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## **Egypt's Unfinished Revolution: The Role of the Media Revisited**

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This article analyzes the role of the media in the Egyptian revolution, distinguishing between the *political synchronization* of media forms, which was achieved during the 18 Days uprising, and broader processes of media *convergence*. We locate the key dynamics of media production and consumption by revolutionary activists not in the affordances of the Internet but in the shifting balance of forces between revolution and counterrevolution on the wider political stage. Using various examples, we argue that parts of the popular movement in Egypt have moved away from reliance on old and new capitalist media as simply carriers of their voices and hopes toward media practices seeking to develop media voices and infrastructures of their own.

*Keywords: Egypt, revolution, Internet, journalism, political activism*

### **Introduction**

Three years after the fall of Mubarak, the Egyptian revolution remains a symbol of the power of popular protest. The celebratory tone of much of the discussions in 2011 has given way to more somber perspectives. The sight of a crowd of tens of thousands in Tahrir Square on the third anniversary of the revolution cheering for the former head of Mubarak's military intelligence apparatus, current minister of defense Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi, demonstrates clearly that a counterrevolution is in full swing. But rather than despair, we look for signs that, as Marx (1850) put it, combat with this powerful, united enemy will allow "the party of overthrow" to ripen "into a really revolutionary party" (Introduction, para. 3).

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This article returns to themes we addressed in 2011, shortly after the fall of Mubarak (Aouragh & Alexander, 2011), to ask whether our analysis has withstood the test of events. Two years later, our characterization of the Internet as a tool and a space of political activism remains largely valid. We reassert the importance of rejecting approaches that understand media as either *form* or *content* and instead start from the dialectical relationship between the two. Moreover, rather than attributing superficial values (positive or negative) to the role of the Internet or focusing on one online platform, we believe even more strongly that, in this new phase, a bottom-up approach helps to explain the local relevance of electronic (digital) media. We therefore reiterate our rejection of a deterministic approach to the relationship between online and off-line political action. Second, the many contradictory experiences in Egypt since 2011, encouraged by the *uneven* nature of Internet access, have shown time and again that it is vital to examine different activist practices as well as how each relates to the larger media ecology. We recognize that the discussion we began in 2011 about synchronization needs rethinking and refinement. We propose distinguishing between the *political synchronization* of media forms (which was achieved during the 18 Days uprising) from broader processes of media *convergence*, hence revealing with more clarity its effects on the political economy of media production in Egypt after the fall of Mubarak (cf. Sakr, 2013).

The political synchronization of media forms and content is not *in itself* revolutionary or counterrevolutionary, because we have observed how each different stage of the revolution reflects new fault lines that in turn affect the media ecology. This leads to our third general point: Our media analysis is embedded in assessments of the balance of forces between revolution and counterrevolution. This assessment requires an understanding of the political economy of communication technologies. Consequently, we locate the key dynamics of media production and consumption by revolutionary activists not in the affordances of the Internet itself but in the shifting balance of forces between revolution and counterrevolution on the wider political stage.

These theoretical points form the basis for our examination of three case studies from Egypt during 2011 to 2013. We will examine the media of the workers' movement, the Askar Kazeboon campaign during the winter of 2011–2012, and the media strategy developed by the Revolutionary Socialists Movement, which, we argue, illuminate wider and deeper processes of change in the way that Egyptians mediated their communications. These examples illustrate our proposition that parts of the popular movement have transitioned from reliance on old and new capitalist media as simply carriers of their voices and hopes toward media practices seeking to develop media voices and infrastructures of their own. This transition occurred despite all the problems involved in the practice of revolutionary journalism within the dominant media and proprietary social media platforms of capitalist society, such as Facebook. In the final instance, we therefore relay what revolutionary activists have argued: that the emergence of a powerful, united counterrevolution requires, above all, the creation of a media apparatus that goes beyond the alternative media model; creating alternative or independent media to strive for the re-creation of the political synchronization of the 18 Days, knitting together political and social protest once again to achieve the promise of January 2011 for bread, freedom, and social justice.

### **Conjuncture, Convergence, and Synchronization: The January Revolution Revisited**

January 2011 marked the conjuncture of two historical processes: the eruption of open war between “the people” and “the regime” with the overthrow of Ben Ali in Tunisia and Mubarak in Egypt took place in the context of the accelerating adoption of digital communication technologies on a global scale. Data from the Egyptian Ministry of Communications and Information Technology estimate a mobile phone penetration rate of 96.8% in 2012, and an Internet penetration rate of 39% for the same year. These statistics also show a dramatic surge in broadband usage (accounting for 90.56% of total Internet users in 2012 compared to 57.47% in 2008) (Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, 2013, p. 2). Statistics suggest that the Arab region contributed the most to global social media growth since 2011 (cf. “Civil Movements,” 2011). As Facebook is reaching 1 billion users, the Middle East and North Africa region contributes the most new users. More importantly, where social media use increased, it was most likely a *result* of the protests, confirming again that cause and effect should not be confused.

In 2011, we noted that the underlining paradigm addressing this conjuncture was based on a false dichotomy between dystopian and utopian implications of the Internet (Aouragh & Alexander, 2011). We also made a case for looking beyond a mechanistic approach to understanding the divide between old and new media—using the specific example of the synchronization of social media and satellite broadcasting as a symbiotic relationship developed between broadcasters such as Al-Jazeera and revolutionary activists on the streets during the 18 Days uprising. Other regional and global broadcasters, including the BBC, CNN, and Al-Arabiyya, followed suit.

