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Can it tweet its way to democracy? The promise of participatory media in Africa

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PREFACE

On 28 November 2010, the day of Egyptian parliamentary elections, prominent Egyptian blogger Sandmonkey wrote a short missive about the depressing state of Egyptian politics. 'Have a lovely day, and don't forget to go to polls and vote for two people on your ballots,' he said. 'That might invalidate your vote, but at least it won't allow them to steal it.' Most of the Egyptian online political activists we interviewed for this report shared his views. Egypt was a land of discontent, but activists were not sure if people would be willing or able to fight the regime.

As the uprising against the President Hosni Mubarak's regime in the streets of the country's cities unfolded, that pessimism of the most politically agitated members of the country's online community two months earlier seemed very misplaced. But in more ways than one, these members had contributed a lot towards defeating their own assessment of the state of affairs by gradually shifting the balance of power between the regime and its pro-democracy opponents. Although most of the research for the report was done before the protest actions in Tunisia and Egypt, and the debates they generated about the role of social media in organising and mobilising anti-authoritarian movements, we believe that it gives a useful insight into understanding the process of awakening and incubation of ideas that led to the revolts.

In this report, we explore the changing ways in which citizens are chipping away the power of authoritarian regimes in Africa, including Egypt, through the use of online participatory media. We argue that African online media are still the preserve of the continent's elite. The internet enables these elite users to develop democratic social practices and information discourse. It does so by reducing government control of information and enhancing political participation. As our case studies show, the democratisation of elite groups can trigger wider social and political changes.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

More than a decade and half after scholars first started to speculate about the democratic implications of an evolving networked public sphere for government and politics in the world, many analysts still dismiss internet-enabled democratisation in Africa as a farfetched scenario, given the limitation of access to the technology of the continent's citizens. In this report, we investigate if this dismissive analysis is justified. Does the internet change the power relationship between states and citizens in African authoritarian countries where the technology's penetration rate is low?

Our theoretical and empirical inquiry into the online participatory political media of five African authoritarian countries provides a mixed answer. Based on our findings, we argue that analysts and scholars ought to avoid falling into the trap of trying to predict the impact of the technology on democratic change solely based on the number of people who use it. The internet's effect on politics in general in some countries with very low connectivity has been noteworthy because the users are mostly members of social groups that have significant political muscle in their countries. Considering several variables, we make five core claims:

- In all the countries we have investigated, there are social groups that play crucial roles in politics. These are mostly elite and educated groups (students, teachers, intellectuals and local elite), and high and medium ranking soldiers. The utilisation of the internet for political purposes by these groups has implications that the weight of numbers alone cannot show. This is not an elitist theory of politics, but an empirically verifiable fact.
- Among these groups the early adopters of the technology usually have significant roles in setting the direction for the technology's use. We call this an interpretative role. In three of the cases – Tunisia, Egypt and Ethiopia – the earlier users were liberals with anti-authoritarian views. For that reason, the internet's introduction to those societies acted as a subversive medium. The fact that the internet's degree of distribution in a lot of cases follows what social scientists call power law – with a small number of blogs (mainly older ones) having the majority of inward links and a majority of blogs having a small number of links going to them – has given the early adopters enormous clout to further interpret and reinterpret its use even after the introductory phase.

- Government policy can determine how the internet is used. But we reject the view that censorship and limiting access to citizens in general are the best ways for governments seeking to control the internet. An optimal result for such governments also requires selective denial of access to opponents of the regime, particularly at the earlier stage of the technology's introduction. The contrast between Ethiopia and Eritrea highlights the different outcomes of different control mechanisms. Ethiopia's approach of control is mainly censorship and a general limitation of access. Yet its cyberspace is one of the most subversive in the world because many of those who have access are anti-government. Eritrea selectively prohibited access to opponents of the government through a profile-screening process when it introduced the internet, resulting in an exclusive early adoption of the technology by the ruling and co-opted elite who then set the direction of its use.
- Although Tunisia's revolution will generate a lot of debate on the potential of the online political participatory media to facilitate revolutions, it is impractical to expect a chain of twitter revolutions to take place in many African authoritarian states anytime soon, both because of low internet penetration and the readiness of many African authoritarian leaders to act decisively and brutally at the earliest stage of protests. We need to leave behind the obsession with revolutions and adopt a long-term approach, which includes empowerment of more and more people through technology-facilitated political participation. Even in Tunisia, the story of the significance of online participatory media to the revolution is much more complex than the media narrative. It is important to remember that blogs and other online social media played an important role in politicising citizens who were once complacent, and created a strong hostility towards the Ben Ali regime, by relentlessly exposing its rampant corruption and human rights abuses, as well as opening a robust participatory forum for discussing these issues long before the revolution. It was exactly for this reason that the Tunisian government tried to censor the net and hack the blogs of dissidents years before anyone ever considered Ben Ali's power as vulnerable.
- The relationship between bloggers and the mainstream media not controlled by the government in African authoritarian countries is much less fractious, both rhetorically and in practice, than what we notice in the democratic West. Bloggers both directly and indirectly influence the agenda of mainstream media outlets and they also function as agenda-testing grounds for journalists. This is relevant for those institutions that want to support the independent media in authoritarian countries.

This paper offers a policy-focused overview of the state of online political participatory media in selected African countries although some theoretical

issues that are relevant for understanding our research questions, and predictive frameworks, are raised in the introductory part of the paper.

1. Introduction

On 19 October 2007, two EU diplomats were expelled from Ethiopia after being caught while they were allegedly trying to smuggle two fugitive dissidents to Kenya. The incident sparked one of the most publicised diplomatic rows between the European Commission and the Ethiopian government. *The Economist* newspaper called the whole saga 'a relic of cold war drama'. But apart from the degree of controversy, what made this case exceptional was that Ethiopia's bloggers were primarily responsible for breaking the news of the arrest of European diplomats, the Ethiopian government's elaborate espionage operation in the European Commission's office in Addis Ababa and the risks of torture to one of the arrested dissidents who worked as a human rights attorney for the Commission. The mainstream media, including international news agencies, woke up to the story long after the bloggers had run with it. Andrew Heavens, former Reuters correspondent in Addis Ababa, had to painfully admit that that Ethiopian bloggers had 'scored an old-fashioned scoop over the rest of the mainstream press'.¹

This is just one example of the increasing role of participatory new media in Africa. In Uganda, eyewitness accounts of the infamous September riots in 2010 were tweeted within the first few minutes of the outbreak of violence. In Rwanda, where the press is a silent partner of the increasingly autocratic regime of President Paul Kagame, critical voices can only be found in Facebook pages and chatrooms. Opponents of Tunisia's authoritarian regime use social network sites to voice their displeasure and agitate fellow Tunisians to challenge the government. Egypt has seen a tremendous growth in online activism and participation. There is also a burgeoning participatory media even in Somalia where little government authority exists.

But does that mark the reignition of a stalled democratisation process in Africa? In recent years, discourse on the internet's potential and actual impact on increasing democratisation in authoritarian and semi-authoritarian states has flourished in academia and other public platforms, yielding often contradictory observations. On the one side are the scholars who argue that, if the proliferation of the internet in authoritarian countries follows the pattern in democratic societies, it can be assumed that the resulting increase in access to information and participation for citizens will make authoritarian governance precarious. On the other side are sceptics who argue that predictions of communications technology-induced democratisations have failed in the past, and that there is very little empirical evidence to support the much trumpeted democratisation potential of the internet.

This growing debate often neglects the internet's democratisation effect in authoritarian countries in Africa, mainly because access to the technology in the

¹ <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2006/10/27/ethiopian-blogger-scoops-mainstream-media>.

continent is very limited. The anecdotes and the media reports are often dismissed as stories that are unrepresentative of the general picture. This five-country exploratory paper on online participatory media in Africa examines if the neglect is justified by asking two questions. What is the internet doing to the information sphere and spaces of political participation in Africa? And what does that mean to democracy in the continent? The research's theoretical arguments and its empirical findings show that the conventional wisdom that dismisses the internet's role of democratic change in Africa cannot withstand serious scrutiny.

Framing the debate: democracy from above

Claims of the democratic effects of online political participatory media (OPPMs) in authoritarian African countries appear, at first sight, to be entirely chimerical. Despite gradual growth in internet penetration, Africa is the least connected continent in the world; less than 11% of Africans use the internet. Studies in individual countries suggest that most of these people either use the internet primarily for exchanging emails with relatives and friends living abroad or to obtain football scores and entertainment news. The number of people who use the major social networking site (OSN), Facebook, is less than a third of the internet users in many African countries. These figures, in fact, are flattering.² Most users of OSNs in Africa are congregated in three countries: Egypt, South Africa and Morocco.

Ebeling (2003) raises the spatial paradox of African online spaces resulting from the small fraction of internet users. The internet has made it easier for Africans to publish stories of significant importance to their societies, but they are more widely read outside of Africa than in the places where these issues have the most impact. Some of our case studies reinforce this view. Analysis of online daily reaches of the most widely read blogs in Ethiopia and Eritrea shows that their readerships are mainly in North America and Europe. Melkamu (2009) argues that accessibility problems have hindered the formation of online public spheres in many African countries. 'Public opinion formation in Africa', he contends, 'is an unambiguously off-line process.' Melkamu and other scholars accept that patterns of internet expansion differ in Africa, but even in those countries where diffusion is increasing at an impressive pace, low literacy and income hamper 'genuine' access. Sophisticated systems of control and monitoring of the internet in authoritarian African countries is another factor contributing to the accessibility barrier. This has led some scholars to argue that African online spaces are, as Merin (2010: 9) puts it, 'decidedly un-African'.

This conventional observation is based on the normatively powerful assumption that democratic change is brought about through mass involvement. The crucial test of the internet's democratic effect is, therefore, the extent to which it involves citizens in the processes and institutions of the state. In

² www.socialbakers.com/facebook-statistics.

democratic countries, the issue is framed in terms of the internet's ability to make individuals in complex society properly engaged citizens of a democratic polity, rather than passive subjects of an authority (Benkler, 2006). From Mill to Pateman, participation in a political process by at least voting intelligently is posited as a crucial aspect of democracy (Hardin, 2009). In recent years, much of the talk has switched from participatory democracy to its sometimes-unfriendly cousin, deliberative democracy. Contemporary political science is awash with observations of disengagement of individuals from political participation and deliberation (Coleman and Blumler, 2009). The internet as an inherently participatory medium is often cited with varying degrees of enthusiasm as a tool to regenerate dying political engagement.

In authoritarian countries, the evaluative question is far more complex. The source of this difficulty is the question: when do we say that democratisation has started? Welzel (2009) proposes three different ways that democratisation can be defined: the introduction of democracy in an authoritarian regime, the strengthening of democratic characteristics of already democratic countries and the survival of democracy. What is relevant to authoritarian states is the first understanding of democratisation. Analysis of the introduction of democracy requires a rough cut-off point. Some scholars fix that point at the time of the change of authoritarian regime, the introduction of civic and political freedoms and the start of institutionalisation of the rule of law. Here, democratisation in its first form and 'democratic transition' are used synonymously. Although this is a dominant view in academia and policy literature, it is by no means the only one. The cut-off point is conceived by some as the time when the conditions under which democracy becomes likely start to flourish. It is perhaps stating the obvious to mention that what these conditions constitute are matters of great contention.

Quite logically, in the regime-change-centric view of democratisation, the test for the internet's democratic effect is its ability to hasten the demise of authoritarian regimes. The question in the alternative view is whether the internet makes the conditions for democracy likely. These different questions can be asked in a deterministic way: does the technology have inherent effects on society? Or in a non-deterministic way: does the internet, *ceteris paribus*, possess the potential to make some conditions or outcomes more likely? But there is now a minimum framework that scholars of both views agree upon. Whether democratisation starts at regime-change or not, one can evaluate democratic developments in authoritarian states. Within the African context, however, the number of users of the technology is so insignificant that many scholars find it hard to ask these questions from any perspective of democratisation beyond a theoretical level.

But the focus on numbers distracts from another important question: who uses the internet in Africa? Many theories of revolution and democratic change have attributed highly influential roles to certain social groups in instigating

changes. In a seminal work on social revolutions in Iran, Nicaragua and the Philippines, Misagh Parsa (2000) identifies students as the core players in sparking movements. Many studies on the struggles for decolonisation also highlight the crucial role of intellectuals. This is true of many African countries; students and intellectuals began (though many times their roles were usurped in the middle by soldiers) movements against colonialism and for modernisation (Kebede, 2008).

In transition literature, a prominent place is accorded to the argument that elite pacts and consociations have resulted in democratic change in many countries, although some findings have recently fallen under serious scrutiny. Modernisation theory posits that the rise in literacy, urbanisation, income, specialisation, better infrastructure and availability of technology alters the power balance between the masses and the elite in favour of the masses – leading to sustainable collective action and demands for the redistribution of resources.

Many of the exploratory studies on internet users in Africa suggest that the digital divide within national borders is high. Mwesige (2003) finds that internet cafés in Uganda are ‘by and large the preserve of the “haves”’ of Ugandan society. He raises lack of basic technological skills, high cost of access to computers and the internet, deficiency in the requisite requirements of the English language and poverty as barrier factors. Megenta and Mekonnen (2005) consider the exorbitant access cost to be the crucial cause of digital divide in Ethiopia. Faris (2010) highlights that even in Egypt, where the government has actively pursued expansion of access, the internet is still the preserve of the relatively rich and educated. In Tanzania, technological availability has resulted in a major rural–urban divide (Furuholt and Kristiansen, 2007). There is scant literature on the demography of users of online social networks, but we can make two plausible claims. First, given that the median user of online social networks (without a breakdown of the specific social network one uses) is rapidly becoming demographically similar to the median internet user at the international level, the digital divide is roughly the same in Africa – provided that the international distributive patterns are similar to the continent’s. Second, given that the sets of technological and language skills, literacy level and the amount of connection time that participating in online social networks requires are bigger than the requirements of internet use, *a fortiori* the digital divide between the non-internet users and the users of online social networks is at least as big as the divide between internet users and non-users. This second claim is tentatively backed by some of our findings in this paper. As Mwesige (2003) says, Africa is indeed a continent of cyber elites.

The divide in internet use is a matter of serious concern for development scholars. But we do not grapple with it here. Our aim is to develop an argument that, despite the small number of users of online social networks in Africa and the great divide, the tools have a strong but susceptible democratic potential. We argue that an imaginative policy by states and institutions which have an interest

in promoting democracy in Africa can harness this potential. This is not just a theoretical approach; we present the relevance and strength of our argument based upon the systematic examination of evidence from five authoritarian African countries – Egypt, Ethiopia, Tunisia, Uganda and Eritrea. For this purpose, we adopt the scalar notion of democratisation. This is not a definitive study of the internet and democracy in authoritarian African countries, but an attempt to set out a framework for approaching and understanding the issue for policy-makers and researchers.

Why the elite matters?

Our argument rests upon three core assumptions. The first follows the two claims we made earlier: regarding the influential role of small elites and some social groups in democratic change in many African states where modernisation is not high and given the almost exclusive use of the internet is by African elite and students, we assume that the low number of internet users is not necessarily an impediment to democratic change – if the internet enables its elite users to develop democratic social practices and information discourse, enhances the power of non-regime elites and democratic discourse and social practice within regime elites, or a different combination of these factors. Our assumption can be made stronger with a modification: all other things being equal, enablement of these factors results in democratic change in African states, if they follow the trend of democratic changes these factors severally or in different combination brought about in numerous other countries.

The second assumption is inter-related with the first. We argue that the internet does enable one of the aforementioned factors or a different combinations of them in many African countries. This assumption rests on two further suppositions. First, elites who adopt the internet early are usually different from elites in power in authoritarian regimes. They are mostly liberal and well connected to the outside world. Second, diffusion innovative theory suggests that these early adopters have enormous influence in technological practices and ideas at later stages (Rogers, 1983). In the context of OPPMs, as the subject of our research, the uneven distribution of connectedness gives early adopters an opportunity to remain very influential for a long period of time.

Regime elites have power over interpretative flexibility in internet policy, offering and constructing meaning to the technology and its use in the country, but that power is usually strongly exercised at the stage of mass adoption rather than elite adoption.

Our third assumption is again related to the subject of our study: online political participatory media. We suggest that the crucial reason for the first assumption is the nature of participatory media. Drawing from literature on authoritarian control, we argue that authoritarian regimes work to arrest the development of potential challengers by making the formation of social groups

and dissenting collective actions difficult. Online political participatory media creates opportunities to subvert these strategies.

First, participatory media have a double effect in that an elite co-optee can wear two hats. Outside of her network created through participatory media, she maintains her support for the regime by falsifying her true private preference. Inside the network, she acts on her true preference.

Second, they lower the transaction cost of finding like-minded people. Policies by authoritarian regimes often restrict associational life, preventing the formation of, banning or restricting civil society groups and political organisations where people of roughly the same views meet and interact. In the pre-internet world, the most common subversive mechanism used to be establishing underground groups. The challenges of identifying and recruiting group members and sustaining the group in a repressive environment are very daunting. The search tools and the network architecture of participatory media minimise the challenge. Since what Geoffrey Blainey once called 'the tyranny of distance' has completely vanished in the internet world, the pool of potential like-minded people is vast. In the context of national politics, elites are able to create region-transcending national groups through participatory media. As significantly, the echo-chamber effect of communication among like-minded people strengthens the antipathy of members towards the regime and, thus, tightens their bond. Bond-strength is crucial for both sustaining the group and reducing spillover costs.

Third, participatory media challenge the regime's monopoly of information and its interpretation. Weber (2009) claims power's need for legitimation. Some of the tried and tested instruments of legitimation for authoritarian regimes are cognitive, such as information control and manipulation, creating rallying ideology and instigating patriotic passions through propaganda. But the regime's monopoly of information and its interpretation is also effectively deployed to confuse even anti-status quo forces and thwart group formation. Participatory media do not obliterate the dominance of authoritarian regimes in the information sphere, they simply diminish their hegemony.

Our three interlinked assumptions, taken together *mutatis mutandis*, make a claim that in Africa elite use of participatory media has a democratic effect. This is not a negative claim, i.e. it does not argue, as some elite theories of democratisation do, that mass anti-regime organisation and mobilisation are unimportant and/or undesirable for democratic change. Rather, our claim is positive. It maintains that internet-assisted elitist democratic change is possible. The analysis below illustrates in a fundamental way how, given sufficient elite use, participatory media trigger democratic change in African authoritarian countries. This question leads us to the discussion of a 'theory of change'.

One internet: three perspectives

For the better part of the last decade, discourse on the internet's democratic effects in authoritarian countries in academia and the public sphere has been conducted in a tangled fashion. Going through stacks of literature, one cannot help but think that partisan scholars and analysts who simplistically categorised it into two contesting general groups – techno-optimism and techno-pessimism – were sometimes talking past each other. One of the fundamental problems of this miscommunication was the lack of a settled framework for the discussion of change. As noted by Zuckerman (2010), academic scholarship and policy research benefits greatly from identifying explicit theoretical constructions to address the question: 'how do we think this changes closed societies?' Zuckerman himself lists four theories of change that implicitly underlie the work behind the internet and democratic change in authoritarian regimes. Clearing some overlapping contours and making slight analytical changes, we think that his four theories can be reduced to three. It is within the framework of these theories that we discuss the possibility of elite-induced democratic changes in authoritarian African countries.

1. THE TWITTER REVOLUTION THEORY: The first and perhaps the most widely trumpeted theory may be called 'the twitter revolution theory'. There are different forms of revolution by tweets theory. One view that has occupied much of the attention of scholars is the claim that participatory media enhances information cascades. Like many other theories pertaining to the internet and democracy, this view was popularised by Clay Shirky (2008). Drawing from the work of UCLA political scientist Susanne Lohmann (1994), who used the general work on social cascades and particularly the theory of information cascades proposed by Bikhchandani *et al.* (1992), to analyse the 1989 'Monday demonstrations' in Leipzig, East Germany, Shirky posited that the internet decreases the marginal costs of protest by sequentially turning rational 'fence-sitters' into protesters.

Informational cascade theory is an attempt to reconcile herd behaviour and other theories that attribute irrationality to crowd behaviour with rational-choice theory. The thesis is simple but germane: it is often entirely rational to depend on public information (information conveyed by the opinion and actions of others), as private gathering of information is costly. Gathering information individually is rational only insofar as it provides more net additional benefit than using public information. Cascades happen when 'an individual, having observed the actions of others ahead of him, follows the behaviour of the preceding individual without regard to his own information' (Bikhchandani *et al.*, 1992). Lohmann posits information cascades as the interpretative framework for a sequence of mass protests.

- People take costly political action to express their dissatisfaction with the incumbent regime.
- The public then takes informational cues from changes in the size of the protest movement over time.
- The regime loses public support and collapses if the protest activities reveal it to be malign.

There are four groups with different tendencies of participation in protests. Anti-status quo extremists get involved in protests irrespective of their private information. Activist moderates participate in political actions based on the information they privately gather. Fence sitters may support the protest, but abstain due to its costs. Regime supporters do not get involved in the action as it may precipitate the collapse of the incumbent. The cascade effect kicks in when activist moderates think that the protest involves more than anti-incumbent extremists. These and members of the third group make sequential decisions based on the turnout of protesters relative to their expectations.

Members of these important groups obviously have different thresholds for acting as a result of the public information they get. An important factor that affects individual threshold for participation in a political protest is the individual's private and public information about current and past regime responses to anti-status quo political action. OPPM amplify informational cascades by increasing the individual's ability to know the identity of individual protesters (overcoming Lohmann's offline assumption of ignorance of individual identity) – refining their knowledge of distribution of preferences through the exposure of private information and hidden profiles, increasing the value of marginal actors and providing the nature of regime response in almost real time. This simple example by Faris (2010) demonstrates the case rather well.

If Facebook had been around in 1989 Leipzig, the message 'Hans is heading to the square to demonstrate' would have been instantly transmitted to anyone in his network. While it is unlikely that Hans' close friends would have been particularly surprised by this decision – since actors tend to inform those closest to them of their political preferences – it may have been news to the weaker ties in his social network: distant cousins, acquaintances from work, old college buddies – the people commonly referred to as 'friends-in-law'.

The relevance of the twitter revolution theory to African authoritarian countries is questionable, not least because the internet, as mentioned earlier, is used by an insignificant number of people. The fundamental premise of this theory is mass involvement in political action. Meier (2007) argues that, even for lesser degree non-regime-change-centric political actions like strikes and small demonstrations, the level of internet penetration is very important. But the scepticism is still difficult to dislodge, even in a situation where the increase in internet penetration makes participatory media a non-elite tool with the potential to reduce the costs of collective action.

For the reasons outlined, we are reasonably sceptical of the applicability of the twitter revolution theory in many African autocracies. If anything, an obsession with it leads to bad policy by democracy-promoting institutions and countries. The following two theories seem more promising.

2. REDUCING GOVERNMENT CONTROL OF INFORMATION: A long-term justification of power of authoritarian regimes can only be achieved through control of the flow and interpretation of information. The force, deliberative, persuasive, social-compact, economic and other theories of authoritarianism do not undermine this basic statement of fact. But the mechanisms and levels of authoritarian control of information and its interpretation vary, depending on the regime typology. Information control and manipulation in a full-scale authoritarian country is different from a competitive authoritarian system. In the latter, quasi-independent press, contentious political parties, civil society and functioning parliaments all act as agents of information transmission and setters of interpretative frameworks; the arenas of contestation acting as spaces of information exchange – less robust than a marketplace of ideas but vigorous enough to challenge the government. That is one of the reasons why the outcomes of elections and political contestations in competitive authoritarian countries are sometimes hard to predict.

Our explanation of this theory combines identification of spaces of interaction in authoritarian countries with the internet's role in expanding them. Although not explicitly, three spaces of information exchange in authoritarian countries underlie numerous studies on authoritarianism: (1) *selectorate space*, where a body of people on whom autocrats rely to stay in power exclusively exchange information; (2) *permitted/tolerated space*, which is a legally or customarily regulated place of information interaction for the public at large; (3) *underground space*, which falls outside the control of the regime. The size, power and independence of these spaces are determined by the typology of the regime, its strength, the effectiveness of anti-regime forces, the organisational structure and principle of the ruling party and international influence. In full-scale authoritarian regimes, where the permitted/tolerated space is very narrow, the combination of strong anti-regime forces and a weak regime can result in a broad underground space where clandestine publications, civil society and other groups of information interaction flourish. A competitive authoritarian regime usually allows a relatively more open permitted/tolerated space, thereby shrinking the underground space.

We offer a theory that the internet in general and OPDM in particular expand the three spaces of information exchange in authoritarian countries in two ways: influence on traditional media (Farrell and Drezner, 2007) and challenging authoritarian control.

- *Influence on traditional media:* This, in the main, is reflected in the four substantive contributions of the OPPM to the traditional media: agenda-setting (Faris, 2010), agenda-testing through challenge and response (Faris, 2010), claim-making and pushing back the boundaries of acceptable ideas in discourse. The latter point is particularly significant in authoritarian countries since most of them set the terms of discourse in the state through propaganda and repression. The mainstream media filter out arguments based on an acceptability test. Bloggers can make some arguments appear to be less fringe by advocating views that are more radical in comparison.
- *Challenging authoritarian control:* Recent successes in authoritarian control of the internet have underscored the limitations of the progressive idealist model of the ontology of the internet. As Hare (2010) noted, 'the internet's architecture allows for a greater degree of interpretative flexibility than once thought'. But assuming that either the interpretation is the exclusive jurisdiction of the state or that the way technology is employed in any given society is determined by how that society makes use of it, *ipso facto*, is naïve determinism. As already argued, early adopters of the technology, non-state opinion leaders, and other key domestic innovators have a competing role of interpretation.

