New Media and Islamist Mobilization in Egypt

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Abstract

Drawing on almost a decade of public Egyptian Facebook posts, this chapter demonstrates that Islamist actors were particularly successful at gaining visibility and spreading narratives that advance their goals on social media, relative to other opposition groups. It also explores the political consequences of this online success, suggesting that the same social media technologies that facilitated the Muslim Brotherhood’s mobilization efforts in the post-revolution period have also undermined the organization by accelerating its fragmentation, amplifying extremist voices, and giving the military regime a new authoritarian toolkit with which to fight the Brotherhood on and offline.

Motivated by resource mobilization theory, I argue that movements with stronger organizational structures, greater access to resources, and more coherent ideologies are able to use new media technologies more successfully than more fragmented and less-well funded groups.

Keywords: Islamist; Mobilization; Social Media; Egypt
In the early days of the Arab Spring, as crowds gathered in Tahrir Square, academics and journalists hailed social media as a “liberation technology” empowering young liberal activists to protest and demand democratic change (Diamond and Plattner 2012). They argued that by facilitating the creation and distribution of user generated content, social media has democratized access to information and communication tools. A consensus formed among techno-optimists that Web 2.0 tools were tipping the scales, bolstering the powerless more than the powerful (Castells 2012; Howard and Hussain 2013; Tufekci and Wilson 2012; Earl et al. 2013). But young liberals were not the only actors to exploit these tools. As early adopters of new media technologies with a well-organized ground game, Islamists were particularly well-positioned to use social media to mobilize when protests erupted in January 2011.

Despite the wealth of journalistic and scholarly attention paid to young activists’ use of social media in the early days of the Egyptian Revolution, this chapter suggests that Islamists were perhaps better equipped to use these tools to mobilize and amplify their messages. Motivated by resource mobilization theory, I argue that movements with stronger organizational structures, greater access to resources, and more coherent ideologies are able to use new media technologies more successfully than more fragmented and less-well funded groups.

Drawing on almost a decade of public Egyptian Facebook posts, this chapter demonstrates that Islamist actors were particularly successful at gaining visibility and spreading narratives that advance their goals on social media, relative to other opposition groups. It also explores the political consequences of this online success, suggesting that the same social media technologies that facilitated the Muslim Brotherhood’s mobilization efforts in the post-revolution period have also undermined the organization by accelerating its fragmentation, amplifying extremist voices, and giving the military regime a new authoritarian toolkit with which to fight the Brotherhood on and offline.

New Media and Social Mobilization

While the Arab Spring protests and other recent episodes of collective action organized online have sparked a growing literature on the impact of new media technologies on social mobilization, “new” media technologies have long shaped how groups mobilize, as well as the consequences of this mobilization (Tarrow 2011; Tilly 1981). Since the rise of print media and mass literacy, diverse movements have relied on pamphlets, newspapers, radio, and

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1See Tucker et al. (2017) for an overview.
2See Zhuravskaya, Petrova and Enikolopov (2020) for a recent review of the literature.
television to build broad constituencies and organizations, secure legitimacy, and advance their agendas (Caren, Andrews and Lu 2020).

The potential of media technologies to facilitate social mobilization can be understood in terms of resource mobilization theory (McCarthy and Zald 1977). Resource mobilization theory posits that centralized, formally structured organizations will be more effective at mobilizing resources and mounting sustained challenges than decentralized, informal movements, and their success is largely determined by strategic factors and political opportunity structures (Jenkins 1983). This suggests that the ability of opposition elites—including organizations, community leaders, and activists—to mobilize using new media technologies is moderated by organizational structure and access to resources. Social movements will be able to use these tools more effectively when they have strong centralized and efficient leadership and sufficient funding.

While social media is often heralded as “democratizing communication” and a great equalizer, viewed through the lens of resource mobilization theory, not all actors are equally well positioned to mobilize on social media. Although social media can be effective in mobilizing the “powerless,” it has often reproduced or even intensified pre-existing power imbalances. Describing this phenomenon Schradie (2019) argues that conservative movements dominate the online sphere due to their comparative advantage in offline resources, infrastructure, and ideologies that favor maintaining or returning to a status quo. Although social media platforms are indeed low-cost and non-hierarchical, greater resources can be harnessed to maximize digital production and reach. Because progressive movements tend to be comprised of diverse coalitions, they often struggle to propagate a coherent message in the online sphere. As a result, while liberal movements have received a great deal of attention for their ability to “go viral” and mobilize in the streets, conservative digital media infrastructures have more quietly emerged, thrived, and persisted.

