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IN THE SHADOW OF THE PYRAMIDS:

A Case Study of Free Expression in the Egyptian
Media, 2004-2009

By Laura El-Tantawy

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Abstract

Since 2004, Egypt's media sector has undergone what appears to be a substantial change in the area of print journalism and on-line blogging, where the government has deliberately allowed more leeway regarding freedom of expression, to an extent never previously observed in the country's history. Whether this is in response to the unwavering campaign launched by the United States government to promote democracy in the Middle East in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the *World Trade Center* or simply an awakening stimulated by the popularity of satellite television in the Middle East and the role that it has played in reshaping the Arab media's landscape and enriching the expectations of its viewers beyond the habitual realm of state-fed news, is difficult to validate. What is obvious is that the Egyptian government has appeared more tolerant of traditional journalists and Internet bloggers who wish to vent their frustration with the regime. However, the extent of this freedom remains largely questionable, given that the government continues to employ old-fashioned bullying tactics and, in many cases, treats harshly any journalists or bloggers who exercise more freedom of expression than the government is currently willing to sanction. This research will examine the role played by the non-state-owned newspapers and Internet bloggers in pushing the boundaries of the freedom of expression and how the government tends to deal with them. In doing so, I hope to gauge the degree of free speech in Egypt and understand whether the government's current strategy towards the media sector is one of sincere resolve or simply an act of showmanship to please its western allies.

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Introduction

During the term of office of the Egyptian President, Mohamed Hosni Mubarak (1981 – present), Egypt’s media sector has experienced a wider sense of free expression, particularly compared to those of his predecessors, a trend which has stimulated private and party owned newspapers to flourish in recent years. This has also promoted the establishment of a platform for citizen journalism through the on-line blogging phenomenon, which allows the spread of news made by citizens for citizens, but, while the government has, on the one hand, paved the way for free expression through the introduction of laws allowing journalists access to information and promoting the information superhighway through the spread of the Internet, it has, on the other, failed repeatedly to implement these laws to any serious extent. This has been viewed by news outlets and the public as an indicator of the government’s indecisiveness regarding the adoption of a steady policy towards free expression, which has created a sense of uncertainty and unpredictability regarding in which direction it may be leading the country’s media sector and relegated the likelihood of addressing the nation’s news outlets as a genuine *Fourth Estate*.¹

This research is conceptualized as a case study of the Egyptian media from 2004 to 2009. It will focus on newspapers and Internet blogs. The latter, although relatively ‘new’ in the news arena, have established themselves as a competitive and timely news resource, and the former, a relatively ‘old’ member of the news arena, has maintained its robustness and continued to evolve in Egypt during a time when declining newspaper readership and shrinking circulation are driving newspapers off the shelves in the international markets. Due to the space limitation and lack of access to view and analyze precisely the content for my research while in the UK, this paper will not delve deeply into the role of television, although this is not to dismiss its importance when tackling the issue of free expression. It is perhaps important to mention that the media, in all forms, should ideally be equally represented in this research, but I have chosen to focus on the two outlets that I believe to be representative of a cross section of the modern and traditional media available in Egyptian society today and in Egypt as a whole in the future.

This study aims to analyze events that highlight the irregularity of the reactions by Egypt’s security forces and judicial system in regards to dealing with issues of freedom of

¹*Fourth Estate* is a term that was used as early as the first-half of the 19th century to refer to the public press. It encompasses all news outlets, including journalists, photographers, radio announcers and television broadcasters. A viable *Fourth Estate* should have extensive political and social power as it serves the community and is of equal significance to the First, Second and Third estates, commonly defined as the Legislative Body (Parliament), Executive Body (Government), and Judiciary.

expression. The study will be conducted through a qualitative research analysis, coupled with interviews with practicing journalists and academics specializing in the field, to obtain first hand accounts of media practitioners who are dealing with questions of freedom of expression, as they find themselves tangled between their theoretical rights and practical harassment by Egypt's security services once they practise those rights.