Egyptian media organizations, particularly those owned by the state, by contrast, went through a different process in the course of the 18 days. The success of the popular uprising in creating a crisis within the institutions of the state, including its media organizations, could be traced directly in the changing coverage of the protests. Headlines denouncing the demonstrators and praising Mubarak at the beginning of the uprising gave way to sympathetic, or at least relatively neutral and factual, reporting.<sup>1</sup> In several prominent cases, this change was the result of a rebellion by the journalists themselves. At *Rose al-Youssef* magazine, journalists and administrative staff took over the building and locked out the editor-in-chief, an ardent Mubarak loyalist (Bassiouny, 2013). As different media forms began to work in concert, a powerful consensus developed at the level of their content. Coverage of Mubarak’s fall was celebratory not only across many global, regional, and local media organizations but between traditional and social media. In Egypt, this consensus was strongly identified with the idea that the revolution was the expression of national unity between Muslims and Christians, across social classes and between generations, albeit with “revolutionary youth” in the vanguard (Alexander, 2011).

Looking back at the analysis we advanced in 2011, we acknowledge the need to distinguish between the media synchronization we observed as a *political effect* of the fusion of social and political protest during the uprising and broader sociotechnical processes of *convergence* (Jenkins, 2006) or

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<sup>1</sup> Personal observation by Anne Alexander during research visit to Cairo, February 2011.

*hypermedia* (Deibert 1997; Kraidy, 2009). We also note the merging of media forms and the changing patterns of media production. Significantly, despite the signs of convergence at a sociotechnical level during the years after Mubarak's fall, political synchronization between protesters in the streets and mainstream media organizations was absent from many of the subsequent clashes between revolutionary activists and the state.<sup>2</sup>

Since 2011, counterrevolutionary forces in Egypt have made highly effective use of social media in parallel with their efforts to regain control of the traditional state media, which was temporarily disrupted during the early phases of the revolution. Although a number of outlets and media collectives were united in the struggle against the regime in the initial phase, the deepening of the revolution narrowed the earlier alignments. We also note the importance of recognizing the contribution of individual journalists and editors to the potential for political synchronization with the popular revolutionary movement, and that the battle lines over this question crossed the divide between state and privately owned media. *Ahram Online*, under the editorship of long-standing activist Hani Shukrallah, for example, remained a source of critical news and comment despite being part of the state media.<sup>3</sup>

Unfolding events after Mubarak's fall have underscored the importance of moving away from approaches that view the relationship between media form and content in a deterministic fashion. Experiments by activists with online and off-line media evolved and matured between 2011 and 2013. Projects combining training of revolutionary activists in filmmaking and offering self-made video content such as *Mosireen*, with off-line nonconnected street viewing by, for instance, Askar Kazeboon ("the military are liars"), attempted to create new forms of political synchronization between online and off-line media, as we will explore later. Moreover, the spread of counterrevolutionary initiatives in online spaces disrupted the former antiregime homogeneity of cyberspace.

Striking confirmation of the importance of understanding the relationship between online and off-line mobilization dialectically is provided by the Tamarod (Rebellion) signature campaign, which called for mass protests on June 30, 2013, against the presidency of Mohamed Morsi. Tamarod's innovation, as Adel Iskandar notes, was to introduce a paper petition campaign in addition to the well-established repertoire of online campaigning. Tamarod learned from Askar Kazeboon by taking the campaign to communities not serviced by social media (Iskandar, 2013). A thorough examination of the Tamarod campaign and its aftermath is beyond the scope of this article; however, we note that the last days of Morsi exhibited many of the same characteristics of political synchronization between online and off-line, traditional and new media, that were visible during the 18 Days uprising of 2011. Several crucial differences, however, help to explain why the political outcome of these events was not the same as in 2011. Critically, in contrast to the effect of the 18 Days, the repressive institutions of the Mubarak regime—specifically the armed forces, Ministry of the Interior, and the judiciary—emerged from the crisis that toppled Morsi stronger, more united, and with restored levels of popular support. One factor contributing to this outcome was the work

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<sup>2</sup> And when it did occur, it was with very different political consequences, as during the crisis that led to the overthrow of Mohamed Morsi by the armed forces in July 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Notably, battles at privately owned *Egypt Independent* over the question of pressure from the authorities ended with several of its journalists leaving to found a publication of their own, *Mada Masr*.

that these counterrevolutionary forces had put in to developing their own strategy to achieve political synchronization of the media *on their terms* during the previous two years.

### Counterrevolutionary Media Strategies

The experiences of the revolutionary movement in Egypt since 2011 point strongly toward the need for revolutionary movements to create the means to achieve *by design* the political synchronization of form and content that was momentarily apparent during the 18 Days uprising and that contributed powerfully to the success of the first phase of the revolution. The fact that this synchronization was the product of a particular phase within the revolutionary process, and not simply a property of the technologies themselves, is illustrated by the Maspero massacre of October 9, 2011. As armored cars crushed Christian demonstrators outside the Egyptian Radio and Television Union (ERTU) building at the end of a peaceful protest calling for an end to sectarian discrimination, the global news networks took a very different perspective from the one they had adopted in February 2011. The BBC News Online report on the October 9 protests initially carried a headline repeating the claims made on Egyptian state TV that Egyptian soldiers had been killed by protestors, with no mention of the numerous reports of demonstrators being killed by the army available from credible activist and local journalist sources at the scene via Twitter.<sup>4</sup> Within Egypt, the ERTU coverage of the events at Maspero highlighted the critical importance of extending and deepening the process of “cleansing” the state media of supporters of the old regime from below, a process that began in February 2011 but was never completed. As we will explore below, the events of Maspero also provided a crucial impetus for the Kazeboon campaign’s attempt to propagate a counternarrative to the military’s claims that violent demonstrators, not a systematically brutal response to protest by the armed forces and police, were to blame for deaths and injuries.

In addition to using the state media to drown out alternative narratives, the military instituted a raft of repressive measures against revolutionary activists. Marching in the cities and blocking roads were deemed illegal offences and susceptible to trial before Emergency Supreme State Security Courts (Amnesty International, 2011). Law 34 was added to the penal code, introducing the absurd term *baltagiyya* (“thuggery”) as a form of legal misconduct. Those who called for, or participated in, demonstrations, strikes, sit-ins, or gatherings faced imprisonment (Human Rights Watch, 2011a). Several activists were targeted directly, including renowned blogger Alaa Abdel Fattah, who was arrested in the wake of the Maspero massacre in October 2011 and accused of inciting violence against the army (Shenker, 2011).