In the Egyptian context, this suggests that Islamists—particularly members of the conservative and well-established Muslim Brotherhood organization—were better positioned to effectively use social media tools than the liberal activists. At the start of the Egyptian revolution, the Muslim Brotherhood had powerful networks on the ground, extensive financial resources, a relatively coherent ideology (Ullah 2017). Moreover, as I describe in detail below, Islamists have a long history of exploiting media technologies to mobilize, even under conditions of severe repression. Digital media technologies are the latest manifestation of this trend, enabling Islamists to mobilize and amplify their messages in real-time.
Islamists’ Long History with ‘New’ Media

From audio tapes and photocopy machines to satellite television and social media, Islamists have historically capitalized on cutting-edge communication technologies to mobilize followers. By imbuing their messages with religious meaning, and drawing on networks fostered through participation in religious community and institutions, Islamists have frequently taken advantage of available media tools to gain mass appeal. Such strategies have allowed diverse actors to build a shared set of symbolic references among constituents, shape mass preferences on the role of Islam in politics, and open new channels of increasingly rapid communication. This has enabled Islamists to more effectively solve collective action problems—both by increasing the degree of personal gain individuals anticipate from mobilizing and lowering individual costs of mobilization (Mecham 2017).

In the 1950s and 1960s, as many Arab countries nationalized the press and began to develop state monopolies of radio and television, Islamists faced barriers to disseminating their messages. In Egypt state radio and television broadcast Friday sermons and hosted programs where state-sanctioned clerics would discuss religion, but the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist organizations were banned and blocked from the airwaves (Skovgaard-Petersen 2011). In this period of almost complete state control over the media, trust among the Egyptian public began to wane. Notoriously, in 1967, newspapers, radio stations, and television outlets across the Arab World reported that Arab armies had soundly defeated Israel and that Israeli planes were falling from the skies “like flies.” Egyptian citizens soon learned the truth of their defeat from foreign sources, exacerbating widespread lack of faith in mass media (Fandy 2000).

In the 1970s and 1980s, amid this atmosphere of distrust in state media, the Islamic revival put pressure on Arab states to allow more religious content on radio and television. Most Arab countries slowly began airing Islamic programs as a means of demonstrating that Islam was an integrated and valued part of the official national culture. At the same time, however, Islamists use of mainstream media remained severely curtailed. While the Egyptian regime permitted the publication of a few small Islamic magazines that allowed some Islamist-leaning clerics to spread their message, overtly Islamist actors were barred from mass-circulation newspapers, radio and television (Skovgaard-Petersen 2011). As a result, Islamists developed other creative approaches to disseminate their messages. They distributed tape cassettes, copies of pamphlets, and later video tapes to reach a broader audience discreetly (Sivan 1990).

These inexpensive methods of communication also enabled a wider variety of Islamist actors to reach potential followers. Indeed across the Arab World, beginning in the 1960s, audio
cassettes of sermons were widely distributed—primarily among the lower classes—mostly for the purpose of promoting individual piety and correcting religious practice, though also to spread political messages (Echchaibi 2011). In Egypt, underground audiocassettes were particularly popular—often more popular than the content produced by state-sanctioned clerics and formally educated religious scholars. This was, in part, because the tapes were in Egyptian dialect, rather than the Modern Standard Arabic of the Hadith and Quran that was favored by preachers at Al-Azhar (Egypt’s premier institution of Islamic learning). This meant that messages on cassettes could reach less educated Egyptians in Cairo and rural areas alike (Fandy 2000).

On the one hand physical media like audiocassettes and photocopies were inefficient means of transmitting a message as they were highly dependent—at least initially—on personal contact at mosques or rallies to spread the word. But they allowed for multiple points of production and distribution. This meant that they were nearly untraceable and irrepressible, making them powerful political messaging tools that authoritarian regimes found difficult to control (Sreberny-Mohammadi 1990). However, these underground forms of communication did not insulate Islamists from state repression. Da’ia or Islamic preachers who produced sermons through pamphlets or audiocassettes that were considered “insurgent” or anti-regime were frequently jailed, tortured, or exiled (Hirschkind 2006).

