

Henri Onodera

# "Raise Your Head High, You're An Egyptian!" Youth, Politics, and Citizen Journalism in Egypt

(doi: 10.2383/36422)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 3, dicembre 2011

**Ente di afferenza:**

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.  
Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

## **Licenza d'uso**

Questo articolo è reso disponibile con licenza CC BY NC ND. Per altre informazioni si veda  
<https://www.rivisteweb.it/>

# **“Raise Your Head High, You’re An Egyptian!”**

## **Youth, Politics, and Citizen Journalism in Egypt**

*by* Henri Onodera

doi: 10.2383/36422

Hosni Mubarak resigned as President of Egypt on February 11, 2011, ending his 30-year rule and marking a major rupture in the country’s history since independence. This rupture was preceded by 18 days of intensified popular protests, whereby the residents of Cairo, Alexandria, Suez and virtually every major city, and even the smallest of villages, rose against the state authorities. They fought the armed Central Security Forces with rocks and sticks, and burnt the local police stations and headquarters of the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP). Over 840 people were reportedly killed and thousands were injured during what the protesters called the “popular revolution.” This unprecedented wave of public protests began on Tuesday, January 25, 2011 – National Police Day – as a response to calls by young Egyptians and internet users to topple the regime. Encouraged by the recent popular uprising in Tunisia and the subsequent end of Ben Ali’s presidency, wide segments of the population responded to these calls, motivated by their shared resentment of endemic public corruption, police violence, poverty and unemployment.

The revolutionary momentum was still precarious on Monday, January 31, when I first visited Tahrir Square in central Cairo. The protesters had succeeded in occupying the square only a few days earlier on Friday 28, the day the Mubarak government had shut down the internet and mobile phone networks in the country. Upon arrival, I stumbled upon friends and acquaintances, who had set up a temporary camp in the lawned central area of the roundabout. This central square, soon to become the

symbolic hub of the revolution, was under the protesters's occupation, and "staying put" was their prime political act.

My friends belonged to a group of well-known bloggers and seasoned activists, who had participated in pro-democracy and human rights campaigning since the previous presidential elections of 2005. Displaying a printed sign that said "Photo and video collection spot," the group had taken on the task of downloading any audiovisual material the protesters had on their mobile phones and digital cameras. This material, mostly in the format of lo-fi video clips and grainy photographs, was for them invaluable. It bore testimony not only to this historic event, but also the brutal use of violence by the Egyptian government against its own citizens. The makeshift media centre they had set up in the middle of the lawn was frequented by acquaintances, foreign journalists, and interested passers-by. Multi-socket extensions to a nearby lamp post were wired in order to maintain the electricity supply at night. This collection of "back-up evidence" – over 60 Gigabytes were gathered in just a few days – was their method of waging information warfare against the public authorities, in the full knowledge that the police would destroy the material at the first opportunity. Luckily, some of them had access to Noor, a small Internet Service Provider (ISP), which continued working after the initial web blockade as it provided crucial services to Egypt's financial and banking sectors. It provided them with an additional means of spreading real-time information, including written updates, images and video clips, to outside audiences.

In this article, based on 12 months of ethnographic fieldwork among young political activists in Cairo conducted between March 2007 and February 2011, I discuss the dynamic interplay of knowledge, mobilization and power in contemporary Egypt, with a restricted focus on young pro-democracy activists in Cairo.<sup>1</sup> They may not have played a central role in the events that led to the downfall of Mubarak's regime but, at the very least they helped initiate the protests, having already raised public awareness of police violence, political corruption and other forms of social injustice perpetrated by the government. In the first section, I provide a brief background to the emergence of youth activism through various coinciding groups and loosely organized networks since the early 2000s. In the second section, I examine the young activists's practices of dissident media management, commonly referred to as citizen journalism (*sahafat al-muwatin*). I focus on the subversive role citizen journalism acquires in a restrict-

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this article was presented at an international seminar, *Between Everyday Life and Political Revolution: The Social Web in the Middle East*, held at the University of Naples "L'Orientale," March 21-22, 2011, in Naples, Italy. I am grateful to the participants and organizers of the seminar, especially Dr. Armando Salvatore, for their comments and the inspiring debates we had during the seminar. I am also indebted to an anonymous reviewer for helpful comments.

ed media environment and argue that, although it is not a “lethal weapon” against authoritarian regimes, as some observers would have it [Hofheinz 2011], it comes close to a “tactic” [de Certeau 1988] amidst the recent structural transformations in Egypt’s information ecology. In the third section, I discuss the current processes whereby citizen journalism on the one hand represents a burgeoning arena of debate on its own and on the other connects with wider contestations over social solidarities and political loyalties during the last decade of Mubarak’s presidency. By way of conclusion, I will argue that the young activists played important roles in appropriating new media technologies as political tools insofar as they provided counter-hegemonic narratives and encouraged ordinary Egyptians’s to retrieve their due rights and dignity. However, citizen journalism goes beyond the normative surface of the liberal democracy it is often associated with. It remains a shifting category – or a travelling concept – and implies an ambiguous sense of the self, its agentic capacities and framework for political action in Egypt’s public life.

### **Youth Activism in Egypt: A Brief Background**

Youth activism emerged in Egypt’s public life during the first decade of the millennium. The solidarity and anti-war mobilizations during the second Palestinian Intifada (2000-2002) and the war on Iraq (2003) were important collective experiences sensitizing young people – university and high school students, young professionals and also unemployed youth from the withering middle classes – to public protesting. The youth activism was preceded by a long period of demobilization, the “black 1990s,” as one activist puts it, as the Egyptian government waged its own “war on terror” against Islamic groups, which also effectively restricted the public activities of the more secular-oriented opposition.

