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Internet and the Egyptian Public Sphere

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Abstract:

The Internet offers many actors in the society ways to present and raise discussions of ideas that are not possible or easy to engage in, especially in societies with conservative facades such as the Egyptian society.

The number of internet users in Egypt has reached 8.6 million in March 2008, this means that more than 10.5% of total Egyptian population have Internet access. The number of Internet users in Egypt is the third highest number of Internet users in Africa and presents about 17% of the total number of Internet users in Africa.

Having more chances to Internet access and using the security of being anonymous if one desires provided by the Internet, increasing numbers of Egyptians started using the Internet to gain information and engage in political, social and religious discussions. This new E-Public Sphere in Egypt is not completely virtual, nor is it completely real.

Giving more chances to networking, forming alliances and addressing the public are a number of aspects that the Internet facilitated. For example, *Kefaya* (Enough!) political movement has utilized its web site to demonstrate its positions, to mobilize support and to announce the dates and places for its organized demonstrations since 2004. While blogging has become a trend between Egyptian Internet users in the last four years and it started to increase since the last presidential elections in 2005, then the People's Assembly's elections in the same year, which lead number of popular blogs to monitor those elections. This has created a kind of alternative media that emerged, run by professional, semi-professional, or amateurs. Taking Internet activism one step further, on April 2008 a semi successful nationwide strike was called for and organised through the Internet. And of equal importance, increasing number of blogs and web sites started addressing social and religious highly controversial issues.

This paper, focusing on websites and blogs, explores the new trends which the Internet gave rise to, and the trends that were disempowered by the Internet in Egypt, and how the state interacts with these trends through the recent attempts to increase censorship on the Internet, and in particular on its usage as a political arena.

Internet in Egypt:

Internet was first available in Egypt in 1993, through the Egyptian Universities Network (EUN) and The Cabinet's Information and Decision Support Center (IDSC). The number of Internet users in Egypt was estimated to be between 2000 and 3000 users on that year (Abdulla, 2005). 15 year later, the number of Internet users in Egypt has reached 8.6 million users in March 2008, this means that more than 10.5% of total Egyptian population have Internet access. Aainst six millions users in December 2006, it is a 7.8 million users increase as compared to the 1999 number of 300,000 (IDSC 2007). According to the Internet World Stats site, in December 2007 Egypt the number of Internet users was ranked third in Africa, Nigeria and Morocco held the first and second ranks[1].

