple task and may not be possible or intelligible. To raise one's eyebrows may display a mock-incredulity which simply reaffirms the gossipy or joking style of the conversation, or may be an attempt to reframe the prior comment – for example to indicate that it was unappreciated and in bad taste. Yet, however thorny this issue can become, there is little

doubt that Facebook is used to communicate information about, and enact, relationships (Miller, 2008), and come to Facebook with expectations – which may be culturally variable – about how those relationships should and should not be expressed. Illuminating these expectations is vital to understanding social media use. If, for example, critical commenting is interpreted as an annoying activity, disloyal, or showing off, then that will constrain opportunities for debate.

It is also not understood exactly what role the political opportunities of cyberspace have played in life trajectories. While individuals appear to have been exposed to political opportunities, it is not clear whether the apparently 'virtual' nature of these opportunities is limiting for the people involved, or indeed if somehow the nature of social media as a social technology which implicates one's friends and acquaintances might de-virtualize this, render politics more potent, or indeed allow social networks to be repurposed for unexpected political purposes (or, indeed, if the affective nature of social media might twist/disrupt the sincere politics expressed in the medium).

In general, it is hoped that attention to the experiences of Facebook users, in the present study and others, will enable more careful theorization in a way that is informed by the particular technical affordances used and their interactions with both cultural practices and individual idiosyncrasies. To focus questions in this way is to address social media as a changeable environment for action and to emphasize human agency in both addressing and changing such environments.

The point of this, then is to explore existing hypotheses in the uses of individuals - for example those concerning the political potentials of social media in the lives of participants - as well as to generate new hypotheses. While this may not directly address issues of revolutionary causality, the intention here is to understand more about the roles social media plays in people's day-to-day lives, which may in turn help us to ask better questions about the macro level. Understanding these micro-effects is especially important because we are not powerless with regards to social media. We can both create new spaces and react differently to the ones we have. For that reason, it is all the more important to document and analyse existing uses.

In particular, three broad, interlocking questions are addressed by the present study:

1. How do participants experience and use social media, and how do these factors play into political outcomes on the site? What forms of continuity and discontinuity can be found between various (offline and online) contexts?

2. To what extent are social media platforms important sites of affect and togetherness? In general, how have the social and phatic functions of social media taken on political relevance – for example with regard to authoritarian dynamics such as preference falsification?

3. How have the new potentials found in social media been politically productive for research participants? For example, to what extent is the modality of 'autonomy' relevant to the uses participants engage in? In general, how do technical affordances, including reworkings of visibility and sociality, interact with local sense-making practices?

Ethnography: Online and Offline

Hine (2000) has highlighted the extent to which online ethnography represents a departure from traditional ethnographic method, while at the same time emphasizing its congruence with recent critical approaches to ethnography. The sense in which online ethnographic study represents a dissolution of clear spatial boundaries (nation, village, site), for example, segues neatly with multi-sited approaches which question the applicability of spatial boundaries even in more traditional ethnographic settings. Furthermore, the (potential) absence of face-to-face interactions, a departure from emphases on the in-person data collection which constituted the bulk of traditional fieldwork, may similarly be viewed as resonant with recent questioning of the centrality of irreproducible fieldwork immersion to forms of ethnographic authority. However, it is to be noted that the internet itself is often conceived not just in terms of lack of stimuli, but in terms of the potential richness of its environment. Furthermore, Hine sounds a cautionary note about the potential for face-to-face interviews with internet users to detract from the sense of spatiality inherent to anonymous communication – a not unreasonable suggestion which is methodologically interesting in that it implies that certain forms of ignorance are epistemologically valuable.

What Hine seeks to keep in internet ethnography is an emphasis on what she sees as the underlying methodological principles and impulses behind the method. In particular, this means gaining verification of ones theorizing through actual practice and interaction with the community; employing ones own experience in order to bridge understanding with

participants; and to "gain the insights into life that comes from doing as well as seeing" (Hine, 2000: 47). By interacting online and engaging in communication in a way that recreates the processes engaged in by informants, one becomes more attuned to their perspectives, gaining an experiential bridge.

While solely online ethnographic methods have been used in various studies, and some authors are cautious about the outright dismissal of such methods (Hine, 2000; Garcia, Standlee et al, 2009), Markham (2004) has noted the difficulties and confusions of online interviewing, in particular due to the absence of non-verbal cues. Therefore, the present study takes its point of departure from boyd (2010, 2015), who counsels the necessity of exposure to offline contexts and face-to-face interaction, not least because it is easy to misinterpret what one sees on social media, especially when the research is an outsider in the research setting. From the point of view of the present study, while social media use was a critical source of understanding, it is perhaps best understood as having played a preparatory role for interviews and interview analysis, which were the main source of data for the study. Indeed, these interviews often revealed the extent to which the social media environment of participants could not be replicated merely by joining the same social media platform and friending them. For example, the present study has found that a significant brake on internet use occurs via extended family relationships online. Understanding that this is present in the minds of Facebook users could not have been achieved through online observation, much less insight into the specific challenges that it brings. In general, as various authors have suggested (Garcia, Standlee et al, 2009; Miller and Slater, 2000), to treat the 'virtual' as a separate realm of human experience is to miss that it is intimately intertwined with other actions and experiences. Hine counters that ethnography itself is inevitably partial; while this is not without validity, the use of offline methods was found to be especially valuable in the present study, reinforcing boyd's emphasis on setting action in as much context as possible.

This is not to say that boyd rejects the importance of engaging in interactions through social media in order to gain ethnographic insight (boyd, 2009b), and indeed she emphasizes that such an endeavour means that the researcher becomes active as a producer of culture (even if only in small ways) and a connector of various contexts, concurring with Garcia, Standlee et al (2009), who also suggest that merely lurking without interacting online is insufficient for the ethnographic method. boyd notes:

Understanding culture in a networked environment requires dodging bullets Matrix-style, weaving through groups, around technologies, and into in-between spaces and times. I found that Heisenberg's uncertainty principle applies just as much to ethnography as it does to physics. Doing participant/observation in a networked culture requires the ethnographer to be a node, a position that may fundamentally alter the culture being studied. Without this engagement, it does not seem possible to really be present in the networked environment (2007b).

A further issue is that, while Hine's focus is on bulletin boards and newsgroups, mine is on social media, which brings into play important epistemological differences. Firstly, face-to-face interactions are in practice part and parcel of social media (although not a logical necessity) to the extent that the latter facilitate interactions not just with strangers but with friends, relatives, colleagues, and acquaintances of various kinds; hence preservation of ethnographic ignorance does not seem to be a particular concern here. On the other hand, the extent to which the ethnographer can 'experience' social media in the same sense as the participant is if anything even further diluted than that in a traditional ethnography. Given that social media is a site at which experience is to a significant extent driven by one's own impulses, concerns, desires, and relationships, any experiential and cultural gaps are only likely to be furthered by an online-only methodology. Exposure to the 'same' social networking site will not automatically yield any of the variety of the experience of participants, because the social contacts and relationships are themselves likely to be different.

Nevertheless, the use of Facebook throughout the research did function in various ways as a useful form of experiential data collection, not least because it was important not to assume that participants would, in every case, suggest the issues most salient to them in interviews - and therefore to have an alternative vehicle for generating a background understanding of social media use. Furthermore, actual experience using social media to interact in various ways with participants and other Cairenes enabled quicker identification with various participant perspectives. In chapter four, for example, I explore varying attitudes to visibility and viewing profiles online, including participant frustrations over the differing attitudes with respect to this subject. This is something which I was assisted in pursuing because of my own encounters with others involving Facebook, encounters which provided an experiential foundation to build on in interviews. The particular sense of compulsive information gathering in times of national crisis, as well as the sense of

immediacy and interconnectedness with the politics of the city, provided other points of commonality with participants, which also served to facilitate the interview process.

Where the ethnographic aspect of the fieldwork came into its own was in gaining exposure to and familiarity with many of the contexts and spaces of daily life which participants traversed. The coffee shops in which they socialized, and the city spaces they crossed inbetween, subtly influenced my understanding of the way participants were emplaced within a wider political and social context, aiding interview conversations as well as sharpening my capacity to interpret them. A palpable sense of cultural divide sometimes informed the political stances of my interlocutors in various ways, not least lending an emotional charge to the activity of protesting (for example, as a form of nation-oriented healing and reconciliation, or even as a form of coming-to-terms-with-ones-Egyptianness), but also in terms of, for some, an intractable sense of deadlock. Such factors allowed me to better appreciate the sense in which Facebook functions as a novel environment for some participants, functioning paradoxically as a site of exposure to and relief from the pressures of daily life, as well as a space in which cultural politics, otherwise sensitive, might be safely broached. What I could not hope to fully understand, however, was the reported sense in interviews of the malaise with which Facebook was often associated, especially after revolutionary hope began to turn sour. Logging on and perusing the newsfeed involved confronting not just a medley of national tensions, but becoming involved in personal shared anguish. While I could witness such discussions and news on my own newsfeed, and hear about participant experiences, I am not an Egyptian citizen and knew full well that the country of my citizenship was just a couple of short flights away at any time. There is no sense in which I can consider myself to have gained experiential access to their anguish.

The point of social media ethnography then is not to fetishize social media (boyd, 2009b), but to understand how social media is related to other contexts as well as the "personal logic" that users bring to it (boyd, 2015). In boyd's case, this required addressing youth culture more generally (boyd, 2009b) in interviews, and spending time with participants in the physical environs in which they conducted the everyday interactions which were most apparently relevant to their social media use. As with the present study, technology itself was not the limit of her conversations, and indeed many broader ranging subjects had to be tackled in order to understand the relevance of technology for the lives of participants.

Given these aims, advantages and limitations, interviews were critical to the study, forming the primary research tool. Interviews were an opportunity to test my understandings directly in conversation, to glean insights from participants, and indeed to have my whole understanding of what the internet might mean as a political tool revised. The requirement here was to recognise that the participant was crucial in establishing the spatiality of the research frame. Taking on Hine's (2000) acknowledgement that the field site must be regarded as both partial and interconnected (and therefore in principle indefinitely expandable), and that the online/offline divide is itself a question for the study, meant a strategy of openness regarding spatial divides. The technique adopted in light of this was to explore with participants, also informed by my own experiences of social media as well as Cairo, the role that social media played in their lives. This involved being flexible enough to follow the participants' interests and thoughts, as well as incorporating a systematic element of working (relatively quickly) through the life history of participants, asking them to reflect on the evolution of their experiences with social media, as well as finding ways to relate the ideas of other participants and inquire about particular social media behaviours such as friending, posting statuses and liking posts. This strategy yielded key insights into the factors which influence people's actions on social media, including those which inhibit posting and political discussion.

On this basis, the present study suggests that Hine's caution regarding the incorporating of offline interviews into the research process (that it may leave only a 'fleeting impression' of internet spatiality) may be unfounded. As might be expected, the method seemed to offer compensations in the form of greater trust and ease of communication. It also seemed to prove quite adept at getting at issues of internet spatiality. Indeed, understanding social media proved to be in large part about understanding the wider formations which underpinned its use – contexts which went far beyond the internet (including, for example, family pressures, social aspirations, career goals, social divides, and political hopes and fears). Furthermore, questions directed at how participants conducted themselves in online debates, what they used Facebook for, how it had provided opportunities for them, gradually produced specific examples, points and counterpoints, and careful explorations of how they felt and acted as what their reservations were at particular times. I also explore subtle changes in relationships and new options provided by the new spatial and social configurations provided by new media, not least the sense in which it seemed to open up new possibilities for new types of group conversations and new ways of connecting on an individual level, too. Of course, a key

bind in this case is that this is necessarily partial, not least because anything which participants do not want to share in front of Facebook friends they may not wish to share in an interview with me. Yet, for all that doubtless wasn't covered, those habits and tendencies which were are quite illuminating. Furthermore, participants often did show a high level of trust and courage in interviews, sharing information which they regarded as sensitive.

In general, the strategy opted for emphasized neither spatial boundedness nor holism, but partiality and interconnectedness (Hine, 2000), and an acknowledgement of the 'networked field site' (boyd, 2015; Burrell, 2009) which was constructed out of my own tracings through the city as well as those of participants. By tracing connections with participants and exploring their encounters with social media, the evolution of their use could be followed, as well as their initial encounters and relevant aspects of their life trajectories. Doing so meant abandoning hope of generating a complete picture in favour of collecting fragments, fragments which nevertheless tell important stories which can inform our understandings of social media.

This emphasis on partiality also extends to the basic philosophy of research. In line with certain existing approaches to ethnography as well as interpretative phenomenological analysis (see below), research participants' own interpretations were afforded a high degree of respect. The functioning of ethnographic authority in the present study is a matter not of claiming a unique right to know above that of readers and (certainly not) participants, but of the natural and inevitable particularity with which human beings generate perspectives. Indeed, the recurring aim of the fieldwork process was to disrupt and undermine my own perspectives, and to then try to build something more durable in the aftermath. What is produced here is not intended to be a final outcome, but a contribution to a larger conversation, which will hopefully re-engage existing participants and engage still others. Although facts are constructed and perspectives are partial, they are still useful and can still be part of genuinely democratic attempts to respond collectively to the new potentials of social media.

While ethnographic methods were critical to the study, then, the approach deployed went beyond the typically-ethnographic out of necessity. The value to be gained from treating interviewees as participants, rather than merely informants or respondents, was immense. Not only did this allow me to properly contextualise Facebook use, as will be seen below,

but to consider more fully the political value of various approaches, and gain new insights into participant priorities and experiences.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

The influence on the present study of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), an experimental, flexible methodology, is manifold (Smith & Osborn, 2008; Pietkowicz & Smith, 2014; Cassidy et al, 2011; Biggerstaffe and Thompson, 2008; Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2009). While this method has been most frequently used in psychological and health-related studies, there is a clear relevance here of its central tenets, given the interlocking concerns of individual experience, shared meaning, and user agency. Also important was the need for a flexible and responsive method. The idiographic emphasis in IPA, for example, has been applied in a variety of ways – sometimes with a heavy emphasis on the individual nature of results, such that sample sizes have been selected at n=3 or even n=1. However, sample sizes are typically much larger than this, sometimes running into the mid-thirties, with the mean sample size for IPA studies in one review being given at around n=17 (Cassidy et al, 2011). In the present study, data collection difficulties surrounding participant comfort and limits meant that 'complete' data for each individual could not always be found, and the interpretative work of understanding and better-constructing participant accounts was greatly assisted by an increased range of interlocutors (especially because knowledge of daily life often falls into the category of unconscious knowledge, with a reservoir of experience left untouched). Also to be taken into account were the challenges of learning about social media use in a foreign (to the researcher) society, as well as the value to be gained from exploring social media use among a wide range of participants. For these reasons, it was decided that the higher end of this range was most appropriate for the present study. Having a relatively high number of participants allowed novel lines of questioning to be developed over the course of the study, and a sense of the differences and commonalities among participants to be sharpened. In all, twenty-seven interviews were conducted, ranging from forty-five minutes long to over four hours.

The idiographic imperative was upheld by the study: participant stories, threaded throughout, are both indicative of the sorts of potentials held by social media at the same time as they are irreducibly individual experiences. This reflects an overall commitment to both generality and attention-to-individuality characteristic of the IPA approach. On this count, Cassidy et al refer to Stephens' distinction between horizontal and vertical

generalizability. The latter does not aim at transferability of results to other contexts, but at "building interpretative theory" (2011: 267). Thus, the point is to "enhance understanding, enlarge insight and contribute to existing theories and the generation of new hypotheses" (2011: 267-268).

The phenomenological dimension of IPA was especially important because of its recognition that even shared understandings vary importantly from individual to individual – "cultural imperatives" are "experienced and evaluated in different ways" (Cassidy et al, 2011: 265). This is especially important in the present study, given that not enough is known to surmise whether the variation in particular cultural sensitivities will impact significantly on the user relationship to social media. The approach taken, then, is to grasp at a range of different experiences and set out, as far as possible, the logics which are discernable, and the way these logics implicate technology, experience, and affect. This is not a matter of elaborating rigid models, but developing sensitivities towards certain possibilities involving social media, and delineating further how we, as human beings involved in creating, choosing between, and using such spaces, can best utilize these opportunities.

IPA furthermore recognizes the need for mediation of questions of the discursive as well as the experiential. Critically, social media sites are ones at which users frequently perform and demonstrate relationships, an endeavour which requires the sharing of meaning – or at least the perceived sharing of meaning. It is therefore inadequate to address such questions as though meaning is wholly an individual phenomenon *per se*; one must seek to address the question of how meanings are made and unmade using social media sites, and how relationships are expressed by their users. Thus, the acknowledgement that "a phenomenon is experienced by an individual in a particular and unique way and yet it is lived within a shared context" was critical to the methodological stance of the study (Cassidy et al, 2011: 265). This approach led to an understanding of how visibility issues on Facebook shape users interactions; discomfort was produced for some by others' not obeying the implicit norms of visibility and relationship performance. Exploring these diverging approaches, and associated frustrations, led to a deeper understanding of how individuals approach and experience social media.

In addition to emphases on the idiographic and phenomenological, IPA adopts an epistemological approach which draws heavily from theoretical approaches to hermeneutics (Smith and Osborn, 2008). This informs a cautious optimism regarding the

capacity for interpretation: while it is impossible to simply bracket out one's own preconceptions (and other forms of Heideggerian thrownness) and engage directly with lived experience, interpretation is held to be a potentially meaningful activity, and the effort to overcome one's own interpretive limitations is one which is seen as worthwhile within IPA. IPA therefore emphasizes a 'double hermeneutic', in which participant interpretations are routed through an interpretive field of my own. A full understanding of this problematic leads to an iterative formula, in which my own interpretations lead to a (hopefully) 'more full' understanding of the phenomena in question, which then lead to more questions, and a new round of interpretations. Such a process should not be framed naively as one of inevitable (even asymptotic) progress towards Truth, but rather as one which even in the final analysis contains the mark of interpretation. Accounts, then, are co-constructed between participants and the researcher. The result of the research is a nuanced understanding, but not one that is free of subjectivity.

This is a process which therefore encourages sensitivity to such matters throughout the research process, as well as an attempt to be open to the experiences and insights of participants. While the researcher may be able to identify various expectations in advance of the project (and so be on guard as to their influence on the interpretive process), other expectations may not be discernible until data collection has already begun (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2009). Care should therefore be taken throughout data collection and analysis. In the case of the present study, particular preconceptions often took the form of assumptions regarding the society at large as well as the lives of the participants who I interviewed. Having lived in Jordan previously, I was not exactly estranged to the Middle East – but it was easy to make assumptions without realising it about what was and was not transferable to Cairo. Spending considerable time in the field site, as well as open-ended interviewing, allowed me to encounter information which disrupted such preconceptions and led to their reformulation or abandonment.

A key area in which this occurred was one of liberality and norms. While I was not, upon arrival, seeking to identify norm-challenging behaviour in participants, this began to emerge through questioning based on what was important to the participants themselves, and through careful attention to the way that such topics were closely linked to the revolution in the minds of participants. Nor did I anticipate in advance the care with which many research participants approach their social media activity, and the significance they afforded to their own communications online and offline. That is, without accusing participants of unrealistic self-importance, they often recognised that in communicating

online about politics, they were in turn creating politics. Recognising this required, in particular, overcoming an insidious assumption which appears to be somehow an innate (but not inevitable) aspect of the researcher-participant relationship. While the methodology I had adopted emphasized the co-creation of accounts, I did not anticipate, nor think to look for, such a high level of reflexivity already within the practices to be discussed. In part, this may have been due to a mistaken and highly dubious, yet subtle, assumption that reflexivity was the province of the researcher and the project, which the participants would be invited into and encouraged to enjoy. In fact, reflexivity was very much their territory, not least (but not only) given that the radical changes in society had led many to seek an understanding of the processes, cultural and otherwise, which had produced such varieties of hope and chaos, and interrogate so earnestly what it means to be Egyptian.

The careful, and often participant-led, methodological approach of the study also enabled unexpected insights into protest experience. In particular, there were aspects of embodied protest experience which are relatively underexplored in existing approaches in the literature – which have emphasized affects such as outrage, humiliation, dignity, and hope, without finding much time to explore the euphoria, which, for participants, accompanied even the most bleak moments in Tahrir Square. Participants also reported a sense of sublime togetherness, and their explorations revealed that being at the square seemed not just politically but personally revolutionary.

Finally, Facebook was assigned meanings by the society in which I was embedded which did not always correspond to my own pre-conceptions or to those prevalent in my society of origin. While Facebook might, in the UK, be framed as trivial, a distraction, a social activity – and, grudgingly, we might accept that it has some additional value as a political resource – in Egypt, for many at least, Facebook was a site of cosmopolitan possibility, elite status, gender mixing, immorality, and political revolution. It was also at times a site of immense creativity and humour.

What IPA aims at, then, is a "rich and nuanced understanding of the phenomenon" under study, but not a "perfect understanding of the essence of the experience" (Cassidy, et al, 2011: 266). While it was worthwhile to interrogate my preconceptions where I could, I could not guarantee that my own interpretive faculties and biographical weight had not left its mark on the research. As will be explored in the next section, my own subjectivity was also quite implicated in determining the sample of the study, along with other factors

such as willingness to be involved in such a study, and informant pre-conceptions about what would be involved.

Sampling, Spatiality, and Ethnographic Arrival

Rather than trying to capture a representative sample of the general population – a task which, in Egypt, is difficult for various logistical and even safety-related reasons – sampling generally took in those of the broad Egyptian 'middle class', and primarily included those of liberal cultural views and revolutionary political views. In particular, many of the participants in the present study, precisely because they are passionately political yet not for the most part full-time activists, might be considered to be especially relevant to questions of social media and mass mobilization. Among those who participated, social media appears to have played a variety of roles in their life trajectories; for many, social media sites were, in various ways, a political life-line. Indeed, it was heavily implicated in the discovery of their political selves; providing personal space in which they could discuss, learn, and begin to think unthinkable thoughts about the regime. For others, it provided access to quick information on changing developments, or functioned as a place to gain courage through social ties. Intensifying a focus on an internally-diverse segment of revolutionary/liberal middle-class Cairenes provides a wealth of material on these process and concerns as they affected that group.

As touched on above, the present study did not draw on a distinct, spatially bounded fieldsite. Rather than encountering a small village which might (to some extent) be treated as self-contained, I conducted my study in an extremely large city with a population estimated at upwards of twenty-five million inhabitants. Clearly, the city was cross-cut by divisions based on culture, socio-economic status, locality, and other factors. Conducting fieldwork and simply living in Cairo meant encountering differences not just in status but in ways of understanding and interacting with the world. The *bawab* (or door person), that I passed on my way out of my apartment every morning is likely to think of my lifestyle in very different terms to that of my landlord, and both would again differ from the person I might meet in a coffee shop that day. Furthermore, being that I was studying the use and implications of social media sites, which could arguably be encountered at home, on the microbus, or in a Downtown bar, my research interpenetrated and interconnected with the city as a whole. In principle, one could not decide in advance which spheres of life were consequential. Nor, for that matter, could one eliminate in advance other parts of the world as strictly irrelevant to the study. Indeed, Occupy Wall Street, the Tunisian

protests, Egypt's colonial history (which have arguably left many with a '*Khawaga* complex' – roughly a sense of inferiority to the West) and the global interconnectedness of the Suez Canal arguably mean that places and institutions as diverse as New York, Tunis, and the British East India company had made their presence felt in the lives of Egyptians, offline as well as online.

A particular point of contrast to village ethnographies here is the concept of arrival. Hine discusses the concept of arrival in ethnography with regard to the internet (2000), countering the self-evident objection that, as online ethnographers do not travel in the strictest sense, they cannot be said to have had such a distinct moment of encounter with a field site. In the present study, arrival was not straightforward even though travel was present. My arrival in Cairo – and my immediate place of lodging, a cheap hostel – was not, as in a village ethnography, my moment of acquaintance with the people who would participate in my research; rather it seemed to be my anonymous entry into a large, confusing city – one which had the power to be distinctly unfussed by my presence.

The Egyptians I made immediate contact with were mostly involved in the tourist industry. At first, this was the people who worked in my hostel; very quickly it came to encompass people who specialized in noticing and targeting tourists downtown, with an array of conversational tricks designed to lure in the unsuspecting and create obligations to purchase unwanted goods. The politically unstable climate in the country at the time, whether exaggerated or otherwise, had kept many tourists away, leading to a palpable sense of desperation and pessimism from many whose livelihoods depended on them. While perhaps I brought to the situation my own distinctions between finance and friendship, it felt as though the congestion, crowding, and bursts of clamour that met my presence in the city were offset by an underlying sense of human disconnection.

The first port of call into a liveable environment began when I enrolled onto an Arabic course (two Arabic courses in fact; modern standard Arabic as well as Egyptian colloquial, which would make a confusing mix with my pre-existing knowledge of Jordanian colloquial) and made expat friends, who soon began to introduce me to Egyptians. This led to encounters with other Egyptians, and ultimately activist networks, civil society organizations, and so on. Indeed, while the city became increasingly comfortable, the process of 'arrival' seemed to continue throughout the fieldwork. Briefly entering and leaving distinct social circles was a regular occurrence, and could easily be the result of a night out or an appointment to have coffee with a friend. In general, meeting new people

seemed to be part of Cairo's social rhythm. And, at least for the first few months, it was a process of gradually coming to feel more at home in the city, as the people who populated my life came to calibrate to my values, my sense of humour, and my social sensibilities, in varying ways. While all environments might be considered to be in some sense a reflection of the self, this seemed distinctly true in the case of a giant city such as Cairo.

At the same time, I was attuning to the city, including in ways which were barely perceptible to myself. Somehow, taxi drivers and others seemed to know I had just arrived in Cairo in the beginning of fieldwork, and seemed to feel I had been there for a long time by the end. Perhaps I was no longer carrying a wide-eyed look; perhaps in this and other senses the embodied habits of the city were instilling themselves in me. To be out in public seemed to require specific forms of regard and disregard. Those whom you knew, or with whom you had friends in common, were part of your world, and to be attended to. Everyone else, by and large, was part of the white noise of the city and had to be filtered out in order to make life liveable. Hearing about the (immediately post-) revolutionary era in 2011 was very striking in this context, in that it depicted a public Cairo in which one was concerned for, and in solidarity with, strangers – including those of different classes, those with whom one cannot imagine oneself as part of a particular scene or extended clique.

I also felt that Cairo was in a sense attuning to me. Layers of shifting and interlocking social circles seemed to open up and close down before me and around me, so that the city itself seemed to be in a process of personally-directed change, although this was a process that seemed to require flexibility. The Cairo that myself and my informants lived in was a place in which new people were always to be encountered. And for most of us, we were not so anchored to the neighbourhoods we lived in; or at least not confined to them. Someone might live in Dokki, do most of their socializing in the sleek coffee shops of Zamalek, and hold down a job in Garden City - or even live in Giza and pay regular visits to 6th of October City, with its iMax and multiple shisha cafes. Despite the congestion, which was at times extreme, this was a city for criss-crossing, at least for the relatively wealthier inhabitants. Doing so was necessary for economic advancement as well as maintaining one's social life, and in order to consume and experience the different atmospheres of the city. Even those who anchored themselves in the Downtown art scene seemed to be in a sense consuming the authenticity of this part of the city.

It was by flexibly moving through various social scenes that I began to make the city liveable for myself, making connections and opening up pathways for research. Only in one

instance did I meet a significant informant in a purely public setting. I had been in Cairo for a couple of months when I was attempting to take the Metro; being, as usual, crowded, I failed to find a place for myself on the carriage before the doors closed. Gamal, who had witnessed this nearby, struck up a conversation, at the end of which we agreed to meet up later to help each other practice our respective languages.

Gamal was a professional in his twenties, well-off by Cairo's standards, but not quite as well off as some other friends. We did not go to places where they sold 20 LE cups of coffee, but places where they sold 2 LE cups of tea (and later, when I found out that he drank alcohol, 8 LE bottles of Egyptian-brewed beer). His English was distinctly patchy, and we made ourselves understood to each other by switching languages as our vocabularies dictated. Gamal's attitudes were quite liberal, and he was broadly sympathetic to the revolution, but he was not a revolutionary, nor even in any meaningful sense political. I got to know several others through Gamal, and at one point visited the village in which he grew up, staying over at his parents' house. While Gamal was only interviewed once, the conversations we had over the 18 months in which I knew him informed various aspects of my thinking.

Another instance I might mark as an 'arrival' was my attendance of a weekend workshop outside of Cairo, meant for people working towards social change in Egypt. The aim of the workshop, attended for the most part by people based in the capital, was to facilitate a series of conversations which would enable individuals and organizations to work together and better respond to the current conditions. At one point, this seemed to become a taking-stock of everything that had happened in the previous two years, a time period which encompassed revolution, hope, movements for reform, military government, and the appointment of Egypt's first elected President. In fact, this was one instance of an intention which I encountered a number of times in Egypt: that of self-interrogation, an effort to understand the underlying causes of the Mubarak era – to take responsibility for Egypt's woes and to understand why it was that Egyptians had allowed the regime to keep them down. Recognizing this phenomenon further helped me develop my understanding of what (some) people sought from social media; which was, in part, a platform to have these discussions and to advance subtle forms of social change. The atmosphere at the workshop was relaxed but purposeful and inclusive, and I was able to easily and sympathetically explain my purpose for being in the country. Several participants at the workshop later gave me interviews, and offered help in finding other informants. I was

also able to remain part of the continued conversations which took place around that network during the remainder of my fieldwork.

As briefly touched on above, concerns regarding ethics and safety placed heavy constraints on sampling, in particular implicating my own particular capacities for rapport and the limits of those capacities. It was essential to form understandings and trust, not just in order that the participant might feel comfortable and motivated enough to engage in the interview, but in order that I could take precautions regarding my own safety. Being known to people, even vicariously, meant being trusted when many in Cairo are suspicious of Europeans, viewing them as potential foreign agents. This was not a matter to take lightly, not least because during my stay in Cairo a number of journalists were arrested for interview activities that would have been considered normal in Europe (and which were in fact not illegal in Cairo).

While these issues will be explored more fully later on, the relevance here is that these factors placed obvious limitations on data collection, and in a sense what was being researched might be regarded as a Cairo which was in some ways peculiar to myself. However, this was not a solipsistic entity which reflected only the ethnographer, and is perhaps best regarded as a negotiation involving myself and the city. A particular guiding factor was the role of key individuals, who emerged not only as strong informants of the study, but also as connectors who would intermediate with potential informants and find people who, sharing an initial grounding of trust in the form of our mutual contact, would be willing to participate in the study. This meant that my own personality did not dictate data collection, although it was one of a number of strong influences on it, in addition to the mere facts of my being foreign and white. Other factors were the willingness of some rather than others to schedule (and attend) interviews and the preconceptions of those whose networks I relied on about which potential participants would be more or less relevant to the study. While I tried to explain that anyone who would be willing to talk open-mindedly and reflexively about their experiences online would be a good candidate for research, everybody seemed to have their own ideas about who would be a good participant – which often seemed to involve a logic to which I was not completely privy. Perhaps, for example, those who are more active on Facebook, or whose social media activities were regarded as more 'interesting', were more likely to have the opportunity to be interviewed.

Having noted the difficulties of being a foreign researcher engaged in Egypt, it is perhaps also important to note that these issues would not be easily overcome by merely restricting such research to Egyptian researchers. Egyptian researchers also carry baggage, both in terms of participant receptions and their own interpretations, albeit in different forms. During the course of my fieldwork, there were periods in which I felt I was able to gain forms of access which might have been more difficult for Egyptian researchers, who would (typically) be easily locatable with the Egyptian class and cultural system and therefore possess affinities which, just as in my own case, include and exclude. The advantage of the present study was a capacity to engage with individuals of a range of lifestyles and cultural competencies, who were perhaps interested in me in part because I was foreign and represented something different, and who were also willing to accept idiosyncrasies and differences precisely because there was no clear set of internal guidelines for my behaviour. Participants were also inadvertently encouraged to explain cultural norms, and explore their lifeworlds, by my very foreignness, which in turn was an advantage in terms of allowing me to transcend my own pre-conceptions (to the extent that I did so). While it is certainly of the utmost importance that Egyptians carry out such research, it is also important that researchers continue to look beyond their countries of origin when choosing field sites.

As acknowledged in the previous section, the partial nature of the city and of my fieldwork has meant that empirical generalizability is no simple matter. Creating rules and generalizations which apply to Cairo and even one individual social class, however, is not the aim – and is in any case likely to be frustrated by the shifting dynamics of social media, which is always susceptible to updates (to newsfeed algorithms, privacy settings, communicative resources) which shift their implicit possibilities. What is useful, and will be explored below, is careful attention to the interrelationship between the various factors which open up and close down the powers of social media. Before moving onto the issue of generalizability, however, we will explore the particular role of interviews in complementing the ethnography, a research tool which heavily drew on insights from interpretative phenomenological analysis.

Interviews

27 semi-structured interviews took place over the course of fieldwork, in addition to a range of informal interactions which also informed the study. Semi-structured interviews were mostly recorded, and ranged from around 45 minutes to over four hours, with the

typical interview lasting around two hours. There was no target in terms of length, and I was focused on respecting participants' comfort as well as taking the most advantage from the session. Usually conducted in coffee shops (but sometimes including homes and in one instance a workplace), topics discussed included personal experiences of social media, life experiences, protest, experiences of the city, and other issues which emerged as relevant to understanding social media.

A key purpose of engaging in interviews was to understand participants' ways of making sense of social media activities (Cassidy et al, 2011), or "get at their personal logic" (boyd, 2015), which also involved understanding experiences online and offline (boyd, 2009b). While understanding the bare facts of their online life was critical, it was important to understand "how they explain themselves just as much as what they say" (boyd, 2015). In doing so, it was important to create an atmosphere of dialogue and to ensure that participants had room to speak. I often found that it was very important in some instances to stay silent in order to elicit deeper responses (boyd, 2015), or indeed to return to the same issue more than once. Throughout, it was absolutely essential to respect respondent's privacy and to keep them interested. Therefore, allowing respondents to shape the interview themselves in many ways was integral to the process. I also suspect that this encouraged participants to be open about their thoughts and experiences.

Like all phenomenological approaches, IPA emphasizes grounding in the experiences of daily life (Cassidy et al, 2011). While this attention to user experience in the present study does not take the form of a discussion of embodied sensations (such as pain, proprioception, etc), it does take the form of an attention to the important feelings and affects associated with social media use, and an associated care towards understanding what is relevant to research participants in their social media practices – as well as a recognition that this lived experience is dependent on social context and culture (Cassidy et al, 2011). This methodological principle was critical in coming to understand visibility – the sense (and at times the lack of this sense) of being watched, as explored in chapter four, and the various ways of feeling and negotiating one's visibility before an imagined public, as explored in chapter six – as key to the experiences of research participants. In taking this approach, the aim is not to achieve generalizable results for a particular sample, but to turn up new theoretical principles which can both fill in gaps in the existing literature and enable that literature to be understood in different ways.