With regard to political dissent, the young activists became an important and powerful part of Egypt’s pro-democracy movement through four consecutive stages since the mid-2000s. The first coincided with the pro-democracy coalition called the Egyptian Movement for Change, often referred to as Kifayah movement, and especially its semi-official “youth wing,” the Youth for Change, in the run-up to the presidential elections in 2005. They both gained public prominence for street protesting and audacious criticism of the consolidation of political power into the hands of the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) and Mubarak, including his alleged plan to transfer his presidential powers to his son Gamal. Moreover, both initiatives represented new forms of coalition politics within Egypt’s factionalized political opposition. They encompassed both unlicensed opposition parties such as the neo-nasserist

Karamah (Dignity), the leftist-islamist 'Amal (Labour) and the centrist-islamist Wasat (Centre), and various small but quite active groups like the Revolutionary Socialists, Democratic Left and other leftist factions. The liberal Ghad (Tomorrow) party obtained its license in 2004 and in this regard was an exception. However, a significant number of the Youth for Change members were non-partisan or 'independent' youth. Their protest activities culminated in the public campaign and protests in support of the independence of the judiciary in May-April 2006. Soon after this Youth for Change gradually dismantled due to internal strife and external, state-imposed restrictions on street protesting.

The second wave of youth mobilization occurred as a response to the protracted workers's strikes in Egypt's industrial cities. In early 2008 left-oriented activists, including former Youth for Change members, established the Solidarity (tadamun) network with the aim of providing logistical and media support for the various localized protest groups across the country, including farmers, fishermen, landless peasants, and local residents, who faced forced evictions. Later that year, the April 6th Youth movement emerged as a Facebook group in support of the textile workers's movement in the Delta city of al-Mahalla al-Kubra. The April 6th movement was initiated by liberal activists, but soon attracted new members with no previous experience in public politics, as well as former Youth for Change members, including partisan youth activists of the 'Amal party. In 2009 the 'Amal activists disbanded after internal power struggles and disagreements over the group's handling of the sympathetic reception it had received overseas, and in Washington in particular. In 2010, the April 6th Youth experienced further internal strife as new splinter groups, such as the Trotskyist Justice and Freedom and the more action-oriented Free Front for Peaceful Change, emerged from its ranks.

The third wave of youth mobilization coincided with the arrival of Mohamed El-Baradei, the former head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, in Egypt in February 2010. His appearance on the political scene mobilized a number of young people and liberal activists, including young members of the Democratic Front Party and the "Nour wing" of the Ghad Party, as well as young Muslim Brothers who were frustrated with their conservative leadership. They campaigned in support of El-Baradei's demands for constitutional change and his bid as a challenger of the regime in the 2011 presidential elections. The fourth event that injected the dynamism back into street protests and youth activism was the death of Khaled Said at the hands of Alexandrian police in June 2010. The anonymous administrators of a Facebook

group called We are all Khaled Said played a crucial role in instigating repeated anti-torture protests and campaigning in Alexandria and other Egyptian cities.<sup>2</sup>

These “cycles of protest” in the wider pro-democracy movement involved a number of political groups and did not only embrace young people [El-Mahdi 2009]. However, the sustained presence of youth-based opposition groups helped to recreate the “youth” (al-shabab) as an agent of social change in Egypt’s public life. In other words, they collectively countered the top-down depictions of youth as apathetic masses in need of social engineering and, importantly, forged new spaces for autonomous political action within the gerontocratic power structures of Egyptian society – including the political opposition itself [Onodera 2009].

Indeed, the young activists have habitually detached themselves from the formal organizations and their ageing networks of power and patronage, and preferred to work through loosely organized networks, ad hoc campaigns and friendship cliques (shillah). The shillah represents a relatively sustained form of sociality and collective action common in Egyptian society. It has attracted passing, but not comprehensive, scholarly attention in the context of the study of public authorities and trade unions [Springborg 1978; Migdal 2001], professional journalism [Sakr 2002] and, more recently, the everyday lives of upper-middle class youth in Cairo [de Koning 2009]. As a form of friendship and social institution, the shillah promotes specific senses of affinity, loyalty and obligation that are central to the processes of group formation among young activists in the 2000s [Onodera, *forth.*]. To give some sociological coherence to such diverse forms of collective action, it is useful to view contemporary youth activism in Egypt as a “field of social practices” [Bourdieu 1977]. In this sense, the young activists differ from those of earlier political generations, firstly by organizing unlicensed street protests in the popular, lower class residential areas and, secondly, by the innovative ways in which they combine dissident street action with the use of new media as avenues for political communication, thus compensating for the lack of avenues elsewhere.

Youth for Change members set the precedent in this respect. In contrast to the accustomed protest sites of central Cairo, they organized several “surprise protests” in the popular (sha‘bi) areas of Greater Cairo, such as Sayyeda Zeinab, Shubra and Imbaba. They aimed to articulate local socioeconomic grievances, but with the ultimate goal of democratic reform, and mobilize local residents to the anti-Mubarak protests in 2005. The protests lasted 15-30 minutes, after which the participants dispersed in different directions before the police could arrive. Both April 6th Youth

<sup>2</sup> For the idiosyncratic role played in the group by the previously non-activist Wael Ghonim, see Salvatore 2011a and Hofheinz 2011.

activists and pro-El-Baradei campaigners would later use the same method. In summer 2010, the Khaled Said group initiated a campaign of "silent stands" in Alexandria, Cairo and other cities along the Nile and the Mediterranean coast. Each person would take a book, usually the Quran, and read it in silence on the waterfront, at a safe distance from the others, as a tribute to Khaled Said and other victims of police violence in Egypt [Salvatore 2011b]. This was a conscious tactic, which circumvented the ban on public meetings involving more than five persons. It proved highly successful, as thousands of people, not all of them young, would line up with total strangers on the pavements across the cities, in an individuated yet collective act of public dissent. Eventually, the police began to disperse these silent protesters, thus making its contested role as enforcer of emergency powers and status quo further evident to the public.

