GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2009

Focus on access to online information and knowledge
– advancing human rights and democracy

Global Information Society Watch 2009

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2009

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Dedicated to A.K. Mahan - an activist who valued intellectual rigour and concrete outcomes.

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EGYPT

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Introduction

Since the late 1990s the Egyptian government has pursued a policy of rapid expansion in the information and communications technology (ICT) sector, with mobile communications and the internet experiencing the greatest economic growth. Egypt is intent on becoming a regional information centre akin to the Indian model. This economic goal has set up a dichotomy: on one hand the government strongly promotes and supports the spread of ICTs; on the other it is counteracting, with increasing dexterity, the freedom of expression such technologies offer.

Egypt has been governed under the Emergency Law since 1981. This law allows the government to keep a tight grip on freedom of speech and political expression and to invade civil privacy. The law has been extended many times, for different reasons, the last being the monitoring of international terrorism. While the internet was – for a short time – a space where citizens were allowed more freedom of expression than traditional avenues, the government has in the last five years extended its surveillance to cyberspace. Egypt has been listed by Reporters Without Borders[1] among thirteen of the top countries practising internet censorship. The others are Belarus, Burma, China, Cuba, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Vietnam.

Censorship and privacy

The internet is now used by approximately 20% of the population. Online use, which was initially mostly for email, browsing and research, has since 2004-2005 turned into an active blogosphere for many, especially urban youth. There is also an increase in the use of Flickr, YouTube and Twitter, as well as the all-popular Facebook.

Most of these networking sites are used for social purposes, but activists have found them effective tools for communication, as they allow things like instant messaging and relaying visuals. Activists have been able to coordinate strikes, send help messages, alert others when they have been taken into custody, and send messages from prison. The government has, as a result, begun to monitor and intimidate some of the more outspoken users.

With the increase of online communication and networking sites, the government has incrementally increased its censorship of internet content. For example, the websites of the Muslim Brotherhood[2] and of the labour party El Amal are being blocked. The political wisdom of blocking these sites is questionable: membership of these two groups does not seem to have diminished.

Another new restriction targets public internet access. Since the summer of 2008, to connect to a public wireless hotspot one has to enter private identifiers like an identification number or private phone number. Internet cafés are also collecting the same information from users,[3] which has been strongly criticised by the Arab Network for Human Rights Information.

To some extent the criticism needs to be balanced. One of the reasons for collecting the personal information is that credit card use in Egypt is very limited and the economy is predominantly cash based. The customary credit card number that is taken in most Western countries, and is used as an identifier, is not applicable in Egypt. With this in mind, what is happening in Egypt is not much different from what is happening in many places in the world, even the ones that appear to be less invasive.

However, in the Egyptian case, where in many respects the internet user was able to protect his or her privacy comparatively more than in many other countries, these new monitoring measures are a serious cap on the ability to maintain a latitude of privacy in cyberspace. Conventional internet use through dial-up, digital subscriber line (DSL) or wireless is easily traced and susceptible to official monitoring, especially of targeted individuals or groups, as is the case in most countries. Monitoring the internet is now a specialist task, and has its own divisions in law enforcement units.

On the other hand, the tracking of private information through online spaces for commercial purposes is, at the moment, much lower in Egypt than in most "developed" countries. But with the diversification of the Orascom[4] conglomerate, and the like, this freedom seems on the wane too.

Legislative context

The government is creating more institutionalised measures to restrict freedom of expression, claiming to protect public ethics, but politically curtailing free expression outright. The latest move is a possible broadcasting law that will govern audio and visual media. In July 2008, the independent newspaper *Almasry Alyoum* published an article on draft legislation regarding "audio-video transmissions" that, among other media channels, will affect internet sites.[5] The

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1 Egypt was originally listed in 2006 and relisted in 2009; see www.rsf.org/en-ennemi26150-Egypt.html

2 The Arabic site is located on a server in California, United States (US).

3 Mobile use has been subjected to the same kinds of monitoring (see the Egypt country report in *GISWatch 2008*: www.giswatch.org/gisw2008).

4 Orascom comprises Mobinil Mobile Service Co. and Link Telecommunication Company.

5 Al-Galad, M. (2008) Law of "Slaughtering" Satellites … and the "Facebook", *Almasry Alyoum*, 9 July. www.almasry-alyoum.com/article2.aspx?ArticleID=112631

article raised a lot of debate as to its accuracy. The story has been confirmed by some government officials, but denied by others.[6] It seems quite probable that such a law is in the pipeline.