Islamists also seized on the advent of satellite television in the early 1990s, achieving new levels of mass-media penetration (Ullah 2017; Lynch 2006). For example, Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated cleric Yusef al-Qardawi’s show on al-Jazeera “Sharia and Life,” launched in 1996, boasted 40-60 million viewers worldwide (Rock 2010). The program addressed controversial contemporary issues from the point of view of Islamic law (Skovgaard-Petersen 2011). Unlike cassette sermons, which were largely popular among lower class Muslims and served no direct commercial purpose, these television channels were and remain popular among middle and upper class Muslims and highly profitable for media companies (Echchaibi 2011).

Although satellite television greatly expanded the national and transnational reach of many clerics and Islamist movements, the license application, studio space, equipment, and start-up costs of launching a TV channel prohibited many Islamists from entering this sphere (Mecham 2017). Along these lines, states were (and still are) still able to exert a great deal of control over satellite media by legislating, regulating, and owning stations, as well as through withholding funding, controlling trade unions, or threatening journalists or editors. Indeed, in most countries throughout the Arab World, private TV companies rely so heavily on the “good will” of the state that they express as much political loyalty as state channels (Sakr 2001). Thus, just as in the early days of radio and terrestrial television networks, even as
satellite television transformed the Arab media environment, many Islamist actors remained excluded or limited by state control of the airwaves.

Continuing their long history of strategically capitalizing on new media technologies, Islamists were early adopters of the Internet. Even though Internet penetration was relatively slow to expand across the Middle East, it facilitated the formation of new organizational structures that helped Islamists to mobilize. Operating as “portable headquarters,” websites offered the Muslim Brotherhood newfound flexibility to expand their reach both within Egypt and beyond national borders. In the early days of the Internet, some Islamist organizations began to host their websites abroad to bypass authoritarian surveillance, and frequently moved web addresses after government authorities shut down their sites (Lerner 2010).

After decades of being excluded from television and radio shows, the Muslim Brotherhood recognized the advent of the Internet as an opportunity to amplify its message. In 1998, the organization commissioned a website for its print publication, al-Dawa (The Call), and launched other websites focusing on Islamist political issues (Hafez 2008). Soon after, the Brotherhood began developing explicitly political websites including Egyptwindow.net in 2002 and their official website Ikhwanonline.net in 2003, which became one of the most popular websites in Egypt (Awad 2017). After the Egyptian regime closed down the official Brotherhood website in 2004, the movement adapted by decentralizing its web presence. In this period Brotherhood activists also began using the Internet to organize demonstrations (Ajemian 2008). Brotherhood blogs began to proliferate in 2007. As a result, the younger wing of the organization gained visibility, using blogs to bring international attention to the plight of jailed Brotherhood members (Awad 2017; Ajemian 2008).

As social media platforms gained popularity in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood worked to grow its online audience. Hoping to supervise the discussions and activities of the organization’s youth, the older generation of Muslim Brotherhood leadership developed alternative spaces for group members to interact. These included Ikhwanbook, Ikhwan Twitter, and Ikhwantube, initially developed between 2009 and 2010. These platforms enabled members of the Brotherhood to share thousands of documents, speeches, statements, and videos with constituents (Herrera 2014). In the years before the Arab Spring, the Brotherhood also expanded its presence on mainstream social media platforms, both setting up official pages and accounts such as @Ikhwanweb. By the time protests erupted in Tahrir Square in January 2011, the Muslim Brotherhood already had established a presence on online platforms. As one media strategist for the Freedom and Justice Party, the Brotherhood’s political party, put it, “We used new media before the revolution to spread the message and people made fun of us.”
Tracking Islamist Online Mobilization

Islamists’ relatively centralized leadership, access to resources, and long history of taking advantage of new media tools to organize suggests that they were especially well positioned to mobilize on social media at the start of the January 25th revolution. But how effective have Islamists been at gaining visibility and spreading narratives that advance their goals on social media relative to other actors? To assess this, I draw on almost a decade of public Egyptian Facebook posts and interactions from January 2011 to June 2020 collected using Facebook’s CrowdTangle API.3 Facebook is the most popular social media platform in Egypt with 90% of Egyptian Internet users using the platform as of 2019 (Dennis et al. 2019). Actors across Egypt’s political spectrum have public Facebook pages and groups, including liberal activists, media outlets, military generals, popular clerics, and prominent members of the Muslim Brotherhood. Facebook data therefore allows me to compare how everyday Egyptian Facebook users engage with these diverse actors over time.

