Social Media and Egyptian National Security.

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The 2010's will be marked as the decade in which the technologies that permanently tethered us to cyber-space became entrenched. Previously, accessing the internet would be firmly enclosed temporally in a finite process that had overt start and end points. With the development of portable smart devices, one no longer needs to be situated physically in a space where cyber-space can be accessed. More crucially, social media has created a platform in which 24 hour content is being produced. Thus the internet is no longer an avenue that is parallel to physical space, but heavily integrated with it. This is not simply evident from the architecture of the technology, but from the ramifications of its use. At no point was this clearer than during the 2011 uprisings in Egypt when aggrieved Egyptians utilised Facebook as a platform to mobilise and facilitate a real political movement that culminated in the ousting of the previous government. Facebook, therefore, had come to represent something more than a website where opinions could be expressed to a small audience. It became almost akin to the public square in which a confluence of voices could be heard to elevate serious political and social issues.

More than ten years on and critical re-evaluation of the political potentialities of social media has become firmly embedded in public discourse. As platforms such as Facebook and Twitter became more popular, it became more evident that they could be used to spread any kind of information, regardless of its veracity. The controversies of the 2016 American election surrounding the usage of bots to spread misinformation (untrue information spread without the explicit purpose of deceiving) and disinformation (untrue information that is intended to deceive) ignited a debate regarding how conducive social media was to creating a democratic environment. Social media today finds itself at a crossroads between becoming a tool for emancipation and civic engagement, and a weapon to be exploited by nefarious actors.

Egypt and Social Media

This double-edged nature of these new technologies is gradually being revealed, especially so in a country like Egypt that already has a tumultuous relationship with the internet. With more than 37% of the Egyptian population made up of people between the ages of 10 and 24, Egypt is highly susceptible to the issues posed by the internet. (Statista, 2021) Internet consumption has rapidly pervaded the entirety of Egyptian society with 71.9% of Egyptians using the internet and 48.9% of them active on social media. (DataReportal, 2021) The rate of growth of internet consumption in Egypt is particularly high with almost 6 million within the same age range adopting the internet between January, 2020 and January, 2022. Social media consumption has risen at an even faster rate with 9.5 million new users becoming engaged during the same period. Egypt additionally ranks 13th in the world for average amount of time spent on the internet per day (8 hours and 2 minutes). (We Are Social, 2022) The most popular social media platforms among Egyptians are Facebook, Facebook Messenger, and Whatsapp with the most cited reason for social media usage being "filling spare time", a reason provided by 40% of respondents.

In spite of this banal reason, social media has found a wide array of highly politicised uses within Egyptian society. The aforementioned uprisings of 2011 were among the first instances that allowed the globe to understand the full capacities for social organisation and political mobilisation that social media could facilitate. The Facebook group created in response to the death of Khaled Said (which grew to become the most followed group in the Arab world) followed organisational attempts by groups such as April 6th that had been devised on the internet, allowing for the congregation of like-minded young people to plan the 25th of January protest. (Elshahed, 2020) Egyptians have continued orchestrating activism through the internet in the polarised post-revolution landscape, with a variety of different groups attempting to seize this new weapon in the

battle of information. (Iskandar, 2013) More extreme forms of political action have also been fueled by social media, with terror groups utilising online platforms to announce attacks as well as drum up support. The fundamentalist organisation *Wilayat Sinai* was among the more sophisticated users of these platforms, distributing slogans and dispersing propagandistic images. (TIMEP, 2015) The European Centre for Counterterrorism and Intelligence Studies has found that radical Islamist groups continue to spread their ideology through messaging services such as Signal and Telegram that they believe are less easily surveilled. (Hegazi, 2022)

In response to mobilization of social media by radical groups, the Egyptian government has made its own inroads into the realm of the digital, coordinating numerous campaigns for political and social ends. In the 2014 presidential elections, social media campaigning witnessed an unprecedented surge with the candidates using Facebook, Twitter, Google +, Youtube, and Instagram as avenues for political advertising. (Hamdy, 2014) Public health has also made use of these new platforms, with initiatives for the treatment and detection of non-communicable diseases (100 Million Healthy Lives) and against drug addiction being among the most successful. (Sayed, 2021; SIS, 2020) Economically, social media has also been used to bolster key sectors such as tourism in the aftermath of the Covid crisis with the "Egypt Welcomes Its Guests" online campaign, which reached nearly 60 million people. (Daily News Egypt, 2021) Not all governmental mobilization of the internet has been met with a positive reception, however, as pro-government news outlets have faced allegations of creating upwards of 2,500 accounts to amplify messaging critical of other states. (Borger, 2020) The growing battle for control over the digital landscape has been under way for some time with the government occasionally opting for the direct suppression of accounts deemed to be inciting anti-state sentiments. (El-Sheikh, 2016)

Social Media as a Security Threat

The very fact that this battle continues to rage is a testament to the power that social media has become endowed with. Its misapplication or exploitation can now potentially create quite explicit security threats to Egyptian society. The use of online networks by fundamentalist groups and terror organisations has already proliferated across Egyptian society, but that is not the only risk that social media could now pose to security. Among the major concerns that has already been witnessed in other countries is the possibility of the illegal obtaining of information from public officials or political actors through hacking or phishing techniques. In the first six months of 2022, there were 69 significant incidents involving cyber-crime reported by the Center for Strategic & International Studies, most of which were against states or state-affiliated groups. (CSIS, 2022)

Another critical issue facing social media is its usage for the diffusion of misinformation or even intentionally deceptive information. The very nature of the internet is intended to place minimal filters on what can be said, creating a space where obstacles to freedom of speech were less pronounced. This has led to certain individuals and groups exploiting this space to spread politically motivated disinformation, as well as others simply making unsubstantiated or dubious claims that have not been verified by authorities that exist to do so in other avenues such as academia or traditional media. The anonymity provided by certain platforms has lessened the potential ramifications one faces for public statements, diminishing incentives to self-regulate what is articulated out in the open. Even more alarming is the spread of disinformation committed by artificial intelligence entities that appear as actual human beings. As A.I. technology becomes increasingly sophisticated, the ability to distinguish between who is a "bot" and who is a human being becomes increasingly less exact.

