

INFORMATION AND REVOLUTION IN EGYPT:

Assessing the Role of New Media in Contemporary and Future Operating Environments

BY SERGEANT FIRST CLASS PHILLIP THORPE

“The advent and power of connection technologies — tools that connect people to vast amounts of information and to one another — will make the 21st century all about surprises. Governments will be caught off guard when large numbers of their citizens, armed with virtually nothing but cellphones, take part in mini-rebellions that challenge their authority.”

— Eric Schmidt and Jared Cohen, *“The Digital Disruption”*

Introduction

Recognizing the impact of web-based social media on the events of the Arab Spring in 2011, the special-operations community has dedicated a considerable amount of time and effort to understanding the value and potential effects of new media in contemporary and future operating environments. One must assume that the primary concern of this effort seeks to understand how the realities of rapid information flow in the 21st century affects future planning at all levels. Efforts toward understanding the role of new media in current and future operations have produced a body of knowledge — some of which this publication has recorded for the consideration of current and future practitioners — that will inform and inspire future thinking about continued efforts toward that end.

There is no doubt of the importance of new media’s role, specifically Web-based social media, in some of the successes of the Arab Spring. Therefore, there is value in examining specific cases from that series of historic events to develop an appreciation for the inherent complexities of contemporary operating environments.¹ A brief examination of the conditions that led to the mass protests turned revolution in Egypt and an analysis of the state of information freedom in post-revolution Egypt provides a lens through which one can expand thinking about the utility of employing new media in irregular-warfare operations, including unconventional warfare. However, the value of considering all available media when planning operations must not be understated.



Creating the Conditions for Revolution

Following the 1981 assassination of President Anwar Sadat, the Egyptian parliament invoked an emergency law, created during the presidency of Gamal Nasser in 1958, and declared a state of emergency. Hosni Mubarak used the emergency law in varying degrees over the course of his presidency, ostensibly as a means to fight domestic terrorism but more often to quell domestic social and political dissent. In 2006, Mubarak pushed for the parliament to renew the emergency law while promising to replace it in the future with a counter-terrorism law that would limit the power of the executive to censor media and detain citizens indefinitely.² Abuse of the emergency law over the first 20 years of Mubarak’s presidency increased the power of the executive to the detriment of the other branches of government. This unrivaled power of the executive effectively limited real freedom of the press in Egypt.



CONNECTED A protester holds a poster in Tahrir Square referring to Facebook and Twitter during the 2011 Egyptian Revolution. *Wiki Creative Commons photo.*

In 1993, Egypt connected to the Internet through a link between the Egyptian Universities Network and French Internet providers.³ Egypt privatized the Internet in 1996 with the introduction of 12 commercial Internet service providers.⁴ With the privatization of the Internet came increased access for the Egyptian public to the networked world and all of the information that was consequently accessible. Internet access within Egypt since the turn of the 21st century increased at a high rate. In 2000, less than 1 percent of Egyptians had access to the Internet; by 2011, the percentage of Egyptians with access to the Internet grew to more than 38 percent.⁵ These figures do not account for the unknown number of Egyptians that connect to the Internet in cyber cafés and at friends' homes or while at work.

The number of Internet users in Egypt increased exponentially over the course of the last decade, increasing the potential for citizens

anonymously to express their criticism of the government and its institutions. Mubarak's security apparatus detained bloggers that posted criticism of the government on the Web, persecuting the increasing inclination of connected Egyptians to question government policies and actions.⁶

The Egyptian government's push to make Egypt the hub of information and communications-technology development in the region had unintended effects for the Mubarak regime. A grassroots movement of social and political protest emerged, calling for change in Egypt. The reality of Internet proliferation and the subsequent diffusion of information between network-connected members of Egyptian society unintentionally promoted the protests against Mubarak's government that started on January 25, 2011, culminating in the dictator's resignation on February 11, 2011.⁷

Information and Revolution

The development of modern ICT infrastructure in Egypt during the 1990s and the boom of Internet users in the first decade of the 21st century bolstered economic and government development efforts. However, the proliferation of computers and Internet access increased the flow of “free information”⁸ to Egyptians, complicating the government’s efforts to control discourse in the country.