The response of savvy authoritarian regimes, like China, suggests an understanding of the internet's long-term threat (Faris, 2010). The architecture and economics of the internet allows OPPM to flourish. Even for states that are relatively successful in filtering the net, the challenge is perpetual. In the place of one blocked or filtered OPPM, another sprouts up. Scanning millions of encrypted email messages and thousands of chat boards is costly. Asymmetric tactical advantages give online participatory media cheap ways of countering government repression efforts. Further, as Benkler notes, the net allows anti-status quo citizens to build 'censorship-resistant' tools by collecting their own resources. It is also argued that, as scale-free networks, online participatory media are resilient against attacks by the state. The state has either to take out a large number of nodes or attack the most influential hubs to destroy the network. The implication of this is clear: the world of online participatory media poses significant problems to authoritarian regimes that set out to shut down underground spaces. This space is the place of subversion, a place where the government's attempt for information dominance is challenged.

Two options are open to authoritarian countries to counter the potential of OPPM to either expand underground space or make it resilient against attack. The first is the North Korean style of complete resistance to internet use. The second is to exclude anti-status quo forces from use. Limiting the distribution of internet use can be done by a careful introduction of the technology. In Eritrea, for example, anyone who wants to subscribe for internet use has to do so via the country's telecom agency, which possesses a checklist of subversive or potentially subversive people. Subscription is approved only after preliminary

screening of the individual, based on the checklist, and a more thorough background check done at the subregional administrations. In Burma, the government must approve individual subscription requests. Both countries have been able to severely limit internet use among opponents of the regime and ensure that the early adopters of the technology are predominantly their supporters. But, in both countries, the economic effect of avoiding the liberating effects of technology is very high.

The problem within many authoritarian countries is deeper. Many introduced the internet in the late 1990s as a tool of scientific and economic progress. They were largely oblivious to its political threats and left it relatively open. When they awoke to the dangers that it posed, the process of adoption had already irreversibly proceeded in a manner that was unfavourable to them. With smart strategic interventions, some regimes have limited the effect, but have not obliterated it totally. We assume that online political participatory media flourish better in authoritarian states that started with a liberal approach to the internet, than those that began the process of adoption carefully. The underground space is much more resilient in the former than the latter.

3. PARTICIPATION THEORY: Treated as subjects of indoctrination, manipulation and passive consumers of message, people in authoritarian countries have a narrow legal-judicial conception of citizenship. This citizenship can be understood as 'one's official membership of a political community (usually a nation-state) and its compulsory laws, regulations and customs' (Coleman and Blumler, 2009). In this sense, to be a citizen is to be a subject of laws and customs – to be in possession of some rights that non-citizens do not have. It denotes the difference between citizens and foreigners. In democracies, this passive state-centred citizenship is contrasted with the populist notion of democracy, in which 'the people are free when their wishes are the law' (Rikker, 2003). In authoritarian countries, even the state-centred form of citizenship is restricted. The legitimacy of the regime is not dependent on consent given by citizens through legal-judicial procedures, but on repression, clientelism and co-optation, enforced through these procedures.

Many political and social theorists have identified the internet as a tool of enabling transformation from a state-centred citizenship to active participatory citizenship in both authoritarian and democratic countries. Rheingold (1999), for instance, suggests that the structure of the internet undermines the clientelistic relationship between a small number of people who 'were able to influence and share the perceptions of entire nations' and citizens. For Benkler (2006), the internet creates a public sphere where active citizenship is fostered. Marc Lynch, who remains unimpressed by the effectiveness of revolutions by tweets theory in the Arab world, is nonetheless sanguine about public-sphere blogging. Coleman and Blumler (2009) see its 'suggestive candidacy' to escape from the brutal claims of social-choice theory.

Counterpublics theorists express their enthusiasm for the internet's potential as an alternative public sphere for marginalised groups. In the early days of the internet, this enthusiasm was qualified. Catherine Palczewski (2001) worried that the economic barriers to the internet and the lack of space for dialogic discussion might hinder the formation and development of counterpublics, although she was generally hopeful as a result of its potential to overcome space and time. The access barrier was raised by other proponents of counterpublics (Palczewski, 2001). Another concern about the internet's potential was the static nature of webpages raised by McDorman (2001). The advent of Web 2.0 and the dramatic reduction of economic barriers turned the qualified optimism into great hope in the mid-2000s. Faris (2010) and Wheeler (2004) encapsulate this hope.

In African authoritarian countries, the application of populist democratic conceptions of participation, both in the public sphere and the alternative counterpublics, remains limited, due to the problem of access. Yet it can be posited that the internet provides the elite who are either excluded from the selectorate or belong to marginalised groups with an opportunity to actively participate in the public sphere or counterpublics. It is perhaps restating conventional wisdom to say that the reference to participation in democratic theory does not include mere engagement in making noise. That kind of participation is highly undesirable; it is a danger to the stability and coherence of a well-ordered society.

Stating the hypothesis

Having made our assumptions and then presented the three theories of democratic change that underlie discourse on the internet and democratic change, it is now possible to state the main research hypothesis. If what we have outlined in theory is correct, *ceteris paribus*, elite use of participatory media in low-penetration authoritarian African countries, which at the initial stage approached the introduction of the internet in a relatively open fashion, decreases regime information control and interpretation and/or increases political and civic participation. By doing both or one of them, it speeds up democratic change in authoritarian countries. This hypothesis, if proven right, is important for theoretical, empirical and policy analysis of the relationship between online participatory media and democratic change in authoritarian countries.

Methodology and framework of discussion

This study employs five self-contained, single-study cases to test our hypothesis. The cases focus on political events in five authoritarian countries in Africa between 2005 and December 2010. The process of choosing the five countries was driven by several factors. First, we wanted different types of authoritarian regimes to be represented in order to view the role of participatory media in each of them. Second, we chose countries that have different models of ICT development in general and internet expansion in particular, to examine the relationship between the dynamics of the democratisation role of participatory media and ICT development roles. Third, we wanted to include countries with differing degrees of development and independence of the mainstream media, so that we might observe the interaction between the mediasphere and blogosphere and its role in democratic change. Based on these criteria, we chose Egypt, Tunisia, Ethiopia, Uganda and Eritrea.

Egypt represents a stable competitive authoritarianism where the development of electoral politics since 2005, the increasing freedom of the media and the judicialisation of politics have opened up arenas of power contestation without endangering the regime's power. The Mubarak government industriously tried to liberalise the telecommunications sector and expand internet penetration, while leaving it relatively free of censorship and control.

By contrast, Tunisia's aggressive ICT development was supplemented by excessive filtering and censorship. With an unfree media, a weak, stifled or banned opposition and a judiciary under absolute control of the government, Tunisia, until January's revolution dethroned Ben Ali, was a case of full-scale authoritarianism.

The authoritarianism of the Meles Zenawi regime in Ethiopia is in a state of flux. In the last six years, it has gone from a full-fledged competitive authoritarianism to full-scale authoritarianism, with indications that the transformation towards the latter will continue. This is a period of deep political decay; independent media, opposition political parties and civil society groups have been muzzled or weakened with successive legislation and government actions. The regime has shunned a market-based approach to the development of the internet, but it did not begin censorship until the online media posed a serious threat to its power.

Developments in Uganda are mixed. With the introduction of competitive elections in 2006, the country has formally entered a period of party competition and electoral politics. Yet multi-party contestation has not led to the expansion of democracy. Instead, noticeable regressions of freedom of the press and association have been documented. Uganda started liberalisation of the internet enthusiastically. It was among the first sub-Saharan African countries to get full internet connectivity. It has also kept the net relatively open.

Eritrea is a country with full-scale authoritarianism, bordering on classic totalitarianism. It has no independent media, no electoral politics and no independent civil society. Its judiciary is the arm of the executive, which is entirely dominated by President Isayas Afewerki. Eritrea was the last country in Africa to establish access to the internet, and its approach has been similar to that of Ethiopia – cautious central allocation of the resource.

We discuss the regime type, freedom of the press, internet development model and surveillance and control of the net in each country in detail. This is relevant because these variables are important elements of our hypothesis. While we use secondary materials for this discussion, we introduce four authoritarian models of information and discourse on the web as a framework for dealing with surveillance and control. These four models are the basis of various research works on surveillance and control, but are not explicitly identified.

The first is censorship of independent websites and sources of information (e.g. China, Saudi Arabia). As Ethan Zuckerman made clear in his ‘cute cat theory of digital activism’, some of these independent information sources, like Facebook, are hard to censor without alerting a large group of people who use the internet for mundane purposes (like exchanging pictures of their cute cats). Instead, or as a supplement to the first, authoritarian countries may use what Sunstein and Vermeule (2008) call ‘cognitive infiltration’. Although the authors recommend this model for the US government to fight conspiracy theories of extremist groups, authoritarians have—prior to this recommendation – used the model against their domestic opponents, which include democracy and rights activists. Cognitive infiltration is defined as an infiltration whereby government agents chip away at the knowledge of their opponents ‘by planting doubts about the theories and stylized facts that circulate within such groups’ (Sunstein and Vermeule, 2008: 219). The case of the Kremlin bloggers in Russia is an example of cognitive infiltration at its best. The 50-cent Army in China also practises a diminished and less sophisticated form of this model. The third control mechanism is old-fashioned harassment, persecution and prosecution of web journalists (citizens or professionals), which has a chilling effect on others and decreases the exchange of independent information. The fourth is event-based information filtering. This is different from the censorship of the first as filtering is limited to events, like elections and mass protests, and blockage of political information is blanket. In a way, for the duration of these specific events, authoritarian countries that have liberalised their internet adopt the Cuba/Burma model of information blackout.

Furthermore, we assess the democratic role of online participatory media in each country. This assessment has two aspects. First, based on existing literature, we survey participation in online political participatory media and evaluate the actual impact of the OPPM in the three spaces of information interaction. Second, we use selected case studies to bolster the arguments made in the general survey and assessment. Some of these case studies were selected

from the dataset of the Meta-Activism Project. In order to provide the basic minimum of information to enable the hypothesis to be tested, we consolidated the selected cases by conducting open-ended interviews with different actors in the case. We also selected other cases based on our in-depth observation of events in the five countries. All of the cases were chosen after careful preliminary research based on the principles of self-containment and typicality. There are no cases for Eritrea because the OPPM are generally silent in the Horn of Africa state. In Uganda, the two cases we selected are more anecdotal than representative of the general sample, as the country's OPPM are just emerging. Yet we want to insert a caveat here: case selection in political research in authoritarian countries is not always a matter of choice. Repression and a general climate of distrust have made people reluctant to give interviews or unwilling to speak. Sometimes, it is even difficult to get bloggers and journalists who fearlessly criticise their governments to speak on the record. Consequently, the very few who do speak are interviewed by many researchers, resulting in a 'poisoned well'. A selection of necessity is, therefore, difficult to avoid.

In analysing each country, we discuss some country-specific issues that may not apply to the other cases. For example, the main actors in the Ethiopian and Eritrean online political participatory media are the digital diaspora. We do not see that phenomenon in the other three countries. Extensive research has been conducted on the internet, transnational identity and politics and we draw upon those studies to explore the online participatory media in the two countries, taking the utmost care to avoid repetition. Another example is the bloggers vs Facebookers debate in Egypt – an issue that is irrelevant in the other countries selected. All of these country-specific situations do not, however, affect our variables, which are held uniformly constant.

2. Tunisia: fighting Ben Ali

On the afternoon of 14 January 2011, Tunisia's former iron-fisted ruler Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, 74, fled the country he had ruled for 23 years after four weeks of violent street protests submerged what was until recently assumed to be a decaying, but secure regime. The protests were set off by extreme economic distress, rampant corruption and despotism in the country. But what immediately captured much of the media's attention was the role OPPM played in facilitating the demise of the government. 'The first twitter revolution?' asked Ethan Zuckerman, one of the net's most distinguished analysts, although he was cautious enough not to draw any premature conclusion.³ Others were less careful. Mort Rosenblum at GlobePost concluded that social media had ended 54 years of dictatorship in a few days.⁴ Critics such as Evgeny Morozov and Jillian York responded with articles that questioned the evolving view.⁵

As events are still unfolding, it is hard to know to what extent OPPM were used for organisation and mobilisation in this revolution. But this much we know: during the four weeks of protests, the number of Tunisian Facebook users increased by hundreds of thousands.⁶ Although twitter is not the most widely used OPPM in Tunisia, its use peaked during the period of unrest.⁷ It is also clear that many protestors posted detailed information about their involvement, and calls for demonstrations at specific locations and times were circulated in social networking sites. The extent to which these activities helped in organising and mobilising protestors is still unclear. Perhaps the most prudent conclusion one can make is to say, as Ethan Zuckerman did, that the internet helped, but it is too soon to quantify the scale of its contribution.

But much of the focus on just the four weeks of protests misses a larger point. As Clay Shirky noted, OPPM 'do not cause otherwise complacent citizens to become angry enough to take the streets'.⁸ Yet OPPM can politicise complacent citizens by exposing the corruption and human rights abuses of authoritarian rulers, and opening platforms for discussion of these issues. As we see in this part of the report, there is overwhelming evidence that Tunisia's OPPM were engaged in this project long before the revolution. Our discussion starts with a brief account of some of the key characteristics of Ben Ali's authoritarianism.

³ www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/01/14/the_first_twitter_revolution?page=0,1.

⁴ www.globalpost.com/dispatch/africa/110116/tunisia-riots-facebook-twitter.

⁵ <http://jilliancork.com/2011/01/14/not-twitter-not-wikileaks-a-human-revolution>.

⁶ www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2011/01/the-inside-story-of-how-facebook-responded-to-tunisian-hacks/70044.

⁷ <http://giladlotan.com/blog/2011/01/sidibouazid-twitter-hashtag-an-analysis-of-the-people-spreading-the-news>.

⁸ www.cjr.org/the_news_frontier/technologys_role_in_tunisia.php.

The rise of Ben Ali

In what many termed a 'bloodless coup', Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali took power in Tunisia on 7 November 1987. Hopes of democratic reforms soared following the coup, as Ben Ali called for national reconciliation and promised to liberalise the arenas of power contestation and increase participation. He amended the constitution to limit the office of president to a total of three terms, permitting no more than two successively, and introduced regular legislative elections. In a gesture of goodwill, he released Islamic activists who had been arrested by his predecessor, Habib Bourguiba. Around the same time, a national pact was formed with an Islamic party called Harakat al-Ittihad al-Islami. Ben Ali's maiden speech, which proclaimed that 'an advanced and institutionalized political life, truly based on the plurality of parties and mass organizations' was what Tunisia deserved, was hailed as a harbinger of a new era of political openness in the North African country.

Azarva (2007: 4) notes that Ben Ali's rise came at a very crucial time. The Bourguiba presidency had reached a critical stage of decay; nepotism, political infighting and economic stagnation were all too common features of the regime. As a country that adopted the first written constitution in the Arab world and gave women rights unparalleled in the Middle East and North Africa in 1956, Tunisians were right to consider their country a major candidate for democracy. However, the establishment of the Tunisian Human Rights League and the blossoming of the independent press in the 1980s aside, Bourguiba failed to translate the expectation into reality. Ben Ali's ascent was therefore welcomed by most Tunisians (Sadiki, 2002a: 137).

Yet this hope was short lived. Two years after the coup, Ben Ali won a presidential election with more than 99% of the vote. His Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD) swept every seat in parliament. This victory was followed by a massive crackdown on Islamists and forced closure of independent newspapers. Most of these actions were carried out under the guise of checking the Islamisation of North Africa, as civil war and terror involving radical Islamists raged in neighbouring Algeria and the prospect of Islamist-triggered political instability loomed large in Egypt. But the victims of the repression were not just members of Islamist movements. Trade unions, civil society groups and members of the Tunisian Workers' Communist Party experienced the full force of Ben Ali's repressive security-military machine – leading the country into an era of what Middle East historian Roger Owen called 'authoritarian corporatism' (Owen, 1992).

From presidential monarchy to authoritarian corporatism

Authoritarian corporatism theories were first posited in the 1960s to explain the proliferation of growth-oriented authoritarian regimes throughout the decade. Wiarda (1973) formulated this theory in connection with institutional and

cultural practices affecting political process. Newton (1970) focuses more on group formation and interest articulation to further define the concept. Malloy (1977) states that, despite the diverse nature of authoritarian corporate regimes, they possess some basic common features – imperative coordination, limited pluralism (as opposed to open pluralism), a two-level regulated system (corporate regulation of social and economic activities and state regulation of intercorporate group relations) and vague ideology.

The Ben Ali government resisted all attempts to pin ideological labels on the regime. It mainly defined itself in negative terms: anti-fundamentalist Islamism, anti-French domination and anti-Communist. When it did employ positive terms, it frequently embraced ‘modern’, ‘nationalistic’ and ‘developmental’; ‘modern’ because its reforms were significantly changing the country, ‘nationalistic’ because it deepened the systematic effort of developing an overarching concept of national identity that was initiated by Ben Ali’s predecessor and ‘developmental’ because Tunisia’s economy had registered a remarkably sustained growth.

The second feature of self-identification is particularly relevant for the discussion of another element of the authoritarian corporatism of Ben Ali’s regime. Sadiki (2002b: 510) points out that ‘corporatist strategies of co-optation and mediation as well as coercion (e.g. exclusion, purges, and imprisonment) have been used to reify unity and defend it against potentially viable projects’. It is within this exclusionary overarching identity that other identities can exist. Interest groups in Tunisia exist and interact with the state at the discretion of the regime. As in many other authoritarian corporatist states, these groups are ‘non-competitive and hierarchically ordered’ (Sadiki, 2002b: 510). As perceptively observed by Frederic Deyo (1989), in his analysis of Singapore’s authoritarian corporatism, state-approved inclusion is fostered at symbolic, material and political levels. Symbolic inclusion occurs through the recognition of one’s value in the society. That is supported by access to resources and the opportunity for material prosperity (material inclusion). At a political level, inclusion refers to participation in decision-making and the political process. Alternative unapproved identities are excluded from all levels of social inclusion. In many ways, Ben Ali’s Tunisia ‘resembles more closely the Singapore of the 1980s, with its authoritarian and centralized control over polity, economy and society’ (Sadiki, 2002b).

To ensure maintenance of this order, achieving fairly robust economic growth is a necessity. International economic indicators revealed the success of the Ben Ali regime in that respect. Growth averaged more than 6% during much of his reign, inflation was kept low and unemployment remained at a sustainable level. Tunisians enjoyed a generous social welfare scheme of cheap housing, education and healthcare. In his 2003 visit to the country, French President Jacques Chirac called the economic transformation a ‘real Tunisian miracle’. Its modern communications infrastructure mesmerised international investors; Bill

Gates was 'amazed by Tunisia'. Although some economists insisted that Tunisian economic growth was fragile – a position vindicated by the popular protest against Ben Ali that was sparked by economic distress – the positive narrative helped Ben Ali to effectively complete the transition from the presidential monarchy of his predecessor (as Bourguiba had declared himself 'president for life') to a full-fledged classical authoritarian corporatism.

Three stages of corporate authoritarianism

The process of transformation was undertaken in three phases. The first phase (1989–1992) was a period of cautious centralisation of power. During this period, Ben Ali slowly reversed some of the reforms begun by Bourguiba and signalled his intention to rescind his promises of democratic reform. Calls for cohesion replaced pluralism, national reconciliation and democracy as the main theme of his speeches. His emphatic, uncontested win in the 1989 elections indicated a move to power hegemony. But these authoritarian measures were mixed with other ambiguous signals of pluralism. Ben Ali gave a degree of autonomy to Zaytuna University, which was considered by Bourguiba to be a bastion of anti-state Islamist forces. He also declared that, despite extending an olive branch to Tunisian Islamists, he had no intention of rolling back women's rights, calling them 'untouchable'.

This phase was followed by the period of 'façade democracy' (1992–2001). Some analysts argue that this phase was triggered by exogenous factors, particularly the Algerian civil war. But it is hard to prove causality; Tunisian human rights activists insist that Ben Ali exploited the conflict opportunistically to deepen the nascent authoritarianism of his early years. Citing the havoc Islamists wreaked upon neighbouring Algeria, Ben Ali banned Nahda, the main Islamist party, imprisoned thousands of its members, burnt books and purged Zaytuna of its 'radical' Islamic elements. He and his party won the next two elections easily.

Yet the regime strove to project a different image. Prior to the 1994 elections, Ben Ali introduced a legislation guaranteeing 19 out of 163 parliamentary seats to opposition parties. Without this provision, the elections would have ended with no seats for the opposition, as in 1989. For the first time, the 1999 presidential elections involved two contestants to Ben Ali. Yet both Muhammed Bilhaj Amor (leader of the Popular Union Party) and Abd al-Rahm (leader of Unionist Democratic Union) were handpicked by him. In this 'contested election', he garnered more votes than he had in the previous two elections when he ran unopposed. The opposition won 34 seats in parliamentary elections held at the same time, nearly doubling their share compared to the previous elections. Ben Ali's rhetoric of democratic reform was also employed effectively as a deceptive tactic. He spoke highly of civic participation and pluralism and repeatedly stated his intention of instilling them irreversibly.

In 1970, S. E. Finer used the term 'façade democracy' to analyse liberal reforms in Jordan. He defined it as 'a system where liberal-democratic institutions, processes and safeguards are established by law but are in practice so manipulated or violated by a historic oligarchy as to stay in office' (Finer, 1987: 441). Finer optimistically predicted that façade democracies would wither away gradually, leaving in their stead robust liberal democracies. The post-Cold War transitions have, however, proved the view to be too hopeful. Tunisia – a very strong case in point – had, in Ben Ali's regime, most of the legal institutions, processes and safeguards that Finer mentioned; but these trappings of democracy were so manipulated that they yielded no meaningful contestation of power. Simply put, the institutions, processes and safeguards were reduced to a mere façade.

Ben Ali's lipservice to democracy during this second period was partly tolerated by his Western allies due to the economic reforms that he introduced. He dutifully implemented the structural adjustment prescriptions of the IMF and the World Bank, liberalised trade and improved the country's infrastructure. Some of his reforms were immediately damaging to Tunisia's domestic businesses but, in the longer term, forced them to become export oriented. These economic reforms, combined with the façade democracy and cohesion strategy of the second period, moved the country deep into a period of authoritarian corporatism.

The third, post-9/11 phase had been a period of consolidation. Following the New York attacks, Ben Ali presented himself to the world as a man who had fought Islamic terrorism long before it became an international issue. When the country's foreign minister travelled to the US in the spring of 2003, he was warmly received by American officials as a staunch supporter of America's war on terror. In between the 9/11 attacks and the US visit, Ben Ali made a key political move: he removed the constitutional presidential term limit and declared himself eligible for the 2004 contest. His Western allies glossed over these actions with hardly a murmur. Some even claimed that his record was outstanding, as 'the most important human rights are the rights to be fed, to have health, to be educated, and to be housed'.⁹ He also secured lifelong immunity from prosecution for himself.

This period was not a phase of façade democracy. Rather, Ben Ali's actions signalled that he was no longer interested in deception. Successive laws severely limiting the rights of association, speech and movement were enacted. The authorities routinely imprisoned and harassed journalists, lawyers, politicians and human rights activists who possessed a solid anti-radical Islam pedigree. After making a verbal commitment to President Bush in 2004 that he would open his political system, Ben Ali returned home and did exactly the opposite – orchestrating an election in which the opposition was denied media access. He

⁹ This was proclaimed by France's President Jacques Chirac in 2003.

won that election with 94.5% of the vote. In 2008, he announced during his party conference that he would run for presidency for the fifth time. This time, he won 89% of the vote.

The regime then continued to use its economic development to secure the acquiescence of Tunisia's middle class and to reward its supporters with perks. The country's much hailed National Solidarity Fund doled out money and benefits to the poor; Ben Ali determined how the funds were administered. Analysts said that most of the money was distributed to party supporters. As Amel Boubeker of the Carnegie Endowment lucidly described, 'the growth of the past two decades has helped sustain a consensus in which many Tunisians welcomed economic development while accepting limits on fundamental freedoms' (Boubeker, 2009). Those who opposed this consensus lost out on the benefits of the 'miracle' – authoritarian corporatism working in high gear.

Media in Tunisia

When Tunisia gained independence from French colonial rule in 1956, the partnership of a strong civil society and independent media was hailed as partially responsible for the outcome. In fact, the history of newspapers in the North African country was a history of liberation struggle. Following its occupation in 1881, political activists opened scores of newspapers to rally Tunisians against second-class status (Labidi, 2010). In 1911, the colonial rulers banned Arab-language newspapers for a decade, accusing them of fanning anti-French sentiment. A year later, a popular editor of the first Tunisian French-language newspaper was forced into exile and others were jailed for instigating social unrest in the country. Labidi and other analysts, however, consider the colonial period as a more favourable time for Tunisian newspapers. With the exception of intermittent waves of repression, the French rulers generally tolerated dissent in newspapers.

Like many Arab leaders of the 1950s, Tunisia's first post-independent leader and the hero of anti-colonial struggle, Habib Bourguiba, had a vision of creating a modern Arab country. He replaced Shariah-based family law with a civil law that treated men and women equally. He discouraged the month-long fasting of Ramadan, declaring, 'a modern nation cannot afford to stop for a month every year'. He fought against 'outdated traditions' and expanded education throughout the country. His foreign policy emphasised pragmatism over ideology. He even maintained a close relationship with France, the former colonial ruler that had jailed him several times during the struggle for independence. Yet for all his modernising ambitions, Bourguiba was reticent about the role of the free press as a catalyst for the change he envisioned.