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4 The headline was rapidly altered to a more neutral “Cairo clashes leave 24 dead after Coptic church protest” (“Deaths as Cairo Violence Flares,” 2011) although the balance of the story was still tilted toward the version of events being put forward in ERTU’s coverage, despite an abundance of contradictory reports via Twitter from locally-based journalists working on Egyptian English-language publications, such as Sarah Carr, who were at the scene. See Carr (2011) for a detailed eyewitness account of events. These issues were raised directly by email with BBC News Online’s Middle East editor Tarik Kafala by Anne Alexander at 11:25 p.m. on October 9.

Under military rule, the Egyptian authorities also adopted a range of strategies for control and surveillance of internet activity, including restricting connectivity during major protests (Freedom House, 2012) and using content filtering devices from Blue Coat (Citizen Lab, 2013). The presence of tools provided by this California-based company in the Egyptian authorities' armory of surveillance equipment echoes the many intimate connections between the U.S. government and Egypt's authoritarian rulers. The recent exposure of the National Security Agency's data-mining project demonstrated that, in addition to being watched by their own rulers, Egyptian citizens were subjected to massive surveillance by the U.S. government. After Iran, Pakistan, and Jordan, Egypt came in as the fourth most intensely scrutinized country with 7.6 billion files (Greenwald & MacAskill, 2013).

Therefore, an understanding of the implications of ICT infrastructures on local political dynamics requires a view on the relations between (global) power relations and the political economy of corporations producing the tools for Internet communication and surveillance. For instance, apart from local surveillance, programs like Prism have been put in place by external governments, which Arab activists and nongovernmental organizations consider to be a violation of human rights.<sup>5</sup> It is outside the scope of this article to discuss this issue in detail, but it is important to note that, for revolutionary activists, to assess the impact of digital activism, it is not the infrastructure of the Internet per se that is the most crucial but their own *relative* power vis-à-vis the *shifting* balance of forces on the wider political stage.

These shifts threw some of the actors who were once behind barricades to the other side, in support of the state. Muslim Brotherhood politicians elected to parliament and the presidency were vocal in their support for police repression of protests and the arrest of young revolutionaries (MENA News Agency, 2013), while many youth activists, leftists, and liberals backed the military repression of Brotherhood supporters following the military coup of July 3, 2013.

### **The Media of the Workers' Movement**

The first of our case studies examines how activists in the burgeoning workers' movement responded to changes in the media ecology as a result of the shifting balance between revolution and counterrevolution in the wake of Mubarak's fall. The workers' movement constitutes an important, although relatively little studied, component of the revolutionary movement, which saw both massive growth in workers' organizations with hundreds of new independent unions founded and a huge upsurge in strike activity (Alexander, 2011, 2012; Marfleet, 2013). There were as many strikes in February 2011 alone as there were the entire previous year. Overall, around 1,500 strikes took place in 2011, and there were nearly 3,500 recorded during 2012 (Beinin, 2013).

Before the revolution, in contrast to other groups of activists such as the April 6 Youth Movement and the supporters of liberal politician Mohamed el-Baradei, we did not observe trade unionists making

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<sup>5</sup> See for instance the work of SMEX at <http://www.smex.org/mapping-laws-affecting-internet-users-in-the-arab-region>.

systematic use of social media.<sup>6</sup> Several possible reasons exist for this apparent change in tactics. Independent trade unionists before the revolution were subject to high levels of surveillance and sometimes to campaigns of physical intimidation or legal harassment (Alexander, 2010). It seems likely that, at a stage when there were only a few independent unions and the potential costs of joining them were very high, many worker activists may have concluded that the risks of public social media use outweighed the potential benefits. Indeed, one of the few workers to engage in blogging as a form of activism, textile worker Kareem el-Beheiry, was tortured and imprisoned as a direct consequence of his role in documenting the 2008 strikes and protests by mill workers in Mahalla al-Kubra (Reporters Without Borders, 2008). After the revolution, the government allowed independent unions to register, although the unions' legal status remained ambiguous, and their numbers grew exponentially, thus reducing some of the risks of public association with the workers' movement. Moreover, Facebook was associated positively with the revolution, even during the uprising itself: Protesters in Tahrir Square spelled out with stones on the ground in English and Arabic letters the slogan, "We are the men of Facebook."<sup>7</sup> Finally, Internet penetration also grew rapidly during 2010–2011, with the number of estimated Internet users rising by nearly 26% over the course of the year (Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, 2012). Facebook's use grew even more quickly, with numbers of users doubling during the same period ("Internet Users in Egypt," 2013).

Various strategies can be distinguished in the media practice of labor movement activists. At times they adopted public relations strategies, attempting to shape their interactions with professional journalists by becoming both on- and off-the-record sources of comment and news information. Larger, better organized groups of workers were often able to work with nongovernmental organization activists, political organizations, and networks of sympathetic journalists to organize press conferences and public events (Alexander, 2010).

Another strategy was that of citizen journalism, whereby worker activists became direct content creators and publishers, but on an individual rather than a collective basis. This particular strategy was rarely adopted by worker activists before the revolution, with a few prominent exceptions, such as the blogger Kareem el-Beheiry, who was employed by the Misr Spinning Company in Mahalla al-Kubra and whose personal site and YouTube channel became an important source of news and comment about events at the mill (Alexander, 2010).

The strategy we will focus on here was the creation of independent publications and media organizations by and for the workers' movement. We use the label "independent publications" where we explore the development of content that is largely restricted to one main platform, such as the Facebook page created by junior hospital doctors as the online newspaper of their strikes in May 2011. In our later

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<sup>6</sup> This point is based on discussions between Anne Alexander and Egyptian trade union activists between 2008 and the present day as well as observation of the setting up of Facebook pages by groups of workplace activists since February 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Observation by Anne Alexander at Tahrir Square, February 6, 2011.



examples, the term "independent media organizations" seems more appropriate to describe publishing and broadcasting activities across a wide range of platforms and media.

