CASCADES IN CAIRO: 
THE ROLE OF FACEBOOK AND TWITTER 
IN THE EGYPTIAN REVOLUTION OF 2011

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CASCADES IN CAIRO:
A LOOK AT THE ROLE OF FACEBOOK AND TWITTER IN THE EGYPTIAN REVOLUTION OF 2011

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ABSTRACT

The role of social media in the Egyptian revolution is increasingly discussed in the popular media and the world of academia, but all too frequently anecdotal evidence is used to understand it. This thesis develops a new methodological approach for analyzing the relationship between protester and social media by utilizing quantitative and qualitative data to understand how Egyptian protesters used Facebook and Twitter to effect political change during January and February of 2011. By first exploring who composed the Facebook and Twitter populations in Egypt, then examining and classifying content from one of the most widely-viewed Facebook group pages in Egypt, and finally developing the relationship between protesters and social media by using data collected from interviews with protesters, this study uncovers a number of significant findings about protesters’ use of Facebook and Twitter in Egypt. This paper examines these issues through the framework of information cascades by discussing how and why information cascades are sometimes an appropriate framework for understanding social media’s role in Egypt and other times not an appropriate framework.
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INTRODUCTION

Since the start of the Arab Spring in December of 2010, terms such as “Facebook Revolution” and “Twitter Revolution” have popped up frequently in newspapers and magazines.¹ Labels like these place a strong emphasis on the role of the social networking websites in the events of the Arab Spring, and consequently a tumultuous debate has emerged regarding the appropriateness of such labels. Social media “optimists” are quick to point to the use of these media by protesters and the emergence of a “digerati” class in Arab countries.² Social media “pessimists” tend to focus on the underlying causes of protests—primarily widespread dissatisfaction with the regime—while also drawing attention to the use of social media by authoritarian regime to suppress protest activity.³ This intellectual battle is being fought through discussions of the Arab Spring as a whole, but it has most visibly manifested itself in discussion of events in revolutionary Egypt.

Rejecting this debate as intellectually shallow and having reach its limits, academics have begun calling for empirical studies of the role of social media in the Arab Spring.⁴ This thesis attempts to begin doing that by examining the role of Facebook and Twitter in shaping events in

Egypt between January 25th and February 11th. By making use of quantitative and qualitative data related to Facebook and Twitter usage in Egypt, this paper explores the relationship between Egyptian protester and social media through the framework of information cascades. The coordination of protests online for the “Day of Rage” on January 25th helped to effect much broader changes in Egypt, accelerating the growth of an online movement into a broader movement of protesters, most of whom did not use Facebook and Twitter. Furthermore, the indirect effects of using Facebook and Twitter as tools of coordination were significant to the dynamics of protests. The perception that these websites were being used to facilitate information cascades shaped the Egyptian regime’s response to protests, which in turn catalyzed the continued outgrowth of protests and brought about the end of the regime.

This paper aims to open a discussion about the strengths and limitations of using social media to usher in revolutionary change by focusing on one dimension of how these media have shaped the events of the Arab Spring in Egypt. Other scholars can hopefully build upon the methodological framework of this paper to study how the use of social media has shaped and is shaping the events of the Arab Spring, as well as other contemporary protest movements, along many dimensions.

**Information Cascades in the Context of the Arab Spring**

Sushil Bikhchandani, David Hirshleifer, and Ivo Welch formally introduced the concept of “information cascades” in an October 1992 issue of *The Journal of Political Economy*. The authors define an information cascade as having occurred when, “…it is optimal for an individual, having observed the actions of those ahead of him, to follow the behavior of the
preceding individual without regard to his own information."5 The tendency toward localized conformity as a driver of behavior in a number of human (and even non-human) environments enables, “…early individuals to influence the behavior of others so that later individuals ignore their own information and merely follow suit.”6 However, information cascades are fragile and can be broken, especially during early phases when fewer individuals have altered their behavior.7 Bikhchandani, Hirshleifer, and Welch demonstrate that information cascades have applications in a wide variety of disciplines, including politics, zoology, medical practice, finance, peer influence, and fads.8 In the context of political science, information cascades can explain why some political movements gain the support of large segments of a population and other political movements peter out relatively quickly.

After the fall of communism in eastern Europe at the end of 1980s and the ensuing collapse of the Soviet Union, political scientists began turning towards information cascades as a theoretical framework for understanding how seemingly entrenched authoritarian regimes collapsed precipitously in a manner of years, months, weeks, and, in some cases, days.9 Susanne Lohmann argued in one paper that the Leipzig Monday demonstrations were an information cascade that revealed the weak nature of the East German regime and generated the pressures that brought down the German Democratic Republic.10 Such conclusions altered the study of

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7 Ibid., 1004-1009.
8 Ibid., 1009-1016.
9 Timur Kuran, “Now Out of Never: The Element of Surprise in the Eastern European Revolution in 1989,” World Politics 44, No. 1 (Oct., 1991), 42. Following the collapse of the communist regime in Czechoslovakia, one banner read, “Poland—10 years, Hungary—10 months, East Germany—10 weeks, Czechoslovakia—10 days.” Kuran adds that had the banner been prepared weeks later, it could have included, “Romania—10 hours.”
protest movements so as to include more detailed analysis of the information environments within authoritarian states. Lohmann’s analysis demonstrates that information cascades have explanatory power for understanding how protest movements can produce political revolutions in authoritarian states.

If the people of a country expect their authoritarian regime to remain firm in the face of challenge—and expect that other citizens are either too afraid to act or supportive of the regime—protest movements will struggle to gain momentum. But as soon as a regime appears weak and unable to contain challenges to its authority, anti-regime activists who are able to communicate this weakness to other citizens can turn small, localized protests into larger movements. The authoritarian state, whether in Eastern Europe or the Middle East, derives its authority from its ability to intimidate its citizens. If this ability should dissipate so publicly, the legs on which the regime stand disappear. Seemingly minor “cracks” in the regime’s authority can therefore escalate quickly into existential challenges to the regime. The parallels between the popular revolutions in Eastern Europe at the end of the 1980s and the Arab Spring are self-evident, even if the results of the Arab Spring are as yet unknown. Given these parallels, information cascades provide an appropriate framework for understanding protester dynamics in the Arab Spring.

The introduction of the Internet and social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter add new and interesting aspects to this framework. Under the logic of information cascades, the Internet is a tool for political change as like-minded activists can connect with each other, share grievances, and coordinate political actions. Internet communications significantly change the information environment of the authoritarian state so that protests can broadcast messages to a wider audience. The regime, if it is adept at using technology, can simultaneously use these same
tools to keep abreast of coordinated actions and recognize political activists. But if the citizens can stay ahead of the regime on the front, they may be able to use the Internet to coordinate protests that alter public perceptions of the regime’s strength. If these perceptions became widespread, information cascades can facilitate the continued growth of protests, which can in turn result in the toppling of the regime.

Using the sources below, this paper will explore the population that used Facebook and Twitter in Egypt, scrutinize Arabic and English-language protest-related content from Facebook, and examine self-reported data from protesters on their perception of social media’s effects. Each section is bookended by a short examination of whether the data presented in each chapter support, undermine, or say little about using the information cascade as the framework for understanding events in Egypt from January 25 to February 11, 2011.

**Studies and Datasets**

In embarking upon this study, I have conducted a rigorous review of similar studies. This review included not only the collection of works that has been written thus far on the use of social media in Egypt and the Arab Spring, but also existing datasets of Facebook and Twitter data from Egypt and accompanying preliminary analyses.

The events of the Arab Spring are recent, and consequently little scholarly work has been completed on social media’s role in events. In an article published in the June 2011 issue of *Political Science*, Marc Lynch examines four ways in which online social media offer “pathways to change” for Arab countries. Firstly, social media may alter the incidence and impact of collective action by reducing transaction costs of communication between protesters, facilitating information cascades that encourages others to outwardly state their opposition to the regime,
increasing repression costs to the regime by publicizing violence against peaceful protesters, diffusing local protests into broader movements, and shaping the organization of political movements. Secondly, authoritarian regimes can use social media as a tool of repression. Thirdly, protesters can use social media to build international alliances and attract international attention to their activities and regime responses. Fourthly, social media can effect broader changes in the public sphere of the Arab authoritarian state by creating an informed population that is better informed. Lynch’s article offers more theory construction than quantitative analysis by presenting the many angles from which one can approach the study of social media in the Arab Spring. This paper takes just one facet of his theory—that social media helped protesters facilitate information cascades—and puts it to the test with the aid of quantitative data from Egypt.

Usage of the terms “Twitter Revolutions” and “Facebook Revolutions” has not been contained to the Arab Spring. The use of Twitter by protesters in Iran following elections during the summer of 2009 brought the attention of academics to the connection between social media and politics in an unprecedented way. Several studies were conducted on the use of Twitter in Iran to develop methodologies for how scholars can study social media’s influence on political events. One report published by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) in 2010 theorizes that social media can shape politics along five dimensions—individual transformation, intergroup relations, collective action, regime policies, and external dimension—then evaluates each dimension using the case of Iran during the summer of 2009. Like Lynch’s article, this report is a better exercise in theorizing social media’s role in politics through the language of political science than rigorous quantitative analysis. This thesis looks to the USIP report’s theorization of

how social media can facilitate collective action, as well as its methodological approach when studying this issue in Iran, as a model for the theorization and study of similar issues in Egypt.

Other studies have made more extensive use of empirical data to develop theories as to how social media shaped the events of the Arab Spring. The Project on Information Technology and Political Islam, based in the University of Washington and directed by Phillip Howard, published a working paper in 2011 assessing the role of social media during the Arab Spring. Using data collected from Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and the Tunisian and Egyptian blogosphere, the working paper finds that social media played a significant role in shaping political debates during the Arab Spring, a spike in online revolutionary conversations often preceded major events on the ground, and that social media helped spread democratic ideas across international borders. In addition to providing social media data that can be used by independent scholars, this study provides a useful model for analyzing Facebook and Twitter data against the backdrop of the Arab Spring.

Another such source is the Arab Social Media Report (ASMR). Published by the Dubai School of Government and currently consisting of three reports published in January May, and November of 2011, ASMR provides ample data on the use of Facebook and Twitter in Arab countries. The second of these two reports, titled “Civil Movements: The Impact of Facebook and Twitter” makes use of Facebook and Twitter data from Tunisia and Egypt to assess trends in activity during the early months of the Arab Spring. The authors of the report conducted a Facebook survey of Tunisians and Egyptians in March 2011 with questions about social media

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13 Philip N. Howard et al., “Opening Closed Regimes: What was the Role of Social Media During the Arab Spring?”, Project on Information Technology & Political Islam, Research Memo 2011.1, Seattle: University of Washington.
usage and its potential impact on the events of the Arab Spring. This paper analyzes the results of this survey as well as the accompanying data on Facebook and Twitter usage in the Arab world.

The website R-Shief provide another valuable source of data from Facebook and Twitter. Directed by Laila Shereen Sakr, a doctoral candidate at the University of Southern California, R-Shief is an ongoing project collecting online content related to the Arab Spring—from Facebook and Twitter as well as other sites—and making this information available to the public. The website provides online tools that allow visitors to aggregate and visualize data the site has collected for individual analyses. This paper uses one of these tools, “Facebook scraping,” to collect Facebook data that is analyzed in the second chapter.

The Tahrir Data Project, associated with The Engine Room, is a project to collect information on protester media usage. Datasets collected by the Tahrir Data Project provide the greatest treasure trove of data for the purposes of this paper. The project has collected three datasets, each of which is a valuable contribution to the existing body of knowledge on media usage during the Egyptian revolution. The first of these datasets consists of survey results from 40-minute interviews with more than one thousand Egyptians who participated in protests in Tahrir Square during the period between January 25th and February 11th. Participants were asked about their own media usage during the protests, how they used different media in tandem,

which media they found most useful, reliable, and informative, and how censorship affected their media use.\textsuperscript{17} The second dataset consists of the results from twenty-eight in-depth interviews with Egyptians who were connected to digital activist networks and actively used social media to mobilize protesters, i.e. the Egyptian digerati. Interviewers asked participants about their own role within protests and how they used social media within the context of protests.\textsuperscript{18} The third dataset contains more than 675,000 tweets bearing the \#jan25 hashtag, collected by using the Twitter aggregation tool TwapperKeeper.\textsuperscript{19} Analysis of these data is ongoing and at the time of this writing much of the Tahrir Data Sets has not yet been released to the public, though the preliminary findings of the Tahrir Data Project were published in the 2011 issue of \textit{International Journal of Communication}.\textsuperscript{20} Altogether these datasets provide the most ample set of data to date on the use of social media by protesters during the Egyptian revolution. For this reason my analysis relies heavily upon the first dataset.