A French-trained lawyer, Bourguiba eschewed ethno-religious sentiments and feared that a pluralistic media would sabotage his project of secular nationalism. Zghal (1991) suggests that Bourguiba's modernisation project was

basically an imitation of the French nation-building model. He believed the virtues of the media lay in carefully fostering the newly reconstructed identity and unity. Sadiki (2002b) considers this view to be shorthand for political hegemony. In secular Tunisia, there was no room for an alternate narrative; media that did not go along with the hegemonising agenda of the president were not tolerated.

Yet Bourguiba's modernisation had unintended consequences. Education and higher standards of living do not universally give rise to a demand for democracy, as modernisation theory confidently predicts. But Bourguiba's reforms led to demands for political change in the 1970s. Trade unions became more confrontational, a splinter group of liberal reformers created a new party, and students demanding change rallied against single-party rule. All these forced the president to concede to the demands of political opening. In the early 1980s, Bourguiba committed himself to pluralism and participation. The liberalisation of the public sphere by his Prime Minister, Muhammad Mazali, resulted in the flourishing of a relatively independent free media. Scores of newspapers, critical of Bourguiba, conducted business without stifling government intervention.

The reluctant media pluralism was, however, short lived. During the 1990s and throughout the last decade, Ben Ali imprisoned journalists – some of them, like the editor of the Islamist weekly *Al-Fajrb*, for years – closed down independent newspapers and issued laws that severely curtailed press freedom. The 2003 law, criminalising freedom of expression, was lambasted by Tunisia's Human Rights League as a 'law of unprecedented serious character in terms of their violation of the right of information'. This was followed by a crackdown on citizen journalists. The Committee to Protect Journalists, a New York-based press freedom watchdog, consistently ranked Tunisia as one of the worst abusers of freedom of expression. In the words of Mohamed Talbi, one of Tunisia's veteran journalists and a professor of communications, 'journalists in colonial times enjoyed more freedom and censorship was less stifling than today' (Labidi, 2010). Another commentator on Tunisian politics labelled the Tunisian media as 'many versions of Pravda' (Lank, 2003).

Ben Ali's ire was mainly directed against the political press. The prohibited/inflammatory issues were human rights, Islamism and corruption. This stark vision/image of the political reality was reflected in the 2002 constitutional referendum. No paper or electronic media criticised Ben Ali's efforts to limit the presidential term limits in a referendum; nor did any of them oppose the changes during the referendum. But the regime continued to tolerate tabloid-style entertainment and gossip news. While Ben Ali's press policies appeared to be the same as his predecessor's, their respective reasons differed. Bourguiba was intolerant of the media because he thought that it would sabotage his modernisation and hegemonising project; Ben Ali, though with the same modernising agenda, seemed more interested in protecting the authoritarian corporatism that was the basis of his power. Such differences have implications

for practice. Lank (2003) states that the authorities in Tunisia were more sensitive to criticism abroad than at home. This was because the government feared that bad foreign press coverage would affect the international flow of investment to the country and reverse the perceived economic 'miracle'. Since journalists writing in French (and French-language newspapers) and bloggers had stronger links to the outside world than those journalists writing mainly in Arabic, they were more targeted by government action. In one of his speeches, Ben Ali himself called them 'traitors'. Bourguiba did not make such distinctions.

Internet in Tunisia

Tunisia's ruling elite were among the first to test the dictator's dilemma theory – a theory developed in early 1990s to highlight the challenge faced by authoritarian regimes in the connected world. Dictators, the theory goes, must choose between open communications, in order to reap the economic benefits of connectivity and thereby undermine their power, and closed communications, which would hurt their economies and undermine their legitimacy (Kedzie, 1997). Ben Ali opted to face this challenge by attempting to negotiate connectivity with censorship and control, benefiting from open communication without risking instability of power. The evidence of January 2011 indicates that the calculated gamble might have failed.

In 2009 Ben Ali delivered an often-quoted speech to parliament regarding the country's ICT policy:

We have dedicated a privileged position, in our program for the future, to the building of the society of knowledge and technological innovation, based on our conviction that no progress or development can be achieved without mastering, adapting and benefiting from modern technologies, in a way that consolidates the foundations of the new economy and expands the prospects of employment and integration in professional life.

Unlike most of his speeches on democracy and pluralism, this was not mere propaganda. In the mid-1990s, his regime spent heavily on telecommunications infrastructure and ICT development as part of the process of modernising the country and enhancing its economic prospects. It established a modern infrastructure of high performance networks and created ICT networks for higher education, healthcare and e-government. In 2002, the telecommunications sector was deregulated. Technology parks were created to consolidate the interaction between ICT research and domestic businesses. The government actively worked to create a digital culture and provide open access digital access for all.

The country gained access to the internet in 1991. The first users were university academics and researchers. In 1996, the internet was launched for public use. Reflecting its priorities, the regime set up a National Commission for Electronic Commerce (CNCE) the following year to implement its strategy and

develop e-commerce infrastructure throughout the country. In 2004, authorities established a programme to encourage family ownership of personal computers. Customs fees on PC imports were removed and low-price-guarantee initiatives introduced. The programme also encouraged every PC buyer to subscribe to the internet at low fees.

The rapid expansion of broadband networks through digital subscriber line (DSL) and fibre optic technologies, as well as the competition between the 12 domestic ISP providers, has resulted in a fast increase in internet users.

According to the International Telecommunication Union, Tunisia's internet penetration rate as of June 2010 stood at 34%, making it the country with the highest penetration in North Africa. Most Tunisians access the internet at home and the office. A significant number (24%) also use cybercafés, although their number is decreasing rapidly as home and office use grows.

Surveillance and control

Such a robust internet expansion policy by an authoritarian regime poses a significant question: how does it efficiently control the flow of information which may endanger its power? Out of the four models outlined in our introductory chapter, Tunisia employed a mixture of the first (censorship) and the third (old fashioned harassment, imprisonment and intimidation).

The country's censorship took different forms. According to a report by the Washington-based Freedom House (2009), all of the country's internet connectivity passes through a single gateway. This gateway is controlled by the Tunisian Internet Agency (ATI), established in 1997 to regulate the internet. The government treated the agency as a significant institution, appointing three highly paid and well-educated women – Khadija Ghariani, a French-educated engineer, Feriel Beji, who holds a doctorate in artificial intelligence, and Lamia Cheffai Sghaier, an electrical engineer – to lead it at different times. ATI tagged and filtered keywords and phrases on the internet, including email boxes. A 2009 test by OpenNet Initiative found that Tunisia undertook pervasive filtering of websites run by dissident activists, opposition groups and independent bloggers critical of the government. Websites of international human rights groups (such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch), foreign newspapers and media outlets that published negative information about the regime, prominent video-sharing sites (like YouTube and DailyMotion) and well-known anonymous proxy servers were also blocked. In 2008, Facebook was censored, but it was unblocked later that year.

Another form of censorship was regulatory. Since 1997, the government had – through directives and letters – made ISPs aware that expression of opposition to the government and discussion of human rights issues were not tolerated by the government, leading all of them to monitor content carefully. According to analysts, these letters and directives had been written in general

terms in order to make self-censorship as pervasive as possible. The same rules applied to cybercafés.

The regime also used heavy-handed tactics of deterrence and punishment. Tunisia became one of the first countries to jail internet activists. In 2002, Zouhair Yahyaoui, a 35-year-old man who wrote at TUNeZINE, was jailed for two years after he criticised the ‘farcical referendum’ which approved the removal of presidential term limits. ‘Is Tunisia a kingdom, a republic, a zoo, a prison?’ asked Yahyaoui sarcastically, following reports of 99.5% support for the president’s position. In 2005, human rights lawyer Mohammed Abbou was jailed for two years after he wrote an article on his blog comparing the acts of American soldiers in Abu Ghraib with the abuse carried out by the Tunisian authorities on prisoners of conscience. In the past five years, at least eight bloggers have been jailed by authorities on charges of defamation and sedition. Most of them reported that they were either tortured or beaten while incarcerated.

Few observers of the Tunisian blogosphere noted that, in the three years before it was ousted, the government had been increasingly using cognitive infiltration as a technique of information control. Freedom House (2008) reported that ‘in 2007 the government put together a small group of people to visit websites and actively guide discussion in a pro-government direction’. But these reports have, so far, been very difficult to substantiate.

As we will see in the next section, while censorship and deterrence limited the ability of bloggers and citizen journalists to operate, it neither stopped them nor caused the government to abandon worrying about their threats altogether.

Tunisia’s OPPM: brief history

In 1998, three Tunisian students, under the aliases Foetus, Waterman and SuX, started a mailing list called Takriz (‘fed up’ in English). As the name indicates, it was intended as a subversive medium. It stated that the main *raison d’être* of the mailing list was to ‘oppose the erosion of freedom in general and those of speech and expression in particular by the corrupt and undemocratic government of Tunisia’. Takriz also flagged itself as the voice of Tunisian youth. Romain Lecomte (2009) observes that the publication was irreverent towards taboos and incisive in its analysis of the subjects of religion, sex and politics. Two years later, they changed the email list into an e-magazine. Despite the ATI’s censorship, the magazine’s daily reach in the year of its formation was more than 2,000.

The case of Takriz is relevant for our discussion not just because the e-magazine was one of the pioneers of Tunisia’s OPPM. It indicates that the early internet adopters in Tunisia were opponents of the government. Consistent with our claim in the introduction, it is demonstrable that early technology adopters in Tunisia had a significant influence on those who came later. In 2001, Zouhair Yahyaoui followed the model of Takriz and established a dissident website called TUNeZINE. Yahyaoui was a fierce advocate of freedom of expression. On the

homepage of the website, he referred to his medium as 'independent of government, economic entities, and any political or religious group or belief'. Most commentators on his website were, however, more partisan in their self-identification. Like Takriz, they claimed that they were the voice of 'the voiceless Tunisians'. In 2002, another dissident website, RéveilTunisien (RT), was founded. Some of the founders had cut their teeth writing anti-government articles on TUNeZINE. The website published lengthy articles, mainly criticising Ben Ali and his human rights abuses. These early members of the online participatory media set the course of the relationship between the state and the OPPM in Tunisia.

The Tunisian government responded to such developments very early. In 2000, it blocked Takriz.com. Two years later, it arrested Yahyaoui. When he was released after 19 months of imprisonment, his health had considerably deteriorated. His death in 2005 at the age of 38 became a symbol of martyrdom for freedom for cyber dissidents in Tunisia. The government also hacked and distorted RT. But as Lecomte (2009) observes, despite the early and decisive actions of the government, Tunisians – predominantly young and educated – continued to participate in discussion forums on the internet.

These early participants were eager to distance themselves from opposition parties. Lecomte (2009: 15) suggests that they considered themselves members of an alternative public sphere. They dismissed the opposition as 'suicidal', 'schizophrenic', 'poorly organised' and 'uninspiring'. In that, their assessment did not differ from some astute observers of Tunisian politics. Political scientists Michel Camau and Vincent Geissar (2003), for example, highlight the extreme bickering and dissension within the opposition. Accordingly, the first-generation OPPM participants were not members of an alternative public sphere only because they distanced themselves from the main public sphere where the government and the legal opposition engaged; rather, Lecomte thinks that their use of informal language and satirical literature was quite different from the formal language style of the main public sphere. In the theoretical construction of Nancy Fraser, this was a space for withdrawal and consolidation as well as agitation (Fraser, 1992).

But it was also an elite sphere. Most of the participants within this sphere were educated Tunisians. Some even lived in Europe and America – like Sami ben Ghariba, a widely acclaimed blogger who lives in Holland – or travelled extensively to these places. In that sense, the sphere differed from what Fraser had imagined.

The explosion of blogs in 2005 and 2006 changed, albeit in a modest way, the type of participants within this sphere. These second-generation participant bloggers were more diversified in their areas of focus and interest. Entertainment and social blogs had a noteworthy share of the ecosystem, leading first-generation bloggers to criticise the newcomers publicly. In one of his most controversial articles, Sami ben Ghariba satirically termed these new blogs

'tourist areas'. The response from the social bloggers was equally forceful, varyingly calling the old bloggers 'boring', 'vitriolic', 'too political' and 'opaque'. Lecomte (2009) argues that these differences have gradually faded away. Although many bloggers now refuse to label themselves as activists, dissidents or opponents of Ben Ali's government, he notes, they generally and regularly speak critically about public affairs. Another change occurred within the nature of activism. While first-generation bloggers used speech as a subversive act, the new generation demanded more than a communicative act. They frequently organised protest actions and boycotts. In December 2008, bloggers boycotted the Tunisia Blog Awards which was intended to 'honor the vibrancy and diversity of the Tunisian blogosphere', because the organisers excluded some of the most-read popular blogs – including popular political blogs – by setting broad, exclusionary criteria, such as 'respect for public order and Tunisia's rules and regulations', as a litmus test for joining the competition. As detailed in the next section, in November 2005 the 'Enough is Enough, Ben Ali' movement organised a 'Freedom of Expression in Mourning' online campaign to embarrass Ben Ali while Tunisia was hosting the World Summit on the Information Society. On 22 May of that year, an online and offline protest against censorship was held by bloggers inside and outside of the country as a part of the worldwide day against internet filtering in Tunisia. The most famous international case was perhaps the Google Earth bombing campaign, organised by Sami ben Ghariba's Nawaat. Third, the OPPM have generally become more innovative and hard to censor as new organising and circumvention tools emerge.

Challenging government control of information

As mentioned earlier, the Ben Ali government had total control of the traditional Tunisian media – through ownership, censorship and intimidation of journalists – and routinely exercised its ban of foreign publications critical of the country. Opposition newspapers, like *Al-Mawkif* (with a very limited circulation), had tried to defy the government's censorship. Although transnational Arabic channels can be watched in Tunisia, the country's lack of strategic importance had shielded the ruling elites from the probing eyes of news outlets like Al-Jazeera, except during prominent political events.

Expecting the OPPM to fill this void is unrealistic. Yet as Lecomte (2009) observes, the Tunisian blogosphere – by breaking news and offering opinions and commentaries on taboo subjects – had challenged the hegemony. In particular, through their influence on the international coverage of Tunisian events, they had drawn attention to political repression, human rights abuses and corruption within a country considered a darling of the West. We now explore empirically two examples of the role of Tunisia's OPPM in challenging information domination of the government of Ben Ali.

The Al Radeyef Protests (2008)

On 5 January 2008, the Gafsa Phosphates Company published a list of new employees. The list was considered fraudulent. Many who competed for employment suspected that the jobs went to people with connections to members of the mining union. Even before the list was announced, rumours circulated of a deal brokered between the company and the union during the recruitment process. After the announcement, several hundred of those who were not on the list surrounded the company's office to complain about the hiring process. Gafsa is a rich mining area, but the unemployment rate is also very high – as high as 40% according to some estimates. The incident rapidly became a full-fledged protest as workers joined the complainants. The protesters, by then in the thousands, demanded decent wages to account for inflation and the rising cost of living, as well as the right to a job. The spontaneous protests gradually became more organised. Local residents, mostly young Tunisians, continued to hold sit-ins in tents and hunger strikes. The tents symbolised the plight of hundreds of women who lived on the outskirts of the province of Oum El Arayes. The women soon joined the protesters, demanding jobs for their sons. It became a social movement for jobs and social justice.

For nearly eight weeks, the protests received no coverage in the local and international press, even though it was a rare act of protest in the North African country. Then the bloggers struck! Samsoun, a blogger who adopted Descartes's *Cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore, I am) as his motto, wrote on his blog about the protests. The same day, the Tunisian Human Rights League picked up the story and published it on their website. Houieda Anouar linked the story on her daily tweet, which was then followed by hundreds of people (and now more than 1,300). A Facebook group was soon established to follow the situation.

As the protests continued, bloggers intensified their efforts. At Free Tunisie, several videos of the protests were posted. Carpediem-Selim detailed eyewitness accounts of police brutality against the protesters. Fatma-Arabicca tried to offer context for the protest by exploring Tunisia's economic woes. Other bloggers expressed their outrage against the response by the state; they were incensed because the Ben Ali government had tricked the protesters into a deal and then engaged a brutal wave of repression when the protests started to ebb. As reports by international human rights groups later showed, the government's attack was targeted at decapitating the movement's leaders who were accused of orchestrating a coup. Blogger Brastos's question, 'Was their fault [the protesters'] demanding their rights with a loud voice?' encapsulated the feeling of many bloggers.

This coverage by bloggers had an impact on the mainstream media. On 12 April 2008, Reuters reported the story. More importantly, several journalists – among them Fahrem Boukadous and a young female journalist, Zakregh Dhifaoui – travelled to the region and provided blow-by-blow coverage of the

events on mainstream TV channels and newspapers. In June 2008, as the protests finally fizzled out, Boukadous (of El Hiwar Eltounsi, a local TV channel) and other journalists were charged with 'forming a criminal association liable to attack persons and their property' and 'disseminating false information liable to disturb the public order'. In what international press freedom watchdog groups called a 'theatrical' process, the courts found them guilty of the crimes. Boukadous, who went underground when an arrest warrant was issued, was later caught at a Tunisian hospital while receiving medical treatment for asthma.

Central to this story is the ability of the OPPM to contest the information flow of the Tunisian regime. First, using their relative anonymity and censored and uncensored tools, the OPPM broke a story that the mainstream media could not. The Al Radeyef protests were of particular importance, as they revealed that the benefits of the Tunisian economic 'miracle' were not shared by all Tunisians. Prince (2010) argues that the main reason for the government's savage response to the movement was not merely an indignant 'how dare you?' reaction, nor was it a counteraction against the existential threat to Ben Ali's power that the protests posed. It was, rather, because the action of the people greatly undermined the main argument legitimising the authoritarian corporatist regime (i.e. its economic performance). Ben Ali was particularly alarmed that thousands of people fled from Al Radeyef to the Algerian border during the protests, exposing to the world through their migration that his regime was not as economically progressive and welfarist as was conventionally assumed.

In light of all this, it was not surprising that the mainstream media wholly ignored the issue before bloggers picked it up. In the pre-internet age, it would have remained another tragic story, to be published only after the fall of the authoritarian regime. Bloggers not only broke the story, they also raised its profile, amplifying the news by linking to each other, creating a Facebook group of hundreds of people dedicated to following the story, offering their solidarity to the protesters and tweeting about the movement. This forced the mainstream media to remove its head from the sand, albeit at a serious cost for Tunisian journalists. The international coverage brought about what the regime so greatly feared – the undercutting of its economic claims.

Another lesson from this story is how traditionally marginalised groups (miners and the poor in an upwardly middle-class country) can make their voices heard. In this instance, the story did not come to light through one of the members of the group. Rather, it was transmitted by elites concerned about the plight of the group.

The Teachers' Hunger Strike

On 20 November 2007, three Tunisian secondary school teachers from three different cities in the country – Mohammed Moumni, Ali Jalouli and Moez Zoghlami – announced that they were embarking upon a coordinated hunger

strike. They claimed that the strike was in protest at their dismissal by the Ministry of Education following their participation in the 11 April teachers strike, in which more than 110,000 teachers participated. In a press statement, Moumni stated that the Ben Ali regime intended to use their punishment as 'an example for others, since we are among the teachers hired in accordance with the contract system'.

Their press statement to the mainstream media in Tunisia was, at first, ignored. But some bloggers and other OPPM members ran with the story. In an interactive online newsmagazine called *Magarebia*, which covers the North African region, Jamel Arafaoui wrote a detailed account of their strike. Before Jamel, a blogger named Ennarqued wrote a moving account of the teachers' dismissal. Other bloggers linked to the story. In response, the Tunisian government temporarily shut down the blog, but the story was already on Facebook and twitter. As the health of two of the strikers deteriorated, blog coverage and the outrage of members of the OPPM community increased. A petition drive organised by bloggers was quickly blocked in Tunisia by the government. A blog named *Professors Expelled* was started but, like the petition, it too was blocked.

The determination of the hunger strikers (two were rushed to the hospital after week four of the strike) and the commotion in the blogosphere finally pushed the traditional media – newspapers and TV stations – to cover the story. Two opposition party papers splashed the story across their front pages. Weak and emaciated, the pictures of the strikers attracted the attention of thousands of Tunisians to their plight. The Tunisian League of Human Rights, secondary-school student groups and immigrants living in France showed their solidarity by issuing statements demanding that the strikers be reinstated to their positions. On 15 December 2007, a group of their supporters gathered at Mohamed Ali square in Tunis, chanting 'Work! Freedom! National dignity!' in support of the strikers. Days later, prominent lawyers, journalists and doctors established a group which backed the strike as an act affirming the constitutionally protected rights of unionisation and employment.

Despite the threats of the Secondary School Teachers Union to join the strikers, the Ministry of Education refused to back down. The strike was long, but ultimately unsuccessful. Yet that does not detract from the Tunisian bloggers who doggedly pursued the story and reported with the tenacity of old-fashioned journalists. Here we learn, as in the first story, how difficult it is for the state to completely shut down the underground space of information interaction and maintain absolute epistemic dominance. This story also highlights how bloggers can force gate-keepers in an authoritarian context to widen their net for filtering information.

More cases of challenging information control

Tracking the Presidential Plane (information on the misuse of public property): Since 2005, Tunisian president Ben Ali had only officially travelled outside of the country on rare occasions. Yet the presidential plane was spotted in different places throughout Europe, causing bloggers to wonder if it was being used by his wife to shop at the taxpayers' expense or if he was ill and secretly seeking treatment in European hospitals. Tunisian blogger Astrubal used photos of the plane taken from airlines.net and jetphotos.net and combined it with a visualisation created using Google Earth in order to disclose at which airports the plane had been seen and when.

GoogleEarth Bombing (highlighting human rights abuse): In 2007, ATI blocked dailymotion.com, a video-sharing site, because it contained testimonies of Tunisia's political prisoners. One of the country's prominent bloggers, Sami ben Ghariba, sewed YouTube videos together with GoogleEarth to dramatic effect; when one viewed the Tunisian presidential palace using Google Earth, one would instead discover the videos of the political bloggers that were blocked within the country.

Participation

Sadiki (2002b) argues that in post-war Tunisia, citizenship as an instrument of equality has never truly evolved. Tunisian citizenship remains a hierarchical, state-centred, passive citizenship based on exclusionary identity. Political articulation of demands and beliefs must be conducted within hegemonising legal-judicial rules and procedures. The 1988 national pact, interpreted and reinterpreted by the regime, was aimed at conferring inclusion on those 'who are willing to work within the straitjacket of either political deference or loyal opposition' (Sadiki, 2002b: 510).

The formal public sphere is, therefore, a sphere of dominance and subordination (Fraser, 1997: 85). Fraser further emphatically asserts that the ideal of 'participatory parity is better achieved by a multiplicity of publics than by a single public' (Fraser, 1997: 87). The single dominant public of the Ben Ali model, by definition, excluded groups and individuals who did not hold the same views as the regime. Lecomte (2009), however, brings our attention to how the Tunisian OPPM made it possible for some of the groups excluded from the dominant public to create an alternative public sphere. This was not, as stated earlier, Fraser's counterpublic of women, minorities and marginalised groups. Instead, it was an alternative public sphere of the excluded elite – mostly young, educated and male critics of the Ben Ali regime. It therefore falls short of the idealised public sphere of Fraser. Yet it is an equally worthy public sphere. The 'absence of a single or manageably small set of points of control places the greatest pressure on the capacity of the regime to control its public sphere, and thereby to simplify

the problem of controlling the actions of the population' (Benkler, 2006: 180) – a parallel 'contestatory' discursive arena for members of the elite who are left out of a hegemonic political power. Based on a detailed case study, Lecomte argues that this alternative discursive space in Tunisia is not only counter-hegemonic, but is robustly participatory.

Our next story and the subsequently highlighted brief sample are consistent with the finding of Lecomte's empirical investigations.

Flooding in Radeyef

On Wednesday, 23 September 2009, the southern town of Radeyef, the epicentre of the mining strike months earlier, was hit by torrential rains and deadly flooding. The rainfall began on Tuesday night and continued for more than 12 hours. The normally arid region was unprepared for the heavy rain and floods. As the damage was becoming clear – 17 dead and hundreds injured or missing – the government of Tunisia began a relentless media campaign heralding its quick and efficient response to the disaster. Even the international media cut-and-pasted the government communiqué. Reports of the quick mobilisation of resources by government authorities dominated government-controlled newspapers and TV channels. President Ben Ali dispatched four of his ministers to the area and their interviews and speeches were aired regularly on national television. The airwaves were also brimming with footage of the town's residents thanking the government for its help.

Bloggers and commenters, sensing government politicisation of the disaster, pushed back in two ways. The first was by providing anti-propaganda analyses of the incidents. Blogger Subjectiff wrote:

Last night I made the mistake of watching the National Television channel Tunis7 in the hope to know about the conditions of our people and brothers in 'Refdeyef.' But in vain. All that I have watched was discourse and stories about the 'Change Maker' and the plane he sent to the region and the poor people thanking him for this generous help.

On *Magharib*, a number of commenters on the disaster story attacked the government line. One anonymous participant said:

In the present case, the most revolting part of this scandal is the vile way Tunisian propaganda has exploited the people's misfortune for the glory of the dictatorship. Instead of paying attention to the tragedy the inhabitants have experienced, the national television channel Tunis 7 has repeated news both on the aid Ben Ali sent, as if he was doing it out of [his own] pocket, and on testimonies of gratitude to His Excellency from citizens who are intimidated by the cameras and microphones. You have to have a strong stomach to not vomit when you see this sordid exploitation of the suffering of these victims of a double disaster, the first of which incidentally comes from nature and the second of which structurally comes from the dictatorship. Moreover, we can also ask ourselves what the many plainclothes policemen who moved into the city after the events of 2008 were

doing. Could they not come to the aid of the population? There would have been fewer victims that way. But, the mission of Tunisia's police is of a very different nature.