This also required understanding participant experiences in terms of their life history – their projects and concerns, and the way they made sense of social media in those terms. As such, room was made to understand how participants engaged with social media, their first experiences and impressions of the medium, and how these impressions and practices changed over time. Doing so also provided a vehicle for understanding how participants were making sense of things, in a way which often led to new discoveries on the part of participants themselves – for example, as they were able to link shifts in social media experience to life shifts. Attention to life history was also critical in terms of understanding the impact of social media under authoritarianism, and the journeys of political self-discovery/self-making that social media enabled. Furthermore, asking questions about mundane life details was a comfortable way to conduct the early part of an interview, allowing the participant time to feel her way through the process and decide how much she wished to divulge.

Typically, the interview began with a direct exploration of the participant's views on social media and its social and political relevance. I felt that it was important to begin this way for several reasons. First of all, many participants already had thought quite carefully about the topic and had developed their own observations. It was important to be able to explore these observations as-they-were, before my own lines of questioning might influence them. I also felt that discussing issues of importance to the participant functioned as sort of a palate-cleanser, so that we could leave behind any issues or points which might predominate in their thinking, enabling other issues to be more successfully explored. This also set the tone for a mutual dialogue, even if it was important for me to direct this dialogue during certain periods of the conversation. Furthermore, it was also often necessary to return, later in the interview, to these initial thoughts about social media, either because some additional relevance emerged in the course of our explorations, or because of my own non-linear digestion process.

As discussed above, however, interviews necessarily incorporated a large amount of contextualizing discussion. Normally, the initial phase would give way to general questions designed to give me a better sense of the participant's life and background, largely oriented around working in chronological order through the major milestones of the participant's personal history. This part of the interview included issues such as parts of the city lived in, school attended, university attended, and language(s) of education – all critical indicators of status in Cairo (de Koning, 2009). Doing so helped me to not only gain a sense of to whom I was speaking, but allowed the conversation (as well as the ensuing

analysis) to stay close to the participant's own personal experience, incorporating their own political trajectories. While the claims made in the first part of the interview might veer into generalizing territory, moving towards the participant's personal experiences allowed the interview to take in more of the particular, often lending important background to their position on social media.

Other personal topics I attended to included various experiences of the city, including work, social life, and public transport. Given the length of interviews, it was important to be friendly and genuine, and use humour to lighten the atmosphere. When we returned to social media, this time I provided clear direction based on pre-existing lines of questioning, which had in turn been shaped by previous interviews. This involved understanding the participant's encounters with various social media platforms, their reasons for joining, preconceptions, initial experiences, and changes in use over time.

After discussing various issues with the participant, I was then well-placed to discuss more political issues in a way that wouldn't be misinterpreted by, or cause distress to, the participant. I was especially interested in protest experiences, attitudes to politics, experiences during the revolution, and experiences of censorship. Each of these subjects proved to be critical for understanding the subtle influences and uses of social media in participant's lives.

After several interviews, I began instituting a policy of asking the participant at the end of each interview whether or not they thought anything had been 'missed out' in terms of the relevance of social media. While sometimes this seemed to cause a sense of mild confusion, being taken perhaps as a sense that the participant was required to give something 'more', in a lot of cases this played a role in opening up other issues. Especially in the case of participants who had thought carefully about social media, I found that doing so opened up new avenues of relevance to explore and gave the participant more influence over the conversation. I also felt that it functioned as a way of giving the participant a polite way to finish the interview even when there might have been room for further discussion.

Ethics

The main ethical issues of the dissertation were the safety of the researcher (myself) and the informants, and informed consent for research participation.

Regarding the first of these, Cairo was in many senses a difficult field site. One day before my arrival, the interim government had begun a national television campaign advising Egyptians to beware of foreigners asking questions in cafes (as well as internet cafes), on the grounds that they are likely to be spies. In addition to this official caution, a range of conspiracy theories abounded, some more fanciful than others, blaming the revolution and subsequent chaos on Machiavellian foreigners who had managed to orchestrate events. In one relatively popular version of events, the Kentucky Fried Chicken outlet in Tahrir Square had played a critical role in fomenting the uprisings.

Throughout the time in which I conducted fieldwork a number of foreigners were arrested for activities that were in some senses similar to the ones I was carrying out, suggesting that a certain level of wisdom and caution therefore seemed to be required in pursuing my activities. For this reason, I was careful not to ask for an interview where I felt that the request would not be especially welcome, and tried to focus for the first few months on understanding the general context in which I was living so that I could make wise decisions. During this period I sought advice from other researchers as well as trusted Egyptian friends.

During certain periods, it seemed as though the likelihood of getting arrested depended simply on whether or not someone had complained about your activities. Indeed, a number of journalists were arrested apparently on this basis, having committed the non-crime of discussing politics in public. In one such case, the owner of a café had taken exception to the line of questioning of a Dutch woman, who was asking patrons about youth unemployment. Fearing that Egypt's name would be tarnished abroad, the proprietor had called the police, leading to a night in the cells for the journalist.

Another potential cause of arrest seemed to be the pursuit of sensitive issues for the regime. For example, it seemed to be generally accepted that those working with anti-corruption NGOs were likely to be targeted in some way by the security services.

On a couple of occasions, the concern that I might be arousing suspicion caused me not to pursue potential research leads. After an enjoyable conversation with a man working behind the counter in a restaurant, for example, we had exchanged numbers and promised to help each other with language practice. When I made a call later on, the man's tone seemed quite guarded and he demanded to know what I did for a living. I explained that I was a student of geography, continued the call in a polite manner, and did not further pursue the relationship.

Regarding informed consent, all interview participants gave express consent for their interviews to inform this dissertation, and to be directly quoted. Twenty-two participants consented to the recording of the interview (the remaining participants, in the very early stage of fieldwork, were neither recorded, nor was a request for recording made). All participants were promised confidentiality as a matter of course (and anonymization), although several indicated that they would have been happy to have proceeded even if that were not the case. Furthermore, participants were informed that they had the right to stop the interview at any point, and to retrospectively revoke their consent.

Given the political environment in which research was conducted, I took care to ensure that each participant was comfortable with the interview, reassuring them of their control over the interview process, and acknowledged that their providing help to me was very appreciated, even if they did not want to answer particular questions. Interviews took place in locations of their choice, which were usually public locations they frequented regularly. Attentive to potential signs of discomfort, I was satisfied that, aside from the very occasional hint of annoyance at a repeated question, participants were happy with the process undertaken. Were there to have been doubts as to whether the participant was comfortable participating, the interview would have been politely abandoned immediately, and any related data or information would have been destroyed.

It was also important that consent was properly informed. Meeting people through existing friends was the easiest way to overcome the trust barrier and explain properly my purpose in Cairo. In either case, though, my concern was that the participant should understand what I was doing and what sort of questions I was interested in, even if they were not going to participate via a fully-fledged semi-structured interview. Those with whom I had informal discussions about my research topic were therefore apprised of my interests and the nature of my fieldwork. I was also concerned to inform others who I met in Egypt of my purpose in being there, given that they may inform my general understanding. In the case of individuals with whom I did not have an ongoing relationship or repeated contact, however, it was sometimes appropriate to elide a full description of my research (e.g. just relaying that I am studying the internet or Egyptian culture), largely due to precautions about safety, given the circumstances in which fieldwork was conducted. For example, I did not always feel it was appropriate to enter into expansive conversations with inquisitive taxi drivers, who sometimes seemed to want to obtain detailed information on my purposes in the city, although of course I met any questions

with a polite and friendly attitude. Importantly, however, these encounters were not seen as research opportunities.

What was also important was that those who I friended on Facebook were apprised that their activity is likely to play into my general understanding of how the latter is used in Cairo, and at various times I made a point of reminding people of that through casual references, or by seeking clarifications of what they were doing online. However, I did not feel that this was a strong enough basis for the citation of choice quotes on Facebook, given that the very nature of Facebook makes it difficult for participants to remember the full extent of their audience. I also felt, based on the outcomes of my interviews with participants, that some would find it inappropriate for me to embark on extensive searches through particular profiles (deliberate perusals of a profile being received markedly differently from happenstance encounters on the newsfeed). For that reason, Facebook was employed in order to inform my general understanding of participant uses, and often participant statuses were opportunities for me to start private message conversations in which we explored the issue in a little more detail, which would in turn inform interviews. As well as expanding my understanding of the topic, this also enabled me to remind participants gently that their interactions were contributing to my understanding.

Analysis

The post-fieldwork process of analysing data began with the transcription of the recorded interviews. While each moment of the interview was listened to carefully, usually more than once, it was in some cases not necessary to transcribe an interview fully. Given the length of some interviews, and the flexibility with which interviews were conducted, there were often passages of five minutes or more which could be deemed extraneous to the analysis at this stage in the study. In this case, brief notes were taken on the bypassed content.

During the process of transcription, additional, speculative notes were taken (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014) and other interviews cross-referenced, a process which gradually culminated in the construction of tentative categories. Through a process of iteration, these then became subordinate and superordinate categories which informed the empirical chapters of the study. For the purposes of exposition, while I have tried to retain a sense of the individually-relevant nature of the results, I have not adopted the especially heavy idiographic focus of other studies influenced by interpretative phenomenological

analysis. Rather, my focus has been on laying out useful theoretical generalizations which address the complexities of social media use as it emerges from participant accounts.

This approach is not intended to yield neat generalizations about the Facebook use of Cairenes, but to understand more the varieties of uses and distinctive approaches to the site which were present amongst those participating in the study. The approach to generalization in the present study is informed by the complexity of the topic (as argued in the previous chapter), and the consequent need to more carefully understand and lay out logics at work in social media use. While we are still lacking a sure footing regarding the topic as a whole, it seems wiser to develop our capacity to conceptualize the interrelationships between social media and everyday life and their impact on the political – than to try to reach too soon for empirical generalizations. Furthermore, social media is a dynamic form of media environment in constant change – practices, favoured sites, and even the dynamics of existing sites have been changing rapidly, and there is no sign that this rate of change is likely to decrease. Therefore, assigning particular purported impacts to social media in general, or even particular social media sites, is likely to be less useful than understanding more deeply the play of interaction and the range of relevant factors. By attempting the latter, it is to be hoped that we will develop new ways of thinking through the possibilities of social media, and sharpen our understandings of those effects which we are already aware of.

It was further found that there is still a lack of technological closure (Hine, 2000) in the field – that is, Facebook and Twitter are not sites whose meanings and uses have become settled and uncontroversial; a good deal of the ethnographic work, therefore, lay in the process of understanding the variety of different ways of approaching these sites. Doing so meant re-encountering these sites in ways which seemed quite alien to much of the literature that has informed the project. Indeed, studies of internet use as well as theoretical texts can be regarded as texts which are themselves part of the closure of internet technologies in the West. By propagating a view of social media sites as frivolous and primarily phatic, one risks discouraging their *detournement* (Debord, 1994; Jappe, 1999) for other purposes and closing off the potentials for interpretive flexibility. Conversely, the theoretical generalizations in the present study seek to do the opposite of this: to open up new potentials and to re-politicize social media use.

The idiographic and generalizing aims of the project are in productive tension with each other, to the extent that what is sought is insight regarding the ways that the particular

circumstances of Cairo have been productive of new ways of being in relation to social media. The point is that while the individuality of participants is recognised, and a level of detail is aspired to which necessitates that individual focus, achieving such detail yields an understanding of the possible which we are unlikely to get if we maintain a focus on horizontal generalizations.

In part, this is a recognition that actual uses of social media are themselves idiosyncratic and collective at the same time – that to fail to recognise this leads to the painting of pictures which are deeply misleading about the reality they purport to represent. Therefore, attention to how social media sites have been implicated in political trajectories promises to aid understandings of the interplay of the various functions of social media, including political and social functions, which can then enable new ways to think through the existing literature and inform future research.

The point is to access experiences and feelings in a way which goes beyond the individual, yet which makes room for people's own interpretations and connections. The method is open to those connections as experienced by participants, but also open to interpretations from the researcher. Of course, the subjectivities of both researcher and participant are implicated all of the time: the researcher's interpretation is critically involved even in straightforward cases; and even cases of researcher-insight depend upon participant framings, informational choices, and expressions. Furthermore, the semi-structured interview is an outcome of the questions, answers, thoughts, and inclinations emerging from the two parties involved. In this sense, the process of analysis began with the first interview, if not earlier, as exchanges with participants themselves depended on prior analyses and emerging themes.

Again, a reflexive engagement with my own subjectivity as a researcher was a necessary component of both fieldwork and analysis. I have discussed earlier in the chapter the process of unpicking preconceptions which I underwent during the study. A further component of reflexivity was to try to be careful not to convey unwarranted assumptions in questions (boyd, 2015) and, as stated, to try to be a careful, open listener to participant understandings, both at the time of the interview and in the period of analysis. It is also important to restate that my Britishness as well as my particular sensibilities were factors in sampling. This is likely to have led to a more liberal sample than the Cairo norm, as perhaps may be evidenced in the data presented in chapter six, in which participants express attitudes towards homosexuality, gender issues, and polygamy which might be

seen as uncharacteristically out of step with Cairo's wider society. Regarding political affiliation, there were no members of the Muslim Brotherhood who engaged in interviews, and nobody who admitted actively supporting the military's increased involvement in political affairs, although it is possible that some participants implicitly supported military rule as a solution to the difficulties which had followed the revolution (some of whom may have expressed this with a disavowal of politics in general).

However, it is also important to note that the thought processes and experiences explored in chapters five and six are perhaps more prevalent than might be assumed. For example, a small number of participants declared themselves to be atheist, and several more identified as Muslim while expressing attitudes of tolerance towards atheism. This particular issue happened to be picked up by Egyptian and later foreign news outlets shortly after my fieldwork finished, suggesting that atheism was at the very least an increasing phenomenon in Cairo (see for example Kingsley, 2014), even if it is in no sense the dominant view. Given that families have been known to exert strong pressures, including invasive psychotherapy techniques, on those who exhibit unconventional beliefs and behaviours, it is easier for most to find much more low profile ways to express their thinking than to identify as an atheist. While this estimate is difficult to verify, it does tally with my personal experience of Cairo, and, although small in comparison to the large population of the city, might be seen as indicative of an important trend in general attitudes experienced by a significant minority of Cairo's middle class. As I argue later in the dissertation, these are ultimately inextricable from the revolution and issues of social control in Egypt.

Arguably, an especially important outcome of the discussion of these attitudes does not, however, concern the prevalence or otherwise of the particular attitudes addressed, but rather the dynamics by which taboo issues are broached and handled on social media. In various ways, both of chapters five and six yield insight into a particular aspect of the spatiality of Facebook, which allows users to engage in mass communication in a way which seems to be experienced without the level of inhibition that would accompany the physical presence of such a large audience. A key contribution of this study is to explore this phenomenon more carefully and develop an understanding of how participants' social and political action was shifted by this dynamic. This contribution stands as a valid form of theoretical generalization regarding social media, even if later quantitative studies show that the political and social views of participants place them in a very small minority. Furthermore, their minority status would not in any sense render participants unworthy of

study in themselves, so long as they are not taken to be unquestioned representatives of Cairo (or indeed its middle class).

IV. Visibility, Sharing, and Participation on Facebook: An Overview of Participant Accounts

Introduction

The present chapter introduces the topic of social media use (with attention squarely focused on Facebook) by middle-class research participants in Cairo, establishing an overview of critical factors which were found to inform participation on the site. This provides a necessary background to the utilization of the site for political and discursive uses, not least because it contributes to our understanding of the social and other factors which inform and constrain uses, as well as indicating the way that the site appears to offer differing potentials for different users, with gender in particular appearing as a key factor.

This begins with an exploration of local understandings of Facebook, which are varied and in tension with one another - indicating that technological closure (Hine, 2000), in which settled understandings foreclose (or at least dampen) the possibility of innovations in use, has not been achieved. Furthermore, Facebook is experienced by participants as a distinctly political space, despite emphases on its trivializing tendencies found in the literature (see for example Miller, 2008). Closely linked to these questions is that of participants' assessment of the roles Facebook plays in their own lives. Here, it is found that far from being divided solely between phatic (Miller, 2008) and political or discursive uses, Facebook plays an important role as infrastructure for educational and career purposes, as well as enabling a more edifying and diverse relation to the city as a whole. Furthermore, attention to shifts in understandings and uses over time is also illuminating with regard to what Castells refers to as the "culture of sharing" (2012), and participant explorations here are suggestive of the potential for affordances to shape sharing practices over time.

Next, attention is turned to the sociality of Facebook use, in particular the nature of Facebook friendship and the senses in which it is utilized for relationship maintenance by participants. This is found to be substantially more complicated than the model proposed by Gladwell (2010), who frames the site as being suited only to the maintenance of weak ties, and proposes a limited political functionality on that basis. Rather, Facebook is found to be significant for ties which are emotionally salient for participants in various ways.

The final section further develops participant accounts of Facebook as a site of visibility, in particular illuminating the sense in which this phenomenon is one which is salient not just for the one who sees, but for the one who is seen. The focus here is on the issues raised by visibility and publicity online, as well as how this visibility is experienced and negotiated in practice. In this and other ways, the present chapter presents a multiple and varied account of the uptake of a technology whose uses are complex and intertwined, and often experienced as a space in which, far from being a zone of freedom, distinct concerns are brought to bear.

First Encounters and Perceptions of Facebook

All of the research participants had spent at least two or three years on Facebook at the time of being interviewed, with some having joined even several years earlier than that, at a time when Facebook's presence in Egypt was minimal. As such, the considerable gap made recalling first experiences somewhat problematic, and interviews involved delving into their life context at the time, understanding what prompted them to join, and their concerns in doing so. Nevertheless, many were able to clearly recount some of their initial motivations for joining as well as provide insight into their preconceptions about the site. This is perhaps because, while for some joining Facebook was quite a casual step, performed out of a sense of curiosity, others engaged with Facebook despite, or because of, strong associations about what joining Facebook promised and signified in terms of lifestyle, values and ideology. For participants in the present study, attitudes to Facebook often seemed to incorporate aspects of two distinct, mutually exclusive poles.

The first of these emphasized Facebook as a vaguely disreputable site, associated in particular with meeting new people, eroding traditional norms governing gender relations, and a troubling lack of privacy in which one's daily life would be publicly displayed. This was particularly relevant for many of the women interviewed. For Heba, a secretary in her 20s, Facebook was initially a site to be avoided, seeming to be "a very open kind of public space where very limited privacy was - and this is why I didn't like the idea of Facebook". Aspects of this vision of Facebook notably contrast with the self-described purpose of the site (at least before the era of 'following'), which is to connect existing friends rather than facilitate networks among strangers. Indeed, Facebook often tries to guard against the idea that it might enable new friendships to form on the site, for example checking with each friend request whether the recipient of the add actually knows the adder "outside of Facebook".

Maryam, a college student whose father works as a civil servant, was in an Egyptian state school when she joined Facebook. She explained that, for her family and friends at that time (around 2009) Facebook was associated with typical internet and phone-related practices of meeting strangers, in which people (usually men) would fish for new friends through internet chat rooms or through randomly dialling phone numbers, often out of a motivation to meet members of the opposite sex. For Maryam and many in her immediate sphere, Facebook's association with such activities gave the site a slight air of danger, as well as a vague idea that someone who used such a site might be 'a bad person'. After curiously responding to an invitation to join Facebook from a friend, Maryam quickly confessed to her mother - who was shocked, and argued that she, in Maryam's words, would "get to know bad people".

The second of the two poles was to interpret Facebook as having a somewhat elite status, and as a site of connection to high society. Ahmed, studying at an expensive private university when he first encountered Facebook in 2007, remembered frequently encountering talk of Facebook on campus and becoming increasingly curious. Ahmed explained that one of the key markers of status for Facebook was its (at the time) requirement of a command of English, as well as its association with technical competence, giving the site a certain insider cache:

> [when] we started signing up on Facebook, it was really more of ermm, a social, fashion, exclusionary thing. If you're in, a part of the Facebook gang, you're obviously someone who can log in and register, cos back then it was only in English [...] it was like 'what's Facebook?' I'm really like curious.

A further element in establishing this more exclusive character of Facebook was its association with colleges. Ahmed explains how the physical sites in which he encountered Facebook, as well as its being implicated in particular social circles, shaped his initial responses to the site.

> [Facebook] took a very long time to get to Egypt, as any technology it happens. So when it started spreading it started spreading through college students, cos it's Facebook - kind of the same alumni idea. So we were mainly college students [...] It was like a platform for college students, we would take pictures and post them of each other and communicate and agree on uhhh parties together.

While both Maryam and Ahmed were curious about Facebook, Ahmed's encounter with Facebook was a trend to resist (and eventually give into), rather than a strange, almost-forbidden zone.

> I'd been resisting the trend for a while back then, but people were telling me [jaunty voice] 'oh Facebook!' and 'Facebook' and like, so I decided to go online and uh try the thing out. And, uh, it was weird at the beginning, with people liking stuff and liking posts, and I used to like my own posts.

While Maryam and Ahmed represented the two extreme ends in the sample, the basic positions they explained were by no means unique to them. Perhaps to some extent both were combined in the case of Fahima, a clerical worker in her mid-20s. Fahima explained that, despite feeling uncomfortable with the basic idea of Facebook, especially sharing personal information and photos, she felt that she would be perceived as unmodern if she did not join. For Fahima, additional factors also included perceived usefulness for career and study purposes, as well as ease of keeping up with friends. On the basis of these issues, Fahima "forced myself to have a Facebook account", initially restricting her use to educational and networking-related purposes as well as private messages.

This sense in which Facebook was a difficult site for some to opt out of is echoed in the accounts of other participants, including one who found that photos of group activities were continually being shared online among members of her social circle: "most of my friends were on Facebook and they were uploading photos and tagging each other and I wanted to be part of that."

Another participant was Mohammed, a professional in his 20s who worked for a foreign firm at the time of the interview. Mohammed joined Facebook primarily as a career development tool, linking him to resources for helping him improve his English as well as study groups for further qualifications. While Mohammed was curious about Facebook and did not feel a sense of foreboding about the site, there was little motivation in joining other than professional interest, primarily because the majority of his friends had not joined at that time.

While Facebook was certainly experienced as a site of the phatic, this does not appear in participant accounts as mapping neatly onto trivial, or even apolitical, activity, especially during periods in which depressing themes, relating to the evolving political situation in Cairo at that time, sometimes predominated. Despite, or perhaps because of these tendencies, many participants emphasized their playful, positive mutually beneficial

interactions, avoiding overly intimate or embarrassing details and life events. Aside from notable exceptions, to be explored in subsequent chapters, this avoided embarrassing issues or other features which might put across a negative self-portrayal.

> I think I share things that I feel I want to share. Good happy moments, that I feel I would like to remember, to share with people [...] I like to be perceived as a happy person, so I mostly share happy things. To deliver positive energy to people.

This sense of benefiting others in a positive and upbeat mood was echoed by another participant, who explained that

> I tend to use Facebook as a way of showing that – to adding something new to people. Even within a status I can make somebody think about a new idea that didn't cross his mind, for example. And it's also for, I mean, pleasure I mean sometimes I make jokes, I put silly things and so on

In addition to career reasons and the need to keep up with friends, participants also found Facebook useful for widening their knowledge of what was happening in the city, whether in terms of circulating practical information or discovering new events. While many did not anticipate the significance of this aspect of Facebook use, one participant in her 40s explained that this was the primary reason for her joining Facebook.

> While I was working there, the younger [...] the younger generation they were – I discovered that they were able to speak to each other over the internet and I didn't understand how that was happening, and they were telling each other about events that they all wanted to go to and I was feeling left out and 'why, why does everyone know about all these events and I don't know about it?' And so one of, one the younger guys told me about Facebook and that's how they know, you know, that's how they communicate with each other and tell me about these events that they wanted to go to. Uuummm, and so that, that was the reason that I joined, is that I wanted to be more involved, you know, with that community and just know what's happening in the world and being able to participate.

Another popular reason given for joining Facebook was the January 25th uprisings. Indeed, sometimes Facebook and the revolution seemed to be synonymous. As one participant explained, one popular narrative had it that "*Kullena Khaled Saeid* [...] started the revolution" by creating a Facebook event – doubtless a drastic oversimplification, but also one which is resonant for some Egyptians. Indeed, one informant relayed an experience of going with friends to purchase food at a bakery in the very early days of the 2011 uprising, and openly declaring their intention to distribute the food to protestors with the intention of provoking discussion. With the protests still fresh, a source of curiosity and mixed

emotions, and difficult to comprehend for some, staff and customers at the bakery took up the opportunity to discuss recent events, and began engaging the protestors, raising questions about their motivations, the society sought by the movement, and the possibility of change. At the end of the debate, one customer called out to the group and expressed his bottom-line endorsement of the protests by conceding: '*bass*, Facebook *haga kwayyesa, ya'ani*' – 'but, I mean, Facebook is a good thing'.

Given such a conflation of Facebook and political change in the popular imagination, it is perhaps understandable that many would join the social networking site in the wake of the revolution. As will be explored in the next chapter, participants also made significant practical use of the site in distributing political information and gaining a broader and deeper understanding of political events. Yasmine, a participant in her 30s who joined Facebook in the wake of the revolution, noted that the political changes in the country provided significant motivation to join Facebook, overcoming a sense of trepidation at getting involved with the social networking site.

> I joined it for the sole purpose of following politics [immediately after the revolution]. I
> remember being very resistant to joining Facebook before – it looked like pictures of
> everybody everywhere and no privacy whatsoever – something that you can't control.

Yasmine was typical of many in Cairo who had not joined Facebook beforehand, and those participants who already had accounts at the time of the revolution reported many of their friends and family members joining at that time. Notably, many of these were outside of Facebook's typically youthful core demographic – older aunties and uncles, for example – who saw Facebook as a way of understanding developments in their country. This was not, however, in itself an indicator of revolutionary intent - many of those joining were opposed to the revolution, seeing Facebook as a practical tool that would help them negotiate the new urban terrain of constant protest and disruption by providing advance warning from the activists themselves.

Many participants had already gained experience of social media, particularly a social networking site called Hi5. Talking about Hi5 evoked nostalgic memories, and an interesting point of contrast for Facebook. Hi5's reputation appears to have been even worse than that of Facebook, with Heba explaining that she joined the site despite her reservations, only to have them confirmed:

> I heard a lot of bad things about Hi5. It's uh, it was like a community of... kind of unpolite
> people who like to know some boys, and boys are looking for girls. I did an account and I

deactivated immediately, yes, because there is no privacy, it's open for everyone, and, and I don't like this.

Hi5 in this way both set the tone for many people's expectations of Facebook and also provided a point of contrast during people's initial encounters with the latter. Hi5's structure was both more public and more oriented around meeting strangers. One participant in his mid-20s recalls using Hi5 to meet strangers based on common interests, an activity which is decidedly more difficult on Facebook:

You make a profile and then people – just like you write everything about yourself, the movies you like, yada yada yada. And there's groups where you have interests, so you join a group where you have an interest, for example I'm interested in [various interests], so you just go to those, like... places where... the groups, and then you click join and you join and people talk about it and you just comment on each other. And then you have friends you add, friends give you testimonials, that's like the wall, so you have testimonial thing and people write you.

Reflecting on his time on Hi5, Ahmed (mentioned above) had felt prompted to leave Hi5 shortly before he joined Facebook, after becoming frustrated with both the lack of privacy settings on Hi5 as well as the particular behaviours he encountered online. Ahmed explained that, during one period, "there was this phase where it became pornographic, like people would post like pornographic pictures" onto his Hi5 profile. Ahmed found this quite troubling, not least because he felt it significantly undermined his attempts at self-portrayal online:

It's defensive, like, uh, it's because, it's not like your inbox, like someone's doing you a favour and posting pictures – someone is posting stuff on your wall and so it becomes part of you. Like they identify you as someone who accepts that kind of thing.

Issues such as these prompted Ahmed to rethink his membership of Hi5, as did that of constant intrusion from strangers.

Of course there were people like... spam, and uh requests from people I don't know... with the anonymous names [laughs], yeah, so that was the point, actually where I thought: phase out from Hi5.

Encountering Facebook shortly afterwards, Ahmed felt that things would be quite different on the new platform, not only because of a sense of a "different crowd," who were either college-educated or in the process of acquiring a college education, but

because it was more secure in terms of like uh - you can approve the things that come onto your wall. You can close your wall and open uh... you can do all kinds of settings. And back then people who were using Facebook were way less. So you wouldn't expect that kind of thing happening.

Ahmed was also reassured by the fact that, while his experiences of Hi5 often brought him into contact with those who used false names, his initial encounters with Facebook usually involved friending those he knew in real life, who had joined with their real names and photos on display, further bolstering his level of trust in the site.

However, Ahmed's perspective on Facebook's early days was not echoed by those participants who were part of less affluent networks. For Maryam, for example, Facebook was full of people using false, dramatic pseudonyms, and people who avoided sharing pictures of themselves. Maryam reports that these behaviours felt quite natural for her and her friends, primarily because "Facebook was perceived as a chatting room, like a chatting room". With this basic reference point, the sharing of personal information and photographs felt completely inappropriate. Maryam notes, however, that attitudes to the sharing of pictures appear to be slowly changing, with her friends seeming progressively more and more willing to circulate pictures of themselves as the activity loses its stigma as an inappropriate thing to do.

The suggestion, then, is that social class was a significant vector in terms of initial approaches to Facebook, with higher social class seeming to correspond more closely to Facebook's envisaged usage pattern – real name, real profile picture, and an engagement with one's friend list as a whole. Exceptions to the envisaged pattern included one or more of shying away from a public-feeling engagement with friends, restricting usage to private messaging and chat, using Facebook primarily or solely as a career- and educational-networking tool, and avoiding real names and real pictures. Despite these beginnings, participant accounts appear to support the suggestion that social media may accustom users to increased publicizing actions (Castells, 2012; Radsch & Khamis, 2013), indeed conforming more to Facebook's expected patterns of use.

Friendship and Facebook Networks

For the majority of participants, Facebook friendship was not taken to signify strong ties, often merely indicating a modest level of interest and involvement between contacts. Consequently, Facebook friendship for most participants was at the very least in the hundreds, and in some cases surpassed 1000 friends. Perhaps the core idea of Facebook

friendship for many participants lies in this minimal objective: of staying casually updated with the main events of that person's life, and accepting that they were going to be similarly updated about you. Accordingly, the level of mutual interest required was minimal. One participant, who has left her privacy settings on the default options, explained that privacy and fears about voyeurism were a concern, saying "some people you just don't want them to know anything about you," (a topic which will be explored below) effectively adopting this concern as the sole criterion of friend request acceptance. Clearly, these constraints regarding privacy and discretion did leave substantial room for casual, low-maintenance relationships between people without especially significant ties. As one participant explained, who has over 1000 friends on Facebook, she would not consider someone she was connected with on Facebook to necessarily be a genuine friend,

> they're just people I just don't want to burn my bridges with. Not because I'll use them later on but because they're, they're people I would like to talk to at some point, maybe ya'ani – there are some people you meet and you like knowing them, but they're not close friends. And that's fine to add – like for me it's fine to add them on Facebook because at some point I just send them a message saying 'hi', or - and you don't want to remove them because you still want to be in touch, you still want to see what they're up to. You don't mind them seeing what you're up to. Uh, you met them and you're probably going to meet them again anyway, so - and you're not bothered by them. I'm not very strict with who I'm friends with. Sometimes, like sometimes I accept people that I have a lot of common friends with who maybe I have met only once for five minutes. Or people who were in my class in college but we never really talked a lot, but I know them. That's fine with me. I'm not very strict.

Indeed, the large network that many participants have accumulated on Facebook, clearly surpassing their number of close contacts, was cited by some as beneficial, leading to awareness of potential opportunities as well as political developments, giving the sense that the expanded network in itself was a valued consequence of Facebook use (Shirky, 2008). At the same time, there was still a level of guardedness expressed about forming connections on Facebook and, although this does not appear to apply to many others in Cairo, friending strangers was not something most participants felt comfortable with. For many, the flood of incoming friend requests from strangers, directed from and towards both genders, was a puzzling reality of social life. Indeed, the idea of accepting such requests seemed alien to participants, one of whom referred to them as "intruders", and noted that they were the source of the majority of her friend requests. Another participant in his mid-20s, who works in the sale of prestige goods, explained that "I don't add anyone

[who is a stranger] because I have about 33 people pending. I don't add or decline their request because I don't know them - most of my friends I've met in real life."

While outright strangers are therefore typically excluded from friend connections on Facebook, there is often no clear line demarcating inclusion or exclusion. A range of factors were seen to contribute to decision-making in this area, very often depending on the vagaries of personal comfort. Overwhelmingly, the minimum requirement for most interviewees was that they should have met a potential friend in person at least once, and, importantly, that their relationship should ideally be grounded in relationships with mutual friends. Indeed, the importance of mutual friends in some cases trumped the lack of an in-person encounter, with many participants making occasional exceptions to their own guidelines by friending those who they had not met yet, based on either strong recommendations from friends in common or practical requirements, such as help with an upcoming test.

Practical requirements also often led to people friending those who they regarded as not in their social sphere at all, such as work colleagues and academic contacts. One participant registered her discomfort with such relationships on Facebook, making clear that there is a distinction between such relationships and those with people she considers herself close to.

> For me it's very rare uhh, very rare to accept a friend request for someone strange – I don't know him. Okay? So that most of my friend list are actually my friend. And people who I met once who are public, like my doctors – my professors – in the university, they are not close to me. But I should be their friend because of updating, because of job opportunities. Something like this. Because being updated by my co-workers and colleagues. But most of the people I don't know very well, I am putting them on the restricted list. They are not accessible to my information, especially with pictures. I am feeling uncomfort with people who... I don't like people to know my information or to see my pictures, like comment.

At the same time, Facebook seemed to encourage the proliferation of friendship grey areas, even where people sought to keep their friendlists relatively free of non-intimates. This was perhaps partly related to one aspect of Cairo's urban geography interacting with sociability patterns. As a very large, densely packed city, social opportunities proliferated for participants, who continually negotiated new social scenes and formed new social connections. Often, this meant that the number of ties formed outstripped those which would be given serious investment in the form of time and effort by the parties involved. Facebook seemed to interact with these socialization patterns in an interesting way,

leading to configurations which seemed to defy previous ways of thinking about friendship.

> People switch groups and switch friends, and just constantly, it's in constant motion. And what happens sometimes is you meet someone and you might hit it off, bring the house down, and then not see them ever again, which has happened. [...] You'll still be friends on Facebook. And you're free to comment on whatever they publicly put up. You haven't had a disagreement, or whatever, like, you're not not friends anymore. Are you really friends? You know, it's a weird kind of, it's a new dimension to human relationships I think.

Large social networks on Facebook played a significant transformative aspect in the lives of several participants, with Facebook's trail of passively-generated information (such as the documenting of event attendance) exposing new aspects of the city, such as volunteering opportunities, art exhibitions, and underground concerts. For many taking up such opportunities these represented previously unanticipated activities, opening them up to new areas of the city as well as new social scenes and ways of approaching life. Importantly, this effect was not simply a result of the increased number of weak ties, but of the proliferation of user information on Facebook, which meant that users did not need to deliberately pass on information in order for it to be spread throughout their network.