Chart (1)
The number of Egyptian Internet users (in thousands) from June 30th , 1997
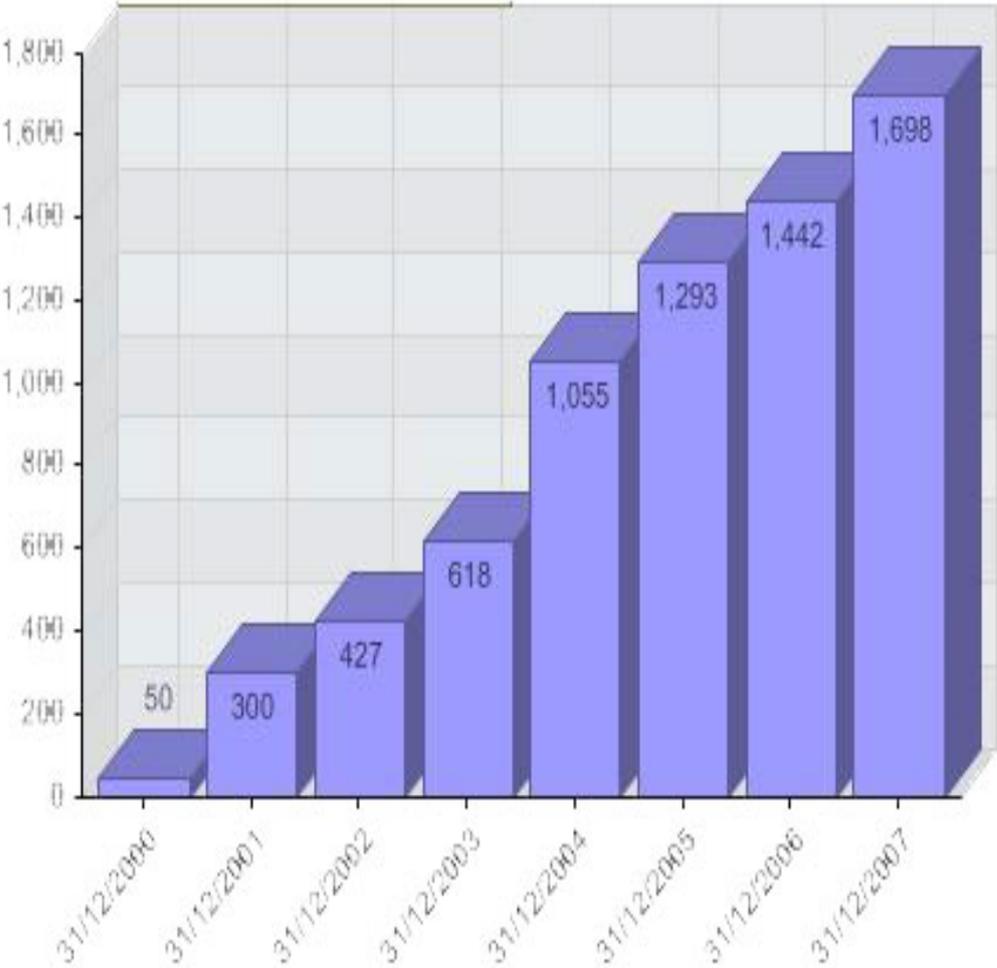till June 30th 2007.
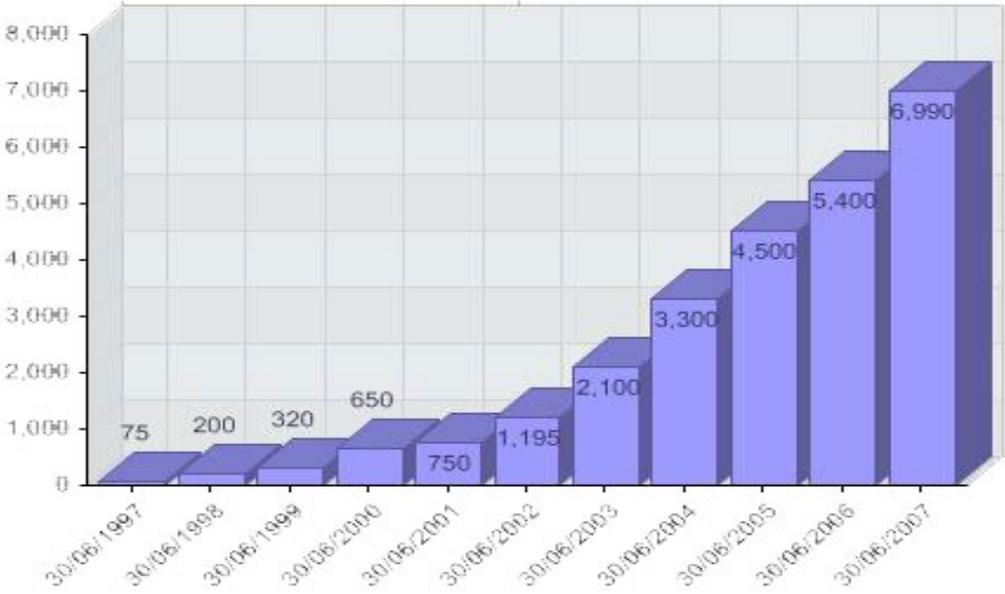
Source: Cabinet's Information and Decision Support Center (IDSC), 2008.
URL: http://www.idsc.gov.eg/nds/nds_view.aspx?id=657

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[1] Internet World Stats site has stated that the total number of internet users in Egypt was 6 millions users in December 2007, while the Egyptian Ministry of Communication and Information Technology (MCIT 2007)presents the number of users to be 8.1 million users.