Others criticised the government's disaster prevention and response strategy. The comment by another anonymous commenter on *Magharib* captures this line of argument, explaining the 'government cannot legitimately say "sorry, we were caught off-guard". That is a terribly lame excuse.' Some bloggers regarded the regime's media offensive as an attempt to heal the wounds it had previously inflicted on a restive population. This suggestion was made in reference to the brutal crackdown of protesters in the region.

The second method of pushback was through offering 'no spin reports'. Bloggers covered the disaster in detail, publishing eyewitness accounts, pictures of the damage and interviews with victims. In those reports, the voices of officials were absent, unlike in the government media. In both senses, Tunisian bloggers showed that they could be subversive even during disasters, consolidating their counter-hegemonic public sphere status.

But the counter-politicisation of disaster was not supported by all bloggers and participants of the OPPM. Some bloggers wanted the blogosphere instead to focus on helping the victims and showing their solidarity. Blogger, *Bidi' Niqat, Liba'd El-Horouf* commenced a campaign of solidarity, asking other bloggers to add a badge he designed to their blogs.

Such differences in opinion and the willingness of bloggers to challenge each other are evidence of the internal dynamics of the OPPM. Different proposals and solutions were suggested and debated in real time; diversity of opinion is tolerated. But, like old media, they also have gate-keeping roles. During the disaster, no blog followed the government line. That was considered an out of the bounds position even within a pluralistic platform.

Additional case of participation

The 22 May Protests: This is an anti-censorship protest action organised by bloggers, Google groups and Facebookers, with wide-ranging initiatives – including online petitions, virtual protests and the indexing of banned blogs. Although it was organised smoothly, there were debates among OPPM members about the outcome of their actions. 'We protested online in the past and nothing has happened. Why do we engage in a fruitless exercise? To appease our emotions?' one Facebooker asked. These and other outcome-oriented doubts were seriously debated, analysed and synthesised. Some introduced supplementary plans which were then approved by the community. The most significant of these plans was proposed by two bloggers, Slim Amamou and Yassin Ayari, who called for a rally in front of the Tunisian Ministry of Communication Technologies. Their call was later joined by another OPPM member, Lina Ben Mhenni. They primarily used Facebook to communicate and

debate the actions with their friends. When their idea was supported by most members of the community, they proceeded and put in a request for the rally. But a day before the scheduled protests, both were apprehended by the police. On 22 May protests instead took place in Tunis and in different places in North America and Europe.

Discussion points

It is no stretch to say that Tunisia is the first country to offer a real testable setting to check most of the theories on OPPM and democracy. January's uprising has already raised a debate as to what contribution social networking sites like Facebook and twitter had made to the protests. Unfortunately, the debates lump three distinct questions into one and tend to confuse rather than clarify the issue. (1) What was the role of OPPM in making Tunisians angry about their rulers? (2) What did they contribute in organising and mobilising fed-up citizens? (3) Have they caused apathetic citizens to protest? The second question can only be answered when sufficient information is gained about the unfolding historical drama. The third is too deterministic. Our Tunisia report does, however, provide an answer to the first question.

First, the Tunisian OPPM challenged Ben Ali's attempt to control information, and exposed his corruption and authoritarianism to educated Tunisians. Despite the regime's attempt to muzzle the blogosphere, many OPPM participants learnt how to creatively circumvent censorship and hoodwink the censors.

Second, the blogosphere in Tunisia created a robust participatory space for citizens who otherwise would have been muzzled due to the absolute dominance of the government in off-net space. As in most of the countries under consideration in this report, these participatory spaces appear to be chaotic and informal, but robust enough to allow participants in vigorous debates about politics unseen in the Ben Ali-controlled public sphere.

Third, the earliest bloggers have remained substantially dominant throughout the history of OPPM, affecting the substance and tone of the discussions. These early bloggers were mainly anti-Ben Ali. While the government tried to affect the substance and flow of information in the blogosphere through censorship and cognitive intervention, its interpretative value did not match that of the early liberal bloggers.

3. Egypt: blogging in a state of emergency

Inspired by the dramatic end to Ben Ali's authoritarian rule in nearby Tunisia, millions of Egyptians revolted against their ruler, Hosni Mubarak, and his repressive regime. As in Tunisia, the political future of Egypt is uncertain. But there are also other similarities between the revolts in the two countries. One of those similarities – a big talking point in the media – is the impact of social media in mobilising and organising anti-Mubarak demonstrators. Our report does not deal with the protests themselves or the mobilisation phase, which was swift. Yet the discussion shows the contribution of OPPM in incubating anti-Mubarak sentiments among the youth during the most stable period of the regime. In fact, some of the previous actions of the movements which helped mobilise the protests are raised in our case studies.

Perhaps it should not surprise us that the role of Egypt's OPPM has become such a major issue of conversation. No country provides as a rich collection of resources as Egypt for students of democratisation and the internet in Africa. Since the middle of the 1990s, Egypt has, by African standards, attempted to expand internet access rapidly for its citizens. But with a penetration rate of less than 16%, the country remains a member of the Third World of connectivity. Most of Egypt's internet users are hardly what Coleman and Blumler (2009) call 'the commons'. Analysis of user profile reveals that they are mostly urban and highly educated (Faris, 2010). The average political participant in the internet is even less of a 'common' than the average general user of the technology. The core of this group is, however, highly active: there are thousands of regularly updated politically oriented blogs and social media forums. The profile and characteristics of Egypt's OPPM members, coupled with the authoritarianism of its ruling regime, makes the North African country a good test case for measuring the impact of the internet in a low-penetration African authoritarian country, and this is where our empirical exploration starts.

Regime analysis: politics as emergency

On 6 June 2010 two police officers in the coastal city of Alexandria entered an internet café, ordering customers to produce their ID cards. After inspecting the documents of 28-year-old Kahled Saeed, they proceeded to search him, eliciting his protest against being searched without warrant. The officers severely beat him before dozens of eyewitnesses, bound his hands and dragged him to a nearby police station, where he later died. Kahled's death provoked a series of protests throughout the country. On Facebook a group that called itself 'My name was Kahled Saeed and I was not a terrorist' attracted thousands of supporters – primarily young Egyptians with strong anti-torture views.

The reasons behind Kahled's death were shrouded in controversy. The country's Ministry of Interior initially claimed that Kahled died after choking on

a plastic bag of cannabis that he was hiding from the police in his mouth. Protesters disputed the story, however, insisting that his fractured skull and dislocated shoulder were testimony to vicious police attacks. It was alleged that the young man was uploading videos of police drug dealing on YouTube. After the case received wide international coverage, Egyptian authorities conducted a second autopsy, which verified the accuracy of the protesters' claims of a battered body. Although the government maintained that the case was drug-related, it went on to prosecute the two police officers in an effort to dampen domestic and international outrage.

The controversy surrounding his death aside, Kahled's case highlights one significant feature of the country's political and legal system – the State of Emergency. A month before his death, the Egyptian parliament, to the consternation of many of the government's critics, ratified President Hosni Mubarak's new decree to renew the country's emergency laws for an additional two years. The laws were modified to restrict their applicability to terrorist and drug cases. But in Egypt, terrorism functions as a 'catch-all' term and the limitations were condemned by international human rights organisations as a mere 'facelift'. Kahled's search and arrest were conducted on the basis of this renewed law.

Egypt's Emergency Law (Law No. 162 of 1958 as amended) entered into force in 1967 during the Arab–Israeli War. After a brief suspension in 1980 as a part of Anwar Sadat's ongoing political process, it was reinstated in 1981 when Hosni Mubarak became the ruler of the country following Sadat's assassination. It has since been extended every three years. This law grants executive power to limit or restrict basic freedoms, including but not limited to the right of demonstration, assembly, movement and residence, due process of law in cases of search, seizure and arrest on the grounds of public safety and national security. Censorship is also legalised. The law further grants broad governmental powers to establish special courts that exercise their judicial functions outside the realm of 'typical civil protections that the Egyptian judiciary affords to its citizens'.

The authorities cite the alleged dangers of radical Islamism as justification for the law. Two Islamic organisations, Al-Gamaa Al-Islamiyaa and Al-Jihad, have fought violently for decades for the creation of an Islamic state – killing intellectuals, civil society leaders and government officials. Anwar Sadat's murder in 1981 and the subsequent insurrections, in addition to the attempted murder of his successor in Addis Ababa during the 1996 AAU summit meeting, were largely the work of these radical Islamic groups. Indeed, even some liberal opponents of the government accept the legitimacy of fighting violent radical groups. But the pervasiveness and the longevity of the government's chosen politico-legal instrument to battle violent radicals has far-reaching implications for the conduct of ordinary collective life.

The normalisation of what is officially an extraordinary state of affairs has engendered institutional behaviours that are hostile to democratic development. Recourse to emergency laws – with all their restrictions on individual rights – whenever the government is faced with organised opposition, strong civil society and robust media has become the most persistent phenomenon. Normal acts of political protest are quickly framed and punished as ‘acts which threaten the public order and national security’. Singerman (2002) calls this development ‘politics as emergency’: civil life has taken refuge in the jurisprudence, language and behaviour of exception, and politics is conducted in perpetual anxiety and fear of prosecution.

Once politics is criminalized, and public discourse and research in the social sciences are made suspect, it does not matter if one is an Islamist, a human rights activist, a homosexual, or a democrat. Politics has no legitimacy unless it is conducted within the extremely narrow and loyalist world of the regime.

(Singerman, 2002: 34)

This is a case of ‘politics as emergency’ anchoring authoritarianism.

A further example of the nexus between politics as emergency and authoritarianism in Egypt is its use to legitimise the country’s one-party system. Anwar Sadat established the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) in 1978, following his restoration of political parties in 1976. Since then it has dominated Egyptian elections, using a mixture of co-optation, manipulation of the electoral regime and repression, with the full backing of the state’s security apparatus and resources (Cook, 2007). The party’s main justification for its reluctance to ease its total lock on power is captured by its motto during the 2000 parliamentary elections, ‘Continuity For the Sake of Stability’. Its message was clear: real multi-party democracy which would grant Egyptian Islamists a stronger hand in the country’s politics would endanger national security and public safety; the price of fighting radicals was forfeiting democracy.

The NDP’s dominance in regional and national legislative assemblies has diminished little in the last 12 years, despite pressure on President Hosni Mubarak from Western allies to loosen his grip on collective life and politics. Most of the reforms during this period remain token gestures to the West. The emergency law also largely supersedes them. The government continues to crack down on its critics, and the NDP’s organised political opponents have endured much hardship. The Muslim Brotherhood, the biggest and the strongest political grouping in Egypt, was banned. Ayman Nour, of the liberal Al Ghad (New Tomorrow) Party and President Hosni Mubarak’s main challenger in the 2005 presidential election, was jailed just after the election.

Yet the trajectory of political developments in politics as emergency is not always linear. A complex web of interaction among what we consider token political reforms by the regime over the last decade, the paradoxical phenomenon of the judicialisation of politics, and the liberalisation of media spaces that began with the advent of transnational Arab satellite media and intensified through the

proliferation of the online political participatory platforms, has cracked democratic openings in the system. It is not certain that these trends are to continue; nor is it clear that they are irreversible. Cook (2007), for instance, suggests that further liberalisation in Egypt is difficult due to the basic dynamics (processes and patterns) of politics in the country. Rutherford (2008) accepts some of the changes previously mentioned – particularly judicial activism – but sees little evidence that the trajectory is that of democratisation. Others such as Lust-Okar (2005) maintain that the strategy of elite fragmentation that is actively pursued by the regime is a stumbling block for liberalisation and reform. We concur with the general tenet of these observations, although we caution against the certainty of some of these observations. Indeed, politics as emergency is most effective in its ability to halt or dissipate promising reforms.

As the subsequent rigorous implementation of the emergency laws after two attacks – one successful, one failed – amply demonstrated, a major terrorist attack in Egypt would change the course of the recent liberal developments. It is, though, worth noting that the four arenas of power contention are expanding. Although the legislative arena of contestation appears too narrow, it is indisputably opening up more and more. The 2007 constitutional amendment provides citizens with the right to form political parties, although its requirement that no political party can be formed based on religion, gender or ethnicity was criticised as too restrictive; the new amendment, however, abandoned the requirement of approval from ‘an NDP-controlled body linked to the Consultative Council’. Opposition parties are increasingly using legal and formal institutions to contest power. Parliamentary elections have become regular; in some districts, they are hotly contested. Judicial supervision of polling stations and ballot counting has decreased the prevalence of election fraud. Opposition parties and other opponents of the regime have enough liberties to meet and hammer out coordinated plans to challenge the government. On 24 February 2010, several opposition leaders, civil society leaders and intellectuals met in Cairo to form a non-partisan political movement called the National Association for Change. Mohamed ElBaradei, former Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and a Nobel Peace Laureate, initiated the movement. The movement’s aim is to bring about political reforms in Egypt, but acts within the country’s constitution and laws. ElBaradei’s name is currently floated among the candidates likely to run against the NDP candidate in the 2011 presidential elections.

Another relevant institution of power contestation in Egypt is the judiciary. Some scholars have been intrigued by the overt activism of non-emergency courts in Egypt (Moustafa, 2003). In the last 25 years, the country’s Supreme Constitutional Court (SCC) has consistently made decisions that promote civil and political liberties, limit executive power, protect activists and expand electoral reform. Opposition groups, civil society organisations and the media have used the judiciary to challenge the government’s laws, policies and

actions. Legal interventions have forced the government to open up autonomous space for its opponents. This paradoxical judicialisation of politics in Egypt is explained by the regime's interest in attracting global capital, as it worked to stave off the growing internal support for the opposition as a result of economic stagnation (Singerman, 2002). The government considered the country's unemployed, youthful population a source of danger to its power. Given the country's history of nationalising private property, the government was forced to show its commitment to the protection of private property by reassuring investors that there existed legal and political safeguards for a proper review mechanism through a strong and relatively independent judicial system. An independent judiciary has gradually expanded its powers and constitutional rights due to what Tamir Moustafa called 'synergistic interaction with legal professional associations, opposition parties, and human rights organizations' (Moustafa, 2003: 886).

In placing Egypt within the competitive authoritarianism category, we depart from the 2002 study of the most frequently referenced writers on the typology, Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way. They consider Egypt as a case of well-entrenched full-scale authoritarianism.

Competitive authoritarianism is distinct from what might be called 'façade' electoral regimes – that is, regimes in which electoral institutions exist but yield no meaningful contestation for power (such as Egypt, Singapore, and Uzbekistan in the 1990s). Such regimes have been called 'pseudo-democracies,' 'virtual democracies,' and 'electoral authoritarian' regimes. In our view, they are cases of full-scale authoritarianism. The line between this type of regime and competitive authoritarianism can be hard to draw, and non-competitive electoral institutions may one day become competitive (as occurred in Mexico). It is essential, however, to distinguish regimes in which democratic institutions offer an important channel through which the opposition may seek power from those regimes in which democratic rules simply serve as to legitimate an existing autocratic leadership. (Levitsky and Way, 2002)

Although Levitsky and Way have published additional works on competitive authoritarianism since then, they have not upgraded Egypt's status from full-scale authoritarianism to competitive authoritarianism. Their reluctance is in part justified. In contrast with many competitive authoritarian regimes, there is no sense that election day surprises are possible in Egypt. The government can win elections without breaking a sweat. But focusing on election day surprises ignores the challenges the regime faces prior to elections, as spaces of political participation and contention continue to expand. We think that the developments in electoral politics since 2005, the dynamics of judicialisation of politics and, as we see in the next section, the increasingly critical posture of the media towards the government and the rapid growth of online political activism – resulting largely from the government's assiduous efforts to liberalise the telecommunications sector and promote internet use – have carved out sufficient

spaces of power contestation to categorise the regime as a form of competitive authoritarianism. Indeed, it is this opening, although very small, that has given regime opponents an opportunity to organise and mobilise against the regime, leading to the ongoing uprising.

Media in Egypt

After the nationalisation of the private media in 1960, Egyptian media served as the mouthpiece of the rulers. Some contend that Nasser's takeover of the media – both owning the newspapers and effectively regulating the electronic media – stifled a relatively robust public sphere. This control was a result of Nasser's acute, and at times exaggerated, awareness that a vigorous public sphere could both foment and sabotage his agenda of creating a strong state based on national consensus. His views of politics as an exclusive realm for elite participation and the public sphere as arena of indoctrination and persuasion without adversarial contention were well known. As the most significant part of the public sphere, Nasser viewed the controlled media as a vehicle for nationalising his agenda. Post-Nasser Egyptian leaders followed his formula almost religiously. Until the mid-1990s, governments owned most broadcasters and newspapers, and people acquiesced or formed weak opposition groups. Pintak (2002) argues that the launch of the first pan-Arab all-news satellite channel 'shook the very foundation of Arab journalism', including that of Egypt. As the heart of the Arab world and its most populous country, Al-Jazeera immediately gave enormous coverage to Egyptian politics and life. Opposition politicians, intellectuals and human rights activists appeared on the channel and proffered criticisms of the Mubarak government; elections and other political events were widely reported.

In 2002, Salah Diab, an Egyptian businessman and the grandson of a famous printing proprietor and publisher during the golden era of Egyptian publishing, founded an independent media company called Almasry Alyoum. In 2004, the company began publishing the first real private newspaper, *Al Masry Al Youm*. The newspaper introduced investigative journalism and relatively balanced news reporting. Other independent newspapers and thousands of online newspapers and blogs soon followed it.

The liberalisation of media space does not occur automatically. Some scholars have viewed such a development as predominantly a domestic affair (Schmitter, 1991). Others give primacy to the role of international forces (Starr, 1991). The changes that began in Egypt in the mid-2000s were precipitated by the combination of both forces. The domestic factors are both structural and agency-centred. One of the internal change-inducing factors was the battle for influence within the NDP. Brownlee (2007) contends that the overwhelming dominance of the NDP has created a political environment in which the only option for the elite to pursue their interests is through either joining or supporting the NDP. The

party therefore has become a 'big tent', where balancing the interests of different groups is of enormous importance to ensure the regime's durability.

Until the late 1990s, the NDP was largely controlled by the 'old guard' who cut their teeth in party politics during the 1960s and 1970s. During the 1990s, a new generation of mostly Western-educated Egyptians joined the party and demanded changes. Collombier (2007) suggests that this new generation is not a monolithic unit; there are differences in the nature, scope and approach they want. Particularly relevant to these differences is the highly personalised nature of Egyptian politics (Kassem, 2004). However, the divisions among the reformers cannot conceal their demand for reform. The reformists gained ascendancy after the poor showing of the party in 2000 and dominated the NDP's annual conference in 2003. A political document based on the principle of *al-fikra al-jadid* (New Thinking) was adopted. In 2005, President Mubarak, at the urging of his son and the newcomer reformers, announced his intention to amend the constitution to allow a presidential contest.

Not all reformers were inspired by an idealistic quest for freedom. In fact, some writers note that most of them have sought reform to maintain the party's dominance, after sensing that demographic shift and economic problems have increased support for the opposition. Idealists like Osama Ghazaly Harb, who considered Mubarak's 2005 announcement unsatisfactory, had to leave the party to force change from the outside. Yet, whether the calculations are utilitarian or idealist, the internal NDP battles have greatly contributed to the liberalisation of the media space. These battles are ongoing, with several incidents of minor fissures, alignments and realignments taking place. The outcomes remain uncertain.

Another domestic factor worth considering is the growth of political protests during the last decade. In particular, the Kifaya (Enough) movement, with its bold demand for President Mubarak to resign and its call for civil disobedience, broke the taboo against criticising the government. Radsch (2008) argues that the movement 'inspired people to demand change by taking to the streets and speaking out'. Among those inspired by Kifaya were journalists in the traditional media and online activists. As we see in the next section, the protestors and the media – particularly the online media – created strong, mutually supportive interactions to carve out independent spaces of participation.

All these were supplemented by the growing international pressure, particularly from the US, on Mubarak to reform the political system. Pintak (2002) also noted that in Egypt and other Arab countries, the Al-Jazeera effect on liberalisation of the media space was real. 'It was an inspiration to journalists laboring under the old model of media-as-government-mouthpiece,' he claimed. 'Within a decade, independent or semi-independent newspapers, magazines, and TV channels could be found from Morocco to Yemen – and everywhere Arab journalists were pushing the envelope of censorship and control.' Similarly, the

demand from international investors for what Moustafa called 'an autonomous rule of law system' indirectly played a role in creating an activist judiciary which decided repeatedly to expand freedom of expression and the press.

It is worth noting, though, that these newly expanded media spaces exist under constant pressure by forces of contraction directed from the outside. The emergency law, the penal law, the terrorism law (1992) and the press law all place serious restrictions on the freedom of the press. Prosecution of journalists is still persistent. Censorship and closure of newspapers under the guise of public order and national security continues to take place, albeit infrequently. In 2010, Egypt initiated a broadly restrictive pan-Arab regulatory framework for satellite television stations, which was adopted by the Arab League's Council of Information ministers. Even prior to that the country had started cracking down on Egyptian broadcast outlets.

In 2008, for example, it accused the Cairo News Company (CNC) of using an illegal telecommunications network and confiscated the majority of its equipment in an office raid. According to Freedom House, this government action was taken after Al-Jazeera aired CNC footage of unrest in the Nile Delta city of El-Mahalla El-Kubra. The 2009 IREX Media Index concluded that media freedom was growing in Egypt, but questioned both the pace and the depth of change.

Internet in Egypt

Hecht and Callon (2009) state that the technological choices of a country must be understood as part of a struggle to define its national identity. Egyptian leaders and intellectuals consider the country as the leader of the Arab world – its bastion of culture, arts and other forms of civilisation. Since independence, the country's leaders have striven to sustain this image. The state has accordingly been heavily involved in leading technological projects, which it believed placed the country at the forefront of political and cultural leadership in the Arab world. Historically there has been particular enthusiasm for communications technology which has been seen as important for the state's aims in terms of cultural diffusion and transnational projection of political power. Abdulla (2007: 150) pointed out that 'radio sets, and later television sets, were subsidized by the government, and thousands were made available free of charge for installation in different cultural centers and cooperative units in rural and urban areas'.

Egypt has since then remained at the forefront of innovation and the introduction of cutting-edge communications technology. The first Arab satellite television was launched in Egypt. The country also owns its own satellite system (NILESAT 101, 102) – unique in the Arab world. It has the Arab world's largest number of broadcast outlets. The sheer quantity of its cultural products such as movies and serials has earned the country a reputation as 'the Hollywood of the

Middle East'. It is within this context that the internet was introduced to Egypt in 1993.

As in so many countries, the internet came to Egypt through the higher education sector, specifically the Egyptian Universities Network (EUN). Egypt Telecom, then a minor actor in the telecommunications sector, provided the connection to France. Only very small numbers – mostly academics in the university – used this network, primarily for email communications. In 1995, the infrastructural challenges of expanding the networks were overcome when satellite-based fibre-optic international connectivity was created. The internet expanded to rural areas and, within two years of its introduction, the number of users increased tenfold. New private ISPs flourished. These developments were accompanied by the government's liberalisation of telecommunication in 1998 and its active promotion of computer use in Egyptian homes.

In 2000, broadband access was introduced in Cairo and Alexandria, and was soon expanded to other cities and towns. Two years later, the government started a new initiative to increase connectivity in Egypt. Abdulla (2007: 155) described this initiative as the 'most ambitious in the Arab World':

The government started a unique service, whereby internet connectivity, through any of the ISPs then on the market, became free for all. All users have to pay now is the negligible price of the telephone call while connected to the internet, a price they were already paying anyway. Telecom Egypt then pays 70 percent of the telephone revenues from use to the respective ISPs. As a result, ISPs competed to offer more access lines, free email accounts and better customer service.

The second phase of this initiative was launched in 2008. This phase of the expansion programme included discounts for computer purchases, combined with 512 kbps broadband subscriptions for the period of three years. Egypt now has more than 200 ISPs and, with a penetration rate of 15.4%, it has the largest online population in the Arab world. More than a million Egyptian households have broadband access – the largest figure in Africa.

Surveillance and control

It is difficult to say that Egypt has consciously chosen any of the four models outlined in the Introduction. A 2009 study shows that, except for pornographic content, Egyptians have unrestricted access to the internet. The rumours in the blogosphere that Skype would be blocked at the beginning of 2010 were later proved to be unsubstantiated. In light of this, Freedom House (2010) designated the Egyptian internet as 'free' – one of the very few generally 'unfree' countries to get this status. The Egyptian government only rarely engages in cognitive infiltration. There are bloggers backing the government, some with the financial backing of the state. But their numbers are very low. The same is true for infiltrators of other blogs. They either do it on their own or are too insignificant in number to cause epistemological confusion in the participatory forums of the

regime's opponents (deflection, diversion, challenge or chaotic discourse). Some of the actions of the government may be taken as evidence of the third model of control. In 2009, the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists labelled Egypt as one of the worst ten countries in which to be a blogger. Hundreds of bloggers have been jailed in the last three years. But a closer look at their cases reveals that most were rounded up during street protests or were arrested for their offline activism. In cases of the arrests of online activists and bloggers, it appears that the government's actions were responses to individual roles and articles rather than systematic acts of collective deterrence.

