

Youth and Citizenship in the Digital Age: A View from Egypt

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Youth are coming of age in a digital era and learning and exercising citizenship in fundamentally different ways compared to previous generations. Around the globe, a monumental generational rupture is taking place that is being facilitated—not driven in some inevitable and teleological process—by new media and communication technologies. The bulk of research and theorizing on generations in the digital age has come out of North America and Europe; but to fully understand the rise of an active generation requires a more inclusive global lens, one that reaches to societies where high proportions of educated youth live under conditions of political repression and economic exclusion. The Middle East and North Africa (MENA), characterized by authoritarian regimes, surging youth populations, and escalating rates of both youth connectivity and unemployment, provides an ideal vantage point to understand generations and power in the digital age. Building toward this larger perspective, this article probes how Egyptian youth have been learning citizenship, forming a generational consciousness, and actively engaging in politics in the digital age. Author Linda Herrera asks how members of this generation who have been able to trigger revolt might collectively shape the kind of sustained democratic societies to which they aspire. This inquiry is informed theoretically by the sociology of generations and methodologically by biographical research with Egyptian youth.

In late December 2011, education bureaus throughout Egypt dispatched year-end exams to schools in their districts. This was no business-as-usual year. Rather, the country had experienced the most momentous prodemocracy event in more than half a century—the January 25 Revolution, which lasted eighteen days and led to the fall of thirty-year dictator and president Mohamed Hosni Mubarak on February 11, 2011. Students carried the spirit of revolution back to their schools and universities. They led sit-ins, demonstrations, and Facebook campaigns to expose corrupt teachers and administrators; they demanded reforms of the curriculum and exam system; they

set up drives to help families of the martyrs of the revolution. In the wake of these events, many expected the government-administered annual exams to provide an opportunity for pupils to write about some aspect of these democratic changes stirring in the country that they themselves had been so instrumental in sparking. But the Arabic exam for first-year high school students represented a conspicuously prerevolution approach to education. The one compulsory essay on an exam from the northern province of Gharbia read as follows: “Write a letter to the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) thanking them for supporting the revolution. Thank SCAF also for their steadfastness in protecting the nation from all the agents despite being opposed and insulted.”¹

SCAF, the temporary caretaker government composed of twenty-one high-ranking military officers, had been ruling the country with an iron fist since Mubarak’s fall and was the object of much civil protest. The exam question signaled that the “new” ruling regime carried the mind-set of the old one. It continued to equate citizenship building with obedience to authority and treated schools as hierarchical, nonconsultative, and highly controlled institutions—as if no revolution had ever taken place.

But wired students of this generation had their own ideas about their place in the nation and had been experimenting with ways of exercising citizenship and agitating for a more democratic system. Pupils used the occasion of the exam to bite back at the system. Someone made a scan of the exam question and posted it on Facebook, where it circulated among different networks. This Facebook post generated numerous comments and lively debates about the performance of the SCAF and the pros and cons of further revolt. This incident illustrates in a small but telling way how the rifts between the pedagogic spaces of formal institutions and those of youth-driven communication spaces have been widening. The concern here is with how students and graduates learn and communicate across lines of difference and, in the process, assert their will on society and its institutions.

Wired Generation

Compared to previous generations, youth coming of age in the digital era are learning and exercising citizenship in fundamentally different ways. Around the globe, a monumental generational rupture is taking place that is being facilitated—not driven in some inevitable and teleological process—by new media and communication technologies. A body of literature on generations dating to the late 1990s draws directly on communication and information technologies for naming this generation, an affirmation of how generational change and technological change are perceived as intricately connected in this era. In addition to Millennials and Gen Y, other terms for this generational cohort include: the Net Generation (Tapscott, 1998, 2009); the E-Generation (Krause, 2007); the iGeneration (Rosen, 2010); digital natives

(Palfrey & Gasser, 2008); Generation txt (Rafael, 2003; Nielsen & Webb, 2011); the Facebook, Twitter, and Google Generation (McDonald, 2010; Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010); and Generation 2.0 (Rigby, 2008). I prefer *wired generation*, for it captures how communication behavior in this high-tech era leads to a “rewiring” of users’ cognitive makeup, which changes their relationship to political and social systems and their notion of themselves as citizens. As youth activist and scholar Aly El Raggal explains:

Revolutions take place first of all in our minds. The new cognitive maps we develop lead to new outlooks on the world. It is no wonder that the new generation led the call for the revolution in Egypt because we were the only ones who succeeded in making an epistemological rupture with the system—and I mean the general system, not only the political one. (Herrera, 2011b)

The writers cited above share an understanding of this generation as possessing patterns of sociability, cognition, and values distinct from generations who came of age in a predigital era. Members of this cohort, born between the late 1970s and the early years of the millennium, function in ways that are more horizontal, interactive, participatory, open, collaborative, and mutually influential (Edmunds & Turner, 2005). Their tendency to be more collectivist oriented has led some to call them the “we” generation (Hewlett, 2009; Jenkins, 2008). Tapscott (2009) identifies eight features of the wired generation that relate directly to how its members experience digital communications: freedom, customization, scrutiny, integrity, collaboration, entertainment, speed, and innovation. A related characteristic stemming from this generation’s media behavior is taking for granted the ability to practice what Shirky (2010) calls “symmetrical participation.” These youth are not passive recipients of media and messages, as in the days when television and print media ruled, but they play an active role in the production, alteration, consumption, and dissemination of content; their relationship to the media is more interactive.

