



Internet and the Egyptian Public Sphere

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Abstract

The Internet offers many actors in the society ways to present and raise discussion of ideas that is 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 had reached 8.6 million by March 2008. This means that more than 10 per cent of the total Egyptian population had access to the Internet. The number of Internet users in Egypt is the third highest in Africa and represents about 17 per cent of the total number of users in Africa. By taking advantage of the opportunity of having greater access to the Internet and using the security of being anonymous, if one desired, provided by this medium of communication, 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.

The Internet facilitated more chances to networking, forming alliances and addressing the public. This has led to the emergence of a kind of alternative media run by professionals, semi-professionals and amateurs. And of equal importance, an increasing number of blogs and websites started addressing highly controversial social and religious issues.

This article, focusing on websites and blogs, explores the new trends which the Internet gave rise to, as well as institutions – such as government and established religious institutions – whose power to monopolise public debates has been challenged by the Internet in Egypt, till 2008. The paper also shows how the state interacts with these trends through recent attempts to increase censorship of the Internet, and in particular its usage for political mobilisation.

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Résumé

L'Internet offre à de nombreux acteurs de la société des moyens de présenter et d'agiter des débats d'idées qu'il n'est pas possible ou facile d'aborder, en particulier dans les sociétés aux façades conservatrices comme celle de l'Égypte. Le nombre d'internautes en Égypte avait atteint 8,6 millions en mars 2008. Cela signifie que plus de 10 pour cent de l'ensemble de la population a accès à l'Internet. Ce nombre est le troisième plus important en Afrique et représente environ 17 pour cent du nombre total d'utilisateurs d'Internet en Afrique.

Mettant à profit la possibilité d'un accès accru à l'Internet et la sécurité de l'anonymat offert à ceux qui le souhaitent par ce moyen de communication, de plus en plus d'Égyptiens se sont mis à utiliser l'Internet pour obtenir des informations et s'engager dans des discussions politiques, sociales et religieuses. Cette nouvelle sphère publique virtuelle en Égypte n'est ni tout à fait virtuelle, ni tout à fait réelle.

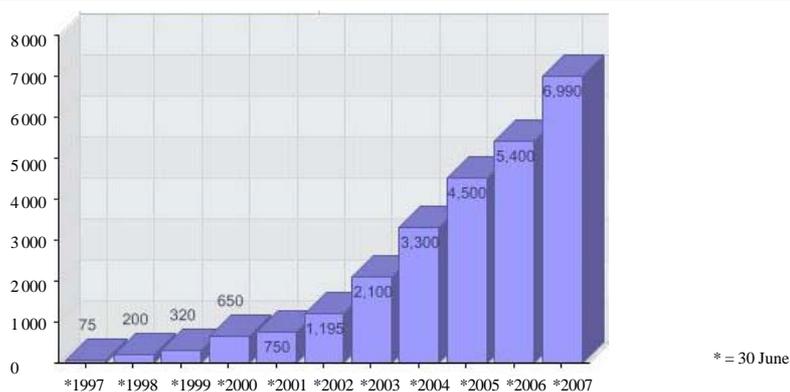
L'Internet permettait de profiter des chances accrues de se mettre en réseau, de former des alliances et de s'adresser au public. Cela s'est traduit par l'émergence d'une sorte de média alternatif gérée par des professionnels, des semi-professionnels et des amateurs. Et tout aussi important, de plus en plus de blogs et de sites web ont commencé à aborder des questions sociales et religieuses très controversées.

Cet article qui porte essentiellement sur les sites web et les blogs explore les nouvelles tendances auxquelles l'Internet a donné naissance, ainsi que les institutions – par exemple gouvernementales et religieuses établies – dont le pouvoir de monopoliser les débats publics a été contesté par l'Internet en Égypte. L'article montre également comment l'État interagit avec ces tendances, à travers les tentatives récentes de renforcer la censure de l'Internet, et en particulier, son utilisation pour la mobilisation politique.