The next section will reveal why the Egyptian government might have opted for a relatively hands-off approach to surveillance and information control on the net. Mirroring the government's success in fragmenting Egyptian elite, as raised by Brownlee (2007) and Lust-Oskar (2005), the Egyptian online political platforms were so divided that they did not pose any serious challenge to the regime's grip on power, particularly after the Kifaya movement lost its momentum in 2006.

Egypt's online political participatory media (OPPM): history and evolution

The mid-1990s marked the nascent stage of the Egyptian OPPM. They began with the exchange of political information through email listserves (Isherwood, 2008). In 1995, Tarik Atia started an aggregated news and information website called Cairo Live. Tarik's statement as to why he started the website 'presages much of the rationale for later bloggers' (Faris, 2010). But until the end of the 1990s and the rise in popularity of chatrooms and email groups, the ecosystem was generally quiet.

The Egyptian OPPM came of age in 2003. They were initially influenced by the rise of blogging in Iraq following the invasion by coalition forces. The *Salam Pax* blog, written by an affluent, Western-educated young man living in Baghdad, became as popular in Cairo as it was in Washington. Salam's style was attractive and emotive. Through the narration of the self, he reported life in Iraq under the occupation. Whitlock (2007: 25) was accurate in his observation: 'Pax is a sign of what happens when testimony – the act of being witness to an event, of providing or establishing evidence before an actual or a projected audience – moves into the cyberspace and goes to war.'

The private and engaged accounts of Pax and other Iraqi bloggers were inspirations to many Egyptians. This crystallised into action when the Kifaya movement bloomed. At the outset, Kifaya was an analogue movement. It won national and international status as a pro-democracy movement when its members staged protests to demand the resignation of Hosni Mubarak in December 2004. The digitalisation of Kifaya was swift, and its impact transformative. Movement members and supporters of its cause moved their activities to the online space in the form of blogging. When Kifaya's stature grew,

so did the bloggers'. Wael Abbas, Malek Mustafa, Manal, Alaa and a few others not only became the stalwarts of Egyptian blogging, but famous offline names as well – particularly after the mainstream media started giving them attention, beginning with the April 2005 blog-fuelled demonstrations to oppose the limited scope of the constitutional amendment.

Most of these early bloggers wrote in English. Sonntag (2003) conceived of language as key. The choice of using global English as a communication tool is thus, according to this theory, dependent on the benefits it grants the communicator. Egypt's linkage with the West, particularly the US, is high. Levitsky and Way (2006: 13) define linkage to the West as 'the density of ties (economic, political, diplomatic, social and organisational) and cross-border flows (of capital, goods and services, people, and information) between particular countries and the U.S., the EU, and Western-dominated multilateral institutions'. Strong linkage with the West can globalise a local issue and make the use of global English for communication of local politics relevant. Many early Egyptian bloggers reckoned that Western readers made up a very significant part of their audience. Another issue in the choice of language is technological malleability. In the early days of blogging in Egypt, most of the easiest-to-use blogging platforms had no Arabic defaults. Blogger, Google's most commonly used blogging service, only launched its Arabic support in 2008.

But the domination of the OPPM by English-language users changed in 2005 and 2006 as the blogosphere expanded. This expansion stage also saw the influx of hundreds of those termed 'brotherhood' bloggers to the arena. These new participants are principally supporters of the banned Islamic political organisation, Muslim Brotherhood. Despite the illegality of their organisation, brotherhood bloggers openly and under their real names espouse the political doctrines of the Muslim Brotherhood, and deliberate and debate with each other about the organisation's internal issues. They form the most organised and easily identifiable cluster in the Egyptian blogosphere.

The weakening of the Kifaya movement – owing to internal splits and disagreements on political objectives and directions, coupled with the massive entrance of brotherhood bloggers – contributed to the fragmentation of the OPPM. As noticed in many countries, fragmentation in the OPPM is the first phase of a maturation process. Blogging as 'a technology of the self' (Foucault, 1988) is highly favourable to the presentation of personalised perspectives and, therefore, the division of the sphere of communication. According to the Egyptian Cabinet's Information and Decision Support Center (IDCS) in 2008,¹⁰ the number of bloggers totalled 160,000. Factoring in the rapid growth of blogging in the last five years, the number would have comfortably passed the 200,000 mark by early 2011. A good chunk of these bloggers are political activists and participants. In spite of these high numbers the blogosphere is not

¹⁰ www.eip.gov.eg/Upload/Documents/417/EN/blog_full.pdf.

characterised by complete fragmentation since, over time, the reputations of individual bloggers develop and users tend to congregate around a relatively small number of selected websites – a finding that is now well-accepted by students of social networks since the work of Albert-László Barabási and Réka Albert (1999) and its subsequent modifications by other scholars (Huberman and Adamic, 1999). In 2008 Faris observed the beginning of this trend in Egypt.

Political participation and challenging government control of information

The Egyptian OPPM almost exclusively operate in permitted/tolerated participatory space, since there are no cases of censorship, filtering or requirements of registration, and the government generally refrains from making their online activities illegal. Most of the participants speak openly under their real names. Other than the case of Kareem Nabeel Suleiman, no blogger or Facebooker has so far been tried and sentenced.

Lynch (2007) divides the Arab OPPM blogosphere (which includes the Egyptian one) between Activists, Bridges and Public Sphere – based on their political activity.

Activists are directly involved in political movements, using blogs to coordinate political action, spread information, and magnify the impact of contentious politics. Bridgebloggers primarily address Western audiences, usually writing in English with the intention of explaining their societies. Finally, public-sphere bloggers tend not to be directly involved in a political movement, but are deeply engaged with the public about domestic (and often Arab or Islamist) [issues].

What is troubling about this typology is that, if it was taken seriously, it would lead to an absurd conception that activism and cross-boundary communication are conducted outside of the public sphere – a misapplication of the theories of public sphere. But, contra Isherwood, we hold that Lynch's analytical model is generally sound and useful in understanding the Egyptian online OPPM. The three groups broadly capture most functions of the OPPM. The political citizen journalism that Isherwood felt was neglected can be conceived of as a tool for performing the activities Lynch outlined. A bridgeblogger may carry out journalism in addressing Western audiences; an activist may unearth and report corruption to magnify the impact of contentious politics. Another analytical tool to assess the blogosphere is one provided by Etling et al. (2009). This approach is based on the 'principle that macro structure arises from the tendency of individuals to link more frequently to things that they are interested in'. Their network map reveals that there are five large attentive clusters in Egypt, namely Secular Reformist, Wider Opposition, Egyptian Youth, Egyptian Islamic and Muslim Brotherhood. This network map is eminently useful in understanding patterns of interaction, but less so regarding broader impacts of the OPPM on democratic change. Our approach is to consider the OPPM in total as a networked public sphere, since what we set out to do is understand the internet's

impact on democratic participation; the delineation is based only on access to the tool.

Flagging the growing number of active political participants online as evidence of the internet's ability to increase democratic political participation ignores the qualitative aspects of political participation. The qualitative issue has been addressed by a growing body of literature. Various cases also illustrate the Egyptian OPPM's indirect role in influencing the mainstream media to cover issues which are neglected, as well as unearthing stories and breaking news. The following two cases are selected carefully as representative of the many overlapping cases of participation and epistemic liberation that we and other students of the Egyptian media have observed.

Case 1: sexual assault in downtown Cairo

On the first day of Eid, 25 October 2006, a mob of young men attempted to enter a cinema house in downtown Cairo. They were told that tickets were sold out. This visibly angry group first destroyed the box office, and then went on a rampage of grotesque sexual assault, grabbing any women in sight and struggling to tear the clothes off some of them. The women sought refuge in nearby shops and taxis. Even then, the women could not hide. The young men encircled the vehicles and smashed their mirrors; others followed the women into the shops. The assault lasted for five hours – all in front of policemen who did nothing to intervene.

Prominent bloggers Wael Abbas and Malek Mustafa were in the area when the incident occurred. They took pictures and videos of the assaults and posted them with their accounts of the events. It immediately became a large issue in the blogosphere and the pictures began circulating via emails and chatrooms. In the blogs that covered the story, commenters added their own eyewitness accounts and personal and cultural interpretations, offering their takes on the inaction of the policemen who were on the scene – including their views on the wider question of the general attitude of the police force towards crimes of a sexual nature. Some victims of the attack were encouraged to come forward and speak out about their ordeals. A blog named *Wounded Girl in Cairo* was launched by one of the victims.

While the OPPM chewed on this story for three days, the mainstream media – even the independent newspapers – were disquietingly silent. Bloggers reported that Al-Jazeera taped the story, but was asked by the Egyptian authorities not to air it. An influential editor of a prominent newspaper also refused to publish the story. Bloggers sensed an official cover-up.

On 28 October 2005, Egyptian blogger, journalist and human rights activist Nawara Negm appeared on a popular TV talk show hosted by Mona Al Shazly. The focus of the show was Ramadan TV shows, but Negm changed the issue in a dramatic fashion: 'What television shows do you want to discuss when Egyptian

girls were assaulted on the streets of Cairo while the police watched and did nothing?' Negm asked the show's host. When Mona said she had not known about the incident, Negm got what she wanted. She spoke of the abuses in detail, shocking millions of the show's followers.

Once the issue was out, the mainstream media began comprehensive coverage. Blogger SandyMonkey, who wrote a scathing attack on the government on its handling of the case, organised the first of many street protests and anti-sexual-attack campaigns in Egypt. Most of them were given sufficient media coverage. The mainstream media were courageous enough to report subsequent sexual harassment incidents: one involving an almost identical mob-style attack by eight men on women pedestrians during the Eid holiday in 2008 and another, an assault on 27-year-old filmmaker Noha Ostadh, in June the same year.

The lesson of the sexual assault story centres on the ability of the OPPM to widen the subjects of discussion within the public sphere. The Egyptian Center for Women's Rights (ECWR) describes the problem of sexual assault as a 'social cancer'. According to the report released by the centre in 2008, 98% of foreign women visitors and 83% of Egyptian women had encountered sexual assault. 62% of Egyptian men admitted to having sexually harassed women and a staggering 53% of the men said that the women were to blame for the actions of the men. Before the era of the OPPM, the Egyptian public sphere was eerily silent on this significant social problem. By raising it the OPPM made the issue a proper subject for political action. The impact of the OPPM was not limited to increasing awareness, but included offering a wide field for opinion and insight. The sexual assault story was dissected by posters and commenters from religious, political and human rights angles in freely interactive exchanges. The assault victims' vigorous involvement in the chain of exchanges – the to and fro with other commenters – lent the participants a perspective of what Egyptian journalist Muhammad El Sayyed Said called 'the oppressed'. While a robust mainstream media can certainly do some of these things, the economy and architecture of mass media would make many of these actions unfeasible. We also learn that the OPPM's intake expansion is not restricted to the online sphere. Fahmy (2010) demonstrated how the OPPM in Egypt counteracted the agenda-cutting (cutting or ignoring stories) by the mainstream media. This, as we saw in the story, is sometimes supplemented by agenda-setting – the ability to lead the process of agenda construction in the public sphere. By juxtaposing the two, the OPPM sometimes expanded the informational basin of the mainstream media.

The 6 April Movement

In mid-March 2008, 29-year-old Esraa Abdel Fattah Ahmed Rashid, a member of a liberal political party called El Ghad, received a mass text message from her friend about a textile workers' strike in Mahalla al-Kubra. It called on the

receivers of the message, and Egyptian youth in general, to assist the strikers. The workers had planned for the strike to take place on 6 April. Its aim was to protest against the stagnation of wages and high inflation in the country. After meeting with the friend who sent her the message, Rashid opened a Facebook page to discuss the idea with others. Within a day, a thousand people joined the Facebook group and soon it reached tens of thousands.

The discussion about the strike began in earnest. Some people questioned whether there was any point in joining the strike. There were other members who wanted to know if the strike was legitimate, whether there was actually a decline in wages and inflation was as high as the workers claimed. Others impatiently dismissed the idea of not doing anything. Even people who supported the government (some of them calling themselves government agents) joined the group to post messages of opposition against any collaboration with the strikers. After a conversation that extended over a few days, it was clear that most of the commenters wanted action.

A plan of action was the next point of discussion. Rashid wanted stay-homes and boycotts of goods to express solidarity with the workers. But she was not against the idea of taking to the streets. It seemed that most of the members of the community were in the mood to go out and protest. Support for the group and its call to action by the Muslim Brotherhood, Kifaya movement and labour groups increased the likelihood of the success of the action.

On 6 April, Rashid and other community members went to Tahrir Square, where the protest was taking place. When they arrived, the location was already chaotic, with soldiers and police fighting the protesters who tore down President's Mubarak's photo. Hundreds of people, including Rashid herself, were arrested. The April Facebook group immediately started a 'Free Esraa' campaign; most members of the group used her image as their profile photo. In Cairo University, Egypt's Prime Minister, Ahmed Nazif, met serious protest from the students. Two weeks later, she was freed.

Contrary to the claims of some reports, the 6 April movement was not a spontaneous action. First, there was an attempt to verify whether the strike was legitimate and other people ought to join in. The process was fragmented but was enough to give most members a sense of its legitimacy. The participants of the discussions were convinced that this could be a focus of proper public political action. The claim of the strikers was taken to be both relevant and credible. It therefore passed the test of both of Yochai Benkler's filtering criteria: filtering for relevance and filtering for accreditation. The selection of an action plan followed a similar process. Multiple choices were provided. Posters used links to articles and reports that they thought would reinforce their support for one action or another. Those who supported the same proposals reinforced each other in the process of trying to show that their proposals were the best. A community proposal was hammered out after these interactions, and a joint view was formed after synthesis of the different ideas and versions. That the whole debate took

place and an agreed proposal was reached in less than 13 days was a testament to how the economics and organisational structure of the OPPM have accelerated the collection of information and exchange of ideas.

Some other cases of participation

The Free Kareem Movement: In November of 2006, blogger Kareem Nabeel Suleiman was sentenced to four years imprisonment for insulting Islam. The 'Free Kareem' movement was started by bloggers and Facebookers to draw international attention to his plight. This is an interesting case of participatory activism. In particular, the debate between secularist and Islamist members of the Egyptian OPPM on the limits of free speech show the diversity of views in the sphere, the internal dynamics of the participation and decision-making.

The Police Brutality Debate: This comprises various cases of Egyptian bloggers utilising video- and photo-sharing sites to expose police brutality and trigger a debate on it in Egypt. Bloggers such as Demagh Mak, Wael Abbas and Hossam e-Hamalawy brought to attention police brutality in different times; sometimes pressuring the state to investigate police officers who had been involved in the brutality. The most famous of these incidents is the case of Emad El Kebir, who was sodomised and tortured by two police officers. After bloggers exposed the incident and the video went viral, the police officers were prosecuted and jailed. Another incident worth mentioning is that of Kahled Saeed, which we highlighted at the beginning of this chapter as a case of the politics of emergency. The cases show the OPPM's ability to investigate abuses of power, break stories and using its amplification effect force the mainstream media to give attention to the agenda. As importantly, they show the remarkably in-depth discourse on police brutality that is taking place in the Egyptian blogosphere.

The Farouk Hosni Defeat: In August 2007, Egypt's Minister of Culture Farouk Hosni entered into the race to become the Director-General of UNESCO. With publicly stated support from the African Union and the Arab league, Hosni was considered as a favourite to win the contest, even though some Jewish intellectuals and activists opposed his election because of his controversial remarks about burning Israeli books in Egyptian libraries. But in the voting which took place on 22 September 2009, Hosni narrowly lost to former Bulgarian Prime Minister Irina Bokova. He quickly blamed his defeat on Zionist pressure, and the mainstream media in Egypt agreed.

For the independent *Al-Amsry Al-Youm*, Hosni's defeat was nothing short of an example of the 'clash of civilisations'. *Al-Ahrar* said that the defeat was a result of a 'ferocious anti-Hosni campaign by the American government, under Jewish pressure'. Government-owned *Al-Haram* criticised the 'uncivilised attack' on Hosni by Jewish intellectuals in France. Other newspapers called it an 'anti-Islam' decision.

But many Egyptian bloggers were unimpressed with the conspiracy theories. Blogger Mostafa El Naggar detailed Hosni's failure as a minister of culture in Egypt to argue why Egyptians were not sympathetic about his defeat. He also commented that there were better qualified Egyptians for the post. *Voice of Egypt* made an ever stronger case against Hosni. 'How could a man whose country is ranked #146 out of 173 countries in freedom of its press by Reporters Without Borders be the head of an international organisation whose role is to protect freedom of the press worldwide?' Zeinobia advised the minister to stop 'whining' and insisted that he lost the election because he was not qualified. Other bloggers expressed sadness that Hosni's defeat meant that he would remain the country's minister of culture. 'We are stuck with the geezer for at least another decade', lamented Hossam El Hamalawy. Mido celebrated the defeat with a video mocking the minister.

This case is striking in its revelation of the role of bloggers as conventional wisdom busters and challengers of consensus by the mainstream media. By acting as a counterforce, the bloggers offer an expanded base for analysis, insight and commentary in the public sphere.

Discussion points

Our exploratory discussion here suggests the democratic potential of the OPPM in a low-penetration African country. Three factors emerged from the Egypt case as possible anchors of such potential. First, the OPPM were introduced to the country by a small group of liberal and highly educated people. Although their domination of the sphere has decreased with the diversification and fragmentation of the general ecology, they remain its most visible members. This has given them a continuing power of interpreting the role of the internet as a critical alternative sphere of public discourse and exchange of information. We are, however, keen to stress that, in contrast to many authoritarian regimes, the Egyptian government has so far been reluctant to control the internet and challenge the interpretative role of the technology's anti-status quo early adopters.

Second, participants of the OPPM continued to freely observe, report and debate news, views and analysis, at least until late January 2011. Some of the discourse is rooted in real life and the personal experiences of the participants. But some issues are defined and discussed at a highly professional level. These discussions are in part transferred to the mainstream media through a complex network of interactions and influence. This has expanded the range of views and insights into the country's public sphere and diversified the locus of content creation. It has also prompted elites excluded from governing and decision-making to assume the role of active citizens instead of passive consumers of policies and decisions, and hence, increasing horizontal power – the power of non-regime members.

Third, although individual blogs and some clusters could be echo-chambers for limited viewpoints, participants of the Egyptian OPPM actively engage in criticising each other and acting as their own watchdogs. Most ideas and information have to pass through rigorous examination by fellow participants to stand any chance of being accepted as true, sound, credible, relevant or legitimate. Unlike in the newsrooms of the mainstream media, such a filtering process occurs in the view of the public and appears to be chaotic and unseemly for people who are unfamiliar with the process of knowledge production in OPPM. But the novelty of the internal dynamics of filtering and synthesis should not hide the fact that the OPPM are able to carry out these functions, not only in principle, but also in practice.

4. Ethiopia: revolutionary bloggers in revolutionary democracy

Power and media

In May 1991, the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front – a coalition of Marxist rebel groups – seized power, ending 17 years of military rule and forming the 'Ethiopian Second Republic' (Abbinik, 2009). The ideological underpinning of the 'Second Republic' is revolutionary democracy (TPLF/EPRDF, 1993). This notion of democracy proffers a radical answer to the questions of self-determination for 'oppressed' ethnic groups, which found little sympathy under the 'First Republic'.¹¹ At the forefront of this radical answer lie two solutions: first, the rights of self-determination (up to secession) of ethnic groups are articulated and accorded constitutional protection.¹² Second, the Ethiopian state is deconstructed into an amalgam of ethnic autonomies. Politics are then generally ethnicised in what Brietzke (1995) called 'Ethiopia's leap in the dark'. Another of revolutionary democracy's claims is the establishment of a state that plays a core role in driving economic development. Although this conception of the state's role is deeply rooted in Marxist tradition, the EPRDF correspondingly redefined it to fit the post-Cold War international ideological setting and discourse (TPLF/EPRDF, 1993; Megenta, 2008; Vestal, 1999).

The two basic tenets of revolutionary democracy (i.e. the deconstruction of the Ethiopian state and the establishment of a dominant role for the state in economic affairs) have since been guaranteed political incontestability in Ethiopia by a systematically entrenched, three-phased hegemony of power. The first monopolistic phase, the era of the 'façade electoral regime', ran from 1995 to 2000. During this period there was no meaningful contestation of power, despite the emergence of institutions of political competition (Vestal, 1999). A 1993 EPRDF strategy document openly stated that the existence of such institutions, as well as opposition political forces and the media, were important due to the demands of Western 'imperialist forces'. This strategy document further noted the Front's worry that the United States could mobilise these forces to cut vital economic aid to the country if the Front was seen as too protective of the rights 'of the masses'. The EPRDF, the document argued, ought accordingly to pretend to be in lockstep with America. While declaring elections as the only legitimate mechanism of transfer of political power and enshrining the rights of free expression, assembly and association within the country's constitution, the Front, however, ensured that parties with a competitive social base were removed from the sphere of political contest. Thus the Front managed to control both horizontal and vertical power.

¹¹ This is Abbinik's terminology for the 'Popular Democratic Republic of Ethiopia', which was established by the military council (the Derg) in 1984.

¹² The FDRE Constitution's (1995) article 39 promulgates the right of self-determination of ethnic groups.

Platforms of public participation were immoderately constrained throughout this primary phase. An excessively broad application of a draconian law regulating the conduct of the press led to the prosecution and imprisonment of tens of journalists (Megenta, 2007). Other subtle forms of media suppression included the dramatic increase in taxes on imported paper, selective allocation of state advertisements, intense harassment and intimidation, and punishing fines and bail bonds. Working under these conditions, the exclusively print-based private media utterly failed to evolve into a mature and fully fledged public sphere, where proprietors and journalists could aspire to meet the requirements of platforms of public participation. The quality of the newspapers remained unacceptably low; their combined circulation level was a pitiful 53,000 in September 2007 (Skijerdal and Lule, 2009).

Public media, both print and broadcast, did not fare any better. They were entirely government-controlled, heavily censored and geared to work as propaganda machines; constitutional rules of intake, relevance and representation were ignored entirely. Such was the level of government intervention in the production and publication processes of the public media that some programmes could not be broadcast without the authorisation of security officials.

The second phase of the power hegemony occurred between 2001 and 2005. It began with an important split among the top brass of the core EPRDF group, the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF), in the aftermath of the Ethio-Eritrean war. Prime Minister Meles Zenawi's faction emerged as victor and presented itself to the world as a modern, democratic and open group, without relinquishing the tenets of revolutionary democracy.¹³ In a 2001 paper, the Prime Minister presented revolutionary democracy as one idea in a pluralistic public sphere, albeit the only one with coherent solutions for Ethiopia's problems. He argued that it was possible to make the people of Ethiopia believers in revolutionary democracy, while allowing space for competing liberal democratic ideas. In one memorable paragraph, he conjured a striking vision of the religious embrace of revolutionary democracy:

When revolutionary democracy permeates the entire Ethiopian society, individuals will start to think alike and all persons will cease having their own independent outlook. In this order, individual thinking becomes simply part of collective thinking because the individual will not be in a position to reflect on concepts that have not been prescribed by revolutionary democracy. (Zenawi, 2001)

This brief romance with the notion of commingling political pluralism and power hegemony had short-lived positive effects on democratisation. Progress was made in reforming and opening up the arenas of political contestation. In 2004,

¹³ See 'Meles and the Plotters', *The Economist* (Mar. 2004): www.economist.com/node,541137, accessed Mar. 2010.

two opposition coalitions were formed and registered to compete in the general elections the following year (Aalen and Tronvoll, 2009: 194). They held public meetings and demonstrations in many places throughout the country, creating formidable organisational networks. Although the National Democratic Institution and the National Republic Institution were prevented from monitoring these elections, other credible groups such as the European Union and the Carter Center were given observer status. Additionally, domestic civil society groups enhanced their participation in human rights and governance advocacy issues. In early 2005, some of these groups stepped up their involvement in election-related activities, educating voters and members of government institutions on civic rights and ethical election conduct. The government's interference in judicial decision-making also gradually lessened, providing maverick judges with the opportunity to make decisions outside of the interests of the ruling party.

The media, and particularly the private media, were less controlled. The number of fresh prosecutions against journalists dropped dramatically. The increasing annual tax on imported paper levelled off, pushing inflation-adjusted printing costs down. While selective allocation of state advertisements persisted, some members of the media that received a large share of such advertising freely criticised the government without fear of retaliatory advertisement withdrawals. In what many considered to be a positive gesture, government officials openly debated the new draft broadcast law with other stakeholders, including representatives from the media and civil society groups. Following criticism, the government slowed the legislative process, incorporating some of the suggestions and agreeing to allow more time for deliberation (Megenta, 2007).

Despite the enormous increase in press freedom, the private media generally failed to work for the fulfilment of the demands of a genuinely democratic platform of public participation. They rather acted largely as mouthpieces of the opposition. Intake, accreditation, representation and relevance – all important requirements of a robust media – were frequently neglected. This extreme partisanship reached its pinnacle during and after the elections. Some observers noted that the repression of the 1990s had made it impossible for private media to emerge that were capable of prudently using their newfound freedoms. Indeed, by the beginning of the last decade, journalism had become one of the least attractive professions to the educated section of Ethiopia's population, owing to the security challenges and deep institutional problems of the media business. The journalists who remained in the profession, along with those who had recently joined, were largely people of enormous courage, determination and aspiration, but with gaping weaknesses in skills and in their understanding of the role of their profession. Yet the fact that both the small number of truly skilled practitioners of the trade and the newspapers with relatively strong institutional setups did not act any better than the others calls

for a more comprehensive explanation of the state and conduct of the press during the Revolutionary II Era (Megenta, 2007).

