Financial Sustainability and the Demise of the Egyptian Blogosphere

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Abstract

Alternative media platforms in general and social media and bloggers in particular have had great impact on pushing media agendas, breaking barriers, and discussing issues that were previously ignored by mainstream media. People have found social media and blogs to be platforms for dissidence in a limited media environment. But bloggers who were once alternative voices presenting nonmainstream coverage and analysis of events and enjoying more freedom than traditional journalists are increasingly disappearing from the blogging and microblogging scenes and moving to mainstream platforms due to lack of congregated blogs, financial backing, and advertising. This article aims to look at how the lack of a viable financial model to support blogs and microblogs is resulting in the demise of the Egyptian blogosphere. This article then looks at financial sustainability of bloggers through the comparative analysis of and interviews with popular blogs and social media users in Egypt.

Keywords: Blogs, Online Activism, Egypt, Microblogging, Arab Spring, January 25

Political blogs have long been studied for their potential for democratization in the Arab world and the plurality they add to public discourse. But what were once the most popular political blogs in Egypt have now become largely inactive. Key political bloggers who were faces of the Egyptian uprising in 2011 either have now adopted the shorter form of blogging on social media platforms, like Twitter, or have been recruited by mainstream media, abandoning their blogs. This research studies this shift away from blogging, discussing the key question of financial sustainability and how some romanticized views of political blogging might have contributed to the demise of the Egyptian blogosphere to be replaced by social media, which is marked by shallower discourse than that posted on blogs. This and the column writer in mainstream media inevitably affect the freedom and plurality of the discourse in Egypt.

Although blogging encompasses microblogging on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, for the purpose of this study, blogging refers to the earlier form of long-form blogging. Early blogger Rebecca Blood² defines a blog as a “website that is updated frequently, with new material posted at the top of the page.” A microblog, like a blog, is updated frequently and offers users a platform to express their unedited views, but the posts are shorter than blogs, for example, Twitter.

When studying the demise of the blogosphere, this research looks at several elements. The first, and most encompassing, is how the lack of financial sustainability led to fewer posts or abandoning blogging. It also looks at whether the inclusion of some prominent bloggers into mainstream media affects their status as counterhegemonic³ elements that can challenge the status quo and sources of authority. Finally, it examines how the move to social media affects the quality and plurality of online discourse.

This study concludes that political blogging was not economically viable in an authoritarian setting like Egypt's. This, along with other factors, led to some bloggers transitioning to the more restrictive mainstream media, which resulted in less plurality and mellowed voices. Other bloggers resorted to blogging on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, which resulted in a simplified, shorter, and shallower discourse. This shift beyond their bloggers' identities resulted in a significant decrease in the frequency of posting that led to an inactive blogosphere.

Background on Bloggers Before and After 2011

From 2006 and well into the Arab Spring, bloggers were sources of objective and open coverage of events and an alternative platform for dissident voices. Before 2011, however, political bloggers remained on the dissident margins, read by the educated elite who had access to the internet. The January 25 uprising in 2011, overthrowing the Mubarak regime that ruled for over thirty years, marked a turning point in political blogging as bloggers became trusted news and opinion sources on current affairs for a wider audience after State print and broadcast media lost their credibility for their biased coverage. Bloggers were live-tweeting the revolution, and even became sources for the media to quote on current affairs and controversial topics in politics, thus becoming faces of the revolution and the center of news.

They were, therefore, taken into the mainstream media spotlight, turning from underground writers to public figures whose roles in the uprising were often celebrated and whose bylines were often sought by mainstream media to give it revolutionary credit. The private sector also started inviting them to their product launches to gain prominence and validation on platforms where those bloggers were popular: blogs and social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. These bloggers had a chance to generate revenue through posting advertisements on their popular blogs or transferring their skills and trusted bylines to the mainstream press.

The Importance of Studying Financial Sustainability of Blogs

In the beginning of this study, bloggers interviewed did not fully grasp why this research looked at the financial aspects of blogging, as they were largely used to reflecting on their role in the democratic process and viewed the activity as one aimed at social mobilization and raising awareness. However, as they started reflecting on why they had abandoned blogging, they realized how failing to consider the financial sustainability of an activity they viewed idealistically might have led to its demise.

Bloggers opting against finding a revenue stream to sustain their blog, or not being presented with the opportunity to generate one, has led them to become unable to maintain frequent posting. This then threatened the existence of bloggers as drivers of change and led them to shift to mainstream media or social media. Potential means of financial sustainability, including advertising or transferring skills onto mainstream media, poses several questions for neutralizing the once plural and freer sphere.

Blogs in the Historical Context of Dissident Media

It is important to put the study of the internet in a historical context because, like other media platforms, it can and was commercialized, mainstreamed, and neutralized through consensus of the free market dynamics, and not necessarily coercion as the literature on Arab bloggers suggests. For example, if we look at the history of labor press,⁴ we can trace a similar story—while State crackdowns were ineffective in censoring labor newspapers, free market dynamics ultimately led to the labor press demise in light of their failure to attract advertisers or achieve other sustainable financial models as advertisers favored capitalist-oriented newspapers. This research concluded that in Egypt consent was achieved through co-opting bloggers into the mainstream after coercion failed and further angered their communities, as interviews indicated.

