The Middle East between Digital Democracy & Digital Society: Egypt as a Case-Study

Media, Communication and Democracy:
Global and National Environments

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“In the coming century, the emergence of a new social framework of telecommunications may be decisive for the way in which economic and social exchanges are conducted, the way knowledge is created and retrieved, and the character of the occupations and work in which men engage.”

Research Questions

- Can the Internet replace traditional tools for practicing democracy in any given society?
- Does the newly developed tool for democratisation create an alternative and effective tool for political change in the region that equally and democratically represents the will of all without discrimination?
Research Questions

- Can we talk about ‘digital democracy’ within the Middle Eastern context?
- If the recent revolutions were ignited ‘online’ and realised ‘offline’ then who are ‘the people’ that initiated and participated in those revolutions?
Outline

I. ‘Digital Democracy’: A Tool for Empowerment?
II. Towards a ‘Digital Society’ within the Middle Eastern Context: A Unique Perception of ‘Digital Democracy’ in the Middle East?
III. The Social & Political Impact of the Internet in Egypt
IV. Concluding questions
I. ‘Digital Democracy’: A Tool for Empowerment?

- The concept of ‘digital democracy’ also sometimes commonly referred to as ‘e-democracy’ is a relatively new concept used to describe the engagement in the political and governance processes using the latest technological advancements in information and communication technologies (ICT), most notably the Internet.
I. ‘Digital Democracy’: A Tool for Empowerment?

- Pushing ‘offline’ citizens and ‘getting them online’ are depictive of the new relationship between government and citizen that is very much at the heart of the concept of ‘digital democracy’.

- At the heart of the concept lies also the willingness of the government to share information with the citizenry at large, making it easily and readily available and spreading political and policy related awareness.
I. ‘Digital Democracy’: A Tool for Empowerment?

Perhaps the most important aspect of ‘digital democracy’ is to make digital technology not only a tool for making information available but also for receiving feedback from the people thus making digital technology a medium that facilitates a two-way relationship between the government and the people.
I. ‘Digital Democracy’: A Tool for Empowerment?

- Yet, despite the revolution in digital technology in practicing democracy as in the case of the most democratically and technologically advanced countries in the world, ‘digital democracy’ is not without flaws:
  - The Digital Divide
  - Centralised Control
Can we talk about a Unique Perception of ‘Digital Democracy’ in the Middle East?
II. Towards a ‘Digital Society’ within the Middle Eastern Context?

- Though the ‘digital society’ is generally understood as a modern and progressive society that exists in cyberspace and is created as a result of the adoption and integration of ICT by the government to reach all citizens equally, in much of Arab world there exists an inherently different kind of society – one that has been forcibly created by the people to advocate for their rights, demand their right to participate in the decision-making process and criticise the government and its activities.
Though digital technology has indeed facilitated political reform, yet it is difficult to talk about democracy in cyberspace within the Middle East context.

Cyberspace within the Egyptian context is suffering from centralised control by the youth, the ICT literate, the financially well-off and activists as well as writers, intellectuals and journalists. But what about the poor, have-nots and common Egyptians?
“The next medium, whatever it is – it may be the extension of consciousness – will include television as its content, not as its environment, and will transform television into an art form. A computer as a research and communication instrument could enhance retrieval, obsolesce mass library organization, retrieve the individual’s encyclopedic function and flip it into a private line to speedily tailored data of a saleable kind”

Marshall McLuhan, 1962
III. The Social & Political Impact of the Internet in Egypt

- More than 200 Internet and data service providers making ADSL service in Egypt as one of the cheapest among all African countries.

- Egypt’s Internet penetration has reached 30.8% in March 2011 compared to 22.6% in March 2010, representing 24.2 million users compared to 17.4 million users in 2010.
III. The Social & Political Impact of the Internet in Egypt

- For the past three years the ICT rate had a growth rate amounting to 13% and estimates suggest that it accounts for 3.3% of Egypt’s (GDP) reaching annually an astounding annual EGP 40 billion.

- Egypt is the only Arab country in the top 30 countries with the highest number of Facebook users with a sheer 3.6 million users with an annual growth of around 121.4%.
IV. The Types of Political Change in Egypt: From E-Mobilization to Digital Revolution?

- The Political Power of Facebook

- From Virtual Revolution to a Revolutionised Reality
IV. The Types of Political Change in Egypt: From E-Mobilization to Digital Revolution?

- 2005: Kareem Amer becomes the first blogger to be arrested and prosecuted for the content of his writing online.
- 2008: ‘April 6 Youth Movement’ organises a nationwide strike using Facebook.
- 2010 marked the first time bloggers were referred to military trials.
Counter-effect ➔ it attracted more youth to the newly-found political space in which they felt more connected, supported and able to voice their opinion and advocate for their long-lost rights.

‘We are all Khaled Said’

‘Facebook Revolution’?
Concluding Remarks:

- Poverty, lack of education, illiteracy (and without a doubt digital illiteracy) as well as the lack of political interest hinders traditional and digital democracy and the creation of a digital society of all without discrimination.

- Ordinary Egyptians preferred to be ‘out of trouble’ and ‘stay away from politics’ for most of their lives ➔ a culture of passivism and complete lack of interest in political affairs.
Unanswered Questions:

- Did history really provide us with a successful “online” revolution and what is the role of this digital revolution in the current political transition that the region is going through?
- Does the “online” behaviour automatically represent and translate the behaviour “on the street” and if so, how?
Unanswered Questions:

- Will Egypt’s new generation (the so-called ‘digital generation’ or the ‘generation of the revolution’) help emulate the positive impact that the Internet has had politically on the social level and reproduce a new social value system and a new collective memory that will sustain this political change?

- Or will the prevalent social structure be stronger that it will end up limiting this change to a mere change of political structures, faces and figures rather than changes in behaviour, attitudes and way of thinking?
Thank You!

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