The relaxation of public media control came in the later part of this era, and was mainly limited to elections. Vigorous election debates among representatives of political parties contesting for power were widely broadcast, and mainly uncensored. Airtime was allocated to various political parties for free political advertisements; demonstrations and meetings of opposition parties were accorded news coverage. Apart from these admittedly significant developments, the public media was, however, largely insulated from the relative openness of the Revolutionary Democracy II Period. Interviews with ruling-party officials revealed that their caution in opening up the public media was calculated, primarily attributed to the fear that a complete freeing up of the public sphere would lead to unexpected challenges to their power. They were willing to take a calculated gamble, 'however, making TV and radio completely free could be a gamble too far'.¹⁴

Yet the results of the 2005 elections and the subsequent existential threat to EPRDF's power hegemony mounted by the opposition proved that the gamble they had taken had already gone too far – leading them to recognise the incompatibility of power hegemony and pluralism and reverse entirely the trends of democratisation that began in 2001. Thus, a new era of repression and control was ushered in (Abbinik, 2009: 11).

This third era of revolutionary democracy has so far been marked by three basic features: first, there has been a series of new laws that constrain freedoms of speech, organisation, assembly and demonstration. Although EPRDF has never shunned the use of legislative restraints, the number of laws issued and the overall similarity of objectives make this period unique. In March 2008, a new law governing political parties and elections was promulgated, followed by legislation restricting freedom of the media and then the status of civil society groups. A year later, a harsh anti-terrorism law was passed by parliament despite protestations by international donors and local civic groups. The combination of these four pieces of legislation has served to make organising and expressing dissenting political views extremely difficult (Aalen and Tronvoll, 2009). Second, repression has intensified. The government continues to employ both judicial and informal mechanisms to intimidate, deter and punish opponents of power.¹⁵ The number of documented cases of human rights abuses has accordingly increased considerably. Third, a new mix of co-option and intimidation has been used to massively recruit members to the party. In early 2010, the number of EPRDF members crossed the five million mark (more than 6% of the population), surpassing the percentage of Chinese citizens in the Communist Party.

¹⁴ Interview with anonymous official A (2008).

¹⁵ See for a detailed review of the condition of human rights: US Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, *2008 Human Rights Reports: Ethiopia* (Feb. 2009): www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2008/af/119001.htm, accessed Mar. 2010.

In the last five years, platforms of public participation have gradually narrowed to virtual non-existence. In early 2010 only a handful of independent newspapers, with a total circulation of less than 50,000 copies a week, remained in business – most of them suffering from a combination of high printing costs and limited access to government printing presses. Popular newspapers (like *Asqual*, *Menelik*, *Ethiop*, *Abay*, *Addis Zena*, *Netsanet* and *Satena*) that were shut down in the aftermath of the elections were denied the licences necessary to resume publication. Imprisonment and intimidation of journalists has also intensified. Not since 1991 has the public media been exposed to this degree of control.

In light of the developments of the last five years, some scholars doubt the value of calling Ethiopia's ruling party anything other than a full-scale authoritarian regime; most spaces of political competition in Ethiopia are now completely closed. Reflecting the death of political contests, the two recent electoral results ended in Soviet-style 99.9% and 99.6% wins for the ruling party. The problem is therefore no longer violation of the criteria for democracy and the resulting uneven playing field of contest, but the vanishing of the playing field altogether. Such events triggered two authoritative scholars on Ethiopian politics to contend that the only apparent remaining avenue of power competition open to the opposition is 'armed struggle' – a radical proclamation!

It is neither disregard for these political developments nor naïve optimism that has led us to classify the regime as authoritarianism with adjectives. A researcher of politics needs to be cautious in categorising the complex realities of political transformations during their period of volatility. We believe Ethiopia is presently in that stage. The trend reveals the decaying of the regime, but it is a touch too soon to label it a full-scale authoritarian regime. This year's Freedom House Index of Freedom in the World captures the reality very well. Ethiopia's score is 5 points, placing it in the category of states that are 'partly free'. However, the analysis states that there is a pronounced setback of political freedoms and civil rights in the country, leaving it just above the zone of 'unfree' countries (Freedom House, 2010). There remains an analytical distinction between 'unfreedom' and 'full-scale authoritarianism' – the former being a bit broader than the latter. Yet, in many cases, the practical differences between the two are whittled down almost to zero. Ethiopia's Polity IV Authority Trend Score (Polity IV, 2008),¹⁶ for example, is very consistent with the country's score in the Index of Freedom in the World (Freedom House, 2009).

Internet in Ethiopia

Before analysing the significance of the Ethiopian OPDM as tool of democratisation, it is important to provide the operational context. With a measly 0.4% of its population with internet access, Ethiopia's internet penetration rate is

¹⁶ www.systemicpeace.org/polity/Ethiopia2008.pdf.

the second lowest in Africa (ITU, 2009).¹⁷ This ITU figure is, however, contested by some analysts. The ITU method of sending survey forms to government agencies to complete leads to a tendency to underestimate the number of internet users in developing countries, where many people access the internet through internet cafés, government and private organisations, workplaces and academic institutions. A researcher at Addis Ababa University, for example, estimates a much higher 1.2% penetration rate in Ethiopia. Yet even this number would put the country in the bottom 10% of sub-Saharan Africa, nearly equal to the penetration rate in Egypt a decade ago (Melkamu, 2009).

According to Market Research Reports (2010), 94% of the country's internet users are concentrated within the capital city of Addis Ababa. This figure establishes Ethiopia as the country with the most unequal distribution of internet access in the world. Most users in Ethiopia are termed by scholars as 'one-night standers' – accessing the internet very infrequently, mainly to check emails from relatives and friends living overseas (Melkamu, 2009). Frequent internet users are disproportionately young, male and educated. A survey of 139 frequent internet users in Addis Ababa in early 2008 shows that most of them use it primarily for email exchanges and as their main source of sports news. Only 24% of these respondents claimed that they used the internet to consume political information. Some studies argue that wealth disparities in developing countries lead to unequal access to the internet; this is true of Ethiopia to a limited extent. While all of the frequent users in the survey earned more than 400 birr (35 dollars) a month, the impact of wealth on distribution diminished dramatically beyond a monthly income of 1350 birr (Melkamu, 2009).

Market Research Reports (2010)¹⁸ predicts that the number of users will rapidly increase in the next four years, with the penetration rate climbing to nearly 8%. This prediction is based on the government's promise to liberalise the telecom sector and expand access to the internet. At the beginning of June 2010, the government announced its plan to extend the existing 7,000 km of fibre-optic cable to 10,000 km by October 2010. It also recently announced the appointment of a French company to partner with the Ethiopian Telecommunications Corporation (a government monopoly) for assistance with technical and managerial operations.¹⁹ Many analysts are, however, unsure whether these promises of liberalisation will be met. In the past ten years there have been numerous false starts in ICT development in Ethiopia. The government's ideological interest in benefiting exclusively from the huge profits of the telecommunication sector, in combination with its political commitment to controlling the flow of information, has so far completely blocked the liberalisation of this sector.

¹⁷ www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/material/ISSP09-AFR_final-en.pdf.

¹⁸ www.researchandmarkets.com/reportinfo.asp?report_id=1369548&tracker=related.

¹⁹ See www.panpa.org.au/ThreadView.aspx?tid=35408, accessed June 2010.

Indeed, most of the strategies incorporated within the government's approach to internet expansion are closer to the model followed by Cuba than China, although much of the writing on the internet in Ethiopia uses China as a framing case. While China's approach is 'the promotion of rapid, market-driven diffusion' (Kalathil and Boas, 2003: 7), Ethiopia relies on the central allocation and control of the resource. Ethiopia's similarity to China is rather largely related to the use of filtering, monitoring and surveillance as instruments of controlling political communication. The Ethiopian government began using these tools in 2006 when it first blocked blogs and web publications run by its opponents and dissidents. A few months later, it strengthened its monitoring and surveillance efforts by requiring internet cafés to register the names and addresses of their customers. The move was taken as an effort to track users who were engaged in online activism and the reading of political blogs.²⁰

Between 2006 and 2010, the government escalated its control efforts by expanding the list of prime targets for filtering. The websites of international human rights organisations Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Committee to Protect Journalists and Reporters without Borders have all become inaccessible in Ethiopia (ONI, 2009).²¹ A more sophisticated 'cognitive intervention' model of control was further added in late 2007; government-paid 'interveners' monitor multidirectional participatory platforms and use diversionary and disruptive tactics to change both the substance and style of discourse in the direction of their choosing.²²

Yet as the detailed case studies that I offer in the subsequent sections of the paper highlight, these efforts at control and the limited number of internet users in Ethiopia have not totally obliterated the online participatory media's direct and indirect impact in opening up new spheres of dissemination of information and public discourse.

The genesis of OPPM

The seeds of participatory media were sown in the early 1990s when an Ethiopian email distribution network called EDDN was formed. The network's main mission was to act as a forum for Ethiopians to exchange views. By the mid-1990s, Ethiopians in the diaspora were able to glean news about life in Ethiopia from people back home (albeit a very few people, mainly in academia) and engage in extensive discussions. Most of the members had strong anti-government views and the deliberations reflected those sentiments. EDDN remained the only platform of e-participation for the next six years. In 1997, Kitaw Yayehirad, an Ethiopian IT specialist living in Geneva, started networking Ethiopians using his website cyberethiopia.com and its affiliate, ethioline.com.

²⁰ Notes from Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), Open Net Initiative (ONI), Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF).

²¹ http://opennet.net/sites/opennet.net/files/ONI_Ethiopia_2009.pdf.

²² Interview with anonymous official A (2008).

This was the first Ethiopian web-based forum of exchange of information and views (Megenta and Mekonnen, 2005).

But the most important political website was one established in 1998 by an anonymous Ethiopian writer under the name 'Dagmawi'. This was a personal page linked to authoritative scholarly articles, news and opinions about the Ethio-Eritrean war (1998–2000) on Yahoo's now defunct Geocities. Dagmawi also often wrote sharp, concise and erudite comments about the war. Although his writings supported Ethiopia's 'war of self-defence', Dagmawi was not an uncritical supporter of the Ethiopian government. His critiques of the government's diplomatic approach and the tactical issues of war were considered the most thorough and were widely acclaimed (Megenta, 2008). Throughout the war, his page remained the 'go-to' site for academics, domestic and international journalists and diplomats. *The Reporter*, one of Ethiopia's leading papers, published Dagmawi's comments regularly, giving them wide exposure among Ethiopian readers. 'In a time when the Ethiopian government was losing the battle to win international public opinion, Dagmawi played a crucial role in bolstering the Ethiopian case' (Melkamu, 2009).

Dagmawi's site was a milestone in the genesis of Ethiopia's participatory media because it had the most rudimentary elements of a networked information economy. By publishing the site on a free pad, Dagmawi eliminated the costs of 'becoming a speaker' and his newfound status, as the most authoritative voice on a significant political issue without being a member of the established media or appearing in a traditional media outlet, was a precursor to the hub-and-spoke network architecture that marked the Web 2.0 era. Dagmawi's efforts inspired Biniyam Kebede, an Ethiopian living in Canada, to start another personal website which, among other things, introduced news aggregation.

Another significant point in time was the year 2000. This year marked the decision of Elias Kifle, the young publisher and editor-in-chief of *Ethiopian Review* – one of Ethiopia's prominent magazines – to discontinue the print edition of the magazine and publish exclusively online. This decision was an illustration of the increasing importance of web-based media. *Ethiopian Review* would later become one of the most influential and popularly followed Ethiopian participatory media sources, incorporating multidirectional platforms of public participation such as blogs and discussion forums. In 2001, several websites – including some that have since become household names, like ethiomeia.com and nazret.com – were created.

By the end of 2005, the number of political or quasi-political websites with multidirectional participatory platforms was at least 57 (Megenta and Mekonnen, 2005). The political blogosphere, in particular, was blossoming – prompting the BBC to label them 'a small, but growing set of citizen journalists'.²³ While pre-2005

²³ A. Heavens, 'African Bloggers Find their Voice', BBC: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/4512290.stm>, accessed Mar. 2010.

blogging was an exclusively diaspora phenomenon, the elections in 2005 marked the arrival of homeland bloggers on the scene. Urael, Ethio Zagol, Dina, Adebabay Ze'Ethiopia, Tsegasaurus and Roha garnered immediate recognition in the blogosphere for their first-hand reports and authoritative accounts of politics in Ethiopia. Foreign bloggers living in Addis Ababa and writing about Ethiopian politics also became an integral part of the Ethiopian blogosphere. The Ethiopian political blogosphere has shrunk considerably over the past two years. Following the acrimonious split of the opposition Coalition for Unity and Democracy, (CUD) – which many of the writers openly and enthusiastically embraced – as well as the government's successful efforts in blocking websites within Ethiopia, many prominent bloggers and web publishers ceased their online political activities.

Yet less centralised political social networking sites have sprung up in their place. For example, Facebook is now the dominant place for political conversation.²⁴ There are several reasons why Facebook and other social networking sites are the preferred platforms of participation for the new army of politically active citizens. First, the Ethiopian government has shown reluctance to censor or block social networking sites because their predominant users are not activists, and there is a risk of upsetting non-political citizens if it does so. Second, political debates can take place in the personal pages of anonymous users who unlike well-known bloggers are hard to detect. Third, blogs are not considered as participatory enough by new-generation users of the internet, as most of the discussion threads are started by the main bloggers. In Facebook and other social media networks, discussions can be opened by anyone who is part of the community. Fourth, it is easier to spread out conversation to several pages in the case of attacks on important nodes by the government.

Challenging government control of information

Until the government began filtering websites in 2006, the status of the OPPM was uncertain. The existing laws were too narrow in scope and technical sophistication to adequately regulate the new media ecosystem and the government made no attempt to draft a new law. Yet there were provisions in the Ethiopian criminal code and press law which could be used to prosecute some publishers, if need be.²⁵ It is worth noting that, at least until the last few months of the 2005 elections, the government appeared wholly unconcerned with the cyber media in general, regarding it as an indulgence of very few elites in Ethiopia and a handful of government opponents overseas. This position was at least in part justified. At the beginning of 2005, internet penetration in Ethiopia

²⁴ In the last two years, Facebook's discussion pages such as 'addisneger' and 'free birtukan' have become sites of vibrant political discussion and participation. Facebook pages of journalists and politicians have also become quasi-public spheres.

²⁵ Some online media owners living overseas were prosecuted in absentia in 2006. See www.amnestyusa.org/document.php?id=ENGAFR250132006&lang=e.

was less than 0.25% (ITU, 2006) and 97% (Melkamu, 2009) of the users were within Addis Ababa. Add the painfully slow connection speed, and it could be assumed that it was a most unlikely tool to threaten government power or be harnessed by the opposition as an effective instrument of mass communication. With an ambiguous legal status and lack of government attention, the OPPM could be said to have been operating in a tolerated space.

It was evident from the outset that online participatory media offered unique advantages that the traditional private and public media do not. First, as the start-up, production and distribution costs of these websites were very low, the constant problems of market survival no longer applied. A part-time publisher could successfully update them daily with a combination of aggregated news and one or two articles from contributors without incurring any financial costs in the process. Second, the option of remaining anonymous reduced both the formal (legal) and informal risks of publishing. Third, the transnational character of the platforms allowed them to attract contributions from well-educated Ethiopians among the diaspora, enhancing the overall quality of their output. Fourth, the distribution of the network architecture of these platforms made them a difficult target for government control.

These advantages, their influence on private media in Ethiopia and their ability to exist in underground space in post-2005 Ethiopia has given them a good shot at countering the epistemic dominance of the government, as the following two cases highlight.

Case 1: Seminawork and the Yalemzewd saga

Seminawork was created by a European-trained Ethiopian lawyer in February 2006. The blogger, who goes by the alias Ethio Zagol, became instantly popular by publishing secret government information. On Thursday 27 October 2007, this blogger broke the story that Yalemzewd Bekele, a prominent human rights lawyer working for the European Commission in Addis Ababa, had been arrested by the Ethiopian government. Yalemzewd's arrest was related to the production and distribution by the opposition CUD of a calendar of action for non-violent civil disobedience. The calendar made a call for 14 actions to force the government to release the party's leaders, journalists and human rights activists who were jailed after the election turmoil. Police in Addis Ababa issued an arrest warrant after its investigation led to Yalemzewd. According to Amnesty International, Yalemzewd was implicated by Alemayehu Fantu, a local businessman who was arrested and tortured after he was caught distributing the calendar.

Having learnt that Yalemzewd was in hiding from the police, two European diplomats used their diplomatically privileged vehicle to take her to the Kenyan border where she was caught while trying to cross into Kenya. *Seminawork* broke the story to the world. The post, 'A prominent human rights

campaigner arrested', on Ethio-Zagol's blog *Seminawork* said that police had been trying to arrest Yalemzewd Bekele for a week. It also mentioned that two EU officials were expelled from the country in connection with the case. A day later, the BBC, Reuters and other international news outlets published the story. Within two days, Ethiopia and the EC were in a serious diplomatic crisis. *The Economist*, which picked up the case from *Seminawork*, claimed that the story seemed like something taken from the Cold War Soviet Union.

Over the next few days, *Seminawork* kept up a steady stream of updates on the story with, in the words of a Reuters correspondent in Addis Ababa, 'the regularity of a well-oiled news wire'. There were more alleged details on the locations of the arrests and how the police tracked every one down. After that there was a story on the Ethiopian government's elaborate espionage in the EC's office in Addis Ababa. *Seminawork* also wrote detailed accounts of Yalemzewd's treatment in jail and a 'torture chamber' in north Addis Ababa where some of the people arrested in connection with the calendar were kept. As bloggers and mainstream media followed the story with fascination, international human rights organisations and the EC pressurised the government to close the 'torture chamber' and release Yalemzewd. Days after the story broke, international attention forced the regime to do both.

This case is an example of a blogger breaking and relentlessly following a story of grave importance and, with mainstream media outlets, forcing an authoritarian government to release political prisoners. The blog did not use the amplification effect of OPPM. Rather, the story was picked up by mainstream media outlets because their reporters read the blog as it had established a reputation for breaking news that would otherwise not have been known.

Case 2: Dagmawi and election analysis

One day after the 15 May 2005 general elections, the EPRDF declared victory and announced its immediate intentions to form a government. While this victory announcement was broadcast, ballot counting was still underway in at least 312 constituencies. The premature declaration of victory combined with reports of widespread discrepancies coming largely from rural areas convinced the opposition parties and most of the Addis Ababa-based private media that it was a case of 'stolen elections'. In the first few days, the newspapers were predominantly limited to reporting statements of the opposition parties questioning the election results, and publishing eyewitness accounts of post-election problems. These reports, while instrumental in convincing opposition supporters to reject the election results, did not provide the 'smoking-gun' evidence of election fraud. But a week later, the complexity of the reports notably changed following the thorough statistical analysis of Dagmawi, who is popularly known as 'The Blogfather'.

Dagmawi commenced his analysis on 26 May 2005, using data taken from the website of the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE). His first article concentrated on the discrepancy between the turnout and winning margins in two demographically and culturally close, as well as geographically adjacent, constituencies. Ethiomedia, one of the most widely read Ethiopian websites, linked the story. It was also discussed in the forum of another popular website and numerous blogs. Outside the online media ecosystem, *Meznagna*, a private newspaper in Addis Ababa that had also launched its own statistical analysis, published Dagmawi's article. It was later picked up by *Asqual* newspaper. Dagmawi additionally contributed three successive articles detailing turnout patterns and their implications for the validity of the results. These articles illuminated staggering statistical anomalies that would lead any objective researcher to seriously question the election results. All three articles were published by private newspapers in Ethiopia. By mid-June, these and other statistical analyses by the prominent blogger had thoroughly discredited the validity of the results. Political writers and party leaders used these same articles to demand either election reruns or the formation of a unity government.

Dagmawi's contribution here was in the production of knowledge that contested and disproved government position. Unlike *Seminawork's* mostly original stories, Dagmawi's role was giving perspective and context to news that had already been reported. His role, nonetheless, is no less worthy. Authoritarian government used spin and manipulation of information as tools of epistemic hegemony and well-thought-out and credible analyses are important in countering those.

Participation

The Ethiopian OPPM is mainly divided into three participatory clusters: integrationist, Oromo and pro-government. These clusters each have their distinct issues, ethos and substance of discourse. Our analysis shows that in each of them, there is a robust, if at times vitriolic participation that mixes sensibilities of farce and staunch support for a cause. The political borders among them are very sharp. Both integrationist and Oromo clusters strongly disapprove of the current government but the reasons for their disapproval are different, if not irreconcilably clashing. Integrationists think that the government has weakened Ethiopia by ethnicising politics. The main concern in the Oromo cluster is that of too little autonomy for Ethiopia's various ethnic groups. In this respect the differences are minimal; both shun crossing each other's boundaries and participating in the discourse of the 'other'. But complete disregard of the other's discourse becomes comparably greater in the integrationist territory than the Oromo one. My finding reveals that this form of enclave participation is one of the most striking features of the Ethiopian participatory media.

Pro-government websites appear less ideological than the others, concentrating mainly on rebutting arguments and attacks from the other clusters, albeit – in the post-1970s Ethiopian political tradition – the rebuttals are cloaked in lofty-sounding ideological vocabulary. As this is generally a reactive cluster, the participants freely cross to other clusters (mainly integrationist) to get involved in the deliberations of the ‘others’ and link to both clusters when they want to react to or attack individual posts. The following two cases illustrate the nature of participation in the pro-government and integrationist clusters.

Case 1: The prime minister announces his resignation

In the last five years, Meles Zenawi has flirted with resignation at least in rhetoric. He first announced this promise in September 2005, during an interview with CNN. Since this original statement was uttered at the height of an election-related political crisis in Ethiopia, it was largely interpreted as a crisis-dampening promise that would surely be rescinded once the political impasse was resolved. Yet the prime minister continued to deliver similar statements in subsequent interviews with other international news organisations.²⁶

As the issue of his resignation had never been discussed by the party leaders, some members of the group were understandably confused. In the summer of 2009, press reports started to suggest that the prime minister would soon present the issue to the executive committee. It was further hinted that he would not leave office alone, but demand the resignation of all the ‘old guard’ within the party. Some of his party’s top dogs began openly to oppose his promise to leave office. Others sent anonymous letters to aigaforum.com. Some pushed their individual contacts within the diaspora to write articles (on Aigaforum), asking the prime minister to stay in power and complete the ‘development projects’ he had started.

By September 2009, when the EPRDF Executive Committee Meeting was held, a tide of ‘No Resignation’ sentiment had captured party leaders. The PM was asked to serve for five more years after the 2010 elections. Some analysts doubted whether this honest-looking debate was not, in fact, an orchestrated public relations stunt (‘I want to leave office, but my comrades do not’) intended to bolster Meles Zenawi’s ‘democratic potential’. Indeed, as Sunstein and Vermeule (2008) noted, excessively secretive regimes are prone to conspiracy theories that are often legitimately grounded. Yet from interviews with EPRDF insiders, we gathered that the prime minister’s promise to leave office had truly taken some members of the party’s leaders by surprise.

This story reveals the potential of OPPM to expand the circulation of even an inside debate by the regime’s leaders. It can also be argued that OPPM have potential for enhancing accessibility, as members of the party leadership whose

²⁶ www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=newsarchive&sid=ad61j4ItAX9c.

speech is normally constrained in face-to-face meetings can air their views using these platforms.

Case 2: Elias Kifle's call for civil disobedience

On 28 October 2005, the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD), the largest opposition group in Ethiopia at the time, openly called for widespread civil disobedience actions to protest the election results. The call included, among other things, acts of non-cooperation in the form of boycotting business organisations owned by the ruling party and ostracising people who informed on political activists in their neighbourhoods.²⁷ On 1 and 2 November, most of the top party leaders were incarcerated and newspapers shut down. With their leaders in jail and information mechanisms cut off, supporters of the party at home and overseas could no longer coordinate their actions. Elias Kifle of *Ethiopian Review* took note and stepped into the arena of political coordination. In the website forum, a variety of action items – such as boycotting Ethiopian Airlines, ceasing money transfers and helping prisoners' families – were discussed by forum members. Elias himself led the discussion, posting suggestions on the website's homepage. Some of the proposed action items were rejected following deliberation; others were adopted by forum members. The process of participation – filtering legitimate proposals and selecting the best ones for action, analysing and synthesising them – was untidy and sometimes chaotic. But it finally led to a result-oriented exercise. In early 2006, Elias intensified his efforts by orchestrating the creation of an action group appropriately named Tegbar (action), using the website as a tool. Tegbar began organising student protests in Addis Ababa and forging networks in some places outside the city. *Ethiopian Review* also played a leading role in soliciting funds for the organisation.

Case 3: Free Birtukan movement

In December 2008, Ethiopia's most popular opposition leader, Birtukan Mideksa, was imprisoned for allegedly violating the terms of a pardon she and other opposition leaders had been granted a year earlier after a court sentenced them to life imprisonment for committing 'outrage against the constitutional order'. Her imprisonment provoked widespread resentment against the government.

News that she had been sent back to jail to serve her life sentence immediately prompted Kassahun Addis, a young political analyst, to start a 'Free Birtukan Mideksa' Facebook page. He first sent messages to his close friends, asking them to become members of the group, but within days the news of its launch had become viral in Facebook, attracting hundreds of people. 'Birtukan is

²⁷ See:

http://nazret.com/blog/index.php?title=cud_ban_on_eprdf_owned_businesses&more=1&c=1&tb=1&pb=1, accessed Nov. 2009.

a political prisoner,' one of the earliest commenters on the page stated in a sentence that captured the sentiment of many of the members. 'She should be immediately and unconditionally released.' By February 2009, the page member list included prominent artists, journalists and politicians.

