



**Egypt, Iran, and Beyond: How New Media Is Their
Voice and How Their Voice Can Be Protected**

by Renee Holzknecht

Minnesota

United States Institute of Peace

"Egypt, Iran, and Beyond: How New Media Is Their Voice and How Their Voice Can Be Protected"

Relatively new innovations in media, such as social networking, participatory media, and mobile phone technologies, are presenting new ways to facilitate peace. They have been the means by which young Egyptians, Iranians, and others have organized protests and exposed their oppressive governments. New media, though it can be misused, is a useful tool in peace-building, and free countries dedicated to democracy must protect access for dissidents.

The revolution in Egypt, which began January 25, 2011, and is still ongoing, casts a spotlight on the great potential of new media. Social media sites like Facebook and Twitter are crucial “both in coordinating among activists and in spreading the word” (Giglio, “Is Egypt Next?”) about protests intended to bring about the ouster of Hosni Mubarak and the end of police brutality. One activist said, “We use Facebook to schedule the protests, Twitter to coordinate, and YouTube to tell the world” (qtd. in Howard, “Cascading Effects”). Egyptians also engage in citizen journalism, using blogs and Flickr to expose police brutality by posting pictures and videos of the acts. Activist Gigi Ibrahim collects photos of human rights violators so they can eventually be brought to justice, and Kamal Sedra documents and maps torture and corruption throughout Egypt, placing the information online (Aitamurto). Though the impact of new media should not be overstated – only 25 percent of Egyptians have Internet access (“Internet Usage Statistics”) – it still clearly plays a role.

Iran, too, utilized new media during the 2009 Green Revolution, in which Iranians protested against Mahmoud Ahmadinejad after his disputed victory in the presidential elections. They used Facebook, Twitter, and instant messaging in order to communicate and organize protests, as well as helping each other find hospitals safe from Basij militias, supporters of Ahmadinejad, for injuries (Howard, “Cyberwar”). A mobile phone camera captured the death of Neda Agha-Soltan, whom a Basij militia member shot dead, and her demise was seen around the world on the Internet. The video re-sparked the protests (Connett).

As can be easily ascertained, in both Egypt and Iran’s cases as well as others, new media has positively contributed to citizens’ causes, aiding the dissidents in organizing protests and exposing government violence so the whole world would know. In fact, Philip Howard, a professor at the University of Washington, points out, “[T]he most consistent causal features of democratization include a wired civil society that uses digital media to undermine authoritarian rule in the course of national and global public opinion” (“Cascading Effects”). This fact has even led authorities to pursue legal action against online activists and bloggers, as evidenced in the arrests of Egyptian bloggers Maikel Nabil Sanad (Shenker) and

Ahmed Salah (Giglio, "Facebook Revolt"), for example, and many Iranian bloggers and webmasters of dissident websites (Howard, "Cyberwar").

With all the online activism in both countries, why were the outcomes so different? In Egypt, the protests have, so far, resulted in Mubarak's resignation ("Hosni Mubarak Resigns"). But Iran's Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is still in power. This is partially because Ahmadinejad used new media more effectively than Mubarak. According to Queens University's Mohammed el-Nawawy, the Egyptian government set up an "Internet police" that made blogs to respond to protester blogs and to infiltrate chat rooms to promote a pro-Mubarak agenda (Conway). Mubarak also shut down many Egyptian Internet service providers for five days (Bartholet 106). Making anonymous blogs and deviously trolling chat rooms, of course, is not enough action to withstand the angry voices of millions of Egyptians. Taking Internet servers off-line was a smart move, but Mubarak did not use new media the way the Iranian president did. Ahmadinejad kept a campaign blog so his supporters could keep up to date with his activities and even donate to his campaign online (Howard, "Cyberwar"). But the manipulation of new media went much further than that. After Iran's Interior Ministry leaked that they had been authorized to change votes, the former president of Iran, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, developed a plan for Iranians to cast votes on a poll using their mobile phones. To counter this, Ahmadinejad's government disrupted phone services and took opposing websites offline. After officials announced Ahmadinejad's victory and Iranians began protesting, furiously blogging, tweeting, and sharing videos and images as they did so, the government closely inspected all the online activity to identify the leaders of the anti-Ahmadinejad movement (Howard, "Cyberwar"). Iran's government was using its citizens' social media activity to its advantage. Ahmadinejad evidently outdid Mubarak in manipulating new media for his purposes. Though more factors may have contributed to the different outcomes of Egypt and Iran's protests, it is clear that governments skillful in utilizing new media, tools of the dissidents, are more likely to be able to crush the voices of dissidents.