Financial Sustainability of Blogs in the International Context

There is also an international trend toward the shorter, quicker, and often simpler form of social media, and the blogs that survived are those offering aggregated content from diverse bloggers. As this research shows, Egypt is the same in terms of the move away from blogging and toward social media. It is different, however, in that Egyptian political bloggers were not able to form aggregated blogs or collaborate to survive the shift to social media. There has been no interest, as interviews show, from advertisers to sponsor political blogs, including aggregated ones, with strong voices as has been the case in the United States.

The Economics of Blogging

Several media scholars and political economists started looking into the motivations behind free digital labor and users contributing to online platforms without expecting payment.

However, when considering the different motivations for digital labor, we need to differentiate between occasional blogging, either long-form or on platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, and the prolific bloggers. The social media user may not need to consider the financial sustainability of an activity they view as leisure, without concerns for frequency, consistency, or quality of their posts. More prolific bloggers, including the political bloggers studied here, invest more time and effort online than the normal user. They engage with other prolific bloggers online; they research and spend time and effort organizing and producing their online contributions and are often consistent in the frequency of their posts. Therefore, sustaining the zeal they held prior and shortly after 2011 may not be feasible without rendering it financially sustainable.

Beyond the Psychological Gratification of Occasional Blogging

Scholars like Benkler,⁵ for instance, theorize that users' contribution to the online sphere is primarily based on social and psychological motivations, as opposed to financial ones. Similarly, Ross⁶ argues that companies like Facebook and YouTube have built their business models on users' free, uncompensated content generation but that the users often are satisfied with social recognition and self-realization rather than monetary payment.

Although the primary motivation for political blogging might be affecting change, we cannot ignore the commercial aspects of online content that media platforms have exploited to generate revenue off users' free contributions. Lowry,⁷ for instance, explains that scholars often ignore the profit angle of the virtual sphere. Dedicating one's time to a cause without financial sustainability can be a question of political activism only, driven by a motivation for change and societal development. But putting it in that context alone would fail to acknowledge that blogs are a media platform that could be profitable. It would also fail to acknowledge that the skills of bloggers could be transferred to mainstream media as columns to mainstream newspapers. Therefore, even if not primarily driven by a financial motivation, there is great potential for monetization that goes beyond social and psychological gratification, and that might be essential for sustaining prolific bloggers.

Hope Labor in the Political Blogging Context

Kuehn and Corrigan's⁸ interviews with sports bloggers and Yelp reviewers concluded that self-realization is not the most important motivation for free digital labor. Instead, the interviewees "identified a recurring, secondary motivation: that their work would lead to personally satisfying future employment opportunities." They dub this as "hope labor" or an "un- or under-compensated work carried out in the present, often for experience or exposure, in the hope that future employment opportunities may follow." It is important to note, however, that political blogging, especially at a time of change like that of 2011, is different to sports blogging or reviews.

Kuehn and Corrigan's notion of hope labor argues that bloggers and microbloggers consciously produce content in the hope of job opportunities. While this research concluded that some "celebrity" bloggers interviewed were recruited in mainstream media, they have not reported this as a conscious effort.

Perhaps it was the bloggers' lack of interest in monetary payment (or in future job prospects leading to financial compensation) that all bloggers interviewed reported a significant decrease in online activity, be it on their blogs or on Twitter and Facebook.

Given the political and social context at the time, all bloggers interviewed viewed their online content production as solely political activism in the process toward democratization. Maha Taki's⁹ research on Lebanese bloggers, who blogged in comparable political circumstances, shows similar results to the findings of this research. Bloggers she interviewed reported the need to be heard and get others to read them as the motive for investing time and effort in blogging.

The Cost of Blogging

While some blogs are backed by political parties and organizations, including Muslim Brotherhood bloggers, most prominent liberal, secular leftist, and democratic bloggers in Egypt are independent of any funding or resources provided by political powers. However, they incur the same costs of blogging. Goldberg¹⁰ discusses the economic dynamic between internet users and networking services in new media scholarship, which assumes transmission of data online is free or too cheap to matter or gage. But that notion is flawed in the context of a developing country like Egypt where most of the population live under the poverty line. Therefore, while more affordable in terms of tools of production than conventional media, blogging still bears costs like high-speed internet access and smartphones with internet plans and free time, and is only affordable to certain classes, but not all members of the lower and middle classes. In addition, if blogging is conducted as a part-time hobby, bloggers can afford the time spent. However, if it takes up more time than they can spend after working hours, then the question of making it a viable activity to maintain the frequency of posting is posited. Calhoun¹¹ argues, "A public sphere adequate to a democratic polity depends upon both quality of discourse and quantity of participation."