While it has been suggested that Facebook's expanded network can be summed up largely in terms of such weak ties (Gladwell, 2010), however, there is evidence to suggest that that the division between weak and strong ties fails to capture the true impact of Facebook networks. Large friend networks for many participants were partly reflective of the prolonging of relationships which were previously felt as strong ties, indicating the potential for Facebook to be important in providing social support. Such ties were found to be significant by participants, yet their maintenance was partially context dependent, such as friends from work or school. On this count, Facebook's undirected messages (such as status updates) were cited as a crucial factor in maintaining a sense of familiarity, and the relatively low-cost chatting and private message functions were also important for maintaining contact. One participant explained:

> I love how Facebook... connects people... everyone you've ever met [...] you sort of lose touch with the people you knew [in the era before Facebook] except the really close people that you know a lot about. Pretty much everyone else is just gone. You don't know what they're doing. You don't know where they are.

This relationship maintenance aspect of Facebook use took on a particular significance in the context of Cairo, particularly given various restrictions on movement faced by many participants. Notably, social relations for most participants were not localized in particular neighbourhoods or areas as much as distributed either across the city generally, or straddling areas which, given Cairo's substantial size, were often a considerable distance away from each other. This was exacerbated by Cairo's often extreme road congestion problems, often meaning that the maintenance of one's social networks was significantly impeded by the urban geography of the city. Trips between Cairo neighbourhoods may take several hours, often involving exposure to intense heat and considerable traffic-related stress. While such high costs did not prevent participants from having social lives which straddled parts of the city, they certainly introduced serious difficulties for relationship maintenance, meaning that many, even those living relatively close to each other, would be considered for all practical purposes cut off.

Public interactions on Facebook such as 'liking' photos and commenting on statuses played a key role in this relationship maintenance. Notably, participants generally report feeling free to publicly interact even with those they haven't otherwise been keeping up with, without awkwardness. One participant explained that

> I can comment on something somebody posts if I haven't seen them in over a year, for example. And not – without the precursor of saying hello, even. You can just drop a comment. Yeah, you can do that.

Thus, Facebook is in some senses treated by participants as a space of relatively free interaction, in which tie strengthening appears to take on new dynamics. While it would be difficult to suddenly text message someone you met at a party two years ago and didn't see subsequently without any form of introduction, such an action would register for a number of participants as considerably more permissible where for many this is a taken-for-granted form of engagement with Facebook. What is salient here is not simply that the 'space' of the newsfeed lowers the costs to, increases opportunities for, or provides reminders of interaction, but that it is practiced as a site in which casual interaction can be read as acceptable and relatively unintrusive (provided, as we'll see below, that it is seen to occur "accidentally"). At the same time, such interactions can and are read by members of the sample as being socially significant. One participant, for example, described her relationship with an old social circle as being one in which "we like each other's statuses", thereby denoting a certain, albeit low, level of relationship maintenance and the performance of mutual remembering.

Thus, the Facebook networks of participants could be regarded as messy and hybrid, incorporating a range of different varieties and intensities of relationship, ranging from close friends to near-strangers and all those inbetween. An important upshot of this is that participants seem to have frequently had trouble calibrating exactly what they regarded as appropriate or inappropriate behaviour for the site. For many, negotiating this space seemed to be an iterative process, in which they worked out over time exactly what sorts of relations would be practiced through their newsfeed posts. One participant explains trial and error regarding the sharing of photographs as follows:

> I feel uncomfortable sometimes, or I started to, when I would post a photograph that I wanted to show my friends, and the assumption in my mind that I hadn't addressed yet was that only my friends would comment on this, or only the people that it had something to do with would comment on it. And then what you don't expect is oh, that person who I accepted that friend request from four weeks ago and haven't seen or heard from since is commenting on that thing, and that makes me a little uncomfortable.

Another participant raised issues concerning the perceived appropriateness of certain forms of intimate relation on Facebook, describing his journey from an expressive use of the site to one which was more curtailed:

> Maybe in the past, but now I'm very careful about what I post on Facebook. In the past I used to like post feelings, and yeah I'm feeling depressed, I'm feeling left out. Then I realised that no one cares. No one really cares about you, so why would you post something like that? And it's gonna look stupid afterwards. So I even actually at one point I took a few hours to remove all my old statuses, and old pictures on the – I did that, actually. I'm very careful about what I share now.

Interactions on Facebook are further complicated by issues of social signaling, making interactions such as commenting and even liking statuses matters which participants sometimes had to consider carefully. For female participants especially, simple Facebook interactions have higher costs than might be first anticipated. One participant expressed concerns that liking and commenting on men's statuses could easily be read as an amorous advance.

> There's this guy, for instance, who has been trying to initiate something with me, and I don't want to cross that kind of boundary with him... and he writes the most amazing posts and I want to like them, but if I keep liking them he'll think that I like him [...] A lot of my male friends are married and I'm not friends with their wives, and I'm a little bit hesitant about getting their wife curious about who this person is that keeps liking your posts...

This sense of trepidation can be especially pronounced when commenting on photographs:

> I sometimes feel very obligated to, if I'm going to comment on a guy's picture and he has a wife... I make a point of making it sound like he's sort of a brotherish person to me. [...] I make it a little bit formal. I don't get over-friendly. I use words like 'I appreciate' instead of 'I like'. 'I trust'. And... [laughing] 'God bless you and your family' and stuff.

Furthermore, issues of relationship maintenance seem to map problematically onto Facebook's functions as a site at which to conduct political and other discourse. A key affordance which maintains the consistency of interactions on Facebook is the comment notification feature, which allows users to be updated with threads that they have been involved in. This was experienced in considerably negative terms by a number of participants, who felt that the knowledge that they would be repeatedly pulled back into discussions actively discouraged them from participation. For one participant, this was related to her sense that comments should be scrupulously replied to, necessitating unreasonable demands on her time.

> So if you send me Whatsapp message or BBM message or Facebook message or, or you comment on my photo or something like this, I should reply. That's my opinion. So I don't like to comment, to not wade through thousands of comments, I will not follow all of that. I'm not free.

While this may not have been the only reason for her reluctance to interact on Facebook, the above quote is revealing of her level of consciousness over her obligations, and shows a level of personal care which was not reflected in all users, perhaps underscoring the sense in which commenting for many participants is something which is relatively free of obligation. For another participant, also concerned with the juggling the proliferation of notifications, the concern was the potential to become inextricably drawn into conversation:

> there is no real equation for it. It depends on what's being said, or who's that person. What will happen when I comment – sometimes, like, I know if I comment now I'll just have to keep on looking at the conversation to see who commented on my comment so I tell my opinion more

While the comment notification features are there to preserve the integrity of conversations over time and promote a sense that replies to comments will be seen, then,

they can also therefore undermine users' willingness to participate in widespread Facebook interactions.

Sharing, Privacy, Visibility

As we have already touched on above, issues surrounding privacy and sharing were a major concern for many participants. While such concerns would typically be thought of as privacy issues (and in many cases could be resolved or at least addressed through the use of 'privacy settings' on Facebook), the sense in which these were really concerns about privacy in a literal sense turned out to be quite problematic, with participant anxieties ranging beyond the simple matter of controlling access to information per se (thereby going beyond the scope of, for example, Westin's definition of privacy, 2003) to include matters which resonated with concepts such as expressive privacy (DeCew, 1997; Joinson and Paine, 2007), concerned with maintaining a sphere of autonomous self-presentation against (the potential for) criticism, as well as issues surrounding the gaze of the other and the various (acceptable and unacceptable) ways in which Facebook was implicated in participants' experiences of that gaze.

While participants found the parameters of their concerns often quite hard to define, understandably often depending on feelings and associations rather than, for example, particular feared outcomes, privacy was nevertheless clearly articulated as an important value which would necessarily be traded off, to greater or lesser extents, with any increased openness on Facebook. Struggling to convey the downside to Facebook's regime of publicity, one participant explained that "the more people you have and the more you want to share, the more you know that you don't have any privacy. Everyone's going to see it, everyone's going to know. So you have to be careful who you have."

Much of the literature on Facebook has emphasized the cognitive limitations of the human brain in anticipating the diffuse, fractured, and incoherent audience represented by a large friendlist; here, this aspect adds to the sense of foreboding about publicity on Facebook:

> I have a lot of friends on Facebook, people who I've met like once in my life. You know, and then they could come in and see my pictures and follow my life and where I'm at and where I'm coming from and where I was last night. Where - that's kind of scary I guess. It's uncomfortable. And that's the thing with Facebook, you [...] feel that you don't know who's watching you.

For one participant, a teacher in her late twenties, a similar sense of unease with Facebook sharing could be partly grounded in the potential for unknown, unpredictable

consequences. For her, there is a clear sense that even seemingly-innocuous aspects of her activities might need to be shielded from effectively-unknown observers:

> I'm thinking I don't really remember who these five or six hundred people are at this very moment and I don't necessarily know if I want to share this with every one of them. If I - you know, there might be a specific person that I don't want to share this with for some reason or another. It could be that I don't want them to know that I was out or it could be that I don't want them to know where I was or who I was with. That's not a discussion that I particularly want to have. I have a lot of work friends or old school friends – I guess it's like, almost like having a live cam on your life all the time, so you go about your day and there's this live cam and, in a way, you can put like a – there's a little black cardboard thing you can put against the live cam so that you can have a moment and then – you can't control what goes on Facebook, cos the other person might tag you, put it on, whatever else. And the live cam – who sees what's on the live cam, it's the people that you've accepted, and you don't always accept those people because they're your best friends and you want to share.

This sense of an unspecifiable, decontextualized audience seemed to prompt very different kinds of reaction among participants. During explorations of their feelings about posting on Facebook, some participants (all of whom were female) explained that an important issue was a sense that their activity on Facebook may be judged, watched, and scrutinized. At times, it seemed natural for participants to explain these issues to me (a foreign researcher) in terms of generalizations about Egypt and Egyptians[8], and in particular their sense that their activities might be the subject of gossip or other forms of invasive inquiry. The following summary is fairly representative of the views of a range of interview participants, which is reproduced here in order to give insight into the experience of interview participants, rather than as an attempt to delineate a perceived Egyptian national character.

> I tend to feel that the nature of Egyptians is very invasive, actually, it's only in really nice places like really high society places that people mind their own business. Even when they do mind their own business they're not really minding their own business – they're just pretend to be minding their own business in front of you, whereas of course they're talking behind your back about you and what kind of laundry you put up... they'll notice everything you can afford, they'll notice everything you're doing and stuff like that.

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[8] This is perhaps also related to the so-called "Khawaga complex", identified as a particular self-critical tendency among Egyptians and a corresponding high estimation of Westerners, clearly related to Egypt's colonial history.

This was echoed by another participant, Laila, who, while being an Egyptian citizen and born in Egypt to Egyptian parents, spent a considerable part of her youth in another country, where she first began using Facebook. Upon her long-term return to Egypt, she noticed herself relating to Facebook quite differently. Resonating with other accounts, Laila explained her experience in terms of feelings of being judged and evaluated: "there's a lot more social convention that happens here. People judge each other a lot more, based on whatever they can sense." In this case, the experience and practice of Facebook relates closely not just to experiences on Facebook themselves, but experiences of the wider city.

> For me, the feeling is like I'm being watched a lot more. You know that feeling that someone is looking at you – eyes on the back of your head kind of feeling? I feel that almost constantly here. But it comes from having experiences [...] When I walk into a cafe and restaurant, specifically the cafes and restaurants, I don't know what it is – everybody looks up. Or the vast majority of people look up. It could be one of two things. It could be they're waiting for someone or checking if they know you or this is a place where you often see people you know so you're checking if someone you know walked in. It could be something like that. Or it could be: 'let's suss out the person who just walked in'. I don't know what it is but it's always – I'm always, at the beginning when I come back [to Egypt] I'm always a bit taken aback by it.

She also noted that this phenomenon, for her, applies to upscale, Western-aesthetic coffee shops in parts of town such as Zamalek and Mohandesseen, as well as Downtown's more lively Borsa area. Notably, a sense that this sort of evaluation hinges around judgements, largely based on perceived social status, considerably adds to the sense that such a gaze is not desired. On Facebook, this sense of facing a judgemental audience was reinforced by seeing critical comments on other people's pictures and status updates.

> Like I, I ordinarily wouldn't care what I'm wearing in photographs. I don't. Or what kind of a face I'm making, or you know. But then you put things like that on Facebook, people – and I've heard commentary about, oh, you know, the things that you're wearing and the faces that you've - it's not a nice kind of approach to discussing someone. Whereas in [her other country] it wouldn't matt - people wouldn't have the same comments, where they're - they wouldn't judge what you're wearing and what you look like in the same way. Or as unkindly, I guess. So whereas it doesn't matter, still, in the photographs, I wouldn't ordinar – I wouldn't now post them up for comment. Or I'd show them to specific people, but it doesn't matter [...] as soon as you post something it's almost like you're saying 'have at 'em'. 'Have at it', anything, photographs or opinion or whatever it is – I've delivered this to the public.

Importantly, it is not simply the (real or imagined) presence of a judgemental gaze which is significant, but its unapologetic, unselfconscious nature, which she experiences both on Facebook and in the various spaces of her everyday social life. Indeed, for Laila and many other participants, this is discomforting even if there is no particular sense of malice or judgement. One example Laila gave was that of encountering someone at a party, whose awareness of having encountered her before felt uncomfortable, giving her the sense that she had been subjected to a sort of unhealthy voyeurism, or "a higher level of watching".

> I was sitting with somebody having a chat and they mentioned that they'd seen me in three other, on three other occasions, and I don't recall, and I don't think I've met this person officially at these – they were parties, lots of people. Or two of them at least were. And this person mentioned that they'd seen me at these three events where I was. And I don't remember this at all. So I feel like if you have noticed me, noticed me, to the point where you remember that you've seen me at two separate occasions without knowing me then that indicates a higher level of watching.

In general, this uncomfortable sense of being watched proved to be highly significant in many participants' accounts of their use of Facebook, as well as replicated on the social networking site. This sense was heightened for many when their online activity became the topic of offline conversation, something which many participants effectively identified as violating an implicit norm of Facebook use. Heba emphasized her discomfort specifically with Facebook's locative aspects, which she felt were handled with a sense of indiscretion and uncomfortable curiosity by many of those to whom she had given access.

> It's became strange for me why you ask me, it's my personal life. But because of Facebook, okay it shows everything, and uh because I'm opening uh everything for them, they are can see what I am doing and what I am going to go, and what am I intend to go the next week, and uh, or maybe if you check in place, maybe in Fifth Settlement or Rehab or any place, uh 'oh wow you were in [a particular café] yesterday – and you were with who?' I don't like these kind of questions.

These sorts of concerns were echoed by most of the female participants. Hoda, a student, also explored her sense of unease about this subject, noting that it felt especially heightened when the initial observation was the result of a deliberate exploration of their timeline rather than an "accidental" encounter on their newsfeed.

> If people see a picture that was posted of me it's cool. It's like I don't mind them seeing my pictures. I just mind them going to specifically see my pictures. Do you get the difference? Yeah, like when they go and actually search for you and, like, look through everything – but

if it's accid – like if they see it on their timeline accidentally, it's okay, it's posted. I don't

mind anyone [inaudible] pictures actually, but the intention of 'oh, I'm going to spy on you',

you know, 'I'm stalking you', is a bit creepy.

However, this sense of an unstated rule regarding visibility on Facebook, while being

shared by the majority of interview participants, is clearly not shared by significant

numbers of their Facebook friends. Indeed, my own experiences in Cairo threw up a similar

sense of tensions over norms about how personal information and photographs on

Facebook were meant to be engaged with by the user. To give an example, one

acquaintance, who subsequently became a close friend, proceeded to good naturedly

inquire about various pictures I had been tagged in over the previous two years, asking

about the locations featured and commenting on changes in my bodyweight. For Hoda,

such behaviour stands both in violent contrast to her own norms and expectations, yet

does not seem to jar with the expectations of others.

When I see pictures it's always like on my timeline, like, you know - it's people posting stuff.

But I don't go inside people's profile and look through their pictures. I don't do that

[laughs]. I think that's weird, I think that's... creepy. I know, I know, and like oh, 'oh my God,

you looked so pretty in your prom' , like why do you know, why do know that?! Stop it [...] I

don't think they think it's a problem. Like, they think it's okay. Like 'you're posting it, we see

it. It's cool'.

One participant relayed an account of her experience - one which she notes she is "not

proud of" - of this phenomenon from the other side. While still new to Facebook, she

began exploring pictures in a way which might have seemed more inappropriate and

voyeuristic than was actually the case, resulting in alienation and the breakdown of their

friendship.

I friended her, she accepted the request, and then first thing I do is go to her school

pictures, which are all common friends. But they are not common Facebook friends - I was

still new to Facebook then. So I started liking some of the pictures and commenting. She

unfriended me. I knew all of them... I would have expected a little bit more... just a shadow

of a doubt. We were friends for three days.

These incidents recall Hogan's (2010) treatment of Facebook use, in which he argues that,

while Facebook is indeed a site of self-presentation, the use of Goffman's notion of

'performance' to theorize Facebook is based on assumptions about the operation of space

and time on Facebook which do not apply, in particular pointing out that communication

on Facebook is asynchronous and individual posts operate as 'artefacts', in that their

presence escapes the control and awareness of its originator. Hogan therefore opts for the metaphor of an "exhibition" to describe this state of affairs.

The experiences and insights recounted above suggest a level of discomfort with Facebook's potential to function as an exhibition site for many of the participants, as well as a profound obliviousness to this discomfort on the part of others. While Hogan's point is, as he points out, on ontological one and not an emic or phenomenological issue, his point of course still applies regardless of the experiences of research participants. At the same time, the evidence uncovered here develops our understanding of the importance of emic and phenomenological issues in understanding Facebook practices. For the participants, what is imagined and expected is to 'behave as if' Facebook were a site of performance, effectively simulating – or, indeed, pretending to simulate – some but not all of the features of real-time presence.

Furthermore, this also highlights the role of Facebook itself, Hogan's "third party" (2010), which acts as a distributor of the data. That status updates and photographs should be engaged with "by accident" rather than on purpose not only indicates a refusal for one's Facebook activity to be read as an exhibition, but effectively privileges the (distinctly non-accidental) algorithm Facebook uses at any one time to distribute one's personal data in normative terms, as having the capacity to intermediate between "friends" in a way which is cleansed of any potential for prurient interest. Perhaps, in this case, the 'newsfeed' can be understood as fulfilling not just a role of gathering and organizing data but of presenting this data in a way which it is acceptable to consume.

Thus, various participants have elaborated on a general problematic of publicity in which one must accept practices of watching which are felt as a kind of unwanted surveillance by those in their social circles. Whereas ordinarily this watching might consist largely of surreptitious glances and gossip, they experience Facebook as a site whereby this gaze becomes itself visible – either through liking and commenting, or through the in-person mentioning of Facebook activity. At the same time, many experience a counterposing pressure – often from family members – to curtail and refine their public activity on Facebook in accordance with relatives' comfort levels. One participant, Marwa, a professional in her 20s, describes negotiating large extended family gatherings as follows:

> when they see you in family gatherings they go like 'oh I saw blah blah blah that you posted with your friend, and that friend of yours seems cool' or 'boring' or, I don't know, 'not your type' or whatever, or if you post silly pictures they go like 'oh, it's not good to post that kind

of stuff' and 'how are you okay with people seeing that?'... they care too much about what other people think... in Egypt the society sort of cares too much about what other people think your reputation – what are people going to say about you, so you're supposed to be always in this perfect form of being very polite and serious, and when you're funny you're not funny in a silly way... you always have to have this respectful image, cos if you don't then it's not cool, and people comment about it...

This perceived need to appear to be "very polite and serious" was a pressure often reported – although not always succumbed to - by female participants, and was associated by many with membership in Cairo's "older," more established families. Part of the issue was in the sense that life activities in general should remain private, an attitude that Marwa encountered often in older members of her family.

things were more private and in control [when her parents were growing up], you could still do a lot of things privately, but now we like to share stuff, now we like to share experiences, and we don't mind that most people know, unless we're doing something really wrong and then we hide it.

For some participants, this pressure felt significant enough to create a second Facebook account, allowing them to separate the two incommensurable contexts of her extended family and her wider friend circle. For others, their friends also represented an audience in front of whom a degree of reputation management was required, and participants described care being taken to ensure that their pictures are not seen to be flouting important norms, in particular those governing relations between people of the opposite sex. Notably, this does not in general seem to apply to political beliefs, which, while remaining a contentious topic, are not in general associated with the same form of shame or embarrassment. As one participant put it, as far as sharing inappropriate political content goes, "they'll just think I'm crazy or something, but they won't think that I'm morally [at fault]".

While some resolved the issue of the complaints of family members by creating a second account, a very common solution was to make extensive use of privacy settings, which allowed a range of users to respond to conflicting feelings about joining in with sharing activities on Facebook. One participant was able to negotiate family issues by making his account invisible to relatives:

And the fact that it was only your friends that were seeing this was a good thing – was one of the motives, because you can control the privacy. And actually I ran into problems on Facebook with my family, because at some point I wrote on a friend's wall that […] [a state

institution is] really corrupt. It was really kind of a stupid post, really [laughs]. Everyone knows it's corrupt! [laughs]. My Father saw my post anyway, and he forced me onto deactivate my Facebook on the spot. But 15 minutes later I reactivated my Facebook and I blocked, blocked him off and I blocked all the family off [laughs].

Both of these examples indicate a sense of a struggle between participants on the one hand, and their families on the other, over their individual control over self-expression on Facebook. Participants of both genders reported qualms about being seen to act morally and sensibly on Facebook in front of relatives. For one, privacy settings were identified as the key to her expressive and open use of Facebook, allowing her to test and experiment with her perceived social boundaries regarding self-display. Noting that "the idea of displaying your pictures in our society is a little bit, kind of, unacceptable to a certain extent," she explains that privacy has allowed her to do so despite being initially very wary of sharing on Facebook.

> I am a little bit private about my stuff. Maybe I'm not cautious about what I post because... I am very conscious about what I post and who sees it. Especially when there's photos... every time I add a friend I rush quickly to adjust the privacy on the pictures.

Interestingly, the same participant further experienced an increased sense of adventurousness about her online activity, eventually becoming inured to the prospect of the disapproval of her friendlist, although notably the capacity to exclude certain contacts remained crucial.

> With time I began to feel that maybe it's, it's good to say things that sometimes, that break taboos. For instance, I remember once posting something that says I just – 'I need a hug'. In Egypt there's always this big taboo about touching and about physical contact and – I sort of enjoy doing that... things that would shock people [...] I'm sure that a lot of people think differently about me now, but I think they're just too nice to say stuff like 'you're a horrible person' to my face.

As will be explored later on, this forms part of an array of evidence which suggests that the evolution of privacy settings has played a definite role in encouraging users to adopt practices of sharing and expression, precisely because it allows them to better negotiate, and thus habituate themselves to, public address, and potentially to what Castells calls "the culture of sharing" (2012). As one participant put it, describing the difference between the present generation of young adults and the previous one, "now we like to share stuff, now we like to share experiences, and we don't mind that most people know, unless we're doing something really wrong and then we hide it". In general, however,

affordances are, of course, a tenuous matter: privacy settings can be shifted in more than one direction, and the nuanced issues regarding publicity and visibility outlined by participants suggests that shifts in publicity regimes may have unpredictable consequences with regard to participation on the part of various groups.

However, while the issues surrounding visibility are in flux, and admit to a high degree of idiosyncrasy, the discussion above consistently reiterates important senses in which these issues are gendered, as pressures to conform and concerns regarding visibility and sharing are ones which are disproportionately experienced by women. Thus, while it has been suggested (Radsch, 2012; Radsch and Khamis, 2013) that cyberspace generally has provided an infrastructure for enhancing female participation in the Arab spring, by providing spaces in which women are encouraged to begin expressing their views before a public, there is reason to be attentive to the way Facebook, as well as its shifting affordances, is implicated in gender, and have the potential to strongly influence the practical accessibility of communicative spaces online. While female participants in the present study made intelligent and dynamic use of the communicative possibilities offered to them by social media, then, their accounts do complicate the view that cyberspace acts as a leveller (even to the point where gender equality is achieved).

Conclusion

The foregoing account has explored Facebook use among participants in Cairo in order to better understand user relationships with, and practices on, the site. Particularly important has been user experiences of visibility and publicity on the site, which illustrate important changes over time and indicate that visibility is not simply a matter of seeing but of being seen. Indeed, participants have outlined both desirable and undesirable effects of the increase in the visibility of their own behaviour online. For many, the visibility of a wide spectrum of interactions for friends and family members have produced difficult consequences, prompting episodes of discomfort and in some cases evasive action. At the same time, the visibility of everyday actions has afforded new opportunities for many participants to increase their social networks and broaden their interests and concerns, as event attendance and other activities are opened up to a wider network than was previously practical.

Matters complicate further when we explore the ways users anticipate and try to accommodate the new kinds of visibility presented by Facebook's architecture. Indeed, Facebook seems to have had contradictory impacts on the anticipation of the gaze of

others, as users grapple with the task of making sense of who their audience is and what sorts of interaction are appropriate for their newsfeed, frequently failing to be cognizant of the full extent of their network. While for some, this seemed to translate into an easy obliviousness, others were acutely aware, if not of the specifics of who was watching, of at least the fact that people were. Explaining the latter, notably at odds with a trend of emphasizing attention and visibility as rewards for Facebook users, involves reference to experiences both on and off Facebook, including how individual participants experience the spaces in which their social lives unfold as well as their expectations of the reactions of others. Interestingly, there is a recursive element in some accounts, in that seeing is in itself not as much of an issue as being seen to have been seen.

There has also been a sense that users adapt to Facebook over time in varied ways. Whereas one participant gradually came to feel less inclined to share photographs online, for example, others appear to have found themselves growing increasingly comfortable with the practice. Furthermore, while some report gradually becoming more restrained in their posts, others are testing new boundaries and challenging various norms and taboos. This is suggestive of the potential for online spaces to be transformative with regards to publicity, albeit in an unpredictable and tentative manner, a suggestion which is explored in more detail in the chapters which follow.

The chapter also provides an important background to issues of sociality in social media, as participant accounts enable us to move confidently beyond dichotomies of strong and weak ties. Rather, not only does Facebook function to better utilize strong ties and further strengthen existing ties, it also appears to extend the breadth of weak tie networks. Significantly, it also appears to act as a form of support to a more networked form of living for the participants studied, in which the limitations of a bustling metropolis enables the maintenance of network of emotionally salient relationships. As we will see in subsequent chapters, this forms part of a pattern in which social media appears to introduce a transformative element even to strong, well-established relationships, through introducing different sorts of possibilities for interaction, a phenomenon which is utilized for political purposes. In this sense, to equate Facebook with weak ties is seen to be a very narrow way of assessing its potential impacts, whether these impacts are taken to be positive or negative.

A related point is the importance of geographical considerations in shaping issues of social capital online, pointing towards a dialectical relationship between Facebook and the city.

Just as previous research has emphasized the importance of taking into account individual user characteristics in appreciating the impact of Facebook on social capital (Burke, Kraut, and Marlow, 2011), the present research suggests further that the wider urban context also plays a key role. In particular these findings suggest that urban environment and socialization patterns characteristic to cities and social classes may also need to be taken into account in quantitative studies of Facebook effects on bonding social capital.

Finally, the themes explored in this chapter raise important issues regarding past and future accounts of the political use of Facebook in Cairo, not only documenting some of the interpersonal dynamics which affect sharing and commenting, but in particular indicating the relevance of gender issues with regard to Facebook and its affordances.

V. Social Media and Revolution: Political Expression, Mediated Protest, and Participant Trajectories

Introduction

The present chapter turns to political expression on Facebook and Twitter prior to, during, and immediately after the uprisings which began in January 2011. By basing analysis on participant accounts and grounding it in their own narratives, the aim is to contribute to a general understanding of the role of social media in the revolution, as well as its imbrications with political life more broadly in the country. While this is an issue which has been assessed in various ways – and it goes without saying that this was not in any sense a 'Facebook revolution' - most interesting for the present study are those accounts and analyses which emphasize social media's reworking of the spatial considerations which govern the flow of information between individuals.

Writing about Egyptian blogs and social media in 2010, Faris emphasizes that Facebook expands the 'neighbourhood' of immediate contacts and, in the process, potentially threatens authoritarian stability. This is based on the premise that increased knowledge about the political views of one's fellow citizens can function to embolden one's own expressions of dissatisfaction, leading to an 'informational cascade' effect increasing the likelihood of future, more concrete expressions of dissent. This impacts the dynamic of 'preference falsification' in authoritarian societies, discussed earlier. For Faris, social media is so potent in this area because, as well as broadening the networks between individuals, its default settings are typically to broadcast messages – including those of political dissatisfaction – to all members of the network. In the present chapter, the aim is to assess some of the practicalities which govern how political information is shared online as well as to understand what sort of role this might play in politics.

Hochheimer and Al-Emad (2013), writing after the revolution, use similar reasoning, albeit theorizing with more emphasis on the internal logic of stifled politics, to suggest that Noelle-Neumann's 'spiral of silence' phenomenon, in which authoritarian governments convince citizens that their dissatisfaction is not reflected by the population at large and thereby disable dissent through a deepening cycle of discouragement, can be reversed through 'polylogic' social media, which routinely evades government control. Suggesting that this phenomenon was a significant factor in the Egyptian revolution, Hochheimer and Al-Emad dub this the 'spiral of voice', in which individuals participate in discussion with increasing boldness and freedom as their environments increasingly reflect their

previously-suppressed ideas. While this devotes much needed attention to the inner aspect of authoritarian experience (and its relation to social media), Hochheimer and Al-Emad's essentially coheres around the idea of an authentic politics (for example a particular view or inner voice) which is held but not divulged, a conceptualization which, while not without resonance, may leave important aspects of authoritarianism's impact on the political under-problematized.

Speaking generally, these explanations are quite resonant in assessing both the functioning of authoritarianism under Mubarak and the subsequent revolution, and perhaps help us to understand the functioning of state repression as well as the importance of excessively crowd-phobic aspects of the Emergency Law[9]. The spectacle of the crowd can be, and was, a visceral force which threw the idea of popular support for the regime into immediate doubt. However, as Youssef notes (2011), it is not merely the sense that the wider population endorses the regime which has functioned to maintain authoritarianism in Egypt, but widespread notions about the eternal quiescence of Egyptians which appear to have, as a self-fulfilling prophecy, contributed to the stability of the regime – a matter which indicates that the preference falsification dynamic should not be taken as a simplistic matter of beliefs about the opinions of one's neighbours, but a more complex and subtle process which requires careful theorization.

Also relevant to the present chapter are accounts of the revolution, such as that provided by Elseewi (2011), which emphasize the importance of social media in enabling a reimagining of the relationship between self and society. For Elseewi, social media sites are part of a general trend in which media emphasize the self over the collective, and they enable the spread of new discourses as well as a plurality of ways of imaginatively emplacing oneself - rather than the more rigid enclosure which he attributes to Anderson's imagined communities. These new selves, Elseewi suggests, were necessary factors in defying traditional obeisance to the president.

Developing our understanding of how social media use might influence factors such as these involves, in part, attention to the sites at which such interactions occur themselves, and furthermore the forms of expression which they enable. This in turn involves taking careful account of participant narratives, including their considerations and inhibitions regarding political expression. I hope to show that the personal nature of their relation to

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[9] This gives police the power to arrest groups of more than three people on the streets, and detain them without charges.

social media, experiential accounts of Facebook and Twitter use, and emotional salience of online experience, are also relevant considerations in this matter.

The Mubarak Era: Facebook and Political Expression

The suppression, control, and monitoring of political activity was clearly enacted upon society as a whole, yet appeared to impact everyday life in diverse ways, with participants often having subtly different perceptions of what the norms were and how closely they were adhered to by others. The most common theme in accounts was a general sense of depoliticization (but perhaps not quite apathy), with the sense of a 'fear barrier' when it came to expressing political dissent also recurring, although one or two participants described themselves as consistently politically engaged throughout, both on and offline. What was common to all perspectives was that the 25th of January protests, and subsequent deposition of President Mubarak, both represented and ushered in a clear shift in attitudes to and practices of political expression in Cairo, from which Facebook was not excluded.

For many, politics in any form had been seen as a risky pursuit – with the sense of risk at a given time being dependent on immediate company. Yet this did not appear to be so much a sense of a totalitarian closure of anti-regime expression, but more of a sense of precariousness and unease, admitting various shades of grey. While a few participants stated the matter in bald terms - "we were not able to talk about politics before the revolution" – others suggested that one could "never ever" talk about politics with a stranger even though, under certain circumstances, one could discuss it with friends. What was perhaps most effectively suppressed and controlled was political communication in an institutional setting, due to the various mechanisms by which media organizations, universities, and civil society organizations were tied to and held accountable by the state. One participant, Mahmoud, describes difficulties in pursuing political science modules for his degree at an expensive private university, despite his willingness to broach the taboo of criticizing the president:

> it was really difficult to talk to anyone about politics [...] we were kind of lucky cos erm, our professors were mostly liberal open-minded people, but there were the... times when I was censored. Like, I wrote an article for [a publication], and it was a sarcastic article that can have been interpreted that's against Mubarak. So it was censored. It was censored and I went and asked them 'where's the article? Why's it not there?' and they said 'it's too political and we will not publish it'

An interesting point of contrast for the present study is Wedeen's (1999) analysis of the internal dynamics of authoritarianism in Syria. Noting that political lying, even when not believed by the public at large, serves useful political functions, she draws on Arendt's emphasis on the centrality of 'public personalities' - "a uniquely political self constituted by words and deeds" (1999: 45) to meaningful political action. This provides a framework for understanding the impact of authoritarianism on politics as well as the implication of everyday life in regime stability. That is, even though individuals may privately disagree with the dominant rhetoric – and even privately communicate this fact among one another - the 'disorienting' function of limits on public discourse is enough to prevent the emergence of clear, purposive political activity. While authoritarianism under Mubarak was in various ways distinct from the Syrian case – the former was undoubtedly freer and more permissive, for one thing; political lying was not as extreme or pervasive, for another – Wedeen's account of Syrian politics is resonant in a number of ways.

Not least, it sheds light on the potential impact of a sense of political caution on the public sphere. For Mahmoud, the sense that politics had been neutralized was apparent in his assessment of the potential for trust and openness in public space: "the public space was very closed and we don't know each other so there's no trust – we don't trust the people out there." While this sentiment was not universal – and perhaps applicable more to the political sphere than to life in general – neither was it uncommon. Another participant, Salma, echoed similar concerns:

> Absolutely not. We used to have like, uh, it's not a proverb, it's a way of saying in Egyptian culture: "*imshi gamb il heyt*", which means always walk beside the wall, so that no one can see you, so that no one can notice something about you. And we have like "the walls have got ears" [...] and "what we know is better than what we don't know". So, Mubarak regime is for thirty years, so that's okay we know him. Let's just don't try to – let's say, have another government. And, for example, the father of the family will say to his children – my own father – okay, now we're we're – we – he was really, I mean, frighting me all the time [about the dangers of politics].