In addition to data from the Arab Social Media Report and the Tahrir Data Project, this paper uses data that was collected by the Information and Decision Support Center (IDSC), a think tank associated with the Egyptian cabinet. IDSC conducts studies and writes reports on political and social issues in Egypt. This paper uses some of the data the think tank has collected

from Facebook and Twitter that was included in an Arabic-language report about the use of social media in protests published in May of 2011.\textsuperscript{21}

Lastly, this paper makes use of posts from the walls of the Facebook groups “Kulena Khalid Saeed” and the “We are All Khalid Saeed.” These two groups were the hubs of online protestor communications before and during the opening days of the Egyptian Revolution, and I have captured all posts from the time period under study for the former group. The content of these posts is publicly available and easy to access for anyone with a Facebook account.\textsuperscript{22}

These are the sources on which my analysis will principally rely. The reader may notice that I have not collected the majority of these data. This does not diminish this paper’s contributions to the scholarly debate over social media’s role in shaping events in Egypt. By peering over the aforementioned various datasets and analyses and forcing them to interact with one another in the language of political science, this debate can be advanced. My contribution to the academic literature is not to collect new data; it is to collect the existing data and point to the shared patterns between them.

It should lastly be noted that each dataset has its own limitations regarding level of completeness and validity of data. Such is the nature of conducting quantitative analysis on any topic, but, as will be explained below, it is particularly true when studying social media data. For now, let it suffice to say that each dataset comes with its own qualifications. These qualifications will be addressed individually as these sources are cited through the progression of this paper.

Challenges

Many challenges present themselves when studying a subject as complex as the use of social media during recent events in Egypt. The foremost of these is the recentness of the subject in question. At the time of this writing, political transition in Egypt is ongoing. Writing about contemporary political events is, as one colleague stated, like taking a picture of a moving object. To address this challenge, this study focuses principally on the period between January 25, which kicked off the series of large protests in Tahrir Square, and February 11, the day on which President Hosni Mubarak submitted his resignation from the office of the presidency. This period has been selected because this study concerns itself with the dynamics through which protesters forced Mubarak from power. While it is clear that protesters continue to make use of social media as protests continue, studying these matters would be difficult as the future of Egyptian politics is unclear. Additionally, the existing Facebook and Twitter datasets that have been collected thus far are largely constrained to this time period. New datasets must be collected before future scholars can examine social media’s role in the Egyptian Revolution following February 11.

Studying data obtained from Facebook and Twitter presents a challenge all in itself. Data collection itself is not particularly challenging—anyone can view the posts and comments on a Facebook group’s wall or gather Tweets bearing a specific hashtag—but the completeness and validity of such datasets are always open to question. The “Kulena Khalid Saeed” Facebook group page may have been an unofficial “hub” for online protester activity, for example, since the posts on this page reached a large number of Egyptians participating in protests. But this only captures a small share of Facebook interactions between protesters in Egypt. Any one protester with a Facebook account can write on the wall of his friend or share an album of photographs.
will all of his friends, and neither interaction would be recorded in the “Kulena Khalid Saeed” dataset. Furthermore, while increases in the membership of this group may signal increased interest in that group’s message or cause, the exact meaning of such a swing in a group’s membership is not clear. Anyone with a Facebook account can join a Facebook group, and so a sharp increase in membership to the “Kulena Khalid Saeed” group does not necessarily reflect increased interest among the Egyptian populace. Because of such considerations I have been careful to detail the limitations of the datasets as I cite of them. In drawing on these datasets and observing trends in Facebook and Twitter usage, one can draw conclusions about social media’s role of events in Egypt. Such conclusions, however, are not without qualifications.

Concerns about studying social media do not end with questions about the validity and completeness of datasets. While data from Facebook and Twitter can be mined and analyzed on many levels, it is essential to connect online communications to protester activity in the real world. It is not difficult to depict the collected data using beautiful graphs, but if such graphs do not say anything about what happens in the real world they are of little use. This paper therefore aims to ground its analysis within the events that played out in Egypt from January 25 to February 11.

To this discourse the old adage, “correlation does not imply causation,” must be added. Increases in the number of Tweets with the #jan25 hashtag may have preceded the protests on the “Day of Rage” protests, for example, but this is not sufficient evidence that Twitter communications in Egypt were pivotal, or even a motivating factor, in the decision of Egyptians to go to Tahrir Square on January 25 and call for the end of the Mubarak regime. One cannot draw such conclusions without other data that explains protesters’ motivations for protesting. Nevertheless, correlations are useful when found. If spikes of activity on Facebook and/or
Twitter consistently preceded spikes of protester activity on the ground, then future spikes of online activity can serve as at least a partial predictor of future activities on the ground. The greatest challenge in conducting this study then is not to look for trends among Facebook and Twitter activities, because those trends are apparent in the datasets. The greatest challenge is illustrating the connection between the virtual world and the physical world.

Lastly, to reemphasize a point made above, there are a multitude of angles from which one can approach studying how social media shape politics. Increasingly more attention is being paid to the use of social media by authoritarian regimes to perpetuate and solidify their hold on authority. As television news networks and print newspapers make greater use of online content to report news, the reporting methods of conventional news outlets are evolving. Social media can be used by transnational communication networks to coordinate actions, and were in fact used by Egyptian diasporas to coordinate protests in their respective countries in support of Egyptian protesters. This paper does not aim to untangle all these puzzles or explain all the ways in which Facebook and Twitter may have played some role in Egypt’s Arab Spring. While I do allude to several ways in which social media shaped events, I have sharpened the focus of this paper to examine how protesters used Facebook and Twitter between January 25 and February 11 principally through the framework of information cascades.

I have gone to some length to point to these challenges not to diminish the results of this study, but to indicate that it is staking new and fragile ground. In the coming years, more details will emerge regarding the events of the Arab Spring. New analytical tools will be developed to

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collect Facebook and Twitter data more completely and effectively, and new methods will be
developed to study these data. This paper aims to do more than just analyze the currently
available data to draw conclusions about how Egyptians protesters used Facebook and Twitter.
By developing a methodological framework to better understand the relationship between social
media and the beginning phase of the Egyptian revolution, future researchers will be able to
build off the methods and findings of this paper to more effectively study the role of Facebook
and Twitter in contemporary politics.

Organization

Having now presented the sources this paper will utilize and briefly summarized the
greatest challenges in conducting this study, this thesis is organized as follows.

The first section of this paper examines the quantitative data that is currently available on
Facebook and Twitter users in Egypt. It gauges the number of Egyptians who used Facebook and
Twitter and the number of Egyptians who participated in protests in Tahrir Square. Additionally,
this section assesses how many Facebook and Twitter users in Egypt used social media for
protest-related activities and how many protesters received information through Facebook and
Twitter. The aim of this section is to shed light on the numbers and demographics of Egyptian
social media users so as to better understand who in Egypt was using Facebook and Twitter for
protest-related activities.

The second section of this paper builds off the first by scrutinizing the content of
Facebook communications from January and February of 2011. This is done by studying posts
from the Arabic-language “Kulena Khalid Saeed” and English-language “We are All Khalid
Saeed” Facebook groups—content that other academic studies of this topic have strangely
ignored. This section categorizes Facebook posts by their content, points to patterns in these
posts, and interprets these trends. The aim of this section is to scratch the surface of social media content that has been so underexplored in order to better understand what was being communicated through social media.

The third section of this paper connects the first with the second by exploring the relationship between protesters and social media through data collected from interviews with protesters. This section examines how protesters described different media and their utility to protest activity, analyzes linear regressions that consider which variables had statistically significant relationships with certain protester activities, and investigates which media users were more likely to relay protest-related information from one medium to another. The aim of this section is to explore protesters’ perceptions of social media’s influence and how social media may have directly shaped protester behavior.

In the concluding section of this paper, the findings of each section are collected and restated in summation. This section then examines the broader implications of this study and recommends topics for future researchers to investigate.

To reiterate a point made earlier, this paper strives to do more than examine how protesters’ use of social media shaped events in revolutionary Egypt, though this is its principal task. It also aims to open a scholarly discussion grounded in empirical data about the strengths and weaknesses of Facebook and Twitter as tools to effect political change, while concurrently developing a methodological framework for future researchers to engage in this conversation. I sincerely hope that future scholars will take the conclusions of this thesis and build upon them.
CHAPTER 1

To many followers of the ongoing events in Egypt, the story of the Egyptian Revolution was as much a generational struggle as a political struggle. Fresh-faced, “wired” Egyptian youth ardently poured into the streets to protest the gerontocracy that dominated their country, at the head of which sat the wizened eighty-two-year-old president, Hosni Mubarak. Indeed, many Egyptians had never known any president but Hosni Mubarak. One third of Egypt’s population is fourteen years old or younger, and Mubarak governed the Egyptian state for more than twenty-nine years. The events of January and February 2011 thereby presented the first opportunity for many Egyptian youth to take back political power from the regime on high. They did so, with fervor.

This, at least, was the popular narrative carried by both English-language and Arabic-language media in their coverage of events in Egypt. It was simple and fluid, and a compelling narrative at that. Moreover, it accentuated the role of social media in determining events in Egypt. The idea that young people harnessing the power of modern technology can depose a dictator is an attractive one. In 2011, terms like “Facebook Revolution” and “Twitter Revolution” sprang up through the media, becoming ubiquitous.

To understand whether social media played a role in setting Egypt’s new course, a more dispassionate analysis is required. At the core of this analysis are two questions: Who were these Egyptians that used Facebook groups to communicate with other people? And of those who turned out to protest, how many even used Facebook and Twitter for protest-related activities? It is impossible to know with certainty the answers to these questions, but data collected by the

Arab Social Media Report, the Information and Decision Support Center, and the Tahrir Data Project begin to answer these questions. They suggest that a small group of young and highly educated Egyptians used Facebook and Twitter for protest-related activities, but that the span of Facebook’s and Twitter’s reach was much narrower than in depictions of the popular media. Only a small percentage of the Egyptian population even used these media, and fewer still for protest-related activity. This underlines the importance of understanding how these “digital natives” used Facebook and Twitter during the political upheaval of 2011, a topic that shall be explored in the second and third sections of this paper.

This section examines the available data about the demographics of Facebook and Twitter users in Egypt, before examining the available data on who used Facebook and Twitter for protest-related activities. Any student of Egyptian politics must first understand who used these technologies, before turning to the subject of how they made use of these media from January 25 to February 11, 2011.

**Facebook and Twitter Populations in Egypt**

This task is made simpler by first looking at the number of Egyptians using Facebook and Twitter at the time of political turmoil in Egypt. Data regarding the Egyptian population as a whole is difficult to come by, as is information on the demographic make-up of Cairo. But the *Arab Social Media Report* (ASMR), published by the Dubai School of Government’s Governance and Innovation Program, collected Facebook internal data and sampled Twitter data for the states of the Arab League to produce a detailed report on the use of social media in these countries.

An examination of these data that stratifies countries by their respective regions reveals a wide range of Facebook penetration rates across the Arab countries, with Twitter penetration
For raw data, see Table 1 in “Facebook Usage: Factors and Analysis,” The Arab Social Media Report 1, No. 1 (January 2011), 6.
rates markedly lower (Figures 1 and 2).

Some caveats must be added to the analysis of these data. Firstly, Facebook and Twitter data were captured according to different methodologies. ASMR collected Facebook official internal data; authors had to go to outside sources and make estimates for data on Syria and Sudan. For this reason, Facebook data is likely to be more accurate than Twitter data. Secondly, these datasets were captured over different time periods. Facebook data were captured between April and December of 2010, whereas Twitter data were captured in March and April of 2011. While these time periods are not so far apart, it is still necessary to point to these qualifications, since this paper uses these datasets to paint a composite picture of Egypt’s social media environment in 2011.