Although hospital doctors, as highly educated professionals, would seem to have little in common with factory workers or low-paid civil servants, the doctors' strikes showed a clear identification on the part of the organizers with the goals and methods of the wider workers' movement (Shafiq, 2011). In fact, the national doctors' strikes in May 2011 may have helped to galvanize workers in other sectors of the economy as they provided a model of a well-organized national action, which few other groups of trade unionists were in a position to achieve (Alexander, 2011).

The action was coordinated by an elected Doctors' Higher Strike Committee, chosen at a general assembly of the Doctors' Union and composed largely of junior doctors, mainly drawn from the radical campaigning group Doctors Without Rights (M. Shafiq and Doctors Without Rights activists, personal interview in Arabic, October 27, 2011).

The committee's Facebook page, which operated only for the duration of the dispute, proved to be a highly effective instant newspaper. It functioned as an organizer for the action, providing access to telephone numbers for the representatives of the strike committees in the provinces and disseminating calls for activities organized during the strike, such as rallies and marches. It was also one of the main vehicles for the distribution of the official statements of the strike committee and rebuttals of misinformation from the Ministry of Health and the mainstream media. Before and during strike, the page's correspondents in the provinces, who were the activists in the local strike committees, provided a constant stream of locally created content documenting their activities and sharing information about the percentage of doctors observing the strike call and the response of other groups of hospital staff and patients. In addition to reporting on local activities, some groups created and shared their own agitational content—such as short videos calling for support for the strike, which were distributed via Facebook (Doctors' Higher Strike Committee, 2011). The screenshot shown in Figure 1 contains the time line of the Doctors' Higher Strike Committee Facebook page with rates of participation in the strike (100% of junior doctors in Benha Teaching Hospital on strike, 100% on strike in Saray al-Qubba, Cairo) and a picture of a strike banner in Zaqaziq Hospital.

 اللجنة العليا لإضراب أطباء مصر  
القااهرة : مركز صحى سراى القبه إضراب 100% بالرغم من التهديدات الإدارية  
Like · Comment · Share · 17 May at 10:52

21 people like this.

[View 1 comment](#)

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 اللجنة العليا لإضراب أطباء مصر  
اضراب مستشفى الاحرار بالقازيق  
الاضراب جزئى مفتوح

 Wall Photos

Like · Comment · Share · 17 May at 10:51

19 people like this.

[View all 4 comments](#)

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 اللجنة العليا لإضراب أطباء مصر  
بنها التعليمى ينضم الإضراب بنسبه 100%. الى الأمام يا شباب

Like · Comment · Share · 17 May at 10:39

**Figure 1. Screenshot showing a time line on the Doctors' Higher Strike Committee Facebook page, May 17, 2011.**

Activists in the publicly owned sugar refineries were another group within the workers' movement who created a Facebook page to act as their collective voice online. Like the Doctors' Higher Strike Committee, the Sugar Factories Front for Change coalesced around strike action, but unlike the doctors' committee, which was created within an existing union, the Front developed quickly into an independent union. The Facebook page was the official online voice of the Front, with the result that use of the platform changed from its original social networking goals. Mohamed 'Abd al-Rahman Abdallah, a quality

manager at Armant Sugar Factory and official spokesman for the Sugar Factories Front for Change told a public meeting at the Center for Socialist Studies in Cairo on September 19, 2011, that the Front's activists were facing harassment by the police and army, who threatened them with arrest and accused them of serving foreign interests, because they were in the midst of organizing a sectorwide strike of around 26,000 workers.

We're seeing the same situation again that happened in Tahrir. The revolutionaries in Tahrir were *eating Kentucky Fried Chicken*, and were *getting money from America or American agents*. This is being said about the revolutionaries in Armant who are from the Islamist current. (Ibrahim, 2011, emphasis by authors)

Abdallah reminded his audience that the campaign of vilification against activists in the sugar factories was likely to have serious consequences, appealing for solidarity in the event that he and his colleagues were arrested.

Despite his public self-identification as an Islamist, the screenshot shown in Figure 2 illustrates how Abdallah sought to define a distinctive editorial voice for the Front's Facebook page, which articulated a revolutionary agenda focused on cleansing [*tathir*] the old regime's cronies from the sugar refineries, but was independent of political parties.

In a post signed by name but published by the page administrator, Abdallah argued that officials of the Front should not use the page to promote particular political organizations (Sugar Factories Front for Change, 2011). He explained that, in his capacity as "Chairman of the page," he had deleted a sticker created by the page administrator that used the Front's name to promote the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party.

From the beginning we said that we do not belong to any political or religious current within this page, and that our cause is workers' rights, and we were born from the womb of the revolution of liberation, so the defence of that revolution has been our priority from the beginning. (Sugar Factories Front for Change, 2011; see also Figure 2.)