What this then culminates towards is an environment where inaccurate information pervades these digital mass media platforms and everyone becomes susceptible to expanding its spread. Worryingly, neither politicians nor reporters are exempt from being deceived by such misinformation. (McDonald & Brown, 2022 ; Schwartz, 2020) This landscape of falsehood encumbers such individuals from retaining the foundations that promote a healthy political environment where rational decision making is its bedrock. The general populace has also become susceptible to misinformation and disinformation, making them less equipped to possess the requisite information to participate civically within a democracy.

This becomes an even larger concern due to the fact that social media has made communication between politicians and the citizenry easier than ever before. Politicians now have a direct line through which they can express their thoughts, leading to situations with more interactivity between officials and their constituents, but also creating scenarios where the input of those versed in diplomatic communication is absent. This is especially disconcerting when the protagonists of tense political standoffs opt to use these lines of communication for political messaging. (Schwartz, 2022) Norms regarding how politicians converse are rendered void, especially when politicians whose electability has come off the back of conveying strength and aggression use social media as a way of further crystalising that image. Several political actors who are active users of social media have been accused of fomenting domestic violence and aggravating international tensions. (Cineas, 2020) The dismantling of the norms of civility within diplomatic communication may be portending a breakdown in peaceful conduct among states.

Combatting the Threats of Social Media

The issues surrounding social media are all relatively modern and there is therefore a degree of experimentation among states and institutions in combatting the threats offered by its misuse. What is abundantly clear, however, is that the wave of online media cannot be rolled back. There is simply no effective way of preventing people from accessing such platforms and any attempts to restrict access are guaranteed to be met with hostility. Even in countries where particular platforms are closed off, alternative ones are created or promoted in order to compensate users. Social media has simply become too firmly embedded in people's lives, making it impossible to remove without some fallout. Egypt has already witnessed how shutting off the internet during the 2011 revolts further galvanised the protestors. Eleven years onwards when the number of internet users has considerably risen, there would be potentially greater repercussions.

There are potential policy solutions, however, to neutralise the nefarious aspects of social media. These solutions exist on both the local level and the global level. Internally, Egypt can develop programs designed to raise social media literacy and to equip the citizenry with more refined capacities in identifying online misinformation. Secondary and tertiary education in Egypt has become calibrated to teach students about the contemporary technological landscape, with information technology and computer science classes offered in many educational institutions. With accessibility to smart devices offered in all public schools in the country, it would not require additional infrastructure expenditure to create the requisite environment for classes teaching online media literacy.

On a global level, there simply needs to be an international initiative to regulate social platforms that are complicit in promoting misinformation. The algorithms designed to increase engagement

on many online media platforms do not filter out incorrect information or inflammatory content. (Agustin, 2021) The lack of regulatory oversight from governmental bodies has allowed this to become more rampant, and there has been an inverse relationship between the growth of the largest social media platforms and their consideration of these ethical issues. There needs to be a cohesive movement coordinated between different states to stifle the promotion of content that is designed to provoke and cause social unrest. Moreover, the lack of regulation of bot activity on social platforms also needs to be curbed. Despite the exorbitant wealth that Silicon Valley tycoons have accrued over the past decades, states still retain the capacity to prevent their most harmful profit-seeking impulses. China has displayed to the world how unaccountable companies can be prevented from damaging their societies, though their strategy of building an alternate network controlled by the state itself is perhaps the most extreme precaution. (Wheeler, 2022) States may continue to allow these companies to operate under their umbrella, but through joint action they can mitigate the threats they pose.

It is important to note, however, that both these local initiatives and global initiatives fail to address the root cause of the acceptance of misinformation and disinformation. Egypt is plagued by two major issues that propel citizens to become taken in by falsehoods. Primarily, there is a general lack of trust in Egyptian institutions among the citizenry. Though in 2018, it was still reported that a majority of the population expressed trust in the government, this was contrasted with fewer than 30% of the questioned sample agreeing with the statement that "most people are trustworthy". (Diwan et al., 2020) A similar figure reported that they had "a great deal or quite a lot of trust of" parliament, far less than the 66% and 79% reported for the president and the judiciary respectively. (Kayyali, 2020) This is quite problematic since parliamentary figures are the ones most likely to reach out to the populace and engage in media communication. The second factor that contributes

to this environment of mistrust is the perception of the Egyptian government as lacking in transparency. Egypt's Corruption Perception Index score has been declining in recent years, indicating increasing mistrust between the government and the citizenry. (Transparency, 2021) This perception is fueled by the lack of available independent media, which has either been shut down or acquired by governmental entities. (Diwan et al., 2020) This lack of space for professional media outlets that have higher publishing standards allows for other less rigorous platforms to establish themselves within the social media landscape. The only way to counter this issue is for the Egyptian government to foster a culture of transparency and to create an environment in which there is no backlash towards accurate reporting from independent parties. Some of these elements have gradually begun to take place, especially in the face of pressure from international financial institutions who require fiscal transparency as a way to promote investment within Egypt. (Egypt Today, 2022) This attitude needs to be generalised to all within Egypt and not just those who possess wealth, especially as cybersecurity threats can now be mobilized relatively cheaply in contrast to traditional security threats. Strengthening the relationship of trust between the government and the people as a whole will be the only way to prevent the desire for alternative narratives that distort the truth.

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