Blogs as Organizations Rather Than Drivers of Democracy

With the perceived role social media and bloggers played in the Egyptian and Tunisian uprisings—and before that in the 2009 Iranian protests dubbed the Twitter Revolution—came a body of literature discussing the role of social media in public mobilization, political and civil advocacy, and the democratization process. An example of these works is Ghazal Saif's research on "Keyboards Fight Tanks" where she studies the antiauthoritarian discourse in Egyptian blogs.¹² Rasha Abdulla has also written about the role the media, including online media, played during Egypt's democratic transition,¹³ followed by a research paper mapping the digital media in Egypt in 2013.¹⁴ Marc Lynch,¹⁵ Courtney Radsch,¹⁶ and Etling et al.¹⁷ have discussed the emergence and mapping of the Arab blogosphere. There have also been a limited number of studies on the quality of discourse in the Egyptian blogosphere. El-Nawawy and Khamis have analyzed the quality of discourse in the blogosphere in 2011 and 2014.¹⁸

Instead of considering bloggers and microbloggers solely as drivers of democratic change or the internet as an exclusive sphere, I look at social media makers and bloggers as micro-organizations that need certain conditions granted to achieve sustainability, including financial sustainability. I am hence considering the blogosphere as a formerly counterpublic¹⁹ and alternative sphere created from counterhegemonic elements of previously marginalized voices, which is potentially becoming part of the historical bloc to achieve sustainability (both financial and career). Subsequently, I consider how this affects the plurality the online sphere adds to public discourse. Fraser (see Note 18) proposes a postindustrial model of counterpublics that form outside propertied public spheres. She proposed multiple public spheres that are not as powerful, articulated, or privileged as the dominant sphere of debate, but that exist to give voice to those excluded. Bloggers could be viewed as a counterpublic that formed after being excluded from mainstream media and so resorted to blogs, which were free to access. These blogs were not necessarily as widely viewed as mainstream media, nor did they have the same effect, nor was the discussion often as structured or followed the same formal rules as that on mainstream media. I take a circumstantial approach to studying the blogosphere and microblogs; I study the blogosphere like any other media platform that can theoretically drive change given the appropriate circumstances. This means positing that the blogosphere and social media are not free from State or economic control, but their success lies in how the makers of that sphere respond to those pressures.

From an organizational viewpoint, bloggers can be considered multisided platforms, which Osterwalder and Pigneur²⁰ define as serving two or more interdependent customer segments—advertisers who finance production and distribution and readers who attract advertisers. This means that there are several revenue options available for bloggers and microbloggers, namely funding from sponsorship, different forms of advertisements, and personal revenues through selling their expertise by syndicating content to or joining mainstream media. However, any revenue stream adopted poses several questions about how it affects the online discourse.

Method

This study is based on the study of twelve blogs and qualitative in-depth interviews with their twelve authors. The study looks at blog posts before and after January 25, 2011, to monitor the change in the frequency of posts as well as the existence or lack of a revenue stream and how it affects the length and frequency of posts in six prominent blogs and six less prominent ones.

Bloggers' prominence and nonprominence were determined on their social media popularity, with a threshold of hundred thousand followers. The six prominent bloggers are Asmaa Mahfouz, Esraa Abdel Fattah, Amr Ezzat, Mostafa El Naggar, Loai Nagati, and Mahmoud Salem, better known as *Sandmonkey*. The less prominent bloggers are Ahmed Badawy, Ali Hisham, Mahmoud Saber, Mohamed Abo-elgheit, Bassem Fathy, and Mohamed El Sherief.

The interviews with the bloggers aim to determine the changes they have lived between 2011 and 2014, the difficulties they perceive as bloggers, how sustainable they perceive their activity is, as well as how conscious or unconscious they are of revenue generation possibilities

and how all of this compares between the two categories of bloggers. The filtering criteria I used for choosing those bloggers are that they should be blogging or tweeting on current affairs in Egypt, excluding party-backed bloggers. They should also have maintained a blog before January 25, 2011.

Three marketers in the private sector were also interviewed to assess the market viability of blogging and microblogging. They are, namely, Mohamed El Mehairy, managing director of the leading online advertisement agency, Connect Ads; Noha El Sherbiny, group project manager at L'Oreal; and Sondos Effat, account director at FP7 Cairo, a leading advertising agency.

Findings

The findings point to three core observations:

1. Political blogging has not been economically viable in an authoritarian country like Egypt.
2. There is a marked loss of counterhegemonic content as bloggers shift to mainstream spaces.
3. With bloggers shifting or evolving identities, often to join mainstream media, or with their inability to make it financially viable enough to find time for it, there has been a significant decrease in the frequency of posting.

The Failure or Unwillingness to Monetize Blogs

Although the online advertisers interviewed said the market has been expanding in the years following the 2011 revolution, this has not trickled down to political bloggers. Most bloggers never considered monetizing their blogs, although none of them objected to the concept. The main reasons behind this is that their content was too opinionated to attract advertisers, they viewed it romantically as a platform for free expression and did not want the financial pressures associated with advertisers, or they were unaware of the means to monetize their blogs.

A platform for mobilization, activism, and self-expression.