Taking these caveats into account, these charts reveal that from a comparative perspective, the penetration rate of Facebook and Twitter in Egypt, as compared with other countries in the region at the beginning of the Arab Spring, was not particularly high. In December of 2010, only 5.24% of Egyptians used Facebook; in April of 2011, a mere 0.15% of Egyptians used Twitter (since the Twitter data is from March and April of 2011, this rate would likely have been lower during January and February of the same year). After taking the Gulf countries out of the picture, the Facebook and Twitter penetration rate within Egypt is middling in comparison with the other countries of North Africa. A greater percentage of Moroccans

\* For raw data, see Table 5 in “Civil Movements: The Impact of Facebook and Twitter,” The Arab Social Media Report 1, No. 2 (May 2011), 28.
\* For further explanation, see “Facebook Usage: Factors and Analysis,” The Arab Social Media Report 1, No. 1 (January 2011), 18.
\* To see a more extensive explanation of this process, see “Civil Movements: The Impact of Facebook and Twitter,” The Arab Social Media Report 1, No. 2 (May 2011), 25.
(17.55%), and a much greater percentage of Tunisians (7.55%), used Facebook during the same time period. With regards to Twitter, very few north Africans made use of the microblogging website, even after the events of the Arab Spring began to accelerate. But even by comparison a smaller share of Egyptians used Twitter than their neighbors in Libya (0.96%), Djibouti (0.45%), and Tunisia (0.34%).

As Figure 3 reveals, only 22.6% of Internet users were also Facebook users – and the data on Internet penetration rates, collected in 2009, is likely undervalued. This is a comparatively lower ratio than the Facebook-to-Internet user ratio in most other north African countries, including Djibouti (174.6%), Libya (67.9%), Mauritania (52.1%), Tunisia (51.5%), and Algeria.

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Such statistics temper the often implicit association between Internet usage and social media usage, to say nothing of social media usage for protest-related activities. According to current statistics, less than one in four Egyptians who accessed the Internet also used Facebook.

Age

Empirical data confirm the characterization of Egypt’s Facebook population as quite young, even in comparison to other Arab countries (Figure 4). Internal Facebook data collected by ASMR reveal that 78% of Egyptian Facebook users were between the age of fifteen and twenty-nine in December of 2010, a ratio exceeded only by Djibouti (79%), Yemen (80%), Morocco (81%), Palestine (83%), and Somalia (84%).

In another study, the Information and Decision Support Center (IDSC), an Egyptian think tank that provides research to the Egyptian cabinet, found that 34.6% of Facebook users in Egypt were twenty-one years old, and that 57.8% were between twenty-one and forty years old (Figure 5). Like the Arab Social Media Report, this study used internal Facebook data, though it was collected in April of 2011. Age breakdowns were not available for Twitter users in Egypt.

This point may seem self-evident; it is not surprising to find that the majority of Facebook users in any country are young, given that social media websites were originally created by and for young adults. Nevertheless, the age demographics of Facebook users in Egypt are extremely pertinent to understanding social media’s role in events. If social media were instrumental in producing revolutionary change in Egypt, as this paper argues, then Egyptian youth were instrumental in directing this change.

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29 The higher number of Facebook users than Internet users in Djibouti is likely due to either mobile access to Facebook, errors in data collection, or a combination of both. See “Facebook Usage: Factors and Analysis,” The Arab Social Media Report 1, No. 1 (January 2011), 12.
Figure 4

**Facebook Users by Age**

![Bar chart showing Facebook user distribution by age and region.](image)

- FB users over 30 (% of total users)
- FB users between 15 and 29 (% of total users)

Figure 5

**Facebook Users in Egypt by Age**

![Pie chart showing Facebook user distribution by age in Egypt.](image)

- <21
- 21-40
- 41-60
- >60
- Unknown

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Gender

Empirical data collected by ASMR also confirm the characterization of Egypt’s Facebook population as being majority male, although Egypt’s Facebook population does not have as large a male majority as the Facebook populations of most other Arab countries, including most of the countries of north Africa (Figure 6). According to Facebook internal data collected by the Arab Social Media Report in December of 2010, 63% of Egyptian Facebook users were male in December of 2010. A separate study conducted by IDSC in April of 2011 that also made use of Facebook internal data arrived at the same conclusion: 63.1% of Facebook users in Egypt were male and 35.3% were female, with the remaining 1.6% unknown (Figure 7).

These studies confirm the characterization of Facebook users in Egypt as being majority male, although this “male majority” is not as large as it is in the Facebook populations of neighboring countries.

Social Class and Education Level

In the same study conducted by IDSC, the education level of Egypt’s Facebook users was gathered, based on what Facebook users wrote about themselves on their individual Facebook pages. Based upon these data, highly educated Egyptians predominate among the country’s Facebook population. More than 87% listed themselves as university graduates, with another 9% listing themselves as university students (Figure 8). These data are self-reported and thus should be regarded somewhat cautiously. Nevertheless, they validate accounts from the popular media that depict Egypt’s Facebook population as highly educated, in the same manner that Facebook data confirm the depiction of this population as young and majority male.

These data answer questions about the Egyptian Facebook population as a whole. They
do not offer any information about the percentage of Egyptian Facebook users that used Facebook for protest-related activities. On this subject there is a paucity of data. An unscientific poll was conducted by the Arab Social Media Report that asked respondents how they primarily used Facebook throughout the Arab Spring. The survey was distributed through Facebook’s targeted advertising platform to all Facebook users in Egypt in March of 2011, and thus a self-selection bias likely corrupts the data. The wording of the question is also somewhat leading; by asking about “the main usage of Facebook during the civil movement and events of 2011,” the question could prime survey respondents to think only about using Facebook for political activities. In addition, the sample size for this survey was quite small. Only 126 Egyptian Facebook users responded. Of those who responded, 85% reported their main usage of Facebook to be protest-related activity, a questionable figure (Figure 9). If a more scientific survey had

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* Ibid.
produced these results, it would certainly back the claim that most Facebook users in Egypt used Facebook for protest-related activity. As it stands, self-selection bias issues, leading question wording, and the small sample size of this survey leave the debate open. Further research—including more scientific polling of Egyptian Facebook users—is needed to determine the share of Facebook users in Egypt that used the social networking site for protest-related activity.

These data do not provide any answers about the prevalence of Facebook and Twitter usage among Egyptians that protested during the period under study. To open up this discussion, an examination of another dataset, the Tahrir Data Sets, is necessary.

Use of Facebook and Twitter in Protests

As stated in the introduction, the Tahrir Data Sets offer the most comprehensive study on the role of traditional and new media in Egyptian protests at the beginning of 2011. An independent organization, the Engine Room, conducted 1200 interviews with Egyptians who participated in the protests in Tahrir Square between February 24 and March 1, 2011, in addition to conducting thirty-five interviews with individuals who were influential in coordinating protests online. Moreover, the organization collected and analyzed more than 800,000 Tweets bearing the hashtag #jan25 from between January 25 and March 20, 2011. As of this writing, the Engine Room has yet to publicly release their data, although their website states that they plan on releasing their first dataset—which includes the data from the 1200 interviews—in the weeks ahead. Nonetheless, two of the Engine Room’s co-founders published a paper in the 2011 issue of *International Journal of Communication* that presents the preliminary results of the Tahrir Data Sets. Additionally, one of the paper’s authors gave a presentation to the Norwegian Centre for Human Rights that offers more details from a preliminary analysis of the data. This paper utilizes the analysis from these two sources, as original analysis of the data cannot be done until the datasets are made public.

Before examining the data and their corresponding analyses, the limitations of dataset A—which comprises the data from the 1200 interviews—must be stated. Interviews were conducted from February 24 to March 1 of 2011, only two weeks after the resignation of President Mubarak. Instability within the country forced interviewers to treat protesters as a
hidden population, and consequently snowball sampling was used to gather a sample of 1200 interview subjects (1,056 interviews were considered valid for inclusion in the dataset). Snowball sampling relies upon study subjects to recruit future subjects from among their acquaintances. In this manner, a large sample can be collected quickly, but it is certainly not a random sample of the population being studied.\(^{33}\) The sampling methodology of Tahrir Data Set A thereby presents the largest limitation on the application of its data to a larger population. Although Wilson and Dunn claim that, “the sample frequencies for age, gender, residence, education, Internet access, and political activity are in keeping with popular assumptions about protest participants and are sufficiently distributed to provide rough proxy measures for class and political engagement,”\(^{34}\) the accuracy of these popular assumptions are of course open to question. Without surveying a randomized sample of protesters in Tahrir Square, the applicability of the study’s conclusions in relation the population as a whole is questionable. Other considerations limit the applicability of the data as well. Given the timing of the interviews at least two weeks after protests, subjects may not have recalled events correctly. By holding the interviews in public spaces like cafes and parks “to avoid undue attention,” interview subjects may have been more wary of providing answers. There may therefore be systematic measurement error in the data, although this distortion may be slight in comparison to the considerable random sampling error that comes from conducting the survey through snowball sampling.\(^{35}\)

The Tahrir Data Sets—and, in particular, set A—present the largest set of data to date on the role of media in the beginning of Egypt’s revolution. These data provide an extremely valuable tool for exploring the actions and motivations of Egyptians who participated in protests


\(^{34}\) Wilson and Dunn, “Digital Media,” 1250.

\(^{35}\) For more on the methodology of the survey in dataset A, see Wilson and Dunn, “Digital Media,” 1250.
Figure 10

% Used in Protest

Figure 11

Respondents' Media Use

*“Tahrir Data Project: Preliminary Descriptive Analysis,” The Engine Room.
in Tahrir Square. Nevertheless, generalizations extrapolated from analyses of the dataset must be strongly qualified.

A quick look at respondents’ answers about media usage during protests suggests that the role of Facebook and Twitter may have been exaggerated in popular media accounts. 42% of survey respondents reported receiving and/or transmitting information related to protests through Facebook, and only 13% reported using Twitter for protest-related activities (Figure 10). By comparison, a much greater share of respondents reported using face-to-face communication (93%), television (92%), telephones (82%), and print media (57%) for protest-related activity. Though these figures do not speak to the relative efficacy of different forms of media for protest-related activities, nor do they indicate how different forms of media were used by protesters. Nonetheless, they do imply that protesters predominantly used conventional forms of media rather than “new media” for protest-related activity—a finding that dampens the arguments of social media “optimists” who credit Facebook and Twitter as the main media through which Egyptians learned about protests around the country.

Interestingly, the percentage of respondents that reported using Facebook and Twitter for general purposes was roughly the same as the percentage of respondents that reported using Facebook and Twitter for protest-related activities (Figure 11). This was also true of the percentage of respondents who reported using television, print media, and blogs for protest-related activities. In their analysis, Wilson and Dunn suggest this indicates these media are better suited for protests activities.36 While further analysis cannot be done until the raw datasets have been released, these data do seem to imply that protesters who used social media almost always did so for protest-related purposes in addition to other purposes. Were these data collected

† Wilson and Dunn, “Digital Media,” 1260.
36 Ibid., 1254.
through random sampling with the same results, it would be safer to conclude that most protesters who used Facebook and Twitter used them for protest-related purposes. Given the aforementioned qualifications of the Tahrir Data Sets, these results merit further investigation into what share of Egyptian protesters with Facebook and Twitter accounts used their accounts for protest-related activities. Face-to-face or computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) surveys that randomly sample Egypt’s Facebook and Twitter users are likely the best research tool to explore this question.

**Deconstructing the Representative Protester**

Based on data collected by the Arab Social Media Report and the Information and Decision Support Center, the representative Egyptian user of Facebook in Egypt at the beginning of 2011 was between fifteen and twenty-nine years old and likely male. He was highly educated, in all likelihood a university graduate. Given that 49% of Egypt’s Facebook users used an English language interface for their account, it was likely that this representative Egyptian Facebook user also knew English.\(^3^7\) While one unscientific study concludes that an overwhelming majority of Egyptians with Facebook accounts used the social networking site for protest-related activities, much more research into this question is needed before any conclusions can be drawn.