For all the seeming advantages and virtues of the wired generation, a parallel body of work points to its limitations and more degenerate sides. For example, consider the following titles of some well-known critiques of this cohort: *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future* (Bauerlein, 2009), *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement* (Twenge & Campbell, 2009), and *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (Carr, 2010). These cautionary works raise valid concerns about how members of this generation exhibit signs of having a short attention span, seeking instant gratification, being unable or unwilling to read and think deeply, and lacking the skills necessary for long-term vision and planning. This set of critical postulations does not cancel out the more positive qualities mentioned above but, rather, brings to the table a more multifaceted picture of this cohort and the challenges it is likely to encounter over time. This combined literature touting virtues and vices leaves us wondering:

as a whole, does the wired generation possess the skill sets, vision, resources, and organizational know-how necessary to build and sustain the type of democratic and just society it values? Before drawing on my own data to begin answering this question, I first turn to the sociology of generations and map out a conceptual framework.

Sociology of Generations

The enduring question posed by sociologists of generations is why, or under what conditions, does one generation become conscious of its common situation and rise to steer the reins of history while others follow the path paved by previous generations? Hungarian sociologist Karl Mannheim (1952) grappled with this question in Germany in the combustible period between the two world wars. Mannheim conceptualizes generations as a “social phenomenon” rather than a biological or life-course category, since generations consist of a cohort of people who share a “common location in the historical dimension of the social process” (p. 105; see also Pilcher, 1994). He asserts that members of a generation are not homogeneous, and differences among groups and individuals exist based on class, ideology, geography, and gender, to name a few axes of difference. According to Mannheim, members of a generation—like members of a social class—can achieve “actuality” when they develop a consciousness of their common interests and form group solidarity to harness their collective power: “It is a matter for historical and sociological research to discover at what stage in its development, and under what conditions . . . individual members of a generation become conscious of their common situation and make this consciousness the basis of their group solidarity” (p. 290).

He also notes that tectonic social shifts along generational lines usually occur as the result of a social trauma and/or acceleration in the “tempo of social change” (p. 309) through, for example, war, economic crisis (Wohl, 1979), or a social, political, and/or technological revolution (Klatch, 1999). During such times the young become less reliant on the “appropriated memories” of the older generations—those transmitted, for instance, through schools, mass media, and the family—and become more reliant on their own directly acquired experiences through a process of what Mannheim calls “fresh contact.”² In these periods the young may cease to view the order of things as inevitable or desirable.

Mannheim treats generations as a cohort in a bounded nation state with distinctive national characteristics. But as youth around the globe develop common behaviors and attitudes stemming from their interaction with new media and communication tools, we can speak at some level of global youth culture (Castells, Fernandez-Ardevol, Qui, & Sey, 2007) and a global generation (Edmunds & Turner, 2005). Edmunds and Turner (2005) argue that global generations can rise and become active if they are able to access and exploit

resources, innovate politically and culturally, and cultivate strategic leadership. They posit:

Generations shift from being a passive cohort . . . into a politically active and self-conscious cohort . . . when they are able to exploit resources (political/educational/economic) to innovate in cultural, intellectual or political spheres . . . Resources, opportunity and strategic leadership combine to constitute active generations. (p. 562)

The wired members of this global generation have undoubtedly been able to innovate in cultural and intellectual spheres, as evidenced in the explosion of ideas and creative content online. This generational cohort has pioneered networked forms of online to offline organizing, whether for the sake of fun and irony, as with flash mobs (Wasik, 2006), or for more political purposes, as with smart mobs (Rheingold, 2003). Yet, even when a smart mob grows into a social movement—as happened with the Occupy Wall Street movement that started in New York City on the heels of the Egyptian revolution, Spain’s Los Indignados movement, and the range of antiausterity protests in Europe (Estes, 2011; Tharoor, 2011; Toussaint, 2012)—it remains to be seen if this online-to-offline crowd-sourced organizing is itself proof that this generation is achieving what Mannheim calls “actuality.”

To fully understand the rise of an active generation requires moving outside North America and Europe, where the bulk of research and theorizing about generations has occurred. A more inclusive global lens should reach to societies where high proportions of wired youth live under conditions of political repression and economic exclusion, where the stakes for change are at their most pressing. The Middle East and North Africa (MENA), characterized by authoritarian regimes, surging youth populations, and escalating rates of both youth connectivity and unemployment, provides an ideal vantage point to understand generations, justice, and power in the digital age.