Other than private subscriber and Internet cafés, Internet could be accessed through IT clubs. An IT club is an open area equipped with a local area network that connects ten to twenty personal computers, and that is connected to the Internet. The number of these IT clubs reached 1525 in June 2007. This project started on 2000 and IT clubs are found in the youth centers, public libraries, civil society's headquarters, cultural palaces, schools and universities (SIS 2007).
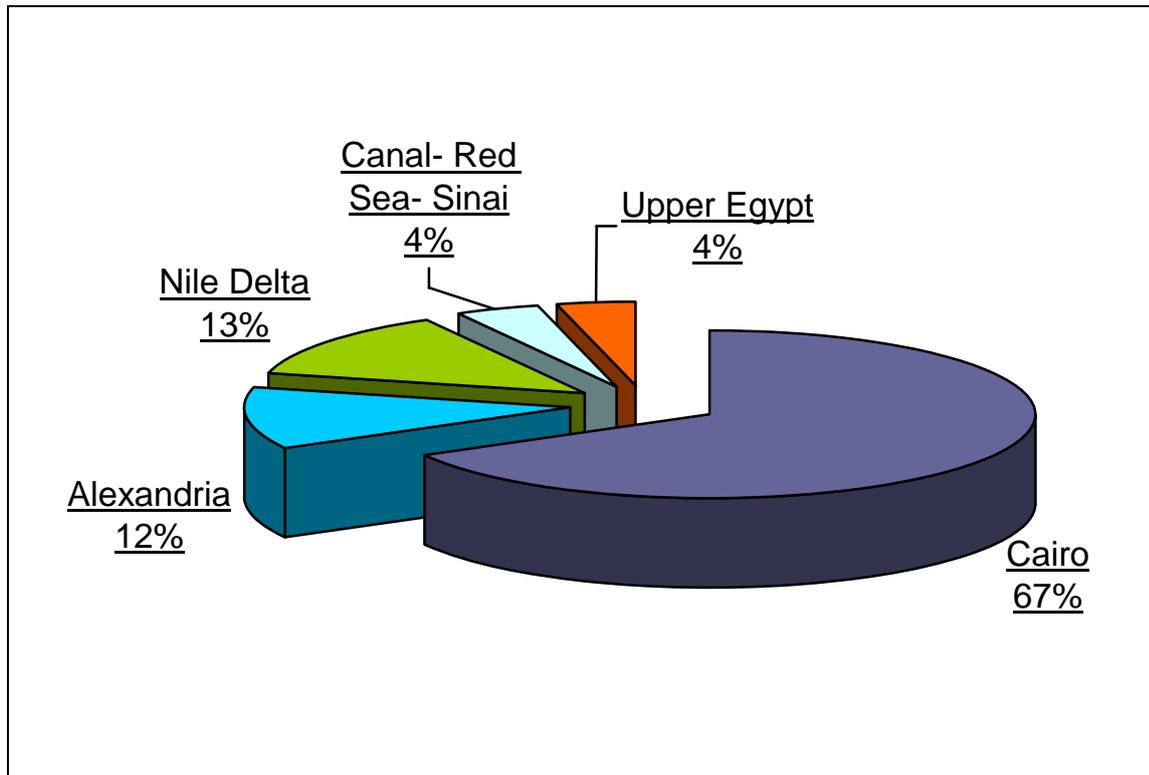
Chart (2)
The number of IT clubs in Egypt, from December 31st 2000 , till December 31st 2007.

Source: Cabinet's Information and Decision Support Center (IDSC), 2008.
URL: http://www.idsc.gov.eg/nds/nds_view.aspx?id=1735

Chart (3)
Egyptian ADSL Subscribers Geographic Distribution, December 2007.

Source: Ministry of Communication and Information Technology, Monthly Report (December 2007), p.3.

Chart (3) shows the geographic distribution of ADSL subscribers, who reached 427,085 subscribers. Given that, according to the last census (2006) results, the population percentages of total population for these areas are as follows: Greater Cairo area 25.21%; Nile Delta 35.90%; Alexandria 6.11% ; Upper Egypt 28.92% and Suez Canal, Red Sea and Sinai 3.86%. (CAPMAS 2007). It is obvious that Internet connection is not evenly distributed throughout Egypt.(Mehanna, forthcoming)

Blogs:

As defined by (Schiano et at., 2004): A weblog or blog is a frequently updated webpage, typically consisting of fairly brief posts presented and archived in reverse-chronological order. Blog posts are primarily textual, but many include photos and other multimedia content. Most are interlinked in that they provide links to other sites on the Internet.