Based on preliminary analyses of the Tahrir Data Sets, protesters were more likely to use conventional media—including live communication, telephones, and television—than Facebook and Twitter for protest-related activity. However, the small difference between the share of protesters using Facebook and Twitter for general purposes and the share of protesters using these media for protest-related purposes suggests that Facebook and Twitter were used for

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protest-related activity by nearly all “wired” protesters. The aforementioned Facebook poll corroborates this conclusion, but until more statistically robust data confirm this conclusion it remains a tenuous one.

These conclusions neither support nor reject the appropriateness of using information cascades as a conceptual framework for understanding how Facebook and Twitter shaped the events of the Arab Spring in Egypt. Given the very small percentage of the Egyptian population with Facebook or Twitter accounts and the more prevalent usage of conventional media by protesters in Tahrir Square, the overwhelming majority of Egyptians heard or spread news about protests through more conventional media. But even given the low penetration rate of Facebook in Egypt, the number of Egyptians with Facebook accounts exceeded 4.5 million in December of 2010—an impressive number capable of coordinating large political activities and facilitating information cascades, if enough users participated. Moreover, the explosive growth in the number of Facebook users between January and April of 2011—the ASMR reports that the number of Egyptians on Facebook grew by 42%—implies that Facebook became very popular during the period of political upheaval. The data available on Twitter reveal a much smaller community within Egypt—just over 131,000 in January of 2011—with a smaller growth rate in the number of Egyptians on Twitter from January to April of 2011—only 0.15%, according to ASMR data. These figures imply that if Egyptians facilitated information cascades using social media during the early months of 2011, they were far more likely to do so through Facebook as opposed to Twitter.

38 Ibid., 27-28.
39 Ibid.
Having explored the population of Facebook and Twitter users in Egypt with available data, this paper turns to an examination of protest-related content from social media communications during January and February 2011.
CHAPTER 2

On June 6, 2010, two detectives entered a cybercafé in Alexandria and arrested a twenty-eight year old blogger named Khalid Saeed. After the officers took Saeed to a nearby building, witnesses reported seeing the detectives beat Saeed violently. One woman reported seeing the detectives kick Saeed repeatedly and smash his head against a staircase. When Saeed pleaded with the detectives to stop, one of the detectives reportedly answered, “You are dead anyway!”

A fact-finding mission by the Egyptian Organization of Human Reports found that:

...[the detectives] dragged him to the adjacent building and banged his head against an iron door, the steps of the staircase and walls of the building...Two doctors happened to be there and tried in vain to revive him but (the police) continued beating him.

Saeed was beaten to death, then taken away in an ambulance. On a visit to a morgue, Saeed’s brother snapped a picture with his cell phone that captured in grotesque detail the wounds Saeed had sustained while being beaten.

Soon afterwards, images of Saeed’s battered face sprang up across Egyptian social media.

On June 8, 2010, Wael Ghonim, an Egyptian employee of Google, saw this image and created a Facebook group page titled “Kulena Khalid Saeed”—a phrase that translates as, “we are all Khalid Saeed” in English. For the next six months, this Facebook page posted updates on the proceedings of the case and acted as a hub for news about police brutality in Egypt. The page gained followers quickly, numbering in the hundreds of thousands by the end of the year. On January 14, 2011—the day that Zine El Abidine Ben Ali’s regime was toppled in nearby Tunisia—the page called for 100,000 Egyptians to take to the streets on January 25, National

The group’s followers, which numbered approximately 350,000, were invited to a protest on January 25, an event entitled “Yawm al-Ghadb”—the Day of Rage. After three days, the number that had responded, “Yes” exceeded 50,000.44

Wael Ghonim has sometimes been heralded as the prime instigator of revolution within Egypt.45 This is undoubtedly an oversimplified account of events. It is impossible to deconstruct the millions of small interactions that brought tens of thousands and then hundreds of thousands of Cairenes to the streets at the end of January. But to understand the events that took place in Egypt at the beginning of 2011 only through the lens of Wael Ghonim and “Kulena Khalid Saeed” does a disservice to the many other opposition groups that promoted January 25 as “Yawm el-Ghadr.” Numerous other opposition groups, including the 6 April Youth Movement,
the National Association for Change, and the Kefaya movement called for protesters to take to Tahrir Square on January 25, 2011.46 A YouTube video posted by an Egyptian blogger that co-founded the 6 April Youth Movement calling for women to not be afraid of protesting on January 25 also received a lot of attention during the week between “Yawm al-Ghadb.”47 To attempt to untangle which Facebook posts, YouTube videos, and Tweets were seen by whom, and then attempt to understand how each individually shaped the political situation, is a Brobdingnagian task and a fruitless endeavor.

Nevertheless, some scrutiny of “Kulena Khalid Saeed,” and the writings that populated it from January to February of 2011, is necessary if contemporary students of political science intend on exploring the role of social media in the Arab Spring. An investigation of the “Kulena Khalid Saeed” Facebook page, no matter how thorough, will not provide a complete answer to this puzzle. However, it will provide an entry point into a broader discussion about how social media were used to direct protesters in Egypt at the beginning of 2011. In evaluating how social media shaped the course of events in Egypt, determining who in Egypt had access to Facebook and Twitter is a promising first step. But it is a small one. Examining the content these media carried is the necessary next step.

This chapter examines the posts of the Facebook group page “Kulena Khalid Saeed” during the eighteen days between January 25 and February 11 of 2011.48 While almost all studies on the usage of social media in the Arab Spring have conducted quantitative analysis to evaluate shifts in the volume of Facebook and Twitter activity over the Arab Spring (a topic this paper covers in the following section), very few have actually explored the contents of Facebook posts

and Tweets. Fewer still have examined these contents in their original Arabic. This chapter starts
to fill in this glaring hole. It simultaneously aspires to open up an academic discussion on the
different uses of Facebook in a political context, and the ability of such content to facilitate
information cascades in authoritarian regimes.

**Four Types of Content**

There are two Khalid Saeed Facebook groups. The first, “Kulena Khalid Saeed,” is
entirely in Arabic; it was this group that Ghonim started two days after Saeed’s death on June 8,
2010. The other group, “We Are All Khalid Saeed,” is in English; its first post is dated January
27, 2010, right after the first big protests in Egypt. This chapter examines principally the Arabic-
language version of the group. This is for three reasons. First, this was the original Facebook
page that disseminated news about Khalid Saeed and police brutality in Egypt, and called for
protests in Egypt in January. Egyptians had been following it for months and therefore. Second,
it can be safely assumed that more Egyptians received updates from the Arabic-language group
than the English-language group after the English-language group was created. As noted in the
previous section, a relatively high percentage of Egyptian Facebook users set the language their
account’s interface to English in comparison to Arabic (49% of accounts used English and 50%
used Arabic, according to Facebook internal data collected between January and April of
2011). However, the language interface of a Facebook account reveals nothing about the
language in which Facebook users post or the groups they join. Given the importance of the
Arabic language (and especially colloquial Egyptian Arabic) to the culture of Egypt, it is safe to
assume that if Facebook—and these groups—played a sizable role in the protests that toppled
Mubarak’s regime, it was the posts on the Arabic-language group that more Egyptians viewed.

49 “Civil Movements: The Impact of Facebook and Twitter,” *The Arab Social Media Report* 1, No. 2 (May 2011),
14-15.
Third, while some journalistic accounts and academic articles have examined the posts from the English-language group, very few have looked in any detail at posts from the Arabic-language group. That being said, analysis of the posts from the “Kulena Khalid Saeed” group will be complemented by some examination of posts from the “We are all Khalid Saeed” group.

After examining the period under study—and the two weeks preceding the initial protests in Tahrir Square on January 25—the posts on the “Kulena Khalid Saeed” page fall within four principal categories: coordination, motivation, documentation, and news.

The first of these categories, coordination, refers to posts that invited others to protest at set places and/or times. Between January 14 and February 11, five posts on the “Kulena Khalid Saeed” group page coordinated protest actions.

The second of these categories, motivation, refers to posts that offered words of encouragement to Egyptians or stressed the importance of participating in protests. Twenty posts on the “Kulena Khalid Saeed” group page offered messages in support of protesters or stressed the importance of participating in protests between January 14 and February 11.

The third of these categories, documentation, refers to posts that documented or reported events occurring inside Egypt so as to make these events more publicly visible. Video clips, photograph albums, and messages were posted on the “We are all Khalid Saeed” page that documented footage of protests around the country. Between January 14 and February 11, five posts on the “Kulena Khalid Saeed” group page were documentary. A separate section of this chapter examines the role that the English-language “We are All Khalid Saeed” page played in reporting events in Egypt to the international media. A comparison of the Arabic-language Facebook page and the English-language Facebook page reveals that a much higher share of

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posts on the English-language page were used for documentation than posts on the Arabic-language page.

The fourth of these categories, news, refers to posts that reported local or national news, but did not provide any form of documentation. Sometimes these posts contained links to news articles about the news items. Between January 14 and February 11, six posts on the “Kulena Khalid Saeed” group page contained news items. Given the straightforward nature of these posts, this paper does not explore them in much detail.

Facebook posts were first collected through “Facebook scraping,” a process of collecting all Facebook posts from a page over a given period, then captured through screenshots.51 It is the screenshots of these posts that are displayed in this chapter. While this section examines only some of the posts from the period under study, a full collection of these posts, their translations, and their categorization can be found in the appendix at the end of this paper.

Coordination

The very first post that coordinated any protests was published on January 14, 2011 (Figure 1). In the post, Ghonim wrote, “Today is the 15th... January 25 is Police Day, an official holiday...If 100,000 of us went to the streets no one can stand in our way…can we do it?” While this post did not contain detailed instructions of how to participate in protests, a post not long after did. Four days later (January 18) a post that included a video of the Egyptian blogger Asmaa Mahfouz encouraging women to participate in protests. The post also included a link to a post on Mahfouz’s blog, which provided explicit instructions on how to prepare for the protests on January 25. Her blog post was published in a number of other sources, including the

51 Coding for Facebook scraping tool was provided by R-Shief. I would especially like to thank Dan for his help.
Following the protests that took place on January 25, several posts on the “Kulena Khalid Saeed” page aimed to keep the momentum of the first protests alive by organizing protests on January 28. Calling it the “Friday of Rage,” a post on January 26 invited people to protest on January 28 (Figure 2):

In an hour...an invitation to “Friday of Rage” had more than 7000 people respond and it reached 200 thousand...I hope we all share with our friends and I hope we send SMS and Blackberry messages and over chat and we print papers calling everyone to demonstrate after Friday prayer and sit-in in the public squares.

A post later that day called on people to protest while simultaneously providing a motivational message to Egyptians:

They slow the Internet and block it...They take down Facebook or block Twitter...They cut underwater cables or cut home networks...We are all going out Friday after prayer...We will walk in processions in the streets all around Egypt...Clubs, tear gas canisters, and live and rubber bullets will not stop us...We have nothing left to lose, and we see hope...Any Egyptian who does not go out on Friday subjects himself, his sons, and the history of this great country to injustice.

On January 28, massive protests were held across Cairo, as disruptions in Internet and mobile phone service were continually interrupted. Over the next two weeks, posts on the wall became

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more infrequent, before resuming regularly on February 7.

The last post from this period that can be categorized as “coordination” was posted on February 9 (Figure 3). Calling for a “Friday of Martyrs” on February 11, the post read the following:

Egypt want all of Egypt to participate in the Friday of Martyrs…This day because the family of every martyr that died knows that their children did not die in vain...I hope that everyone goes to the event page and shares it with all Egyptians they know right now.

On February 11, tens of thousands of Egyptians took to the streets in protest. That night, Vice President Omar Suleiman announced the resignation of President Mubarak.