What such accounts have in common with the Syrian case is a sense of the fragility of political being, and its dependence upon accommodating spaces of expression and exchange in order to develop. In this sense, despite its relative lack of repression, the sense of depoliticization in the Mubarak era which participants report does appear to be understandable in Wedeen's terms: participants did report a sense of having internally spurned their political inclinations in response to prevailing conditions – for example,

Salma, whose experiences online will be explored later in this section, reported a sense of having had only a vague sense that "something was wrong", while having shunned any outright political claims; another participant notes of her social media use that "I just felt like I'm being watched all the time – so I'm never going to post anything that's politics-related because I'm not even interested". Tarek, currently in his thirties, but reporting on his university years and formerly apolitical way of living, attributed his lack of political thinking to his cognizance of the risks of politics:

> I was very apolitical and most of us were raised this way. I remember when I went to university and my Mother called me up and she was like 'you know, don't get involved with anything political, don't get involved with the people there who are, you know like, pushing a political agenda or anything, just do what you're there for, just stay with the academic side and' - and that was the mentality of most families at time, that was the norm. So I took her advice, I wasn't involved in anything really […] I remember one time I had a friend come over from the US and we were talking about how... much corruption there is in the country, and he's like 'ahhh', he's saying 'I just don't understand why you guys don't do anything about it'. And I was like 'I don't know, we just don't' [laughs]. And I had no idea why we're not doing anything about it.

The notion of public personalities also enables us to understand some of the nuances of everyday political communication. What was especially resonant with Wedeen's (1999) account of Syria was that it appeared to be the overt expression of political inclinations which itself which was problematic, more so than the relaying of political information. When I discussed the matter with an experienced activist, for example, she emphasized the way people expressed themselves in this area avoided overt politics, emphasizing in particular, as does Wedeen, the role of humour:

> People would, umm… my experience is that people would say it [acknowledge the effects of corruption], but subtly, very subtly […] I felt people wanted to be a little more subtle. They didn't speak about the President or the royal family… *ya'ani*… people hardly ever spoke about them, if they did it was almost like a joke. Jokes were fine, people joked all the time and they said things in the jokes that they wouldn't put into a political argument.

Interestingly, political jokes were largely exempted from the general aversion to political speech; as a number of participants and other informants confirmed (if such confirmation were needed - see for example Shehata, 1992), while people often felt uncomfortable discussing politics in general, joking in ways which implied a knowledge of unacceptable

practices on the part of the regime was a familiar conversational feature and a rich part of Egyptian culture.

While this may be seen as a puzzling contradiction, it arguably provides important insight into the internal dynamics of authoritarian politics. Not only can it be seen as exemplary of the importance of avoiding overt expression in dealing with political issues, but we can regard the functionality of the joke in terms of the alienation involved in authoritarian conditions. Everyday political humour implies non-belief in official discourse and undermines the legitimacy of the regime (Wedeen, 1999); as such, it provides a relief from the sense of alienation of living in authoritarian conditions and being unable to express and formulate ones sincere thoughts. By enabling a sense of widespread 'non-belief' in the regime discourse (which is still publicly complied with), the joke "counteracts the atomizing effects of the politics of 'as if' conducted in public" (1999: 130).

At the same time, however, jokes are politically ambiguous. They reaffirm, in their intimate solidarity, that the regime is powerful, and so actively reconstitute the power of the regime: "it is precisely this shared acknowledgement of involuntary obedience that also makes the cult [of the President] so powerful" (Wedeen, 1999: 131), as jokes cement the sense that public life belongs to the regime, and that individuals cannot speak out. While they ameliorate the feelings of disorientation that the inability to express a genuine, publicly-political self, seems to create, they often do so at the expense of a cementing of the status quo.

In Egypt, too, humour appears to have an ambiguous role. Shehata (1992) notes that political humour in Egypt appears to allow those feeling the weight of repression to find "solace" and "to momentarily triumph by being able to ridicule and criticize those who they would not be able to ridicule and criticize", but that the cost of this is that it may work as a "safety valve", releasing political pressure without causing disruption. We can also regard the plethora of jokes which revolve around the oppressive environment for freedom of speech[10] in Egypt (Shehata, 1992) as being relevant by its subject matter alone, which directly strikes a chord with Wedeen's emphasis on the experiences of alienation and disorientation attending the suppression of political being, and the function of jokes in providing relief. Furthermore, jokes (especially those which point out that nobody is

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[10] One such joke refers to a dog travelling to the Libyan border in order to be able to bark; another to a dentist appointment in which the tooth has to be removed via an entry point in the stomach. The point in both cases is that one cannot open ones mouth in Egypt (Shehata, 1992).

speaking out), may, in a similar way, discourage others from speaking out as they reinscribe the familiar political ethic, based around the certainty of political passivity (Youssef, 2011).

There is reason to be sceptical, therefore, about the argument that jokes may help to "break the fear barrier" (Hammoud, 2014), and to suspect that their apparent compatibility with authoritarianism indicates that the political role of the joke is not straightforward. Indeed, even everyday registers of regime corruption may simply reinforce a sense of the powerlessness of ordinary people, who are relegated merely to recording and relaying injustice in relatively palatable ways. Indeed, the sense that jokes are actually part of the status quo may explain their acceptability, in that they seem to avoid the presentation of a public (political) personality - not being indicative of "a uniquely political self constituted by acts and deeds" (Wedeen, 1999: 45)- and in fact advertise its absence. Such indications suggest that the dilemma of 'preference falsification' (Tufekci and Wilson, 2013) may admit to more complexity than is usually anticipated: even as those in authoritarian societies accurately communicate personal preferences (for example, an end to corruption), they do not necessarily relieve the sense of political inertia. As Wedeen argues, the power of public display does not necessarily cohere around the myth of an actively complicit subject, so much as it functions by depriving the means for such a subject to be formed through expression, a strategy which results in characteristic 'disorientation'. Part of this power lies not just in propagating the myth that the public agrees, but in establishing the common-sense view that the public is tacitly complicit in authoritarian rule, even if it disapproves.

A frequently recurring theme of Egyptian passivity was evident in the case of one popular joke, which I encountered from a number of sources. Circulating in the wake of the Tunisian revolution, the joke portrays a sense of frustration with Egyptian politics and desire for a new point of departure, while at the same time evoking a familiar inertia. The basis of the joke was the remixing of a popular advert for *chibsi* (a snack product), which gave viewers the chance to vote for their favourite outfit during the previous Ramadan. Although the joke itself represented a level of *detournement* which would have impressed Guy Debord, it touched on the underlying sense of national shame which pervaded politics towards the end of the Mubarak era.

> You were given a month to select your favourite out of three models. One was dressed in a Barbie pinkish dress, the other one was dressed – she was an athlete, and the third one was like a teacher or something, and people chose the model with the pink dress, and there was

this joke on the street: 'Egypt chose the pink dress, Tunisia chose change'... the same joke kept changing – Egypt chose to... chibsi with whatever flavour, because there was this new flavour introduced – this is what they're doing, this is what we're doing – it was like a sense of public shame.

This sense of national shame was also a recurring one, and can be viewed as a contributing factor to the sense of depoliticization present in the Mubarak era. Again, it resonates as a measure not only of the invulnerability of the state but of a deficiency of the Egyptian people. Not only did Egyptians castigate themselves in the wake of the Tunisian revolution, as touched on above, but participants reported a general sense of the hopelessness of political action, with the critical issue being the perceived deficiencies of Egyptians themselves.

I never thought we'd be able to do a revolution, or to say no to something. We're very, I thought Egyptians are very uhh – they accept anything, they don't mind anything, they're okay with everything because that's how it is and – you know what I mean, right?

Subsequent accounts of the revolution revealed similar themes, with a clear link between the revolution, authoritarianism and national self-esteem emerging in the statements of participants. One who was about to take a course on civil society and human rights, reports being told by a fellow student that, through learning more about Egypt's rule of law situation, "you will hate yourself! It's terrible." One participant, in his account of his own revolutionary experience, echoes the sentiment in his account of the Egyptian revolution.

It gave me a sense of, like, things are possible, because Egyptians have this very pessimistic view of theirselves. They believe that Egyptians are bad, like in general – Egyptians will tell you that Egyptians are bad. You never see this anywhere else on Earth. They will tell you that they are the worst people on Earth, there is no hope for Egyptians – we have a very negative imagine of ourselves. But then in the protests and during the 18 days and afterwards I saw that 'no, they are just like anyone else. There are the good people and there are also some people who are doing bad stuff, but that's normal'.

As far as political activity on Facebook is concerned, this, too, was a subject of caution, as it was in everyday life generally. Certainly, many participants avoided politics on the site. Marwa, whose upbringing and social circles place her firmly in Cairo's upper middle class, was especially clear about what it meant to her to talk politics on Facebook before the revolution:

> Before the revolution where people used to - it was never okay to post political stuff on Facebook unless you were really bold... I would have never ever ever shared anything political – ever.

Various participants evoked a sense of potential surveillance regarding politics online, albeit this was muted by pragmatism about the capacity of the state to suppress acts of dissent that were considered to be of trivial importance. A student explained that, although she did find ways to express her dissent on Facebook and calculated that this would not attract regime consequences, this neither left her free from fear, nor from the sense that she was being watched. The sense that her decision was influenced by the thought that Facebook was seen as somehow a less consequential realm – 'kids rambling on the internet' – is also evident.

> I was always afraid that I've been – I'm sure that I have a file, you know [...] there were as many people, like right now I'm sure they don't even see me because there are thousands and thousands of people writing [about politics] and stuff. But I don't think the government was very aware of Facebook because if they were, they were, they wouldn't have started a revolution against them, you know, I think like 'oh they're a bunch of kids rambling on on the internet, they're not gonna do anything about it, let them, you know, let them say whatever they want'. I guess that was, that was the stance back then, now it's not [...] it was easier for me and, you know, to say what I want there [on Facebook], and just, taking the streets it was very dangerous, and my parents are not, not, not for that kind of stuff. So I, I'd always try to say what I want and reach as many people.

Tarek notes that Facebook was felt to be, if not completely free, then a slightly safer environment for political discussion, a factor which he felt encouraged Egyptians to use it more politically:

> I think, I think the common perception was that it can be dangerous to talk politics. I mean at the end of the day you had the emergency law in place. Anything can happen with the emergency law [...] absolutely, absolutely [Facebook] was a much safer atmosphere. And I guess that's why... people galvanated towards it, I guess. It was an outlet, I mean for – like I said, I mean, coming up, that one year before the revolution we were pent up, I'm not just talking about myself here, but you could see it.

While the reasons for this phenomenon of relative safety will be explored in the next chapter, for now it is sufficient to note that anti-regime talk on Facebook represented neither a complete break with existing constraints and concerns, but nor was it a simple continuity of existing norms. Among those who did engage politically during this time, the

sense that Facebook was a site of novel political opportunity is consistent. For Mahmoud, whose attempt to publish a satirical article was thwarted, Facebook represented an alternative outlet – he published his satire as a Facebook note, making it available to friends. Furthermore, Facebook provided other opportunities to engage with the political which were felt to be lacking in daily life. One participant, Sherif, speaks of his first encounter with the 6th April movement, years before the revolution, via a Facebook protest event. Here, he reflects on the significance of this event, which, despite its apparent 'failure' to turn into an actual Tahrir-based protest, carried a multifaceted significance in terms of his political trajectory.

> I remember the first time I saw the event for *sitta abreel* [6th April] it was 60,000 people going to the event. That was like very inspiring, although that was Facebook, a page on Facebook. But the fact that back then 60,000 people RSVPd to an event, with their picture and their name on their profile, it was a statement. It was really interesting because, back then, it was common for activists to be arrested from their Facebook or their blog. Like Wael Abbas was arrested several times. So 60,000 people actually signed up, RSVPd - that actually encouraged me to participate in April 6th, like I actually went on strike. […] And I, I even tried to go to Tahrir back then, and uh, it was completely surrounded by security forces and uh, at some point, uh, I - I pretended to be walking by, because I couldn't find any protest, there was nothing, no one, only – only central security forces were like the ones who were protesting really in Tahrir – and it was an eye-opener, because it led me to the street, like Facebook. Which is weird, usually Facebook should take you away into a virtual world.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of this experience is the extent to which the virtual event represented a real encounter with a wider public at a time when a relatively daring political attitude seemed short of outlets, leaving Sherif feeling isolated. In the circumstances, Facebook clearly provided an alternative outlet, enabling him and others to overcome the limitations on public expression and providing a mechanism whereby a sense of trust in a wider public could begin to be formed. Importantly, however, it was in part the sense that Facebook *was* to an extent consequential, and that repercussions, although unlikely, were conceivable, which allowed the virtual event to take on significance and provide an antidote to feelings of alienation. Precisely because it was indicative of a genuine risk, implying some form of real commitment - rather than what might be termed the shallow, inauthentic participation which sometimes appears to be characteristic of social media use (Morozov, 2011b; Dean, 2010) - it was able to have a profound psychological effect. As Sherif put it,

> What affected my willingness to click on 'attending', whatever it was, was there is hope.
> Back in that time the public space was very closed and we don't know each other so there's
> no trust – we don't trust the people out there. And the fact that the others who have signed
> up for this event, saying that there are [people] like you outside, outside in this world. So it
> gives you the encouragement to move and act, you're not alone. That was the critical point I
> think.

Of critical importance, and the stage for further affective charges, was a particular
Facebook page - *Kullena Khaled Said*, which represented a similar opportunity to begin to
engage with a wider political public. This page, established in 2010, and whose title literally
translates as 'We Are All Khaled Said', responded to the death of a young Egyptian
businessman at the hands of police officers whose corrupt activities had been exposed in a
Youtube video he uploaded. While this seemed to several participants to mark a
watershed in the discussion of politics on Facebook, as issues of corruption and police
brutality began to be increasingly discussed on the site, the barrier of fear was still very
present for many, who saw even liking the page (which on Facebook is a public act) as
"really brave". Again, however, the sense of there being a mathematics of repression, in
which the safety of one's speech is naturally a function of the numbers involved in one's
dissent, again comes through. The following is an account of someone who, while avoiding
'liking' the page, was nevertheless aware of its existence in the months before the
revolution:

> For someone clicking the like, it's like 'I'm risking being followed by the national security',
> like, they had to think, oh my god, they might, like, follow, like, even like a thousand or two
> thousand people and set them in jail'. That's how afraid the people were in Egypt.

Salma describes her encounter with this page and the pivotal role it played in her own
political trajectory, first of all echoing Sherif's sense that Facebook was providing a
medium of political communication as well as building a sense of hope, and trust, in a
public space which seemed designed not to transmit those qualities:

> Well yes [I felt hope from seeing page likes] because I felt that Facebook is somehow united,
> is uniting us, I mean people are like the page like thousands of Egyptians are liking the page
> daily, on daily basis, so I felt that okay, maybe Facebook is doing something new and
> something strange here, maybe now we're getting larger, we're getting bigger with our
> number so people are more discussing and their word, the word of those guys from the
> page and those activists will reach to a large amount of Egyptians thanks to this page
> because it was unifying us.

Also key was the sense in which, for Salma, Facebook provided an opportunity not only to develop an imagination for the existence of others like herself, but a space in which she could develop herself as a political being. For Salma, her engagement prior to her encounter with the page stood in sharp contrast to her politicized, post-revolutionary self.

> I didn't have that political information like now. I mean I wasn't politically active, I wasn't really interested in knowing what's going on. I mean all of my life I felt that something was going wrong - something regarding the system, when I received my education I felt that something was not really going okay because, you know, academic and abuse from the teachers and also why they treat services are crap and when you go to some governmental let's say institution you feel like you're dealt with – lack of human rights constant[ly], so I felt like something was really wrong [...] however I wasn't that politically aware, like when I was on the 25th [January] revolution.

Political interactions on Facebook represented an opportunity to flesh out the vague notion that "something was going wrong" in terms of Egypt's political system. Clearly, this involved exposure to new sources of information, including videos of police brutality, but also involved a process of making sense of things, generating hope, and deepening understanding through dialogue with others. Facebook provided space in which she could begin to tackle her emerging questions and become more politically engaged.

> It was always, let's say, having a view, and having a look on what they publish, about their opinion. I try somehow to communicate with some of the admins and they respond back.

This political engagement was clearly a multifaceted phenomenon, involving fleshing out her political views and developing her own opinions as well as generating a sense of hope.

> I wanted to understand their point of view, and I wanted to understand more about the reality. I wasn't that politically aware and I wasn't participating in any other politician or any other demonstration as I said. I was really concentrating on my studies. I wanted to know more. 'Why are you doing this? How do you think the Mubarak regime is so bad? Why it is so bad? Why are you have - Where does hope come from? Why are you saying that maybe we can reach some positive point? Why are you saying we can do something? Give me some evidence.' I needed to be encouraged, I needed to feel that other people - that we're a lot, basically.

Salma's account emphasizes then that her political encounters on Facebook were not simply a matter of enabling and encouraging her to declare her *pre-existing* opinions, but the site at which those opinions could begin to be formed and take shape. To describe this process as one of persuasion is perhaps to miss the point: Facebook functioned as a site at

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which vague, undeveloped feelings of dis-ease with the present state of affairs could be assembled into a coherent politics, in an overarching environment in which significant pressures prevented Salma from engaging with the world as a political being. In this sense, Hochheimer and Al-Emad's (2013) emphasis on the suppression of politics is reaffirmed by the evidence presented, yet this suppression emerges as something more profoundly internal than they acknowledge. Political being registers in accounts such as those presented by Salma, Tarek, and others not as something which is fully-formed-and-yet-denied, but rather as a potentiality which requires development over time in order to manifest as coherent political dissent. To return to Wedeen's appropriation of Arendt, the sense of a publicly political self appears particularly salient in participant accounts.

Indeed, the contrast with political jokes is sharp. Not only did Facebook present the opportunity for clear political expression, including the evocation of a coherent political self, the defiance of normal politics was registered as salient by participants – as affectively potent, and as indicative of a willingness to act, rather than as confirmation that a passive role was accepted and inevitable. Furthermore, rather than relieving pressure, talking politics on Facebook seemed to give rise to a cumulative demand for change. Whereas anti-corruption jokes, for example, could be read as reconfirming the status quo in terms of the role of the individual in politics, Facebook appears in participant accounts as disruptive in this respect. As Tarek explains, there was a sense of a potent encounter between friends, enabling people to encounter each other in radically new ways.

> the story goes that [a cabinet minister] went to have a very very small eye operation in France, and stayed there for a month, and everything came out of the government budget for that. It's a very, very simple operation, it can happen in the smallest clinic here. It's a one-day operation, you leave on the same day, and he had to go and spend the month in Paris for that, somehow. So that was the kind of thing you would normally read in the newspaper and go 'ooph, aww', that's it. But then you had this outlet where you can post that online and start discussing it. And then you see that there's other people frustrated as you, other people who knew there was something terribly wrong, other people who wanted change - I guess. So that's why it was such an interesting time to be exploring Facebook at that time. And that's, like I said, that's, that's the shift for us from talking about 'ooh I woke up today with a headache' to 'this is my poli- this is what I'm thinking about now, this is what's making me angry'. And then something popped up like 'we are all Khaled Saied' and then we all galvanised towards that, we were getting stories, they were telling us what's happening. We were – we were seeing each other for the first time, really. Seeing a different side to each other.

In various ways, then, participants encountered registers of outrage which they found triggering to their own political expression. For various reasons, this was experienced as salient, and indeed potent, and clearly shifted their sense of what was politically possible in Mubarak's Egypt – as theories of preference falsification would indicate. Indeed, the experience may well have been a misleading one. Tarek continues:

> It was just this strength, people were frustrated. And when I say this I'm talking about a very, very definite segment of society. Everyone was frustrated, obviously, but you could see it on Facebook in this educated, middle-class, internet-savvy, young people segment, which is a very thin segment of society, to be honest, but this was where the discussion was taking place, more or less. I think we saw ourselves to be more than we really are, but it's because the discussion was so rich, it was so exciting to actually have this outlet, to actually be able to discuss these things.

Participant accounts clearly do not fit neatly into the conception of social media as a safety valve which detracts from more serious political action, and signify potentials for social media use in authoritarian societies. Unlike jokes, for example, Facebook exchanges were not so easily metabolized into the existing order of things; rather than a pressure-dissipating confirmation of existing political norms, they were taken as indicative of a more genuine counter to the regime. Here, we can identify several points of contrast: expressions of anger on Facebook appear to have been not (exclusively) oblique or humorous, but directly expressive of a political view, and openly representative of a transgressive affect; they afforded continued and open dialogue, leading to more information and development of established political views; and they provided an environment of relative safety for those who had witnessed such expressions to join in. Not least, Facebook interactions were experienced as public, albeit public in a safer form.

While such accounts are resonant of the power of political conversation as put forward by Shirky (2011), and the prior documentation of the 'spiral of voice' associated with the Arab uprisings by Hochheimer and Al-Emad (2013), they provide important additional clues about what was distinctive about political practices on social media during this period. They often constituted a *space* (Lim, 2013) in which participants could express, develop, and re-orient their political being with less caution than previously seemed possible, and which was consequently more overt, making fewer concessions to the norm of avoiding outright dissent. Rather than just providing a convenient facilitation of transformative conversation, social media appears to have enabled importantly different dynamics.

Gladwell's account of social media use is an apt comparator, in that it is almost diametrically opposed to the view supported here. Firstly, whereas Gladwell dismisses social media's power as being restricted to the mobilization of weak ties in large numbers, the trends and tendencies expressed here show the salience of social media even to the stronger ties in participants' lives. That is, the distinctive environments and affordances of social media proved to be conducive to the transformation even of already-intimate relations, given that those intimate relations were often likely to have been previously conducted in such a way as to minimize and downplay political interactions. The implication here is that Facebook, during that period, was a more apt environment for the formation of (previously-unlikely) strong political ties based on face-to-face contact.

Secondly, weak ties themselves proved to be salient for participants in ways which are not anticipated by the Gladwell model, suggesting that his reading of McAdam's study (which McAdam himself does not appear to share) is not necessarily a reliable guide to the politics of social media. Participants were able to experience encounters with even strangers and weak ties as politically transformative, in cases where those encounters disrupted the sense that nobody was willing to challenge the status quo. This was in turn experienced as salient encouragement of their own, low-key, political activities. Indeed, Facebook and other forms of social media, in enabling the agglomeration of small acts of dissent (for example, the number of likes attracted by a particular page), may carry a disruptive punch when it comes to the dynamic of preference falsification, precisely because they enable small acts to coalesce into the image of a wider movement.

While there is resonance generally with Elseewi's (2011) emphasis on social media (and an eclectic media environment more generally) being conducive to the development of political subjectivities, a key difference is that the mechanisms here concerned not the introduction of a new *overarching* logic by which self and society were interrelated (Elseewi emphasizes a transformation from passivity to active subjectivity as characteristic of the new media environment), but a more prosaic dynamic in which social media seemed to provide a peculiar loophole as far existing logics of repression were concerned. In turn, this does appear to have enabled participants to make sense of the wider society in new ways, as particular ideas of passivity were undermined, but this was a fragile and contingent upon various factors, rather than a direct reflection of a characteristic of the media in use. That is, it was not so much that social media inherently placed the user in the driving seat, but that space was afforded for expression in a way that was both readily, and less discriminately, communicated among people in large numbers, and which was

read as indicative of a deliberate, albeit low-key, political gambit. The suggestion here is that, while theories which attempt to grasp the nature of wider media environments as a whole certainly have their place, the devil may lie in the detail. Furthermore, in addition to the critical nature of privacy settings, explored in the previous chapter, two prominent changes which have occurred on Facebook since 2011 are altered newsfeed algorithms (which govern which posts appear on a user's newsfeed), as well as the requirement that pages pay money in order to reach their audience. While counterfactuals are a thorny area, there is a clear potential for these affordances to impact the sorts of dynamics discussed above – for example by cutting off influential Facebook pages from their audiences, and by restricting expressions of dissent to bubbles of individuals who have already expressed such dissent. Furthermore, the political dynamics may well be locally-specific and changeable over time, appearing partly dependent on local ways of making sense of social media as a site which was both potentially-monitored as well as less significant than real life. Arguably, a tilt in either direction could have resulted in a very different dynamic.

In the next section, we will continue to address the importance of social media in the political exchanges of participants, with a focus on the transitional period which began on around January 25th and continued through the eighteen days of uprising. This period was one in which attitudes to politics began to dramatically reverse, as assumptions about the inherent passivity of Egyptians were overturned and a sense of new possibility for society took hold. Again, those who used social media during this period were able to create novel forms of value from the process. In particular, the interconnectedness of demonstration and social media use is explored, as are the experiential differences between access to information via social media as compared to monologic media such as satellite television.

The Eighteen Days

As the foregoing account indicates, the decision-making of participants regarding the 2011 uprisings was not simply affected by mediated communications over a period of weeks, but by political trajectories in the years leading up to the protest. While the majority did not attend the opening demonstrations on January 25th, participants who had utilized social media to locate political resources, find encouragement, and engage in political expression were quick to recognise the significance of the uprising. Indeed, a number of such participants attended protests on the 28th, in notable cases unsupported by strong ties with established protestors.

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Despite the need to take into account longer trajectories, Facebook was implicated in a more short term re-energization of politics occurring around the time of the revolution. In the build-up to January 25th, this included a revivification of politics generally, largely buoyed by the Tunisian uprisings, which had begun the previous month. In addition to a rise in political talk on the street – including the *chibsi* joke explored in the previous section - *Kullena Khaled Saied* page likes rapidly increased during that period. Speaking of that time, one participant explains the role of Facebook in providing a key political affordance:

> I think everybody was talking about it, everybody was really really fed up and they were very happy for Tunisia and everybody wanted to do the same but they like didn't know how to or what to do... they were full of this enthusiasm but they didn't know how to direct it. That's where venues like Facebook helped, because it helped you locate other people who were thinking of the same thing.

Continuing the themes of the previous section, again Facebook was providing opportunities for people to develop their political nous in an environment which lacked clear opportunities for substantive political engagement; again, Facebook provided a site where politics could be found amidst ones existing ties. Even for those who had remained, up to that point, relatively estranged from political expression, social media appeared to have a key orienting role. Yasmine explains that, lacking a Facebook account before and during the revolution, she felt profoundly cut off from events. Even when the news of protest did filter into her awareness, her reliance on traditional forms of media substantially skewed her perspective:

> I wasn't aware at all. […] I remember a friend of mine calling me on January 25th and said 'do you think it's safe to go to [an event] tomorrow?' [which was the first time I discovered that there a protest was happening]. [...] Because at that time I was not on Facebook, I was not on any social media, I only watched TV for news and read newspapers, the sheer magnitude of what was happening was not revealed [...] I only started taking note after the 26th because a friend had disappeared.

The importance of social media as a source of information during the protests, rather than as a political arena *per se*, is indicative of its distinctive role in an information environment which was still restricted by authoritarianism. Hamdy and Gomaa (2012) report that the various newspapers affiliated with the state, for example, deployed a range of (mutually contradictory) machinations in order to disrupt the subversive agenda of protestors, including suggestions that the protests would destabilize the entire region, attribution of

the protests to foreign influence, and, most ambitiously, reporting that the attempt to stage a protest on January 25th had failed. Yet the strategy of denial was perhaps not so ridiculous as might be assumed. In addition to Yasmine's account of her reliance on one-way, 'monologic' media such as newspapers and television, Laila describes the feelings of cognitive dissonance she experienced when, despite being informed about events in Tahrir, she saw footage of what was assumed to be *Qasr-el-Nil* bridge (at the entrance to Tahrir at a time when the latter had been occupied by protestors).

> Or they were just showing a clear bridge with cars passing by – do you remember this? Oh you weren't in Egypt at the time? I remember turning on national TV, all day long pictures of the bridge. Old footage I guess, or a different bridge. I don't know. Cars just going up and down. Calmly, the river flowing. Beautiful, peaceful [laughs]. All day long. All day long. I remember a documentary playing once, and I sat and watched it for a while – your brain goes different, it's almost like tripping out in a lot of ways, in some ways you trip out over - what is it cognitive dissonance? Your brain doesn't want to accept a lot of these things. Or it doesn't know where to put all this stuff. So everything that you watch you just, you just watch it, you just watch it anyway. And I was watching this documentary about some old palace which is now a museum. And they were looking at all the paintings. The vases. [Laughs] I can – and I remember watching it for just 10 or 15 minutes. This is what Egyptian national television is showing us. And this is what I don't understand – after this experience, why people believe anything the media says now. You know, you *know* [that they are untrustworthy].

Laila's account of the coverage of traditional media brings to mind Noelle-Neumann's emphasis on the power of ubiquitous and concordant media to stifle politics (Hochheimer and Al-Emad, 2013). While opposition and independent newspapers were significantly more disposed to relay the significance of the uprisings that government-owned press, even these sources were restricted by the threat of government reprisals, including violence targeted at journalists. Indeed, the experience of Laila and Yasmine is of a relative lack of contextualising information. While documentary sources do confirm that newspaper accounts of the protest existed (Hamdy & Gomaa, 2012), this does not necessarily equate to the experience of adequate political access on an individual level.

> For two days after that we were going to work as normal. It was amazing. Looking for news on what was happening was like looking for a needle in a haystack. There was nothing. Nothing. Media blackout. It was unreal. *Unreal* how effective the clampdown was. There was nothing. And then I found out afterwards just how much was happening on the 26th and 27th, which I hadn't realised at all. We kept looking for things but I couldn't find anything.

Given such prevailing conditions, most participants were quite unaware of the scale of what had started to unfold, even if they were aware of the plans for the protest itself, until quite late on the 25th, if not afterwards. Typically, this took the form of an encounter on Facebook, with photographs of a large protest in Tahrir going viral. At a time when Facebook had typically been used for trivial and/or social uses, and in cases people had restricted themselves to private one-on-one chats, this represented a significant and immediate break in Facebook usage, which swiftly gained momentum as the revolution progressed. Furthermore, in addition to sharing the provocative pictures, people felt inclined to share their views, insights, and emotions, essentially intensifying the logic of political expression documented above. Social media occasioned a potent fusion, in which informing oneself, relaying information, and expressing one's reaction merged seamlessly. Initially, however, there was a mixture of both optimism and pessimism about the protests.

> Definitely right away [people started expressing themselves more]. 25th of Jan, everyone was sooo surprised by the number of people in Tahrir. Everyone just could not believe it. And everyone just continued, and everyone – it was gradual, it was definitely gradual but it started right away. It started when that picture of Tahrir was, went viral. It just went viral and everyone was just sharing it and commenting and talking about it and planning for things [...] I didn't really understand it on that day, because I was never the type to go to protests or demonstrations or anything and... everyone was still very cynical and skeptic about it. And they said that 'oh this is never gonna work, nothing's gonna happen' and then other people were just really inspired by the number of people and how, how the photo was just so uplifting.

Given the decades of apparent apathy and suppression of political activity, even many who were inspired by events in Tunisia did not unanimously feel a sense of hope at the developments of the 25th. Laila expands on her sense that the uprisings would not lead anywhere, prior to the even bigger protest on the 28th, known as the 'Day of Rage', which was swiftly organized to capitalize on the numbers of people who would be leaving mosques after Friday prayers. Her comments underscore the novelty of what was happening, both in protest sites such as Tahrir, as well as online, where people were increasingly discussing the emerging political situation in status updates and comments.

> I remember having a conversation with someone on the 27th of January and we discussed a lot of different things and came to the conclusion both of us that nothing would happen, it would not turn into Tunisia. Egypt is *immovable*. It's too heavy, nobody's that interested. Nobody cares that much. It is what it is. 28th – boom. [laughs] We were so wrong about it.

> And the reason that we thought nothing would happen is because people never ever ever *ever* discuss politics. Whether it was because of lack of interest or fear. Never discussed politics. Never said the President's name, never discussed the army or the police. You never knew what was gonna happen to you if you did that. Why get into it?

In addition to photographs depicting the size of the crowd – which did not fill Tahrir, but clearly contained a substantial number of people – pictures of injuries and police abuses were also going viral. Despite the fear which such images can obviously instill, especially perhaps in Egypt, some respondents noted that such images also seemed to provide encouragement to join in and protest. For one participant, it was the nature of the responses she witnessed on social media, rather than the pictures themselves, which brought home the magnitude of what was unfolding. Speaking of a photograph depicting police brutality, she immediately took note of impassioned responses from friends who had before seemed to be largely apathetic.

> Actually the person was beaten, was beaten up. So that made me very angry and, so I checked other people's reactions and I, I realised it was - of course nobody, nobody expected it to be something like what happened but uh [...] It made me feel like it wasn't like, I thought it will be nothing but now it's really starting to be something, and everyone is planning to go to Tahrir and protest. It was nothing like I expected.

Indeed, the sense of connection to events that such encounters provided appear to have had the potential to inspire attendance at Tahrir. Ali, for example, reports his sense of outrage at the attacks on protestors and his subsequent decision to go to Tahrir: "I think because I felt uh, it's a chaos, and people should not be treated like that for revolting, and just like for protesting peacefully". As a consequence, he felt more determined to participate in political events, both online and through protest attendance.

Critical to Ali's decision was not just the abstract issue of justice, but his intimate connection to one of the protestors, a friend whose injury Ali had learned of through his Facebook newsfeed. In this sense, the intimate connection afforded by Facebook provided a connection between Ali, who had not been especially politicized, and the square, adding the affective potency of events and ultimately leading to his own participation. At this point, Ali began to use his own intimate networks to similar effect, urging people to see Tahrir as safe and countering, using personal networks of trust, the dominant narratives peddled by established media, in which protestors were thugs intent on destabilizing Egypt.

> I think I was mostly sharing, like, when I was in Tahrir, mostly on Twitter, I was like
> hashtagging 25th of Jan, Tahrir, yada yada yada. Like 'it's very safe, people should come' all
> that things. Retweeting things by people.

Indeed, this was a common practice among participants attending protests as intimacy and political engagement became mutually implicated, marking another key distinction between social media and the dominant media forms of television and newspaper. While this connects to Bimber et al's (2005) argument for the potency of blurred boundaries between private and public, in this instance it is not so much that this enables the recognition that an individual problem is indeed a shared one, but that it affords the mobilization of networks of trust and human connection, rendering events more affectively potent and 'immediate', as well as transcending matters of political organization and affiliation. In a sense the distinction between participation on social media and protesting as two separate activities becomes blurred (but the two are not equivalent); reposting requests for help and practical updates on the Tahrir situation helped involve people who, for whatever reason, were generally supportive of the aims of the protest but not physically present in Tahrir. This too was not without an air of risk and a sense of commitment, and clearly enabled a feeling of personal connection to the protests. For many respondents, their participation spanned both sporadic attendance at Tahrir and much more frequent engagement online. While it is clearly going too far to suggest that the protest at Tahrir could be virtually attended, there are clearly important senses in which social media enabled the protests to escape and transcend their sites, enabling the effective transmission of emotion and affect across social networks. This clearly led and enabled many participants to experience the protests for themselves, further deepening the real-time interconnectedness of the square and many Facebook users. Indeed, even many of those who were sceptical about the protests would have easy and compelling access to such personal, involved updates on Facebook.