While Blogging has become a trend between Egyptian Internet users in the last four years, it started to increase since the last presidential elections in 2005, then the People's Assembly's

elections in the same year, which lead number of popular blogs to monitor those elections. So a kind of alternative media emerged, run by professional, semi-professional, or amateurs.

There are two main landmarks that contributed to the wide spread of blogging between Egyptian Internet users:

The first landmark was last the presidential elections in 2005, followed by the People's Assembly (Parliament) elections on December of the same year. In these two events, some blogs started reporting the events and proceedings of these two elections, for example how in some cases voters were not allowed access to the ballots or how certain candidates for the People's Assembly seats were favored or been prosecuted by the executive authorities. This has lead to the increased numbers of viewers to those blogs who documented these incidents, specially the blogs that posted photographic pictures or videos. From here interest in following these blogs started, also this was when some newspapers started paying attention to blogs and copying, sometimes not without permission, coverage and pictures from these blogs.

Some of the blogs that started to be famous as a result of the coverage of the two elections on 2005 include: "*Al-Waa'e Al-Masri*" [The Egyptian Awarness] blog, with an English title "Misr Digital" for Wa'el Abbas, a young journalist who was one of the first who presented comprehensive coverage with pictures included to some of the events of the elections, this blog was a development of a e-mail group under the same name, that is still active but not as accessible, nor as famous as the blog. Another blog that gain popularity around the same period is "Manal and Alaa's Space" for Manal Hassan and Alaa Abd-Al-Fatah, a young couple who are both civil society activists.

The Second landmark, which was a result of the first one, namely the coverage of the two important elections of 2005, was an episode of the "*Tahet Al-Megehar*" [Under Examination] Program   titled "*Al-Modawenon Al-Arab: Al-Moa'rada Bi Sout Gadid*" [The Arab Bloggers, Opposition With A New Voice], produced and aired by Al-Jazeera News Channel, this episode was aired for the first time on the 26th of May 2006, after airing advertisements about the episode for sometime. This was the first time a widespread media outlet gives this coverage to blogging.

While this episode title speaks about the Arab bloggers, it only dealt with Egyptian bloggers and featured guests from Egypt only. And in this episode there were invited seven bloggers to speak about their experiences, ideas and reasons for blogging. The main guest, that was the reason of the importance of the episode and why it is considered to be a landmark of the rapid increase of Egyptian Internet users who started to blog after watching it, was Mohammed Hassanien Haikal[2], considered by many to be the most important, influential and masterful journalist and political analyst in Egypt. In this episode, Haikal spoke for a few minutes, saying that the writer he reads for a lot those days is a writer he doesn't know, but who write anonymously in a blog called "Baheyya"[3], he doesn't know is she, but he asks his office to printout any new articles she publishes on her blog, and he reads for her more than he does for any known Egyptian journalist. As he thinks that her writings speak for a passionately of a new generation, and indicates a society that is full of life.(Al-Jazeera News Channel, 2006).

These short words of Haikal, who is considered by many to be the most respected writer and analyst, has caused many of the aspiring youth to start blogging themselves. Thinking that if Haikal reads for Baheya and commends her in a very positive way, then maybe there will be a chance for them to be read by Haikal and to be part of this new generation he spoke about. This was noted in a number of blogs whose owners admitted being interested in blogging after watching Al-Jazeera episode.

Attention to blogs continued to increase with each event that was covered online before the traditional media outlet start paying attention to it, or with events that received better coverage online than they do in printed media. Examples of these events were the religious

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[2] Mohamed Hassanein Heikal : born 1923, is a leading Egyptian journalist. For 17 years (1957-1974) he was editor-in-chief of the Cairo newspaper *Al-Ahram* and has been a respected commentator on Middle East affairs for more than 50 years (Moss,2001).