While some of the posts on the “Kulena Khalid Saeed” page were used to coordinate and/or publicize protests, it should be noted first that they were relatively few in number. Second, it should be noted that these posts were often sparse on details, with the exception of the post linking to Asmaa Mahfouz’s blog post. Most posts that coordinated protests offered only information on the day that people were protesting and the general location—it might be fairer to say that they raised awareness rather than coordinated specific actions. Third, posts that coordinated and/or publicized protest actions were often accompanied by messages of encouragement to strengthen protesters’ motivation. While the “Kulena Khalid Saeed” page may have been at the center of social media communications, it appears to have served more as a motivational tool than an instrument of direct coordination. The motivational aspect of posts on the “Kulena Khalid Saeed” page is explored below.
Motivation

Sorting through the posts of the “Kulena Khalid Saeed” reveals that the majority of these posts had a motivational purpose, encouraging Egyptians to continue protesting in the face of adversity. Of the thirty-one posts published on the “Kulena Khalid Saeed” page between January 14 and February 11, 2011, twenty were categorized as motivational. This section examines some of these posts, but not all—an exhaustive list of these posts can be viewed in the appendix.

The posts preceding January 25 focus around the dilemma of mobilizing protesters. They recognize a challenge in mobilizing a society that has been under the yoke of authoritarianism for so long, and consequently they aim to inspire bravery. On January 24, a post appeared on the “Kulena Khalid Saeed” page that rebuked critics claiming that Egyptians were too “cowardly” to participate in protests (Figure 4):

Someone deciding that he is not going out tomorrow, sitting at his keyboard, continuously writing comments on the page that the Egyptian people are a cowardly people and will not go out...Like I said before there is a phenomenon in psychology called projection...You have a specific problem and because you feel no need to rebuke your conscience you justify to yourself that everyone has the same problem. But unfortunately, my friend...I am not a coward. I am going out on the 25th.

The trope of projection, its debilitating effects, and the need of the Egyptian people to overcome it is a repeating one among the posts on “Kulena Khalid Saeed.” The trope speaks to an awareness of how individual decisions together comprise collective action, and thus the importance of every individual taking action. Indeed, the high frequency of motivational language on the page suggests that, in the mind of activists like Wael Ghonim, motivation was the greatest challenge of the Egyptian revolution, as opposed to coordination.

After January 25, the posts make use of photographs and video from protests to inspire Egyptians and strengthen their resolve. One post from January 26 linked to a video of protesters attacking a tank:
An Egyptian youth being brave…Going on top of a tank and took down the criminal that was spraying water on thousands of peaceful demonstrators…These are real men…No one should keep saying the Egyptian people are cowards…I told you from the beginning that whoever says the Egyptian is a coward is sick with projection and justifies his cowardice by saying that everyone is like him.

This post marked the first of many that vigorously defined the Egyptian people as brave and “manly,” disproving naysayers who claimed that Egyptians were cowards. Another post from the same day showed a picture of a man fighting security forces (Figure 5):

I discovered yesterday that Egypt is full of men who are really not afraid… Imagine that with your abilities you attack five national security soldiers bearing clubs and armor in order to prevent them from reaching people…Seriously a free man…You deserve to taste the taste of freedom.

Posts like this one stake the claim that the very act of revolting is liberating for the Egyptian people. In this manner, the posts on the “Kulena Khalid Saeed” page depict the struggle against the Mubarak regime to be as much a psychological revolution as a political revolution.

This motivational message on this page shifted in the weeks that followed, however. As the regime tried to crush the protests through repressive means, the messages become increasingly focused on strengthening the resolve of protesters, telling them to honor those who
have died by not backing down until the regime has fallen. A post from February 6 thanks the support of Egyptians online, implicating that those who have taken to the street have done so in Khalid Saeed’s honor:

I find a big difference between feeling the love of people on the Internet and the love of people in reality...God bless you all...Seriously the most important thing is that whoever sacrificed with his blood for his dream should not be told that there are a million Egyptians neglecting him.

On a post from February 9 inviting members of the group to the “Friday of Martyrs” protests on February 11, Ghonim stresses the importance of honoring the martyrs of the revolution. The implication is even made that not attending the protests disrespects those who have died: “We want all of Egypt to participate in the Friday of Martyrs...This day so the family of every martyr that died knows that their children did not die in vain...I hope that everyone goes to the event
page and shares it with all Egyptians they know right now.” Following the collapse of the
regime, several posts showed pictures of military officials and activists saluting the martyrs of
the revolution. The last post on February 11, triumphant in tone, read:

Khalid: From ‘immortality’…Saeed: from ‘happiness’…Khalid Saeed: means Khalid is
happy on the Day of Judgment…Khalid Saeed, now I can say to you: We restored your
right to you, my dear friend…And I say to Aunt Leila, his mother: Raise your head high,
mother of Egyptians, because your son is the spark that caused all Egypt to liberate itself.

By honoring Khalid Saeed and other martyrs, these posts gave heavy symbolic meaning to the
toppling of the regime. Political revolution was depicted as more than a political revolution,
more even than a psychological revolution; it was the ultimate tribute to those who had paid with
their lives for these revolutions, with Khalid Saeed as the most iconic martyr.

The “Kulena Khalid Saeed” Facebook page delivered more “motivational” messages than
“coordinative” or “documentary” messages. For the English-language “We are All Khalid
Saeed” page, this was not the case. Rather, the English-language Facebook group posted mostly
messages that fit in the “documentary” category, targeted to an international audience. This
group and its posts, as well as the “documentary” posts from the “Kulena Khalid Saeed” page, is
explored in the section below.

Documentation

While the “Kulena Khalid Saeed” Facebook page has some posts that can be considered
documentary, they number only five among the thirty-one posts between January 14 and
February 11. Even among these posts, those that were documentary often served as sources
of motivation. One video depicting a man attacking a tank, posted on January 25, contains the
positive message: “So that you know that there are real men in Egypt.” Another post linked to a
video of entertainer Tamer Hosny crying, dated February 9, quotes Wael Ghonim’s comments on
the news item: “‘I ask you to say to the youth: Opposing Tamer Hosny is the biggest mistake, We are making each person want to reflect on himself and think a thousand times…Each person that joins benefits us.” While other news items, including one from February 11 informing readers of General Saad al-Din al-Shazli’s death, inform the page’s viewers of contemporary events, these posts have been categorized as news and not as documentary. Furthermore, those that can be classified as such are also motivational in tone; the post announcing al-Shazli’s death speaks of how he was imprisoned by Mubarak’s regime.

This finding is not surprising. If the readers of this page in January and February of 2011 were mostly Egyptian, they were not in need of documentary evidence of events in Egypt. More likely they were in need of encouraging words as the regime cracked down more harshly over the eighteen days between January 25 and February 11. Based on this analysis, the “Kulena Khalid Saeed” served as a tool for motivating and encouraging Egyptians who participated in protests much more than a tool of coordination or publishing documentary evidence of events.

The English-language page, “We are All Khalid Saeed,” on the other hand, was filled with posts that informed readers of the latest events in Egypt. Analysis of these posts reveals a Facebook page acting as more of a news feed for international observers than a motivational tool for Egyptian protesters. Several points are to be made about the differences between these two pages.

Firstly, posts were published on the English-language “We are All Khalid Saeed” page much more frequently than on the Arabic-language “Kulena Khalid Saeed” in January and February of 2011. While thirty-one posts were published between January 14 and February 11 on “Kulena Khalid Saeed,” hundreds were published on “We are All Khalid Saeed” during the same period. The “Kulena Khalid Saeed” page sometimes went days without updates. Updates on the
“We are All Khalid Saeed” were very frequent; on some days, there was a post every fifteen minutes (Figure 6).

Secondly, these posts very often disseminated information about events in Egypt. This information included rumors about regime activities, news about protests in support of Egypt in other countries, and updates about what was happening within the country (Figure 7, for example). Posts were generally targeted at an international audience. In one post, Ghonim writes:

“Few days after Khalid Said’s death, I started this English page to send our message to the world

Figure 6: Updates on the “We are all Khalid Saeed” page were more frequent than updates on the “Kulena Khalid Saeed” page.
and to gain international support for our just peaceful and simple demands.” These posts explained places and people that would be unfamiliar to people outside Egypt, while also displaying information about events abroad that pertained to the political situation in Egypt. Quite clearly, the intended audience of posts on the “We are All Khalid Saeed” page was international, in contrast to the domestic audience of posts on the “Kulena Khalid Saeed” page.

Thirdly, the “We are All Khalid Saeed” page did contain some posts that were coordinative and motivational, although coordination and motivation appeared to be secondary to informing an international audience about events in Egypt. The page was used to coordinate protests as far away as Switzerland and Washington, DC in support of protesters in Egypt. In addition, the Facebook page provided motivational messages to people protesting outside of Egypt, often stressing the importance of how actions outside of Egypt could shape the political
situation within Egypt (Figure 8). On January 27, for example, one post urged readers to contact their government officials and the Egyptian embassies in their country to help save lives in Egypt.

Fourthly, the number of “likes” and comments on posts from the “We are All Khalid Saeed” page was much smaller than the number of “likes” and comments on posts from the “Kulena Khalid Saeed” page. In the case of the former, “likes” and comments for each individual post typically numbered in the tens or hundreds. In the case of the latter, “likes” and for each post often numbered in the thousands, but sometimes exceeded ten thousand. By no means is this a scientific measure of each page’s respective audience. But given the challenge of obtaining

**Figure 8**
information on the number of members in Facebook groups, it is one of the few available metrics for assessing how many Facebook users read and respond to the posts of each page. If “likes” and comments are used as a rough measure for the relative number of each page’s viewers, it would appear that the number of people reading and responding to posts on the “Kulena Khalid Saeed” page far exceeded the number of people reading and responding to posts on the “We are All Khalid Saeed” page.

**Reading Between the Lines**

Examining posts from the “Kulena Khalid Saeed” and “We are All Khalid Saeed” Facebook pages speaks to the challenge of analyzing such content in that it raises as many questions as it answers. These posts provide only a small sampling of the communications through Facebook and Twitter that may have been instrumental in shaping events in Egypt. Moreover, while the intentions of these posts can be discerned by reading them closely, whether these posts produced their intended results remains an open question. With these qualifications in mind, three principal observations can be gleaned from the preceding examination.

The first of these is that Facebook’s role as a motivational tool is considerably overlooked by the existing academic literature on social media in Egypt. While most other studies have looked at the role of social media in directly coordinating protests and documenting the abuses of an authoritarian regime, very few have looked in much detail at the motivational role of social media content.\(^{54}\) While some of the posts on “Kulena Khalid Saeed” provided information about the location and time of protests in January and February of 2011, the overwhelming majority did not. The majority appealed to readers’ emotions by invoking pride in Egypt and calling on Egyptian to honor slain martyrs to stress the importance of protesting to

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\(^{54}\) Preliminary analyses by the directors of the Tahrir Data Project do investigate this somewhat extensively, as will be explored in the next chapter.
Egyptian readers. These posts deliberately attempt to shape popular conceptions of protesting in Egypt.

The second observation is that social media content was heavily bifurcated based on its intended audience. For its intended audience of Egyptian protesters, most posts from the “Kulena Khalid Saeed” page contained motivational content. Posts from the English-language “We are All Khalid Saeed” page, on the other hand, chiefly reported events from Egypt while sometimes calling for international support in an effort to communicate with an international audience. This point may seem conspicuous—of course different messages will be tailored to different audiences—but it has meaningful implications for scholars of social media and politics. Differences in the two pages’ content implicate a deliberate communications strategy that must be examined qualitatively to be understood. Purely quantitative analysis, all too present in the existing literature on social media and politics, tends to lose these subtleties among the statistics and line charts. An examination of trends in social media activity—such as the number of tweets bearing the hashtag #jan25 or #egypt—carries little meaning without understanding first the content of such communications.