The Case of Arab Youth Rising

The political and economic realities of growing up in the MENA region, where 65 percent of the population is under thirty years of age, distinguish youth there from their cohorts in North America and Europe in important ways. Youth in most all the Arab states, as in states in sub-Saharan Africa, live under authoritarian and militarized regimes ruled by oligarchies that seized power decades ago and continue to hold on to it well into their seventies and eighties. With the exception of the offspring of the political elite, younger citizens have, to a large degree, been locked out of the formal political establishment (Bayat & Herrera, 2010). Political exclusion of youth is made worse when it is met by economic marginalization (Dhillon & Yousef, 2009). The Arab states have among the highest youth unemployment rates in the world: roughly 25 percent in Egypt, 31 percent in Tunisia, and a staggering 77 percent in Syria

(Chaaban, 2008). For those youth who find employment, the overwhelming majority labor in precarious circumstances with no fixed contract or benefits or in jobs incommensurate with their education and training (Silver, 2007).

Notably, Arab youth unemployment rates are highest among high school and university graduates (Assaad & Roudi-Fahimi, 2007), a fact that bodes especially badly for the education system in this region. An underlying assumption guiding this research is that formal educational institutions have been losing their hold over the young and declining as sites of nation and citizenship building (Herrera, 2010). Neither schools nor universities seem capable of preparing Arab youth to deal effectively with the challenges the new age poses, whether with regard to securing livelihoods, confronting issues relating to economic insecurity and social injustice, or participating in the political system in meaningful ways. Yet, as this study shows, these youths have taken it on themselves to seek out such development through more informal, horizontal, and globally informed networks.

Young educated Arabs born in the 1980s and 1990s make up an exceedingly disaffected group. In interviews with sixteen- to thirty-year-olds in 2006 (Herrera, 2006), a recurrent theme I found was their deep frustration with the corruption of the Mubarak regime and the lack of democracy and accountability at all layers of society, including schools and universities. A female university student in this study voiced a commonly expressed view when she said that

the Egyptian political system . . . governs people with steel and fire (*hadid wa naar*) . . . Corruption spreads like fire on dry leaves. The government doesn't care about the demands of people or allow room for us to express our opinions or change the status quo. Security is the most important thing, but only wealthy people are protected by the police. The poor are always in state prisons.

Twenty-one-year-old Fatima, another student in the study, reinforced this view when she said with indignation, "We all know that we live in a dictatorial society far removed from the democracy that we all want, all of us."

Young people have been developing awareness of their common grievances—the consciousness to which Mannheim refers—and forming solidarities and strategies along generational lines with the aid of mobile and digital communication tools. Internet use in Egypt, the most populous Arab country with 82 million people, is spreading exponentially. In 2000 there were a mere 300,000 users, a number that increased to 6 million in 2006, 10.5 million in 2008, 17 million in 2010, and 21 million in March 2011.³ Under-thirty-five-year-olds use the Internet at far higher rates than other age cohorts. According to one study, 58 percent of Egyptians between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five have access to computers, and among them 52 percent are Internet literate. Thirty-six percent of youth have their own home computer, and the numbers are growing (Rakha, 2008). Digital inequality remains a reality, and large percentages of the population experience digital exclusion by virtue of their poverty, location, or other factors. But even in contexts where the young

do not have access to the Internet, the ones who do influence and drive generational changes with far-reaching civic, cultural, and political consequences (Bayat & Herrera, 2010).

Wired youth in Egypt have been in the global vanguard when it comes to using communication tools as a “weapon of opposition” (Eid, 2004), building coalitions, and engaging in civil disobedience. The first uses of the terms “Facebook Revolution” and “Twitter Revolution” in the Western media were in relation to Egypt in 2008 after two twenty-something Egyptian college students used the social networking sites to coordinate a strike in solidarity with textile workers in Al Mahalla al-Kubra, an industrial city in the Nile Delta region of Gharbia.⁴ These social networking terms were later applied to Moldova, Iran, and Tunisia in 2009, 2010, and 2011, respectively. The term “Facebook Revolution” resurfaced after it became known that the call for the Egyptian revolution of January 25, 2011, originated from the Arabic Facebook fan page We Are All Khaled Said (*Kulina Khaled Said*). Many have objected to the term since it ascribes agency to high-tech companies rather than to the people who use the technology (Aidi, 2011; Herrera, 2011a). But it remains valid to argue that the wave of prodemocracy movements in Tunisia, Egypt, Iran, and other countries of the region would probably not have been triggered at this historical moment in the ways they have been without social media and the availability of new connection tools and technologies.

The questions that beg to be asked at this juncture are: How have Egyptian youth been forming citizenship dispositions in the digital era? How has their use of communication tools evolved through different phases? And, a question of a more speculative nature, does this wired generation possess the tools and know-how necessary to play a meaningful role in long-term democracy building and economic reform?

Methodology

The sociology of generations and theories about global youth cultures emphasize the need for research that is attentive to two levels: the individual and the group. The concept of “fresh contact” that is so pivotal to Mannheim’s (1952) generational theory plays out as “an event in one individual biography” and the experience of a cohort of people “who are in the literal sense beginning a ‘new life’” (p. 293). It is therefore pertinent to come up with research strategies that allow for an understanding of autonomous individuals *and* age cohort collectivities. Biographical research offers such an approach.