[3] *Baheyya:* is one of the popular Egyptian blogs. The blog is titled "Baheyya: Egypt Analysis and Whimsy. Commentary on Egyptian politics and culture by an Egyptian citizen with a room of her own."The language of this blog is English, but the depth of the analysis provided made it gain a lot of readers who normally would rather read in the Arabic language. The blog   started since March 18th , 2005. The owner is a female writer who decided to remain anonymous, and she presents her blog as follows "Baheyya is an Egyptian female name that has come to stand in for Egypt itself. The symbolism of course is the handiwork of the gifted duo of Shaykh Imam Eissa and Ahmad Fu'ad Nigm in their haunting song, "Masr yamma, ya Baheyya." I make no foolish claims to represent Egypt or all Egyptians, I just like the name."

violence which took place in Alexandria in 2006, and received a very good coverage on the (Jar Al-Qamar) [Neigbour of the Moon] blog.

The Egyptian Cabinet's Information and Decision Support Center (IDSC) conducted a recent study about Egyptian blogs on April 2008. The study estimates the number of Egyptian blogs to be around 160,000 blogs. Table(1) shows the percentages of new Egyptian blogs started since 2004, using a sample of 2497 Egyptian blogs.(IDSC,2008) The reported results supports what was mentioned previously that the increase of blogging started in 2005.

Table (1)
The Percentages of New Egyptian Blogs Started
for Years (2004-2008)

Year	Percentage of New Egyptian Blogs
2004	3 %
2005	18%
2006	27%
2007	37%
2008 (till April only)	14.2%

Source: IDSC (2008), Egyptian Blogs: New Social Space, IDSC Monthly Reports Series (April 2008)

Websites:

Many political powers and societal actors have created a website for themselves, to be a way to reach a larger audience than they usually do. This includes registered political parties and their newspapers, such as (Al-Wafd) and (Al-Tagamo') who both have websites for their news papers.

There has been also a number of websites for legal and human rights support groups and organizations. Examples of some of the more famous websites is the Hisham Mubarak Center for Legal Aid, which keeps an active websites of the cases it is working on or concerned about. This has increased both the documentation of human rights violations and the access of the general public to related information which was not available before.

Also those un-officially recognized political powers have utilized their websites first to recruit new supporters, ,then to publish their press releases and news. Of the more obvious is the website of The Muslim Brotherhood (*Al-Ikhwan Al-Muslimeen*), which is quite powerful movement in the Egyptian society, although it has been outlawed since the 1940s. The Muslim Brotherhood, has an official website in both Arabic and English, with the English version being more moderate than the Arabic one.

Trends Affected Negatively by the Internet

The traditional political powers has been affected negatively by the Internet. Oppositional voices, monitoring of elections, reporting of events by the independent media, which is enabled by the Internet, have contributed to undermining them.

The monopoly the state-own/controlled newspapers and television channels once had is not possible to maintain anymore. These media outlets were once the sole source of accessing information to the general public and were mostly unchallenged in their coverage of events and in the analysis and facts they decide to produce or hide. Now the main source of accessing information regarding current affairs or special events.

One of the Institutions that was affected negatively is Al-Azhar, which has since the 1960s been identifying its stances with the positions taken by the Egyptian state. This has for long caused criticism for the seemingly state controlled positions taken by the last Grand-Imams of Al-Azhar. But the Internet has allowed for the increased access and spread of these opinions opposing the positions taken by Al-Azhar, the access to these opinions was limited before, since they were not welcomed in the traditional medial outlets.

The Coptic Orthodox Church, which the vast majority of Egyptian Christian follow, is another institution that was affected negatively by the Internet. There appeared some websites and blogs that opposes different positions taken by the Church, either for some of the theological or the political positions and opinions. Still the person of the Coptic Pope is not disputed on the writings I saw online, although the actions or comments of some of the clergy members around him are .

Trends Affected Positively by the Internet

There are a number of trends in the Egyptian society that are affected positively by the Internet. In general, the Internet can be said to have given a voice for the voiceless. That is the Internet have given a platform to express opinions for those who don't have this platform in face-to-face societal interactions. Not having an ability to voice the opinions held, could include those who are not organized in any formal way, or those who are organized but either their organizations ask them not to express their opinions or there are other reasons that prevents them from voicing their opinions publicly. These reasons could include fears for reactions towards their opinions, this might be for fear of official prosecutions or societal ones.