The draft law, made up of 44 articles, would pave the way for the establishment of a new enforcement agency, the National Agency for the Regulation of Audio and Visual Broadcasting (NARAVB).[7] This would govern broadcasting by radio, satellite and websites.

On another front, a new case in cracking down on bloggers involves Tamer Mabrouk.[8] Mabrouk is a blogger who launched an environmental campaign against Trust Chemical Co. in Port Said, stating that the company is throwing untreated toxic chemical waste in the Suez Canal and Lake Manzala that is endangering public health. Trust Chemical Co. filed a defamation suit against Mabrouk and won the case in May 2009, with the judge imposing a fine of close to EUR 6,000 on him. According to Reporters Without Borders, Mabrouk is the first Egyptian blogger who has been sued in court.[9]

A change – this time towards more openness – has been allowing the public to use global positioning systems (GPS). After many years of banning GPS, saying that it was a security risk, the government is finally allowing civilian GPS and navigation systems that will interact, among other applications, with computers and mobile devices.[10]

How effective is online activism?

The historical development of online activism shows that despite government repression, it has increased in Egypt, and is less anonymous than it used to be. For instance, although the blogging community of activists has endured years of surveillance, threats and even torture, it has not diminished; on the contrary, the number of political bloggers[11] is increasing. In fact, it seems that repression of outlets for opinion has helped the profusion of online venting, reporting, networking and political activism in general.

Online political networking and campaigning is especially useful under the pressure of the Emergency Law that legalises the arrest of as few as three people coming together for a political cause.

Initiated in 2005, Baheyya is one of the earliest Egyptian political blogs.[12] Baheyya is still widely read, although its author(s) have never publicly identified themselves, and it is written in English. Political blogs now proliferate, many with the identity of the bloggers declared openly. A good number of the new bloggers are females. The tone of the blogs has become more accessible: everyday occurrences are being talked about, inner thoughts are discussed, and the human side of the blogger is exposed. The language and attitude have also become less "intellectual". Arabic is increasingly being used as the predominant language, rather than English, indicating that the bloggers are not exclusively targeting the "outside world". The messages are intended for national discourses and actions, and not mainly to expose the government to Western readers.

Bloggers like Wael Abbas, Nora Younis, Mohammed Adel and Hossam el-Hamalawy name themselves despite the high personal cost of such openness. It seems that bloggers who openly identify themselves are in fact responding to the reality of censorship and surveillance – which includes arrests and torture. The attitude is: I might as well make my identity public, if you can find out who I am anyhow. By using their real names, and in many cases their photos, it allows bloggers to talk about harassment publicly. The personal commitment is often profound. Younis, for instance, blogs about leaving her apartment door unlocked in an attempt to psychologically pretend that she can live safely.[13]

What happens to activists is often immediately conveyed via Twitter and Facebook: one such incident involved the harassment of Abbas and his mother by a police officer, a neighbour, that led to his arrest.[14]

Interestingly, in the case of Abbas, instead of support by sites from the West, he faced yet more censorship. His accounts were closed by Yahoo, Facebook and YouTube. While the latter has finally reopened his account, a lot of the original video footage has been deleted.[15] This shows the instability of many social networking sites when it comes to their use for the dissemination of human rights information and the voicing of political views. These international sites are caving in, often easily, to national governments' demands, if they are not actually pre-emptive in closing accounts to avoid potential discord with governments. This attitude emphasises the need for activists to use several different sites to disseminate their messages to ensure that communication channels stay open despite a crackdown by some of them.

Facebook's social popularity has meant some activists, like Ahmed Maher, have been able to attract tens of thousands of Egyptian youth by rallying them around a cause.

6   Al-Hawari, M., Farghali, D. and Karnashawi, S. (2008), Contradictory Statements Over 'Audio-Visual Transmission Law', *Almasry Alyoum*, 11 July. www.almasry-alyoum.com/article2.aspx?ArticleID=112863

7   Stanford, D. (2008) Egypt faces new media censorship, *Al Jazeera.net*, 7 August. english.aljazeera.net/focus/2008/08/20088791952617974.html

8   El Haqiqa El Masreya (The Egyptian Truth), blog by Tamer Mabrouk: elhakika. blogspot.com

9   Reporters Without Borders (2009) Tamer Mabrouk is the first blogger prosecuted by a company in Egypt, 26 May. www.rsf.org/Tamer-Mabrouk-is-the-first-blogger.html

10   Crowe, J. (2009) Egypt Allows GPS, *The Map Room*, 14 April. www.mcwetboy. net/maproom/2009/04/egypt_allows_gp.php

11   Egyptian youth, especially in urban areas, are internet savvy. With the spread of mobile phones, most of which have built-in cameras, it soon became easy to voice one's political opinion through blogs and social networking sites, and to post audiovisuals that stress one's point of view on the internet.