Among the twelve bloggers interviewed, only Mahfouz, Sandmonkey, Nagati, and Badawy considered monetization, but only Sandmonkey has advertisements on his blogs. Sandmonkey used his blog to crowdfund for equipment he needed to report; he would ask the readers to contribute toward a digital camera and the following day would find “\$1,000 and two cameras sent.”²¹ His readers donated the money, Sandmonkey assumed, because they wanted him to go out and report for them, and he felt a sense of engagement and civil action. Despite believing his readers would pay to help him report and analyze the events, he never considered it a money-making platform and believed money would come from other sources. Similarly, all bloggers interviewed said they did not think blogs were financially rewarding. Nagati, for instance, said he could not be successful in monetizing the satirical blog he founded because he believed the market was small and because he criticized situations and people, which might cause an issue with advertisers.

Others, however, viewed blogs as their personal space, and the thought of monetizing them was never considered. El Naggar, for instance, viewed his blog as a way to express himself and work toward human rights and political reform. He therefore worked as a dentist to be able to blog freely without financial pressures from entities wanting to shape him into certain molds. Ezzat also felt his blog was a space to express himself freely and said he was inconsistent in the frequency and topics of his posts, and therefore monetizing his blog would put pressure on him to fulfill his responsibility toward the readers and advertisers. Similarly, Saber said, “I write whenever I feel like it.”²²

Reluctance from advertisers.

However, interviews with marketers have shown that even if bloggers had attempted to generate revenue from their blogs, they could not succeed without compromising their voices and directions to be less controversial and mellower. All three marketing experts interviewed said that while they had seen a big increase in online advertising, this did not apply to political bloggers. Connect Ads’ El Mehairy said that in the three years after the revolution, the online advertisement market had escalated. El Sherbiny of L’Oreal said 20 percent of her marketing budget was online and she was interested to promote her brands among bloggers. Effat of FP7 Cairo said that while advertisers were spending around 1 percent of their budgets online before January 25, they were now spending around 7 percent: “This is a huge figure in terms of volume given the difference in prices between digital and traditional advertising.”²³ She added that online advertisements reached the major segment of consumers in Egypt—the youth. El Mehairy, however, said that while most companies dedicated increasing chunks of their marketing budgets to online, they all shied away from association with political bloggers. He added that brands did not want to be associated with one side over the other, and political bloggers often represented a side of the argument, which alienated those disagreeing with opinions expressed. El Mehairy also considered the language used by some political bloggers as a major factor alienating advertisers who did not want their brands associated with profanities or extreme language. El Sherbiny also said she would not advertise with political bloggers because she would not want her brands to be associated with anyone whose content might alienate a portion of society, which was the case with political bloggers who voiced strong opinions. Effat agreed, “Most brands in Egypt are avoiding political connotations, so they wouldn’t go for bloggers or opinion leaders focused on politics” (see Note 22).

Shifting to Mainstream Media

Another way of monetizing blogging is for bloggers to transfer their skills and now-in-demand bylines to mainstream media. This revenue stream seemed the most attractive to bloggers interviewed as they said mainstream media gave them a wider audience base and a more prestigious career. This, however, was associated with much less online activity and a moderated voice for those who adopted this revenue stream. Others who had been unable or unwilling to join mainstream media were unable to continue with the same rate of activity online as they tried to find sources of income elsewhere.

It is worth noting that although the shift to mainstream media could have resulted in more plurality on mainstream platforms, in the Egyptian context—one that is markedly

authoritative and where the media is often pressured and controlled to varying degrees—the plurality those bloggers added was limited. Bloggers who opted to write for mainstream media reported that they had to moderate their voices to fit the new platform's rules and restrictions on freedom of speech. This did not mean that they sacrificed their opinions, but were more cautious in what they could say. In addition to abiding by the mainstream media's guidelines on what they could say, they practiced self-censorship as they feared for their own security as more exposure on mainstream platforms led to more scrutiny from State apparatus. Sandmonkey, for instance, felt more restricted on mainstream media, saying, "I was freer before the revolution" (see Note 23).

The research showed that seven of the twelve bloggers interviewed were collaborating with mainstream media, either through writing columns or through working on social media. Sandmonkey contributed to popular mainstream media outlets like *Daily News Egypt* online and print newspaper through writing opinion columns: "There is a difference between being in your twenties and being in your thirties. . . . It has to do with business and your financial situation."²⁴ As he grew older, Sandmonkey started feeling that he needed a stable and financially rewarding career. He then started to shift away from investing long hours in preparing and writing frequent blog posts, and toward investing his time in more financially rewarding activities like writing for online and print newspapers as well as launching a private media business, helping companies with their online activities and social media platforms. His writings in popular newspapers have given him the wider reach and financial reward that his blog lacked.

Their new capacities as writers for newspapers and online publications often conflict with those of blogging. Therefore, what they can write on their own blogs often conflicts what they want to save for paid publication on newspapers. Sandmonkey and El Naggar, for instance, transferred the material previously written in their blogs to their newspaper columns. Sandmonkey feels it is unethical to drive traffic to his blog instead of the newspaper that pays him for this content, and therefore reserves most of his writing for his newspaper column and social media activities to promote this column.