To get a sense of the relative success of Islamist mobilization in the early days of the Egyptian Revolution, I compare engagement with the Rasd News Network, a popular Facebook page used by Muslim Brotherhood to organize protesters to the Arabic language “We Are all Khaled Said” page, the Facebook page credited with helping spark the Egyptian revolution and the epicenter of activity by liberal activists during the protests (Alaimo 2015).

Brotherhood youth mobilized protesters through the Rasd Network Facebook page during the early days of the revolution even as the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood initially announced that it would not participate in the demonstrations (Sakr 2014). While the Facebook page was initially perceived as a politically neutral space with anonymous administrators who were not tied to any particular group or ideology, it soon became clear that Rasd was towing the official line of the Muslim Brotherhood. By late 2011, Amr Farag, the director of the Rasd page was put in charge of electronic media for the Freedom and Justice party. Rasd page administrators took direct orders from deputy chairman of the Muslim Brotherhood, Khairat al-Shater, launched a website and hired tens of correspondents, paid directly by the Muslim Brotherhood to act as a mouthpiece for the organization (Herrera

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3CrowdTangle is a social media analytics platform owned by Facebook that tracks public posts on Facebook made by public accounts or groups as well as public interactions (likes, reactions, comments, shares, upvotes) to these posts. I received CrowdTangle data access from Facebook in collaboration with Social Science One through NYU’s Center for Social Media and Politics. CrowdTangle tracks 99% of public posts from pages with over 100,000 likes, as well as a large number of pages with smaller followings. This makes it ideal for measuring engagement with posts over time as posts from more popular pages receive more engagement. It does not include paid ads unless those ads began as organic, non-paid posts that were subsequently boosted using Facebook’s advertising tools. CrowdTangle also does not track posts made visible only to specific groups of followers. See https://help.crowdtangle.com/en/articles/1140930-what-is-crowdtangle-tracking for an overview of what data is included through the API.
Looking at data from the first year of the revolution, we see that while posts on the “We are Khaled Said” page generally received a higher level of engagement (18,430,921 total interactions), posts on the Rasd Network page perform surprisingly well by comparison (13,214,113 total interactions). Interestingly, Rasd Network received more engagement than the Khaled Said page in the first two weeks of the Egyptian Revolution. This is particularly noteworthy given that the Khaled Said page is frequently credited as playing an important role in sparking the Egyptian revolution. Moreover, the Rasd Network page was not created until January 25th, the first day of the revolution, whereas the We are all Khaled Said page had been gaining followers since its creation in June 10, 2010.

Figure 1: Engagement with Rasd Network vs. We are all Khaled Said Facebook Pages

*Plot displays the weekly volume of engagement (interactions including likes, shares, comments and reactions) to public posts on the Rasd News Network and We are All Khaled Said Facebook pages from July 2010 to January 2012. Data was collected through the Crowdtangle API.*

In the post-revolution period, the Muslim Brotherhood continued to use social media to disseminate their messages and broaden their appeal. Following the uprisings, the use of social media across the Arab world grew dramatically (Liu, Kliman-Silver and Mislove 2014), enabling the Brotherhood to reach a larger online audience than it had previously. This bolstered the organization’s success as it seized the opportunity to compete for power
in Egypt’s first democratic elections.

The Muslim Brotherhood’s electoral success in 2012 is often—rightly—credited to its impressive ground game, cohesion, and reputational advantage (Cammett and Luong 2014; Brooke 2019). At the same time, the use of social media in alongside this offline mobilization helped to amplify the Brotherhood’s message and broaden its appeal in this period. Beginning in April of 2012, the Muslim Brotherhood began strategically promoting its election campaign on Facebook and Twitter. While many of the Brotherhood’s constituents remained offline and in rural areas, social media helped Islamists to mobilize educated and urban Egyptians. As one spokesman for the Muslim Brotherhood described in the leadup to the 2012 election, “It is important for me to know the opinion of the educated classes of Egyptians and I can find those by mining the Internet . . . I don’t want to lose them . . . My state needs the educated people to drive the state—but under my rules. I have to cooperate with them, understand them and work with them” (Srinivasan 2014). In the lead up to the elections, candidates from across the political spectrum promoted their campaigns and attacked one another on Facebook, Twitter, and Youtube.