As a parallel approach, the young activists combined street-level dissent with the tactics of "cyber-resistance" [Fahmi 2009]. While mobile phones were important tools in the organization of these actions – for instance, in arranging to meet at a specific street corner – the internet provided the platform for political critique and mobilization. The e-mail lists, blogs, YouTube, and, later on Twitter and Facebook, have been highly functional in this respect. By early 2007, the political bloggers of the "2005 generation" managed to stretch the limits of freedom of speech by revealing cases of police brutality, election fraud and even cases of sexual harassment on the streets of Cairo. They would often headline in the more traditional media, such as the Egyptian and foreign press and satellite channels [Fahmy 2010; Hamdy 2009]. The importance of the new media was not only based on its technical capacity to circumvent the state control over news outlets, but also on its interactive character. Especially Web 2.0 platforms provided a constant feed of testimonies from street actions which, in turn, would be openly debated and deliberated on further [see Hirschkind 2011]. Interestingly, the young activists would print blog posts and other material they regarded as important from the internet and distribute them to co-protesters and passers-by.

As a field of social practices, contemporary youth activism should not be regarded as a monolithic field with rigid boundaries. It is, rather, characterized by internal heterogeneity, social hierarchies and struggles for resources, legitimacy and influence among different social actors. The various ideologically organized groups – liberals, leftists, Arab nationalists, Islamists, and so on – were often at loggerheads over political demands, appropriate lines of action, and power hierarchies. During the 2010 parliamentary elections, which resulted in the NDP's landslide victory and marked the high water mark of frustration and perceived lack of prospects within the political opposition, a former April 6th Youth member complained to me:

We [the young activists] have not learned anything from the past, and make the same mistakes over and over again. Everyone is out there for the fame; to be in positions of power. We should have a bigger picture of what's going on.

In his opinion, the activists engaged too easily in personal disputes and did not necessarily build on, nor benefit from, their collective experiences. While ideological strife, as a general characteristic of Egypt's political opposition, has hindered coalition politics among young activists, other markers of social difference are equally important. Egypt is a highly class-conscious society in which levels of education, family background, wealth, and also acquired knowledge of political, cultural and global affairs position the young activists in different social spheres and consequently structure their everyday interactions. It needs to be said, however, that youth-based groups have mainly attracted members from relatively well-educated youth from the urban middle classes. Despite the prevailing patriarchal norms, they have been relatively inclusive in terms of involving both young men and women, and gender differences are seemingly resolved at this level, although the family plays a bigger role in sanctioning the participation of young women in dissident political actions.

The multiple differences among young activists with regard to, for instance, their social class, gender, ideology, public piety and, even, religion, have been partly overcome through the emergence of the seemingly transnational habitus of "activist" (*nashit*), which articulates a particular "youthfulness" [Bayat 2010, 115-136] and experimental political action. Being a young opposition activist in Egypt encompasses not only specific tastes and sensibilities that draw on cosmopolitan youth cultures, but also the very ways of behavior and self-comportment that distinguish him or her from older political generations. The young activists communicate in Egyptian dialect rather than resort to polished political rhetoric in literary Arabic, wear trendy jeans and T-shirts rather than suits, and use new communication technologies, in contrast to some of their elders who may not use computers at all [Onodera 2009, 57-58]. Also, issues related to activist experience, reputation and courage – a result, for instance, of detention or fighting the riot police on the street – as well as coherence between a person's word and deed are highly relevant issues. Unsurprisingly, some young activists appear "more activist" than others. Not everyone is equally knowledgeable in new media technologies, or versatile in political theory or public mobilization tactics, nor do all have similar resources to acquire camera phones, digital cameras, laptops and other state-of-the-art technical tools. Some wear ill-fitting jeans and baggy T-shirts, and may be more attracted by financial incentives in the hope of upward social mobility. Others do not necessarily have a camera or internet on their mobile phones and cannot participate in quick-witted debates on the latest news. Despite the apparent differences in social and educational backgrounds, personal life



trajectories and levels of political engagement, the young activists find commonality in the shared belief that new media technologies are integrally linked to their youthful ways of being political.

### **Citizen Journalism: A "Tactic" in the Politics of Knowledge?**

De Certeau's notion of "everyday forms of resistance" [de Certeau 1988] offers a useful view of this form of political engagement in Mubarak's Egypt. In an attempt to overcome the age-old social scientific dilemma between structure and agency, de Certeau introduces a corresponding dialectic between "strategies" and "tactics." The strategies refer to the sustained effort by "the powerful" to separate itself from its social environment and to consolidate its panoptic position as a mechanism of othering and surveillance. The powerful also aim to monopolize what de Certeau calls the "scriptural economy" in an attempt to decontest public concepts and categories of meaning [*ibidem*; Mitchell 2007, 99-100]. On the other hand, tactics refer to everyday forms of resistance by those – "the weak" – who are subjected to the authority of the powerful and its hegemonic strategies. By their very nature tactics never turn into strategies, but help to create autonomous spaces for the subjected others in the wider discursive field framed by the powerful. As such, tactics involve innovative and subversive ways to exploit the symbolic and material resources at hand and, as such, are "always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized 'on the wing'" [de Certeau 1988, xix].

The social web, including blogs, YouTube and Facebook, was originally invented for purposes alien to political activism. Ethan Zuckerman [2008], who has closely observed the appropriation of new media by pro-democracy activists in Egypt and, more generally, in the global South, coined the "cute cat theory"<sup>3</sup> in order to explain this phenomenon: online publishing tools were initially created for internet users who wanted to share "harmless" information with friends, such as pictures of their cute cats. People who live in authoritarian countries appropriate these tools in order to expose human rights violations, political corruption and other injustices perpetrated by public authorities. As an unintended effect, the online publishing tools would become an intrinsic part of the information ecology as alternative sources of news, online debates and networking. In general, however, the internet's various social net-

<sup>3</sup> I am indebted to Amr Gharbeia, an Egyptian blogger and human rights activist, for bringing my attention to Zuckerman's thesis. The fact that it is acknowledged and debated among Egyptian bloggers is testimony to the very reflexive approach to their own practices which is constantly fed by outside observers's analyses, including journalistic accounts and academic research.

working sites do not amount to a free and unfettered social space. It can be seen, as York [2010] puts it, as a “quasi-public sphere” regulated through various content controls by both state and corporate agencies, and subject to multiple, overlapping jurisdictions.