Prominence and opportunities presented.

While prominent bloggers such as Abdel Fattah, Ezzat, El Naggar, and Sandmonkey made their way to mainstream in the leading newspapers in Egypt like the *Daily News Egypt*, *Al-Shorouk*, *Youm7*, and *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, the less prominent bloggers were either unable to do so or had joined mainstream media in less prestigious positions. The less prominent ones were also able to gain editorial space but in less popular or less prestigious newspapers with smaller circulations than those of *Al-Shorouk* and similar ones or on less popular online portals. Hisham, for instance, was rejected by several publications he approached. Hence, while Abdel Fattah became a columnist and a social media consultant for the popular *Youm7* newspaper, Abo-elgheit became a television producer. While Ezzat and El Naggar were offered one of the few exclusive editorial spaces in *Al-Shorouk*, Abo-elgheit was one of many reporters who eventually succeeded in writing opinion pieces in the paper.

Rejecting mainstream media's pressures.

Other less prominent bloggers missed opportunities in mainstream media or refused to yield to the pressures of the mainstream. They showed a more emotive approach compared with

the practical approach that prominent bloggers adopted with their writings. El Naggar, like several other prominent bloggers who made it into mainstream newspapers, believed he could be flexible in his writing to be able to publish and gain the most readers instead of abstaining and not been heard.

Hence, while El Naggar and others said they were aware of the limitations of mainstream media and often tweaked their content to fit it without forsaking the integrity of their opinions, less prominent bloggers felt strongly against tweaking or toning down content. Fathy, Saber, and Badawy expressed frustration with mainstream media's demands on writing. "I don't like imposing censorship on myself or changing my style. . . . this is probably why I am not successful at this [publishing in mainstream.]"²⁵ Saber also said he could not tailor his style to fit mainstream: "I write how I speak. I can write in classical Arabic, but it's not really me" (see Note 24). Therefore, while he can write in colloquial Arabic on his blog and use whatever voice and format he desires, Saber did not want to change his voice and style of writing to suit the more formal newspapers, which require classical Arabic—a less personal voice with more rules than blogs. Nagati also opted out from joining mainstream because he believes he cannot be objective and adhere to the editorial styles and directions or compromise his writing to match the publication's own restrictions. Similarly, Fathy refused to accept those restrictions and left *Al-Masry Al-Youm* after he was banned to write about an issue.

Appealing to the masses and adapting to narrower freedom ceilings.

All bloggers interviewed realize mainstream media are more restrictive than social media and blogs because they follow more rules and certain editorial guidelines and style, and are subjected to censorship that do not apply to blogs. They are also more conscious to adapt their writings to fit the publication's large audience who are less elite and more diverse.

Some bloggers have been censored in that they were asked to either publish the article on the newspaper's online edition only or tone down their voice. The most prominent ones who continued to write for mainstream media agreed to those terms in the belief it was best to reach the audience, even in a subtler way, than not to reach them at all. For example, Ezzat had issues with *Al-Masry Al-Youm* when they changed a sentence in his column for being too strong to publish. Abdel Fattah and Ezzat could publish an article in the online version of the newspaper but not in print as the online ceiling of freedom was higher than that of the print editions. Some bloggers were banned from writing for certain newspapers, like Abdel Fattah who was stopped from writing for *Al-Masry Al-Youm*.

Someone like Abo-elgheit realizes the pressures of mainstream but chooses to stay in it because it gives him a wider reach, especially with those who may disagree with his political directions, and therefore he tones down his voice to reach them:

I tend to tone it down a bit. I can't tell people "you're slaves" even if I believe that . . . I can't insult them if I want them to listen to me. . . . Even though there are pressures [from mainstream publications], we [voices of opposition] are adamant to maintain our positions in mainstream because it reaches a larger number of people and I, personally, feel a responsibility to deliver my voice to the people.²⁶

Abo-elgheit explained that he now made a conscious effort to write articles that would be read, liked, and shared on social media by the masses, regardless of their backgrounds. This

conscious mass-writing style was not one he used before writing for mainstream. He simplified and shortened his articles when he moved from writing to the “elite” as he called them onto the mainstream: “I now know that when I write in a certain way it will bring more people and readership and what buttons will resonate more with people.” Ezzat adopted a similar style. He recognized that each platform he wrote for had a different audience to the others and customized his writing to the readers of each. The complexity, voice, and persona he had differed with each audience.

Reflection and discussion.