In doing so, I hope to answer some key questions, including: is freedom of expression in Egypt valued and defended as a universal value or is it merely cited selectively and molded according to the political circumstances? What kinds of regulation does the government implement when questioning an individual or a news outlet's use of free expression? How is it possible that, despite the existence of laws protecting journalists' rights, such as allowing them the right to access information, the Egyptian constitution's extension of freedom to its citizens and Egypt's signing of Article 19 of the United Nations' International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights,² the Egyptian authorities still find cause to persecute them?

² Article 19 of the *United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* allows individuals freedom of expression, orally, in written form, and in art, as well as all forms of expression. Available at – <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/ccpr.htm#art18> / Accessed on 7 March 2009.

1. Then and Now: A Brief History of Egypt before the Time of Mubarak

Egypt, a former British and French colony, gained its independence in 1922 and received full authority following World War II. Lt. Col. Gamal Abdel Nasser officially became the country's president in 1956 having led a military junta, dubbed the *Free Officers* movement, to overthrow the then Turkish King Farouk.

President Anwar al-Sadat succeeded following Nasser's death in 1970 and implemented a constitution that allowed for a different model of government, one that established a strong political system and gave leeway to free political and civil rights. Although Sadat's policies did not altogether succeed, he was credited as a leader who tried to open the door to free expression and encouraged alternative opinions to flourish, at least for a period of time, until he found himself personally under attack by those groups. Sadat also initiated a strong alliance with the United States government, which has garnered Egypt a substantial chunk of US foreign aid over the last 34 years.

Sadat's assassination in 1981 was stimulated by his signing of the 1979 peace treaty with Israel, a move that isolated Egypt by angering its Arab neighbours and made Sadat hugely unpopular. The vice president and former military air pilot, Mohamed Hosni Mubarek, reluctantly took over the presidency following Sadat's assassination and immediately declared a state of emergency, which remains a staple ingredient of Egyptian national security policy today.³ When the security situation following Sadat's assassination eased, Mubarak started to present himself as a reformer and an advocate for free speech. He proceeded to lift restrictions placed on the media, including the release from prison of several journalists who had been jailed during Sadat's presidency, and Egyptian journalists enjoyed greater freedom than had been the case at any other time in modern history.⁴

Despite having been on the receiving end of extensive foreign aid and the country's once thriving agricultural sector, in the early 1990's, Egypt witnessed extensive social instability aggravated by poor living conditions and a failing economy. People lacked a political outlet through which to express their frustration and this manifested itself in the form of an Islamist insurgency that fueled a fierce battle between the government and Islamist groups. The authorities imprisoned thousands of suspected militants without necessarily citing judicial

³ *The Emergency Law* allows the government to arrest people considered dangerous to the public and national security and hold them for prolonged periods without charge. Thousands of Egyptians are believed to have disappeared due to this law.

⁴ Rugh, William A. 1979. "The Arab Press." (Page 6).

approval.⁵ During the 1990's, Egyptian national security is thought to have detained at least 26,000 suspected Islamic militants and executed a dozen others.⁶

Today, and following the 28-year-old reign of the Egyptian President, Mohammed Hosni Mubarak, the country's social and economic sectors have undergone an extensive deterioration while many groups in the political sphere are no longer acquiescent, enraged by the government's apparent lack of interest in reaching out to the average Egyptian citizen.

"The generation born since 1981 came into the world during the worst period of Egyptian history," said Mohamed Abdel Aziz, a 23-year-old aviation engineer and founder of the 6th of April anti-government protest movement.⁷ "We can see how dynamic the rest of the world is, but we feel alienated, as if we are living outside of time."⁸

Given a population of just over 83 million people, Egypt is the Arab world's most populous country.⁹ One fifth of this population is currently living on under 1 US\$ [65 pence] per day. Meanwhile, the current global financial crisis has impacted on the country heavily, hitting its tourism industry, which is one of the primary sources of foreign currency, as well as the revenue from the Suez Canal, oil and gas exports and transfer of funds from Egyptians living abroad, mainly in the Gulf region. Transparency International, a civil society organization, aiming to fight corruption worldwide, ranked Egypt 13th out of 18 countries in the Middle East with a serious corruption problem, scoring it 2.8 on its Corruption Perception Index for 2008.¹⁰

⁵ The Freedom House: Map of Freedom in the World. 2008. "Egypt." Available at – <http://freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=363&year=2008&country=7387> / Accessed on 15 April 2009.