The fact that governments can use new media is not the only limitation of its glories. The Internet and mobile phone services can be censored and blocked. The examples of Egypt's Internet shutdown and Iran's mobile phone blackout are enough to demonstrate this, but unfortunately, there are many more examples. Access to the Internet is extremely limited for private citizens in North Korea; in Burma, having an Internet connection requires registration with the police (Graham 18). Syria, Morocco, Zimbabwe (Maderazo), and Cuba (Del Riego et al. 222) are among the nations in which new media is censored. The social networking and participatory media sites sometimes also take part in censorship. For example, Flickr began removing some Egyptian activists' pictures of police violence because the pictures did not belong to the users, which the site usually overlooks. YouTube also removed videos an Egyptian activist filmed of a case of police torture, deeming it "inappropriate" (Preston).

New media has even more flaws. It is a good tool for the organization of

events, but it does not discriminate between peace-building and hatemongering. In March 2011, radical Muslims in Egypt used Twitter to incite sectarian violence against Coptic Christians, resulting in deaths and injuries in both groups and the destruction of property (Bradley). New media can be used to facilitate terrorism as well. Ian Graham, the author of numerous books on technology and communications, says "[terrorists] use [the Internet] . . . as a communications channel to exchange messages" (49). A well-known example of this is Anwar Al-Awlaki, an American-born Islamic cleric, who used the Internet to disseminate videos meant to recruit terrorists (Levin). Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the "Underwear Bomber," is thought to have been influenced by terrorist recruiters online (Hosenball et al. 39). In addition to recruitment, the Internet has been used for raising funds for terrorism ("Cyberterrorism" 38).

Unfortunately, there is no way to stop unjust governments from misusing new media. In the case of the incitement of violence and terrorism, it is possible to censor the Internet so the voices of those trying to cause strife will be silenced, but where would this stop? Counter-terrorism censorship could easily go too far and lead to the violation of freedom of speech. Countries and organizations committed to democracy and freedom of expression, however, can do something about regime censorship. They can help set up stealth wireless networks and Internet in a suitcase—a suitcase of hardware smuggled into a country and later set up for wireless Internet service—where regimes block or limit new media. This is called "shadow Internet," and the United States has already done this for Afghanistan in defiance of the Taliban (Glanz et al.). Two other ways to get around censorship are proxies and browser extensions. Web proxy servers, which are computer applications that act as go-betweens for requests from users for Internet service available on another server, were used in Iran; people around the world volunteered their computers to Iranian activists during the Green Revolution to serve as proxies (Howard, "Cyberwar"). Since this is possible, human rights organizations should set up proxy systems for dissidents. Browser extensions are computer programs meant to extend the function of web browsers, which Iranian programmers also use to get around regime censorship (Maderazo). For countries where there is no one who can or is willing to create these programs, free countries should send people to repressed nations to write these handy browser extensions. There are many ways to defy government-imposed silences.

A decade ago, Graham said: "Technology changes society by changing what we do, how we do it, and, often, how quickly we can do it. The Internet . . . is already altering the way in which we work, play, and communicate with each other" (4). He was entirely right, but he could hardly have conceived of how helpful the Internet and new media would become to those living under the thumb of controlling or violent regimes. New media is making the world smaller—making it shrink—and as the world is shrinking, the repressed are suddenly close enough to those capable of helping to tap them on the shoulder and say, "I need help." The people of Egypt, Iran, and the millions of others who want peace are connecting with each other and the rest of the world in order to fight for their rights and let

everyone know about it. It is working, and we must protect their voices by protecting new media.

Bibliography

Batholet, Jeffrey. "Young, Angry, and Wired." *National Geographic* July 2011: 102-107. Print.

Cyberterrorism—the Use of the Internet for Terrorist Purposes. Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing, 2007. Print.