The myriad implications of intimate networks during the uprisings is explored in the following observation, in which a participant relates the commonly witnessed practice in which relatively depoliticized Egyptians, over the course of the eighteen days, were gradually coaxed into Tahrir despite their reservations. Not only were such people encouraged by seeing acquaintances in Tahrir and multiple pictures and accounts, as well as to make a connection themselves by showing support, these activities directly led to their utilizing existing ties to be able to make a safer entrance into the square.

I would say that yes it is raising awareness in people who would otherwise not have access to this kind of information or this kind of talk, and that was very important. Even if you're not gonna do anything. So you didn't take part in the first, let's say, not in 2010, but in the first 9 days of the revolution you didn't take part whatsoever, but then you decide to join later on. Because you saw also that your friends are going, and this encourages you. You started talking to them, okay let's go together, because people are scared. You don't want to go alone. You want to go with your support group. So in that sense it's really important. Like it encouraged people to take things in. Also it was important for me to stay up to date with what's happening, the time of the protests, and people would share their pictures, so it was good to stay up to date with events.

A further reason this interconnectedness was important was because, in addition to the bias of local media sources, it provided a counter to the dramatic, perhaps fear-inducing coverage of Tahrir provided by transnational television channels available in Egypt. Participants were able to relay their experiences in Tahrir in a way which made the protest site more inviting, and at the same time better expressed their own experience.

[Social media] was totally different to the media we see in the news, because the Egyptian media was crap. [But it was also different to Al Jazeera:] I feel like the Al Jazeera was showing more extreme things, I don't know where they got it from but – I'm sure they were there, but on the square I felt it was very safe, I never felt in danger. Even I can hear the gunfire, I can smell the gas, but I feel like on TV you feel like it's more dangerous.

The more intimate connection provided to Tahrir, being more engaging, personally connective, affectively charged, and apparently less daunting, may account for Wilson & Dunn's (2011) finding that Facebook in particular had a relatively high motivational impact for protestors compared to other forms of media, such as satellite television. Not only did Facebook connect participants to the action in a more emotionally potent way, it provided an effective counter to the dominant media discourses which in various ways distanced participants from events. Gerbaudo's (2013) suggestion that politically salient aspects of the atmosphere of Tahrir (to be explored below) were indebted to the communications blackout is neither confirmed nor refuted by this line of reasoning, but the evidence presented here does complicate the matter, in that it suggests a role for social media in conveying this atmosphere to the wider society, as well as drawing new people in and enabling a more human connection to political events.

While social media may have been implicated in diffusing the message of Tahrir, it is important to distinguish between experiences in Tahrir and those which occurred online.

Indeed, the former are perhaps crucial for understanding Facebook use in Cairo. For many, the 28th January represented the key opportunity to get involved in Tahrir protests. Inspired by the events of the 25th, and reassured by the likely large numbers attending after Friday prayers, participants took advantage of both social networks, which facilitated smaller meet-ups across the city which would then converge upon Tahrir, as well as established political activists, who would guide such meet-ups to Tahrir, providing encouragement and support for the protestors, as well as leading chants and often encouraging passersby to join the protest. Salma describes her experience of attending a protest for the first time, after months of interactions on *Kullena Khaled Saied*. Echoing the accounts of other participants, she notes the sense of enthusiasm, vibrancy, and optimism which permeated the protests from the beginning.

> Basically, the concept of the Friday demonstrations that people gather in the mosque, so after that Friday prayer we have more numbers [...] so regarding the Friday, let's say it's a day that we can be more organized, people know the, let's say the meeting points. So I prayed the Friday prayer in Mohamed Mahmoud [mosque] in Mohandisseen, and that was one of the biggest demonstrations of this day, and we walked from Mohandisseen 'til here, walking. And inviting people to get down and join us, and - everything was peaceful, everything was fine, people were really energetic and enthusiastic. They felt that it was a very very big event, everybody was full of energy and full of power, and everybody was cheering, no one was just [inaudible], everybody was cheering, and inviting other people. Other people joined us until we just came here. We just crossed the bridge til the entrance of Tahrir Square. They wouldn't let us get into Tahrir Square because other people were already there so the numbers would be so much for them, so there may be a chaos, so we ended by Tahrir Square, in front of the entrance. Since then it took til 9pm that people could enter Tahrir Square.

As one participant put it, it was "like all of Egypt is occupied and Tahrir is the only place that's free". At the same time as protest was marked by a sense of exhilaration and collective empowerment, though, participants were fully aware of the possibilities that day held, and the sense of danger escaped no one. Yet participants were divided in terms of their experience of fear.

> I think the one thing that strikes me to this day is how there was just no fear on my part or anybody else's. Just zero fear.

Yet, whether experienced as fear or otherwise, the magnitude of what was happening was critical to various aspects of participant experiences. For example, a connection between

jeopardy and a profound sense of community is evident in Laila's account of her experiences on the 28th, in which she notes that the intense dangers being faced seemed to be assuaged by the experience of the collective, as well as reinforce that collective experience.

> there was just like one brain, everybody just had one brain. It was *weird* [...] One mind because for one thing nobody was afraid. And you're not afraid because you're in the same situation as what looks like a million people. So I think fear is lessened. Fear of the unknown is lessened even, if you are with someone, you're not alone.

Later, she reiterates and elaborates on the sense that protestors were in possession of 'one mind':

> It was funny, people were just, all the formalities and boundaries and everything else just flew out the window. People were just sitting on the... just sitting on the ground or the pavement or whatever and people were handing out food and drinks and water. And there was just concern on people's faces, concern and surprise and – and the ability to talk to people without any formality, number one. Anybody could talk to anybody without even saying hello or anything. And no filters, really. I guess this is where the 'one mind' comes from because everybody seemed to agree on why they were there, without having talked about it. We're all opposing something here and we're all ready to potentially die for it.

What was particularly striking was the intermingling of danger, pain, and exhilaration in accounts. Enthusiasm for Tahrir seemed to be again and again undimmed by the traumatic experiences participants had lived through. Repeatedly, this sense of community and togetherness is cited. These themes can be seen in Salma's report of being attacked on the Qasr el-Nil bridge:

> I have really good memories in this bridge, painful but good, because I got beaten by one of the officers... I was like paralysed for a moment [...], I was completely wet and tear gasses. So I get beaten, and I was faint, I fainted [...]. And some guys from 6th April movement came and took us in this street basically. I mean, uh, I have good memories in this day and I remember that this was the first time in my life that I felt free and that I belong to this country. Yes, and I felt also that there are other people like me, I didn't felt alone for the first time, that there are other people awake and sharing my whole dream and we're more united and we're, we feel that we actually are the authority, the sovereignty – for the people, not for the regime.

This sense of community, seemingly underpinned by a common purpose in the face of death, transcended religious and class divides, enabling previously unthinkable

conversations, interactions, and co-operation – for example, as Muslims and Christians protected each other at their respective prayer times, and as the Tahrir stage was maintained, by widespread consensus, as a secular space, accommodating not just the diversity of religions but the diversity of attitudes to religion, enabling the movement to include and represent socialists as well as unreligious people. For a number of participants, especially those who, being part of a socio-economically privileged class, had often felt uneasily integrated into their national life, this sense of inclusion was part of the power of the experience. Indeed, a recurring theme was the idea that Tahrir represented a perfect society, marked by values of tolerance, togetherness, and co-operation across division.

> It felt that we were the people. And I saw faces that I had never seen in my life in the square – people from different classes... and uh, like, yeah, it was multiple diversity, multi diversity pots of people. Very romantic actually, to think of it now. It was really nice, uh [...] it's really romantic and uh, yeah, I really miss that, those days. They were tolerant, uh, surprisingly it was very tolerant. And very like, uh, democratic sound. Not democratic, even, they reached, people - it was more like a utopia, kind of. Really, it felt like a utopia. It felt like people in Egypt are changing. People are changing and the square was clean, despite that there were millions of people. Like, it was really taken care of and you would see people who were taking care of the square and making sure that nothing happens at all.

Another participant also noted the sense of diversity, grateful for having an experience in which Egyptian society was felt to be characterized by tolerance and collective strength, rather than division:

> That was the really interesting thing about it, they were everyone, like literally everyone. They were old people and young people and Christians and Muslims, you know, poor, rich, it was really an experience worth having.

This sense of tolerance, and of a unified society, contrasts sharply with the uprisings on June 30th, 2013, in which protestors sought the removal of President Morsi. As Ali notes,

> I think in 25th of Jan there was a higher spirit because for me, with seeing a guy with a big beard on the 25th of January, and a guy who's wearing a pendant with a cross on it – I didn't care, like we're all Egyptians, we're – but in 30th June it's like we're all against Ikhwan, so when I saw someone with a beard, even if it was not a Ikhwani beard, I was like 'uhh'. I was feeling bad for having this feeling in myself but I couldn't change it. There was something built against those guys that make me not feel like I'm happy to see you. They're the ones against the good for the country. That was my idea.

There is a definite resonance between some of the political encounters online and the protests in Tahrir in participant accounts, although the latter were clearly more profound and dramatic[11]. In both, a sense of involvement, belonging, and even danger was afforded by the encounter with those who felt a sense of unity through opposition to the Mubarak regime. As I spoke about this issue with participants, the affect they experienced even through recalling the events of the revolution was almost palpable. One participant, who had been pursuing politics through social media for some time when he attended his first protest in Tahrir, recalls the feelings he had upon joining in chanting for "the downfall of the regime":

> '*Ishsha'ab yureed isqaat innizaam*' [the people want the downfall of the regime/system] – it was really like uh, it gives me the chills like uh [shudder-laughs]. Can you imagine for years we had Mubarak, like a president, everyone would say good things about the president. And now you're saying *Ishsha'ab yureed isqaat innizaam*, like the whole system.

Taher also reflects on the importance of collective chanting, and protest experience generally, in terms of its transformative capabilities, both in terms of experience of the nation and experience of locality.

> When they're chanting something that you keep inside, you're kind of chanting a thought. And this thought is now existing in the world. And then you look around you and you see other people expressing that same thought that you have in that street. It has a kind of feeling – it has that kind of communal feeling that – or belonging feeling, that okay this thought that was only confined to this space is now everywhere. And it's not like I shouted it, no, we all feel the same thing and we all shout so... so it does change like, I dunno how it changes, like, my feeling towards this uhh place [Egypt] – but again we go back to the collective experience, the feeling of 'I experience this, and there was kind of collective experience around it, like as we... this experience... It could be because... originality, like this moment was so original that it will be stuck to my mind and I will remember this corner of the street, cos this thing happened and it clicked. So it could be a very personal original moment or it could be a collective moment where 'that was the moment where we all said this thing that I always felt inside that I couldn't communicate, but I found myself communica – communicating it so well with so many people'

He reflects further on the differences between social media and the street, indicating the more visceral nature of the latter. Indeed, the observation is one which throws the

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[11] In fact, their sheer profundity calls into question Gerbaudo's (2013) suggestion that they are to be attributed primarily to the communications blackout.

foregoing account into context, indicating the comparative limitations of social media as far as transformative experiences are concerned, not to mention the sense that individualization and separation are characteristic even on profound occasions.

> It could be comparable, *bass* it's less than - it's not a collective experience. I don't know, I wouldn't register it in my mind cos we don't all collectively feeling it in the same place at the same time. It happens dynamically – like, I say something and five minutes later, someone likes it, someone likes it, someone likes it - but it's not like at this moment we're all saying it at the same time and we're all looking at each other and I see what you're wearing and I see how your eyes look like, and I see your body language, so all this relates to this – I see an indication or like a flasher [notification] that says 'he liked it'. How much did he like it? Was he 'woah, I love it' or [inaudible] – I didn't see all this. I just saw a finger.'

Facebook and Political Expression After The Revolution

For several participants, even those spoken to in late 2013, more than two years after the revolution, the new era could be characterised as one in which a barrier of fear had been decisively and even irrevocably broken, leading to a surge in political activity and expression.

> Absolutely. Oh my god it was like massive culture change. The wall of fear has been really broken. I mean people, even my father that was afraid from the government before, and from saying anything – now he can actually speak about politics with people in the mosque or by the streets. I mean uhh people are now demonstrating for their own let's say career progress inside their government or their institution. People are speaking up. And it's not about the fear, it's about the hope, that we can reach some – however, the fear is not there any more. Absolutely not. There is no way we can come back to what things used to be before.

As implied above, this affected more than just Facebook, and more than just political discussion. One way of interpreting the multifaceted social shift which followed the revolution was as a shift in the relationship between the individual and the wider community. This took the form of widespread, relatively small-scale demonstrations over a number of issues, including within universities and particular ministries, and a sense of radical empowerment against state institutions and established ways of organizing space. Participants reported quite unanimously that this period in particular witnessed an upsurge in street harassment as well as a new willingness to break the rules: men feeling emboldened enough to start using the women's carriages on the metro, coffee shops expanding their seating into the pavement, unlicensed street vendors cropping up in

Tahrir, and a sudden burst of unlicensed informal construction activity. Much of this may have been related to the widespread sense that the police were no longer doing their jobs, and that the state was fragile. However, there was also a distinctive shift in the relationship to political activity. Taher, who was actively involved in the protests, explains that

> after the 25th of January and until the 11th of February, protesting was – 'fuck, why are the - these fuckers are there, they're ruining the country', *kidha*, so if you would protest you would be fucking crazy. And then it started to normalize, normalize, until it reached the 11th of February where 'oh these people are heroes', so whoever protests is a hero, so now protest is a good thing.

Politics had in a sense become fashionable. This included not just outright acts of protest, but also political discussion. Not least, the shift involved a surge in political expression, as well as expression of all kinds. Marwa relates an uptick in street harassment to this general phenomenon of increased expression and freedom throughout society.

> The revolution changed... only one thing – people's ability to express. But... in a way this is sort of negative, because now people express everythiiing. Now people feel like they have the right to express that they don't like what you're wearing and that they have the right to harass you, if it doesn't suit them. So that's sad because that is not, that is never going to be their right... but it's good to have more transparency in the country, politics-wise... there's still a lot of... it's still very corrupt... but now at least people talk, now people express.

On Facebook, there were a number of implications. First, participants noted rapid shifts in the way participants used the site. For some, this shift seems to have begun late on January 25th, as photographs of Tahrir were going viral. As outlined in the previous section, this involved a notable increase in political expression and debate. For Marwa, what was notable in the wake of the revolution was a clear transformation in people's basic methods of communication on Facebook. The old norm of largely restricting oneself to realtime chats with friends gave way to a new emphasis on the newsfeed. The novelty of this development comes through especially in Maryam's phrasing, which underlines the sense in which being on Facebook and chatting were effectively synonymous beforehand.

> After the revolution... Facebook was used really differently... people would go on Facebook and they wouldn't be online. They wouldn't click 'online' and chat with people. They'd be offline and just like checking their newsfeeds. They would be like... sharing a political article, a political joke, or something that's going on... so Facebook became more relevant to daily life after the revolution.

The contrast with the Mubarak era could not be more stark. Indicative of a new, more public and discursive approach to politics, the site was now increasingly mediating many-to-many interactions, anchored in status updates and shared links in the newsfeed, rather than simply the strictly private, one-to-one, typically real-time conversations afforded by Facebook chat. Facebook became a place to discover your friends' political stances as they developed, and to engage in collective learning as events unfolded. Facebook groups and pages became increasingly popular, mediating encounters, including political discussions, with people outside one's friends list. This rendered access to a wide range of views and information, prompting an increasing view of Facebook as an important political tool.

Participant accounts of social media's value during this period both confirm the sense in which the authoritarian environment was previously stifling to political being, and illustrate the sense in which Facebook and Twitter were still providing critical space for political expression. As Tarek explained, speaking of his own use of the platform:

> as a generation we were not really raised in politics, we were not good with it, we don't know much about it. But then this became pretty much an area of learning for us, through our interactions together. And uhhm, and I think it started to change in a way that - it became, for me at least, a platform – I'd say that on Facebook and Twitter – a platform where – I would not, I mean it's not necessarily about keeping up with the everyday life of friends I don't see, but more about what they're thinking, what their stances are on various things. What they're fighting for, what they're calling for, their political stances.

Facebook was not simply a site which offered opportunities for political expression, however, but was an essential tool for navigating the complex and disorienting political environment in the wake of the revolution. Despite not attending any of the January 25th protests, Yasmine joined Facebook within weeks of the revolution for precisely these reasons. She explains that for her:

> it wasn't about wanting to talk, more than wanting information. I looked at it as a source of information, that was faster, that was saying things that were different from official sources. That was what I was looking for, especially information about what was going on in protests... there was always news about somebody being killed, somebody being gunned down, being seriously injured [and this wasn't getting through to mainstream media]

Through the connections and groups afforded by Facebook, Yasmine became increasingly engaged with politics, leading quite quickly to her involvement in many of the anti-SCAF protests which followed the revolution, directed at the abuses of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, which had taken charge of the country following the departure of

Mubarak. Despite the intensity of the events, and indeed strong disagreements, her reflections on this early period show the extent to which, for her, Facebook facilitated rewarding and fulfilling interactions, which, despite heated debates, were perhaps more characterised by a sense of optimism and purpose than was the case later on in Cairo's political trajectory. Echoing the views of a range of participants, Yasmine conveys a sense of a newly energized public sphere, characterized by a robust exchange of views, but also undergirded with feelings of hope and optimism.

> I think it was fun. I tend to be like uh I take very great care not to be provocative and to be objective as much as possible... especially when it involves a conversation with strangers. I like to be as respectful as possible in sharing my views... when I would involve in a conversation on public posts, I got a couple of messages inboxed from strangers who told me that I really enjoyed what you said, you were that only person who was not cussing in the conversation. Somebody actually told me once 'you should not sink that low, don't speak to those people' – they didn't know me! I don't really believe that you can learn nothing. There's always something to learn.

For Yasmine and others, information itself, rather than opinion, emerged as the priority. This is perhaps related to a sense of both the scarcity of accurate information and the perhaps-related preponderance of conspiracy theories, felt by many to lack even a loose basis in reality. A definite sense of needing to carefully select ones sources comes through in a number of accounts, in addition to the need to balance one type of source against another. Speaking about her priorities in this period, Yasmine explains the extent to which the primary benefit of even debate lay not, for example, in the sharing of views for its own sake, but in the development of an accurate picture of the world.

> They were providing a lot of information all the time. It was 24/7... of course there were the opinions alongside, but there was always the video and then the commentary, the article and then the commentary, but the important thing is you have the information... actually, the commentary is also important, especially when there are debates between people commenting. It's so enriching... because it's like reading religious debate, sometimes you don't really discover what's there until you find somebody who's debating... your dogma says this, this, and that, and that's news, too [...] some of the comments are actually information themselves, they're not just opinions, they are new pieces of information.

Through this continuous, '24/7' exchange of information and airing of views, Facebook came to seem increasingly central to political life in Cairo. Even those who sought to avoid politics were continuously exposed, via their newsfeed, to the political exploits and

interactions of a large circle of friends, acquaintances, and colleagues. This was an unprecedented opportunity for anyone with an account to access a huge array of political information as well as points of view, which seemed to reflect the diversity of views in the nation as a whole. This, combined with the multitudes of people who were joining Facebook, each subscribing to pages of varied political stripes, seemed to imbue the site with a sense of relevance.

> I do believe that Facebook is like a reference for the political life in Egypt now. It's like that people even if, for example, people have got different point of views, or the minority is saying something even if it's right, and the majority is saying something else, they do gather together on Facebook and they do discuss this. They even fight, however they do it on Facebook, so it's now like a meeting point for all Egyptians. People from the media from the television get some news from Facebook pages that the youth have established, and umm international newspapers also get the news from Egypt from those Facebook pages that we established before, so it's like a very valid reference right now.

Perhaps this sense of Facebook's centrality was at times too compelling. Although Facebook has arguably proven to be a catalyst in the political trajectories of many individuals, there is perhaps a tendency to forget that one's own clique is not necessarily representative of the majority. Indeed, the sense in which access to information differed online meant that participants were sometimes out of step with majority opinion.

> [During the] first referendum which was a few months after all this, there was this conviction among Facebook users, [adopts slightly ironic voice] the Facebook community, that the answer would be 'no', absolutely 'no' to this referendum. Everything – every form of [social] media made it seem as if it would be a 'no'. Everybody educated and avai - who had Facebook available was saying 'no, no, no' and just this extreme confidence, almost arrogance. It's gonna be a 'no', we're gonna reject this referendum. The Brotherhood and the military agree on something, they're trying to fool us blah blah blah blah, the Muslim Brotherhood is trying to take over blah blah blah blah blah blah blah, and it was a 'yes'. The silent majority had voted 'yes'. So Facebook is a faction of society. In a way.

This sense of Facebook's importance as a site of politics becomes more intelligible when we note that, for many, Facebook represents a priority source of political information above and beyond newspapers and television. In part, this doubtless reflects the almost addictive engagement with Facebook reported by many participants, as the site connects them to friends and relatives at the same time as various distractions such as games and pages. At the same time, the trustworthiness of established media was questioned by

most participants, creating room for social media, including Facebook and also Twitter, to play a key role in the dissemination of credible information. Even those who did not accord complete trust to the medium felt that it played a key role in countering mainstream media.

> I think it is my main source of news, because I – you know, Egyptian media lately hasn't been very fair, you know [...] I follow trusted people so whenever someone is arrested, whenever there is something going on that television doesn't want you to know, it's there, it's on Twitter.

Trusted sources on Twitter and Facebook were commonly cited by respondents. These bonds of trust were often based on perceptions based on personal features, if not directly on personal ties, and, especially in the case of activists, a history of having seen that individual take personal risk in order to achieve collective goals. At the same time, this sense of trust also often crossed (perhaps relatively minor) barriers of political allegiance and ideology. Perhaps even more important, though, many participants expressed a sense that the multiplicity of viewpoints and sources available online had a kind of authority in itself. Participants would trust an account which was verified by multiple sources. As one participant put it,

> If you see the thing that is being repeated then you're gonna get the sense that this is true... You can see everyone putting it in a different way, retweeting almost the same thing, so you get to know.

By following and liking groups, pages, and individuals of diverse political agendas and ideologies, then, it was hoped that a sufficiently accurate picture of reality would be arrived at. For many, this sense of epistemological safety in numbers certainly seemed to be a safer bet than an established news media which could be relied upon to distort information, either in the interests of the establishment or those of their owners. Furthermore, social media also seemed to afford a qualitatively different relation to events. For one thing, the level of immediacy meant that participants were now regularly learning of events as they unfolded, rather than simply discovering what had happened after the fact. However, in several respects social media afforded a break with the sense that news was there to be passively consumed. Not only was one in a position to question and evaluate sources, sharing and retweeting articles meant that one was involved in a sort of low-key activism oneself. Laila's account illustrates just how far along this scale one can go:

> To be honest I can't remember very much about what the newspapers and the news were
> saying at that point because the news was coming from Twitter and Facebook. The primary
> source of what was happening, and for almost a year and a half after that, was Facebook
> and Twitter. When something was happening you wouldn't turn on the news. You wanted
> to *do* [emphasis added] what was happening right now. You know I'd hear something or I'd
> get a Facebook message of some sort – Twitter. Where is it? What's happening? Go out
> there. It was happening before – it was weird because it was real time, and then the news.
> Rather than hearing about something and going to find out what happened.

Not only did Facebook offer an alternative means for consuming news, then, it offers a
different sort of relation to the mediated event. For one thing, this meant that news
consumption was now immediate and in real time. For another, Facebook, and especially
Twitter - with its quickly cascading, real-time relays on events going on in the same city –
afforded the opportunity to be involved in the event as it happened, rather than merely
informed about it afterwards.

For many participants, social media came into its element during elections, particularly the
parliamentary elections in 2011. What it provided was a way to circumvent the established
channels of information to provide alternative ways of making sense of the elections,
including the emphasis on 'revolutionary' priorities which were often not shared by
newspapers and television stations. In this limited sense, Facebook continued to function
as a site of anti-establishment politics. Yasmine explains the way that Facebook enabled
her to become well-informed about candidates and positions which were not being
properly conveyed in traditional media.

> Facebook was really important at the time, it gave you a lot of information, like people
> would share videos that featured some of the candidates and what they were saying about
> things before the revolution... This is exactly why I joined Facebook, this kind of information
> and dissemination of data that is very rich and gives you the information very fast. So it did
> help a great deal to give me background about people. I remember that not necessarily the
> parliamentary, but the presidency elections, I remember going through so many youtubes
> and so many previous Facebook posts that featured Abdel Moneim Abul Futooh because he
> seemed vague to me, I didn't understand – is he a Muslim brother, is he not a Muslim
> brother? [I read] articles that he previously wrote, part excerpts of his books that people
> would post on Facebook... some were to promote him, some were to debate him, but what
> is debatable for others may be convincing to me so, so the information is always [useful]

However, for many there was an ambiguity about political discussions on Facebook, which
was frustrating. For one participant, it was the very public aspect of Facebook itself which

was the source of the problem, as debate became a matter of showing off second-hand opinions, rather than careful consideration:

> I mean, like, they watch something on TV, and then they try and make it sound like they are wise. All they do is just copy what they heard and try to make it their own opinion. And it's so obvious, it's a parrot. You are a parrot. That I don't like. I also don't like how everyone's wanna share their, everything they know about life, on social media. I kinda do that on my blog, but I feel like it's the place. But I don't feel it's appropriate on Facebook.

She later expanded:

> It's okay to share some of your wisdom, but uh, look it's kind of complicated to explain but I feel like social media gave everyone a microphone, and gave them a fake feeling that they are, like, on a stage. And everyone is... waiting to say, to hear what they think about something. So sometimes they, it's not really worth it to [engage with them]

Mahmoud, among others, shared similar concerns about political talk on Facebook. His sense was that after a few weeks of valuable discussion, a new sense of normality began to reassert itself, in which politics shifted from the urgent matter of transforming the country to one of idle talk and philosophically-minded distraction. Instead of being a site at which politics became accessible and participatory, a sense of spectacle was becoming increasingly characteristic.

> People were starting to be, like, uh, going with their business normally and not talking about corruption, or not talking about, like, the issues of the state. And uh, focusing about very philanthrophical [sic] discussions are, are like a leisure, talking about whether we should vote for *ikhwan* or for ex-*feloul*, and we actually - the problems with the economy and the poor people who are, who are really under - way deep under the poverty line, and the - the unfair distribution of resources, and money and jobs, and like all that - they are really very terrible issues. And people are talking about something like, very, like, that is not essential, like the way the media is trying to funnel the debate to distract people again – is going through different channels, is not going through the right channels.

Politics over time again came to be regarded as a difficult subject on Facebook, albeit for quite different reasons. For one, people became frustrated with the political situation of the country, either for the lack of progress of the revolution, the increasing sense of instability, or the frequent occurrences of violence, including severe police brutality, during protests. While the sense of political malaise which followed the initial rush of optimism has been broken up by periodic mobilizations, often accompanied by their own sense of euphoria (at least for their participants), such as the protests in response to

Morsi's declaration of powers in November 2012, or those which ultimately led to his removal from power in June/July 2013, many Egyptians began expressing a desire for the more stable, less financially imperiled era of Mubarak. Even those committed to the revolutionary cause began to hit a point where politics, even on Facebook, became too intense, too difficult and emotional.

> Mohammed Mahmoud, I think Mohammed Mahmoud was when I first started to be overwhelmed by it all. Because I was in Mohammed Mahmoud and helping at the field hospitals and I was harassed out there and, you know, it was an incredibly intense experience. And I'd go home and turn on Facebook and just be hearing things that I, were – it just hurt sometimes. It was too much, it was too much to kind of go home to that kind of - it was already wounding enough to kind of see people's brains out on the floor. It was just – you don't wanna to go home to it at some point. And so I started to, to sort of unlike, or whatever, some of the pages, uhh started blocking some people's posts – they were just like 'these animals let them die, what are they doing out there?' kind of – do you know, do you remember that stuff? 'They're just thugs, aww they're just thugs, they're just a bunch of blah blah blah blah blah blah blah', I can't do it. I can't do it.

While the above renders a unique and personal perspective, there is a resonance of the accounts of others for whom politics ceased to infused with a sense of hope, and gradually became a profoundly disaffecting experience. Facebook was thus no longer felt to be the conduit of a sort of imperfect (and structurally limited) democracy, but a site at which one would come face to face with the insistent reality of Egypt's seemingly-unreformable institutions and encounter an apparent lack of humanity in one's friends and family. Furthermore, it was a site at which political debate seemed to be become a matter of intransigence and hostility (bringing to mind Suler's 2004 thoughts on the dangers of an online disinhibition effect), leading many to avoid politics altogether. The sense that the priorities of different factions in Egypt were incommensurable – those in support of the Muslim Brotherhood versus those vehemently opposed to it; those who were willing to side with the security apparatus versus those who would not – was exacerbated by bitter arguments and ended friendships which occurred in all sorts of sites, but seemed to gain a new sort of prominence online. In part, this was due to the strange visibility of politics on Facebook. If one did not deliberately guard against the sharing of the political, then one's politics would be open for all to see. Whereas face-to-face conversation necessarily might be cautious, and specifically tailored to present company, Facebook seemed to be primed to facilitate a new kind of unwitting honesty, a theme which will be taken up in more detail in the next chapter:

because the risk is much less when you're only facing a screen. It doesn't even have to be as polar as to put Sisi's picture or the four-fingers picture... I can tell so much about a person by the kind of posts they choose to share. I can tell what they really feel, as opposed to if I were meeting this person in personal life and discussing something with them - they would be nice and they might not tell me the extent of how different we think. But their choice of posts tells me that. They are more candid and more open and honest about them.

In response to the argumentation, political instability, and sense of infighting and chaos, however, participants adopted a variety of strategies for participation on Facebook. Often, political discussion became a matter of trying to adopt various forms of emotional distance, for example seeking simply to understand others. Others limited themselves to the sharing of 'inspirational quotes', feeling that outright politics was too sensitive. While strategies varied, the shared conclusion appeared to be that Facebook had, for the time being at least, ceased to be quite such a free space of expression, yielding to a more combative mode of political discussion.

Conclusion

The accounts of research participants expressed above have, in part, lent credence to Faris's (2010) general approach to the relevance of social media in Cairo as well as that of Hochheimer and Al-Emad (2013), at the same time as provoking a refinement in the way that we consider the way that social media functions to enable political expression, in particular enabling a sharper problematization of the nature of political expression in authoritarian conditions. Following the political trajectories of participants also suggests that the way Facebook and social media functions in terms of political communication depends heavily on the wider environment and on the evolution of user practices, both individually and communally, with the site emerging as a distinctly politicizing or profoundly depoliticizing space depending on the period in question and the individuals involved.

Importantly, Facebook groups and public events did, in line with Hochheimer and Al-Emad's analysis, function to encourage and embolden research participants in their political expression as well as protest attendance at various points during the period under consideration. What perhaps was of particular significance was how social media enabled assessments of environmental conditions to reduce to a quantitative matter: the number of page likes and event-attenders gave a clear signal of safety for others to join in. Furthermore, the range in participant approaches to political expression meant that even

personal networks were likely to include matters of political expression which were previously unencountered, as well as low-key, relatively low-risk opportunities to register agreement and encouragement through liking.

At the same time, however, participant accounts reveal the extent to which participation in political expression on Facebook was often not simply a matter of no longer suppressing already-formed ideas, but of a slow, myopic (in the sense of lacking an overarching agenda) process of gathering information, forming opinions and responses, and coming to consider the potential for a different sort of regime. Hope was an important ingredient not just in taking bold steps, but in forming the selves who could conceive of such steps and regard them as reasonable and realistic moves.

This is not to deny that a general dissatisfaction was not commonplace under Mubarak, nor that the spectacle of protest, hardly alien to Cairo's twentieth century history, would not have been conceivable to Cairenes without the influence of a Facebook page started in 2010. Clearly, protests did resonate with a wide range of people who, like Salma before her encounters on Facebook, did sense that there was something wrong with the present society, and did feel a sense of burgeoning humiliation at the increasing injustice at work in the present society. It is rather to highlight the operation of online space in affording the development and clarification of political selves which were fragile, in flux, and dependent on their environments for formation. For many I encountered in Cairo, politics largely seemed to figure as a vague source of trouble which it did not really do to start developing opinions about.

While the emphases of existing theorizations of the importance of affect and connection (Castells, 2012) on social media were supported, it is this aspect of providing space for politics to become crystallized which emerged as most salient in the accounts of participants. Yet this dynamic was not so much a matter of a general tendency towards active subjectivity (Elseewi, 2011), but of a contingent effect dependent on particular technical affordances and ways of interacting with social media. In fact, Elseewi seems to cite features of social media use which are quite ambivalent and potentially seriously counterrevolutionary. For one thing, accounts of the January 25th uprisings seem to overwhelmingly emphasize a deeply embodied feeling of collective solidarity and cohesion which seem to stand counter to both the emplacement of the self at the centre of political narratives as well as the dissolution of the imagined community of the nation. What Tahrir Square seemed to provide for many was precisely a sense of relief from the feelings of

being constrained within their bubbles and cliques. Furthermore, even online encounters with strangers functioned among participants as a powerful source of hope which fuelled their imaginations, while access to a multiplicity of transnational discourses may have had the effect of making it easier, not harder, to steer around the dangerous subject of politics and still live a fulfilled, happy life, feeling quite removed from many of the other inhabitants of the city.

However, this is neither to deny the impact of different ways of imagining the world on participants (several, for example, reported familiarity if not outright solidarity with the Occupy Wall Street movement and endorsed values of global citizenship), or to dispute the fact that social media's capacity to centre the political around the individual shows the potential for transformative effects. Indeed, important effects along these lines were documented above, in that participants were now afforded increased means to engage immediately and directly with unfolding events, as well as the recurrent sense that to comment, share and retweet were acts which implicated the participant. This power of the individual-centric could also be seen through the affective powers of social networking, as expressions of anger at an event seemed to add momentum to a collective sense of mobilization, uprising and transformational change, a phenomenon which implicated social ties in a more dynamic and powerful way than Gladwell's theorization of social media could admit.

VI. Thinking the Unthinkable: Conformity, Taboos, and Discussion

Introduction

Having elaborated on political transformations surrounding the revolution and their relationship with social media use, the present chapter turns to participant uses of Facebook which go beyond overt politics, encompassing the ways in which the site is used to challenge and rework social norms and basic values in everyday life. In particular, this concerns an area in which Facebook holds distinctive value for participants in the present study: that of discourse concerning issues which are perceived to be taboo, or otherwise seriously contentious, by the participants themselves.

There is something paradoxical about participant accounts regarding this issue: despite the fact that social media sites are in many ways experienced as sites of heightened publicity and inspire due caution, Facebook was also experienced as peculiarly enabling for the purpose of challenging, interrogating, and directly transgressing the perceived borders of acceptable discourse. Much of the present chapter will involve exploring the sense in which Facebook's novel environment makes it suitable for this type of discussion, a suitability which, I argue, can be only partially explained in terms of the 'online disinhibition effect' (Suler, 2004), an established phenomenon in which computer mediated communications can in some circumstances disinhibit user behaviour. Furthermore, while there is resonance here with existing studies, for example those which indicate that social media and cyberspace are often utilized as freer spaces, enabling participation and more genuine interaction (Radsch & Khamis, 2013; Cockain, 2014), the finding that this general tendency can extend to the broaching of taboo subjects before a socially salient audience is a novel one, which requires careful understanding.