⁶ Info Please. Country profile: "Egypt." Available at – <http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0107484.html> / Accessed on 14 April 2009.

⁷ 6th of April is the name of the pro-democracy movement established in 2008 to support striking workers at a textile complex in the Egyptian town of al-Mahalla al-Kubrah. At the time of its founding, it was strictly a youth movement composed of university students and now boasts just over 73,000 members. The group communicates through social networking sites, primarily Facebook, and was responsible for the largest civil unrest the country has witnessed in recent years, after the founders attracted thousands of members to their Facebook site and called for a country-wide strike in 2008. This will be discussed in chapter 3[b] on (page 21).

⁸ Fleishman, Jeffrey. 3 May 2009. *Los Angeles Times*. "Facebook Activist Attempts to Spark a Revolution in Egypt." Available at –

http://www.boston.com/news/world/middleeast/articles/2009/05/03/facebook_activist_attempts_to_spark_a_revolution_in_egyp / Accessed on 12 May 2009.

⁹ CIA World Factbook. Egypt country profile. July 2009 population estimate.

Available at – <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/print/eg.html> / Accessed on 5 June 2009.

¹⁰ Transparency International: The Global Coalition against Corruption. 2008. Transparency International bases its classification of countries by gathering information for two years prior to publishing its findings and using data from 13 independent sources. For the Corruption Perception Index, it runs a scale from 0-10, with 0 being high corruption and 10 being no corruption. Its 2008 report surveyed 18 countries in the Middle East; Egypt is one of the 13 with a score lower than five. Only five countries in this region scored more than 5. Available at –

http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi/2008/regional_highlights_factsheets / Accessed on 15 May 2009.

Egyptian civil society is trying to push the boundaries of free expression in an attempt to institute genuine changes that will steer the country politically, and salvage its social and economic autonomy.

2. Transformation of the Egyptian Media: the Factors which Helped to Shape Egypt's Media Landscape

In the Arab world, media in all its forms has traditionally been thought of as an instrument strummed by those in power. “Many Arab governments talk about ‘freedom of the press,’ but it is often code for precisely the opposite.”¹¹

In order to understand the influential role that today's media plays in Egyptian society and the government's persistence in trying to undercut it, it is critical to highlight the factors driving the Egyptian government to feed the media freedom with one hand while trying to choke it with the other. Those factors can be summarized below and will be expanded upon in the section that follows:

1. The *Al Jazeera Effect*
2. The United States campaign to bring democracy to the Middle East
3. The rise of independent and party-owned newspapers

Prior to the invention of satellite television in the early 1990's, Egyptian and Arab audiences had been receiving their news through a tightly controlled network of government broadcast television channels. From the government's perspective, the news was under control and the idea that its public agenda could somehow be swayed by public opinion was out of the question. It was not until the Emir of Qatar launched an Arabic speaking news network in 1996 that the audiences in the region realized the extent of their isolation.

The *Al Jazeera Effect* has become a familiar term, describing the reverberating impact stirred by the launch of *Al Jazeera*¹² news more than a decade ago. Under its slogan, “*The Opinion and the Other Opinion*”, the channel revolutionized the Arab media and opened up a platform for discussing issues that had formally been conceived as taboo in the conservative Middle East. Western-style debate talk shows stimulated the Arab audiences to partake in the news through call-in commentaries during live programming.