Learning biographies are principally concerned with how, in a period of advanced globalization, individuals learn inside and outside of formal institutions, including during their leisure and consumer activities (Diepstraten, du Bois-Reymond, & Vinken, 2006). As Vinken (2005) has elucidated, “The domains of leisure and consumption might well be the playing fields where young people and their closest associates exercise their generational con-

sciousness” (p. 153), where they “build a new community identity . . . as well as alternative routes to establish solidarity, community life and involvement in the common good” (p. 155).

The biographical interviews I conducted for this study are part of my ongoing research on youth, power, and educational and political change. The data come from narrative interviews that took place between 2006 and 2011. I designed the interviews to understand how, from childhood to the present time, Egyptians in the sixteen-to-thirty-year-old age group have been incorporating new media and communication tools into their everyday lives and how their Internet use has been shaping their citizenship dispositions, or their awareness about society and their place within it. I adjusted interviews to keep in step with ever-changing communication tools and platforms. In 2006, for instance, my conversations revolved more around texting and e-mail behavior, whereas by 2010 my interviews focused more on social networking activities.

The participants for this study, born between 1981 and 1993, are part of a generation insofar as they share a common historical location and have been coming of age in a similar political-economic context and communications environment. I chose them through a process of snowball sampling combined with selective sampling to ensure gender balance and the inclusion of individuals from diverse social, economic, and educational backgrounds. Participants hailed from the range of urban poor to affluent middle-class areas in Alexandria and Cairo, with a small sample from towns on the outskirts of the cities. I conducted a total of twenty-eight in-depth interviews and two focus group meetings with university students in 2006, 2008, 2010, and 2011.⁵ Due to the wealth of data and given space limitations, I use the biographical details of a small group of research participants—Mona, Fatin, Haisam, and Murad (pseudonyms)—to guide us through the findings. I chose their stories, though unique in some respects, because they complement one another and contain patterns common in the overall sample. The words of other youth are interspersed throughout the narrative to enrich the text and spotlight the multiplicity of voices informing this analysis. Unlike other kinds of research, biographical research by nature deals with a statistically small sample size and thus cannot claim representativeness or provide the basis for generalization. What this approach can offer is a means to arrive at a deeper understanding of “the ‘personal’ and its interlinking with the immediate and wider social context and political practices” (Roberts, 2002, p. 31).

Findings

Overall, this research shows that “ordinary” youth in Egypt and much of the region have been learning culture, forming a generational consciousness, and more actively engaging in politics away from schools and adult authority figures. In the process they have been gaining a greater awareness of their place in the world and experimenting with ways of challenging the status quo.

According to this analysis, these changes have occurred in four phases that led to the revolution of January 25, 2011. A fifth, postrevolution phase, "Claiming the System," is ongoing.

Phase I: Opening Frontiers

For many young Egyptians with access to the Internet in the early years of the twenty-first century, their cultural frontiers opened in unexpected ways as they took part in online gaming and chatting with strangers. Take the case of Mona, a twenty-two-year-old agriculture student and amateur graphic artist from a semi-rural town in the north who comes from a conservative family associated with the Muslim Brotherhood. She recalls the excitement in 2006 when her parents bought a computer on installment for her and her siblings. She especially relished the time she spent in chat rooms, first ICQ and then Yahoo. Her English was limited, but that did not deter her. She was always curious about other cultures and dreamed about getting to know people from different parts of the world. Being from a religiously conservative family, she wasn't sure if she should chat with boys online. But when a guy from New Zealand was in a chat room asking questions about Islam, she began an online friendship "to talk more about Islam." Having broken that first taboo of chatting with boys, she later sought out "off-limits" groups. She chatted several times with Israelis because, as she explained, "we hear a lot about them in the news, and I wanted to know about them firsthand. It was normal. There was no big problem." She breached another national taboo in November 2009 during Egypt's "soccer war" with the rival Algerian team when she sought out Algerians online to hear their side of the story. For Mona, chat rooms provided an opportunity to talk about and spread Islam, to broaden her social circles, and to seek out contrary positions in order to form her own opinions about important issues of the day.

Murad, an architecture student at the University of Alexandria, was less inclined toward chat rooms and more drawn to massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs). Murad grew up in Alexandria in the 1990s during the piety movement, when many of his classmates and peers were becoming more outwardly religious. He was ill at ease with the conservative youth culture, which he found to be hypocritical, and began feeling increasingly like an outcast. As he became more socially isolated, he slipped into depression. His lifeline at the time came from online gaming communities. At one point in high school he spent up to eight hours a day online, and his parents were concerned that he had an addiction. While that may have been true, what they did not understand was that these games provided him the interaction and social acceptance that was lacking in his actual physical environment. His preferred game was the World of Warcraft (11.5 million subscribers worldwide), which he played on a European server. Murad recounted how these games helped him not only to learn better English but to "learn culture." For instance, during a game he taunted his opponent through the

chat function with a homosexual slur. Other players immediately called him out for being homophobic. Their reactions took him by surprise and led to exchanges about discrimination and other related issues. The community of players formed and enforced its own codes of civility. Some of his online players became friends and even visited him in Egypt during their holidays.