The Egyptian government wielded considerable control over Egypt’s terrestrial television networks and used them as a platform for dissemination of pro-government news stories.⁹ Access to private satellite television networks, such as Al Jazeera, flourished in Egypt, however providing alternative perspectives for those Egyptians able to afford the subscription costs.¹⁰ Despite the government’s tight control of state-run television networks, the Egyptian news media “was relatively free, giving vent to popular frustrations.”¹¹ This allowed for a degree of dialogue on sensitive political, social and economic issues in the news media and through public demonstrations. However, the Egyptian Ministry of Information and the state security police paid close attention to the level of government criticism in the news media and had experience dealing with public demonstrations, ensuring that they did not escalate to an uncontrollable size.¹²

Egypt’s emergency law legalized government censorship and allowed state security to imprison citizens for lengthy periods without formal charges or court trial. Abuse of the emergency law, as well as a myriad of other political, social and economic grievances commonly led to widespread protests against the government throughout the decade, providing Egyptians with practice at combating the containment efforts of security police.¹³ Whereas issues that concerned distinct elements of the population usually motivated protests in the years prior to the revolution, the January 25, 2011 protests brought

these seemingly different interest groups together in a way in which the security police and the government were not accustomed.¹⁴

The convergence of political, economic and social-interest groups in a mass protest, kept informed by access to free information via the Internet and other new media platforms, was not something that Egypt’s security police had planned for or were adequately prepared to deal with. Initially, the Egyptian government did not officially recognize the protests as a threat and, as such, made no mention of them in the state-run news media.¹⁵

The government narrative of the protestors as intransigent elements of the population echoed across state-run news media for days. State-run television news programs showed video footage purporting to be of pro-Mubarak protestors and aired interviews with “protestors,” their faces covered and voices disguised, claiming to have trained in Israel.¹⁶ However, the government very likely hired these “protestors” to act in a manner that reinforced the government narrative of the actual protestors as thugs attempting to destabilize the country. The regime’s narrative espoused the idea that the protestors were agents of foreign powers seeking to destabilize Egyptian society and Egypt’s economy, imploring protestors to end their uprising for the ‘good’ of the country and the Egyptian people.¹⁷

Both regular citizens and veteran activists used web-based social media, such as Facebook, to promote the protest narrative while the government used state-run television news media to promote its own narrative. The protestors’ narrative focused on the desire for rule of law and justice in Egypt, as well as the resignation of the president and the conduct of fair and democratic elections.

In response to the rising tide of protests, Egyptian government officials ordered ISPs to sever links to Internet gateways, effectively shutting off the Internet.¹⁸ Protestors used face-to-face communication as their primary method of communication following the Egyptian government’s Internet shutdown.¹⁹ The move by the Egyptian government to shut down the Internet was unprecedented at the time and caused observers outside of Egypt to increase criticism of the Mubarak’s regime authoritarian abuses.²⁰ Technology-savvy Egyptians were able to use proxy networks to circumvent the government Internet shutdown and Twitter had its technicians develop a tool that allowed Egyptians to use landline telephones to leave voice messages that were translated into ‘Tweets’ and then uploaded to Twitter.com.²¹

The regime finally relented and ordered the reconnection of Egyptian ISPs to the Internet on February 1, 2011. Nevertheless, the protests continued and on February 11, President Mubarak ceded control of the government to the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces.²² In less than a month, Egyptian protestors achieved what they thought was impossible, using global communications technology to mobilize seemingly disparate interests within the population into action to pursue regime change and an end to government abuses. Over the course of the next year, the SCAF maintained control of the government, eventually submitting to popular appeals for a democratic, multi-party election.

A “New” Egypt

In the year following the Egyptian revolution, the Muslim Brotherhood, through its Freedom and Justice Party, campaigned for and won enough seats in the Egyptian parliament to give them a major stake in the formation of a parliamentary coalition and the

EGYPT COMMUNICATIONS QUICK FACTS

TELEPHONE USE

Main (Land) Lines:	Mobile (Cellular) lines:
· 8.714 million (2011)	· 83.425 million (2011)
· Ranked 23rd in the world	· Ranked 16th in the world

INTERNET USE

Internet Hosts:	Internet Users:
· 200,430 (2012)	· 20.136 million (2009)
· Ranked 71st in the world	· Ranked 21st in the world

BROADCAST MEDIA

- Mix of state-run and private broadcast media
- State-run TV operates two national and six regional terrestrial networks as well as a few satellite channels
- About 20 private satellite channels and a large number of Arabic satellite channels are available via subscription
- State-run radio operates about 70 stations belonging to eight networks; two privately-owned radio stations operational (2008)

Source: CIA World Factbook
<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>



MASS PROTEST A large banner erected early on in Tahrir Square, repeating in English a frequent and prominent demand of the protests, “al-sha'b yoreed esqat al-nezam,” during the Egyptian Revolution of 2011. *Wiki Creative Commons photo.*

ability to nominate a serious candidate for the presidency. In June 2012, Egyptians elected Mohamed Morsi, a former member of the Muslim Brotherhood, as their new president. However, his win was not without objection from liberal elements within Egyptian public and political spheres.