Importantly, the phenomenon referred to here is not one which can be grounded in technological factors alone. Particularly significant has been a general challenging of received wisdom which accompanied the 2011 uprisings, yet which has not been confined to political debate, but appears to fundamentally address some of the basic norms underpinning Egyptian society more generally. Indeed, participants often seemed to see issues of conformity and freedom of thought as multiply intertwined with a broader revolutionary project, in which a perceived lack of critical thinking, for example, was seen to be a key aspect of Egypt's political inertia. However, although this trend should be understood in terms of wider processes, including those relating to the revolution, the peculiar appropriateness of Facebook for this purpose requires explanation: why, for

example, should participants be able to discuss their attitudes to atheism or homosexuality in front of five hundred contacts on Facebook, but not in front of a few of those same contacts in person? Exploring these issues is illuminating with regard to participant experiences on social media, representing a continuation of the concern with publicity and public action established in previous chapters, and also yields insight into the broader politics of participants in the wake of the 2011 revolution. The foregoing discussion is also relevant to questions of tolerance and pluralism which inform approaches to democracy and public norms, which has been identified as a critical issue in any potential transition away from authoritarianism in Egypt (Tripp, 2013).

The chapter begins with a section accounting for participant experiences of social control, focusing on perceived pressures to conform to various norms and restrict communications. Echoing accounts explored in the previous chapter, the unstated injunction against the discussion of certain topics was also in some cases articulated as a barrier not just to speaking, but to openness and clarity of thought in regard to taboo areas. The discussion here touches on important issues for understanding how participants locate themselves in terms of wider patterns of post-revolutionary social and political change, which are shown to inform activities on social media which are not self-evidently political. Analysis is also grounded in the wider structures which form an important background for participants' communicative action, in terms of social class and education, as well as the participants' imaginative constructions of the city, and the senses in which other, less privileged Cairos nevertheless made their presence felt for middle-class participants. The point here is to understand experiences on their own terms, rather than to paint a definitive picture of Cairo as a whole, in order to provide a foundation for better understanding how the communicative affordances of social media have been utilized.

The remaining two sections then explore the capacity of Facebook to provide a novel site at which the apparent status quo is challenged in various ways. First of all, focus turns to the discussion of taboo and otherwise-difficult subjects on Facebook, with an exploration of various factors which have shaped participant approaches to broaching such topics online. Particular vehicles for exposition here are gender norms and religion, two topics which emerged frequently in participant accounts. The final section focuses explicitly on the various ways that affordances have informed the use of the Facebook newsfeed as the site of choice for many participants to undertake these forms of challenges, ahead of apparently more discreet options such as in-person meetings or private messages. Careful attention to accounts here reveals an important phenomenon of recontextualization

which appears to significantly inform behaviour. I argue that a key factor in this is the (typically) undirected nature of messages on social media, as this and other relevant factors represent an important shift in how an individual statement is situated, and therefore in what that statement communicates. Furthermore, while diminished presence seems to figure in existing literature (for example Dreyfus, 2001) in negative terms, the present study gives cause to view this feature as potentially productive of reworked dynamics of publicity and new types of political relations. Indeed, not only have participants utilized this aspect of social media for political ends, including imbuing their immediate spheres with open discursive values, such practices are indicative of the – tentative – potential for social media to facilitate a shifted relationship between individual and society, and resonate further with the overt political action explored in the previous chapter.

Conventions and Conformity in Middle-Class Cairo

In general, participants (both male and female) espoused the view that their social environment in some ways inhibits individual freedom of expression. As we will see, this extends to difficulties regarding religious conversations coming from a sceptical and/or critical perspective; regarding discourse concerning practices which attract disapproval (especially for women, as touched upon in chapter four), such as drinking, smoking, and swearing; and regarding the discussion of sexual conduct, including norms of mixing between genders as well as homosexuality. One participant, a student at a public university, elaborated on her experience of these restrictions, explaining that she experiences her wider environment as one in which diversity is not tolerated:

> I guess it all comes back to the point where, like, no one accepts differences. If you notice, like, in Egypt everyone pretty much dresses the same and we don't have the, the variety of people we see abroad. I guess because if you see someone with punk hair here in Egypt he'd be slammed by comments in the street. I have a friend who, she's a girl and her hair was a bit afro-wise, and she'd be called names cos of her hair, you know. You just, we're used to a certain type of look, a certain type of opinion and so on, and we don't get it, we don't process it when we see something else.

For many participants, this was, if not something to be openly resisted, a displeasing feature of their society. Indeed, accounts frequently revealed a sense that lack of space for diversity and individual expression was central to participant experiences of the wider society in which they were embedded, a feeling which was enhanced in the wake of a revolution which seemed to have illuminated the possibility of a multifaceted social

change. This was experienced through the lens of social class as well as in terms of a wider global imaginary: as will be explored below, participants sometimes spoke from a positionality outside of Egypt, which in some cases appeared to be informed by a tentative self-coding in terms of Western attitudes, as contrasted with the 'Egyptian' norms which were more traditional and, as far as participant accounts were concerned, afforded less room for diversity and individuality. Regarding the latter category, this was experienced not least in the form of pressures to conform, although these were often subtle, which were experienced on a daily basis on and offline. In some cases, they arose due to attempts to live openly in a way which seemed to grate against the norms of the wider society. As one participant explains, these pressures came in the form of relatives as well as members of her peer group who disapproved of her way of thinking.

> I think one of my biggest problems with people in general is that I tend to have a much more open mind to things. I am more outspoken. Sometimes I don't really think before I talk. And in a society like this it's kind of unacceptable. For instance, I'm the kind of person who would use a lot of swearwords – unintentionally. I mean, I don't mean to piss anyone off. But it's just how I express myself. So whenever I for instance say [an expletive] as a status I'd have like ten comments of 'oh my God, I can't believe you said that in public'. And I don't want that. I just want to say whatever I want to say and share what – what if I want to share a picture of a naked lady, that I think is beautiful? 'Oh my God, you can't share a picture of a naked lady'. If I wanna have an opinion about religion or, I don't know, politics, or whatever, it's just so difficult. Because you'd get into these arguments with people who are trying to impose their opinion on you and trying to prove themselves right. And at that time, Facebook hadn't installed the option of not getting notifications for every comment. So I would get notification after notification after notification. And I just – I don't wanna know. I don't wanna talk about this. I don't wanna know anything about it, so it just became a hassle.

While not all participants were quite so ready to challenge perceived constraints on behaviour, this basic outlook – in which the wider society is viewed, negatively, as a somewhat oppressive space in which one is expected to conform to perceived majority views and practices – was echoed by other participants, including those who kept a lower profile. Another participant, remarking on the way she has seen others approach discussions on controversial topics on Facebook, reiterates a sense of people imposing their views on others, and exclaims her frustration with this state of affairs:

> I get it, I know that you're trying to make them go to heaven, but your heaven is not his heaven. And it's always like 'read the Quran', it's like, 'he does not believe in it! Dude, he's

not gonna read it.' You know? It's always religiously oriented and the person or the talking

is, is not a religious person. So there's always the diversion [divergence] in the conversation

and the, they're speaking from a religious, like with religious texts and stuff. And the guy is

like [laughing] 'I don't believe that!', you know. And sometimes it's like 'Islam is the best

religion in the world. You should not diss it […]'.

Thus, participants espoused general values of social liberalism and freedom of thought

against the background of a society they perceived as in various ways in opposition to

these ideals. Relevant here is previous work on middle-class Cairo (Koning, 2009;

Armbrust, 2003; El Sayed, 2010), which has located self-consciously Westernized spaces,

such as private language schools and elite, cosmopolitan consumption and leisure spaces,

in terms of a global imaginary. This sense of a heterotopian logic at work in participant's

lives is an important point of departure for understanding participant accounts regarding

the intertwined issues of perceived conformity and liberalism. Not least, such sites mark

out special zones in which specific codes of behaviour hold, in juxtaposition to those at

work, for example, in the street, or in more 'popular' spaces for socialization. This is

especially the case when it comes to gender norms, with an upmarket coffee shop being

regarded as a site at which mixed gender socializing is normal, in contrast with less

economically privileged equivalents, such as an *'ahwa baladi*, in which the presence of

women is less straightforward.

This alternate normality of upmarket coffee shops is interlinked with the sense of prestige

and sophistication which accompanies such sites, as well as the self-conscious

Westernization of these and other upper-middle class sites. As a number of studies have

confirmed and explored (Koning 2009; Armbrust, 2003; El Sayed, 2010), the coding of such

spaces as Western operates as a locally-salient signifier of elite status; indeed, denizens of

these coffee shops are frequently fluent, or at least highly conversant, in at least one

European language, and have often attended foreign-language schools and universities in

which they achieved internationally-accredited qualifications. For Koning, coffee shops are

sites which are experienced by upper-middle class Cairo residents as sites of a globally-

imagined cosmopolitan belonging.

The present study did not adopt an explicit focus on coffee shops, nor on the sense in

which they are a site for cosmopolitan belonging. To an extent, the latter term can be

taken to imply a sense of the valorization of coffee shops and other Westernized spaces,

which may have somewhat worn off in the ten years since the close of Koning's fieldwork.

At the same time, it is clear that the availability of such spaces and the distinctive norms

and exclusions which characterized the concomitant social milieus were a key taken-for-granted aspect of participant's lives. While it is certainly beyond the scope of the present study to provide a theory which explains (what may be categorized as) the liberal cosmopolitanism of many participants, whether in terms of the imagined Westernization of city space or otherwise, it is notable that such sites as private language schools, private beaches, upscale coffee shops, and so on (whose modes of fraternization appear in some respects closer to the Euro-American norm than to the local one) often provide a means for the association of an elite social class whose cultural repertoires and tokens of status frequently cohere around an apparent command of Western behavioural codes. More to the point, such spaces provide the capacity for the exclusion of those whose socialization might render such social codes problematic. Significantly in this regard, Koning (2009) has noted the extent to which the performances of socialization characteristic of coffee shops and other upper-middle class spaces of the city are 'fragile', suffering catastrophic harm from the gaze of what she describes as the 'class other'. Therefore, maintaining the exclusivity of such spaces has been paramount for coffee shop owners. Furthermore, there is a sense that, even though coffee shops are sites which license socializing between genders, the sense of fragility is not only a result of exposure to the class other, but lurks hidden in the sites themselves. As Koning notes, even many male coffee shop regulars prefer to marry women who, unlike their female coffee shop friends, adopt more traditional attitudes to gender mixing.

Participant accounts in the present study certainly lend support to Koning's (2009) contentions regarding class separation and the implication of westernized spaces in this separation. One participant, for example, positions herself in terms of belonging to a 'bubble', represented by social class as well as the scenes she frequents, which include upscale cafes in places such as Zamalek and Ma'adi. Evoking and identifying a distinction which encompasses issues of norms, habits, and ways of thinking, she echoes Koning's sense of a spatial rift within the city, and her observation that intervening spaces between middle class sites can threaten the integrity of this reality[12], while also adding to the sense of enclosure.

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[12] The sense of physical danger does perhaps differ from Koning's (2009) account, which is based on research conducted prior to the revolution, and therefore prior to a significant deterioration in public safety due to policing and security issues. What both Koning's and my research confirm, though, is the sense of a spatial rift confirming and reinforcing class divides in the city.

There are those mind shields, or personal space shields, or attitudes, that just totally disconnect you from the other person because they're different. And then this instant connection with someone that looks similar to you. You just... sometimes... even though it's safe... sometimes it's just so humiliating to just walk in the street, so you just, you just get into your shield, your mind shield, and you just walk in the street taking out anyone you do not like. Anyone that looks... anyone that looks like they're, anyone that looks like they've never seen a rich person before, or a middle class person before […] you know that they're going to comment about you in some way, and just have a negative comment about you. It doesn't always happen, of course, but a lot of times it does so it's sort of your expectation all the time and you just don't want it to happen so you just take everything out and pretend that nothing is happening and sort of disconnect yourself from that world you don't like, that world you're not used to.

Despite the intellectual knowledge that 'their' Cairo is not 'the' Cairo, the bubble is phenomenologically compelling for participants, who often, even as they notice themselves doing it, project the norms of their own social spaces onto the city at large. Even minutes after the participant noted the trap of conflating personal experience of the city with its more objective parameters, she explained:

I don't think Egypt will ever turn into a strict Islamic country, I hope, I really hope not. I don't think so because I, because when you go to those cafes and the nightclubs and, like everything... nonono, I mean like, when you go to, to places like Left Bank and you see how people are dressed as they want to be dressed... Sequoia, whatever... the girls wear short skirts and they wear whatever they want, like, even if I don't personally do it but I mean... when you see that, when you see that segment of the society you feel like nono, we're never going to be like that because we'll never accept being like that. There are just too many of us that don't accept that.

Again, while this sense of a wider intolerance at work in Cairo constitutes a key to situating and understanding participants' lives, this may in a sense be misleading about the city as a whole. Cairo is in another sense a site of tolerance even beyond the confines of middle class spaces, in that its mammoth size accommodates multiple perspectives and ways of living. Downtown bars, for example, are licensed to sell alcohol for touristic purposes, yet seem to have a clientele consisting largely of Egyptians who fall outside of the (aspiring) cosmopolitan elite catered to by coffee shops; furthermore, different neighbourhoods are characterized by a multitude of religious approaches and practices, and mixed-gender socializing often occurs in less upmarket environments, too. Yet this phenomenon of mutual co-existence may be in part afforded by the size and segregation of the city rather

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than any general principle of mutual tolerance or of individual sovereignty. The city, seen as a unified entity, often has a way of exercising tolerance by other means than by way of explicit ideals, at least for those who find themselves in a position to take advantage of it.

At the same time, participant accounts generally emphasize the potential for, if not the ubiquity of, a wide range of expressions of what they experience as intolerance and social control, emerging from both the wider society as well as their own social circles. While this sort of behavioural regulation might occur both on Facebook and in person, Facebook emerged clearly as an environment in which new opportunities for these sorts of interactions are multiplied. One reason for this is the radical upscaling of ordinary communicative acts, so that party photographs and moral observations, to name two potential sources of controversy, often become witnessed by hundreds, if not thousands, of members of one's social circles, and in a manner which obviously involves less careful audience selection. Those witnessing could be old school friends (long out of touch) or relatives, whose social milieus and moral stances may differ from those of the person featured. One participant explains her experience encountering criticism from an old acquaintance, who was shocked to see her new life revealed on her newsfeed.

> I'm not like an average – I hate saying that. I mean who is an average Egyptian anyway? But I lead like - a different lifestyle to most people. Like, I travel and I drink and I go to parties and things like that. And everybody sees these pictures of me. And it made me feel like: 'okay, so why do you know all this information about me and why are you judging me?' You know? Because I had a friend from school that I hadn't seen for like seven years or something, and she's my friend on Facebook and she sent me like 'what happened to you? I feel like you are a different person?!' I was like 'who are you? I'm sorry?' You know?

Part of the issue here lies in the sense in which Facebook knits together the different social norms and etiquettes which have infused participant biographies, creating expected difficulties for many participants who wanted to use Facebook more openly. By this logic, a sufficiently expansive friend network would raise the potential for negative reactions to quite a high level, and indeed participants reported high levels of censure from connections from various areas of their life, as women especially reported a sense that others were uncomfortably willing to impose their own values on others.

> And it's also because we don't, like most Egyptians we don't really respect, like, personal boundaries. Like I have an issue with that a lot. Starting with the looking at your Facebook page and thinking it's okay and talking to you about it, and ending with comments on the street about how you are dressed. You know. It's a mindset. They don't see – we don't

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accept differences easily and when we don't accept it we think it's okay to comment on it and guide you.

It would be a mischaracterization to see these statements as evidence of mere personal gripes; participant frustrations with what they saw as overly conformist attitudes in society were frequently linked to complaints about the country's political direction, and were often listed as a cultural challenge faced by Egyptians as they sought to construct a fairer society. One participant, for example, referred to a sense of herd mentality in order to explain political outcomes in the country (speaking specifically about the development of protest in the wake of the murder of Khaled Saeid):

> I don't wanna generalize but I will take the risk: Egyptians are not leaders, they are followers. They just need to see somebody is doing this and they will follow them. But they will not take the initiative.

For another respondent, overly conformist approaches to social issues were related to the lack of critical thinking she perceived among many of her friends and colleagues. This was a matter of being willing to think in terms of a Manichean worldview, in which moral absolutes based on conventional wisdom predominated, to the exclusion of the acknowledgement of grey areas and complexities as well as the inculcation of continuously-developing individual moral sensibilities. A young professional, she describes encountering such attitudes in her workplace, in which social class issues might be thought to mitigate against a lack of critical thinking which is associated by many with Egyptian educational approaches.

> And that's the case even with some of my co-workers. Like when the voting on the constitution came up, we were having this conversation. I share my office with three other girls, and I was the only one that was kind of – I don't agree with the constitution because I don't believe that a const – even if it's a really good constitution, that a constitution written by corrupt people does not make it a good constitution. So I'm gonna say no. And then I have this other girl, she's like 'oh, I'm just gonna ask my Dad and see what he's going to say and I'm gonna say exactly, like, what he says'. So if he says no, she's gonna say no because Father knows best. And if he says yes she's gonna say yes because Father knows best. This, ya'ani, we were raised, ya'ani, a lot of boys and girls especially were raised like that. You have to always listen to your parents because they know everything and they know what's best for you and you think for yourself and you shouldn't have an opinion. And a girl should listen to your parents and when she gets married she has to listen to her husband. And that's it, kind of thing – it's very frustrating. And I don't think any form of social media or

any form of exposure can change that, because it's so deeply rooted in our culture. You know, it's very bizarre.

For her, this difference in thinking was not totally explainable by social class or even in itself by schooling, although it was clearly linked to both issues (as denoted by the implied surprise of these individuals being her co-workers, who share similar education and professional status). Rather, family life, especially early life, was crucial – and the issue was seen to be one which implicated, if not basic values themselves, then basic approaches to the issue of values.

> The people I've met that think the way I have come from a certain level of education, and a family upbringing that is kind of similar to mine. I mean I was raised on – I was never raised to think that to be a good person went hand in hand with being good religiously. You know, I was kind of raised, you know, being a good person has nothing to do with the God you pray to. It just has to do with the way you live and you should be good because you have to be, not because [...], yes of course I know that in my religion it's not okay to lie, but that was kind of like, you know, in-between brackets, in the middle of – like 'yes, you don't lie because it's not nice to tell someone something that didn't happen, and by the way, God isn't gonna really like that', kind of thing. So I think, you know, people who are trying to be fair, come from this mentality.

The identification of a mentality, as the participant puts it, of basing one's values on an internal notion of right and wrong, rather than simply on an external authority, resonated with other accounts, as participants frequently advocated for ideals of sidelining convention and absolute authority in favour of personal expression and individual growth. For another participant, the 'shock' of opening up communication in a way which subverts conventional wisdom and propriety was itself to be valued, as a way of breaking out of that form of thinking.

> Sometimes I actually feel that I – I want to defy it in a way. This post I was feeling like – sometimes I feel that way – that I'd like people to be shocked. Please be shocked a little. Please see something that – please let's discuss something that's taboo!

Again, the novelty of her perspective was ascribed to formative experiences, this time outside of the family. She credits individuals who took the risk in broaching issues with a key role in her development, and explains a feeling of ethical obligation to continue that process.

> Personally, I'm a person who... thinks a lot about things that are taboo in my society, and if it had not been for some certain people in my life who had opened subjects in front of me, I

might not have ever read about them or felt that it's okay to discuss such things, so I feel

that it's maybe a little bit of a duty to do that.

For these reasons, action that might gently break the hold of taboos in communal life, and disrupt settled, conformist equilibria, was clearly valued by participants. These impulses were also critically linked to the (post-)revolutionary situation in which participants lived. As explored in previous chapters, participants reported noticing a more expressive atmosphere in the weeks and months following the deposition of Mubarak, linked to a related destabilizing of established authority in which formidable institutions and conventions seemed vulnerable to popular challenge. Perhaps echoing the emphasis of the political moment on the power and wisdom of the people, *ishsha'ab*, over the established, paternal authority of the outgoing president, previous political and social certainties seemed to, at least temporarily, have given way to a new sense of possibility. This involved not just politics, but also social issues, and it was not just the former which evoked angry debates. While the extent to which online vitriol represents any particular novelty on the part of Egyptians is unclear at best, participants frequently accounted for this in terms of the nature of Egyptians (perhaps giving too much credence to the West's own internal narrative of liberalism and fair-mindedness) and/or the strange dynamics which must accompany a period in which overwhelming pressure to conform is suddenly lessened. Regarding the latter, one participant argues that an emphasis on conformity renders people ill-equipped to co-exist in a more open and diverse society:

> I think we have to blame education for that. We were never really taught how to express
> ourselves correctly. And I think it's like a pressure-cooker. You know? After you keep –
> we're in such a closed kind of society, where everything you wanna do is either a 'no' or a
> 'maybe'. So there's so much pressure it's bound to explode, and an explosion is never really
> good. But at the same time it's a really good thing that people started to express
> themselves. But I think the problem is that we were so full of anger that we were not
> expressing ourselves correctly.

She offers an important reference in several encounters with atheists after the 2011 uprisings, noting that, while publicly disavowing belief in God was considered radically out of bounds under Mubarak, many atheists became more vocal in the wake of social changes after the demise of his rule. However, this often took the form of aggressive denunciations of other views, in a manner which again seemed to evoke ideas of absolute right and wrong as well as the tendency to deny space for other ways of thinking – 'imposing', to use the word chosen by another participant, one's own personal views on others.

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Three years ago, for someone to admit he's an atheist was kind of like a huge 'no'. Even though they do exist – but it was kind of like, very - it was such a taboo, you know, you could never admit to anyone that you're an atheist. And I think that brought a lot of people a lot of frustration, because he wants, or she wants to live in a certain kind of life that this society or this country does not allow her to do so. So I think in the midst of this calling for freedom and equality they started expressing themselves in such an angry kind of way that they appeared to be hostile. And instead of actually just voicing their opinion of the fact that they don't believe in a God it turned into a kind attack of how religion is the stupidest thing in the world, and and it's terrible, and all of you are losers and all of you are liars and I'm the only one who gets how this world goes. And that's not really the case, that's not what they're trying to say. But they're angry. It's like telling – you know, they're caged and all of a sudden they're filled with such hostility.

Describing herself as a Muslim who is open-minded but secure in her faith, she relates her encounters with atheists online, via a Facebook group, initially borne of her attempt to try to understand atheist perspectives during a moment of religious uncertainty.

So I went into that group and it was nice and everyone was uh, you know at the beginning they were very friendly when I was introducing myself, and I just kept scrolling down into the page, and I didn't notice anything amazing about this group. I mean, I expected, you know, scientific research and science talks and lectures, and something that I could benefit from. And instead it was just post after post of attacking. And at one point I was kind of attacked by this really obnoxious idiot because I don't believe that *higab* is something that I have to do. And they were having this conversation where they were making fun of *higabi* girls, and I was like 'uh I don't believe that's, you know, an essential part of religion' and I was just - it was like, you know, gunfire just started firing at me. It was like 'oh my God, you don't know. And if you're not gonna believe that then you shouldn't be a Muslim anyway. Either do your religion right or don't do it at all. And this is just ridiculous and you're stupid and blah blah blah blah blah blah blah.' And it was just weird. I just left the group because I didn't want to argue with such a person. And even the way he was trying to prove me wrong was ridiculous – he was getting me articles off this page called 'wiki Islam'. Since when is Wikipedia a reliable source of information? [...] but they had a Facebook group that combined these people together in this private group where they express themselves.

This sense of an open, aggressive challenge directed towards public norms was not solely the preserve of private Facebook groups, enclaves of specific minority opinion, but were in certain cases boldly emphasized in the public sphere – or, at least, in much larger enclaves of the public sphere. One particularly extreme example, not witnessed directly, is described below.

[A public institution was] inviting different people to write stories about themselves that, you know, you have to be very true and very honest. And you had – and at one point they were having this discussion in one of these local cafes [in Downtown] and one of these people that were participating in the workshop was an atheist. And a very vocal and a very angry atheist. Umm, and umm, of course, he was choosing the wrong time, the wrong place to express himself, because you're sitting in a local cafe where you have different, you know, uh levels of people from plumbers to, you know, educated artistic people because that's how it is in Wust-el-Balad [downtown]. In Downtown, you know, you have like a mix of people. So he's voicing his opinion, you know, talking about how Islam is stupid and all of that. So naturally some people heard him talk, and they decided to attack [the institution] to kind of, you know, show them who's boss. [...] And incidentally he had written a story about how he and his girlfriend during the revolution wanted to sleep together. And they couldn't find a place to do it, so they went and had sex in a mosque. And for that to be published in this country, to be distributed in Downtown, is a complete and total disaster. Aside from the fact that I think he is the stupidest person in the world, because it's so disrespectful…

For the activities depicted in the story (whether or not they were in fact carried out) to appear in a magazine for public consumption clearly violates the established norms of society. For the research participant who related the story, what made these actions intelligible at all were their conformity to a general pattern in post-revolutionary Egypt, which encompassed a general sense of challenge to the established institutions and ways of thinking, as well as existing attitudes to expression and normal spatial rules (including, as noted previously, an increase in street harassment, a willingness on the part of men to travel on the women's cars in the metro, as well as the taking up on the part of citizens of social regulatory roles such as traffic direction). Even more compelling evidence than the fact of publication itself, however, is provided by the reactions of others, which are illustrative of the ethics at play in public discourse among many who wish to undermine conformist thinking. As the participant explains, those who objected to publication

were kind of deemed closed-minded [by some] because they felt it was inappropriate to publish such a thing. So I think that in the midst of all this revolution people started to forget that line between appropriate and inappropriate [...] This is a Muslim country. Islam is, like, the leading religion. It is, I think, the most Muslim of Muslim countries in the entire world. It's not something that you can just brush away or even voice an opinion about it. For God's sake if you're not Jewish, Christian, or Muslim you get, like, this blank line next to the religion part of your ID [...] most of these atheists are supposedly very well educated, enlightened kind of people. So, I'm sorry, you should know what to say and what not to say.

Thus, while Egyptians who experienced their society as being closed, and who sought, especially in the wake of Mubarak's deposition, to open up space for new ideas and ways of thinking, can be regarded as having significant common cause, there was also a range of ethics and strategies according to which they pursued these goals and conducted themselves in the public sphere. Overviewing some of these approaches on Facebook, outlining participant experiences, and gaining insight into the role of Facebook's spatial dislocations in both enabling and shaping this discussion will be the purpose of the next section. As we will see, Facebook does not simply provide a new locus for the experience of a conformist reigning-in, but also appears to provide new tools with which participants wage a struggle against a perceived closure in their society. Indeed, it was common for participants (often from distinct social networks within Cairo) to report not only that they themselves were edging into taboo territory, but that they were witnessing this activity on their newsfeeds in a way that was extremely novel for the social context. As one participant put it,

> I've seen a lot of people discussing civil marriage, I've seen a lot of people discussing homosexuality, about people discussing the right to nudity and stuff – these things simply were NEVER spoken about in Cairo, ever. You simply don't speak about these things face to face.

Thinking the Unthinkable: Questioning Norms on Facebook

As explored above, many participants not only valued the transgression – or at least the gentle tweaking – of perceived normative boundaries, but actively sought to challenge and weaken them in their everyday lives to varying degrees. In a sense, Facebook represented a site for such activity *par excellence*, to some extent driving and enabling such progress in other spaces. Indeed, in various cases participants described having anticipated the potential to use Facebook and other social media to stretch the limits of polite discourse, presenting their actions as issuing from a deliberate choice to seize on opportunities presented by a new communication technology. As one participant, Dina, put it:

> it was deliberate right from the beginning, yeah. No, I wa- I was conscious of going through the process of testing out these ideas that were going through my head. And testing out what kinds of reactions you get to them when you speak to people about them.

Crucially, Dina's process of 'testing' involved using Facebook to broach difficult subjects before a quasi-public audience not just in order to observe the reactions of others, but, notably, also to expand one's own internal horizons and break through personal limits.

Challenging perceived restrictions on discussion was a matter of action directed towards reconfiguring the public sphere, but also of shifting one's own, personal relationship to taboo discourse.

> I can tell you that Facebook in general and Twitter gave me an opportunity that I didn't have before then – to broach topics in a public sphere. An uh, not, not always a very public sphere because it depends on who – umm – who I send that information out to on these feeds. But broaching topics umm to kind of get a sense of what – umm, what people think about these topics. And it's usually – I do these a lot with topics that I would normally think of as being taboo. First of all to break that sense of it being taboo in myself, but also to break that sense of it being taboo within society. Because the more you talk about something the less it's an issue to talk about it.

Furthermore, the internal shift regarding taboo subjects was multiple, enabling participants not only to feel differently about their taboo thinking – 'to break that sense of it being taboo in myself' – but also to develop the content of that thinking, to begin to clarify what a sense of prohibition had ultimately rendered opaque.

> Umm, being able to talk about a lot of different things that before social media were going round and round in my head, and I didn't get feedback on those concepts and ideas, because it was just, the conversations going on internally, and thus it was difficult before social media to form, to form those ideas and develop them. Because I wasn't getting feedback, because I wasn't talking to people face to face about them. Because I was thinking it probably wouldn't be the right thing to do. But then when social media came I decided: 'let me test this idea out. Let me test this out and see what happens and see what kind of response I would get'.

This sense of a purposeful project to shift internal and external boundaries resonated with other accounts in that, while not all feature such a premeditated version of events, there is a degree of deliberateness with which several participants nurtured a more liberal approach to discourse in their social circles. Again, social media appeared as a distinct tool by which this might be realised. Tarek, who engaged in a similar (although not identical) process of challenging discursive boundaries, expresses similar sentiments in describing the process whereby he started to raise controversial issues on Facebook.

> [My attitude was something like] 'you know what, I have this tool right now, so let's see what I can do with it, let's see how far I can push it, really'. It – uh, I think you started with the first one and then it went nicely and then you go like 'you know what, I have this other issue I want to talk about' and then you go from one issue to the next to the next.

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Both Dina and Tarek, as well as other participants, articulate a sense of progressive experimentation which resulted in a shift in the way they related to others, as well as their own internal boundaries regarding taboo topics. As this process became more developed, both reported increased comfort in sharing on taboo topics as a result. As Tarek put it:

> When you started it out it was – yeah, I mean you're just testing the waters first, you know. But then every time you start to say something more controversial and then you started having discussions around it and you started to question things – and then I – I hit this point where I was, I was more or less rather comfortable with saying [on Facebook] that this is what I'm thinking about, and you know it's out there because I would like to talk about it with you. But I wouldn't say that I would share everything publicly [e.g. posting it so that non-Facebook friends could see it], but at least in my circle of friends, I personally am very comfortable with sharing anything right now.

Dina's account concurs, also emphasizing the extent to which this has encouraged her to broach taboo subjects in person. As we will revisit later, she also describes the sense in which Facebook has become for her a space of particular safety - yet one whose effects ripple outwards into other venues.

> ...creating that space where I feel safe talking about almost anything, instead of having that feeling that there are certain things you can talk about with people and there are other things that you can't talk about. I think it's emboldened me, not only in social media now but also generally in life, to feel free in saying what I think.

This sense of social media as a freer space is reminiscent of Cockain's work in China, in which research participants described the internet as enabling "more genuine, less inhibited, expressions of subjectivity" (2014: 51), yet this does not appear to have extended to discussion of challenging taboo topics, but remained confined to less unsettling practices. Nor does Cockain report that participants had noted transformative impacts on other spaces in this regard. Perhaps somewhat more resonant is Radsch & Khamis's (2013) work on cyberspace as a facilitator for female participation in the Arab uprisings, although while this account notes both the potential for social media to facilitate expression as well as its role as a sort of transformative incubator, their emphasis on encouragement as an explanatory factor appears less straightforward with regard to results in the present study. Not only did participants report significant discouragement in response to their posts, but Facebook was a venue in which negative responses might be anticipated in advance.

Yet, at the same time, there was an element of cascading which emerged in participant accounts: witnessing the discussions of others appears to have played a significant role, as participants discovered unanticipated aspects of their friends' characters, thoughts, and inclinations on Facebook. As we saw in the previous chapter with respect to overtly political uses of Facebook, an important outcome of Facebook use is the re-encounter by which one's Facebook friends come to be seen in a new light. Whereas chapter five documented participant accounts of a revivification of politics in the late Mubarak era, prompted in part by a recognition of shared outrage on a larger-than-anticipated scale, a parallel process seems to have occurred regarding attitudes to taboo discussion. Deferring momentarily the clarification of how Facebook appears to have enabled this sort of contextual shift, the site does emerge from participant accounts as enabling those wishing to think beyond societal boundaries, psychological or otherwise, to find counterparts with whom to do so. Both Dina and Tarek explore the sense in which they were able to break new ground in their understanding of the people around them through the opportunities provided by social media. As Dina explains,

> I think I felt more safe doing it on social media than doing it face-to-face, and it gave me an opportunity to um, find out who among my friends, firstly, and then others that I didn't know – who among them were considering the same kind of issues that I was considering and thinking along those same lines, or thinking along different lines that I would like to consider as well.

Tarek's account elaborates further on this process. Indeed, he not only managed to witness new aspects of others' thinking, but witness others going through the same process of challenging norms and exploring unconventional ideas, as his newsfeed came to increasingly feature commentary on and insight into social and cultural issues, including taboo topics. Often, this was not a matter so much of sheer conceptual novelty, in which the people who originated discussions began asking questions which had not been thought of, but sometimes a matter of bringing ways of thinking - which had previously been confined to relatively isolated, and intimate, pockets of life - into new, more open territory. The result of this was to create a cumulative reimagining of how one's social network thought and felt about social issues.

> You started to have these kind of discussions on more of social, cultural, norms and issues. And then you'd start seeing that there were other people thinking about the same thing. That, that includes everything from […] issues like religion, and then you'd have someone go, like, 'oh I question this particular issue in' - about religion, and someone else would say

'oh, I also have been questioning this'. But then in real life they both had no one to talk to about this because it's a very taboo issue. I mean, in in lots of families you can talk about these issues, but then there was this platform where you can discuss these things. And then you'd have someone who comes from a very religious background and he go in and – or she'd go in and they'd go like 'oh, actually I think this means this and this and this', and you can have a very healthy discussion here - I've seen that countless times about religion itself, about atheism, atheism and immorality, hijab has a lot of discussions about it. I know a lot of discussions, for example, about hijab that ended with girls feeling more comfortable about taking off hijab, and with others who actually started wearing hijab. So you had both things happening really. To issues like, for example, sexual harassment on the streets like you mentioned, I think it's – nobody really paid attention to it until it started to have an impact on social networks.