In this sense, citizen journalism functions as political tactics at the precarious intersection of knowledge, mobilization and power and becomes deeply embedded in the wider politics of knowledge [Leach and Scoones 2007], which has been, alongside the dissident street actions, the main arena of engagement in which young activists have established their presence and made their influence felt. Citizen journalism builds on pre-existing processes of structural transformation in the mediascape, whereby notions of social authority and affiliation have already been challenged by the popular consumption of “small” and “new” media, such as cassette-tapes, wall graffiti in urban spaces and satellite television channels [Starret 1995; Eickelman and Anderson 2003; Hirschkind 2006; Turner 2007]. Egypt’s entrance into the information age and the exponential growth in the number of mobile phone and internet users, added to the small but vocal private press, have made state attempts to monopolize Egypt’s public arena increasingly difficult, if not impossible. This is not to say that the Egyptian government gave up its attempts to control media output. The Emergency Law, upheld since 1981, authorized security services under the Ministry of Interior to monitor and censor all forms of communication. Also, from the mid-2000s onwards, public prosecutors arrested several journalists, including Ibrahim Eissa, one of Mubarak’s most vocal critics, and young bloggers for their writings. In 2008, the NDP planned to create the National Agency for Regulation of Audio and Visual Broadcast to control any audiovisual material in print, and broadcast and digital media that damaged “social peace,” “national unity,” “public order” and “public values.”<sup>4</sup> At the same time, private newspapers, such as al-Badil and al-Dustur, were forced to cut down their publishing activities for economic reasons, amidst public speculation about behind-the-scenes political manipulation [see al-Aswany 2011: 189-192].

In comparison with other Middle Eastern countries, Egypt has enjoyed relatively wide freedoms over the internet. There have been no sustained filtering activities, although the government has shut down specific websites, such as the Kifayah movement’s harakamasria.org and Muslim Brotherhood’s ikhwanonline.net, during major political events like the strike day of April 6th, 2008, or the parliamentary elections in November 2010. In 2003, it established the National Telecommunica-

<sup>4</sup> The draft law was leaked to *al-Misri al-Yawm* on July 9, 2008 and consequently covered in Al-Jazeera International. See: <http://english.aljazeera.net/focus/2008/08/20088791952617974.html>.

tion Regulation Authority (NTRA) to supervise and regulate mobile phone networks and Internet Service Providers (ISPs). The NTRA, being associated with the security services, used its emergency powers to block internet services and to send pro-NDP text messages to mobile phone subscribers in January and February 2011.<sup>5</sup> The initial internet restrictions were partial, but included, for instance, the blocking of access to Twitter and Facebook. The young activists circumvented these deterrents easily through external proxies, special software and smart-phone applications, and instructed others to follow suit. Even the media blockade attempted on the eve of Friday, January 28, was not complete, as the internet could still be accessed through dial-up services. I have previously mentioned the case of Noor, a small ISP that was allowed some life-lines during the blockade because of its vital services to Egypt's financial sector, including banks, multinational companies, and "top-end" hotels. Among the latter was the Intercontinental Semiramis, a few blocks away from Tahrir Square, where both Egyptian and foreign journalists were stationed. Thus, for a brief period, the young activists's tactic of dissident knowledge management was in part guaranteed by the logic of Egypt's neoliberal state, which they actively opposed.

Despite the different levels of restrictions – including the users's limited capacity to 'dislike' anything on Facebook – the power of the social web lies in the very messages within it. In early 2000s the NDP made repeated efforts to polish and modernize its public image. The campaign was spearheaded by Gamal Mubarak and his inner circle of "young NDP reformists" in the party's Policies Committee, who claimed they were bringing the party, and Egypt along with it, "into the 21st century." For instance, they devised a number of "Citizenship documents" [see NDP, 2004a; NDP 2004b; NDP 2006], which, in stark contrast to the reality on the ground, claimed to promote citizen participation in public affairs as a "national duty" and to strengthen the trust of the average citizen in the state apparatus. In 2005 Gamal Mubarak's associates, who then worked as strategists in Hosni Mubarak's presidential campaign, went to great lengths to portray the incumbent president as both 'citizen' and "leader" during the electoral period [Schemm 2005]. These PR campaigns appeared in the context of contested economic reforms, which, already in the 1990s if not earlier, clearly impoverished rather than benefited the population as a whole [Kienle 2000], and were partly intended to impress outside audiences, including the international

<sup>5</sup> Link.net, one of Egypt's main ISPs, explained the issue as follows: "It was decided by national security forces who issued a directive to the National Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (NTRA) dictating that all providers were to immediately shut down all services from January 28, 2011. As per articles 64-69 of Law 10/2003, we were required to comply with this request to avoid any penalties, custodial sentences, or even temporary seizure of the ISP operating license" [Link.net 2011].

financial institutions, the European Union and, especially, the policymakers in Washington. These policies represented an apparent move towards the logic of hybrid regimes that are often, as Tripp [2010, 1] notes, “fraught with contradictions”:

Their leaders adopt the trappings of democracy, yet they pervert democracy – sometimes through patronage and largess, other times through violence and repression – for the sole purpose of remaining in power. This creates a catch-22. Because leaders have sought power through violence and patronage, they cannot leave power; the personal consequences would be too great. Because there is no easy exit, they must continue using violence and patronage to remain in power.