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 Centre (IDSC). The number of Internet users in Egypt was estimated to be between 2,000 and 3,000 users that year (Abdulla 2005). Fifteen years later, the number of Internet users in Egypt had reached 8.6 million users in March 2008, which means that more than 10.5 per cent of the total Egyptian population has Internet access. Against six million users in December 2006, it is a 7.8 million user increase as compared to the 1999 number of 300,000 (IDSC 2007). According to the Internet World Stats site, in December 2007 Egypt had the third highest number of Internet users in Africa; Nigeria and Morocco ranking first and second respectively.¹

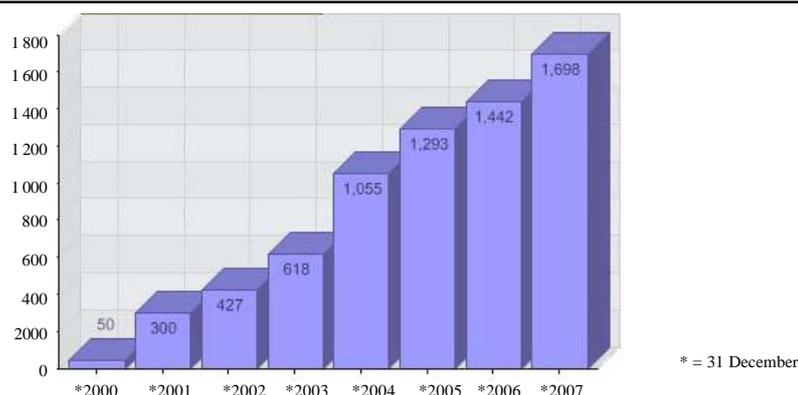
Chart 1: The number of Egyptian Internet users (in thousands) from 30 June 1997 to 30 June 2007



Source: Cabinet's Information and Decision Support Centre (IDSC), 2008.
 URL: http://www.idsc.gov.eg/nds/nds_view.aspx?id=657

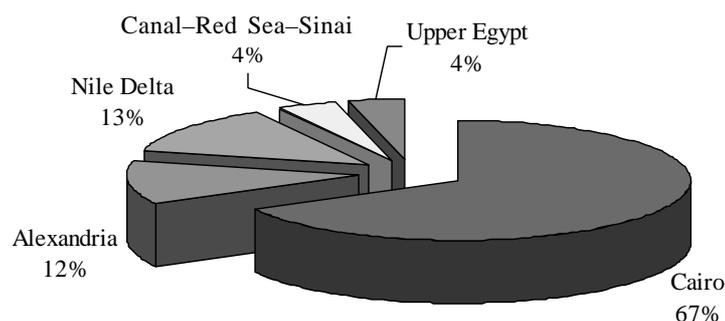
Other than private subscribers and Internet cafés, Internet could be accessed through IT clubs provided by the state. An IT club is an open area equipped with a local area network that connects ten to twenty personal computers, and is connected to the Internet. The number of these IT clubs reached 1,525 in June 2007. This project started on 2000 and IT clubs were found in the youth centres, public libraries, civil society headquarters, cultural palaces, schools and universities (SIS 2007).

Chart 2: The number of IT clubs in Egypt, from 31 December 2000 to 31 December 2007



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

Chart 3: Egyptian ADSL Subscribers by Geographical Distribution, December 2007



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

Chart 3 shows the geographical distribution of ADSL subscribers, who numbered 427,085. According to the last census (2006) results, the population percentages of total population for these areas are as follows: Greater Cairo 25.21 per cent; Nile Delta 35.90 per cent; Alexandria 6.11 per cent ; Upper Egypt 28.92 per cent and Suez Canal, Red Sea and Sinai 3.86 per cent (CAPMAS 2007). It is therefore obvious that Internet connection is not evenly distributed throughout Egypt (Mehanna 2010).

Blogs

As defined by (Schiano et al. 2004) a blog (from weblog) 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 among Egyptian Internet users in the last four years, it started to increase during the last presidential and People's Assembly elections in 2005, which gave rise to a number of popular blogs to monitor those elections. As it were, a kind of alternative media emerged, run by professionals, semi-professionals and amateurs.

There were two main landmarks that contributed to the spread of blogging among Egyptian Internet users. The first landmark, as noted above, was the presidential and people's assembly elections in 2005. In both elections, some blogs started reporting the events and proceedings; 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 either favoured or prosecuted

by the executive authorities. This interest led to increased numbers of viewers of the blogs that documented these incidents, especially those that posted photographs or video clips. As a result, wide interest in and following of these blogs grew. At the same time, some newspapers started paying attention to the blogs, copying, sometimes without permission, stories and pictures from them.