Examining Facebook posts containing the Arabic term “election” over time offers some insight into Islamists’ successful use of social media during the 2012 elections. Figure 2 shows engagement with the most popular candidate and party Facebook pages posting about the election in the lead up to and aftermath of the 2012 Presidential election. The solid line shows the weekly volume of interactions with posts from Islamist party and candidate pages, while the dotted line shows interactions with non-Islamist candidates and pages. As the Figure suggests, Islamists dominated discussions of the election on Facebook both before and after the two election rounds.
Plot displays the weekly volume of engagement (interactions including likes, shares, comments and reactions) to public posts on Facebook pages of Islamist and Non-Islamist candidates in the top 50 most popular pages referencing the election from January 2012 to January 2013. Data was collected through the Crowdtangle API.

The Muslim Brotherhood’s online presence may also have contributed to its ability to peacefully transition to power in the aftermath of Morsi’s electoral victory. Their coordinated online and offline campaign in the period surrounding the election made it very difficult for the election to be rigged or stolen and forced a new level of transparency. On the night of the election, members of the Muslim Brotherhood systematically updated and publicized results in real-time on Twitter. The Muslim Brotherhood had people on the ground at polling stations who called electoral results into Muslim Brotherhood headquarters as votes were counted. As Zeynep Tufeci blogged in the aftermath of the election, if the old-regime apparatus had rigged the election or changed the results, a “Google spreadsheet would stare at them every turn. And the narrative laid by Ikhwan’s online and offline operation would be hard to surmount.”

The July 2013 military coup that ousted Mohamed Morsi sparked the largest wave of Islamist mobilization in Egypt’s modern history. For months, in the face of violent repression,

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4Available at: [http://technosociology.org/?p=1064](http://technosociology.org/?p=1064)
anti-coup protesters turned out in the streets. Protests persisted as Brotherhood leaders and members were jailed, tortured and killed, financial assets were frozen, associations and centers were closed, and the organization was designated a terrorist group. Despite massive setbacks, the Muslim Brotherhood continued to organize. In this period, social media became a particularly effective resource for the Brotherhood. It helped the organization to broadcast its messages in real time and organize collective action as its traditional lines of communication were shut down. On the one hand, the Muslim Brotherhood’s use of social media in the post-coup period represents a continuation of its long history of exploiting new media channels in the face of repression. On the other hand, the real-time networked structure of social media made these tools were particularly well suited to mobilizing collective action on the ground in a manner that previous technologies could not.

After Morsi was removed from power, his supporters used social media to condemn the military coup, highlight military brutality, and call for democratization. Dozens of popular pro-Brotherhood Facebook pages were used to disseminate the Brotherhood’s message after its satellite channels were blocked. For example, the Rasd news network page developed before the revolution had an audience of almost 5 million people by the time of the coup. The site worked to “reveal the agenda” of the military through a series of video leaks known as el-Sisileaks. Other pro-Brotherhood Facebook networks such as Ahrar 25 TV and Egypt online also became very popular in this period (Shehabat 2015). Pro-Brotherhood Facebook pages and Twitter accounts worked to document military brutality such as the violent crackdowns on peaceful protests held in Raba’a and Elnahda squares when many thousands of peaceful protesters were killed. YouTube videos, photos, and voice memos were captured by protesters and posted daily in an attempt to persuade followers to denounce military rule. The daily volume of posts mentioning Morsi, the coup, and the Raba’a massacre on Egyptian Facebook pages are displayed in Figure 3.
Figure 3: Facebook Engagement with Posts Mentioning Morsi, the Coup, or the Rabaa Massacre

Plot displays the weekly volume of engagement (interactions including likes, shares, comments and reactions) to public posts on Egyptian Facebook pages referencing Morsi, the coup, or the Rabaa massacre from January 2012 to June 2020. Data was collected through the Crowdtangle API.

These social media platforms were similarly used to mobilize collective action on the ground. The “Peace and Justice Party” Facebook page, quickly gained almost two million followers, and frequently called for people to respect the legitimacy of the 2012 elections and protest the coup. As Figure 4 demonstrates, engagement with the page increased in the immediate aftermath of the coup and again spiked throughout 2014 and 2015 as the crackdown on the Brotherhood intensified. Similarly, the “Morsi’s Ultras” page called for daily mobilization of Muslim Brotherhood supporters to bring down military rule (Shehabat 2015). In addition to these public pages, anti-coup activists also used closed social media groups to coordinate national days of protest and disseminate tactics. This was especially necessary as the regime began to monitor the anti-coup movement online and search protesters’ mobile phones or laptops. As a safety measure, these private groups, some of which had many thousands of members, were given misleading names such as “I love Christiano Ronaldo” or “Buy second-hand cars” (Ketchley 2017). Additionally, demonstrations were creatively organized online to prevent surveillance, and false dates for protests were posted on public social media platforms to throw off security forces monitoring the Brotherhood’s social media accounts (El-Sharif 2014).
Plot displays the weekly volume of engagement (interactions including likes, shares, comments and reactions) to public posts on the Freedom and Justice party Facebook page from July 2010 to June 2020. Data was collected through the Crowdtangle API.