An interesting group that were empowered by the Internet would be the Muslims Brotherhood youth, or younger members. Previously, there were no public news about the younger generation of the Brotherhood. Only the older generation, specially the top officials in the Brotherhood's Guidance Office (*Maktab al Ireshad*) and of course the General Guide (*Al-Murshid Al-Aam*). Starting 2006 there has been establishing of a number of blogs for youth members of the Brotherhood. These blogs discussed a number of issues and promoted the Brotherhood opinions which is the expected discourse and it is similar to the comments made by older members. In addition, some issues were discussed publically for the first time, about differences of opinions inside the Brotherhood, this is done under the general term (Self Critique). It is not clear yet, if the introduction of these Muslim Brotherhood youth blogs is upon the individual choices of the blogs owners or is it used as a systematic propaganda tool by the Brotherhood to attract a different population of supporters among internet users, particularly that these blogs started around the same time. Examples of these blogs include : "*Yalla msh mohem*" (Alright, it doesn't matter) for Magdy Saad,   "*Shabab Al Ikhwan*" (Brotherhood Youth) for Abulrahman Rashwan, "*Wahed Men Al Ikhwan*" (One of The Brotherhood) for Mohamed Hamza and "*Ebn Akh*" (Son of a Brother) for Mahmoud Saaid.

Spread of New forms of using the Arabic Language:

The Internet has another impact, which is the form of language used in most of the blogs.
Most bloggers write using the Egyptian dialect of Arabic (Al-Lahga Al-Masreya), what is spoken on the daily basis in Egypt, instead of the more formal Modern Standard Arabic (Al-Arabia Al-Fuseha). This is not a new trend for writers, but its widespread is, specially that a number of newspapers have started giving more space to writings in the Egyptian dialect.

Specially, those newspapers that have designated a section or even a page to follow and report the writings online, like (Al-Dustor) newspaper for example.

This was also reinforced with publishing houses interest of publishing some social blogs as books, which lead to more spread of this new form of using the language in the public sphere. For example in the 2008 Cairo Book Fair, Dar El Shorouk one, which is one of the major publishing houses in Egypt, presented three new books for three popular blogs. The title of these books are either the title of the blog or a title of a specific entry in it. These three books are "I Want To Get Married" (*Aieza Atgwaz*) for Ghada AbdAalal, which was so popular that now it is in its third print run (Abdelhadi. 2008). The other two books are "This Is My Dance" (*Amma Hazeh fa Raqsati Ana*) from the blog titled "*Maa* Nafsi" (With Myself) for Ghada Muhammed Mahmoud, and "Rice Pudding For Two" (*Orez bi Al-laban li Shakhsayn*) from the blog titled "*Hawadeet*" (Stories) for Rehab Bassam. More importantly the introduction of these new three books was announced not to be a one time event, but to be only the start of Dar El Shorouk's new book series titled "Blog" (Dar El Shorouk, 2008).

Networking and Mobilizing Support:
Different activists have used the Internet to mobilize support for the causes they work for. This includes publishing of information and announcing protests, demonstrations, and strikes. Giving more chances to networking, forming alliances and addressing the public are a number of aspects that the Internet facilitated. For example, Kefaya (Enough!) political movement has utilized its web site to demonstrate its positions, to mobilize support and to announce the dates and places for its organized demonstrations since 2004.
Taking Internet activism one step further, on April 6th 2008 a semi successful nationwide strike was called for and organized through the Internet.

The April 6th strike was called for mainly through a Facebook group, which was promoted and advertised in many Egyptian blogs The Facebook group had more than 65,000 members subscribed to it. and websites, and its events was followed and covered online as well. The moderators of the Facebook group were arrested for some days.

Breaking of Taboos:

The Internet has also enabled the breaking of what were considered taboos or close to taboos in the Egyptian society regarding discussions of certain issues. Some of these issues include sexuality related discussions and those discussions related to the accepted gender roles.