Some of the blogs that became famous as a result of the coverage of the two elections in 2005 include: *Al-Wa'y Al-Masri* (The Egyptian Awareness) blog, with an English title 'Misr Digital' by Wa'el Abbas, a young journalist who was one of the first to present comprehensive coverage, with pictures included, of some of the events of the elections. This blog was an outgrowth of an e-mail group under the same name, which is still active but not as accessible, nor as famous as the blog. Another blog that gained 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, was an episode of the programme *Taht Al-Mighar* (Under Examination). The episode, titled *Al-Modawwenon Al-Arab: Al-Mo'arada Bi Sout Gadid* (The Arab Bloggers: Opposition With A New Voice), produced by Al-Jazeera News Channel, was aired for the first time on 26 May 2006, after advertisements about the episode had been run for sometime. This was the first time a wide-reach media outlet gave such coverage to blogging.

While the episode title spoke about Arab bloggers, it only dealt with Egyptian bloggers and featured guests from Egypt only. And in this episode, seven bloggers were invited to speak about their experiences, ideas and reasons for blogging. The feature included an interview with Mohammed Hassanein Haikal, considered by many to be the most important, influential and masterful journalist and political analyst in Egypt.²

This gave high profile to the episode, and it became a landmark of the rapid increase of blogging among Egyptian Internet users who started to blog after watching it. In this feature, Haikal spoke for a few minutes, saying that the writer whose work he read most those days was a writer he did not know, an anonymous writer in a blog titled *Baheyya*.³ Haikal said that although he did not know her, he asked his office to print out any new articles she published on her blog, and that he read her work more than that of any known Egyptian journalist. He thought that her writings spoke passionately of a new generation, and indicated a society that was full of life (Al-Jazeera News Channel 2006). These short words by Haikal inspired many of the aspiring youth to start blogging themselves, thinking that if Haikal read *Baheyya* and commended it, then maybe there would be a chance for them to get their voice, and the voice of an entire new generation, heard.

This was made explicit in a number of blogs whose owners said that they became interested in blogging after watching the 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. One example of these events were the religious riots that took place between Muslims and Christians in Alexandria in 2006, and received a very intensive coverage on the (*Jar Al-Qamar*) [Neighbour of the Moon] blog.

The Egyptian Cabinet's Information and Decision Support Centre (IDSC) conducted a recent study about Egyptian blogs, published in April 2008. The study estimates the number of Egyptian blogs to be around 160,000. Table 1 shows the distribution of Egyptian blogs by year of opening since 2004, using a sample of 2,497 Egyptian blogs (IDSC 2008). The reported results confirm the rapid increase of blogging in 2005 and its steady growth in the following years.

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 oppositional political parties and societal actors have created websites for themselves, as 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-Tagammu*.

There has also been a number of websites for legal and human rights support groups and organisations. One of the most famous websites of this kind is the Hisham Mubarak Centre for Legal Aid, which keeps an active website 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 the officially unrecognised political powers (especially, but not only, the Muslim Brotherhood) have utilised their websites first to recruit new supporters, and publish their press releases and news. The most prominent among them is the website of the Muslim Brotherhood (*Al-Ikhwān Al-Muslimūn*), which is a powerful movement in 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. Such tendency to speak in different styles and languages is common to many publications and internet sites that aim to reach different audiences.

Trends and Institutions Affected Negatively by the Internet

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

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

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 evidently 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, which was limited before because the opinions were not allowed to appear in the traditional media outlets.

The Coptic Orthodox Church, which the vast majority of Egyptian Christians follow, is another institution that was affected negatively by the Internet. There appeared some websites and blogs that oppose different positions taken by the Church, either in respect of some of its theological or political positions and opinions. Despite the – often heated – debates on politics and doctrine, the person of the Coptic Pope Shenuda III stands beyond dispute in the writings I saw online, even if the actions or comments of some of the clergy members involved in the debate do indirectly undermine his authority.