In this light, the blog posts on sexual harassment of young women published after protests in May 2005 and during ’id celebrations in 2006 [Klaus 2007], the video clips of humiliation and torture at police stations, and the images of the disfigured face of Khaled Said – “who could be anyone of us,” as the popular commentary stated – represent a cumulative set of counter-narratives that undermined the official depictions of the social world over the course of the 2000s. These counter-narratives represent important wedges into the “scriptural economy” carefully managed by the NDP elite, insofar as national and international media, human rights organizations and other pressure groups act on them. The main audiences were, however, closer to home. Citizen journalism as a political tactic has concerned – if I may use Lacanian terminology – a sustained campaign of “exposing the Real,” the brute and inescapable violence, to the eyes of average Egyptians. For them, the counter-hegemonic imagery does not amount to news as such, but rather to striking evidence and confirmation of the circulating tales and rumors, and, quite simply, their worst fears of what might happen to them. The young activists’s long-term aim has been to sensitize Egyptians to take transformative, if not revolutionary, action against the public authorities. Several activists have emphasized to me that the audiovisual material is superior in this regard: it can be distributed via mobile phones and it is more accessible to illiterate audiences. Importantly, video clips and photographs do not lend themselves as easily to ideological debate and disagreement as the textual format (e.g. blog posts). In other words, they evade the need to promote specific visions of an ideal social order but point to the continued humiliation and violence, or the way in which human dignity has been stripped from the people, by the powerful [see Hirschkind 2011]. In this light, the tactic of citizen journalism concerns the Egyptians’s fundamental “right to have rights” [Arendt 1958, 295-296] rather than their right to a rigidly pre-defined polity.

## **Whither Citizen, Whither Journalist?**

In the late 2000s citizen journalism could be seen not only as a set of innovative political practices but as a burgeoning debate on its own. This debate was fueled before and after the 2010 parliamentary elections, especially through a series of workshops aimed at training young Egyptians in the use of blogs, digital cameras, internet security software and other tools of the "art of citizen journalism."<sup>6</sup> These workshops were often organized by international agencies and were attended by dozens of young participants who were carefully selected through application procedures. In this light, citizen journalism appears as a "civic capacity" in need of strengthening – or as an "object of development" [Grillo 1997] – and therefore also as part and parcel of the "civil society aid" industry that claims to strengthen citizen participation, civil society and liberal democracy in the global South [see Ottaway and Carothers 2000]. As such, it has the propensity to become a subject of future contestation, as yet another form of "foreign interventionism" in Egypt's internal affairs [see Abdelrahman 2004, 101-105, 182-185].

Be that as it may, these citizen journalism workshops would, in turn, attract the attention of various newspapers (such as al-Yawm al-Sabi' and al-Shuruq) and even of satellite television talk-shows. The Egyptian daily al-Misri al-Yawm is one of the most forthcoming newspapers in this respect, which by mid-2010 had organized its own training programs and established special "citizen journalism" sections on its website. Moreover, media professionals began to debate openly the scope and content of the ordinary citizens's reporting on current affairs, with reference to professional journalistic practices, such as the quality and reliability of news reporting, the verification and protection of sources, and the interconnection between print, broadcast and digital media today. After the parliamentary elections, a seminar held at the Journalists Syndicate contended that "citizen journalists" were the most active and reliable news sources at the polling stations, which the NDP put under a virtual news blockade on the polling day. Presently, public attention is gradually shifting from bloggers – the pioneering cyber-dissidents of the 2005 presidential elections – to today's citizen journalists, who use not only blogs but any available means and technical tools to disseminate alternative information.

The emergence of citizen journalism as an arena of public debate is not, however, as one-dimensional as the above may suggest. Several young activists, and especially bloggers, were sensitized to "citizen journalism" through the blog posts of

<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, several of the prominent bloggers who were involved in the Youth for Change worked as trainers and, in this way, transmitted their "activist knowledge" to their younger peers.

Alaa Abdel Fattah, a prominent blogger and pro-democracy activist, in 2005. A few weeks after the sexual harassment of female protesters at the Journalists's Syndicate in Cairo, he published a blog post entitled Towards popular journalism [Manalaa.net 15.6.2005] and printed it as a pamphlet, with links to various political blogs, and he and his friends distributed it during street demonstrations. It emphasizes the role of blogs and other online publishing platforms as "alternative media" that allows for anyone to report on issues and events that are not covered in the mainstream media and, importantly, to engage in two-way communication and, in a sense, deliberation with unknown audiences. As of April 2011, this particular post has been read nearly 130,000 times.

Interestingly, Abdel Fattah uses two different terms for 'citizen journalism'. In the www-address, he uses "citizen journalism" in the Latin script but refers to *sa-hafah sha'biyyah* ("popular journalism") in the Arabic text. This is admittedly a small semantic difference, but it points to the fact that in Egypt, and the rest of the Arabic speaking world, these two terms – "citizen journalism" and "popular journalism" – are ambiguous and used interchangeably. As Khiabany and Sreberny [2009] remind us in the case of Iran, "citizen journalism" is not an indigenous category, but rather a travelling concept with distinct origins and genealogy in the debates among media researchers and professional journalists in Western Europe and United States. As such, it refers to two different discursive fields, namely citizenship and journalism, which do not translate smoothly into other languages, to say nothing of different cultural and social contexts.

In Egypt, the ambiguities around the uses of the two labels reflect the uneasy processes of state transformation in the post-colonial Middle East. As such, they refer to the coinciding notions of citizenship (*muwatinah*) and people (*sha'b*) and their differently nuanced senses of social membership, loyalty and obligation [see Butenschon et al. 2000; Maghraoui 2006]. While an extended analysis of this matter is beyond the scope of this paper, we can acknowledge that "people" enjoys much wider social resonance than "citizenship" in Egyptian society. In retrospect, Abdel Fattah notes that his choice of "popular journalism" stemmed from his collectivist sense of political tact, as it simply "fits the Egyptian political mood more" while the notion of "citizen" promotes "a very US-centric model for the role of the individual." This claim could also be viewed against the backdrop of the NDP's forceful attempts to decontest the public notion of citizenship in the 2000s, as mentioned above. This top-down definition culminated, in a sense, in the 2007 constitutional amendments – again drafted by the Policies Committee – that replaced the Nasser-era references to workers and peasants with a new state discourse of citizenship. The NDP's citizenship rhetoric effectively pointed to the existing structures of Mubarak's hybrid

regime as the prime locus of social authority with its territorial, cultural, historical and even racial underpinnings. Yet, it never quite succeeded in submerging the public constructions of the "people" as imagined community and source of legitimacy, which is much more ingrained in the very fabric of Egyptian society. In everyday parlance, it resonates powerfully with the lower, or popular, classes, impoverished as they were during Mubarak's presidency – but, also, to their revolutionary potential. Lockman [1994, 182] suggests that the "people" was adopted by the early Egyptian nationalists at the turn of the 20th century to mobilize the masses into the liberation movement with the aim of evoking a "desirable frisson of populism, of heroic virtue, of activism, of a democratic, egalitarian, and possibly even revolutionary inclination." Equally, Nasser capitalized on its mobilizing potential through political rhetoric and revolutionary ethos, and aimed to steer the popular political agencies, at times through the local popular committees, whilst keeping them at an arm's length from the Arab Socialist Union.