جبهة التغيير بشركات السكر والتكرير

Public figure

Like

853 like this

80 talking about this

جبهة التغيير بشركات السكر والتكرير

الاح الاذمن الذي انزل منذ قليل ملصق دعاه حزب الحرية والعدالة باسم الجبهة ولم يوقع باسمه نفيكم بانى بصفتى رئيس هذا الموقع قمت بحذف هذا الملصق وذلك لما بلى :-  
 1- الملصق باسم الجبهة يدل على ان الجبهة بالكامل تؤيد حزب دون الاخر وهذا غير صحيح فلماذا لا ندعو الجبهة مثلا الى حزب النور السلفى او حزب الوسط او الكتله او اى حزب اخر  
 2- لقد حدثنا منذ البدايه قضيتنا وانتماءاتنا واننا لا ننتمى لاي تيار سياسى او دينى داخل هذه الصفحه وان قضيتنا هى حقوق العمال واننا خرجنا من رحم ثورة التحرير لذا فان دفاعنا عن ثورة التحرير هو من اولوياتنا منذ البدايه  
 3- نحن لا نتجر على راء احد من العمال كائن من كان حتى من يتالفونا بالتراي ولك ان تدعم من شئت حال كتابتك باسمك وليس باسم الجبهة فنحن لن نسمح بان تصعب الجبهة بصيغه معينه  
 4- من اعضاء الجبهة من لا ينتمون الى الحزب الذي تدعوا له وهذا يشعرهم بالكثير من القلق فى توجهاتنا ونحن حريصين عل توافق جميع العمال معنا ولن نفرط فى اى واحد منهم  
 لذا فانا اكرر الرجاء من الاخوه المسئولين معنا بالجبهة مراعاة هذا الامر جيدا واذكر بانى امك من الصلاحيات على هذه الصفحه ما يعطى قادر على الحفاظ على هوية الصفحه وعدم الانجراف بها فى اتجاه دون الاخر  
 د محمد عبد الرحمن عبد الله  
 رئيس النقابه المستقلة لعمال مصنع سكر ارمنت  
 See translation

جبهة التغيير بشركات السكر والتكرير

حزب الحرية و العدالة - الصفحه الرسمية

اجعل صفحة النبي رقم 1 على الفيس بوك.. انشرها بقدر

الصفحة الرسمية للمجلس الاعلى

**Figure 2. Editorial comment by Mohamed Abd-al-Rahman Abdallah on the Sugar Factories Front for Change. Facebook page, December 9, 2011.**

The most significant event during our period of analysis was the popular mobilizations against the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF). This began on November 18, 2011, with protests in Tahrir Square against the military's attempt to carve out a dominant role in the process of writing the new constitution. The Front's leaders and members quickly responded to the call for solidarity with the new uprising. They organized a strike and sit-in at Arment refinery to express their support for the demands of the protesters hundreds of miles away in Tahrir Square. On November 23, the page administrator posted a photograph of a banner with the words "Arment Sugar Factory Workers' Coalition supports the Tahrir Revolution" with an editorial comment above, "We meet at 2 p.m." (see

Figure 3). Over the following days the page administrator posted several links to YouTube videos presumably created by some of the Front's members on mobile phone cameras showing the workers' rally and speeches by the Front's leaders inside the factory. The Front's "video journalists" also recorded the failed attempts by Arment's senior managers to bring the sit-in to an end. In other words, the pages were both a mobilizing tool and a disseminating space.



**Figure 3. Screenshot from the Sugar Factories Front for Change Facebook page showing a photograph of a banner in support of the "Tahrir Revolution" at Arment Sugar Refinery, November 23, 2011.**

It is important to emphasize that Facebook pages created by labor movement activists were not simply spaces in which to share content created by others; they served as platforms for the dissemination of content created by the workers concerned. This took a number of forms, including editorial comments accompanying other content or comments and statements in the voice of the group. Because most of the Facebook pages we analyzed for this article allowed either comments or postings by others on the page, battles with hostile commenters were relatively frequent.

It is important to emphasize that, in some of these cases, we observe incipient tendencies typical of the fast pace imposed by revolutions rather than a properly worked-out strategy. Because these activities were largely carried out on proprietary social media platforms, there is a question as to whether

they involved the same degree of awareness of the importance of developing collective approaches to journalistic and editorial practices that setting up a printed newsletter or newspaper would impose. Nevertheless, the evidence from the cases we discuss here, and many others that we can only mention in passing, suggests that the combination of increasing levels of workers' protest in the revolutionary context of Egypt post-2011 with the expansion of social media use propelled worker activists toward adopting by default many journalistic practices that a minority began to shape into embryonic independent media organizations. Many of these examples were temporary, impelled by the specific circumstances of a strike, particularly national or sectorwide strike action. However, they constitute important experiences within the broader processes of organizational development across the workers' movement.

### **Askar Kazeboon: Building "a Campaign to Expose the Truth"**

The Askar Kazeboon ("the military are liars") campaign was launched on December 18, 2011, by revolutionary activists from political movements that were involved in mobilizing protests against the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (Askar Kazeboon, 2011). Like activists in the workers' movement, they had begun to face the organized hostility of the mainstream media, directed by the SCAF's spokesmen, who claimed that demonstrators, rather than the military and police, were responsible for violence and damage during protests. Kazeboon's innovation was to generalize existing practices, such as outdoor screenings of films shot by activists and citizen journalists, into an organized campaign that aimed to create a revolutionary media apparatus intervening across proprietary social media platforms, privately owned broadcast, online and print media, and street protests. The campaign's film, which depicted the killing of 28 peaceful protestors outside the state television building at Maspero by the army, was shown by activists from their laptops via projectors in popular neighborhoods, thus exposing those not connected to the rich material online and those being fed false information via mainstream and state media to an alternative analysis of the protests. Or, in the words of the banner on its Facebook page, it was "a campaign to expose the truth."

The campaign must be seen within the political context discussed earlier—in relation to the fracturing of the revolutionary consensus of the 18 Days, and activists' growing consciousness and that the political synchronization they had achieved with the mainstream media during the uprising against Mubarak would not easily be re-created. This overall shift was confirmed by a frightening increase of violence and stigmatization of activists. Askar Kazeboon was born as part of the growing demand to end military rule, manifested by campaigns opposing military trials mounted against activists and illustrated through the emergence of the #NoSCAF hashtag and the revival of street protests and sit-ins in November and December 2011.