12   Baheyya identifies itself this way: "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." baheyya.blogspot.com

13   Nora Younis' blog: norayounis.com

14   Committee to Protect Bloggers (2009) Wael Abbas Under Arrest, 11 May. committeetoprotectbloggers.org/2009/04/11/wael-abbas-under-arrest

15   Wael Abbas' YouTube account: www.youtube.com/user/waelabbas

One of these causes was a rally to support striking textile workers on 6 April 2008. He used the workers' rally as a spark to form the "April Youth Movement" on Facebook, which among other activities, has been used as a "voice to spread the workers demands."

Twitter has also been successfully used by political activists in Egypt. It has proven especially useful to inform people about upcoming rallies and demonstrations, to organise these events, and to warn about impending police interference. However, unlike Twitter, Facebook's use to gather people around a political cause is new.

The bad news is that on the day of the abovementioned rally to support the textile workers' strike, bloggers were targeted by police, resulting in many detentions. At this point it is not yet clear if this movement will survive the repression it encountered, nor is it evident if it will encourage similar instances of online activism.

Based on recent experience, one is not hopeful. The promising activism that was ignited in the 2005 elections and culminated in mass opposition groups like Kefaya and Shayfenkum has been beaten down. A major question remains: is online dissent potent enough as a political tool to ultimately lead to positive changes? Or is it more of an avenue for venting that dissipates anger without achieving reforms?

Action steps

There are few prescriptive advocacy strategies or tactics available under the present political climate. With the lack of political will to reform, one has to look to alternative sources of support. In Egypt, the internet has proven itself an excellent exposing and "shaming" tool that, with increased use, is hard to suppress. The international nature of cyberspace is a point of strength: as long as online spaces can remain relatively open and receptive to dissenting voices, they are spaces that can counteract censorship. Privacy is a more complex issue.

International online avenues need to resist government pressure to close accounts. Blogs, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Flickr are some of the tools used to voice social and political issues, rally activists and offer outlets for gender and minority opinions.

Mirroring blocked sites internationally will assist in keeping the internet a viable space for disseminating dissenting views. Websites can be easily mirrored. If some websites are blocked their content can still be made available with new software.

To combat censorship there are an increasing number of circumvention technologies available: anonymous proxy servers, virtual private networks (VPNs), Sneakernets, Tor (also known as the "onion router"), and Psiphon, among others. More access to mirroring and anti-censorship software is needed, supported nationally and internationally.

Activism is largely spearheaded by young people in their twenties. The economic and employment prospects of this generation will impact on their resistance to the mainstream.

If the youth are burdened by significant unemployment, they will tend to find outlets for their frustration that can be found on the internet. To keep these outlets open might be an act of political wisdom.

To still believe in the possibility of online privacy seems naïve. On the other hand, to secure a high level of freedom of speech with personal safety could become a struggle of numbers: the more people voice themselves, the harder it will be for authorities to suppress them. Multiple outlets are important. If Google, Facebook, YouTube and the like cave in under government pressure, they might not cave in all at the same time.

Again there is a fine line between policing the internet for public safety, as Interpol and its national equivalents do, and invading privacy and suppressing opinion and voices. At present this line is not clearly defined with regard to the activities of Egypt's General Administration for Information and Documentation (GAID).[16] ∎

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16 GAID was formed in 2002 by the Egyptian Ministry of Interior and has been policing the internet ever since. It publicly claims to offer protection against pornography.

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH (GISWatch) 2009 is the third in a series of yearly reports critically covering the state of the information society *from the perspectives of civil society organisations across the world.*

GISWatch has three interrelated goals:

- **Surveying** the state of the field of information and communications technology (ICT) policy at the local and global levels

- **Encouraging** critical debate

- **Strengthening** networking and advocacy for a just, inclusive information society.

Each year the report focuses on a particular theme. **GISWatch 2009** focuses on *access to online information and knowledge – advancing human rights and democracy.* It includes several thematic reports dealing with key issues in the field, as well as an institutional overview and a reflection on indicators that track access to information and knowledge. There is also an innovative section on visual mapping of global rights and political crises.

In addition, 48 country reports analyse the status of access to online information and knowledge in countries as diverse as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mexico, Switzerland and Kazakhstan, while six regional overviews offer a bird's eye perspective on regional trends.

GISWatch is a joint initiative of the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) and the Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries (Hivos).