The third observation is the scarcity of coordinated events among these posts. As one of the Facebook pages that attracted the most attention—if not the most attention—during the events of January and February 2011, only three protest events were publicized through the “Kulena Khalid Saeed” page: protests on January 25, January 28 (Friday of Rage), and February 11 (Friday of Martyrs). Given that protests were ongoing throughout this period, it is plain to see that any narrative placing Facebook as the dominant medium through which protests were coordinated is misinformed.
However, this does not disprove that Facebook posts had some pervasive influence in the outcome of events, particularly as a means of facilitating information cascades. Based on the mechanics of information cascades, it is possible that Facebook communications about protests on January 25 and January 28 motivated enough Egyptians to protest that they jumpstarted a process that quickly gathered momentum until the regime’s toppling on February 11. Indeed, the early stages of an information cascade are the most critical in determining whether it will sustain itself or peter out quickly. It is clear that the dynamics of protests in Egypt fell outside the purview of Facebook posts. But the role of these posts in motivating Egyptians to protest, and potentially facilitating information cascades, remains an open question without some exploration of the connection between the people who might have seen these posts—detailed in the first chapter—and the content of these posts—which are examined above.

The crux of this puzzle thus lies at the intersection of protester and media. Having now examined who made up Egypt’s Facebook population and the content of some of the most widely seen Facebook posts in Egypt, it is necessary to explore the connection between the two. The following chapter examines these questions with the aid of data from the Tahrir Data Sets.
CHAPTER 3

Having up to this point explored both the people within Egypt that used Facebook and Twitter as well as the content of some of the most widely-viewed Facebook posts at the beginning of 2011, it is necessary to examine the relationship between the two to more fully develop a theory of how social media shaped events in Egypt. As was stated in the previous section, examining the content of Facebook posts on the “Kulena Khalid Saeed” page is only useful insofar as its relationship with the people taking to the streets is understood. Understanding this complex relationship is a challenging task, even with the most complete of datasets. It is impossible to know how many Egyptians viewed Facebook posts announcing protests or providing words of encouragement. It is also impossible to know how many Egyptians who viewed this information acted on it or found it to be encouraging. Developing the relationship of social media content to protesters requires a comprehensive survey of protesters that examines not only the individual motivations of protesters, but also how social media communications may have activated or strengthened these motivations.

Fortunately, some data on protesters in Egypt provide insight into this relationship, even as they leave much unexplained. Among the questions asked of respondents in Tahrir Data Set A—the aforementioned collection of more than one thousand interviews with Egyptians who participated in protests in Tahrir Square—were multiple questions about media usage of protesters and how they responded to information from different media sources. The limitations on the dataset that were mentioned in the first chapter apply as well in this analysis. To collect data in a discreet manner, snowball sampling was used to gather a sample of interviewees. While the sample size of 1200 is impressive (with 1056 valid cases being used in the analysis), a

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smaller sample collected through random sampling would provide more statistically robust data. Other considerations, including the method through which the interviews were conducted, may introduce some measure of systemic error into the data. In short, these data are not ideal for statistical analysis. But given the paucity of data on protesters in Egypt, they offer the best survey to date on the individual motivations of those who took to the streets at the beginning of 2011.

This chapter bridges the gap between the first and second chapters by examining self-reported data from Egyptians on how social media directly shaped the dynamics of protests. By looking at protesters’ perceptions of content received through social media and how this content was then used, a fuller theory of social media’s role in Egypt can be developed through the lens of informational cascades.

**Evaluating the Motivational Power of Facebook and Twitter**

The preceding chapter concluded by asserting that the motivational role of social media content has been overlooked in previous analyses. Given the difficulty in determining which individual impetuses were *decisive* in motivating a person to attend a protest—an extremely dangerous act in a country with an authoritarian regime—it is necessary to rely on self-reported data from protesters to further explore this role. To obtain these data, the Engine Room, the organization which directed the Tahrir Data Project, asked protesters to rank which media they found to be most important to their protest activity, most informative regarding the protests, most frequently used in relation to protests, and most motivating them to participate in protests (Figure 1).56

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As a percentage of the total possible score for the entire sample, the scores for each medium are highly correlative across individual media.\textsuperscript{57} Across the entire survey sample, telephone communications were ranked the most important, most informative, and most motivating medium through which protesters participated in protests. Face-to-face communications were ranked most used. Facebook was ranked third most important, third most informative, and third most motivating medium behind face-to-face and telephone communication, and ranked fourth most used medium behind face-to-face communication and satellite television. Twitter, on the other hand, was ranked sixth most important, sixth most informative, eighth most used, and fifth most motivating medium through which protesters participated in protests. Twitter’s lower score is no doubt due to the lower number of users within the sample, but it is also likely that the more impersonal nature of Twitter may explain its lower score than Facebook.

\textsuperscript{*} Wilson and Dunn, “Digital Media,” 1259.
\textsuperscript{57} Until the Engine Room public releases the data from the Tahrir Data Project, details of their scoring system are not known.
Discrepancies in these rankings present intriguing suggestions about how protesters made use of each medium. Facebook, for example, received a markedly higher score for the descriptions “used” and “motivating” than it received for the descriptions “important” and “informative.” This suggests that though protesters may not have found content received through Facebook to be particularly important or informative (albeit more important and informative than content received through many others forms of media), they were more likely to use Facebook for protest-related purposes, e.g., reading content from protest-related pages, such as “Kulena Khalid Saeed,” or communicating directly with other protesters. Twitter, in contrast, received a considerably higher score for the description “motivating” than it received for the description “used.” This discrepancy implies that though protesters may not have received much protest-related content from Twitter or used the microblogging site frequently to communicate with one another—especially in comparison to other media—the content they did receive was noticeably more motivating than content received through SMS, radio, print, and e-mail. Facebook and Twitter were the only two forms of media to receive higher scores for the description “motivating” than both “important” and “informative,” suggesting that among those protesters who did use the social media websites for protest-related activities, the content of communications they received was distinguished by its ability to motivate people to participate in protests.

Scoring media usage by the highest potential score among users of each form of media—as opposed to highest potential score across the survey sample as a whole—further accentuates the role of social media in motivating protesters. When ranking scores are expressed as a percentage of the top possible score for each medium’s users, Facebook receives the highest score for the descriptions “used” and “motivating,” i.e., among protesters that used Facebook,
the same ranking system, Twitter receives the second-highest score for the description “motivating” and a considerably higher score for the description “used” (Figure 2). It should be noted that the number of Twitter users was considerably smaller than the sample as a whole—138 of the total 1054 interviewees reported using Twitter—and that random sampling error may play some part in explaining the variation in these numbers.\textsuperscript{58} Nonetheless, the sharp swing in these scores does advance the argument that Facebook and Twitter content was more motivational for protesters than content received through other forms of media.

The different results from the two scoring systems indicate that among those protesters who used Facebook or Twitter, Facebook and Twitter were exceedingly important tools for protest-related activity, a point that is underlined by Figure 3. When compared side-by-side in aggregate ranking scores that combine each medium’s scores of “important,” “informative,” “used,” and “motivating” as a uniform score of “significant,” Facebook, e-mail, Twitter, and radio have the greatest score increase from the first system to the second. Based upon these

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Figure2}
\caption{Rankings by Media Users}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{*} Wilson and Dunn, “Digital Media,” 1260.

\textsuperscript{58} The number of Facebook users (447) is larger, and consequently random sampling error for the Facebook scoring data is less.
results, it is apparent that protest-related content transmitted through Facebook and Twitter were significant factors in motivating people to protest, according to protesters who used Facebook and Twitter as well as others forms of media. This gives added significance to the motivational dimension of the posts on the “Kulena Khalid Saeed.” If the goal of those posts was to motivate young and “wired” Egyptians to take to the streets, they appear to have achieved some success, according to these self-reported data. Overall, the preceding data suggest that while telephone and face-to-face communications were the media through which most survey respondents received information about protests that was deemed “important” or “informative”—perhaps details about the location and timing of protests—Facebook and Twitter were the channels through which social media users received the most “motivating” content. Furthermore, social media users receiving this content found it to be more motivating than other media users found content from other channels.

Another way of evaluating the motivational power of Facebook and Twitter-based content is to examine whether social media users were more likely to attend protests at the very beginning of the revolution. Given that the success of protests were least certain at the very

beginning, the riskiest day of attending protests from the period of study was the first day: January 25, 2011. If Facebook and Twitter users were significantly more likely to attend protests on January 25, this implies that social media content may have played a critical role in motivating Egyptians to protest. Christopher Wilson of UNDP Oslo Governance Center ran a linear regression that evaluated this question, which was included in a presentation to the Norwegian Centre of Human Rights. His regression indicates that, among the sample surveyed, Facebook and Twitter users were significantly more likely to have attended protests on January 25 (Figure 4). This was also true for those who used television and print media regularly. In fact, among the variables included in the regression, Facebook usage, Twitter usage, television usage, and print media usage were the only variables with a statistically significant relationship to protesting on January 25. Other variables, including age, gender, education level, and whether Internet was installed in the respondent’s house were found to not have a statistically significant

**Figure 4 (Linear Regression of Protested on Day 1)**

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Exp (b)</th>
<th>P</th>
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</thead>
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<td>Net on Phone</td>
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<td>0.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses Text Gen</td>
<td>1.092</td>
<td>0.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses FB Gen</td>
<td>1.443*</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses TW Gen</td>
<td>1.429*</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses Blogs Gen</td>
<td>1.197</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses Email Gen</td>
<td>0.818</td>
<td>0.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses Phone Gen</td>
<td>1.22</td>
<td>0.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses TV Gen</td>
<td>0.483**</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses Radio</td>
<td>1.089</td>
<td>0.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses Print</td>
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<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_cons</td>
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<tr>
<td>ll</td>
<td>-654.933</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

relationship with protesting on January 25.

As stated emphatically in the introduction of this paper, correlation does not equate to causation. The fact that Facebook and Twitter users were significantly more likely to attend protests on January 25 does not in itself indicate that protest-related content transmitted through these media were what motivated them to protests. Facebook and Twitter users in Egypt might have been more politically active, and thus instinctively more likely to attend protests against the Mubarak regime. In another regression included in the same presentation, Wilson finds that social media users were in fact more likely to be politically active. Facebook and Twitter users were significantly more likely to have attended a protest prior to January 25, 2011 (Figure 5). It is thus possible that the statistical relationship between Facebook and Twitter usage and attendance of protests on January 25 is a spurious one.

In conjunction with the media-ranking data presented above, however, the likelihood of a

**Figure 5 (Linear Regression of Not First Protest)**

<table>
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<th>Exp (b)</th>
<th>P</th>
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</thead>
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</tr>
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<td>Education</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Net on Phone</td>
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<td>Uses Text Gen</td>
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<td>0.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses FB Gen</td>
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<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses TW Gen</td>
<td>1.467*</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
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<td>Uses Blogs Gen</td>
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<td>Uses Phone Gen</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses TV Gen</td>
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<tr>
<td>Uses Radio</td>
<td>0.723**</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses Print</td>
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<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>ll</td>
<td>-631.21</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

* Ibid.
spurious relationship between these two variables seems diminished. Egyptian users of Facebook and Twitter were more likely to be politically active. But given that they found content received through Facebook and Twitter to be considerably more motivating than content received through other media—and that the content of these media, as has been examined, was quite motivational in tone—this statistically significant relationship bolsters the thesis that protest-related content transmitted through Facebook and Twitter motivated Egyptian receivers of this content to protest.

**The Relay Effect**

Data collected by the Engine Room reveal that protesters receiving protest-related information through social media were also critical *transmitters* of protest-related content. In this respect, they were not much different from others who did not use social media; all survey respondents in Tahrir Data Set A reported some form of relaying information from one person to another through different forms of media. Strikingly, Facebook users were most likely to relay protest-related information through other channels, although other media were also characterized by high relay rates.

Looking at the survey sample as a whole, respondents most frequently reported relaying information received through satellite television; 21% of reported relays transmitted information from satellite TV sources (Figure 6). Given that satellite TV was scored highly as “used” among respondents, this is not a surprising finding; nor is the fact that 18% and 15% of reported relays transmitted information received through live communication and telephone sources, respectively, given the high scores they received. While 14% of reported relays were of information obtained through Facebook, only 3% of reported relays were of information obtained through Twitter. This is in keeping with previously-mentioned findings that the number...
Figure 6

Reported Relays by Source

- Radio: 3%
- Blogs: 2%
- Twitter: 3%
- E-mail: 5%
- SMS: 8%
- Satellite TV: 21%
- Print: 11%
- Live Comm: 18%
- Facebook: 14%
- Phone: 15%

of protesters using Facebook, as well as the number of Egyptians as a whole using Facebook, was considerably larger than the number using Twitter.