Though Murad no longer has the time to play games, he is grateful for the many social, civil, and cognitive benefits they offered him at a crucial period in his life. His experiences echo studies of online gaming, which have found that these games can be much more than a way to pass time; they “epitomize the ways in which contemporary identities, expectations, and understandings about the world may be shaped and influenced” (Beavis, 2007 p. 52).

Phase II: Cultural Revolution

If early contact with the Internet opened cultural frontiers, the second phase, which overlapped chronologically with the first one, heralded a cultural revolution. With the arrival of torrent peer-to-peer file sharing in the early 2000s, the world’s cultural and scientific repertoires became accessible online. On recalling that time, when he had a gateway to art and music around the globe, twenty-four-year-old Haisam declared, “The computer changed my personality 180 degrees. It was the best thing that ever happened to me.” Haisam, an Egyptian who spent his childhood in Saudi Arabia, returned to Egypt with his family when he was thirteen. He loved math and engineering but found that the Egyptian school system stifled rather than stimulated his avid mind. He searched outside of school for ways to feed his interests. Peer-to-peer file sharing supplied him with an endless and free, albeit illegal, supply of music, games, videos, films, and e-books. For Haisam, the computer became “like a gateway to heaven.” For over a year he spent most of his waking hours downloading music and lyrics and meeting people with similar interests in online forums. He joined a group of Arabic music aficionados and worked on transferring 125 years of Arabic music recordings into digital format. If not for their labor, this music might have been lost.

Cinema was the next frontier, and Haisam discovered the world of foreign films. He recalls, “I was totally immersed in consuming the Internet. I wasn’t working or reading, just consuming movies, songs, culture, and everything I didn’t know before.” Downloading a film was “painfully slow,” but he had the tenacity to download the “100 Best Films of All Time” with Arabic subtitles. He took a liking to the Cohen brothers, Frances Ford Coppola, Woody Allen, Ingmar Bergman, Quentin Tarantino, and Danish Dogma cinema. After just two short years of using file-sharing programs, his cultural repertoire and English ability grew in ways that were unthinkable just a couple years earlier. “Having this knowledge pumped into your head is like the Matrix,” he observed. “Maybe someone who lived for seventy years wouldn’t have the chance to know what we were able to learn in two years.”

Haisam and scores of young people who grew up online when the Internet was more or less unregulated and functioned as a global commons experienced a veritable cultural revolution. Their exposure to, and interaction with, ideas, people, images, virtual spaces, and cultural products outside their everyday environments led to a substantial change in their mentality and worldview.

In a society like Egypt's, where large segments of the population are culturally conservative and worried about negative exogenous influences, not everyone was as enthusiastic as Haisam about the cultural opening provided by the Internet. In the interviews I conducted in 2006 and 2008, a number of respondents expressed concern that the Internet could be a source of moral corruption. Dina, a student in a teacher's college, worried in 2006 that young people used the Internet in "morally wrong ways." Her views were shared by nineteen-year-old Samer, who argued that unlike individualistic Western youth, Egyptians value marriage and family stability and are highly moralistic. He complained that the openness of the Internet would tempt some users toward pornography or forming improper relationships. "We have our sexual mores from the prophetic traditions (*sunna nabawiyya*), the Holy Book, and not [atheist books] which may lead to illnesses like AIDS," he said. For him, it was important that Arab youth enjoy the knowledge benefits of the Internet while understanding the limits dictated by religion and tradition.⁶ In later years, however, respondents expressed less concern that the Internet would be a source of temptation and corruption and more alarm that this space would be closed through regulation and censorship. Cognizant of the threat of a restricted Internet, Haisam has developed an interest in open-source operating systems and is working to keep the Internet free and open.

Phase III: Citizen Media

By 2006–2008, scores of "ordinary" Egyptian youth were using mobile phones and computers for many familiar activities, such as chatting, exchanging photographs, playing games, passing on jokes, and flirting. But one activity that especially stood out was how they were using these tools to circumvent official media and construct an alternative news universe. High school and university students had come to understand the power inherent in selecting, circulating, and commenting on a news story that contradicted the official version of an event or was absent altogether in mainstream news outlets. And research has shown that this generation has been thirsty for news. A 2008 survey on youth Internet use in Egypt reported that 74 percent of respondents used the Internet to stay current with the news, and 68 percent used it to download games, songs, movies, and programs (Rakha, 2008). With communication tools at their disposal, youth who may not have otherwise been especially political were acquiring political sensibilities. Shayma from the College of Arts said, "Many youths are trying to change things through the Internet. We are

expressing our viewpoints through blogs and using the weapon of words to transform society.”

Data on the Egyptian blogosphere are imprecise; size estimates range from 35,000 to 160,000 bloggers. A leading study presents a picture of bloggers as being predominantly in the twenty-to-thirty-year-old age range and the majority males, but with adolescent girls and young women of eighteen to twenty-four years a fast-growing force (Etling, Kelly, Faris, & Palfrey, 2009). There has been much speculation about the ideological character of the Arabic blogosphere—of whether it exhibits tendencies toward Islamism, democratic liberalism, secularism, or other affinities. The Arab blogosphere does not appear to be oriented toward a certain political ideology, though there is “very little support for terrorism or violent jihad in the Arabic blogosphere and quite a lot of criticism [of it]” (Etling et al., 2009, p. 10). It is more fitting to think of the new communication space as an expansion of the public sphere toward more participation (Lynch, 2007).