Similarly, the NDP's top-down depictions of citizenship could not represent the "average citizen" as the individuated core of the people. Several activists have explained to me that they are, in effect, defending the "average citizen," who is usually on the street and, it goes without saying, male. During independence, the "average citizen" has found expression especially in the realm of popular culture, including music, literature, television domestic drama serials, and feature films that focus on the daily lives, concerns and aspirations of ordinary people [see Abu-Lughod 2005, 112-114; Gordon 2000, 166-173]. These often feature their lived experiences of social injustice at the hands of the powerful. For instance, the 1991 adaptation of Yousef al-Qaaed's novel *al-Muwatin Masri* ("The Citizen Masry") brought to cinema theatres a tragic story of social injustice and public corruption through the fate and eventual death of Masry, the son of a poor family symbolically called "an Egyptian," in the 1973 October War, where he was sent to replace a local village chief's son. During the 2000s, social criticism emerged as a popular genre in both cinema and literature. As a parallel with the new culture of protest, social criticism narrated highly affective stories of ordinary people suffering from police violence, local corruption, and urban poverty. Several authors, like Alaa al-Aswany and Khaled al-Tawfiq, as well as the publications of the Dar Merit publishing house, fed in different ways into the popular imagination, and direct experience, of social injustice. In 2008, Omar Afifi, a former police officer, created a minor scandal by publishing a book whose title, in colloquial Egyptian, is best translated as, "So that you don't get slapped on the back of your neck," informing average Egyptians of their legal and constitutional rights when facing police abuse [Afifi 2008]. In Egypt, a slap on the back of another person's neck is a highly offensive gesture of public humiliation, a direct insult to one's honor and,

incidentally, a frequent scene in the video clips that were leaked from police stations to be seen openly by the Egyptian public.

It is this level of signification, fused with the senses of subjugated nationalism and loss of honor, which sheds some light on the protesters's two central messages at the crucial junctures of Egypt's revolutionary momentum in early 2011. "The people want the regime down!" (*al-sha'b yurid isqat al-nizham!*) was their initial and central demand, which articulated the diverse demands, wishes and aspirations of large segments of the population and, simultaneously, constructed anew the "people" – elusive as it may be [Salvatore 2011b] – as the subject of the revolution. On the day of Mubarak's resignation on February 11, 2011, I witnessed the spontaneous vocal outburst of "Raise your head high, you're an Egyptian!" (*irfa' ra'sak faw', inta masri*) among the protesters. It was a touching moment and, at the time, bore witness to their sudden and collective experience of regained dignity. It expressed a two-way symbolic movement that was instantly ingrained into the revolutionary narrative: the downward fall of the unjust regime and all that represented it, and the proudly "erect posture" of an Egyptian.

## **Concluding Remarks**

At the dawn of a post-Mubarak era, Egypt's state-society relations are going through profound political, social, and economic transformations. While the 2011 "popular revolution" is yet to be analyzed and is largely still in the making, it is clear that the critical masses did not rise only from within the ranks of the young activists. By and large, the revolutionary momentum involved the average Egyptians, who continued to protest because of deep and long-standing resentment against the government and the police as its subcontractor of violence and daily humiliation. The wage laborers in particular intensified their industrial action during the very last days of Mubarak's rule, steering their demands for better living and working conditions towards the political goal of the revolution. Moreover, a crucial role was played by high-ranking officers in the Egyptian Armed Forces, who opposed Mubarak's "succession scenario" and wanted to safeguard the country and their vested interests in the national economy from looming social disorder.

However, the young activists examined in this article played an undeniable role in triggering the street protests, not least by raising public awareness of the critical issues involving abuses by the state authorities during the last decade of Mubarak's presidency. After the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) took over during the interim period, they were quick to respond to the changed reality. On March



9, 2011, for instance, the military personnel arrested dozens of young protesters in central Cairo and allegedly subjected them to various forms of torture during detention, including verbal abuse, beating, electric shocks and 'virginity tests' on young women. Upon release, the graphic images of bruised bodies and personal testimonies circulated over the internet, and as a consequence the abuse of power under the SCAF's rule was reported in the national and foreign press, demonstrating once again the relevance of citizen journalism as a form of political dissent.

In this paper, I have argued that the young activists play an important role in appropriating new media technologies as political tools and, in turn, articulate them into the collective efforts of pro-democracy campaigning in today's Egypt. Despite internal differences within the activist youth and between its sub- generations, the 2000s youth activism represents an important collective experience that promotes citizen journalism as a "tactic" [de Certeau 1988] insofar as it keeps an eye on the powerful – whoever they may be. In this context, citizen journalism refers to the activists's part in the politics of knowledge – their political dissent on the street and the internet – and their conscientious efforts to provide counter-hegemonic narratives, or to expose lived realities, to various audiences at home and abroad. As such, it is directly linked to the rapid expansion of new media, especially mobile phones, digital cameras and the social web, since the turn of the millennium. In the years leading to Mubarak's resignation, the young activists consciously used subversive images and video clips as part of the wider pro-democracy movements's efforts to sensitize ordinary peoples to their legal and constitutional rights. It is conceivable that the counter-hegemonic narratives of social injustice, including the audiovisual evidence of police violence that resurfaced in private newspapers and satellite channels, reinforced the popular sense of neglected honor and subjugated nationalism in different segments of society.