President Morsi faces opposition to the newly adopted constitution and he is dealing with a push by many Egyptians to balance the powers of the executive with those of the other branches of government, such as parliament and the judiciary. Furthermore, President Morsi reenacted emergency law to deal with domestic security concerns created by the continuation of protests in the most problematic areas of the country. His actions raise important questions about the future of information in Egypt. If President Morsi adopts Mubarak-style tactics to deal with domestic issues, what is the potential outcome in Egypt for the freedoms that the population sought to gain from the revolution?

The Future of Information in Egypt

In Mubarak's Egypt, citizens had little to no voice in politics. The revolution empowered Egyptians and now the power of protest pervades the whole country. Although average Egyptians feel empowered and willing to criticize moves by the government that they find objectionable, public opinion is not a strong enough force in Egypt to stop the president from making decisions that may serve to benefit his party and others in his political bloc.

In November 2012, President Morsi asserted his power over the judiciary by making a constitutional declaration that shielded the president's decisions from judicial oversight, citing a mandate from the ideals of the Egyptian revolution, such as routing out remnants of the Mubarak regime.²³ This move found Morsi at the receiving end of a lot of criticism, within and outside of Egypt. One may argue that Morsi is attempting to stifle criticism by shielding himself from judicial oversight, effectively becoming Egypt's newest dictator.

Moreover, Morsi invoked emergency law in January 2013 to quell protests in the cities of Port Said, Suez and Ismailia.²⁴ Again, this action only served to increase the level of protests against him and his government. The legacy of Morsi's predecessors lives on in Egypt through the inclination of the new president to make executive decisions with little regard for public opinion or for the separation of government powers.

What, then, will be the future of the Internet and the free flow of information in the “new” Egypt? It is true that Egyptians are freer today to express publicly their dissatisfaction with the government and its institutions. However, there is evidence that this trend toward greater freedom of expression is slowing due to the pervasive influence of the conservative agenda of some of the more ardently Islamist elements within the new government.²⁵ Web-based social media continues to thrive in Egypt, providing the public with an outlet to express sentiment and for the government to gauge public opinion.

President Morsi's government is aware of the new methods of communication for the younger generation of Egyptians. Whereas Mubarak used state television to address Egyptians, Morsi is using Twitter to communicate with the population and to respond to their inquiries in a limited fashion.²⁶ Many young Egyptians view the state-run media as a corrupt arm of the government, biased toward the regime.²⁷ On Twitter, however, one may comment freely, providing instant praise or criticism for the government as well as private citizens. Morsi's use of Twitter as a communications medium may be an attempt to appear more in tune with Egyptians than his predecessor was.

However free and democratic many Egyptians want their country to be, they must still contend with the state's sovereign power, its monopoly on violence. On March 24, 2013, President Morsi, while providing remarks at a conference, issued a warning to Egyptians against using media to “incite violence” in Egypt.²⁸ Just a day later, on March 25, Egypt's prosecutor general issued arrest warrants for five

prominent activists, including a blogger, citing their complicity in the violence that erupted outside of the Muslim Brotherhood headquarters building in Cairo the previous Friday.²⁹

Previous authoritarian regimes in Egypt paid little attention to public opinion, asserted tight control over the media and created policy despite the concerns of either of the other two elements in the media, public opinion and policy relationship, namely, the media and the public. Morsi's government has yet to spiral completely into such an authoritarian model.

Employing New Media in Operations

Egypt offers one example of a complex contemporary operating environment with multiple and competing narratives. Disparate interests work alongside one another and often in contrast to one another. This is a familiar scenario for Army special-operations forces, but it serves as a reminder of the numerous complexities present in contemporary operating environments and is a sample of what ARSOF will face in the future.

Employing new media to reach target audiences is beneficial when planning operations in areas that have a moderate or high level of Internet access. For instance, a relatively moderate level of Internet access in Egypt fostered an environment where information crossed enough social and political boundaries that it promoted awareness of the impending protests of January 2011. Traditional media in Egypt — often controlled by the state — and

word-of-mouth never produced the type of inter-group coherence necessary to promote a large-scale protest, such as the one that forced the resignation of Mubarak.

Every operating environment is different and it is necessary to treat each as dissimilar until proven otherwise. Planning for irregular-warfare operations, including unconventional warfare, requires robust analysis of information environments. Despite the persistent attention paid today to web-based social-media platforms as a vehicle for message dissemination, it is ill advised to focus myopically on a single medium when planning inform and influence activities. Military Information Support Operations practitioners must always consider the full range of available media in any given information environment and be prepared to offer candid assessments to commanders, whose decisions are based on their analysis of the information environment and the potential psychological effects of IIA. **SW**

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