While the percentage of media users reporting relays among Facebook (88.8%) and Twitter (80.3%) users was high, it was not so much higher than relay rates among other media users (Figure 7). Noticeably, Facebook users reported relays more frequently than any other media users and Twitter users were the third most frequent relayers. Given the small difference in percentage of users that reported relays between different media, however, there is not substantial evidence to conclude that Facebook users played a particularly important role in transmitting information from one medium to another. All protesters that were surveyed transmitted protest-related information from one medium to another. Facebook users were the most likely to relay information, but not by very much in comparison to live communication. The significance of this finding should thus not be overstated.

The most frequently cited reason for relaying information was relative ease of access of

certain forms of media over others (Figure 8). 30% reported relaying information to reach a larger audience, while 17% reported relaying information to reach a different audience. 16% reported relaying information because it was not possible to use others forms of media. Until the Engine Room publicly releases data from the Tahrir Data Set A, it is not clear which media users reported which motivations. Based upon their preliminary analysis, nearly half of all survey respondents reported relaying information to reach a larger or a different audience. Since Facebook and Twitter users comprised a politically active but small community, it would be consistent with the preceding analysis to infer that social media users transmitted information from Facebook and Twitter to reach the enormous share of the Egyptian population that was not on Facebook and Twitter. Until the Tahrir Data Project has fully divulged its data, however, such theorization is mere speculation.

*Ibid., 1257.*
Critical to the Cascade?

The preceding analysis supports the thesis that Facebook and Twitter were media through which politically-minded Egyptians received motivating content and transmitted protest-related information to other Egyptians. In the theory of information cascades, initial actors play an especially important role in determining whether a collective action will develop into a cascade or languish. A “critical mass” must be achieved early to create a perception among the general population that political change is possible; otherwise, a repressive response from authoritarian regimes will smother such political activity before it gains traction. Based upon data from protesters, it appears as though Facebook and Twitter users were very active in launching the protest movement and achieving that “critical mass.” Whether or not they were indispensible to it remains an open question.

*Ibid., 1258.*
A linear regression of Tahrir Data Set A reveals that Facebook and Twitter users were more likely to participate in protests on January 25—one of the most dangerous days to protest given that a mass protest movement had not yet emerged—suggesting that content received through these media may have been a significant factor in their decision to protest. But the results of a different linear regression indicate that Facebook and Twitter users were more likely to have protested in the past. Social media users were thus already more politically active; they may have been likely protesters, whether protests were publicized through social media or not. This puts the motivational effect of social media content in question: if Facebook and Twitter users were predisposed towards political activity, how motivating was the content of Facebook pages like “Kulena Khalid Saeed?” Furthermore, while Facebook and Twitter users each relayed protest-related information from one medium to another frequently—with Facebook users the most frequent relayers—other protesters also relayed such information quite frequently. This evidence makes arguments that social media turned a bunch of apathetic Egyptian youths into the vanguard of a mass movement appear unconvincing. Facebook and Twitter users were more politically engaged than their countrymen. Moreover, the media environment through which Egyptians were relaying information to one another was far too complex to place Facebook and Twitter users as critical transmitters of protest-related information, without which the information cascade would wilt. Cascade dynamics were as much at work in phone calls, television coverage, and personal conversations as they were in the “Kulena Khalid Saeed” Facebook page.

However, the murkiness surrounding extrapolation of these data does not discount the fact that Facebook content was consistently ranked to be the most “motivational” among Egyptians surveyed, nor the overall significance Facebook and Twitter users attached to content
received through social media. Social media users may have been predisposed to protest against
the regime, but they cite content received through these media as part of what motivated them.
Whether or not the content was in fact what motivated them to protest requires a granularity of
data that is impossible to attain. Furthermore, dissecting the countless relays through which more
and more Egyptians became aware of events is a gargantuan task. It is enough to say that though
everyone surveyed was eager to relay protest-related content from one medium to another,
Facebook and Twitter users were among the most enthusiastic. If the protests that ousted
Mubarak were like an army overrunning a castle, Facebook and Twitter users were some of this
army’s most motivated soldiers.
CONCLUSION

This paper opened by listing the many limitations for understanding the complex role of social media in the Egyptian revolution in 2011. Despite the difficulties imposed on any researcher examining this topic, this paper has analyzed available data to arrive at significant conclusions about the role of Facebook and Twitter in political events in Egypt. By dissecting the population that used Facebook and Twitter in Egypt, exploring Arabic and English-language protest-related content on Facebook, and finally examining self-reported data from protesters on their perception of social media, a new methodology for understanding the relationship between political actors and social media has been developed. This paper’s findings, which are restated in summation below, offer a valuable contribution to the academic literature on social media and politics. Additionally, they point toward new topical horizons for researchers to explore.

Firstly, an analysis of demographic data on social media users reveals that popular media accounts of Facebook and Twitter users in Egypt are startlingly accurate. In January and February of 2011, the average Egyptian Facebook user was a young male, between the age of fifteen and twenty-nine years old. He was highly educated and very frequently a university graduate; it is also likely that he knew English. However, data on the penetration rates of Facebook and Twitter in Egypt indicate that a small percentage of the Egyptian population used social media websites. In December of 2010, 5.24% of Egyptians used Facebook. In April of 2011, 0.15% of Egyptians used Twitter. Such statistics should curb overeager assertions that Facebook and Twitter were sine qua non for facilitating protests in Egypt, and that the events of the eighteen days between January 25 and February 11 can appropriately be labeled a “Facebook revolution” or a “Twitter revolution.” Nevertheless, the large number of Facebook users in Egypt—and the dramatic growth in the number of Facebook users during the spring of 2011—
make plausible, if not probable, the ability of online activists to facilitate information cascades by informing others about coordinated political activities.

Secondly, an examination of the “Kulena Khalid Saeed” and “We are All Khalid Saeed” Facebook pages—among the most viewed by Egyptians during January and February 2012—finds that posts from January 14 to February 11, 2011 contained content that was coordinative, motivational, and documentary. Of these three categories, motivational content was most abundant on the Arabic-language “Kulena Khalid Saeed” page. Posts that were coordinative and documentary often were framed in language that encouraged Egyptians to continue protesting and not be intimidated. On the English-language “We are All Khalid Saeed” page, however, the content of posts was almost entirely documentary and updates were much more frequent; indeed, the “We are All Khalid Saeed” page appears to have functioned as a constantly updating news feed for the international media and activists abroad following events in Egypt. The bisection of this content speaks to an intricate communications strategy through which different messages were promulgated to different audiences. In light of these revelations, scholars of social media and politics should spend less time studying the coordination of protests in Egypt and focus more of their efforts exploring how social media content shaped emotional narratives for ordinary Egyptians. Academics exploring this phenomenon through familiar frameworks of revolution theories and purely quantitative analysis have overlooked the motivational aspects of this content, perhaps because they have examined little of this content themselves, especially Arabic-language content. More qualitative analysis of social media content is direly needed to more fully understand the relationship between protester and social media.

Thirdly, interviews with protesters who were in Tahrir Square between January 25 and February 11 reveal that Facebook and Twitter users ranked content from social media to be more
motivating than other media. In fact, Facebook and Twitter users ranked this content to be more motivating than other respondents ranked content from other media. Furthermore, Facebook and Twitter users were significantly more likely to have attended protests on January 25, the first day of major protests. The significance of this finding is tempered somewhat upon closer inspection, which reveals that Facebook and Twitter users were also more likely to have attended protests in the past and therefore predisposed to attend protests. Nevertheless, the data make clear that Facebook and Twitter users considered content from social media to be more motivating than content from any other medium. Additionally, Facebook and Twitter users were among the most frequent relayers of protest-related information; answers from survey respondents show that nearly half of all protesters relayed information from one medium to another to reach a larger or different audience. These facts compositely depict Facebook and Twitter users to be some of the most enthusiastic participants in protest activity. They evince the motivational role of content transmitted through Facebook and Twitter, a role explored in detail in the second section of this paper.

These insights shed light on the many ways that protesters in Egypt used Facebook and Twitter to shape the outcome of events in the beginning of 2011. Social media were tools of motivation, coordination, information, and documentation that were deeply entangled in the variegated and intersecting media environment that Egyptians used to communicate with each other. Indicators of social media activity, including the number of “likes” for Facebook posts and the number of Tweets bearing certain hashtags, followed cascade-like trends in Egypt from January to February of 2011. But it is impossible to dissociate these trends from cascade dynamics that may have been at work in the broader Egyptian media environment that included Facebook and Twitter. Ultimately, those researching social media’s role in the Egyptian
Revolution do not have all the information to understand how Facebook and Twitter fit exactly within the sequence of interactions that created a mass movement calling for the regime’s downfall. Rather, they should look to empirical data—both qualitative and quantitative, from direct interviews with protesters and from Facebook and Twitter—to understand how protesters used social media and related to social media content within the jumbled information environment surrounding the events in question. This paper has presented a model for approaching these questions by methodically examining the social media population of Egypt, translating and analyzing content from social media communications, and evaluating protesters’ perceptions of the relationship between them.

These findings also reveal some of the weaknesses within the current academic research on social media and its role in politics. While much that has been written on the role of social media in recent political events has been innovative and thought-provoking, there are a number of areas unexplored in the academic literature. The extensive analysis of Facebook’s and Twitter’s role in the Egyptian Revolution that this paper has conducted observes three principal recommendations for researchers in the future.

Firstly, the collection of precise and pertinent data is an absolute must for future researchers. This may seem obvious, but what defines precise and pertinent data appears to have eluded many of the scholars who have written about social media in Egypt.

For data to be precise, it must be collected according to a proper sampling methodology. If collected with the intention of extrapolating findings about a sample to a larger population, surveys must be conducted through random sampling. The Arab Social Media Report’s survey on Facebook usage during the civil movements in Egypt and Tunisia, for example, is a paragon of poor survey sampling. The sizes of the survey samples are woefully inadequate, with only 126
respondents from Egypt and 105 from Tunisia, introducing an unacceptable level of random sampling error into the data. Furthermore, the sampling methodology of the survey no doubt skews the data further: the survey was distributed through Facebook’s targeted advertising platform to all Facebook users in Tunisia and Egypt, running for three weeks in March 2011.\(^{59}\) Such methodology introduces a self-selection bias into the data; it is possible, for example, that only those most enthusiastic about the topic of Facebook usage in protests cared enough to participate in the survey. While random sampling using social media platforms is no doubt difficult—indeed, this should be reason enough not to conduct surveys like this one through social media platforms—there appears to have been no effort on the part of the Arab Social Media Report to achieve a random sample. Given the difficult circumstances of conducting surveys in politically unstable countries, it is not surprising that organizations like the Engine Room used snowball sampling to achieve a large sample. These organizations should be commended for their efforts; all empirical data is valuable in a discourse that has all too frequently been dominated by anecdotal evidence. However, more effort must be made towards collecting data through random sampling if researchers wish to produce findings that are statistically robust.

For data to be pertinent, they must effectively operationalize the variable in question. Too many academic papers on social media and politics use the number of Tweets bearing certain hashtags (\(^{#}\text{jan25}\) or \(^{#}\text{egypt}\), for example) as measures of the influence of social media activity on political events. A report by the Project on Information Technology & Political Islam (PITPI) at the University of Washington, for example, suggests that the sharp increase in the number of tweets bearing the hashtag \(^{#}\text{egypt}\) from outside the Middle East demonstrates that Twitter,

\[^{59}\text{“Civil Movements: The Impact of Facebook and Twitter,”}\text{ The Arab Social Media Report}\ 1, \text{No. 2 (May 2011), 6.}\]
“…was used to draw the international community into Egyptian events.” The increase in tweets bearing the hashtag #egypt indicates only that more Twitter users marked their posts with this hashtag; they reveal nothing about the content of the tweets in question. Though this may be a valid metric for measuring discussion of Egypt on Twitter, it is an inappropriate metric for measuring the engagement of the international community with events in Egypt. To a certain extent, it is understandable that scholars use figures like these to operationalize social media activity given the paucity of social media data available to the general public. But this does not excuse overstating the meaning of trends in certain indicators of social media activity. To keep analysis grounded in reality and germane to understanding political interactions, researchers should focus more on data collected from protesters—Tahrir Data Set A, for example—than data collected from social media websites like Facebook and Twitter.