Trends Affected Positively by the Internet

There are a number of trends and movements in Egyptian society that are affected positively by the Internet. In general, the Internet can be said to have given a voice to many people who previously were not able to make their voices heard in public. The Internet has given a platform to those who do not have it platform in either established media or face-to-face societal interactions to express their opinions. Those who had no opportunity to voice their opinions could include those who are not organised in any formal way, or those who are organised but either their organisations constrain them from expressing their opinions or who for other reasons are prevented from voicing their opinions publicly. The latter has been the case with people whose opinions or lifestyles are rejected by the majority of the society, and who tend to fear possible negative reactions – either official or societal – to their opinions.

An interesting group that was empowered by the Internet are the Muslim Brotherhood youth, or younger members. Previously, there was no public news about the younger generation of the Brotherhood. The news only reflected the views of the older generation, especially the top officials in the Brotherhood's Guidance Office (*Maktab al Irshad*) and, of course, the General Guide (*Al-Murshid Al-Aam*). Starting in 2006 a number of blogs by youth members of the Brotherhood were established. These blogs discussed a number of issues and promoted the Brotherhood's opinions. Doing so, they were reproducing the established discourse of their movement in a tone very similar to the comments made by the older members. At the same time, however, some issues were discussed publicly for the first time. There emerged an open and public debate about differences of opinions inside the Brotherhood. This discussion took place under the general term 'self-critique', one of the many Marxist notions of political action that today have become commonplace among Islamists. It is not clear yet whether the introduction of these Muslim Brotherhood youth blogs is due to the individual choices of the blog owners or whether it is a systematic propaganda tool by the Brotherhood to attract a different population of supporters among Internet users. The fact that these blogs started around the same time may speak for the latter assumption. Examples of these blogs include *Yalla mish mohem* (Alright, it doesn't matter) by Magdy Saad, *Shabab Al Ikhwan* (Brotherhood Youth) by Abulrahman Rashwan, *Wahed Men Al Ikhwan* (One of The Brotherhood) by Mohamed Hamza and *Ebn Akh* (Son of a Brother) by Mahmoud Saaid.

Spread of New Forms of Written Arabic

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-Masriya*) which is spoken in Egypt on almost all occasions, instead of the more formal Modern Standard Arabic (*Al-Arabiya Al-Fuseha*), with the exception of very official occasions and religious rituals, where use of Standard Arabic is the norm. Using Egyptian dialect in writing has a longer tradition in literary fiction, but its use in the media is a relatively new phenomenon. Online, Egyptian Arabic is used as a written language as often as Standard Arabic. The use of dialect in writing has become increasingly familiar to Egyptian readers through its use on the Internet and newspapers. Since many newspapers also use materials directly copied from the internet, this further reinforces the prevalence of dialect in writing.

This has also been reinforced by the publishing houses' interest of publishing some social blogs as books, which increased the spread of this new form of written Arabic in the public sphere. For example in the 2008 Cairo Book Fair, Dar El Shorouk, which is one of the major publishing houses in Egypt, presented three new books based on three popular blogs. The titles of these books are either the title of the blog or a title of a specific entry in it. These three books include 'I Want to Get Married' (*Aieza Atgawwaz*) by Ghada Abd Al-Aal, which is so popular that now it is in its third print run (Abdelhadi 2008). The other two are 'This Is My Dance' (*Amma Hazihi fa Raqsati Ana*) from the blog titled *M'aa Nafsi* ('With Myself') by Ghada Muhammed Mahmoud, and 'Rice Pudding For Two' (*Urz bi Al-laban li Shakhsayn*) from the blog titled *Hawadeet* (Stories) by Rehab Bassam. More importantly, these three new books were launched with a promise that it would not be a one-time event, but 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 information and announcing protests, demonstrations and strikes. The Internet has given more chances to networking, forming alliances and addressing the public. For example, *Kefaya* (Enough!) political movement has utilised its website to announce its positions, mobilize support and announce the dates and places for its organised demonstrations since 2004. On 6 April 2008, *Kefaya* took Internet activism one step further by calling for and organizing a partly successful nationwide strike through this media outlet.

The 6 April 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. There were also special websites dedicated to the strike, and its events were followed and covered online as well. The moderators of the Facebook group were arrested on the day of and after the strike and remained in custody for periods ranging from days to weeks.



A widely circulated caricature after the arrest of a number of the 6 April strike organisers.