It rapidly became clear that silencing those voices critical of military rule was central to the SCAF's strategy for dealing with continuing protests. As reported in *Al Masry Al Youm*, at clashes in December 2011, the army targeted journalists and destroyed their equipment and accused the media of "sabotaging" Egypt (Abdel Kouddous, 2012). Activist publications were labeled as conspirators, and their authors could now be detained without trial (Human Rights Watch, 2011b). Omar Robert Hamilton, a British Egyptian filmmaker and activist, one of the founding members of Tahrir Cinema, which worked closely with Kazeboon, recalls: "In terms of rumours and all that, there are a couple of nasty Facebook

pages that publish our photographs and the office address and tell people we're all homosexual Zionists or whatever" (in El Hamamsy, 2012, p. 48).

The event that prompted the launch of the campaign was the attack by military and police forces on protestors camped outside the cabinet offices in central Cairo on December 17, 2011. One particularly shocking image of a young woman protester, her underwear exposed by soldiers as they dragged her along the ground and stamped on her chest, was taken by the liberal daily *Al-Tahrir* for its front page under the banner headline "Kazeboon" (*Liars*), responding to claims by the army's spokesman that the military's response to the demonstration had not involved excessive violence ("Al-suhuf al-masriyya tualiq," 2011). Revolutionary activists quickly organized their own press conference countering the narrative given to the media by the SCAF, and the Askar Kazeboon campaign was born (Masrawy, 2011; ONtv, 2011). The key innovation in Askar Kazeboon's repertoire was not, however, the rapid deployment of a social media campaign but the connection between action in the streets and the dissemination of alternative media content. Marches organized around Askar Kazeboon film showings, such as the one that took place in the south Cairo suburb of Al-Ma'adi (Abuallail, 2012), often involved hundreds, and occasionally thousands, of people, galvanizing the revolutionary movement in response to the escalating threat from the SCAF.

As Adel Iskander (2013) argues, the activists organizing Askar Kazeboon faced a general public opinion still optimistic about the army, and the campaign thus intended to bridge dissonance between revolutionary activists and the public at large. What infuriated activists was the return of police brutality so soon after the revolutionary ousting of Mubarak. The deeper factor raising the stamina of Askar Kazeboon is therefore not to be found so much in the experimental collaborations for the sake of creative protesting but in the violent crackdown of the mass protests. Thus, Askar Kazeboon's films can indeed be framed as "shooting against shooting" (El Hamamsy, 2012). Spreading the truth in this context had become a revolutionary act in itself. Coordinators of Askar Kazeboon were often threatened with arrest and suffered from smear campaigns, and at times, during projecting videos on streets, security agents disrupted the meetings and ripped up the screens.

Did this extremely challenging context, which restricted their ability to use online spaces and tools for revolutionary mobilization, leave activists without agency? It is true that the Internet helped propagate visual mobilization, but there was another space of interaction that proved more crucial: the ability to continue reporting about off-line events as an alternative source for mass media while organizing on the street as well. A view into the practice of one of the most vocal and active revolutionary parties in Egypt will help answer these final questions.

### **The Revolutionary Socialists: Journalism as Revolutionary Practice**

Our final example is the media apparatus created by the Revolutionary Socialists (RS) movement during the revolution. Unlike the trade unionists discussed earlier, RS activists drew on a long-established body of socialist theory that emphasized publications as "collective organizers" for revolutionary movements (Lenin, 1901, 1902) and their own practice in producing regular print and digital publications on a small scale for two decades before the 2011 revolution. Moreover, the group counted among its

leading activists many professional journalists working in the state and privately owned media, some of whom, such as Hossam el-Hamalawy, were also well known as bloggers and citizen journalists. El-Hamalawy played a particularly important role in expanding the RS publications beyond the small circulation print newspaper and magazines that the group had brought out since the early 1990s to include a website (launched in 2009), Twitter account, and Facebook page.

Nevertheless, the revolutionary explosion of 2011 made possible the transformation of all these publications across several dimensions. Not only could they reach much wider audiences than ever before, partly a result of the relaxation of state repression that had hampered the RS publishing activities in the prerevolutionary era, but the relationship between the different elements of what El-Hamalawy terms a "revolutionary media apparatus" could be reconfigured to meet the needs of building revolutionary organization in the digital era (Television al-Ishtaraki, 2013). This reconfiguration did not involve the abandonment of print publications; on the contrary, the RS massively expanded both the print runs and, more importantly, the distribution of its newspaper between 2011 and 2013. However, the reconfiguration did involve a shift toward a model based on the group's website rather than the printed paper as the "collective organizer" of the movement (El-Hamalawy, 2012c).