Secondly, researchers must make a greater effort to pair qualitative analysis, which is scant in current studies of social media’s role in politics, with quantitative analysis, which abounds in these studies. This paper found that examining even a small sample of the content of social media communications reveals a great deal about the ways in which these media were used by protesters. The enormous volume of content should not deter researchers from examining it any more than the challenge of translation to fully understand it. Grounding one’s analysis only in quantitative data—as too many researchers are wont to do—can point to important trends. The aforementioned PITPI report, for example, finds that, “…a spike in online revolutionary conversations often preceded major events on the ground.” Without doing the qualitative analysis to understand what these “online revolutionary conversations” were actually discussing, however, it is impossible to advance a theory of what these spikes mean. While

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61 Ibid., 23.
valuable, stylized charts and glossy graphs mean little without diligent examination of the social media content they describe.

Thirdly, researchers must continue to think about the usage of social media in new and inventive ways. Much discussion of social media in Egypt has focused on how Facebook and Twitter lower the costs of coordinating protests, for example, but this paper finds that posts on the widely-viewed “Kulena Khalid Saeed” Facebook page were mostly motivational in tone. Indeed, the use of social media content to frame discussion of political issues, and thereby motivate and encourage protesters, has been overlooked in the many analyses of Facebook’s and Twitter’s role in events in Egypt. This speaks to a larger problem within the study of social media. This paper, like others preceding it, has used information cascades as the principal framework through which to understand the use of Facebook and Twitter in civil movements. This is at times an appropriate framework for understanding political interactions through social media—when looking at the percentage of media users that reported information relays, for example—but at other times—such as when explicating the content of social media communication—it is not been particularly elucidating. Rather than using the language of existing political science theory, new theoretical constructs must be developed to meet the challenges of studying new media like Facebook and Twitter. Protesters in Egypt were innovative in their use of these tools to help produce political change. As researchers studying this phenomenon, we should expect no less from ourselves.
APPENDIX

This appendix lists the original Arabic-language posts from “Kulena Khalid Saeed” Facebook page (URL: http://www.facebook.com/elshaeed) from between January 14 and February 11, 2011. Below each post is the date of the post, my translation of it into English, and the group into which I have categorized it according to the taxonomy described in Chapter 2. Yomna Sarhan and Samer Shehata also provided assistance with translation. I am grateful for their help.

Date: January 14, 2011

English Translation: “Today is the 15th... January 25 is Police Day, an official holiday...If 100,000 of us went to the streets no one can stand in our way...can we do it?”

Category: Coordination
Date: January 17, 2011

English Translation: Photos added to the album, “Revolution of the People of Egypt”

Category: Documentation (Photo)
Date: January 18, 2011

English Translation: “Asmaa Mahfouz...a girl much stronger and braver than 100 men...Thank you, Asmaa...You [readers] must hear her”

“Video title: I am going the 25th because of my dignity as an Egyptian woman
I ask you take hands, Egyptians, in order to restore our rights
Very important steps to gather on January 25”

Category: Coordination

Date: January 21, 2011

English Translation: “A joke: The Arab rulers are attending a meeting and think about opening a Facebook page in solidarity with one another, its title: We are all Zein al-Abideen bin Ali”

Category: Motivation

Date: January 24, 2011
English Translation: “Someone deciding that he is not going out tomorrow, sitting at his keyboard, continuously writing comments on the page that the Egyptian people are a cowardly people and will not go out…Like I said before there is a phenomenon in psychology called projection…You have a specific problem and because you feel no need to rebuke your conscience you justify to yourself that everyone has the same problem. But unfortunately, my friend…I am not a coward. I am going out on the 25th.”

Category: Motivation

Date: January 25, 2011

English Translation: “So that you know that there are real men in Egypt

Video title: Protester against tank”

Category: Documentation (Video) / Motivation
Date: January 26, 2011

English Translation: “An Egyptian youth being brave...Going on top of a tank and took down the criminal that was spraying water on thousands of peaceful demonstrators...These are real men...No one should keep saying the Egyptian people are cowards...I told you from the beginning that whoever says the Egyptian is a coward is sick with projection and justifies his cowardice by saying that everyone is like him”

Video title: Clashes between the Egyptian people and the police”

Category: Documentation (Video) / Motivation
اكتشفت امبارح إن مصر مليانة رحالة فعلا مش بيخافوا .. تخيل لما تبقى بطولك وتهاجم فوق الخمس عساكر أمن مركزي وافقين بعضهم ومتمردين غسان تفك الحصول عن الناس .. بجد راحل حر .. وتستاهل تدوق طعم الحرية

Date: January 26, 2011
English Translation: “I discovered yesterday that Egypt is full of men who are really not afraid… Imagine that with your abilities you attack five national security soldiers bearing clubs and armor in order to prevent them from reaching people… Seriously a free man… You deserve to taste the taste of freedom”

Category: Documentation (Picture) / Motivation

Date: January 26, 2011

English Translation: “In an hour… an invitation to “Friday of Rage” had more than 7000 people respond and it reached 200 thousand… I hope we all share with our friends and I hope we send SMS and Blackberry messages and over chat and we print papers calling everyone to demonstrate after Friday prayer and sit-in in the public squares”

Event title: Friday of Rage of the Revolution against Corruption, Injustice, Unemployment, and Torture
Friday, January 28, 2011 at 12:00am”

Category: Coordination
Date: January 26, 2011

English Translation: “The broadcaster Mahmud Saad refused to appear on the program Egypt Today because of his refusal to promote the lies against demonstrators”

Category: News
Date: January 26, 2011

English Translation: “They slow the Internet and block it...They take down Facebook or block Twitter...They cut underwater cables or cut home networks...We are all going out Friday after prayer...We will walk in processions in the streets all around Egypt...Clubs, tear gas canisters, and live and rubber bullets will not stop us...We have nothing left to lose, and we see hope...Any Egyptian who does not go out on Friday subjects himself, his sons, and the history of this great country to injustice

Event title: Friday of Rage of the Revolution against Corruption, Injustice, Unemployment, and Torture
Friday, January 28, 2011 at 12:00am”

Category: Coordination/Motivation
Date: January 26, 2011

English Translation: “We are all Khalid Saeed I swear by God that I will not announce my real name until the Egyptian people rise, until all of them have gone out and realized their dreams…I swear by God I do not want anything except our country to change and get better…I want you all to live honorably…This is a pledge from me to our Lord and to you…It is necessary for us all in this moment to be an Admin and forget false personal glory…We are making history”

Category: Motivation
Date: January 26, 2011

English Translation: “Peace to you Egypt…And peace, my country…If time/life shoots arrows at me…I will shield her with my heart…and be safe in all times [lyrics of song]”
Video posted: The old Egyptian national peace”

Category: Motivation

Date: January 27, 2011

English Translation: “Today is Khalid’s 29th birthday…Rest in peace, Khalid :-( :( :-( ”
English Translation: “A long time ago I was saying that we are the strongest and people made fun of me… Now if I said we are the strongest would you believe me or still make fun of me?”

Category: Motivation

Date: January 27, 2011

English Translation: “Shared link: Egypt users report major network disruptions”

Category: News
Date: January 27, 2011

English Translation: “Khalid was born January 27, 1982
That means he was 29 years old
The president has stayed 29 years (this year 30)
The celebration of Khalid’s birthday is a celebration of the end of Hosni Mubarak’s rule

Image text: January 28
Friday of Rage
Don’t break anything
Conscious Youth…Understanding youth
Peaceful Youth”

Category: Motivation

Date: January 31, 2011

English Translation: “I am going to Tahrir, I will not return before I take my rights, We will go because of our honor, our freedom, and our rights, We have to fight for them…I am prepared to die as a martyr for my rights…I am not retreating, my testament to you, Egypt…Egypt

Video title: Our people awaken – dedicated to the martyr Khalid Saeed”

Category: Motivation
Date: February 2, 2011

English Translation: “I am going to Tahrir and I will stay there the rest of the day”

Category: News

Date: February 7, 2011

English Translation: “Praise God…I returned… Believe me, I didn’t change…I love my country…and by God we will change her”

Category: Motivation
Date: February 8, 2011

English Translation: “I find a big difference between feeling the love of people on the Internet and the love of people in reality…God bless you all…Seriously the most important thing is that whoever sacrificed with his blood for his dream should not be told that there are a million Egyptians neglecting him”

Category: Motivation
Date: February 9, 2011

English Translation: “Tamer said in the video that shows him when he is crying: ‘I know that I might die today, but I am not upset at them, I don’t know what is happening exactly, people asked me to go out and say things and I didn’t understand.’

And Wael Ghonim wrote: ‘I ask you to say to the youth: Opposing Tamer Hosny is the biggest mistake, We are making each person want to reflect on himself and think a thousand times…Each person that joins benefits us

Video title: Video – Tamer Hosny crying: Not upset at those who attacked me in Tahrir Star Tamer Hosny broke out in tears, after a number of Tahrir Square demonstrators’ refused to receive him and accused of changing his views on the revolution. He stressed that he is not angry at demonstrators”
Date: February 9, 2011

English Translation: “We want all of Egypt to participate in the Friday of Martyrs... This day so the family of every martyr that died knows that their children did not die in vain... I hope that everyone goes to the event page and shares it with all Egyptians they know right now

Event Title: Friday of Martyrs
Friday, February 11, 2011 at 12:00am”

Category: Coordination / Motivation
Date: February 10, 2011

English Translation: “I swear to God Almighty that after realizing the dreams of the Egyptian youth I will withdraw completely from all political life and return to personal life as an ordinary Egyptian full of pride that the people of Egypt are awakened… I said it in June 2009 and I will say it again: I do not want anything but to walk in the street proud that I am Egyptian…and that any impoverished person is not beaten on the head and unable to say, ‘OW’”

Category: Motivation
Date: February 10, 2011

English Translation: “From Wael Ghonim on the page Kulena Khalid Saeed: I spoke four hours ago after the news about the end of the president after the speech and there was no statement from me either negative or positive concerning the speech until now. Because there are media attributing to me statements I did not say, including asking people to return home.

An important explanation to all youth: I spoke four hours ago after the news about the end of the president after the speech and there was no statement from me either negative or positive concerning the speech until now. Because there are media attributing to me statements I did not say, including asking people to return home [citing Wael Ghonim].”

Category: News
Date: February 10, 2011

English Translation: “I am doing an opinion poll now on the opinion of youth about political gains and on continuing the sit-in…and I want everyone to participate because in the end, as we did everything in agreement with each other, it is necessary to continue in the same manner”

Category: Motivation

Date: February 10, 2011

English Translation: “O lord you are most knowledgeable of our intentions and that we want our rights and our freedoms…O Lord inspire us to reason and strengthen the resolve of every one of us”

Category: Motivation
Date: February 11, 2011

English Translation: “I just found out that the Egyptian hero General Saad al-Din al-Shazali passed away yesterday…Rest in peace, hero of the October War and Chief of Staff of Army during the war…General Saad was persecuted under the Mubarak regime and was imprisoned for an entire year despite that the court ordered his immediate release”

Category: News
Date: February 11, 2011

English Translation: “The Army’s tribute to the martyrs of the Egyptian revolution”

Category: Motivation
Date: February 11, 2011

English Translation: “May God have mercy on the martyrs of the revolution for they are its true heroes and only today were their rights restored”

Category: Motivation
Date: February 11, 2011

English Translation: “Khalid: From ‘immortality’…Saeed: from ‘happiness’…Khalid Saeed: means Khalid is happy on the Day of Judgment…Khalid Saeed, now I can say to you: We restored your right to you, my dear friend…And I say to Aunt Leila, his mother: Raise your head high, mother of Egyptians, because your son is the spark that caused all Egypt to liberate itself

Picture caption: Martyr of Egypt, Khalid Saeed”

Category: Motivation
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