Al Jazeera single-handedly elevated the standard of Arab television and rejuvenated its sluggish audience, who had been dulled by years of state-fed programming, so much so that

¹¹ Pintak, Lawrence. 16 May 2008. “The Role of the Media as Watch-dogs, Agenda-setters and Gate-keepers in Arab States.” Available at – <http://ksghome.harvard.edu/~pnorris/Conference/Conference%20papers/Pintak%20Arab%20Media.pdf> Accessed on 10 April 2009.

¹² *Al Jazeera* is an Arabic word meaning *Peninsula*. Following the success of its 24-hour Arabic news and current affairs channel, the Qatar based broadcaster launched *Al Jazeera* English in November 2006. Please note: all references in this paper are to the Arabic version unless indicated otherwise.

some countries, feeling that *Al Jazeera's* coverage thwarted their capacity to manipulate the public agenda, to which they had been traditionally accustomed, closed down the broadcaster's offices in their respective countries, intimidated its correspondents or strained diplomatic ties with Qatar.

In 2006, *Al Jazeera's* bureau chief in Cairo was arrested and held on charges of false reporting following coverage of a triple bombing in Sinai. The Egyptian authorities stated that his inaccurate coverage incited public confusion and he was later released on bail.¹³ In the following year, the Egyptian authorities arrested a journalist working for the news channel and confiscated at least 50 videotapes relating to a documentary on police torture in Egypt. The journalist, an Egyptian national named Huweida Taha Metwalli, used re-enactments to illustrate torture incidents, which allegedly took place inside Egyptian police stations. She was given a six-month prison sentence and fined 20,000 Egyptian Pounds [£2,410] for allegedly fabricating the story and tarnishing Egypt's reputation.¹⁴

Most recently, in 2008, *Al Jazeera's* journalists were among a batch of foreign media representatives that the Egyptian border authorities prevented from entering Gaza through the Rafah border crossing during the height of the Israeli offensive on Gaza, a three-week military campaign that claimed the lives of at least 1,300 Palestinians. Egypt's lax response during the crisis and its perceived stalling of humanitarian relief into the Gaza Strip was heavily condemned by critics throughout the Arab world. Some cited Egypt as an ally of the West and a traitor to the Arab cause, while accusing Mubarak's regime of making covert deals with the Israeli government and conspiring against the Palestinian people, all of which were broadcast on *Al Jazeera*. This has since escalated the already strained diplomatic ties between Cairo and Doha.

Another substantial factor that helped to change the face of the Egyptian media in the last few years is the United States' campaign to bring democracy to the Middle East.

Following the September 11, 2001 (9/11) attacks on the *World Trade Center* in New York City, the United States government, under the leadership of former President George W. Bush, pursued an active campaign to bring democracy to the Middle East, catalyzed by the fact that all of the 19 airplane hijackers involved in 9/11 were said to be of Middle Eastern descent.

¹³ *BBC News*. 27 April 2006. "Egypt's al-Jazeera Chief Charged."

Available at – http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/4949996.stm / Accessed on 5 February 2009.

¹⁴ *BBC News*. 14 January 2007. "Egypt Seizes al-Jazeera Reporter"

Available at – http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/6260285.stm / Accessed on 5 February 2009.

Given its track record as a strong ally of the Middle East, the Egyptian government continued to be a key player alongside the US in the period following 9/11. Given the country's peace treaty with Israel in 1979, and its active role as middleman in the peace negotiations between the Palestinians and Israel, the United States has traditionally viewed Egypt as a primary weight in the region.

It is worth noting that Egypt had long been a beneficiary of US support in the form of economic and military aid. Since 1975, the United States government has given Egypt over 50 billion US\$ [almost £32.4 billion] in military and economic aid, second only to Israel.¹⁵ Following 9/11, US assistance to Egypt took on additional sectors, particularly in the area of political aid, which came in the form of promoting human rights organizations, programmes supporting women's rights and election monitoring for the country's parliamentary and presidential elections.