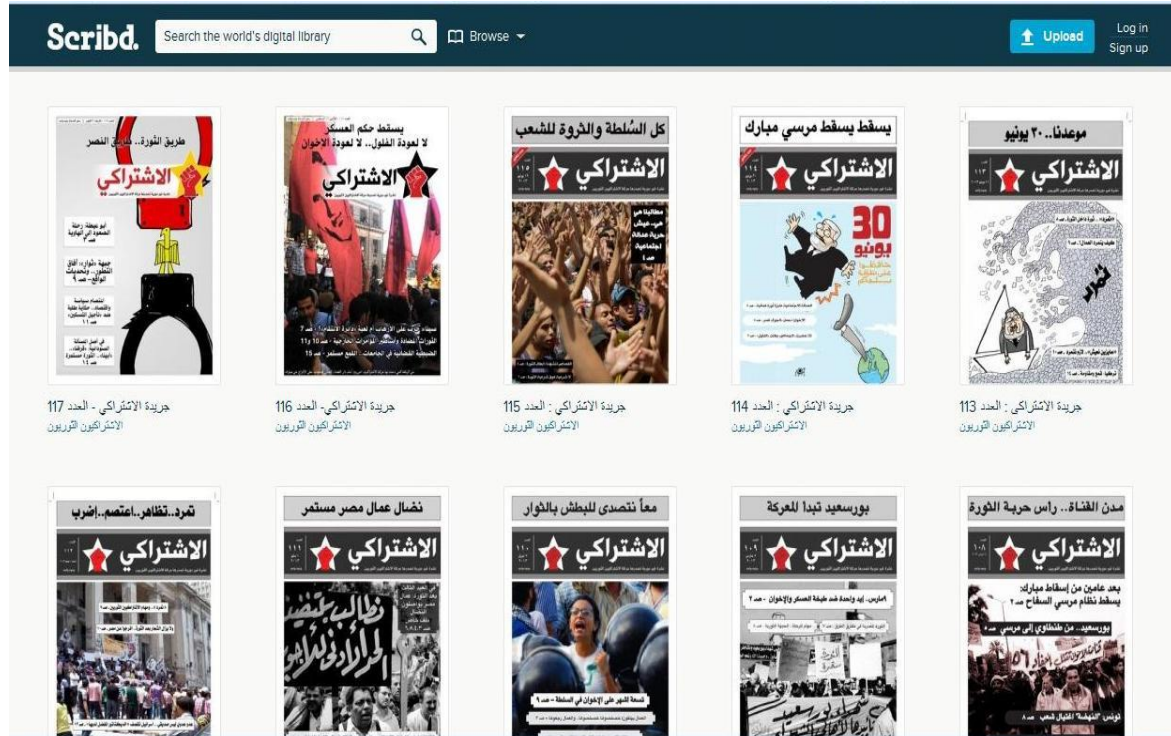


Figure 4. The RS Twitter account @RevSocMe, October 2013.

At the time of writing, RS regular publications and channels include a newspaper (*Al-Ishtaraki*), appearing on average every two weeks between February 2011 and October 2013, a website ([www.revsoc.me](http://www.revsoc.me)), three Twitter accounts (@Egycapitalism, with 24,320 followers; @Egystrikes, with



8,976 followers; and @RevSocMe, with 136,362 followers; see Figure 4), a Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/RevSoc.me>, with 34,237 likes), a YouTube channel (<http://www.youtube.com/user/RevSocMe/about>, with 938 subscribers and 26,751 views), and a Scribd channel (<http://www.scribd.com/revsocme>, with 592,125 reads and 633 followers; see Figure 5).



**Figure 5. The RS Scribd account showing uploaded copies of Al-Ishtaraki newspaper, October 2013.**

These numbers suggest that the RS is engaging with an audience that is relatively large compared to its actual membership, although assessing audience engagement is complex and cannot be reduced to crude metrical comparisons that assume that likes on Facebook are the same as reads on Scribd or followers on Twitter, let alone readers of the print publications. The RS media strategy is also much more than a question of aesthetics; it relates to grassroots mobilization strategies. In fact, one of the distinctive features of the RS media strategy is the emphasis on the special qualities of the face-to-face interactions generated by public sales of its print publications.

We have chosen the RS as a case study for several reasons. First, the RS media apparatus is a creation of the revolutionary period, although the group was active in the prerevolutionary period across all the media discussed here, and RS is disproportionately influential in many of them given its size, reflecting the organization's turn toward public activism in the context of an expanding opposition movement to Mubarak since 2000 (El-Hamalawy, 2013). The process of creating the new media apparatus represented not simply a quantitative change in the numbers of publications sold or size of audiences reached but a qualitative shift that transformed a relatively disjointed collection of publications into a powerful collective voice. Second, one of the reasons this shift was both possible and successful was that the strategy adopted by RS activists took up the everyday media experiences of both the workers' movement and the wider revolutionary movement and transformed these into a practice of revolutionary journalism appropriate to the media ecology of Egypt in 2011–2013.

Four key innovations in RS media practice were generalized during the period 2011 to 2013. The first of these was a shift toward creating content that made the most effective use of digital, and particularly social media, forms. The RS media team creates digital posters featuring the group's slogans and demands on a regular basis—a type of content that is particularly suited to Facebook dissemination. The media team also creates short agitational videos on YouTube featuring photography and video from protests and strikes in addition to other genres of video content, including films of meetings and events, reports of protests and strikes, educational videos, and interviews with activists. In both of these cases, the key shift was toward integrating this kind of content into the RS publications so that it complemented rather than competed with or replaced the core of the group's publications on the website and print newspaper. During 2012, the media team created a consistent visual style for each media channel, set and disseminated editorial guidelines for content contributors, and mapped out the political criteria for content creation (Revolutionary Socialists Movement, n.d.).

Both the content disseminated via social media channels and the redesigned website that launched in August 2012 pointed to a second change: treating images as integral to the content rather than auxiliary. Although images had featured on the 2009 website, they were less important to the overall composition of the page, and fewer articles used them. The website that launched in 2012 was, by contrast, designed around images (El-Hamalawy, 2012c). El-Hamalawy, who had already developed an international profile as a photographer during the prerevolutionary period, was central to putting this shift into practice, and his photographs form the literal backdrop for the beta version of the RS website (see Figure 6).



Figure 6. Front page of the beta version of the RS website, October 2013.

The turn toward images required a third change: working with and refining the use of media tools that were already in the hands of hundreds of thousands of Egyptians—in particular, camera phones. The RS media team organized training sessions for members and supporters that emphasized the use of images and video (Ibrahim, 2013). Underlying this change in practice was a political perspective elaborated by El-Hamalawy in a two-part article from 2012, which argued in favor of developing the mobile phone as a key tool for revolutionary activists in their battle with the state-run media (El-Hamalawy, 2012a, 2012b).

A final change was the acceleration of content production and dissemination cycles to fit in with the speed of digital rather than print publication. In an article published in September 2012, El-Hamalawy argued that a radically changed media ecology in which news “travels at lightning speed” required revolutionary activists to alter their journalistic practice (El-Hamalawy, 2012c). The increased tempo of content production for the RS website was not simply driven by external pressures, however; it aimed to strengthen the internal bonds of the organization and its relationships with its audiences.