Graham, Ian. *The Internet*. Austin: Steck-Vaughn Company, 2001. Print.

Hosenball, Mark, Michael Isikoff and Evan Thomas. "The Radicalization of Umar Farouk Abdulmatallab." *Newsweek* 11 Jan. 2010: 37-41. Print.

End Notes

Internet Bibliography

Aitamurto, Tanja. "How Social Media Is Keeping the Egyptian Revolution Alive."

PBS, 13 Sept. 2011. Web. 7 Nov. 2011.

<<http://www.pbs.org/mediashift/2011/09/how-social-media-is-keeping-the-egyptian-revolution-alive256.html>>

Bradley, Matt. "Egypt Clashes Turn Spotlight on Radicals." *Wall Street Journal*, 9

May 2011. Web. 22 Aug. 2011.

<<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704681904576311282620420522.html>>

Connett, David. "Iran Online: Around the World in 60 Minutes." *Independent*, 28

June 2009. Web. 17 Nov. 2011.

<<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/iran-online-around-the-world-in-60-minutes-1722467.html>>

Conway, Evan. "How Wired Are Egyptians?" *PBS*, 31 Jan. 2011. Web. 8 Nov.

2011. <<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/2011/01/how-wired-are-egyptians.html>>

Del Riego, Alissa, and Adrianna C. Rodriguez. "Ladies in White: The Peaceful March

Against Repression in Cuba and Online." *Harvard Human Rights Journal* 24 (2011):

221-240. Web. 22 Aug. 2011. <<http://harvardhrj.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/09/221-240.pdf>>

Giglio, Mike. "Inside Egypt's Facebook Revolt." *The Daily Beast*, 27 Jan. 2011.

Web. 22 Aug. 2011.

<<http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2011/01/27/inside->

egypt-s-facebook-revolt.html>

---. "Is Egypt Next?" *The Daily Beast*, 23 Jan. 2011. Web. 15 Nov. 2011.

<<http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2011/01/22/the-revolution-comes-to-egypt.html>>

Glanz, James, and John Markoff. "U.S. Underwrites Internet Detour Around Censors."

The New York Times, 12 June 2011. Web. 22 Aug. 2011.

<<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/12/world/12internet.html>>

"Hosni Mubarak Resigns As President." *Al Jazeera*, 11 Feb. 2011. Web. 17 Nov. 2011.

<<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/02/201121125158705862.html>>

Howard, Philip. "The Arab Spring's Cascading Effects." *Miller-McCune*, 23 Feb.

2011. Web. 22 Aug. 2011.

<<http://www.miller-mccune.com/politics/the-cascading-effects-of-the-arab-spring-28575>>

---. "Inside the Cyberwar for Iran's Future." *Miller-McCune*, 18 Dec. 2009. Web. 23 Aug. 2011.

<<http://www.miller-mccune.com/culture/inside-the-cyberwar-for-iran-s-future-6535>>

"Internet Usage Statistics for Africa." *Internet World Stats*, n.d. Web. 8 Nov. 2011.

<<http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats1.htm>>

Levin, Brian. "Anwar Al-Awlaki, American Internet Terrorist Pioneer and Plotter Killed

in Yemen." *Huffington Post*, 30 Sept. 2011. Web. 19 Nov. 2011.

<<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/brian-levin-jd/anwar-al-awlaki-american->

_b_988695.html>

Maderazo, Jennifer. "YouTube, Flickr Become Forces for Cultural Change." *PBS*, 28 Sept. 2007. Web. 8 Nov. 2011.

<<http://www.pbs.org/mediashift/2007/09/youtube-flickr-become-forces-for-cultural-change271.html>>

Preston, Jennirfer. "Ethical Quandary for Social Sites." *New York Times*, 27 Mar. 2011.

Web. 8 Nov. 2011.

<<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/28/business/media/28social.html?pagewanted=all>>

Shenker, Jack. "Jailed Egyptian Blogger on Hunger Strike Says 'He Is Ready to Die'." *Guardian*, 18 Oct. 2011. Web. 17 Nov. 2011.

<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/oct/18/jailed-egypt-blogger-hungerstrike>>