While most of this mobilization initially focused on peaceful protests, calls for action became increasingly violent over time. For example postings about the third anniversary of the Egyptian revolution celebration included warnings directed at the military regime claiming that protesters would respond violently to any military brutality by burning police cars and armored vehicles, abducting military personnel, and using molotov cocktails and attack police stations. Pro-Brotherhood social media users shared advice and tactics on these pages, including videos from activists as far afield as the Ukraine who, in the words of one Brotherhood supporter, knew “how to use molotovs to hold their square against the police” (Ketchley 2014).

Pro-brotherhood Facebook pages were also used to call for civil disobedience in this period. Brotherhood supporters were mobilized to disrupt trains in the metro, boycott military products, close businesses, and even set fire to public buildings (Pargeter 2018). One civil disobedience campaign started on pro-Brotherhood Facebook pages was called “expose them” and worked to doxx or identify police and military personnel who had been involved in the killings of pro-Morsi protesters. Participants posted photos, phone numbers, and addresses of these individuals, urging supporters to seek revenge (Shehabat 2015).
The transnational reach of social media further bolstered mobilization of the anti-coup movement both domestically and abroad. Following the violent dispersal of anti-coup protests in the Raba’a al-Adawiya square in June 2013, the four fingered hand gesture which came to be known as the “Raba’a Salute” went viral on social media (van de Bildt 2015). Anti-coup Facebook pages and Twitter accounts called for their followers to use the Raba’a symbol in their profile pictures to show their solidarity with those who were harmed during the government crackdown. The symbol quickly spread, not only on Egyptian social media platforms, but also in the Gulf, Turkey, and across the broader Muslim world as sympathizers expressed their solidarity. Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan even played a role in the virality of the symbol, using the Raba’a salute to greet Turkish crowds shortly after the massacre (El-Shenawi 2013). In this same period, popular pro-Brotherhood clerics also expressed their support for the movement online, bringing more transnational support to the movement. For example, Saudi cleric, Mohamed al-Arefe tweeted and posted Youtube videos calling for solidarity with Morsi’s supporters, which quickly went viral among his millions of fans across the Muslim World (Pan and Siegel 2019).

Social media also facilitated communication with exiled Brotherhood leadership and access to official Brotherhood media abroad. Many members of the Muslim Brotherhood sought refuge in Turkey after the coup. These exiled Islamists quickly set up their own television channels in Turkey in order to continue to broadcast their message. These pro-Brotherhood channels, which air 24 hours a day, include Raba’a, Misr Al’n, Mekammelyn, and Al-Sharq (Magued 2018). Because each of these channels maintains active social media profiles on Youtube, Facebook, and Twitter, they were easily able to reach Muslim Brotherhood supports in Egypt. Social media also made these television channels interactive as followers and opponents could post content and interact with TV presenters in real time, directly incorporating social media into broadcasts. For example, the Al Sharq channel began presenting programming where TV presenters discussed current issues in Egypt with viewers by reading aloud their comments on the channel’s Facebook page and Twitter account.

The Facebook pages associated with these TV programs were critical in drawing attention to the anti-coup protests. Videos showing large anti-coup demonstrations occurring on Friday nights in Egypt and around the world spread quickly online. These videos were frequently live broadcasts of ongoing demonstrations and protests taken by demonstrators on their smartphones. In addition to protest coverage, these channels and their associated pages also documented the humanitarian conditions in Egypt’s prisons as well as growing numbers of arrests, torture, and death sentences for Brotherhood leaders and supporters.

Examining interactions with posts mentioning the Raba’a massacre, we see that posts on pages outside of Egypt received more engagement than posts from Egyptian Facebook
pages, particularly after 2014 (11 million interactions vs. 9 million interactions in total from 2011 to 2020). The most popular posts outside of Egypt came from the Gulf, Turkey, and the UK, where many members of the Muslim Brotherhood moved after the coup.