Although the young activists promote the principles of freedom (*hurriyyah*), democracy (*dimuqratiyyah*), human rights (*huquq al-insan*), and the civil state (*dawlah madaniyah*), the subversive effects of citizen journalism carry the potential of transcending this normative surface. Citizen journalism conceived in this way concerns premeditated struggles to know of, and to make known, the deplorable context in which Egyptians live their everyday lives. However, the tactic of citizen journalism under authoritarian settings does not necessarily promote predefined visions of an ideal social order, but rather the ordinary people's right to a decent life, or their right to have rights, to make ends meet and to live with dignity. These notions can hardly be described as universal and consequently it is not a given that the appropriation of new media as political tools necessarily leads to democratization. Shortly after Mubarak's resignation, various opposing groups, including pro-Mubarak sympathizers, Salafists, and

the SCAF itself were eager to use new media platforms to establish their influence. In this light, although de Certeau's stand on "tactics" can be used to analyze the politics of young activists studied in this article, it can be also criticized, as Mitchell [2007, 101-103] suggests, for promoting a certain theology, if not a teleology, of human action, in that it suggests that the unleashing of some kind of innate powers in the human being leads to prosperity and emancipation.

This charge is especially relevant in the context of public debates and scholarly analyses of citizen journalism as a new form of participatory politics in the Middle East. In the early 2010s, to talk only about "bloggers" is somewhat misplaced, as the young activists resort to any means of communication and any social networking sites available to them. Admittedly, it is very tempting to talk about "citizen journalists" to capture this new reality. In Egypt, and the Arabic speaking world more generally, citizen journalism remains, however, a fluctuating and unfixed category that promotes differently nuanced normative registers of social membership, duty and obligation. On the one hand, individuated 'citizen journalism' appears more common and features especially in the projects and professional discourses of liberal-oriented entities, such as civil society organizations and international donors, while pointing to citizens's freedoms and rights within the existing structures of the modern nation-state. On the other hand, the more collectivist and left-oriented "popular journalism" suggests that the people, or even the popular classes, are the prime agent of political change and the quintessential locus of social authority. Although these shifts in meaning are not debated among activists, they point to an ambiguous coexistence of multiple senses of the self, its agentic capacities, and its directions of political action in Egypt's public life. This is not an issue of "false consciousness" as my aim is not to overemphasize this semantic fissure, nor to belittle the importance of the actual political practices commonly referred to as citizen journalism. Rather, by way of conclusion, I wish to suggest that citizen journalism should be simultaneously examined as a form of political practice and as an object of public debate in the Middle East. In this way, research might shed light on the everyday appropriations of a travelling concept, and on the meanings it engenders through actual practices in given socio-cultural contexts. Indeed, critical contextualization of the uses, understandings and practices of citizen journalism would help to avoid the normative analytical pitfalls which many "buzzwords of the day" may suffer from, as happened with "civil society" not so long ago.

Onodera, "Raise Your Head High, You're An Egyptian!"

## References

- Abdelrahman, M.  
2004 *Civil Society Exposed: The Politics of NGOs in Egypt*. Cairo: AUC Press.
- Abu-Lughod, L.  
2005 *Dramas of Nationhood: The Politics of Television in Egypt*. Cairo: AUC Press.
- Afifi, O.  
2008 "Ashan matindarabsh 'ala qafak." <http://lifethinking.files.wordpress.com/2008/04/ma7dood-afak.pdf>.
- Arendt, H.  
1958 *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Orlando: Harcourt Brace.
- al-Aswany, A.  
2011 *On the State of Egypt*. Cairo: AUC Press.
- Bayat, A.  
2010 *Life as Politics. How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Bourdieu, P.  
1977 *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Butenschon, N.S., Davis, U., and Hassassian, M.S. (eds.)  
2000 *Citizenship and the State in the Middle East: Approaches and Applications*. New York: Syracuse Press.
- de Certeau, M.  
1988 *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- De Koning, A.  
2009 *Global Dreams: Class, Gender, and Public Space in Cosmopolitan Cairo*. Cairo: AUC Press.
- Eickelman, D., and Anderson, J. (eds.)  
2003 *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- El-Mahdi, R.  
2009 "The Democracy Movement: Cycles of Protest." Pp. 87-102 in *Egypt: The Moment of Change*, edited by R. Mahdi and P. Marfleet. London: Zeb Books.
- Fahmi, W.S.  
2009 "Bloggers's street movement and the right to the city. (Re)claiming Cairo's real and virtual 'spaces of freedom.'" *Environment and Urbanization* 21: 89-107.
- Fahmy, N.  
2010 "Revealing the "agenda cutting" through Egyptian blogs." <http://online.journalism.utexas.edu/2010/papers/Fahmy10.pdf>.
- Gordon, J.  
2000 "Nasser 56/Cairo 96: Reimagining Egypt's Lost Community." Pp. 161-181 in *Mass Mediations: New Approaches to Popular Culture in the Middle East and Beyond*, edited by W. Armbrust. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Grillo, R.D.

- 1997 "Discourses of Development: The View from Anthropology." Pp. 1-35 in *Discourses of Development: Anthropological Perspectives*, edited by R. D. Grillo and R. L. Stirrat. Oxford: Berg.

Hamdy, N.

- 2009 "Arab Citizen Journalism in Action: Challenging Mainstream Media, Authorities and Media Laws." *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* 6: 92-112.

Hirschkind, C.

- 2006 *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- 2011 "From the Blogosphere to the Street: Social Media and the Egyptian Revolution." *Oriente Moderno* 91: 61-74

Hofheinz, A.

- 2011 "Nextopia? Beyond Revolution 2.0." *Oriente Moderno* 91: 23-40.

Khiabany, G., and Sreberny, A.