Fatin, a young woman from Cairo University, explained how it was a natural transition graduating from chat rooms to blogs. She began blogging with a group of friends, five boys and three girls, when she was twenty-one. They blogged anonymously so that they could explore taboo subjects. Their blog dealt with Islamic feminism and delved into questions about whether pious and practicing Muslim women could be feminists; about gender and psychology; and about cinema, culture, and a range of other things. The act of writing to an unknown public gave Fatin great pleasure. She said, “I felt I wanted to open up, and I loved writing. Also, I wanted to see my words online. I don’t know what’s the difference [between seeing the words online versus in a notebook], but I just loved it.”

Haisam also experimented with blogging in 2005. He became close virtual friends with a tight-knit group of six to seven male and female bloggers. They initially treated their blogs as private conversations with each other and a small circle of readers. But when a Syrian blogger from their group disappeared—just vanished from cyberspace with no word—they awoke to the risks of blogging in their respective police states.⁷ For these pioneers, blogging did not start as a self-consciously political activity; rather, they were merely experimenting with a new kind of expressive art. Haisam used his blog to share anything that caught his attention, like music, films, current events, and rants about how much he hated school.

His blogging took a turn in 2005, however, during Egypt’s parliamentary elections and first multicandidate presidential elections. Then nineteen years old, Haisam walked the early steps of citizen journalism.

I was really interested in carrying out an experiment, of monitoring an election from inside a poll station. I went to a small village outside of Alexandria and started to observe what was happening. I saw how people would sell their votes and write “yes” for Mubarak just for money. I took pictures and posted them on my blog.

He wasn't working for a particular political party or candidate, just acting as an independent citizen with an online voice. Throughout Egypt, in Aswan, Mansoura, and Cairo, other bloggers, some as young as fifteen and sixteen years old, undertook similar experiments.

Among the pioneers of Egyptian youth citizen journalism was Wael Abbas.⁸ He was one of the first bloggers to effectively connect his blog with the video-sharing Web site YouTube to agitate against police brutality and torture. In 2006 the Egyptian blogosphere was shaken after he posted a video clip of two police officers torturing and sodomizing a minibus driver, Emad al-Kabir. Not only did the horrifying and graphic video go viral, but al-Kabir came forward at the urging of human rights activists and pressed charges against the offenders, leading to the unprecedented conviction of each police officer to a three-year prison sentence.⁹ This case emboldened many others to use their communications tools to "name and shame" perpetrators of crimes and corruption. Young citizen journalists anonymously founded anticorruption blogs and Web sites in different parts of the country, from the south to the north. It was also during this period that the U.S. Department of State and international civil society groups working in human rights took an interest in Egypt's cyber citizens. They spearheaded training and networking initiatives with young activists who came to be known as "cyberdissidents" (Herrera, forthcoming). It would not be off the mark to suggest that from this time the communication behavior of wired Egyptians was channeled toward political oppositional activities at least some of the time.

Phase IV: Becoming a Wired Generation

By 2007–2008 blogs were being surpassed by Facebook, the digital social media platform of choice for Egyptians. In March 2008 there were some 822,560 Facebook users in Egypt, and by February 2011 that number grew to more than 5.6 million (Burcher, 2010; Hui, 2011). During the early months of the Arab revolts alone (between January and April 2011), 2 million new Egyptian users joined Facebook. An overwhelming 75 percent of Egypt's Facebook users were now between the ages of fifteen and twenty-nine, and 36 percent of those users were female (Mourtada & Salem, 2011). In 2007 Fatin, like many other bloggers, transitioned from blogging to Facebooking. She explained: "For a while I was putting my posts on my blog and on Facebook. Then I switched to Facebook only because you can filter the people you want to read your writings and tag people when you want to discuss an idea with them." A second reason for the shift had to do with security concerns. Fatin no longer felt comfortable transmitting her thoughts so openly in a blog to people she did not actually know. Facebook allowed her to tailor her audience and decide who could be in her networks, though she was under no illusion that Facebook was a secure or private space.

Murad also slowly phased out of blogging in favor of being the administrator (admin) of a Facebook group. By 2008 his group about tolerance and art

gained a modest but loyal following of about 350 members of mainly Egyptians in their teens and early twenties. Many of them got to know each other offline, and some of them started their own Facebook pages devoted to such spinoff issues as religious freedom, the headscarf, graffiti, and cinema.

The organizing and movement building potentials of Facebook became more evident in 2008 after university student and part-time activist Israa Abdel Fatah received a text message from twenty-eight-year-old Ahmed Maher, an engineering student and fellow activist, suggesting they do something to support an April 6 strike planned by textile workers in the Nile Delta city of Al Mahalla al-Kubra. Israa set up a Facebook event for a general strike expecting to attract a small circle of activists. Unbeknownst to her, the event went viral, and the Facebook group, the April 6 Youth Movement (*Harakat Shabab 6 Abril*), was born (Shapiro, 2009). Yet for all the advantages and empowering features of Facebook organizing, it also carries heavy risks. The two creators of the April 6, 2008, event were arrested. In one confrontation, Maher was beaten for twelve hours by the state security police in order to get him to disclose his Facebook password. His friend Wael Abbas, in the spirit of the cyberdissidence, posted images of Maher's bruised and beaten body on his blog.