The Facebook campaign intensified with the launch of two other pages that had similar objectives. The pages were primarily set up as gestures of protest. But they quickly became forums for discussing the ordeals of prisoners of conscience in Ethiopia. By December 2009, there were at least six Facebook groups with the avowed aim of protesting Birtukan's arrest. Although there were suggestions and attempts to unify these groups, most of them continued to be active until October 2010, the month of the politician's release from jail.

Her release followed a vigorous campaign by a 'Release Birtukan' Facebook group created by a well-known online grassroots activist who uses the pseudonym Selam LeEthiopia (Peace for Ethiopia). It was a campaign to remember Birtukan Mideksa's unjust imprisonment during the first two weeks of Ethiopian new year (beginning 11 September 2010). Members and other Ethiopians on Facebook were asked to change their profile pictures to that of Birtukan. As information spread quickly, even the least political Facebookers joined the protest by changing their profile pictures, embarrassing the government.²⁸ The main objective of this action was to bring attention to Birtukan's fate. The protest organisers thought that press coverage of her imprisonment had gradually disappeared. Measured by the yardstick of getting international attention, the protest was very successful. By the second week of September, international media including the *Guardian*, the Voice of America, the Associated Press and *Deutsche Welle* had reported the story. Encouraged by the media interest, the organisers extended the campaign for two more weeks.

On the morning of 23 September – a day after the prime minister hinted in his talk at Columbia University that Birtukan might be released – censors working at the Information Network Security Agency (INSA) were asked to 'look into filtering all free Birtukan Mideksa Facebook pages and creating a database of all users who have changed their profile pictures'.²⁹ The government shelved its demand after technicians at INSA reported on the impossibility of the task, although they had previously been successful in target-blocking the Facebook page of the dissident *Addis Neger* newspaper.

The Facebook protests occurred at the lowest point for freedom of speech in Ethiopia in the last two decades. Following Birtukan's arrest, the State Minister for Communications, Shimeles Kemal, fired a warning to anyone who had a plan to protest. 'She is a criminal,' he said. 'An attempt to present her as a saint or a patriot is a crime.' Although the government permitted a small demonstration

²⁸ Interview with government official (anonymous).

²⁹ Correspondence with an INSA technology expert.

against the decision, the organisers limited the participation to members of Birtukan's party and her family, under the instruction of the authorities.

Howard Rheingold's (2002) *Smart Mobs* explains why Facebook emerged as the most significant space for the protests. It was the combination of tech-savvy activists, the existence of an easily accessible and hard-to-control social networking tool, and the possibility of minimising risk that made what could have been an impossible task in such a tightly controlled political space possible. The decentralised, non-hierarchical nature of the groups and the absence of prominent individuals in all except one of the groups not only shielded the groups from government eyes, but gave confidence to members that they were not unknowingly getting into political movements with a broader agenda to which they did not subscribe.

The structure of collective action represented by this case is different from the top-down hierarchical organisation of the analogue era. Although the actions were coordinated by specific individuals, they were not leaders of the orchestras. It was the agenda and the issues that participants raised in relation to the agenda which were at the heart of the collective action.

Discussion points

Ethiopia is one of the most fascinating case studies with regards to the internet and democratisation in low-penetration authoritarian countries. It has one of the lowest levels of internet penetration in the world (0.5%), but very vibrant OPFM. The majority of these are anti-government. Although the government filters the net substantially, tools like Facebook have made it difficult for it to control information flow and participation.

- As in Tunisia, the early OPFM members have set the subversive tone and substance of discourse on the net in Ethiopia. Many of the websites and blogs started by early adopters are still available. Most of them have dominant traffic rankings. New entrants usually gain visibility when the early websites link them. Almost invariably, they would link to new entrants if, and only if, their political outlooks are similar. This has given them an overwhelming and continuous interpretative power.
- The Ethiopian OPFM have increasingly become very participatory although the level of discourse is less than the discourse we observed in Tunisia and Egypt. Members, however, freely inform each other, debate and select issues for political action.
- New-generation online political participants are migrating to Facebook because it is more participatory and hard to censor. This has the potential to challenge the relatively hierarchical structure of the blogosphere.

5. Eritrea: the land of few political bloggers

In 1991, the Eritrean Peoples' Liberation Front (EPLF) swept into the capital of Asmara, making it a *de facto* independent African nation. Two years later, the country won its *de jure* independence and full recognition from the international community after Eritreans voted for a secession from Ethiopia.

Over the next few years, the country tried to project an image of a harmonious, rapidly developing and well-ordered country. The EPLF changed its name to the Popular Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) to underscore its commitment to lead the transition from a war-ravaged province of Ethiopia to a modern independent state. The country's president and liberation hero, Isayas Afewerki, promised the West that he would undertake both political and economic reforms. The Clinton administration became a close ally, with the American president himself calling Afewerki 'a new generation African leader'. Debessay (2003: 436) argues that this image was 'coloured by the euphoria of independence following a military victory'. Other scholars also observe that, beneath the charm offensive of Afewerki and the hope and aspiration that was projected, Eritrea's promise was broken no sooner than independence was gained. Isayas was on his way to becoming one of Africa's ruthlessly despotic rulers, and his nation was rapidly decaying into the last outpost of totalitarian tyranny on the continent.

Eritrea's most astute student, Richard Reid of the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, divides the country's short political history into three phases (Reid, 2009: 213). The first phase was considered the period of post-liberation hope. Eritrean political scientist Ruth Iyob called it a period of 'cautious pragmatism' (1997). In 1993, Isayas Afewerki quietly quelled an army rebellion. A year later, disabled veterans of the war demonstrated in Asmara. That was also swiftly crushed by the Eritrean army. A conflict with Yemen in 1996 over the disputed Hanish Islands ended in absolute military triumph for Eritrea, which led to a negotiated cease-fire. Apart from these and small skirmishes on the Sudanese border with some radical Islamists, Eritrea was generally peaceful. The fact that gloomy forecasts of bloodshed and economic collapse did not materialise, coupled with the useful confidence ('arrogance' for some) of Isayas Afewerki, made the case of Eritrea very promising to most of its observers. 'Proud, principled and impoverished, Eritrea is virtually without peer in Africa as it pursues its own model of development and vision of democracy,' wrote Michael Holmann and Michaela Wrong (1996) in the *Financial Times*.

Peeling away the layers of this naïve romanticisation of the country reveals what went wrong in the country during this phase of euphoria and jubilation. The key lies in the phrase 'its own model of democracy'. The PFDJ had openly claimed that, following its experience of years of struggle, it would adopt *akay'da gobi'ye* (a tortoise's pace) approach to democracy. This approach was to be

slow and steady. In practice, it meant years of transition that, as empirical evidence suggests, had a possibility of decay (Olcott and Ottaway, 1999). Indeed, the 1996 drafting process of the country's constitution was a warning shot of what was to come. The PFDJ soon asserted its absolute commitment to hegemonic identity. The constitutional debate could only be held within the ambit of PFDJ's rule: cohesion first, democracy second. The multi-ethnic model of pluralism was abhorred. Debessay (2003: 436) states that, in this multi-ethnic country, the issue of Eritrean identity was never seriously debated. In other matters, dissenting opinions were 'either ignored or interpreted to fit the tradition of democratic-centralism that is part of EPLF's culture' (Debessay, 2003: 436). The PFDJ declared that Eritrea's time for pluralistic democracy had not yet arrived. As in most African authoritarian countries, officials declared that Eritrea's political system would be based on local customs and traditions, without specifying which local customs were relevant and what those entailed – a short-hand for authoritarian rule.

In 1997 the constitution was ratified by the Eritrean National Assembly, composed of mainly PFDJ members. But it never came into being. Several months earlier, a special court that had jurisdiction over economic and political crimes was constituted; it immediately moved to attack dissenters from the PFDJ consensus. During the same period, religious minorities, such as Pentecostal Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses, were attacked because of their conscientious objections to military service.

The second phase is the period of the Ethio-Eritrean war (1998–2001). The years of the real war and its immediate aftermath had significant consequences for the country. The war depleted its resources, killed thousands of its servicemen and wreaked unspeakable destruction on some of its towns and villages. The euphoria of liberation completely evaporated. It also tested the loyalty and trust that Eritreans provided to the PFDJ and Isayas Afewerki in the first phase, despite visible tendencies of authoritarianism. Opposition began to fester in public. As is customary in many authoritarian countries, the regime's first challenge came from university students. Just after the Ethio-Eritrea war ended with an American-brokered cessation of hostilities agreement, serious political wrestling commenced within the PFDJ. Some top members called for an investigation into both the cause and the conduct of the war. They also called for reform of the political system, including the introduction of pluralism, national elections and regular convening of the national assembly. The president, at his weakest due to losses from the war, agreed to hold national elections within a year. He also agreed to issue legislation that would enable a multi-party contest.

In October 2000, 13 top leaders of the PFDJ published a letter on the internet. They challenged the president to fulfil his commitments of reform and democracy. This so-called 'Berlin Manifesto' was a demonstration of the political schism within the ruling front. Between October 2000 and May 2001, the division was played out in public. In May another open letter to the president, attaching

his written correspondence with the reformists, was published on the internet. Four months later, they published an article calling on Eritreans to support their reform efforts. Afewerki then used the military to crush the reformers. All of them were jailed for committing treason; their whereabouts are still unknown (Connell, 2005).

The president's successful deployment of the army to silence his once very powerful comrades marked the beginning of one-man totalitarianism in Eritrea. This is the third phase of Eritrea's post-independence political history. Afewerki's leadership exhibits the basic characteristics of a personalist rule as defined by political scientist Natasha Ezrow (Ezrow and Frantz, 2011). It does not seek to please the public by achieving speedy economic growth.

The personalist dictator must also ensure that everyone below him is divided and suspicious of one another to prevent cohesion of an opposition group that can oust him. Thus, he must keep the elites on their toes, rotate positions and give out favors at the right time, and to the right people. Furthermore, the level of charisma and cult of personality of the leader helps sustain obedience from the public, and in cases where this is low, it becomes difficult to exact obedience simply by force. A combination of being both charismatic and able to instill fear is the best recipe for sustaining the obedience of the masses and the cadre of elites that could oust him. In addition, low levels of institutionalization actually help maintain his power as all loyalties are personal in nature. When they are unable to do all of the above or they never truly consolidate power, they become weak personalist dictators who are susceptible to internal coups, assassinations, foreign interventions and popular uprisings. (Ezrow, 2009: 13)

Afewerki is a strong personalist leader. As Reid (2009: 214) notes, as the president's power grew increasingly secure following his decisive victory over the 2001 insurrection, he achieved a functioning, but deliberately confusing, balance between the military and the party – sometimes playing them against each other or creating divisions within each entity. His survival of the many attempts against his power has made him a mythical figure in Eritrea, a trait that personalist leaders rely upon to create an aura of invincibility. Alternative centres of power have completely vanished. The opposition groups generally have no serious support and the reliance of many of them on Ethiopia's assistance further reduced their legitimacy. There is no independent civil society, no independent trade union. Universities are infiltrated with government spies and student organisations are all controlled by the PFDJ. There is a growing lack of reverence towards Afewerki by urban Eritrean youth; yet that is not enough to pose any danger to his power. His power is so uncontested that he believes he can alone can interpret and guard the principles of the struggle (Reid, 2009).

Media in Eritrea

Eritrea is the only African country with no independent or quasi-independent media. The country's three newspapers, one radio station and one television station are owned by the state. The media's mainstay is nationalistic, anti-Western and anti-Ethiopia (the 'enemy at the gates') belligerent propaganda. After giving the country the lowest grade for freedom of the press, Reporters without Borders in 2009 called the situation 'scandalous'.³⁰

But this was not always the case post-independence. In 1995, the country got its first private newspaper; seven more were established within the next five years. All of these publications were owned by PFDJ supporters and they were reluctant to broach subjects that were inconsistent with the interest of the Front. In 2000, this changed following the division within the party. The private newspapers started publishing letters by reformists, covering the debate in PFDJ, interviewing the opponents of the president, criticising his failure to reform and supporting the attempt of elders to solve the political crisis. All of them broadly allied themselves with Afewerki's opponents. When he moved to quash the rebellion in September 2001, the press comprised part of his target. He shut down all private newspapers. On 28 February 2002, ten journalists were arrested and detained indefinitely. Two explanations were given. The first was that they were financed by foreign governments to destabilise Eritrea. Second, the government issued a statement claiming that some of them had failed to complete their mandatory military service. All of them, and three other journalists who were jailed when they covered the story of the 'Berlin Manifesto', remain in jail as of the writing of this report.

The internet in Eritrea

At the turn of the millennium, Eritrea became the last country to introduce the internet. The government's caution was surprising. When Eritrea became independent, one in three Eritreans were living outside the country and many of them did not return. Most diaspora Eritreans were firmly behind the liberation struggle, helping it with resources, diplomacy and ideas, and subsequently they were supportive of the PFDJ. The Front maintained strong links with Eritreans living abroad. Many of them voted for independence in the national referendum of 1993. In addition to that, the country had a vision of building a modern export-oriented economy. With very few Eritrean political opponents abroad and an economic policy that relied much on communication, it was reasonable to expect the Eritrean government to be enthusiastic about the internet. However, although the government agencies paid lip service to the potential of the internet, they were hesitant to introduce it.

Robinson (2000) points out that even a loyal but robust Eritrean public sphere might incrementally endanger the PFDJ's hold on power by fostering self-

³⁰ <http://en.rsfsf.org/report-eritrea,15.html>.

expression, debate and participation. That, rather than a fear of the diaspora, might be what resulted in the cautious approach. Even when Eritrea finally introduced the internet, it did so within a very stringent regulatory framework. Eritreans who wanted to subscribe to the internet had to go through several levels of bureaucracy and screening to gain approval. Getting a license to open cybercafés has even been more difficult. After the 2001 PFDJ civil war and the role that the internet played in spreading the views of the reformists, President Isayas Afewerki became even less enthusiastic about the internet. The regulatory power and personnel of the communications department was beefed up to make sure that the government had full control of the medium. Although Eritrea's internet policy is part of its general ICT policy, it is carefully dissociated from the development of a fixed telephone service, IT education and the expansion of computer availability.

The country's bandwidth has been upgraded since 2000, but connection remains painfully slow. There are less than 50 internet cafés in the country. In many of them, the average speed of the internet sometimes drops below 10 KBps (Kidane, 2008). The demand for internet service from governmental agencies and businesses remains very high, but the supply is frustratingly low. Even with such slow service and very low computer literacy however, the penetration rate is 4.3% (eight times that of neighbouring Ethiopia and half the rate of Africa's average).

Surveillance and control

As discussed in the Introduction, Eritrea's cautious approach to the launch and development of the internet and its careful selection of the identity of early-technology adopters allowed it to fend off the creation of a subversive public sphere. But the government still does not want to take any chances. It makes infrequent, surprise raids of internet cafés. People who are found browsing subversive websites, like awate.com, are punished – generally jailed for weeks.³¹ The communications office requires all websites in the country to be hosted on its server. This is aimed at controlling content.

Beyond that, however, there are no indications that the government filters websites or makes cognitive infiltrations. This may be because the majority of Eritrean websites published in the diaspora are not anti-government agitators. Most of the critical websites are run by the discredited opposition, and the slow internet connection seems to be enough of a disincentive to visit those sites.

OPPM in Eritrea?

In 1992, Eritreans in North America established the first online socio-political network. Its name Dehai (meaning 'voice') suggests that the organising principle of the network was free expression. During the 1990s, Dehai was the main

³¹ Telephone interview with Eritreans in Asmara (July 2010).

internet link for Eritreans in Europe and America (Bernal, 2006: 170). Once it became a website, Dehai acted as a news aggregator. Community members posted links and published news articles in the news list section. On its discussion board, Eritreans raised different issues pertaining to their country. Most of the postings on the website reflected the nationalistic fervour and utopianism of the immediate post-independence period. Although doubts were raised about some policies or plans of the government, they were expressed in tones that were deferential to PFDJ officials. There was consensus among members of the community on basic issues of Eritrean identity, nationalism and respect for war heroes.

As Eritreans had no internet connection until 2000, Dehai remained a diaspora website. It was joined by another Eritrean diaspora website, Asmarino, in 1997. This started as a social website, but dealt with politics as well. Like Dehai, Asmarino was not critical of the government at first. 'There was a lot of optimism in the air, and Asmarino shared the optimism without being unrealistic of the reality on the ground', the editor of the website wrote in 2009. When the Ethio-Eritrean war began, other Eritrean online political forums, mainly chatrooms and discussion boards, were started by Eritreans abroad. Most of them acted as a public relations forum for the Eritrean government and raised funds to help the military.

Until the Berlin Manifesto, the role of the Eritrean diaspora OPPM had not been divergent from the government's interests. The division gradually changed the nature of the websites. Asmarino declared itself non-partisan and published articles by the reformists and their supporters. Dehai was more cautious about itself getting involved in the crisis, even though the discussion forum sometimes raised the issue. When President Isayas Afewerki defeated the rebellion, Dehai lined up behind him while Asmarino turned into a critic. New websites like meskerem.com chose to be purely oppositional. A new, complex and fragmented, public space emerged from the ashes of the war.

Yet the impact of diaspora websites in homeland politics is very limited. Bernal (2006: 173) argues that 'the public sphere within Eritrea must be understood in relation to the history of nationalistic struggle'. Although the rhetoric of the struggle was based on the notion that all Eritreans are 'Tedalays' (fighters), with emphasis on mass movement, the real war was waged by a guerrilla army. The rhetoric of equality aside, power rested in the hands of the leaders of the army when the country achieved independence. During the struggle, these leaders received absolute loyalty and trust. They demanded the same in nation-building after liberation. They silenced dissent at home and abroad (at least until the first crack in the façade of unity of the leaders). As a matter of theory, we agree with Bernal's contention that 'when home-grown dissent is silenced, what Eritreans in diaspora write in cyberspace has added significance' (Bernal, 2006: 173). But Eritrea's cautious, centralised introduction of the medium and its subsequent proactive and reactive strategies were successful

in delinking homeland politics from cyberspace chatter. The internet has become an unregulated medium of expression for Eritreans abroad, but not for Eritreans at home. Kidane (2008: 8) rightly says that Eritreans at home could not even be passive observers of the diaspora debate, let alone participants in the forum. Another point worth mentioning here is the stagnation of the Eritrean OPPM after 2003. While Web 2.0 turned the cyberspaces of a lot of authoritarian countries into oppositional noise machines, Eritreans have chosen to utilise them for non-political purposes. Having been earlier users of the technology for political discussion, members of the Eritrean diaspora have in the last seven years fallen behind almost all other African national diaspora groups in that respect. The reasons are complex and unclear. Lack of significant inroads into homeland politics could be a discouraging factor. Some analysts consider it as a sign of withdrawal after the post-liberation euphoria, a reaction to the hard realities of life. It could also be an extension of the politics of silence of the homeland (Reid, 2009). The old websites such as Dehai, Asmarino and Meskerem, still with the old-fashioned community forums and static publications, dominate the political OPPM of the Eritrean diaspora. Blogs, video-sharing websites and OSNs are mainly used for social interaction, with politics only playing a peripheral role.

The politics of silence: government information monopoly and lack of participation

The Eritrean OPPM is jarringly silent – at least in Eritrea where it matters. The silence reflects the general silence of the Eritrean population. Eritreans, as Reid observes, are disengaged from the political process. Young people leave the country in droves even though the costs of migration are high. Reid's key framework for interpreting the silence is the misunderstanding and the failure of communication that arises from what he calls the 'bombastic inflexibility' of the Eritrean state. He predicts that this status quo will persist. 'The government will continue to urge patience with what it defines as temporary problems, and it is likely that it will be both greeted by silence, and granted the patience it requests' (Reid, 2009: 220).

While Reid has moved away from his much-criticised analysis of the situation solely in terms of the frustration of the population, the state's insistence on the values of liberation and the general impact of international politics, we think he still underestimated the role of the regime's brutal repression and the collective action problems that it creates. Even for such an intelligent observer, interpreting silence in an authoritarian country where using credible public opinion survey models is not practicable is a risky exercise. Admittedly, however, Reid's framework makes explaining the silence of Eritrea's OPPM easier. If the silence meant the general resignation of the society which is frustrated by its government but has no better and clear alternatives, it would be unsurprising for the same society to show a similar political disengagement in

the internet. But this argument clashes with the theory that participation in the internet is not just instrumental, it is dialogical as well (Kim and Kim, 2008). This theory treats the internet as a part of both a private sphere and a public sphere (Jiang, 2008). Reid asserts that despite the eerie silence in the public sphere, Eritreans chat and gossip about their leaders in the private sphere. He, for example, claims that President Isayas has become the 'favorite topic of awed conversation (necessarily subdued) in the bars and the cafes of Asmara' (Reid, 2009: 214). If the internet is a place for non-purposive private talk, there is no reason not to expect parts of blogs in Eritrea to resemble the bars and cafés of Asmara.

Thus, for our purpose, the more plausible explanation of the silence of OPPM is the successful strategy of internet introduction to the country. This theory is obviously no substitute for a more thorough empirical investigation of the issue.

Discussion point

The Eritrean OPPM is one of the most silent in Africa. The most vibrant Eritrean blogs are run by diaspora Eritreans, of which only the blogs that support the government line can be read inside Eritrea. Although the internet penetration rate in Eritrea is higher than Ethiopia, and the Facebook population is rapidly growing, the Eritrean government has been much more successful in thwarting online dissent than the Ethiopian government. Eritrea, the last African country to go online, introduced the internet carefully. Only supporters of the authoritarian regime or people who pass a series of security checks can subscribe to the internet. Internet cafés, where many Eritreans access the internet, are forced to check what their customers browse. The government thus managed to exclude a non-regime elite from the net or limit their potential to use the internet for political participation and to challenge the government's information hegemony.

6. Uganda: just starting

In 1986, Yoweri Museveni came to power through a guerrilla war, promising to fundamentally change a poor and war-torn country. Sweeping market-friendly economic reforms quickly gained him widespread approbation as a new-generation African leader. His aggressive effort to tackle Uganda's serious HIV/AIDS problem in the early 1990s was hailed as a model for other African leaders, who were generally reluctant to admit the problem. On the political front, Museveni increased local participation, relaxed restrictions on freedom of expression and allowed civil society to flourish. The bloody civil strife was largely gone. The country scored high points between 1989 and 1995 in the Polity IV chart on Political Instability in Africa.³² Richard Joseph, a close observer of African politics, called Uganda 'the model country in the reconfiguration of power in the twentieth-century Africa' (Joseph, 1999: 67). In the land which had not yet fully exorcised the ghosts of the murderous dictatorship of Idi Amin and the repression of Tito Okello's junta, Museveni's reforms appeared to herald a new era.

As has often been the case in many post-colonial African states, the early promises of liberalisation and political reforms by the National Resistance Movement (NRM), Museveni's party, were not followed through. The president first imposed wide-ranging restrictions on the activities of political parties, including the right to demonstration, assembly and issuance of public statements. He expanded NRM's base in local councils using the carrot of co-option and the stick of the armed forces and security. After an exemplary deliberative process at the initial stage of the drafting of the constitution, the constituent assembly formulated a basic law that ended up being an instrument to consolidate what Museveni called a 'movement system', a system with no political parties. Subsequent legislation was enacted to further strengthen this system. It took a lot of pressure from Uganda's Western donors for Museveni's government to accept multi-party elections. With the president himself campaigning for multi-partyism, Ugandans voted overwhelmingly to scrap the 'movement system' in 2005. A year later, in a poll marred by controversy and violence, Museveni's NRM won the first multi-party elections in 26 years. However, since then the Museveni's regime has become more repressive.³³

³² See www.systemicpeace.org/polity/polity4.htm.

³³ See Freedom House reports on Uganda between 2006 and 2010:
www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=140&edition=7&ccrpage=31&ccrcountry=127.
www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=22&country=7294&year=2007.
www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=22&country=7511&year=2008.
www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?country=7725&page=22&year=2009.
www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?country=7940&page=22&year=2010.

From neo-populist authoritarianism to personalised authoritarianism

Weyland (2001) analyses the curious mixture of populism and neoliberalism that emerged in Latin America in the 1990s. This 'unexpected affinity' is referred to by political scientists as neopopulism. Weyland identifies populism's three basic features: a strong personality-based leadership that appeals to heterogeneous groups of people; direct or quasi-personal communication; political organisations as vehicles of personal rule. Before the 1990s, populism was married to either far-left or far-right ideology, and was considered incompatible with other forms of politics and economic policy. But Weyland's (2001) central thesis challenges this: 'A purely political concept of populism opens up the possibility of finding populism and economic liberalism compatible.' Indeed, he suggests that the anti-organisational and individualistic aspects of neoliberalism can be deeply attractive to a modern-day populist leader. The perceived superiority of neoliberalism in delivering rapid economic development was also a draw to populist leaders.

The first 20 years of Museveni's rule showed a coexistence between neopopulism and personalised rule. After just a few weeks in power, Museveni seriously restricted the activities of political parties. As Andrew Mwenda (2007) noted, the ban was imposed on the grounds of national healing. This move was accompanied by anti-politics and anti-political organisation rhetoric. Museveni blamed the conflicts that followed Uganda's independence on the fractionalisation of society through ethnic-based parties. He created a broad-based government and invited leaders of other political parties to join him. Popular participation was devolved to local assemblies with a strict warning that involvement of parties and 'divisive groups' would not be tolerated. Political pluralism was rejected as a cause for 'manufactured societal divisions'. Giovanne Carbone observed that the depoliticisation of society in Uganda occurred not through demobilisation as it happened in other many African states, but through 'dis-organization' (Carbone, 2005: 4).