Speaking at the *American University in Cairo* on June 20, 2005, the former US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, delivered a speech that was fundamental in identifying the path that the United States government intended to take in its promotion of democracy in the Middle East. Rice expressed her government's dismay over the infringement of human rights and the intimidation of "peaceful supporters of democracy" in Egypt, explaining that the US did not want to impose its own method of government, but were merely extending a helpful hand in "supporting the democratic aspirations of all people" and aiding countries in their quest towards democracy:

"We should all look to a future when every government respects the will of its citizens — because the ideal of democracy is universal. For 60 years, the United States pursued stability at the expense of democracy in the Middle East — and we achieved neither... When we talk about democracy, we are referring to governments that protect certain basic rights for all their citizens — among these, the right to speak freely. The right to associate. The right to worship as you wish. The freedom to educate your children — boys and girls. And freedom from the midnight knock of the secret police".¹⁶

The months preceding and following Rice's speech were critical in ascertaining the dominant role played by the US government in trying to maneuver Egypt's political realm towards embracing democratic values. While changes came in the form of tiny steps that were

¹⁵ Levinson, Charles. 12 April 2004. *The Christian Science Monitor*. "\$50 billion later, taking stock of US aid to Egypt." Available at – <http://www.csmonitor.com/2004/0412/p07s01-wome.html> / Accessed on 2 February 2009.

¹⁶ US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice speech to promote democracy in the Middle East, American University in Cairo, 20 June 2005. Available at – <http://arabist.net/archives/2005/06/20/condoleezza-rices-remarks-and-excerpts-from-her-cairo-speech> / Accessed on 17 February 2009.

viewed by skeptics as a continuation of the government's pretend democracy strategy, in mid-2004, the Egyptian government introduced some changes, hinting at political reform, and the country saw a spark of political vitality.

Kefaya (Enough), a movement integrating intellectuals, valued academics and a generation of young people bursting with ambition, all trying to enforce political and social change in Egypt, came into the limelight in 2004. Although the grassroots organization had some presence as early as 2000, with the solidarity movements forming around the second *Palestinian Intifada*¹⁷ and the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, *Kefaya* ultimately gained popularity in 2004, as rumours circulated there would be a significant change in Egypt's political dominion. The changes soon took place with supporters of Mubarak's youngest son, Gamal Mubarak, taking up key positions in government. This ultimately stirred the public's fear of a hereditary transformation of power similar to what happened in Syria, where a constitutional amendment allowed the Syrian President, Hafez al-Assad's, son, Bashar, to take over the presidency after his father's death in 2000.

As Egyptians contemplated the outcome of such a move, *Kefaya* had already harvested enough support on the streets to create outwardly vocal protests against the Egyptian government. For some time, the country's capital was the site of frequent demonstrations where hundreds of protestors braved the tight security barricades demanding that the government should step down and give a chance for change. The spirit of a revolution of mind and spirit was pulsating. The last time the country had experienced a similar vibe was in 1952, when the military, fronted by Gamal Abdel Nasser, lead a coup to oust King Farouk.¹⁸

In 2005, another key event helped to shape the direction of Egypt's media and aided *Kefaya* firmly to plant its feet in the public sphere. The *Cedar Revolution*, as it became known, is where tens of thousands of Lebanese people held peaceful protests in the streets of Beirut, demanding the ultimate withdrawal of Syrian troops from their country following the assassination of the former Lebanese Prime Minister, Rafiq Hariri. Extensive media coverage of the event brought to Arab viewers, and Egyptians in particular, a sense of empowerment, as it showed that the will of the people to bring about political and social reform could be attainable by peaceful means.

¹⁷ Palestinian Intifada refers to the Palestinian uprising against Israeli Occupation. The second Intifada, also referred to as the Al-Aqsa Intifada, broke out at the end of 2000, as frustration over a visit by the former Israeli Prime Minister, Ariel Sharon, to the Al-Aqsa Mosque in East Jerusalem, sparked an outbreak of violence.