The caption in both Arabic and English reads, 'Member: surrender yourself, the profile is encircled!' From Ashraf Hamdy, the caricaturist, blog http://caricatoon.blogspot.com/2008/04/blog-post_23.html

Breaking of Taboos

The Internet 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 included those that relate to sexuality and the accepted gender roles. These discussions were made easier using the Internet and then moved from the Internet into other media outlets.

One example that illustrates this point is the IslamOnLine.net Arabic Cyber-Counselor Section. IslamOnLine.net, which is a multi-service, multi-lingual website, is published in both Arabic and English. Each of these sections has

different editorial teams. It is one of the largest and most influential Islamic websites online, with administration and editorial offices based in Cairo. It was first brought online in October 1999 and has since expanded enormously. The Arabic Cyber-Counselor Section was the first media outlet in Arabic to include counselling on sexuality-related problems. The popularity this section received led a number of newspapers and satellite channels to follow the same route a couple of years later and start offering sexuality-related awareness and counselling (Mehanna 2010).

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 criminalisation of some online activities without legal stipulations that outlaw them.

Egypt issued law No. 10/4 in February 2003 known as the Telecommunications Regulation Act. As part of implementation of this law, the National Telecommunication Regulation Authority was established. The role of this authority is to administer the telecommunication utilities. Some of the articles of the law criminalise certain offences committed while one is using telecommunication facilities. However, the law does not handle the online publishing aspect.

In comparison with traditional media, the Internet is relatively free. But the majority of Internet users in Egypt have realized that the authorities are controlling the outlet in an undeclared and clandestine way. Blocking websites, although limited, is an ordinary procedure in Egypt. Unlike China, Saudi Arabia or Iran, the Egyptian government does not generally regulate access to internet sites. However, it has often closed down Internet sites operated from Egypt, and occasionally blocked access to specific sites. Blocking is implemented without declaring the legal reasons for it. Blocking websites in Egypt is practised without following any legal procedures or giving the reason for the blocking. That is why blocked website owners cannot legally take action against 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 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 manufacture or use of weapons, as well as websites that broadcast extremist ideologies. Seventeen human rights organisations 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 (*HRIInfo 2006*).

The censorship of the contents of websites and blogs, and the prosecution, legally or otherwise, of those who express views opposed to those of the political establishment continues in Egypt.

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

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

On June 2008, Internet surveillance was increased by the introduction of a new registration system 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 his or her name, email address and mobile number. The system then sends a text message with a pin code for access. This allows the government monitor not only those who access the Internet from their homes, but also visitors of coffee shops and Internet cafes, where the less privileged users have to give café owners their ID numbers to use the service. Before June 2008, coffee shops offering wireless Internet connections to upper and middle-class users were the only ones left unmonitored, which is why this process was introduced whereby one had to register 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, 9 June 2008).

The prosecution of Internet activists does not seem to stop at the national borders, because in July 2008, the Saudi Arabian authorities deported an Egyptian who had been living and working in Medina city for 44 years. The reason for the deportation was his writings against the Egyptian government on different websites and articles he wrote in a number of newspapers. The deportation is thought to have been at the request of the Egyptian authorities (*Masrawy News* site, 26 July 2008).

Conclusion

The Internet has affected the Egyptian public sphere in a number of ways. This includes the dis-empowerment of some of the traditional elements of the Public Sphere in political, religious or cultural terms. The Internet has facilitated discussion, mainly by a new generation of activists who are challenging the existing traditions, about topics that were considered taboo, or close to taboo, in Egyptian society, which included sexuality-related problems and gender roles in the society.

On the other hand, both the Internet and the satellite channels have facilitated what one 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 kind of moulding of a single national identity is no more.

The e-public sphere is not inclusive of all segments of the society, as Internet is mainly accessible by those who belong to the upper and middle economic classes. Increased debate online has only partly translated into social and political activism. Aside from the economic class of users, the use of Internet is representing the whole spectrum of opinions and movements in the Egyptian society.

It is fair to conclude that after decades of Egypt applying the Emergency Law, and silencing most of the traditional political forces and actors or marginalising them into insignificant roles, the traditional Egyptian public sphere has become quite stagnant. The new e-public sphere, which is sometimes more active and productive, can be regarded as the real public sphere in Egypt.

Notes

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

18 March /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'.

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