When you read a report about a factory in an issue of *The Socialist*, it means that a comrade went to the factory, interacted with the workers and created links with them, and then returned with the report. The process of journalism is a process of organization. It is easy for anyone to sit in the office, browse the net, and write a news

story about the factory, but this is not the kind of journalism we want. Sending a report to the paper means that you are engaged on the ground at the same time as you are connected to the rest of the members of the movement, and that you are engaged through the channel which is open between you and the editorial board of the newspaper. (El-Hamalawy, 2012c, para. 10)

In articulating this vision, El-Hamalawy explicitly draws on a long tradition on the left, and in radical social movements more generally, of using publications not only as their collective voice but as collective organizers—a theme he returned to in another article arguing for a shift toward digital and mobile in the internal communications architecture of the revolutionary movement (El-Hamalawy, 2013; Harman, 1984; Lenin, 1902) Lenin, in his classic pamphlets written for an audience of revolutionary socialists in early-20th-century Russia, projects the vision of an “All-Russia newspaper” as both embodiment and creator of a revolutionary movement capable of confronting the authoritarian state (Lenin, 1902, section 5). The paper “marks the contours of the structure,” of the party, while it “facilitates communication between the builders” and therefore allows them to work more effectively together, so that they can “view the common results achieved by their organized labour” (Lenin, 1901, para 8).

The quest for publications that can both express and help to create a total political perspective in a rapidly changing media ecology has led RS activists to rethink some of their previous assumptions about the relationship between print and digital publications, such as the idea that the website is the digital edition of the printed newspaper (El-Hamalawy, 2012c). As noted, one of the distinctive features of RS media practice has been the concurrent development of its print and digital publications in the context of the Egyptian revolution. A member of the editorial team working on the RS newspaper argued that a reciprocal relationship between print and digital was critical for the group:

It is essential that we do not replace the print paper with the Internet. They are two channels for our propaganda and agitation. We used to say that the paper is the printed extension of the website, and the website is the electronic extension of the paper. (RS member 1, personal interview in Arabic, Cairo, Egypt, November 1, 2012)

The fact that print and digital publications complemented each other did not mean, however, that their roles were the exactly the same. Another member of the editorial team, who edited the RS newspaper during the first phase of the revolution in 2011, explained:

I believe that the concept of the “revolutionary paper” now means something wider than just the printed paper. It covers the website, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube. The revolutionary paper can’t just mean the printed paper. But there are still many reasons why a printed paper is vital. For starters, there is a direct, tangible interaction with the reader. I sell it to him, and so he can say to me “that’s great” or “that’s rubbish,” as he’s paying me the money. Online it is different. Someone might read something or not. They might get involved or not. Before the revolution we had this problem with online “likes” for activities. You’d get 700,000 people say they were going to something online, but in reality only 700 would turn up. And most of those 700 hadn’t even found out

about it online. Selling the paper makes direct physical contact with people, and translates directly into activity. (RS member 2, personal interview in Arabic, Cairo, Egypt, November 2, 2012; see also Figure 7.)



**Figure 7. Photograph of activists from the Revolutionary Socialists selling their newspaper on the street in October 2013, posted on the group's Facebook page.**

This same editorial member also sees the specific form of a print newspaper as opposed to digital content as crucial to its political role:

The paper, as an object, embodies a complete political perspective. It doesn't just offer a single issue—which I might agree with or not. On the site you get a degree of compartmentalization. I might agree with the position on the workers' movement, but not with the position on the Syrian revolution. Or I might be convinced by the perspective on the Military Council, but not on the workers' strikes. The paper is a complete collection of ideas and analysis, which are connected together. (RS member 2, personal interview in Arabic, Cairo, Egypt, November 2, 2012)

The revolutionary newspaper (and, by extension, its online variants) is "the guide for all to see and follow"; it has *authority*. This authority is created *in the present*, because the newspaper summarizes, draws conclusions, and "train[s] us all to select the facts which are the most outstanding" (Lenin, 1902, section 5, para 19). It is also has a *past*, and its voice carries weight because of the political tradition behind it. And it projects its authority onto the *future* by proposing tactics and strategies, by trying to answer the question "What do we do next?"

### Conclusion

The 18 days of January 2011 against Mubarak gave impetus to a process of synchronization between social media and satellite television when a symbiotic relationship developed between broadcasters and revolutionary activists; however, the changing coverage of the protests unveiled a deeper crisis not only within the revolution but between activists and media institutions. We therefore located the key dynamics of media production and consumption by activists not in the affordances of the Internet but in the shifting balance of forces between revolution and counterrevolution.

We have explored how several very different groups of Egyptian activists have used digital and print media in the context of revolution. Despite significant differences in both the political ideology and form of organizations discussed here, we argue that a common thread binding all three is the central role that journalism plays in revolutionary practice. In the case of the workers' organizations, their use of Facebook pages as platforms for organization, agitation, and propaganda propelled them toward the development of editorial practices that not only expressed but also helped to define the collective political perspective of the organizations concerned. The Askar Kazeboon campaign developed on a temporary basis an alternative broadcasting apparatus that did not merely confront and challenge the state media through social media and online dissemination of a counternarrative to that of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, but literally projected this counternarrative onto the streets with the aim of reaching and mobilizing new audiences. As such, it marked a transformation in activists' consciousness of the role of the media in the battle between revolutionary and counterrevolutionary forces. Finally, the changes in RS media practice generalized and refined experiments in revolutionary journalism by thousands of activists and connected those experiences with a wider and deeper political critique of capitalist society. This is important because,

Making the connection between its principles and the experience of the mass of people means, for a revolutionary party and its paper, relating to those elements in people's experience that have been established through struggle, separating them off from the rest of experience and using them to lay the basis for a completely different world view. (Harman, 1984, para. 21)

The connection between experience and the development of a different world view operates both at the level of the activities that the revolution's journalists are documenting (the strikes, sit-ins, protests, meetings, and debates that are the expression of popular revolutionary processes) and at the level of journalistic practice itself. Thus, we move seamlessly between the practice of revolutionary journalism and journalism as revolutionary practice.

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