It is important to clarify, then, that it is not being proposed that social media is an originator of unconventional thought, or that it inherently prompts people to think unconventionally or break taboos. Rather, as I have acknowledged in the previous section, these must be located in cultural attitudes and processes which envelop social media, involving education, home environments, cultural capital, and other factors. However, for participants who were already inclined to challenge taboos in their own thinking, and perhaps explore the issues with some of their close friends or relatives, Facebook emerges as a site at which broaching taboos was simultaneously more possible and in important senses more effective, allowing one to broaden the circles in which such communication occurs, influence the thinking of others, and, perhaps rapidly, increase one's comfort in taking such discussions into new spheres. For Dina, in particular, there is a sense in which Facebook represents a liminal zone, in which ways of thinking which might otherwise be routinely expressed in some of her private, intimate relationships could come, with her Facebook friend-network as an intermediate stage, to characterize her public communications. That which was previously restricted to more intimate settings becomes opened to a much wider network, incorporating a significantly increased range of friends and acquaintances. As she explains,

there were things that I *thought* I wouldn't be able to speak about with friends or I might have only spoken about with one or two friends, wouldn't have spoken about it with other people, thinking that they would not be open to discussing certain issues, so I test it out with a larger group of friends on Facebook and then I test it out with a larger group of people generally through Twitter and Facebook.

Thus, the significance of the already-documented sense in which participants experienced Facebook as a somewhat public space becomes clearer: viewpoints which they could not anticipate defending or advocating except in rare circumstances become increasingly normalised and routine; because this was experienced as in some sense constitutive of a public test, this encouraged them to feel comfortable expressing themselves in other spaces, with and without computer mediation. An interesting point of comparison here is the metaphor of 'CyberZomia' employed in reference to uses of the internet in China (Marolt, 2014). This refers to the sense in which the internet enables an escape from (state-related) constraints, in turn leading to a proliferation of diverse practices. Here, however, social media figures not so much as a space of escape from constraints, but as one in which these constraints are still fundamentally present, yet are experienced differently. Engagements conducted under such conditions in turn feed back into other spaces of daily life. A vital point here is that the presence of such constraints is critical to the sense in which the site is transformative. In essence, the newsfeed can be seen as a sort of intermediate space which adopts certain features of both intimacy and publicity, enabling characteristics and practices which characterize the former to be brought into a more open setting, which in turns leads to further experimentation and new understandings of one's social circles.

This latter repercussion, in which existing relationships were re-encountered and experienced in new ways, was not simply a matter of discovering more liberal views than one anticipated, but often simply of encountering an unexpectedly constructive approach, or a diversity of opposing views as opposed to a homogeneous prohibition; interventions which could effectively be received as implicitly condoning the questioning process itself. One participant, for example, noticed that even those who opposed his way of thinking were responding differently than he might have anticipated. He describes discussing homosexuality on Facebook, initiating conversations which he approached from a liberal perspective.

> It was interesting. You see different point of views, you see for example a vast approach from religious people, you can't just lump them all together [...] you started to see really religious people who some of them are completely against homosexuality and then others who would say 'you know what? I don't approve of it, but if you wanna do it you can go ahead, I just don't wanna be part of it, I just don't want - I don't approve of it and I'm completely against it [but ultimately it is your decision].' You had people who would say 'no, I would not be friends with a homosexual' and then others who would say 'I would tolerate

being friends with a homosexual as long as he's not engaging in a homosexual relationship' for example – it's a whole wide spectrum and then you'd start seeing different sides of people and started seeing different opinions of how people feel about a certain issue that in the past you'd never be able to talk about.

This participant's exploration of polygamy, which is permitted by both Egyptian and Islamic law, yet which struck him as anachronistic in modern life, is also instructive. Again, the participant notes the constructiveness of the discussion on a controversial subject, the extent to which the idea of a homogeneous, un-nuanced assent to a single hegemonic interpretation of Islam was undermined, and the novelty of such a discussion occurring at all.

> I had this discussion about the fact that I think that the law in Egypt should ban polygamy, even though it's religiously accepted for a man to marry up to four wives in Islam. I said I think that regardless of that I think by law it should be banned. And I stated my point of view[…]. And then I got some really extreme replies from some people who were – who felt angry at me because I was trying to ban something that God allowed. […]There's a verse in the Qur'an that says you should not ban what god has allowed - something along those lines. […]So this, this was kind of a discussion that we had, and then, like I said, I mean there were some extreme voices who were saying you shouldn't even discuss that. But then you had religious people discussing that 'you know what, maybe you do have a point […] but at the same time it helps solve several problems, like this and that and that', and then others who were saying 'you know what, I think you're right, polygamy should be banned', so it was kind of a really – of an issue for example, before that discussion for some time I did not feel well about polygamy – I'm personally against it. It was my personal position, I am against polygamy, but I'd never had a discussion about it before, and this was a very nice outlet to actually have this kind of discussion, and at the same time it's really interesting because you're having a discussion with a group of people that you would never be able to bring together in real life.

While the accounts above represent especially clear examples of this phenomenon, their questioning of received wisdom (including that on religious matters) was part of a larger trend, which involved a number of participants, with others still observing such behaviour repeatedly on their newsfeed. Indeed, I even witnessed such behaviour from those who described themselves as prone to avoiding controversy on Facebook – for example, one such participant questioned the use of the male pronoun in reference to God, prompting a spate of comments endorsing her approach as well as a number of comments providing religious justifications.

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Particularly important for these trends were the affordances of privacy settings, as well as decisions about friending. For Dina, her willingness to explore the possibilities of Facebook was backed by a considered caution about who she would and would not allow into her friend list. Indeed, she was perhaps the most guarded of the participants when it came to Facebook friending.

> On Facebook I'm not broadcasting to everyone. I have a list of friends, and on Facebook I only have friends on my friends list. I mean real friends. And I'm actually a bit picky as to which friends I will accept into that group. Some friends I will just not accept. And if I'm not comfortable, if I feel like won't be able to say anything I want to say then I just won't add that person. And then on the other hand I have the followers, so I have a public feed where I can say anything I want to to the whole world, so that's very public. And so I choose what I want to say to which group I'm saying it to.

For Amira, on the other hand, causality ran in the other direction: her outspoken nature resulted in conflict until she started to significantly scale back her friendlist. She explains that, for her, the important factor in securing a more peaceful newsfeed was to focus on the strength and salience of the connection. Aggressive or abusive responses to her Facebook statuses always came from those whose friend requests she had accepted out of a feeling of obligation, rather than a genuine affinity.

> Yeah, they were just, you know, random acquaintances. Maybe I went to one of [mutual friend]'s parties, I said 'hello', and when I go home I find this person has added me on Facebook. I'm like 'why?' And out of, because, you know, [mutual friend] is a good friend of mine, I would say 'fine, I accept'. But now, now I think my personality's developed a lot more and I've become a lot more eh confident in, you know, the way I think, so I'm just like 'you know what? Fuck it. I'm not, I'm not gonna even – I'm gonna pretend that you didn't even push that 'add friend' button', and I just ignore it. I think it has something to do with personal development, especially. Because I can say that in the past couple of years – or if I compare myself now to the person I was in college, we're very different people. So I can say that it has something to do with personality – or maybe I've just become a very antisocial person with very little tolerance to what I may deem as stupid.

Her friendlist was thus significantly curtailed, with the exclusion of especially weak ties reducing her Facebook network from nine hundred to two hundred friends. Here, it was precisely the *salience* of ties which was regarded as the critical factor in building a more peaceful newsfeed; Amira and others were in this way not looking to escape from their social networks, as per Turkle (1996), but to build a more personal and intimate space in which behaviour would be constrained and informed by significant relationships. The point

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here is not to be distanced from social reality, but on the contrary to ensure that one's interlocutors are those with whom one has formed 'real' relationships.

Either way, as with Dina, a personal knowledge of her network, coupled with the capacity to neatly tailor the participants to a discussion, enabled Amira to enjoy a high degree of success in creating a sphere of tolerance and respect in which she could express unconventional thoughts without attracting negative consequences. Furthermore, the affordance of privacy settings was not simply employed in order to avoid flack, but to establish a network of people who thought in sufficiently similar ways to enable productive discussion. She describes the new environment of her newsfeed with regards to difficult discussions around religion.

> Because I tailored the kind of people I would add, so now I have the kind of people I know – except maybe my Mom. There are some things that you can't really talk about [in front of your mother], but usually I would just hide from her so she doesn't see it, ya'ani. Umm. But yeah, now at least when people get into arguments I'm having arguments with people who have kind of like the same line of thought as me, somehow. Slight differences. So it's not annoying, it's actually interesting. You know what I mean? And now it's become easier because Facebook now has a lot more options of hiding people from your timeline and unfollowing people and not getting notifications from this or that person. So it's easy for me now to kind of tailor what I see and what I don't. Before it was a bit more difficult.

She gives the example of her own discussions of religion, which again proved to be constructive.

> I'm Muslim and I'm convinced with my religion, somehow, but there are certain aspects of it that are ridiculous, that they just don't make sense to me. So if I ponder – like what's the point of having uh, I don't know umm, what's the whole deal about, let's say virginity or whatever. At least now I'm not going to be attacked or deemed blasphemous just because, you know, I wrote that. You know, like people would actually – some of my friends who are quite avid readers in religion actually might have interesting arguments, or they would explain certain parts of the Qur'an that would explain that I did not understand that would shed light on a certain topic. Now at least when I talk about politics, and I'm very vocal about my political opinion, I don't have to be worried that I'm going to wake up tomorrow morning, you know, with like 100 comments about how stupid I am. People would actually, you know, maybe someone would tell me their opinion, like, 'oh no maybe the army is as great as they say it is'. And he would give me valid points or whatever in a clean, civilised manner. Because I know this person. I don't have to, like, hide.

Even Tarek, whose friending strategy was not especially guarded, noted the importance of audience restrictions in underpinning the constructiveness of interactions:

> On Facebook, now I tend to post a lot more than before publicly. But at the same time there is a side that I always just keep with friends because I want to have a certain type of conversation, really. A conversation that's - rather than getting as many opinions as possible about something I just want to have interesting, worthy opinions, just instead of getting any troll or something that just wants to come in and say something that would just piss you off.

Other participants also noted the effectiveness of personal ties in adding to the constructive nature of arguments, using personal experiences and intimate connections in order to challenge aspects of her life and experiences which are often not necessarily well understood or represented in public discourse. Speaking about the issue of sexual harassment, another participant explains how she approaches the issue on Facebook.

> Obviously this person knows me personally, right? So - and they know my background [...] Sometimes the problem is the person posting this does not put - usually our men, if we're talking about this specific example, they don't really know what women go through, okay? So if I'm a man and I'm saying 'by the way, sexual harassment is so overrated'. Like, 'come on girls, ya'ani? It doesn't happen that much.' Then I talk about a personal experience [...] and this is really offensive when you say that it doesn't happen, because I face it every day. When you make it a little bit personally you can add a little bit of perspective to that person, maybe. Maybe you can make him think again, maybe it won't. But that's fine, I feel like at least I tried to make a point clear to someone else.

However, while the potential for more intimate and thoughtful interactions could often be afforded with the right approach to friending and privacy, this was not a matter of simply excluding in advance any sense of risk – a characteristic which many treatments of internet politics have emphasized (e.g. Dreyfus, 2001; Morozov, 2011b). As Tarek explains, his provocations on Facebook, while controlled in the sense of being shared with a known audience, represented a gamble, which would (and did) affect the way he is perceived by his friends, colleagues, and acquaintances, and held a significant possibility of aggressive comebacks. While Tarek was more fortunate than some in encountering negative responses to his sharing, he still encountered hostility and risked harming his image in the eyes of others.

> I didn't expect it to go completely nicely, you know, I expected there would be some people who, who don't like what I'm saying, some people who feel, who feel offended by what I'm saying. I had people then sending me private messages and saying 'you know what, you've

changed a lot' and I was like [sharp intake of breath] 'maybe' [laughs]. I don't know but, yeah, it's my position. And what was nice was that the vast majority of people were able to respect that. You know what, we don't agree with it, but this was my, our opinion, for example. But yes of course you actually, of course you had people saying, no, you're attacking religion [by raising issues for discussion], no you're, I don't know, something's wrong with you. Yeah, you had that. I mean it's expected.

Another participant, Amina, notes similarly that even severely curtailing her friendlist did not completely eradicate a sense of tension from more provocative aspects of her sharing on Facebook, illustrating her point with the example of disclosing aspects of her scepticism regarding religious matters – although, for Amina, the sensitivity is expressed more in terms of causing offence to her friends than in a feeling of her own vulnerability.

However, some things I write people still find offensive. Like I, I do believe that I'm going through an exploration phase when it comes to faith. And I have been going through it since I was 16. And I ask a lot of questions regarding that and - or for example I read an article about evolution and I post it. And someone finds it offensive! You know, they're like 'evolution did not happen!' Really, so what happened? [laughs] How are we here now? And they tell me about creationism and stuff. I don't mind getting into these debates and I respect people's opinions, however if I'm gonna post something – if I'm gonna post something that's gonna be so offensive to people […]I wouldn't share something like that. Not because I'm scared of feedback but I because don't wanna hurt people who do, I don't wanna be offensive to them so I wouldn't [...] Yeah, I do [share atheist articles], and I get feedback and we talk about it. And I think that also – being online, I don't wanna sound conceited or anything, really, but I feel maybe something I will share will get somebody to think about something they haven't thought about before. I'm not saying I will change their life, or I will change how they think, because I couldn't care how they think. Everyone is entitled to think whatever they wanna think. However, what is important for me is having access to information and then deciding what to believe. But if you don't have that access from the beginning, then there is something wrong. So sometimes I share challenging things just so people can get into a debate. Like sometimes I post something, add a reply, whatever, so people are debating and I'm leaving it.

Amina's account is here resonant of the sense in which exposure to global discourses was viewed by some participants as having an emancipatory function, which is certainly anticipated by existing literature (for example, Castells, 2012). However, what is interesting here is that, as far as such emancipatory functions are concerned, it is matters of social salience which figure far more prominently in participant accounts. This is suggestive of a new way to think about social media as a site of autonomy and

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participation. Castells' emphasis on *access* to discourses and information, as well as the individualizing nature of networked communications, may turn out to be less pertinent than the ability to share one's inner thoughts before a socially salient network; indeed, it is the effect on the person sharing the conceptual or informational resource which seems most pronounced. Furthermore, it is the structuring of social media around social ties which enables any new discourses to travel into the lives of those who have not sought them out. As Fuchs has noted (2012), mere access to information is no guarantee that it will be utilized; furthermore, as has been discussed in the previous chapter, there is doubt as to whether mere exposure to information is itself as transformative as has sometimes been supposed. If social media can provide a site at which minoritarian ways of thinking, overtly political or otherwise, can be more easily expressed without sacrificing social salience, then it is suggestive of a new relation to social rules and issues of conformity, and a new potential for what might be regarded as greater autonomy.

Yet this phenomenon is an extremely tentative and contingent one, and resists explanations which reduce participant agency to the mere effect of computer-mediated communication. In addition to the centrality of shifting affordances to expression on social media – privacy settings, for example, have emerged in various ways as critical in enabling transformations (and not to mention the viability of sharing on Facebook generally, as established in chapter four) – what is critical here is the particular understandings and projects of the participants themselves. It is within this wider framework of deliberate action that social media is able to fulfil a purposive function. While the noted tendency of 'online disinhibition' (Suler, 2004), then, may have been a factor (and will be explored below), the active quest to challenge internal and external limits was frequently the driver for the psychological and emotional changes which were brought about. The role of social media in this appears to have been to function as a site at which participants felt, in some circumstances, substantially freer to express aspects of their thinking which they generally did not vocalize in person.

Furthermore, the intimacy and connection which above accounts reveal indicate that the phenomenon recounted here cannot be explained by accounts of online space (e.g. Turkle, 1996) which conceive of computer-mediated communications in terms of their disconnection from a less mutable form of reality, and consequent conduciveness to radical identity play. On the contrary, Facebook audiences represent relationships, experienced as highly salient to the user, which are relevant to the emotional, professional and socially-oriented concerns of participants, as confirmed by the privacy concerns

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relayed in chapter four. Indeed, participants who pushed boundaries were aware of doing so, and often did so in the face of their own disinclinations. This may have in fact been critical to the sense in which their activities on social media were transformative: by expressing their thinking in a salient space, and making their views known to others, they issued a genuine challenge to their own comfort zones. In the process, they also received salient social support, weathered disapproval, and became emboldened to do the same in person.

In diverse ways, then, Facebook has afforded participants of varying inclinations regarding controversy and taboo to begin to raise subjects for discussion which are perceived to be out of bounds by the participants themselves. In doing so, they seek to express themselves, increase their own comfort levels in this expression, and provide occasions for others to debate and explore such issues – the latter coming through as a distinct value in participant accounts. The impact of this on the discussion of gender issues is particularly worth exploring. Indeed, public discourse and perceptions appear to have been significantly influenced through social media interventions, not least the acceptability of street harassment. Regarding the latter, Reem describes the sense of struggle (somewhat in contrast to the sense of cordiality which has largely characterized the accounts above) that her Facebook activism seems to have brought about. Her account echoes those of other participants, not least in her emphasis on objectivity, which appears to complement an emphasis on non-conformist thinking in participant accounts.

> [I spend a considerable amount of time posting] against sexual harassment in Egypt – I'm a very feminist activist [...] here in Egypt there is no way for a woman to survive without being a feminist. I mean come on we're getting harassed like more than 5 times a day. It's not fair. More than 98% of Egypt[ian women have experienced harassment], so whenever I write something against sexual harassment I always find this person who comments 'okay, look at her clothes, look at what she was doing, uh, you... you women should just stay home' and I be like this... I try to be objective, however... I go into discussion. I used to write comments like this length or something [gestures], describing how I think about things and giving actually statistics and reality about what happens – come on guys, wake up. I mean, it's not the case that 'I may be your sister or your mother'. It's not the case any more, I'm a human being, I should be dealt as a human being. And... we get... uh, we have different scenarios for harassment every day, daily basis, sexual harassment by, by by words, by touching by everything. So, have some mercy. So whenever I write something politically, or anti-harassment uhh anti sexual harassment, I get discussion and get people argumentative, and people discussing everything.

As in the accounts presented above, Facebook figures here as a site at which difficult issues can be, and are, broached in a setting which incorporates a multitude of participants and responses. What comes through here also is the sense of a fundamental link between personal issues and larger debates concerning what sort of society Egypt should be. The private life of the participant in this sense takes on a political aspect, whereby defending her own autonomy becomes a matter of explicitly advocating for a particular way of life. Perhaps partly because what is shared on Facebook is necessarily reflective of a choice about what *should* be shared, and therefore more directly implicates values of public norms, the personal and the political become explicitly intertwined.

> Mainly the girls are more concerned about how an Egyptian girl like you fight her reality all the time and don't get exhausted. 'What kind of conflicts do you have with your parents?'; 'how could you reach to the point that you become independent in your life without uh making your, uh, without uh the parent's interference in your own?'; 'how could you do this?'; 'how can you achieve this?'; 'are you happy with your new lifestyle?' so they always discuss this. Some of them are being, let's say argumentative. You see things differently, you see things wrong but this is not the way. And some of them speak with a religious point of view. Not only with hijab, but with my own way of seeing things for example. I'm very liberal and I live and I do no harm to people so I just live, and so that's it.

Echoing the communicative struggles recounted by other participants, Reem's efforts resulted in a new equilibrium, in which she had found ways to express her own views and meet with a form of acceptance from her Facebook network. This is as much about winning space for herself – and maintaining a sense of identity in the face of the challenges represented by the norms of Egyptian society as a whole – as it is about championing liberal views in society.

> I respond with objectivity. I try to be sincere and be integrated person. My life, I like to live my life with integrity. So when, when they ask me how do you think of things or why do you do this, I tend to respond with sincerity, with integrity, so I say very simply my own point of view of things, why I do this. And by the end they got - they don't show that they are convinced with what I am saying, however, they start to think of it. And even if they don't like the way I do [think], they respect me… for my, uh let's say, for my courage, for they know that this is the hard way, that I am in a continuous conflict with society, with parents, with relatives and I still know what I am and what I want to do.

The sense in which Facebook functions to complicate and enrich the mutual understandings of users is again relevant. For Reem, her Facebook activity revealed

aspects of her personality and lifestyle which many others were previously unaware of, providing the occasion for new sorts of encounters surrounding norms and values. Furthermore, she explains that she has found common cause found with others, to whom she would not have originally looked for dialogue or support on these issues. She gives the example of a colleague whose dress and personal manner struck her as conservative, yet whose Facebook activity revealed liberal attitudes regarding gender and harassment:

> I used to have a friend of my faculty [...] we didn't spend that much time together. Every time we just spoke like for 5 minutes, 10 minutes and that's it. And I used to speak more with her on Facebook, and I was surprised that this girl was not conservatives, not conservative as I was thinking she would be. She had for example very good points of views when it comes for example to anti-harass, anti-harassment movement in Egypt to the women reality as general, to the political situation to – I found that there is a different kind of girls for, for example to the majority that I meet. A girl that would be very liberal but in human rights way, not a liberal to just to be rebel and that's it. And I found out she's not really shy she was really speaking her mind very open and very sincerely, and she was different from what I thought she would be. Other people also the same. Some people, I mean let's be clear, some people are even so shy in reality and on Facebook you would say 'come on, you're like the spokesman for some movement!'

Particularly important for gender-related discourse on Facebook has been the sharing of viral images designed to make a political point. This is often related not just to more 'serious' issues such as harassment, but to lifestyle issues such as double-standards over how behaviour is assessed, particularly when it comes to religiously and socially frowned-upon behaviours such as drinking and smoking. This can also be regarded as a challenge to perceived mentalities which underpin social conformity, as participants attempt to undermine the currency of the stigmatization of those operating outside the limit of social norms. As Hoda, a student at Cairo University, explains, labels easily become attached to women who smoke, drink, and/or swear, whereas men have relative freedom to engage in those sorts of behaviours.

> [People apply labels to women] very easily and very quickly. Like this smoking thing, oh my gosh, she's a bad girl. There are a lot of things. Like if you swear for example you're a bad girl [tutting] [...] It's okay for men to swear, but not for girls.

The viral images shared are designed to convey ideas which resonate with a wider audience in a form which is compelling and aesthetically pleasing. Such images are made

to be shared by a multitude of users, who can add them to their wall with little in the way of any apparent effort. Hoda explains:

> There was a picture that I liked a lot. There was a veiled girl, a girl in a niqab, holding a glass of wine, and a girl, like, with her hair down reading the Quran. So because people, they wanted to say, you know, you don't judge a person by how they look, you know, she might do a lot of things, she might be a bad person – not that drinking wine is bad, but religiously speaking, you know. [...] And there was another thing that said girls who smoke are not necessarily bad girls. I never got that. Never ever got that, why they think that. I don't get it. It's a bad thing to smoke, it harms your health, of course, but what does that have to do with anything. I know, Egyptian double standards. [...] They were just random – other people shared it so I shared it. It circulates.

While the sharing of viral political content, such as the instance recounted above, has been criticized as mere interpassivity (Dean, 2005; see also Zizek, 1996), the evidence here suggests that it can take on a more potent aspect. Indeed, while there is certainly a pre-fabricated quality to the sharing of articles regarding gender and other issues, the unique context in which each act of sharing occurs means that each instance can be viewed as a definite communicative act with specific consequences - for example, it may represent the point at which an individual publicly affirms her opposition to dominant views. This goes beyond Peterson's (2014) observation that sharing is an opportunity for reframing content; neither is it just a matter of the sense of authority, or of a pre-affirmed voice, which may be invoked by users in order to bolster their communicative claims. The viral image or article provides the occasion for doing so: the sharing of a meme represents a way of communicating about an issue which is not seen as an out-of-the-ordinary foray into controversial territory, but as a normal, undistinctive act of sharing – "other people shared it so I shared it. It circulates." Sharing what others have shared, and which expresses in more eloquent words one's own thoughts, arguably not only legitimizes one's own participation in social networks but even blurs the sense in which it is that individual alone who is acting. This is especially significant given that, as we have seen, for many research participants the capacity to join in with taboo-challenging behaviours has resulted in an increase in their experience of freedom both online and in person.

In addition to the sharing of viral content, Facebook activism regarding gender sometimes took the form of commenting on perceived transgressions. A relevant factor here is that online resources provide a potent armoury for those wishing to advocate a minority position. This is quite different to the usage outlined by Amina above, however, in that the

function here is not so much access to new concepts or information in themselves (Castells, 2012), but a form of social fortification, enabling participants to support and defend perspectives which may be otherwise easily dismissed by those on their network. It functions not just as a conceptual resource, but also as a rhetorical one.

> Or if someone posts something, like, that's pro-FGM, for example – [addresses hypothetical poster:] you don't know shit about FGM, because if you do you won't actually say shit like that, yeah? The first thing I do is I find a well-trusted article and I post them the link. I'll be like, you know what? I think you don't have the full picture. Check out this. And I post them the link, it's up to them to read it or not. Again, depends on the situation. If they read it and they reply and I reply it can go back and forth really long. Or sometimes the discussion just ends.

In this fashion, sharing articles in critical responses was a common practice for those seeking to lend authority to their points. Indeed, the availability of a credible source seems to have played a key enabling role, allowing participants to venture into discursive territory they may otherwise shy away from. One participant notes,

> If I can prove him wrong with verified proof, then I would comment. If I can't prove him wrong with using valid, you know, information or valid um pieces of news, then I won't even bother. Because I don't see the point of having a constructive argument if you can't, if you don't have something to fall back on. I can't just say 'oh, you're so stupid I disagree with you', no, I have to say - usually I would say 'I respect your opinion but I have to disagree because of so-and-so points'.

The comment function was also found to be conducive to participation in other ways. Relevant here is the spatial structure of commenting, in which the accumulation of comments, each from a commenter connected to the author of the status update, enables the reactions of diverse members of one's social network to be drawn into what can be regarded as the same context for interaction. Given such a structure, those who are happy to engage with a controversial status effectively send reassuring messages to those who might be reluctant. As one participant suggests, when Facebook users start to see others implicitly endorsing the line of questioning represented by the original status, they feel increasingly licensed to voice support themselves.

> And then once a person writes something you find other people supporting this argument. Again, remember when I told you people do not like to lead but like to follow, so maybe another girl or guy had the same opinion and never really felt – like, thought 'maybe I

shouldn't comment on this', you know, but, when they saw other comments said 'actually I support - '.

Yasmine frames this in very similar terms, discussing leadership and the way Facebook's context can be experienced as empowering. Here, she echoes the 'spiral of voice' theory (Hochheimer and Al-Emad, 2013), which, as was discussed in the previous chapter, has been applied towards the understanding of online expressions of dissent towards the Mubarak regime.

> In questions such as these you rely very much on one person commenting and another person... commenting because someone already spoke, so it's fine now. I don't have to be the first one to go. Yes, you do feel empowered by other commentators... it's like if you're in a classroom and the teacher says 'any questions' and nobody raises their hand – and then one person raises their hand. And you feel empowered to raise your own hand [...] I notice that the people who respond most – respond first – to provocative questions, are certain people, who are courageous and leaders and this kind of person who enjoys putting themselves out like that. [... Whereas for others they are initially hesitant, but after they see the issue being engaged in by others] it's fine now to respond now that I have 30 comments.

A further issue which emerged here is that, once an issue has been raised, even if through what might be regarded as 'interpassive' sharing, the results reverberate beyond Facebook and frequently draw participants into debates with others, where more in-depth conversations will take place. As we have seen above, participants feel a greater sense of freedom to broach issues in person once their comfort zone has been expanded through Facebook. Furthermore, encounters via statuses, open to a multitude of users, often lead directly to private encounters via telephone or status updates.

> Yeah I actually umm, the smoking, the girl smoking thing, I, uh, saw it because a friend of mine commented on it. And the comment was like 'no, girls who smoke are lidlidlidla', and then I got - I called them up and said 'no'. Yeah I called them on the phone and I said 'you shouldn't say that about people. It's a bad thing to smoke and it's addictive and it harms your health, but that has nothing to do with it. Why, why would you think it's okay for one person and it's not for the other. And he said because girls, like, their parents take more care of them and teach them better and nanananana, than boys. […] I personally know a lot of girls whose parents don't give a shit about them. In a bad way, in a very bad way. I know someone who's been through hell, and she's the kindest person I've ever met. And she smokes and she's awesome, she's wonderful. You know. And you just don't compare, you

don't put a label on people like that. You know. But that's a thing Egyptians do, I guess. It bothers me a lot.

Amina, whose sharing of atheist articles was touched on above, also gives an example of receiving a private message in response from someone who did not feel comfortable pursuing the issue in the more public setting of the newsfeed, a reminder that even those who remain uncomfortable expressing or exploring ideas in front of a multitude can find counterparts, partners with whom to think the unthinkable.

Explaining the Emboldening Effect

The discussion above has already explored three explanatory factors which seem to underpin the emboldening effect witnessed on Facebook. First, the not-quite-public nature of Facebook networks, bolstered by privacy settings enabling the specific targeting of any provocative material, was seen to have enabled participants to construct a space of relative safety in which they can broach such issues before an audience which is still large enough to meaningfully impact their wider social network. Second, the expansiveness and visibility of networks have also enabled people to take encouragement from the risks taken by others, an observation which echoes findings in the previous chapter, in which a similar encouragement was found to be salient to political expression. Finally, the technical capacity to share images and well-presented articles has afforded participants the capacity to lend authority to their expression of minoritarian views, facilitating their challenge of local hegemonies – often through recourse to those perceived as global.

Participant accounts also suggest that a highly relevant feature of Facebook, which also applies to social media in general, is the extent to which 'presence', on a phenomenological and embodied level, is experienced differently via social media than in person. In this sense, mediation of presence therefore informs the ways in which participants communicate online, often rendering participants freer than otherwise. The sense of a lack of presence resonates in particular with Suler's (2004) work on what he refers to as the 'online inhibition effect', as well as, to a lesser extent work which has explored the unfavourable effects of a lack of 'social presence' in online fora. Three of Suler's six explanatory factors touch on this sense of presence – those of dissociative imagination, solipsistic introjection, and invisibility. While the first two – which appear to be ruled out by the sense in which participants do take care over and invest in the psychic reality of their Facebook interactions – do not resonate with participant accounts, there is considerable grounding for the latter. Suler's observation that in daily life people will

frequently avoid eye contact when discussing personal or emotional issues appears to be borne out in the present study, finding an echo in Yasmine's discussion of her own taboo-tweaking posts on Facebook. She frames the matter in a way which makes explicit the functioning of her cognizance of the Facebook audience in shaping her choices about what to share and what not to:

> You feel freer because you're just facing a screen, than you would act in normal life. I think I'm much more bold on social networks than I am in real life. I can post things in front of my 200-300 friend list... I sometimes think 'would I have put this up on a projector had I seen these faces sitting in that room in front of me? No, I wouldn't.

Another participant uses the metaphor of the '4th wall', the imaginary (lack of a) divide between stage actors/characters and their audience, to express a similar point:

> It's easier on Facebook as well in the same way as when acting because when you play a character to an audience it's much, much easier to do that when you're separated from the audience, there is that – what do they call it, the fourth wall – do you know what it is? Yeah, you have that fourth wall and it protects you in a way, and you can do a lot of things that you ordinarily wouldn't be able to do when you're across from somebody. Even if that person was in the audience I wouldn't be able to play that character in the same way. It's too personal, there's – the 4th wall is thinner and there's less of it.

As was discussed in chapter four, however, there is an instability about the experience of visibility and the presence of others online, and it is not proposed that the 'emboldening effect', despite the fact that we might regard it as in important senses systematic, is universally or consistently experienced by participants. There is doubtless also a sense of guardedness about Facebook, which also makes itself felt in the context of social and political discussions. In fact, the extremes of comfort and discomfort on Facebook might be regarded as two aspects of the same underlying phenomenon, in which normal ways of gauging and experiencing publicity are subverted, leading potentially to either increased caution or a heightened sense of interactional freedom – or potentially a combination of the two - depending on the individual, and the manner in which he or she anticipates this threat. This sense of multiplicity can be seen, for example, in those participants who often attempt to maintain an intellectual consciousness of their audience on Facebook, yet who frequently find themselves acting out of concert with their prior intentions when provoked in a particular manner. One participant notes that, for example, while he tries not to swear in front of relatives on Facebook, it is difficult to bear in mind the mediated presence of others, and the full implications of that presence.

Rather than a simple, homogeneous, and universally-experienced effect, then, there was a tension in participant accounts regarding how they experienced Facebook and how this informed their behaviour online. Indeed, the sense in which social media might be disruptive of embodied mechanisms of emotional connection and correspondence between participants arguably functioned in both ways, leading to both a lack of restraint and excessive constraint, depending on the participant. For some, this clearly opens the way to begin to challenge the psychological barriers which prevent them from engaging in public discourse in a way that fully expresses and reflects their values. However, it also appears to underlie much of the more aggressive behaviour engaged in by users whose Facebook invectives do not seem to correspond to their in-person comportment. For several participants, Facebook communication was seen to bring with it a sense of emotional insulation which was often inimical to constructive debate.

> So, I guess once we're on Facebook that fight becomes easier immediately because it's not going to be physical, you're not in any physical danger, right away. So that's different. And you're not going to have to deal with people's emotions. People's emotions, right away, you're not going to have to deal with the actual visual sort of anger or people being upset or – you don't have to deal with that, you can say whatever you want. And you do get away with it, with impunity, complete impunity.

In addition to this feeling of impunity, another participant noted that there was always the potential to be wrongfooted by the lack of information that could be gleaned by visual cues.

> I honestly would feel more reluctant raising these topics online than I would in real life. Because I am a person who - I think it's very important to see how a person's facial expressions look like when they're discussing a certain topic. Cos you can see – is he lying? Is he really convinced of what he's saying? Is he reluctant? Is he really passionate about it? Etc. I like to look people in the eye and discuss things. Some people think it doesn't make a difference but I am one of these people who does. It's crucial.

For another participant, too, this means that it is better to use other means where one wishes to engage in discussions which might become fraught or difficult:

> but then when I want – I want to talk about something I just call people and – when they're my friends and I try to explain something. Because when you're on the phone the chances of fighting are less. You know, you personally talk to me and I'm hearing your voice and you're hearing mine. You know when I'm pissed and I know when you're pissed.

Furthermore, neither is the suggestion that Facebook provides a context in which people are systematically inclined towards more free or spontaneous expression. While Hochheimer and Al Emad's (2013) spiral of voice places emphasis on the way in which social media seems to have afforded freedom of a true self-expression, the emboldening effect we are trying to explain might not be understandable in those terms. Indeed, spontaneity, an outpouring of emotion, and the expression of an unmediated self in the face of restraints, appear to be more the exception than the rule. As one participant notes, Facebook, for him, is a zone in which spontaneity and self-expression are particularly deadened. He dimly echoes the Debordian notion of the spectacle – in which one's life and actions are "experienced at one remove" (Plant, 1992: 1), as he explains the extent to which human encounters become increasingly filtered and regulated by ideas of how they will be perceived.