By this time Facebook had become such an integral part of Egyptian youth culture that it entered the local vernacular as "al-Face." This virtual space housed a cacophony of voices and innumerable groups ranging from biology study groups, fans of Arabic singers, car racing aficionados, and volunteer associations to hate pages against corrupt teachers, Quranic memorization clubs, fashion watchers, and everything in between.

In 2010 diverse individuals and groups from among Egypt's Facebook youth (*shabab al-Face*) came together around the cause of Mohamed ElBaradei, former diplomat, director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), 2005 Nobel Peace Prize recipient, and Egyptian presidential hopeful. ElBaradei founded the National Association for Change in Egypt to advocate for electoral reform and pave the way for representative democracy. Over a quarter of a million Egyptians from different religious, political, class, gender, and regional backgrounds joined the Mohamed ElBaradei Facebook page. As a critical mass of youth rallied behind ElBaradei, they came to realize that Mubarak and the system that kept the oligarchy in power were not inevitable. Using all the digital tools and online platforms at their disposal, members of this wired generation emboldened each other to challenge the status quo.

Mona, who by this time had joined a virtual community of female Arab graphic artists, made political cartoons that ridiculed President Mubarak. When asked if she was afraid of the possible consequences of her postings, she declared, "No! We're not afraid of them. What are they going to do, arrest millions of us? Because millions of us are doing this kind of thing." Faten echoed this sentiment when she explained:

There is something about being active on a social networking site that breaks all our concerns about anonymity. It's totally changing our attitude. No one can arrest thousands of people for what they're saying on Facebook, and they can't control the millions of conversations taking place there.

Two of the admins involved in running the ElBaradei Facebook page, twenty-three-year-old Abdelrahman Mansour and thirty-year-old Wael Ghonim, went on to create an even bigger online sensation, the antitorture campaign named after a victim of police brutality, We Are All Khaled Said. The admins worked under the cover of anonymity partly for security reasons and partly to serve as the faceless, unifying voice of the youth. They spoke from behind the mask of the airbrushed "Everyouth" portrait of the martyr Khaled Said.

From its inception the page operated on a principle of online to offline street action. The page housed a unique cultural space that was youthful, Arab, Egyptian, Muslim oriented, educational, participatory, and subversive. Within hours of its launch, the admins called on members to get up from behind their computer screens and go out into the streets, initially to attend the public funeral of Khaled Said. The page continued to mobilize its members by organizing a series of antitorture silent stands, or civil disobedience-styled flash mobs.

In the lead-up to the November 2010 presidential and parliamentary elections, the ElBaradei and We Are All Khaled Said Facebook pages were blocked. The temporary loss of Facebook caused its young users great anxiety. Twenty-one-year-old Ahmed talked about how he was genuinely distressed that Facebook might be permanently "turned off." He said that depriving him of Facebook would be like "blocking the air to my lungs." The social networking site had become an extension of his social, political, psychological, and even spiritual life.

Ahmed explained how those on the We Are All Khaled Said page abided by unwritten codes for participating in the community: members should not use the space to insult each other's religion, to make fun of each other, for pornography or sexual harassment, for advertising, for spreading false rumors, or for spying. When someone crossed these lines, others would intervene by way of posting a corrective comment, starting a conversation on the post in question, or by asking the admin to remove that person from the group. Members of the group expressed pride in knowing they had created a virtuous society that stood in contrast to the corrupted society outside (Herrera, 2011a).

When the Facebook pages came up again, following the direct intervention of a U.S.-based human rights activist and high-level Facebook executive (Giglio, 2011), the We Are All Khaled Said page surpassed even the ElBaradei page as Egypt's most active and consequential youth movement in over half a century. It had morphed into a unique community with its own identity, rebel culture, ethical codes, and politics. The true genius of the page was how it took the collective, generational "we" and branded it with a common identity,

conviction, and purpose. Like the ElBaradei cause, the members of the We Are All Khaled Said movement, though highly diverse, came to view themselves as a social collectivity with deepening ties of solidarity and overlapping sets of interests that converged on the need to claim and change the Egyptian system. The ElBaradei movement zeroed in on reform of the electoral process, whereas the We Are All Khaled Said cause targeted the state's menacing security apparatus.

The We Are All Khaled Said page issued a call for a march on January 25, 2010, the national holiday in honor of the police, to protest police corruption and torture. But on the heels of the Tunisian revolution and fleeing of its dictator, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, on January 14, the protest became a call for a revolution against "Torture, Corruption, Poverty and Unemployment." This event became the trigger for the eighteen-day revolution that brought down the thirty-year dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak. On the eve of the January 25 Revolution, the page had grown to 390,000 members and was receiving more than nine million hits a day.