For example, there was a distinct change related to the discussion of sexuality related IslamOnLine.net Arabic Cyber-Counselor section started in March 2000, IslamOnline.net is one of the largest and most influential Islamic websites online, its administration and editorial offices are based in Cairo. By the end of 2007 it had 4,374 answered problems published online, and almost other 4,000 problems answered and published on a temporary web-pages not accessed publicly, but only by the problem sender, either because the sender asked to have a private answer or the editors thought it would be better not to publicly discuss these problems. When IOL-ACC section first started, it was heavily attacked a on number of fronts for publishing and answering sexuality related problems. Most attacks came from other Islamists who found it inappropriate for an Islamic site to have such a section. Some voiced concerns that the result of the section would be to increase the number of people committing sins in the society by exposing people to information regarding them, and even giving them examples to copy from. These accusations went to the extent of even accusing IOL-ACC of promoting "Islamic porno". Others claimed it to be a part of a conspiracy to help disintegrate the society, and to make the society focus on micro problems rather than macro challenges. These attacks were acknowledged and published in IOL-ACC along with replies by the counselors, mainly explaining that there is nothing unreligious about discussing an important aspect of daily life and that there are different religious opinions different than the popular opinions steering away from these discussion.

It is interesting that after the initial criticisms and objections in the first couple of years of the beginning of IOL-ACC, due to the attention and popularity gained by IOL-ACC approach of presenting sexuality awareness and counseling, a number of other websites and then satellite channels started presenting similar contents. For example, in 2007 a couple of private satellite channels that have fundamentalist religious orientation, to the extent they don't allow women to appear on screen, started featuring programs related to sexuality. So it can be said that those trends that attacked IOL-ACC in the beginning have started to capitalize on the success of the approach first presented by IOL-ACC. (Mehanna, forthcoming.)

Censorship of the Internet:

The Egyptian Constitution states that: "no crime and no penalty may be awarded out of law, and no penalty may be awarded to the violations committed before affecting the respective law" (Article 66 , Chapter 4), but in reality there has been criminalization of some online activities without there are no legal stipulations that outlaws them.

Egypt issued law no. 10/4 February 2003 known as "Telecommunications Regulation Act". Upon this law, the National Telecommunication Regulation Authority was established. This role of this authority is to administer the telecommunications utilities. Some of the articles of the law criminalize some of the ways of using telecommunication facilities. However, the law does not handle the online publishing issue.

Egyptian government does not fully block the Internet. In comparison with traditional media, the Internet is relatively free. The vast majority of Internet users in Egypt can realize that the authorities are controlling the Internet in an undeclared and intangible way. Blocking websites, although limited, is an ordinary procedure in Egypt. Blocking is implemented without declaring the legal reasons for it. Blocking websites in Egypt is practiced without any legal procedures or clarification of the reason for the blocking. That is why blocked websites owners cannot legally react to the authorities when their websites are blocked.

During the convention of the Arab Interior Ministers Council in Tunisia in January 2006, the Egyptian Interior Minister, offered a proposal to merge the Arab efforts to work on a Security Council resolution. This would oblige the States followed by the institutions and the biggest international companies engaged in the management and operation of information and communication networks to close websites broadcasting information and data concerning the manufacturing or using weapons, as well as websites that broadcast extremist ideologies. Seventeen human rights organizations announced their rejection of the attempts of Arab Interior Ministers to enact legislations giving them the right to close websites under the claim of fighting against terrorism. (*HRInfo,2006)*

There continues to be many efforts to censoring the contents of Egyptian websites and blogs, and prosecuting, legally or otherwise, those who express opposition

For example :

On February 22nd, 2007, Kareem Amer, who is a 23 years old blogger from Alexandria, was sentenced to four years of imprisonment for charges related to insulting Islam and defaming the president of Egypt. So far Amer is the only Egyptian blogger who got jail sentence for opinions expressed online.