Bloggers’ move to mainstream means that the once counterpublic of the online sphere is no longer independent from the State and economy—an aspect comprising a powerful public sphere. The switch to mainstream media led them to blogging far less as well as altering and toning down their voice online as they were subject to more scrutiny due to their growing prominence and bigger audience. Abdel Fattah agrees, saying, “You can use your account to mobilize masses; you can’t do that in a column.”²⁷ The wider audience base and the financial rewards achieved from mainstream meant sacrificing a key advantage the blogosphere provided—complete autonomy over content. Half of the bloggers interviewed stressed that they felt the pressures of being in the mainstream sphere. These findings resonated with Morozov’s theory that the internet was not emancipatory in nature²⁸ and Papacharissi’s argument that online discourse was an “orchestrated performance with the other in mind.”²⁹

Although bloggers do not directly monetize their blogs, this does not negate the effects of commercializing online space that dystopian theories of the internet warn about. The move into mainstream then eliminates a merit that authors like Beacham³⁰ and others argued about the internet—its freedom from government and corporate constraints. Even though the blogs themselves are not monetized, the bloggers have still capitalized on their online popularity and commercialized not their spaces but their status and fame. Hence, while they may not post an ad on their blog that will subject them to pressures of the media economics, they are still influenced by the political economy of the media as they join mainstream media and need to alter their content on social media platforms and blogs accordingly. Herman and Chomsky argue that market dynamics, media economics, and availability of sources lead to self-censorship in favor of the State.³¹ As Golding and Murdock argue, “The premium prices are commanded by shows that can attract and hold the greatest number of viewers.”³² This side effect of commercializing bloggers is evident in bloggers who collaborate with mainstream media to reach the most readers and alter their content to achieve that. The counterpublic now indirectly intertwines with the mainstream as a spillover effect of the main players in the counterpublic joining the mainstream. This fusion brings this counterpublic into the mainstream media spotlight as well as the State, leading to bloggers and microbloggers becoming more subject to authorities and to various crackdowns. In fact, seven of the twelve bloggers interviewed have faced court at some point, and four of those cases were prominent.

Blogs have started losing what defined them as blogs in the beginning; “It’s updated regularly. . . . It doesn’t patronize the end user, dumbing things down too much”.³³

Blogging is free: When you write a blog entry, it’s your personal space and you can write whatever you want, and you’re not tied to the rules of writing. . . . you write whatever is on your mind. But

when you're writing an article, you're tied to a certain image the reader has for you and the standard of writing you do so you can't write everything. Also, my work in politics made my writing more disciplined than before because anything I write can be used against me and can add or subtract from my credit with people. Writing in newspapers in general is one restriction but writing when you're politically engaged is another restriction as well. One article can make a difference.³⁴

Inactive Blogosphere

The findings from the study of the blogs point to a demise of the Egyptian blogosphere to make way for mainstream media and social media. The findings from the study of blogs and the interviews with bloggers have shown that four factors led to bloggers drastically reducing their activity on their blogs. These factors are the changing political climate in Egypt: bloggers' failure to make blogging financially sustainable, the founding generation of bloggers growing older and more career-oriented, and social media replacing blogs. In fact, seven of the twelve blogs studied were inactive by 2015, going down from posting as much as 168 times a year to nothing. The other five active blogs only posted once or twice over the year.

Study of Blogs: Number of Blog Posts by Year.

Blogger	2015	2014	2013	2012	2011	2010	2009	2008	2007	2006	2005
Loai Nagati	0	0	0	0	2	10					
Sandmonkey	2	1	4	43	28	8	0	345	444	7	
Mostafa El Naggat	0	3	0	0	0	35	31	320	15		
Asmaa Mahfouz	0	0	0	2	12	11	26				
Amr Ezzat	0	0	39	44	26	23	24	54	53	69	32
Mohamed Abo-elgheit	0	0	0	2	9	15					
Ahmed Badawy	7	54	88	130	106	186	168	125	30	32	
Bassem Fathy	0	1	4	10	17	27					
Ali Hisham	1	8	21	33	43						
Mohamed El Sherief	0	0	2	11	9	8	37				

The above table indicates that bloggers were most active before 2011. After 2011, the number of posts fell for all the blogs studied. By 2014, half of the blogs studied were inactive and two of them had only one post per year. By March 2015, only three of the ten bloggers studied were posting. Of the six prominent blogs studied, only one blog was still active in 2015 (that of Sandmonkey) compared with two of the six less prominent ones. Hence, while the

frequency of blogging is dwindling across both prominent and less prominent bloggers, the trend seems stronger among more prominent bloggers. This may be because they have more outlets to express themselves, including through mainstream media, than less prominent bloggers.

It is apparent from the above table that blog posts fell from sixty-three in the month studied in 2010 to fourteen in the month studied in 2011 across all blogs, which is consistent with the finding from the number of posts over the years.

Failure to monetize blogs.

Although bloggers' reluctance or inability to make their blogging financially viable and to take it from a time-consuming hobby into a revenue- and status-yielding, sustainable career was a major element in the blogosphere's demise, the political climate of the country and the loss of revolutionary momentum were also key factors. Many bloggers expressed despair over the situation in Egypt post-January 25 that led them to abandon blogging. However, those feelings only kept the more prominent ones from writing online. They continued writing in mainstream media because they felt a sense of obligation to the newspaper or website that employed them. This indicates that while bloggers view their blog as a personal space and attach more sentiment to it, mainstream writing is more of an obligation or responsibility that cannot be subject to personal feelings.