The page did not cause the revolution, and youth of the Internet were not the only group active in the revolt, but it is hard to imagine the revolutionary movement unfolding in the way it did without the determination, tools, courage, training, networking, and changing political and cultural understandings of this wired generation. But, as it turned out, bringing down a dictator was the easy part; the hard work for deeper, structural, systemic change lay ahead.

Conclusions: Claiming the System?

Egypt's wired revolutionary generation that emerged on the world stage following the January 25 Revolution contributed in no small measure to the success of the first stage of the revolution, namely the toppling of President Hosni Mubarak. But like their generational counterparts engaged in various struggles throughout the Middle East and North Africa, Europe, sub-Saharan Africa, and the United States, young Egyptians grappled with questions about how to move forward. Even now, the hoped-for outcomes of the revolution—dignity, democracy, and equity—are far from inevitable.

The post-Mubarak period in Egypt has been fraught with uncertainty and conflict—and pregnant with risk. The country has had some success in the area of electoral democracy. It held its first ever multicandidate presidential election in June 2012. But the process favored two groups of entrenched power elites: the military and the eighty-year-old opposition group—and ultimate victor—the Muslim Brotherhood. Both of these groups have had especially poor track records when it comes to democracy, transparency, and equity, as well as long proven records of cronyism, nepotism, and paternalism.

Egypt's young cyber citizens have been crowded out of the power game and are now struggling to find ways to more deeply dismantle and penetrate the old power structure. For all the dexterity and creativity they have shown

in horizontal organizing, persistent civil disobedience, and networking and mobilizing across lines of difference—ideological, religious, class, gender, and otherwise—citizens of Egypt’s wired generation have exhibited serious limitations when it comes to strategizing for the long term in ways that allow them to achieve their vision of a good society. This generation of young Egyptians faces debilitating obstacles resulting from the entrenchment of old power structures, the growing sophistication of surveillance systems, and the uncertainty that comes with long-term economic insecurity. Egypt’s young aspire to live with dignity and freedom in accountable democratic systems with a standard of equity and justice. However, social media-based activism—whether the Khaled Said youth movement that sparked the 25 January uprising in Egypt or the Facebook activity around the Arabic exam—lends itself to short-term, single-issue campaigns. These campaigns can activate feelings of citizenship, start conversations, build coalitions, get people to the streets, and even trigger revolutions. But can they facilitate the sustained deliberation, organization, and leadership needed to imagine alternatives and rebuild structures of power?

The democratic movements of Egypt’s wired generation have yet to develop an aptitude for planning over the long term; exploiting educational, economic, and political resources; and cultivating strategic leadership. At this critical juncture, it is important to consider how to best support citizens of Egypt’s wired generation in their pursuit of deep democracy by developing educational systems—informally and formally—that provide the conceptual, methodological, and critical tools necessary to understand how power and counterpower operate. In the absence of critical and collaborative educational endeavors, the fear is that a dreaded counterrevolution, with its regressive and antidemocratic tendencies, may very well prevail in Egypt.

Notes

1. Taken from the first-year Arabic exam administered in December 2011 at a high school for boys located in an educational district in the Governorate of Gharbia.
2. Mannheim (1952) posits that young people begin forming their own memories, distinct from the older generations’, during late adolescence, at about age seventeen. In contemporary times, given the earlier onset of adolescence and the ubiquitous youth-oriented media and communications ecosystem, this is likely happening in the earlier teens.
3. For detailed country-specific and regional statistics on Internet users worldwide, see Internet World Stats at <http://www.Internetworldstats.com/stats1.htm>.
4. Israa Abel-Fattah, who was dubbed the president of the “Facebook Republic,” and Ahmed Maher used their Facebook networks to coordinate support for the striking workers. They were both arrested and detained as a result of their activism.
5. I am grateful for the invaluable help of two research assistants, Rawda Waguih and Hosam Basyoni, for the 2010 phase of research. The 2006 research was coordinated with Professor Kamal Naguib of Alexandria University. For an elaboration of those data in English and Arabic, see Herrera (2006) and Naguib (2008).
6. These attitudes were mirrored in a government survey on the Internet use of 1,338 Egyptians between ages eighteen and thirty-five. It found that 72 percent of youth sur-

veyed considered the Internet “a bad influence on themselves”; 71 percent thought “the Internet is dangerous for children”; 43 percent believed “that the Internet has negatively impacted family ties”; and 89 percent agreed to “having a law in place that monitors/censors Internet content” (Rakha, 2008). Even accounting for biases of a governmental survey, it is highly plausible that in 2007–2008 young people were not entirely comfortable using a medium without adult supervision. But those attitudes appeared to have changed significantly in the succeeding years.

7. Howard’s (2010) table “Blogger Arrests in the Muslim World, 2003–2010” is a very good source for understanding the risks of blogging in the region (pp. 113–116). See also Gasser, Maclay, and Palfrey (2010) on digital safety in developing countries.
8. Abbas’s blog can be found at <http://misrdigital.blogspot.com/>. See also a 2007 CNN story about how YouTube shut down and then restored Abbas’s account and torture videos at <http://www.cnn.com/2007/WORLD/meast/11/29/youtube.activist/>.
9. The popular blog *The Arabist* played an important role in disseminating news about the case (see El-Amrani, 2007).

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