- 2009 "The Iranian Story: What Citizens? What Journalism?" Pp. 121-132 in *Citizen Journalism: Global Perspectives*, edited by A. Stuart and E. Thorsen. New York: Peter Lang.

Kienle, E.

- 2000 *Grand Delusion: Democracy and Economic Reform in Egypt*. London: I.B. Tauris.

Klaus, E.

- 2007 "The 'Ayd "Sexual Rage Scandal": Managing the Lack of Information through Categorical Photo-Fit." Pp. 371-390 in *Chroniques Égyptiennes/Egyptian Chonicles*, edited by E. Klaus and C. Hassabo. Cairo: CEDEJ.

Manalaa.net

- 2005 "Nahhwa sahafah sha' biyyah." June 15, 2005, [http://www.manalaa.net/citizen\\_journalism](http://www.manalaa.net/citizen_journalism).

Leach, M., and Scoones, I.

- 2007 *Mobilising Citizens: Social Movements and the Politics of Knowledge*. Sussex: Institute of Development Studies.

Link.net

- 2011 "LINKdotNET's Response to The Recent Human Rights letter." <http://www.business-humanrights.org/media/documents/linkdotnet-response-hrf-feb-2011.pdf>.

Lockman, Z.

- 1994 "Imagining the Working Class: Culture, Nationalism, and Class Formation in Egypt, 1899-1914." *Poetics Today* 15: 157-190.

Maghraoui, A.M.

- 2006 *Liberalism without Democracy: Nationhood and Citizenship in Egypt, 1922-1936*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Mitchell, J.P.

- 2007 "A fourth critic of the Enlightenment: Michel de Certeau and the ethnography of subjectivity." *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale* 15: 89-106.

Onodera, "Raise Your Head High, You're An Egyptian!"

NDP (National Democratic Party)

2004a "Wathiqat huquq al-muwatinah al-misriyyah." Policy paper approved in the 2nd NDP Annual Conference, [http://www.ndp.org.eg/ar/conferances/2nd\\_conf/papers/muatana\\_doc.aspx](http://www.ndp.org.eg/ar/conferances/2nd_conf/papers/muatana_doc.aspx).

2004b "Huquq al-muwatinah wa-al-dimuqratiyyah." Policy paper approved in the 2nd NDP Annual Conference, [http://www.ndp.org.eg/ar/conferances/2nd\\_conf/papers/citizenship\\_index.aspx](http://www.ndp.org.eg/ar/conferances/2nd_conf/papers/citizenship_index.aspx).

2006 "Siyasat al-muwatinah wa-al-dimuqratiyyah." Discussion paper in the 4th NDP Annual Conference, 2006, [http://www.ndp.org.eg/ar/conferances/4th\\_conference/papers/10thPaper.pdf](http://www.ndp.org.eg/ar/conferances/4th_conference/papers/10thPaper.pdf).

Onodera, H.

2009 "The kifaya generation: Politics of change among youth in Egypt." *Suomen Antropologi: Journal of the Finnish Anthropological Society* 34: 44-64.

Forth- *Youth Activism and Aspired Citizenships – An Ethnography of Political Engagement in comingEgypt*. PhD Thesis, Helsinki, University of Helsinki.

Ottaway, M., and Carothers, T. (eds.)

2000 *Funding Virtue. Civil Society Aid and Democracy Promotion*. Washington: D.C., Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Sakr, N.

2002 "Seen and Starting to Be Heard: Women and the Arab Media in a Decade of Change." *Social Research* 69: 821-850.

Salvatore, A.

2011a "Before (and After) the 'Arab Spring': From Connectedness to Mobilization in The Public Sphere." *Oriente Moderno* 91: 5-12.

2011b "The Elusive Subject of Revolution." *The Immanent Frame*, February 16, <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2011/02/16/the-elusive-subject-of-revolution>.

Schemm, P.

2005 "'Citizen and Leader': Evaluating the Impact of Campaign Advertising in Egypt's 2005 Presidential Race." *Transnational Broadcasting Studies* 1: 225-232.

Springborg, R.

1978 "Professional Syndicates in Egyptian Politics, 1952-1970." *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 9: 275-295.

Starrett, G.

1995 "Signposts Along the Road: Monumental Public Writing in Egypt." *Anthropology Today* 11: 8-13.

Tripp, A.

2009 *Museveni's Uganda: Paradoxes of Power in a Hybrid Regime*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner.

Turner, B.S.

2007 "Religious Authority and the New Media." *Theory, Culture, and Society* 24: 117-134.

York, J.C.

2010 "Policing content in the quasi-public sphere." <http://opennet.net/sites/opennet.net/files/PolicingContent.pdf>.

Zuckerman, E.

2008 “The Cute Cat Theory Talk at Etech.” <http://www.ethanzuckerman.com/blog/2008/03/08/the-cute-cat-theory-talk-at-etch>.

Onodera, *"Raise Your Head High, You're An Egyptian!"*

## **"Raise Your Head High, You're An Egyptian!"**

### Youth, Politics, and Citizen Journalism in Egypt

---

**Abstract:** A period of relative opening in Egypt's media landscape, which started in the mid-2000s, witnessed an increase in new forms of political communication, especially through the new media technologies of the internet and mobile phones. In this context, notions of "citizen journalism" and cognates have gained prominence in Egyptian public life. This article focuses on young pro-democracy activists in Cairo and argues that citizen journalism has provided them a useful "tactic" in the wider politics of knowledge and mobilization during those years. It shows that, though being initially a global label appropriated by young bloggers, "citizen journalism" has functioned as a travelling concept that carries ambiguous notions of the self and its agentic capacities.

---

*Keywords:* Citizen journalism, youth activism, new media, political dissent, Egypt.

---

**Henri Onodera** holds an MA in Social Anthropology of Development from the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. He has worked as a researcher at the University of Eastern Finland and is at the moment affiliated with the Department of Political and Economic Studies at the University of Helsinki, where he is completing a doctoral dissertation on the lived experiences of young pro-democracy activists during Mubarak's late presidency in Egypt.