Developing new more lucrative or prestigious identities.

With blogging remaining largely a hobby and bloggers never considering or failing to turn it into a revenue-generating profession, the founding generation of bloggers have expressed that they were growing older and thus more focused on their professional lives. This led them to develop identities other than bloggers as they assumed new responsibilities. Those whose identities were forged as bloggers pursued careers in mainstream media, politics, or civil work. As both interviews and their own description on their Facebook and Twitter accounts show, most of those who used to identify themselves as bloggers now identify more with other identities like journalists and social media consultants, as with Abdel Fattah, Abo-elgheit, and Nagati. A blogger like El Naggar went from an alternative voice of opposition to a party founder, a parliament member, and now a public figure.

Ezzat explained that his identity as a blogger gave way to new ones like researcher, journalist, and activist to the point that he started refusing to be hosted as a blogger because he felt it was overdone and it was only one aspect of his identity that was no longer significant now that everyone became a microblogger. Similarly, El Naggar said his situation was different because he was not an activist "sitting all day on Twitter insulting people and so on,"³⁵ which shows that he believes his status as a columnist and parliamentary member is more significant than his role as an online activist.

Fathy explained that although he could afford to be active and get arrested when he was younger, this was no longer a lifestyle he wanted to live: "I was okay with losing an opportunity and leaving a job I have and not attending a job interview and so on; at a certain age it is nice and all. But after this age it becomes difficult." He adds that as they age, "we need to serve ourselves."³⁶

The switch to social media.

All bloggers interviewed agreed that while they might not be active on their blogs, they were still active on Facebook, Twitter, or both. Social media posts are typically shorter and take less time to produce, which better suits the bloggers' lifestyles.

Bloggers' move to social media or mainstream has significant consequences on the nature of their content. Social media offers an easier interface than blogs, but has limited archives. Unlike blogs, it is not searchable on search engines and there is no way to gage the traffic on a certain post. All this means that social media is not as easy to monetize as blogs. All bloggers interviewed agree that the quality of their writing on social media is vastly different from that on their blogs. While blog posts required thinking and time invested to research, reflect on, structure, and write a post, bloggers say their posts on social media are quicker, shorter, and less in-depth. This has a significant impact on the quality of discourse on social media compared with that on blogs. Bloggers say they feel freer on their blogs than they do on social media where their families, acquaintances, and friends reside. However, bloggers agree that they often need to dilute their content to fit a wider, more diverse audience than that of a blog.

The switch to social media is not restricted to Egypt as studies, including one done by Neiman Lab in December 2014, show a similar move in the United States. Veteran blogger Jason Kottke predicted the death of blogs as online users adopted social media platforms. He said that 30 percent of traffic to his website came from social media and that marketers were urging him to promote their products on social media channels rather than his blog.³⁷ Pew Research Center indicated in 2010 that the number of teenagers working on their own blogs had halved since 2006, whereas the rate of blogging among adults aged 30 and above increased from 11 percent in 2008 to 14 percent in 2010. In the Egyptian context, those bloggers who constituted most of the blogosphere were adults who then grew more interested in their careers than in blogging. Nielsen, a market research company, also found that while traffic to blog hosting sites like Blogger and WordPress stagnated in 2009, traffic to Facebook grew by 66 percent and to Twitter by 57 percent. The data support the findings from this research, indicating that the bloggers themselves moved to microblogging platforms. Others argued, however, that blogs were not dying but morphed into mature parts of the publishing ecosystems and social networks.³⁸ Kabadayi argued that the loss of casual bloggers had *shaken things out*, with more committed and skilled writers "sticking it out." Kabadayi argued that the decreasing number of active blogs was improving the quality of the blogosphere. Kabadayi said this created an opportunity for bloggers to monetize their blogs and gain advertising revenue they were unable to access before.³⁹ Leading blogger Andrew Sullivan agreed with Kabadayi, arguing that blogs were not dead but had rather evolved into a diverse organism with many contributors.

However, the situation in Egypt is not exactly comparable with that in the United States or Europe. Although it is true that the abundance of blogs around in 2007 has decreased worldwide in favor of the rising popularity of social media, other aspects of this trend have not been replicated in Egypt except for a few blogs. In Egypt, instead of publishers adopting blogs and providing content aggregation platforms for leading bloggers, they have recruited

them to work on their own platforms. There has been no interest from advertisers in bloggers and it is false that the leading bloggers providing quality content are those who survived because they turned to mainstream media, as this research indicates. It remains to be seen whether the blogosphere in Egypt will evolve the same way it has in the United States and Europe. However, unless bloggers move back to their blogging platforms, or a new wave of bloggers replaces them and finds more sustainable models, there is little indication that blogs in Egypt will evolve the same as in the United States and Europe. It is worth noting that younger generations of bloggers seem to maintain a more active presence on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and Snapchat, but are not interested in the long-form writing of blogging. However, travel, fashion, fitness, and beauty bloggers have been able to generate revenues through sponsorships, paid content, and advertisements on mainstream—all options that were not available to political bloggers.