Museveni convinced many Ugandans of his outsider status through a clever handling of the mass media and appeal to 'the myth of the bush war' (Carbone, 2005: 5). The media's portrayal of the president as a man who, fed up with injustices, went to the bush to mount a guerrilla war made him very popular. He was considered as a charismatic, profoundly intellectual and incorruptible former rebel with an understanding of the ordeals the common man. His 15 years of involvement in conventional Ugandan politics, including a brief stint as a minister of defence, was generally overlooked. Museveni's outsiderism was not limited to his claim that he did not originate from Uganda's ruling class. He projected a degree of detachment from Uganda's state institutions as well. He berated some of them as inefficient, and personally intervened in their activities when people complained that they were not delivering. His anti-institutional rhetoric reached its zenith in 1999 when he

attacked parliament for sabotaging the popular will. 'When I was elected, I signed a contract with the people of Uganda,' he retorted. 'Traditionally, I have been fighting bureaucrats, but now there are MPs . . . How many wars shall I fight?' This attack was received with glowing praise for Museveni by the Ugandan press.

Although Museveni called this new system of anti-politics 'movement democracy', it had many hallmarks of personalised authoritarianism. He had strong control of the armed forces and the security apparatus, and used violence selectively. Through an intricate patronage system, Museveni rewarded loyalty, bought opponents and punished dissent. There were no institutions, but only the popular will, as defined by himself, which the president was accountable to. Most of the repressive laws from the days of Idi Amin remained in force. Indeed, the president found no reason to submit to the institutions and organisations which he had been attacking as the enemy of the people. His project was to transform the country in the interest of the sovereign people of Uganda, and the only theoretical constraint to his power was the popular will. He had never accepted parliament as the sole institution where the popular will resides. When he took the oath of office on 29 January 1986, he said: 'The sovereign power in the land must be the population, not the government. We shall have both committees and parliamentary democracy.' The constitution of 1995 deepened this confusion. By creating uncertainty as to which institution represented the people, Museveni was able to claim monopolistic possession of political legitimacy by the virtue of his popularity and mythical understanding of the needs of Ugandan people.

Ugandans started to get increasingly lukewarm about the personalised neopopulist authoritarianism of their leader in late 1990s and at the beginning of the last decade. Among various reasons for the growing disenchantment, one was the so-called movement bill that was passed by parliament in 1997. The legislation required all adult Ugandans, irrespective of their political orientations, to be a member of the movement system. This was seen by many as an act of merging government with NRM, 'a ploy by the movement to turn the five-tiered local governance into branches of the movement' (Green, 2008). It was also described as the hegemonisation of Ugandan society. In 1999, this bill was supplemented by a law introducing a referendum on the issue of multi-partyism in 2000. With half of Uganda not participating in the referendum, the movement system received a whopping 94.3% support. Some analysts interpreted the low turnout, which contrasted with the 1996 presidential elections, as a clear statement of Ugandans' dissatisfaction with the direction of their country.

Ugandans had reasons to be frustrated. The economy's growth was slackening. The solid average GDP growth of more than 7% in the first ten years of Museveni's rule had dipped to less than 5%. Unemployment and inflation were increasing. Political stability was unravelling. In 1998, Uganda intervened in the Congolese civil war to oust Laurent Kabila, a warlord Museveni had supported when he fought Mobutu Sese Seko. The intrusion was justified on the

grounds of protecting Uganda from the domestic rebels who were waging war against the Ugandan government from Congo, and saving the Banyamulenge Tutsis from genocide (Tripp, 2004: 21). Museveni and his ministers used the then fashionable principles of liberal interventionism in their rhetoric. But many Ugandans were openly critical of the war. They knew that, despite the formal justifications, Uganda remained embroiled in the war for years due to the involvement of government officials and military officers in a war economy. Clark (2001) documented these involvements. Tolerance for the intervention wore even thinner when fighting between troops of supposed allies Uganda and Rwanda broke out in DRC. In one newspaper poll, almost 80% of the country's population opposed the war.

In March 2003, the president started a 'third term' project by asking the NRM executive committee to push through a constitutional amendment on presidential terms limits. The 1995 Ugandan constitution had placed a two-term limit on presidential office. Two years later, the parliament scrapped the term limit, paving the way for President Museveni to run in the 2006 multi-party elections. In the elections, he faced a strong challenge from Kizza Besigye of the Forum for Democratic Change. Besigye, who was arrested before the elections for treason, concealment of weapons and rape, garnered 37.4% of the vote, increasing his total vote from the 2001 elections by 10%. Even with allegations of rigging and electoral shenanigans, Museveni could only muster 59% of the votes.

This third term of Museveni is characterised by a general hostility towards freedom and consolidation of family power. The president's wife, Janet Museveni, won a parliamentary seat and was appointed by her husband as the minister of state for Karamoja. Muhoozi Kainerugaba, the president's son, is a rising star in the army and informally controls the security. In Uganda, he is seen as the eventual successor of his father. The Musevenis have consolidated their patronage empire, and Ugandan media openly talk about the corruption of the ruling family. Gone are the days of his outsider rhetoric and projection of a squeaky clean image. 'Museveni has a Ben Ali problem',³⁴ wrote journalist Charles Onyango-Obbo, comparing the corruption and despotism of the two leaders.

Media in Museveni's Uganda

Omara-Otunnu (1992) argues that NRM's vision of movement politics was centred on Marxist notions of democracy, which demand high levels of participation by the citizens. Integral to this project was the creation of local assemblies and committees, where citizens deliberate free of party politics. But in a post-Cold War era, NRM was conscious that its democratic credentials would be questioned by its new Western allies if it banned both an independent press and political parties. Its strategy was, therefore, to liberalise the media sphere,

³⁴ <http://allafrica.com/stories/201101190159.html>.

but carefully manage the new institutions. As Tabaire (2007: 203) noted, Museveni allowed freedom of expression to a 'greater extent than the previous Ugandan governments'. Dozens of independent publications immediately emerged. Foreign correspondents reported favourably about these developments.

Indeed, Museveni was a master of media manipulation. He established personal relationships with editors of newspapers, and was willing to grace their front pages by making himself accessible for interviews and personally replying to his critics. He appeared on FM radio stations to select his favourite music or participate in phone-ins on a wide range of topics. With the vacuum created by the ban of political-party activities, the media was theoretically the most significant institution of checking power. But many veteran Ugandan journalists now reflect that Museveni's media honeymoon period went on for more years than it should have.

Tabaire (2007) argues that, even in the early years of NRM rule, media freedom was not as vast as it was portrayed to be. A crackdown on dissent started almost immediately. The report by Maja-Pearce for 'Index on Censorship' showed that there were at least six criminal charges against journalists as early as 1992. According to blogger Mutabazi, Sam Stewart, the trials served the function of making an example of journalists who had dared to go beyond the boundaries which 'government was not ready to allow them to transcend'.³⁵

The early signs of intolerance of dissent intensified with the consolidation of the president's authoritarianism, even though the country's 1995 constitution firmly guaranteed freedom of expression. According to the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists, between the year the constitution was promulgated and the first multi-party elections, at least 30 journalists were charged with engaging in criminal activities. The attacks mainly targeted print journalists because they were the most critical voices against authoritarianism and nepotism. Uganda then had four major daily newspapers: *Daily Monitor*, *New Vision*, *Red Pepper* and *Bukedde*. Many journalists in these dailies, including those that are owned by the government, have experienced threats to their freedom. In 2009, four journalists from the *Monitor* faced criminal prosecution. Before it was deemed unconstitutional by the constitutional court of the country, the law that had been repeatedly used to charge journalists was the Sedition Act. The country's 50 FM and seven televisions are also vulnerable to attacks if they overstep the mark. In September 2009, the government closed four radio stations after they reported on violent clashes between security forces and supporters of the Baganda king. All live talk shows were also temporarily banned. The government accused some of the shows of fuelling upheavals and violent clashes.

³⁵ <http://mutabazisamstewart.blogspot.com/2008/12/switching-roles-in-pursuit-of-democracy.html>.

The government has also bought off some journalists by offering well-paid civil service jobs. Journalists covering the ruling party are treated with free food and drinks, and are given pocket money. On September 2010, for example, 47 journalists covering the NRM general assembly meeting received \$1,800 as an allowance. 'Usually when journalists do work as friends, I normally give them something,' Dr Hassan Galiwango, the party's administrator was quoted as saying after the handout.³⁶ As Ugandans prepare to go to polls in February and March 2011, the carrot-and-stick approach to silence the press is intensifying.³⁷

The internet in Uganda

Museveni's conception of technology during the early years of his rule was positively Marxist. He saw technology as a basic means to establish a great society. But unlike traditional Marxists, he thought the hub of technological innovation was the private sector. In the spirit of his early economic liberalisation, deregulation and privatisation project, Museveni was one of the first leaders to liberalise the telecommunication sector among the least developed sub-Saharan African countries.

The internet started in Uganda in 1993, earlier than most African countries. The first users of the technology were scholars and students at Makerere University. A year later, commercial email services started. The industry experienced rapid growth. In 2000, 11 ISPs had already been licensed. It is, however, important to know that the increase in ISPs had not been accompanied by a parallel increase in users. In 2000, the number of internet subscribers was as low as 0.2%. This was more the result of the poor telecommunication infrastructure, and the fact that demand was suppressed by exorbitant tariffs and the high cost of computers, than regressive government policy. In fact, the government tried to tackle the slow take-up by pushing through legislation that was aimed at developing the telecommunication sector. The 1997 Uganda Communications Act incentivises private investment in telecommunications and sets a relatively lax regulatory framework. In 2003, the government passed a much-praised ICT policy. The policy identified ICT as a sector that is fundamentally important for economic development, and 'creating the conditions for the fullest participation by all sections of the populations'. Prior to the release of the document, the government removed tariffs on computers in a bid to decrease the cost of connectivity.

Internet penetration grew from 0.2% to 9.6% between 2000 and 2010. The Ugandan government expects that these figures will grow by leaps and bounds once the Eastern Africa Submarine Cable System (EASSy), an undersea fibre-optic cable system connecting eastern African countries to the rest of the world, becomes fully operational. The system started in July 2010, but it has so far faced

³⁶ <http://allafrica.com/stories/201009131101.html>.

³⁷ See a series of reports by CPJ on Uganda since 2009.

problems. Until the arrival of the system, most Ugandan ISPs failed to provide reliable and cheap services because they purchased their bandwidth through satellite, although a few of them have taken measures to make their services affordable by consolidating their bandwidth purchase. High costs mean that most Ugandans prefer to use the internet in cybercafés.

In spite of these problems the continuing techno-optimism of the Museveni government suggests there is still potential for growth in internet penetration.

Surveillance and censorship

The Ugandan online space can generally be regarded as free. An Open Net Initiative Study (ONI) showed that there was no evidence of filtering. In our correspondence with some of the prominent bloggers, all of them agreed that they had seen no visible attempt by the government to disrupt or influence the direction of conversations in their blogs. Facebook and other social networking sites are freely accessible. The government did not try to block OPFM even after twitter was widely used to disseminate information about a violent anti-government demonstration in September 2009.

On 14 July 2010, the country's parliament passed a law that allows the government to intercept telephone, postal, email and text messages. This bill was drafted in 2007, but was rejected by parliament in May 2009 after human rights activists, journalists, opposition politicians and Western diplomats voiced their concerns. The government brought the bill forward again immediately after suspected members of Al-Shabaab, a Somali Islamist group, bombed two restaurants in Kampala, killing 76 people. It argued that the bill would make it easier to fight acts of terrorism, which are increasingly coordinated through modern communications technology. To its credit, the Ugandan parliament amended the original draft to add safeguards against the abuse of power by government security forces. For example, it gave the power to issue a warrant for tapping to the judiciary rather than the security forces.

OPFM in Uganda

'They are failures,' Henry Owera, a Ugandan blogger wrote of his fellow Ugandan bloggers on 18 April 2007. 'I think Ugandans are sleeping in the blogging era! Few are blogging! And few are blogging with regularity.' Owera's frustration was caused by the failure of the country's bloggers to raise political issues. In that year, Uganda had only six political bloggers, and only two of them updated their blogs regularly. These blogs, except the gossipy radionkatwe.com, had little readership.³⁸

³⁸ Alexa.com statistic of the six political blogs from 2004–6.

Blogging came to Uganda very late. In 2004, when the country's neighbour Kenya had more than 40 blogs, Uganda had only a handful. The first bloggers wrote exclusively on social issues. Even the constitutional referendum of 2005 and the controversial elections of 2006 got little attention from the blogosphere. When bloggers held their first happy-hour meeting, an expatriate blogger took a snap poll of their interest areas, and she reported that all of them chose social issues. A year later, another blogger who worked for Globalvoices, an international community of bloggers, wondered why political issues are avoided by Ugandan bloggers.

Heacock³⁹ argues that one of the reasons why the online participatory media had a distinctively non-political nature was the broad freedom of expression that the media enjoyed. According to this hypothesis, the vibrancy of the Ugandan media left bloggers with little role to play as sources of uncensored news. But this contradicts the story of blogs in other countries with even more robust media. It is not solely the act of dissent and government's control of the flow of information that has made bloggers relevant in many countries. As Yochai Benkler noted, it is their contribution to the improvement of the public sphere by complementing the mass media through access to 'direct individual communications, to collaborative speech platforms, and to nonmarket producers more generally' that has given bloggers an important place in democracies (Benkler, 2006: 211).

Another often cited reason for the absence of political blogs for much of the history of Uganda's blogosphere was the low level of internet penetration. In 2005, only one in 20 Ugandans had access to the internet. Without a huge diaspora population, as in the case of Ethiopia, the argument goes that level of penetration was not enough to give rise to a lively online political participatory media. This argument is plausible in its explanation of the thinness of the online community, but not its highly skewed distribution in favour of social blogs. Melkamu (2009), however, contends that Ugandans were late arrivals to political blogging because President Museveni was successful in depoliticising society in 1990s and the effects were still felt in the first half of the decade. 'The press think that they have a universal watchdog mission. Therefore, they could be much politicized even in the most de-politicized of societies. Bloggers are better representative samples of their society.'

This situation changed in 2009. Political blogs have since grown rapidly, and their contribution as sources of original information and participation increased. The impending presidential election, Uganda's intervention in the war in Somalia, gay rights issues, wire-tapping law are all now frequently discussed. Heacock⁴⁰ believes that what changed the landscape were the September 2009

³⁹ <http://jackfruity.com/page/8>.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

riots and the role of social media in disseminating news of them. Solomon King, a prominent blogger, summed up this suddenly acquired status nicely: 'One day I wake up and there was an armored personnel carrier right outside my house. I tweet about it, and the next thing I know I am a citizen journalist.'⁴¹ Merin (2009) believes that moment crucially provided a sense of purpose and confidence to bloggers. But despite this new-found vigour, it is too early to say whether the Ugandan OPPM have so far become a true alternative or complementary participatory space or a genuine platform for the distribution of uncensored information. The following two anecdotes,⁴² however, suggest its potential.

Challenging information control: anti-government riots

On 5 September 2009, the king of the Baganda tribe, Ronald Muwenda Mutebi II, announced that he was planning to make an official visit to Kayunga, a district near Kampala. This district is home to the kingdom of Buganda to which the Baganda people belong, but many members of a rival tribe called the Banyala lived there. Members of the Banyala wanted their own kingdom and warned that Mutebi's appearance would provoke them to protest. Fearing that the event would cause a tribal conflict, the government told Mutebi to cancel the visit. Security forces also arrested several Banadans who erected tents on the streets to receive their king. Ignoring the government warning, the king sent his premier to visit the district and help prepare for his reception. The police responded by blocking the premier from entering the place. When news of that reached Kampala, members of the Baganda tribe went onto the streets to protest. The riot police fired tear gas and live ammunition at the protestors. During two days of protests, at least 14 people were killed and 88 injured.

What made this case interesting was that the government immediately sent cease and desist orders to the media, telling those that had started reporting the news of the riots to stop reporting and the others to remain silent on the issue. TV stations played music and sports instead of reporting the most violent clashes between police and protestors since Museveni came to power. Many radio stations also said little about the clashes. The price for those which defied government orders was high. Four FM stations were closed, and talk show host Kalundi Sserumaga was arrested on charges of sedition. There was a general information blackout. Yet OPPM were quick to fill the gap. Tweets about the riots started almost immediately. 'Dead people . . . It is surreal,' one tweet said. 'OK. We are running for our lives,' said another. 'I see police beating people. Blood all over,' another claimed. 'Going out and buying airtime to transfer people who can't leave their homes,' tweeted a person who was trying to help stranded people. Eyewitness accounts of the riots were posted on Facebook pages and blogs.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² They are anecdotal because there are not enough samples to select representative cases.

A day after the riots, a blog called Uganda Witness was opened for people who wanted to share their accounts about the riots. Most of the entries on the website were factual reports by people who were in the protests. The international news media picked the story from the Ugandan OPPM, particularly Uganda Witness, and a couple of days after the riots ended, a Google news search showed that there were at least 250 stories about the clashes online. This is a classic case of OPPM members distributing suppressed information. These were not journalists trained in the art and science of filtering and verifying information. Their reports were usually incomplete or fragmented. But they were witnesses of history. Here is a beautiful definition of journalism by *New York Times* columnist Roger Cohen:

Yes, journalism is a matter of gravity. It's more fashionable to denigrate than praise the media these days. In the 24/7 howl of partisan pontification, and the scarcely less-constant death knell din surrounding the press, a basic truth gets lost: that to be a journalist is to bear witness.

The rest is no more than ornamentation.

To bear witness means being there – and that's not free. No search engine gives you the smell of a crime, the tremor in the air, the eyes that smolder, or the cadence of a scream.

No news aggregator tells of the ravaged city exhaling in the dusk, nor summons the defiant cries that rise into the night. No miracle of technology renders the lip-drying taste of fear. No algorithm captures the hush of dignity, nor evokes the adrenalin rush of courage coalescing, nor traces the fresh raw line of a welt.⁴³

These Ugandans had borne history with their tweets, blogs and Facebook pages. They had replaced the trained journalists who were prevented from doing their tasks. The incomplete information of these witnesses could be carefully sewed to form a complete whole.

Participation: gay rights

In December 2009, a firebrand law-maker named David Bahati sponsored a bill to criminalise homosexuality in Uganda. This draft anti-homosexuality bill was part of the growing campaign and hostility against homosexuals in Uganda. Domestic and international human rights groups and donor countries criticised the legislation. Some critics even suggested that the issue was deliberately raised to divert attention from the Museveni's crackdown on civil society and the press. Bahati, a member of the ruling party, however, dismissed the accusation that his bill had any hidden motive. 'It is a family values bill,' he asserted in interviews with the media.

With the hostility to gay Ugandas reaching an all-time high, they could not publicly make their case for equal protection and non-discrimination. This period was similar to 1999. In that year, President Museveni ordered that

⁴³ www.nytimes.com/2009/07/06/opinion/06iht-edcohen.html.

homosexuals be arrested and charged. 'God created Adam and Eve,' he retorted. 'I did not see God creating man and man.' He said he had told the Criminal Investigation Department to look for 'homosexuals, lock them up and charge them.' An overwhelming majority of Ugandans agreed with the president. In a *New Vision* poll 84% of Ugandans were against legalising homosexuality.

The difference between 2009 and 1999 for homosexual Ugandans was, however, the blogosphere. Within days of the draft bill's submission to parliament, gay bloggers started attacking its legality and morality. Conversation among members of the gay community on how to defend themselves by publicising their case ensued. Once a community of gay bloggers and commenters was created, most of them moved to other social media networks (mainly Facebook) to discuss strategies of defending themselves outside the public gaze. In the blogosphere, bloggers like GayUganda, and Afrogay continued to write a series of beautifully crafted posts pointing to the hypocrisy of their leaders and defending their rights to be treated as equals. When the bill drew international attention, the bloggers became the voices communicating what gays in Uganda think and feel about the issue. In a way, they gave a human face to the issue. At the same time, the Facebook group started an online campaign against the bill.

The bill is still at the draft stage, and the president, under pressure from the US state Department, had vowed to veto it. Whether the collective action of gay Ugandans becomes successful or not, this story exemplifies the OPPM's potential to create – in a low-penetration authoritarian country – what Nancy Fraser called 'subaltern counterpublics', which permits oppressed minorities to 'invent and circulate counter discourse, which in turn permits them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs' (Fraser, 1997: 123). It is here, through participation in a sequestered setting, that a shared view of domination and the strategies to fight it can be developed.

Discussion point

The Ugandan OPPM are very recent additions to the country's public sphere or counterpublics. The country's blogosphere was at its early periods dominated by people who write about their childhoods, witchcraft, romantic relationships and other social issues. The lingering effects of the depoliticisation of society in 1990s might have been one the reasons for Ugandans getting into political blogging and Facebooking very late. But in the last two years, the country's OPPM have been showing some signs of life. As our two anecdotes show, they are emerging as potential spheres of democratic participation and fighting information suppression.

The increasing constraints on the Ugandan press by the government, the erosion of transparency, the mounting corruption of ruling elites and the

growing authoritarianism of the regime will make them even more relevant than they would otherwise have been.

7. Tentative conclusion

The hypothesis of this report was that the use of OPPM in societies with limited access to the internet by the elite reduces the epistemic dominance of authoritarian regimes and/or increases political and civic participation. But we preceded this with a caveat: the hypothesis holds if, *ceterius paribus*, the internet is introduced in these societies in a relatively open fashion: i.e. without selective limitation of access. We argued that this facilitates democratic change without necessarily endangering the regimes in power in the short term. Our starting position was neither deterministic, nor utopian. It was, however, in sharp contrast to that which dismisses the democratic impact of the internet in low-penetration authoritarian African countries.

Our carefully selected cases – Egypt, Tunisia, Ethiopia, Uganda and Eritrea – illustrate the soundness of our hypothesis. All of the countries are authoritarian, with centralised control of power, limited arenas of power contestation, stifled media and civil society, heavily politicised judiciary and persistent attacks on human rights. By a surprising coincidence, all of them were led by strong men who had an overwhelming control of their party and military. Yet the degree of their authoritarianism differs. Eritrea is a classic totalitarian system, one of the very few remaining ones in the world. Ethiopia is a case of decaying competitive authoritarianism. As Ethiopia travels to the land of more authoritarianism, it is crossing the borders of full-scale authoritarianism that is inhabited by Museveni's Uganda. In the same category was Tunisia which under Ben Ali's leadership had established a strong corporate authoritarianism. Egypt was in a painful reform process, and where it will go after the revolt is not yet clear.

We found that the corporate authoritarianism of Ben Ali was very enthusiastic for the expansion of the internet in Tunisia because its legitimacy rested on Tunisia's progress in modernisation and economic development. Egypt had a similar enthusiasm for the technology. It considered the internet as a tool for projecting itself in the Arab world; the country perceives itself as top dog in the region. But the reformist influence in the ruling NDP at the end of 1990s and at the beginning of the last decade had also shaped Egypt's policy of liberalisation of the internet. Eritrea's regime is cautious. With millions of Eritreans living in North America and Europe, it risks challenges to its power if the internet is liberalised. For the same reason, Ethiopia follows the Cuban model of central control of the internet. Museveni is ambivalent. The internet in Uganda has been a useful tool for journalism, but not for democratic participation and organisation – through no fault of the president. So for Museveni, insurrection by tweets seems an academic bubble.

Ethiopia is the best illustration of our theory. With a penetration rate of 0.4%, the internet is used only by elites and educated youth. The country has a

strong net censorship regime which mixes tough regulations with monitoring, filtering and infiltration. Yet democratic participation and anti-government activism have persisted. Some analysts dismiss this as a diaspora phenomenon. Our case studies and in-depth observation shows that this conventional wisdom is wrong. In particular, Ethiopia proves our assumption that a non-selective internet access distribution at the introduction stage of the internet, however centralised and limited it is, amounts to an unintended ceding of use-interpretative role to competing elites. Early technology adopters have a significant impact in interpreting how the technology should be used. Other things being equal, in most countries the early adopters of 'liberation technology' are liberal and anti-authoritarian. Ethiopia's first users of the technology were no different in profile.

By contrast, Uganda seriously challenges our hypothesis. An authoritarian country with relatively robust independent media and civil society and with non-selective access distribution, Uganda should be the best candidate for the internet's participatory effects and its role in exposing hidden information. Our investigation shows that Ugandans use the internet more for social interaction and dissemination of information (in a limited way) than as an alternative political public space. Even more surprisingly, until very recently, we have not noticed any change in that pattern even as Museveni increasingly constrains some spaces of the main public sphere. In the last year and half, there are signs that online political media are emerging and the anecdotes that we presented indicate the potential of this media to be a place of participation and reducing authoritarian control of information.

The general soundness of the hypothesis is, however, vigorously shown by the Tunisian and Egyptian cases. Tunisia, like Ethiopia, distributed access non-selectively when it introduced the internet, although the penetration rate is much higher in the Maghreb country. Thus its cyberspace immediately became an alternative and subversive public sphere of participation and challenge to information dominance. Ben Ali's powerful censorship regime could neither change this nature of the participatory media nor eliminate the underground space it operated in. We cannot yet know if the OPPM were the main tools of organisation and mobilisation for protesters who ousted Ben Ali from power. But it was clear that what they had created contributed in politicising Tunisians by providing them with spaces for political participation and exposing corruption and abuses by the government. In Egypt, the Mubarak government had a surprisingly liberal policy, with little censorship. The result was the most robust public sphere in Africa which might have played a role in instigating the protests which posed an existential threat to the regime.

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