Figure 5: Facebook Engagement with Posts Mentioning the Raba’a Massacre Inside and Outside Egypt

![Graph showing Facebook engagement with posts mentioning the Raba’a Massacre](image)

Plot displays the weekly volume of engagement (interactions including likes, shares, comments and reactions) to public posts on Egyptian and Non-Egyptian Facebook pages referencing the Raba’a massacre from January 2011 to June 2020. Data was collected through the Crowdtangle API.

How New Media Undermined Islamist Mobilization

As these examples suggest, social media played a key role in amplifying the Brotherhood’s messages, spreading news and information, and facilitating collective action in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, bolstering its ground mobilization strategies. But the same features of social media that helped the Brotherhood to mobilize in the face of repression also undermined the organization by accelerating its fragmentation and polarization and amplifying extremist voices. Moreover, at the same time the Brotherhood was using social media to mobilize, the military regime worked to use the tool against the movement.

While the proliferation of Brotherhood social media pages and accounts may have fa-
cilitated the spread of information and mobilization of collective action after the coup, by reducing barriers to entry and undermining hierarchical structures, social media may have played a role in fragmenting the authority of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. The coup that removed Mohamed Morsi from office and subsequent crackdown on Brotherhood activities dealt a devastating blow to the organization’s leadership. With the core Brotherhood leaders imprisoned, rival factions began to operate separate websites with different spokespeople. Competing to secure the loyalty of their base, senior leaders posted rival statements on websites and their followers responded in real time, frequently arguing on the leaders’ Facebook pages. Other members set up independent Facebook pages to assert their demands or attack rival factions (Awad 2017).

While social media was of course one of many factors that has contributed to this fragmentation of the Muslim Brotherhood, it provided an avenue for new actors to fill the void, amplifying extremist voices. For example, Brotherhood members courting Salafi support frequently framed the state’s crackdown on the organization as a war against Islam, encouraging angry youth to embrace violent Salafi jihadism. As (Awad 2017) argues, “Through these [social] media platforms, Brotherhood leaders and clerics also attempt to acculturate a fragmented organization and win over a young rebellious generation. When left unchecked, Brotherhood clerics and their Salafist allies with Gulf funding quickly propagated the most hateful, violent, and sectarian expressions of Islamism, arguably helping radicalize some youth by providing them with religious justifications for violence against the state.”

Additionally, social media has several affordances that facilitated the amplification of extremist voices within the movement. First, online platforms provide social distance and anonymity, enabling people to produce and spread extreme or violent content with few consequences. Second, the amplifying nature of social media makes extremist content—once relegated to the dark corners of the interest—highly visible (Siegel 2020). As a consequence, Egyptian extremist groups like the Islamic State in the Sinai and Ansar Beit al-Maqdis have been adept at using a wide variety of social media tools to propagate their message and lure recruits. Groups like the Islamic State have used a combination of “atrocity porn,” fear, and entertainment to gain visibility on social media (Berger and Morgan 2015; Siegel and Tucker 2018). They have also effectively developed cross-platform means of reaching supporters and would-be followers, radicalizing Brotherhood youth. For example, as Figure 6 suggests, Egyptian Youtube searches for Ansar-Beit al-Maqdis spiked after the coup, and then grew more dramatically in 2015, highlighting rising interest in the extremist group.
Plot displays the relative weekly volume of Youtube searches located in Egypt referencing Ansar Beit al-Maqdis from January 2011 to June 2020. Data was collected through the Google Trends API.

The networked structure of social media also means that individuals who seek out extremist content online often find themselves deeply embedded in echo chambers where harmful content is normalized and encouraged (Siegel 2020). Research on the Egyptian Twitter-sphere suggests that Egyptians became increasingly polarized into Islamist and Secular or non-Islamist networks after the coup (Borge-Holthoefer et al. 2015; Lynch, Freelon and Aday 2017). Indeed the period after the coup was marked by a “great unfriending” in which anti-Brotherhood social media users stopped following Islamists and vice versa. This polarization appeared to push Egyptians into more extreme camps. A recent study of political tolerance in Egyptian Twitter networks after the coup demonstrates that individuals that spent an additional year in ideologically homogenous networks—that is networks where they were only exposed to content produced by either Islamists or non-Islamist Egyptians—became less tolerant of the outgroup over time (Siegel et al. 2018). In this way, as viral rumors and polarizing content flowed through segregated online networks, moderate voices lost traction and extremist voices were amplified.