Reflection and discussion.

Their new identities and focus on their careers left bloggers far less time and energy to write online, as seen from the study of blogs and the interviews. Mainstream media provided them with sustainable revenues and a wider reach that the blogs could not achieve without significant time and financial investment to make them appeal, as well as market them, to a wider audience. One can see that the frequency of the blog posts started falling around the same time bloggers started new careers.

For example, El Naggar stopped blogging when he became more active on the ground and joined, then led, the Baradei Presidential Campaign. He said this left him no time to write as it was a period of political momentum. Ezzat said,

I like the blogs' style of writing and want to go back to it but practically, during the past period, my time became very tight because it was all spent fulfilling my duties to newspapers. This affects blogging a lot; writing for *Al-Masry Al-Youm* and other, the audience base is very wide and so since I started in 2011, my articles had a lot of interaction and attention so it took a lot of my time.

El Naggar believes blogging was a phase that a certain generation that is now in their thirties went through together to form an alternative sphere and practice public work. But that this phase, and thus blogging, has ended as this generation moved onto the mainstream sphere. This view is significant as it shows the bloggers are fully aware of their shift from virtual to mainstream and that this blogger views his move onto the mainstream as an end to his virtual activity or a replacement of his virtual world rather than a continuation or an addition to it.

Bloggers expressed their new positions in mainstream, be it media or politics, also gave them a sense of pride that blogging alone did not.

With those new identities and more responsibilities and commitments, bloggers found less time to thoroughly research and write blog posts, which pushed them away from their blogs and closer to the time efficiencies of social media platforms. All twelve bloggers interviewed believe social media is easier to use and has a wider audience and therefore have all almost stopped posting on their blogs and turned to social media instead, sacrificing in-depth content for shorter, shallower posts on social media.

Conclusion: The Need for a Different Narrative on Blogs, Microblogs, and Democracy

Bloggers in Egypt have long been marginalized dissident voices who could not find their place in mainstream discourse, and therefore opted to online platforms to freely criticize the status quo and the regime away from the financial, editorial, and political pressures that mainstream media entailed.

Much like the labor press, bloggers grew older and more career-oriented, and thus needed financial sustainability and self-achievement which then pushed them into mainstream media or politics and away from blogs. The State often cracked down on activists and controlled the media through censorship, confiscations, cracking down on investors, and raising court cases against media platforms.

In Egypt, hegemony was often coerced and not co-opted with the absence of an ideology to legitimize hegemony. Therefore, political and economic coercion (in the form of threatening investors to exercise censorship over the media they owned) was exerted to force the public and the cultural institutions, including the media, into hegemony. Because coercion alone is not enough to suppress revolts and maintain the status quo, ultimately activists, who include bloggers, started calling for changes in the status quo, eventually leading to a revolt against the ruling class.

After the uprising, bloggers continued facing efforts of coercion from the State and were subjected to arrests and crackdowns from authorities. However, mainstream media co-opting prominent bloggers proved more efficient in moderating bloggers' voices or gagging some of them in the process of reproducing hegemony than coercion. Like the shift Eley⁴⁰ described happened in France, England, and Germany with the formation of the bourgeois public sphere, there was a shift from the repressive mode of domination to a hegemonic one that was based on consent supplemented with a degree of repression. They remained opposition voices, but their new roles affected their personalities, content, severity, and direction of their voices. Hence, whereas their arrests caused uproar among activists online and offline, thus not achieving the hegemony hoped for, co-opting them proved more successful in Egypt.

However, this is not to say that coercion efforts have failed. Some bloggers have reported moderating their voices to enable them to continue publishing in mainstream media and reach a wide audience. Others said they feared for their security and therefore stopped blogging, like the case of less prominent bloggers, whereas others moderated their voices to avoid prosecution.

Joining mainstream media or other elements of the historical bloc means that the once counterhegemonic elements, or the *déclassé*, have been co-opted and incorporated in the process of remanufacturing consent⁴¹ during the political transition Egypt underwent. Authorities often try to coerce Egyptian activists into silence, using violence and military trials in the process. But a far more powerful tool was co-opting them into mainstream institutions like politicized media outlets. Although they remained opposition voices, their co-opting

into the historical bloc had significant effects on their content and the severity and direction of their voices as they became more institutionalized.

The further this research went, the clearer it became that while studying the social and political impacts of blogs and the internet, one must look beyond the much-discussed narrative of how bloggers and microbloggers have driven change in authoritarian countries. The findings point to the importance of bloggers' contribution to the plurality of the public space for discourse in a media environment like the Egyptian one and how this plurality can easily be limited by various factors at play in developing countries like Egypt, as well as free market dynamics and State coercion. This is evident in the current situation where the main Egyptian blogs are not updated regularly anymore and the bloggers started editing their voices on microblogs. Inactive blogs are taking up space on search engines and continuing to direct users to these famous blogs, which became familiar to the public through the media, search engines, or endorsements from other star bloggers and microbloggers. This then leaves little opportunity for other rising but more active bloggers to find space and readership in a crowded virtual sphere.

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