> The thing is, Facebook – I used it as a chat as well – the thing is it - it never resulted into a successful relationship, even in terms of intimacy, like, in terms of, like, with girls – it doesn't work. I discovered that as well. Yeah, and it's better to be spontaneous and take her out on a date, for example, or something. But not Facebook. You type something and you change your mind so you backspace, so you don't really express yourself. You lose the spontanicity of, like, human feelings. When I'm with you right now I'm spontaneous, I'm just talking out of mind, but on Facebook, if we were doing this interview on Facebook I might have, like, changed my mind about something. It wouldn't be representative because it's something uh - Facebook forces you to only show what you think you want to tell people, but not what you want to say.

Thus, the emboldening effect is not one which is universal or continuously experienced, and any such effect arguably stands to be diluted by the increased mediation which separates user's thoughts from their actions, and indeed the emphasis placed on the signifying characteristics of communicative expression. Yet the fact that *some* users, *some* of the time, and in regard to *some* forms of interactions, are willing to establish new behaviours, is in principle enough to meaningfully shift the way participants address and monitor themselves. This is because, once participants have broken into a particular off-limits area of discussion, the fear factor associated with the topic stands to be forever undermined; the implications have effects, however weak, for oneself and for others, and subsequently travel into everyday spaces beyond the newsfeed. The potential for a ratchet effect, for which evidence has been provided above, means that social media does not need to have a consistent, systematic effect on how users engage in discussion in order to

have a systematic effect (in a particular social context) on the way networks approach difficult debates.

There is a further sense in which Facebook can be regarded as being conducive to the broaching of off-limits discussions. Facebook has the potential (as long as privacy settings are not specifically directed towards making this impossible) to re-aggregate the various contexts in which participants lives are conducted into an undifferentiated mass. As discussed in chapter four, this can disorient participants, creating dangerous ambiguities and blind spots. At the same time, this *recontextualization* of relationships appears to, in some sense, allow behaviours and norms which seem established in some social circles to seep out into others. As discussed above, commenters on a controversial status update are mutually validating, and make the environment safer for others to comment. Furthermore, someone who is tempted to make a controversial status update might know that certain individuals will disapprove, yet be empowered to share due to the wider context in which their status would be received.

> It's more about me, it's not about them. It's about me feeling – me feeling that I can speak to someone without being judged. Uhm, and so, so, I might feel, I might know that friend A won't judge me no matter what I say. But I might think in my head that if I spoke to B, C, and D that they'd judge me for thinking in such a w- a certain way, uhm, and so I won't speak to them in particular, but if I do it through the Facebook feed of friends, which is general it's not speaking to B, C, and D in particular, it's speaking to – maybe 20 or 50 or 100 friends, I can, I can sense what different people think about this and who accepts it and who doesn't, and who criticizes and who doesn't and who judges and who doesn't, and that it, it allows me first of all to get feedback on my thoughts, but it also allows me in a certain way to get a sense of which friends think in which way and which friends I'm more comfortable talking to and discussing things which, uh with, and which friends I'd rather not expose to certain ideas I have so I'm not judged. Or, on the other hand in certain ways it's made me, as I said at the beginning it's made me feel – after this process, because I've been going through it for some time it has made me feel more emboldened. It doesn't matter any more if certain people are judgmental or if they do criticise.

Part of the novelty of social media in general is to create the potential for new contexts, involving more diverse and varied participants than might previously have been formed. The network of interlocutors produced by a status update can be regarded as a mechanism for exporting ways of thinking and discussing from one patch of participants social lives into others. Indeed, even those who disapproved of a status would see others approving, or even providing constructive models for disagreement.

And not only that, but if I'm throwing this out to a large number of people, and B, C, and D think negatively about what I'm saying, they might see the feedback I'm getting that, um - one might support what I'm saying, or might criticize what I'm saying but in – in a gentle way, in a sophisticated way – in a, in a, umm, umm, you know in way that is acceptable. And that in a way it would show them that - we can disagree with each other, that's fine I don't have a problem with the disagreements, what I have a problem with is the way that you judge me or the way that you perceive me because I have a different viewpoint. And so maybe that, in a certain way, it gets B, C, and D to get involved in conversations in a better way than I would have expected them to do that before.

The significance of this is that it must be considered that it's not just that the context is *experienced* differently, as is suggested by the notion of online disinhibition, but that the context itself is different. Indeed, participants described numerous occasions in which they were able not to challenge cultural issues as lone voices, but to raise them in ways that brought others into play, who would support and validate their communicative gambits either by endorsing the sentiment, exploring it, or even objecting to the statement in a way which indicated the acceptance of the intent behind it. Importantly, then, participants could not only receive salient encouragement, but could display this encouragement before others, and carry the reasonable expectation that this may set the tone for the debate and in an important sense neutralize negative interventions.

Also relevant here is the undirected nature of (untagged) Facebook messages, and in general the ubiquity and novelty of undirected messages in the era of social media. It is importantly different to communicate indirectly, such that one's interlocutor may legitimately be apprised of one's communiqué and empowered to respond, than to communicate directly and create an obligation to respond – and indeed create a mutual knowledge of witnessing. The latter scenario delimits the scope of what one will raise, in real life contexts, not merely because one does not want to put others on the spot regarding a particular issue, but because one would have to anticipate in advance a common, shared interest – and as we have seen, participants frequently found unanticipated common interest with those able to access their newsfeed provocations.

This factor becomes especially novel when it is considered that most social communication is geared towards communicating, indeed performing, a relationship between individuals (see for example Bateson, 2000: 10-12; 177-9). This is a factor which therefore forms a considerable part of the constraints which attend communicative practices, for example:

I guess when in real life you don't really – it ha, like a certain event has to happen for you to see the stance of a person on the issue. To know their opinion on people smoking, they have to have a girl smoking in front of him and he could say that in front of her without her getting offended. You know, and, and it's really rare for something like that to happen. So when they share it it's like, it's not towards anyone in specific – and it's just they see it and they think 'oh, I agree with that', and they just take it on their own. Or something has happened to them and they're just reflecting on it on Facebook. And it's, and as I said, it's easier for someone to express themselves when no one's seeing their faces, you know, and they tend to be more free on the internet. And uhmm, so, and of co - also because of the diversity of people on Facebook, the diversity of issues and pages and, you know, photos on Facebook, you get – people come across a lot of different issues and - when they see other people's opinions they start to reflect on their own, you know. Like I know X is against women smoking so I realise 'no I'm not', you know, so it gives them the space to just express their opinions about different things – ahhhh, and in easier way, in an easier way because uh, they're not directly dissing someone, you know.

This suggestion is interesting in part because it indicates that, to the extent that everyday communication implicates one's interlocutors, social media offers the potential for the phatic nature of this communication to reduce constraints on what is communicated. This is quite contrary to Miller's (2008) contention that social media sites are ones in which phatic considerations limit communicative capacity. While Miller's point is not to be dismissed entirely, it is to be noted that other potentials certainly exist: Facebook users are capable of raising subjects of concern without the fear that they will cause undue embarrassment to those witnessing, because they receive such messages in a way which neither implicates their own identities, nor obliges them to respond.

In any case, the overarching point here regarding undirected messages and recontextualization more generally is that one's sense of context is altered not merely because Facebook is providing an illusory experience, but because Facebook *is* an importantly different context in which one's actions carry different implications than in other spaces. This is not only because others in one's network might model more constructive responses and retrospectively legitimize the status, but because participants correctly ascertain that the social meaning of a particular statement, when posted on Facebook, is importantly different to that which accompanies the formally-identical statement when issued in various in-person contexts.

Conclusion

In the present chapter, I have discussed the sense in which Facebook's affordances, and the social context in which participants found themselves, have interacted to produce a novel outcome: in various ways Facebook has functioned as a particularly relevant site for participants wishing to radically question social norms. This includes those whose discussion is ordinarily perceived as a matter of taboo, or is otherwise unacceptable. While the impact of technology has been emphasized, then, it has been argued that the unique outcome has been produced by a complex of factors. The projects and self-understandings, as well as the taken-for-granted cultural co-ordinates of participants, have been critical reference-points, as have been the peculiarities and technological affordances of the site which mediates these interactions.

Several factors were critical in this. Firstly, Facebook enables participants to screen out problematic members of their network, with whom they do not wish to explore certain issues, as well as the public at large. Secondly, the sense in which Facebook's newsfeed structures interactions makes provocative questioning especially visible, and peculiarly liable to gain momentum. Thirdly, when it does gain traction, this is again clearly visible to, and emboldens, those who might be inclined to vacillate over their response – and notably, this participation will typically be visible to the friends of the author of the status, and not to friends of the commentator (at least, not to those friends who are not mutual). Moreover, various features of Facebook, such as the capacity to easily share compelling images, help to create an environment in which participants feel relatively inconspicuous and/or justified in making sensitive political declarations.

I have further argued that an important feature of Facebook, which is shared with other forms of social media, is the undirected nature of status updates. In various ways, this feature importantly changes the context in which participants operate and brings important forms of freedom to their activity. While the undirectedness of Facebook's newsfeed has not been given much explicit attention in existing literature on social media, Burke, Kraut, and Marlow (2011) anticipate part of this outcome, noting that undirected messages may allow users to establish common ground, citing a study in which such messages assisted tie-formation in researcher-contrived conditions[13]. What the present

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[13] Participants in the cited study were asked to make previously-unknown conversation partners like them via SMS messaging. Some were given access to the Facebook profile of their interlocutors in advance; others were not. The former group were considered to have been more successful (Hancock, Toma, and Fenner, 2008).

study adds to this is a suggestion that the undirectedness of messages may be implicated in visibility issues, and accordingly can result in the establishment of common ground between users. Furthermore, this elaboration suggests a subtle shift in the way we currently think about the distinction between directed and undirected messages. Existing literature seems to implicitly presume that, to the extent that the content of the two might differ systematically, it is the latter which will be more restrained and less meaningful, the overt suggestion being that undirected messages are less intimate and more useful for bridging social capital than bonding social capital (Burke, Kraut, and Marlow, 2011). The present study suggests that, in their circumstantially-dependent conduciveness to newness and difference, undirected messages may not only be meaningful, and in specific ways less restrained, but might thereby contribute significantly to bridging social capital.

It is worth emphasizing also that, while the findings of the present chapter can be interpreted as being consonant with certain existing conceptions of cyberspace, there are significant differences. Importantly, the phenomenon documented here is strikingly different to that documented by Turkle (1996), in that the present study does not feature instances of freedom of expression due to either anonymity or a perceived disconnection from relevant social ties. While participants did note that they felt emboldened by a sense of invisibility, they clearly experienced Facebook as a space which was salient to their reputations and their sense of self, as explored more fully in chapter four.

Furthermore, while Castells conceives of the internet as inherently liberating, promoting a culture of sharing and providing a space of autonomy (2012), the evidence presented here is much more qualified. Not only, as discussed in the previous chapter, do we see that practices are critically dependent on (shifting) affordances – automatic notifications and privacy settings, to name two - but that the tendencies discussed here are clearly dependent on the salience of these activities to the participants themselves. In this respect, social media is better understood as a tool, albeit one whose effects were profoundly internal, utilized as much to resculpt the self – to 'break the sense of it being taboo in myself', as one participant put it – as to simply relay thoughts and ideas to others.

The sense in which social media figured as a site of autonomy in the present chapter, then, was dependent on its sociality: via sharing in front of a socially salient audience, participants were able to substantially shift their attitudes to issues of social conformity and taboo thinking, a process which in turn enabled them to clarify their own thoughts,

find common ground with others, and challenge perceived norms more boldly. This can be seen as lending credibility to Castells' (2012) emphasis on networked forms of communication as a personally transformative form of technology. Yet here it was not 'mass self-communication' in itself which proved conducive to autonomy, nor a materially-determined 'culture of sharing', nor access to information per se - but the contingent, and indeed rather tangential, capacity of networked communications to rework the dynamics of publicity and public discussion as experienced by participants. By circumstantially enabling participants to broach taboos, and initiate and sustain discussions surrounding social norms, participants were able to begin thinking more coherently and creatively about the circumstances in which they lived. Because Facebook was able to simultaneously represent a space of safety and a space of risk (Dreyfus, 2001; Morozov, 2011b), it was able to function in specific ways as an incubator of transformation.

VI. Conclusion

In the preceding chapters, I have explored various aspects of social media use with a view to understanding the latter's role in political change. I have argued that it is implicated in the political trajectories of participants, that it has engendered shifts in relations to publicity and public action, that it has been critical in enabling participants to critique cultural and political norms, and that it has enabled new forms of participation. The overarching strategy has been one of openness to innovation and unanticipated uses, and has incorporated a careful assessment of participant experiences regarding publicity and communications, as well as other salient factors affecting social media use. This has enabled the present study to go beyond dominant conceptions of social media, such as those which view mass-self communication as itself conducive to autonomy (Castells, 2012), consider the participation it facilitates as inherently inferior (Dean, 2010), or regard it as a realm which pertains only to the facilitation of increased weak tie networks (Gladwell, 2010). In place of these, I have argued for a conception of social media which views its capacities and shifting affordances as containing new potentials, yet which take on their characteristics by virtue of their interrelationship with a wider social context. Through a reworking of sociality and visibility, participants were able to create new forms of value using this technology, which has in turn reshaped their approach to politics.

Overview

Exposition of new evidence began with an overview of some of the important parameters which inform participant uses of Facebook. These included their perceptions of Facebook in particular and social media generally, their typical purposes in using the technology, important experiential factors, and contextualizing information regarding wider social networks and the urban setting. Participation on Facebook was found to be a problematic issue for many participants, as they negotiated various pitfalls, which often prevented them from sharing or commenting as much as they would otherwise like to. Relevant issues here were behavioural policing by family members and others, the need to avoid mixed messages regarding relationships, and differing ethics regarding visibility online. Various female participants explained that Facebook participation often rendered them uncomfortably visible to others, who may overstep perceived boundaries, leaving them open to unpleasant forms of attention. On the other hand, Facebook's privacy settings appeared to be critical in allowing people to adjust to more public exchanges in a society which was described by participants as often being in some senses averse to such

exchanges. Paradoxically, then, privacy settings seem to have enabled greater openness and, over time, more public sharing of information. In these senses, then, Facebook was seen to be imbued with complexity, in which publicizing tendencies were facilitated in some users, while being discouraged in others. While politics did not seem to be typically considered a 'moral' issue (and therefore ripe for policing), at least in the wake of the 2011 uprisings, there is nevertheless strong reason to suspect that social media does not constitute a level playing field for political discussion, in that sensitivity to the gaze of others, and the need to clearly and coherently perform relationships within normative guidelines, are constraints which have significant gender dimensions. This was seen to complicate, but not fatally undermine, Radsch & Khamis's (2013) argument that cyberspace facilitates female participation in Arab countries.

Following this, I explored the role of social media in political trajectories before, during, and after the revolution, finding that social media had had a significant effect on the political pathways of several participants. Not only did social media provide important political information to participants, this political awareness was experienced as 'shared' (Shirky, 2011) in various ways. Not only were the statements and reactions of friends seen to be affectively potent for participants, but the activity of strangers was also seen to be a powerful encouraging factor, for example comments left on Facebook pages and event attendance statistics. More than this, though, Facebook provided a venue in which users could begin to express themselves politically, as well as clarify their own thoughts and gain a more politicized understanding of their relationship with society. While this was not a replacement for protest in Tahrir, which was transformative on a much greater scale, social media was seen to have facilitated the journeys of participants to Tahrir. Furthermore, when in Tahrir, protesters were able to utilize social media to communicate effectively to their personal networks, mobilizing trust, humour, and outrage to make their message understood.

Finally, I explored the sharing of taboo and controversial issues on Facebook, exploring participant accounts of these activities. I argued that these experiences constituted an important means of understanding the role of social media in shifting attitudes to publicity, and that they illustrate potential for social media to significantly remediate the relationship between self and society. The indirectness of messages and a reduced sense of presence constitute two of the important differences between social media and face-to-face communication; yet experiences online have clearly had a transformative effect in terms of what participants are willing to discuss in person. At the same time, this

phenomenon is by no means an inevitable outcome of social media use, but rather depends on participant agency, local culture, and the minutiae of technical affordances.

Social Media as a Revolutionary Tool

A critical question which the present study has sought to address is that of the role of social media as a revolutionary tool – one which might, for example, facilitate uprising and politicize users. While I do not offer conclusive evidence regarding this issue, participant insights and experiences do provide an opportunity for the generation of new theory as well as a new reading of existing studies.

Firstly, in various ways the present study suggests that social media may, in the right conditions and with the right affordances, be uniquely disposed to facilitating cascades of dissent which are threatening to authoritarian regimes. There is a concordance here with Hochheimer & Al-Emad's (2013) argument that social media was critical in enabling a 'spiral of voice' in the Arab spring, albeit the present study is suggestive of a less stark contrast between the internal and external dimensions of politics than the latter account appears to acknowledge. While a number of participants were already quite politically engaged and aware, and took courage through encounters with like-minded others on social media, there was often a sense that dissenting subjects were themselves constituted by the processes of political exchange. What one participant described as "seeing each other for the first time" therefore seemed to be in important ways an encounter with oneself: a more profound, engaged, and constructive formulation of feelings and thoughts which would normally be even internally downplayed, if not suppressed.

This complicates notions of the spiral of voice and also stands in tension with the concept of 'preference falsification' (Faris, 2010; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012), in that accounts here were often less evocative of the idea of a secret politics coming out into the open than they were descriptive of a gradual politicization, in which participants moved from a vague awareness of political injustice which felt remote from their daily concerns, to a sharper, more forthright engagement with such matters. What appears to have been critical is the existence of a space in which participants could express dissent more directly and more publicly than the norm, enabling them to not only find common ground with others and explicitly develop their views, but to shift their understandings of what Egyptians are capable of, taking encouragement from the qualified, collective risks of expressing online dissent. Participants thereby developed an understanding of themselves and others as active political subjects, in contrast to the hegemonic myth of political passivity. Spaces

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such as *Kullena Khaled Saied*, as well as the algorithm-dictated access to posts on the newsfeed, were in these ways critical to participants' political trajectories.

Secondly, the present study offers further insight into the specificities of social media with regard to these dynamics. Various factors were observed to be important to the experience of Facebook as a freer space and to cascades more generally, such as the increased visibility of the views and thoughts of others, a sense of diminished presence enabling freer (but not necessarily unplanned) communications, and the undirected nature of Facebook messages. Also uncovered were the subtle influences of affordances in such processes, as participation was observed to be swayed by considerations regarding privacy and a potential flood of notifications.

A particularly important theme throughout has been the centrality of publicity to questions of individual political trajectories. Social media was seen to facilitate public engagement with politics, the direct expression of dissent, and important episodes of shared affect. Accounts of transformative experience on social media furthermore significantly reference the dimension of publicity, as participants found themselves more able to reveal and explore their values and inclinations in person, found common revolutionary cause with those in their social circles, re-evaluated their political estimations of Egyptians as a whole, and came to develop and solidify their political understandings, all in large part due to the shared aspects of social media use. This interpenetration of self and society means that the complex senses in which social media reworks publicity, explored in various ways in each chapter of the thesis, becomes itself a key aspect of social media's political efficacy.

The present study also provides important theoretical clues towards understanding Tufekci & Wilson's (2012) finding that social media appears significantly more mobilizing than satellite television. In the present study, participants were shown to be more affectively connected to Tahrir via the sociality of social networking sites, and were furthermore able to access trusted sources of insight which countered negative regime portrayals of protestors. Not least, participants suggested that social media conveyed more of the infectious spirit of the protests, and significantly less sense of danger. It is hoped that these insights will be explored and reproduced in further studies, quantitative or otherwise.

Not least, the study also suggests ways to theorize social media's complex employment in post-revolutionary tendencies regarding openness of thought within Egypt, tendencies

which appear to implicate the radical openness and acceptance of the other (Sabry, 2012) experienced in revolutionary Tahrir at the same time as recent trends regarding attitudes to established norms, such as those surrounding religion and atheism. While in practice social media is invested by users with multiple and contradictory tendencies, and certainly it is a site at which controversy can meet with suppression, disapproval, and defriending, it has also functioned as a site at which an acceptance of the other, including the other within oneself, has seemed to be especially apt. This appears to have been informed by revolutionary ways of thinking, among other factors, yet social media has undoubtedly been critical in enabling participants not only to "find each other" (Hamed, 2014), but to alter their relationship to themselves as well as the wider society, becoming more expressive and forthright politically and more willing to broach topics in other spheres.

Social Ties and Social Media

The implications of the present study for the conception of social media as being fatally restricted to weak tie networks is worth exploring in more detail. Gladwell's equation of social media with a "tool for managing acquaintances" (2010) was central to his (qualified) dismissal of social media as a political force. Accounts explored in the present study seemed to defy this conceptualization in several ways.

Firstly, a relevant phenomenon here is that participants tended to find salience in relationships other than those involving daily or weekly contact, for which Facebook seemed to be critical. Thus, the taken-for-granted assumption that Facebook provides important sustenance only for 'weak ties', which can be safely considered to be insufficient for political co-operation, is considerably weakened, at least as far as sociability in middle-class Cairo is concerned.

Secondly, social media was shown to have been transformative to relationships, including strong ties, not least through enabling people to view aspects of each other's thinking which were previously hidden. In various cases, people were able to identify the political beliefs of friends and acquaintances through using social media, and to share outrage with friends as well as take up opportunities for dialogue and understanding.

Thirdly, the political efficaciousness of social media was seen to go beyond matters of tie strength, in that various forms of encouragement from strangers and weakly-tied contacts was experienced as profoundly salient, playing a vital nurturing role in the development of political interests and attitudes towards political expression generally. Participants were

able to witness acts of social media sharing as inspiring instances of courage, or as examples which indicated the safety of such activity.

Autonomy and Participation

Engagement with participant accounts has also been fruitful with regard to approaches to the internet as a site of greater autonomy, as well as its facilitation of political participation. While the present study does not rule out the potential for interpassivity (Dean, 2010), or indeed a generally distracted comportment, to undermine political engagement, it certainly indicates that social media sites have the potential to function as nurturing spaces for expression. This was seen to have serious implications for matters of autonomy and participation.

Various participants reported acting and thinking with greater autonomy vis-à-vis established media and traditional norms, in ways that were coherently attributed to Facebook use. This included being more critical and vocal in response to government decisions, understanding a wider range of views (including familiarity with both global discourses and a variety of local movements), and feeling more empowered to voice their views on subjects where they may not be in the majority. I have argued, however, that this was not an overarching tendency of networked communications (Castells, 2012), nor of a cosmopolitan media environment (Elseedi, 2011), so much as a contingent and fragile process, whereby particular affordances coalesced in specific ways. The present findings have much more affinity with Marolt's work (2013; 2014a; 2014b), which emphasizes that, while autonomy is not irrelevant, scholarly attention must capture the important details and myriad contradictory tendencies of internet use. As discussed above, what was important in this particular case was the sense in which in various ways social media afforded nascent acts of participation in political and social discourse, which in turn enabled participants to break through internal barriers to political and social non-conformity in wider spheres. This was a fragile process, not least because social media was also often experienced as inhibiting, and participants were often critically dependent on the affordance of privacy settings in order to act as they did.

Local readings of Facebook – as a site of genuine political relevance and even subversion – may also have been a critical factor in these outcomes. In addition to speaking of social media as a site of distraction and social competition, participants often registered social media as a tool with political outcomes, and indeed engaged in something approaching deliberate experimentation using this tool. This raises a question as to whether or not, in

portraying social media sites as inherently trivializing, popular accounts of social media might not be foreclosing more constructive uses. Yet at the same time, Facebook was read by participants as a site in which political communications would be less salient than those made in person. Participants felt more free to express themselves, but also often sensed that those expressions represented genuine risk, and were often experienced as tantamount to public action, factors which appeared to be critical to their transformative nature.

The upshot of this is that Castells' account of the internet as a space of autonomy in itself, and its critical dependence on public symbolic space, stands to be somewhat modified. While the basic insight that movements and tendencies which gained momentum via cyberspace were indeed critically dependent on actions in a wider sphere for their increased salience, the relationship between cyberspace and protest (as well as cyberspace and in person conversation) was more complex than Castells theorizes. Cyberspace was important not simply because it was free, but because it was in important senses *unfree*. Sharing political content, for example, often represented a risk-taking activity for participants, which was an important factor in its being regarded as salient activity. Furthermore, while cyberspace figured in participant accounts as a space of partial freedom, it also at times took on symbolic importance. Indeed, the aggregation of page likes itself figured as powerful symbolism, as did circulated pictures of the Tahrir crowd. Furthermore, the site of protest was itself a space of autonomy, not just of symbolism, in which participants experienced a sense of togetherness which was felt simultaneously to embrace their individuality. Cyberspace and physical space were therefore intertwined in the present study, but not as twin poles with clearly demarcated purposes.

Rethinking Affordances

As touched upon above, these dynamics were not inevitable outcomes of social media in general or individual sites in particular, but complex interactions between technology, agency, and social context. Indeed, the present study clearly upheld the view that politics cannot be regarded as deriving neatly from, or being determined by, technology. Rather, there is an element of the chaotic in how affordances are used. That which was created in order to allow users to express preferences in accord with what is arguably a neo-liberal version of self, and thus to facilitate marketing data (Miller, 2008), was mobilized for purposes which were surely not conceived of by Facebook's creators.

At the same time, the power to alter technological affordances may also become the power to shatter any existing modes of use, even if it is difficult to determine specific effects. For example, even something as simple as comment notification was seen to factor significantly into participant behaviours on social media. Furthermore, altering newsfeed algorithms could conceivably reduce the potential for cascade effects, if it were the case that only those who were already sharing and interacting with political content, or a given political topic, would view such items on their newsfeeds. It is clear that this represents a serious form of power, which, especially when coupled with the capacity to harvest data which social media companies possess, becomes in itself a political issue. The long-term hope must be for forms of social media whose structures hold some form of accountability as well as progressive intent.

While affordances do not map directly onto outcomes, however, the present study provides three key ways in which social media was seen to be generally efficacious. While specific effects will vary, sociality, presence, and visibility repeatedly emerged as key dimensions of social media, which are importantly reshaped in various ways with political consequence. The point, then, is to sensitize ourselves to the various 'powers' that social media offers, as a means of developing our thinking about the technology and the possibilities which it may in future offer.

Regarding sociality, the present study has found that the sense in which social media imbricates the political and social has led to new forms of political potency. As has already been observed by Zuckerman (2013) and Lim (2014), the sociality of social media functions as a way of extending cover to political uses (the 'cute cat theory'), enabling activists and others to address political issues in a way that is not easily blocked by governments. At the same time, sociality has been witnessed as an aspect of the potency of Facebook. Firstly, despite the fact that Facebook has been viewed as a political site, its uses are sufficiently apolitical to attract those who had no political agenda whatsoever. These users of Facebook appear to have been exposed to political material, and were furthermore enabled to develop political interests, and began to express them before a salient audience. Furthermore, these enabled them to form connections, including within their existing social circles, which enabled them to develop their political activities further. Not only did this factor of sociality enable participants to experience social media as a salient space, it was also seen to facilitate networks of trust which were critical during the revolution, enabling participants to transmit their ideas and experiences to a wider public with impact. On this score, some support was found for Katz and Lazarsfeld's contention

that new political ideas were better transmitted through social ties than impersonal media (Granovetter, 1973). Yet, at the same time, the need to protect reputations meant that the dimension of sociality was also constraining to participants' actions.

Another crucial dimension was that of presence – the diminishment of which emerged as a critical factor in Facebook's utilization by participants a freer space. A useful counterpoint here is provided by Dreyfus (2001), who emphasizes the fact that presence provides critical functions, underpinning processes of learning and human communication. Given that Dreyfus was writing about a pre-social media age, it is to be expected that his view of the affective potentials of cyberspace stood to be amended, and indeed cyberspace figures here as affording presence, in part through its connection to salient ties for participants. Yet a further contention here is that the diminishment of presence itself should be understood as containing positive potentials. Participants were able to have valuable learning experiences of various kinds, in part because factors which inhibited their participation in a public sphere were experienced more weakly. This was precisely the case, of course, because social media sites functioned for participants as one communication tool among many, and their forays into social media facilitated transformations in other spaces.

Finally, the reworked visibility of social media functioned both as a constraining force and as one which set the stage for cascade effects. However, these were not so much informational cascades (Faris, 2010) as they were affective and agentic; participants not only joined together in shared outrage, their witnessing of others' actions caused them to re-evaluate possibilities and modify their own actions in turn. At the same time, the visibility of social media was a factor which led to significant conflict during times in which society itself was more profoundly divided, as the political views of friends and acquaintances became more visible. Facebook was for many a site at which users could see what their friends "really think" – an aspect which owed both to forms increased visibility as well as a sense of 'invisibility' (Suler, 2004) – and a site at which people expressed views before an audience which was experienced as somewhat public, lending potency to its transformative potential.

To note these tendencies is not to portray social media in utopian terms, nor is it to dismiss tendencies which may be perceived as less value-creating and even destructive. Certainly, political conversations frequently became fraught and angry exchanges which, for many, seemed to be unproductive, especially those concerning the deposition of

Mohammed Morsi in 2013 and the associated targeting of the Muslim Brotherhood. Social media can also clearly provide a distraction from politics and even appeal to our egotistical and narcissistic tendencies. Yet, what I have demonstrated in the present study is that social media cannot be reduced to these aspects of its use, and that seeking to exploit the political potentials in social media can be productive for designers of sites as well as individual users. Even if such appropriations remain the preserve of a small minority, they can be profoundly significant for individual trajectories, and can figure as relevant factors in wider social and political change.

Acknowledgement of Primary Sources

This study was primarily informed by 27 semi-structured interviews, which took place in Cairo between June 2012 and February 2014. The interviews ranged in length between 45 minutes and over 4 hours, and typically exceeded 2 hours – a testament to the generosity of participants. A range of topics were covered pertaining to social media use in general as well as other spheres of life which proved to be relevant, such as protest experience, political discussion offline, as well as the wider life context of participants.

As has been discussed in detail in the methods chapter, interviews were informed by the tradition of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), which emphasizes an intensive focus on a relatively small sample of participants (and a careful attempt to unravel their perspectives and understandings) as a way to generate important theoretical insights. As such, participants were encouraged to expand on issues that they felt were important and to assume a degree of responsibility in directing the interview. The intensive focus on each individual participant, as well as substantial practical issues explained above (and to be recapitulated below), necessitated moderation when it came to recruitment. While it was desirable to go beyond a typical IPA sample size (usually less than 20) in order to increase the relevance of the study and create more opportunities to understand local issues, it was not practical to go too far beyond this. Fieldwork was extended as long as was practical, although by the end the number of novel issues which were raised in interviews had fallen dramatically. Nevertheless, this approach to sampling necessitated a very cautious approach to generalization, as explored and instantiated above, in which participant insights and experiences are used to offer points of reflection on the conceptual adequacy of existing literature as well as to drive hypothesis generation (Cassidy et al, 2011; Smith & Osborn, 2008).

A range of participants were selected, usually in their twenties, often in their thirties, at the time of interview. The basic selection criteria employed were that participants should be over 18, have significant first-hand experience of social media, self-identify as Egyptian, and be resident in Cairo with very substantial experience and social networks in the city. There were no requirements of gender, and both men and women were prominently featured in the study. Participants were mostly liberal, predominantly favourable towards the January 25th revolution, generally not activists, and middle class – although this last term refers to what may be considered a hybrid identity in modern Cairo, incorporating a

range of socio-economic statuses, life experiences, educational attainments, as well as social milieus.

A particularly key factor in middle class identity in Cairo is education (de Koning, 2015). All of the participants were educated to degree level or in the process of acquiring their first degree. Their educations took place in a variety of institutions, including elite, expensive private schools and universities as well as well-respected, yet relatively low-cost institutions such as public universities and "religious" schools – though the majority of participants were given the majority of their tuition in a European language, a factor which again distinguishes them within Egyptian society (as does their habitual use of and high level of access to social media). Likewise, their social lives unfolded in socio-economically diverse spaces, but most were on at least passing terms with the Western-style coffee shop, a venue which is relatively unaffordable to the majority. While some participants were still financially linked to their parents, they held a range of jobs, working in accountancy, the university sector, sales, teaching, civil society organizations and elsewhere. Some were still in education, either completing undergraduate studies or undertaking postgraduate study.

Care was taken to ensure that participants were drawn from a wide range of social circles and resided across a range of areas in Cairo, including Nasr City, Ma'adi, El Dokki, and elsewhere. Often, the participants worked, socialized, and lived in a manner which was more 'across' the city than bound by a particular district or neighbourhood, as is often typical for relatively well-off Cairenes. For example, a participant might live in Giza, work in Garden City, and socialize in 6th October City, rather than concentrating their friendships and activities in a particular, close-knit neighbourhood.

The requirements of safety detailed in chapter three had a significant impact on selection issues. This constrained recruitment, given for example the importance of not adopting an overly public call for participants and the consequent need to rely heavily on the generous co-operation of others (especially because of the importance of not relying too heavily on a single individual or social group for introductions). In general, it was not wise to overreach to potential participants who were not trusting of foreigners, or who were not linked to the researcher via trusted intermediaries, given a number of incidents involving the arrest of people interviewing members of the public, which took place in Cairo while the fieldwork was carried out. This need for relationships of trust – either direct or vicarious – certainly slowed the pace of recruitment, yet the presence of this trust appears

to have had very positive implications for creating an open and reflective interview environment.

The precautions taken in recruitment no doubt help to explain the generally liberal, progressive, and somewhat revolutionary sympathy of most participants. This concentrated focus lends a particular usefulness for the purposes of the analysis, most notably significant insight into how challenging micro-political interventions, in an online environment which may often be fairly hostile, are undertaken by an array of practitioners of varying personalities and backgrounds, engaging in what might be termed a low key personal activism. While individuals with very illiberal worldviews are certainly present in the lives of participants, they feature in the present study only indirectly, as figures in the various stories, strategies, thoughts, and anticipations explored therein. While the sample cannot be seen as representative of Cairo as a whole, then, this focus on a group of participants who are able to yield a particular insight into specific areas is regarded as a significant advantage in the IPA tradition. Here, this enables the exploration of issues such social media's use for dissent, and the propagation of liberal values. As such, the work lends insight into some aspects of social media in Cairo at the expense of others, and is intended as one contribution among many to an evolving conversation about the political use of social media in the city.

In terms of political experience the participants in the present study are particularly diverse, incorporating those who have never attended a protest as well as those who have amassed significant experience. In general, though, the criterion from the outset was to go beyond prominent and established organizers whose views are already quite represented in the literature. Accordingly, most participants have been significantly politicised over recent years, and their experiences and memories yield insight into important processes regarding the unravelling of Mubarak's rule and the role of social media in facilitating dissent from previously unlikely sources. For the most part, the interview excerpts reproduced in this study are not the words of seasoned activists - those who were already ensconced in activist circles, regularly exposed to anti-regime discourse, and committed to political change prior to their social media encounters - but the insights of those whose participation in the revolution, and indeed electronically-mediated dissent, represented a novel turn in their lives. Illuminating the processes underlying this, and indeed presenting the experiences of such participants in their own words, addresses a significant gap in the literature, and therefore constitutes one of the important contributions of the present study.

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