In addition to the acceleration of fragmentation, polarization and extremism within the organization, the Muslim Brotherhood also faced a direct challenge from the regime in the online sphere. Authoritarian regimes in diverse contexts have not stood idly by as citizens and movements have used new media technologies to mobilize against them. Digital media
provides regimes with an authoritarian toolkit, which they can use to promote their messages while stifling opposition (Tucker et al. 2017; Roberts 2018). As Figure 7 demonstrates, the volume of engagement with posts using the pro-Sisi and pro-Military slogan “Tahya Masr” (Long Live Egypt) have continued to rise since Sisi came to power.

Figure 7: Facebook Engagement with Posts Mentioning “Tahya Masr”

Plot displays the weekly volume of engagement (interactions including likes, shares, comments and reactions) to public posts on Egyptian Facebook pages referencing the pro-Sisi and pro-Military slogan “Tahya Masr” (Long Live Egypt) from January 2011 to June 2020. Data was collected through the Crowdtangle API.

In the post-coup period, Egypt’s military regime stepped up efforts to use social media to surveil and target members of the Muslim Brotherhood. While many members were arrested during protests on the ground, the government also began investing in new technology to monitor their online communications on a large scale. Although officially the monitoring was intended to focus on terror attacks, as one Egyptian Interior Ministry official described in 2014, “We are looking at any conversation, any interaction, we might find worrying or would want to keep a closer eye on...We are watching conversations between Islamists, or those who discuss Islamism. We are watching communities, which we consider at risk” (Frenkel and Atef 2014). Along these lines, social media communications have increasingly been used as a pretext for arresting members of the Muslim Brotherhood (Freedom House 2018) and recent legislation considers any individual with over 5000 followers on social media to be a
media entity, enabling the regime to further monitor and control online activity.

Beyond intimidation and censorship of online activists, the Egyptian regime has also embraced the use of computational propaganda, with General Sisi even stating publicly that he could sway social media agenda using “electronic brigades” (Darwish et al. 2017). These messages pollute the online sphere, inflating perceptions of grassroots support for the military regime and drowning out other voices. By portraying members of the Muslim Brotherhood as extremists and terrorists in the online sphere, the regime has effectively discredited the organization in the eyes of many Egyptians. As Figure 8 demonstrates, the volume of engagement with posts referring to members of the Muslim Brotherhood as terrorists increased after the coup and has spiked again in 2020.

Figure 8: Facebook Engagement with Posts Referring to Muslim Brotherhood Members as Terrorists

Plot displays the weekly volume of engagement (interactions including likes, shares, comments and reactions) to public posts on Egyptian Facebook pages referencing the Arabic phrase “Brotherhood are Terrorists” from January 2011 to June 2020. Data was collected through the Crowdtangle API.
Conclusions

Islamists have long capitalized on new media technologies to mobilize their followers in the face of repression, and their embrace of social media is the latest manifestation of this trend. As the examples detailed in this chapter suggest, the Muslim Brotherhood’s early adoption of new media technologies, extensive offline networks and financial resources, and hierarchical structure have enabled the organization to be remarkably effective on social media relative to non-Islamist actors. Additionally, the organization has proven resilient, mobilizing online persistently in the face of severe repression in the aftermath of the coup that ousted Mohamed Morsi.

However, the same tools that gave Islamists new opportunities to mobilize have also accelerated the fragmentation of their leadership and amplified extremist voices. Given how adept extremist actors are at exploiting online platforms to broadcast their messages, this development is particularly troubling from a policy perspective. Moreover, as Egypt’s military regime has increasingly harnessed social media to achieve its goals of stifling opposition, the ability of Islamists to continue to effectively mobilize on these platforms remains uncertain.

If, as resource mobilization theory would suggest, groups with more centralized leadership and access to resources will mobilize more effectively both on and offline, then we are likely to see the Egyptian regime, and repressive regimes in diverse contexts, increasingly exert control over the online sphere. At the same time, the flexible and fast-evolving nature of social media platforms enables opposition movements to constantly find new opportunities to mobilize. Given Islamists’ long history of creatively harnessing new media technologies in the face of repression, we may instead continue to see the Muslim Brotherhood embrace alternative online platforms for mobilization. Thus the cat and mouse game between Islamists and authoritarian regimes may continue to evolve across new platforms as Islamists continue their power struggle on and offline.
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