And on May 12^{th,} , 2008. on the same day that Cairo was hosting the largest African Telecommunication Conference, Africa Telecom, the government owned telecommunication company (TE-Data) has decided to block IP address of the site of the Egyptian Movement for Change (Kefaya!) to its internet subscribers (ANHRI, 12.05.2008)

While on June 2008, Internet surveillance has been increased by a new registration system required to access the wireless Internet service in major coffee shops. According to the new registration process: each visitor of a coffee shop with a wireless Internet connection is given a scratch card to get access and is then required to fill out a form detailing their name, email address and mobile number. The system then sends a text message with a pin code for access. So that the government can already monitor those who access the internet from their homes as they are subscribers with an Internet provider as well as at internet cafes, where the less privileged users have to give café owners their ID numbers to use the service. Coffee shops offering wireless Internet connections to upper and middle class users were the only ones left unmonitored, so they've created this process whereby you have to register with all personal information.It is worth noting that coffee shops known for providing wireless Internet service, such as Cilantro, Starbucks, Costa Coffee and Beano's have become popular hangouts for youth, many of whom are activist bloggers or use Facebook. (Misr Digital blog, 09.06.2008)

The prosecution of Internet activists doesn't seem to stop on the national borders , as on July 2008, the authorities at Saudi Arabia have deported an Egyptian who has been living and working in the city of Al-Madina Al-Monura for 44 years. The reason for the deportation was his writings against the Egyptian government in different websites and articles he wrote in a number of newspapers. The deportation is thought to be at the request of the Egyptian authorities (Masrawy News site,26.7.2008).

Conclusion:

The Internet has affected the Egyptian public sphere in a number of ways. This includes dis-empowering of some of the traditional elements of the Public Sphere, either religiously or culturally. On the religious front, both Al-Azhar and The Egyptian Orthodox Church, have been affected negatively by the criticism addressed to them through it, while it was not the case before.

Of the other elements that faced negative impacts were the state owned TV channels and newspapers, having lost the monopoly they once possessed. As Internet users usually turn to international news sites and independent media sources available online to get the latest news and analysis.

Some of the trends that are empowered by the Internet, were those who were denied access to the public sphere, or allowed very limited or heavily controlled access. This includes the Muslim Brotherhood which has a ambiguous relationship to the government and is allowed very controlled interactions in the public sphere. Also, there are those who had no access to forums of expressions as they were simply not organized individuals, who found the internet a chance to meet others that hold the same opinions as theirs and started being active online before taking it a further step and moving their activism in to physical movements and protests. Therefore, it can be said that in this regard, that the Internet has given voice to the voiceless.

One of the impacts of the Internet on the Egyptian public sphere was to introduce a new language to the public discourse, more close to the daily language in the streets, with what this entails of realism and even vulgarism at times, which uses the Egyptian dialect instead of the Standard Modern Arabic (*Al-Arabia Al-Fuseha*). This has started mainly online and then was re-produced on a number of newspapers, that were either copying from the Internet or going with this new trend. Also, publishing houses are starting to pay attention to some of the popular cultural and social blogs and asking the owners of these blogs to start publishing it as books, which reinforces the spread of the new ways and forms of writing.

The Internet has facilitated discussions about topics that were considered taboos, or close to taboos, in the Egyptian society, this included the discussion of sexuality related problems.

Also the discussions related to Gender roles in the society, mainly by a new generation of activists who are challenging the existing traditions.

> *On the other hand, both the Internet and the satellite channels, have facilitated what I would call "segmented identities" in the Egyptian society, particularly for the youth . The monopoly state-owned media had, also helped to create unified consciousness of the self and the other, a sort of national identity . With the introduction of the many different sources of knowledge and entertainment provided by both the Internet and satellite channels, this source for molding a single national identity is no more.*

The Egyptian government does not fully block the Internet. In comparison with traditional media, the Internet is relatively free. The vast majority of Internet users in Egypt can realize that the authorities are controlling the Internet in an undeclared and intangible way. Blocking websites, although limited, is an ordinary procedure in Egypt. Blocking is implemented without declaring the legal reasons for it. There are a number of cases where Internet activists have been questioned and sometimes arrested for the opinions they presented online.

The question posed at the end of this paper and that requires further research, after nearly three decades of Emergency Law, and with the silencing of most of the traditional political forces and actors or marginalizing them into insignificant roles, is how viable has the Egyptian public sphere become, and could the new e-public sphere which is more active and productive sometimes, be thought as the real public sphere in Egypt?! Or more generally, should the public sphere be identified with the known physical spaces assigned to it, or more with performing its functions whether this would be in physical or cyber spaces.

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