¹⁸ King Farouk I was the King of Egypt and Sudan. He was overthrown during a military coup on 23 July 1952, which has become known as the 23 July Revolution, on the grounds of conspiring with the British government against Egyptian interests, and he was blamed for Egypt's poor performance in the 1948 war with Israel.

In May 2005, just a month prior to Rice's speech in Cairo, the Egyptian government passed a controversial referendum allowing for multi-candidate presidential elections. Observers suggested that the referendum would not have been the natural choice for the Egyptian government without a hefty share of arm twisting from the US side, including Rice's scheduling and canceling of her visit at least once before ensuring that the referendum were instituted. While the referendum at its premise was a positive sign, it was hugely unpopular among the regime's opponents because independent candidates were required to have at least 250 recommendations from elected members of parliament and local councils, all of which are dominated by the ruling *National Democratic Party* (NDP), in order to be allowed to stand for the country's presidential elections,¹⁹ thus making it almost impossible for them to garner the necessary support. A few months later, in September 2005, Mubarak, at the age of 81, was re-elected to serve his fifth consecutive term as president of the *Arab Republic of Egypt*.

Adding to the quandary over validating its role in promoting democracy in the Middle East as either successful or questionable, the United States government faced another decisive dilemma in the region, one that presented itself in the form of Islamic militancy and religious fundamentalism, an issue at the heart of the very problem that it was attempting to tackle.²⁰

In December 2005, Egypt's parliamentary elections closed amid widespread clashes between the police and supporters of the *Muslim Brotherhood*, the country's oldest and largest Islamist movement. The *Muslim Brotherhood* supporters, nominating themselves for election as independent candidates, given that the group is officially banned from taking part in any political activity, won a record 20 percent of the parliamentary seats (88 in total), which was the most the organization had ever managed to gain. Observers note that, if fair elections were to be held, the group would probably garner far more votes, but the government has long employed policies to sever the *Brotherhood's* influence by clamping down on its constituents and producing obstacles that hamper its members from playing any active role in politics.

The *Muslim Brotherhood*, founded in 1928, has been a major influence on Islamist-based movements worldwide. Under its current Supreme Guide, Mohamed Mahdy Akef, the organization has made it clear that they want a state governed by Islamic law, but, despite the fact that it is banned from engaging in political activity and the deficiency of its leaders in publicizing any agenda outlining potential plans if they were to attain power, a large sector of

¹⁹ *USA TODAY*. 25 May 2005. "Violence mars Egypt's election law referendum."

Available at – http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2005-05-25-egypt-referendum_x.htm / Accessed on 31 May 2009.

²⁰ Sharp, Jeremy M. 15 June 2006. "U.S. Democracy Promotion Policy in the Middle East: The Islamist Dilemma."

Available at – <http://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL33486.pdf> / Accessed on 10 March 2009.

Egyptians foresee it as the most promising alternative to the ruling NDP. The group denounces violence and speaks in favour of democratic rule.

Some skeptics dismissed the 88 seats won by the *Brotherhood*, claiming that it was part of the government's carefully-orchestrated plan to showcase its open-minded initiative to introduce democracy and arguing that the *Brotherhood's* mere 20 percent win gives the organization no significant role in parliament. Others saw the outcome as a signal of a change in the government's policies and a glimmer of hope regarding more a prominent democratic change in the years to come.

Determining how much the *Al Jazeera Effect* and the US campaign to bring democracy to the Middle East influenced the events that trailed in Egypt is arguable, but certain aspects of the ensuing events suggest that they played a significant role.

For example, in 2004, Egypt witnessed the birth of the opposition press, a semi-independent movement that has since boomed explosively. As worldwide newspaper readership dwindles and many newspapers close down their operations, Egypt's independent newspapers are thriving. In February 2009, the most recent of these private publications came into the limelight. *Al Sherouq* (The Sunrise) newspaper brings the number of daily newspapers in Egypt to 17. This fairly new wave of newspapers tends to adopt an anti-regime slant, offering readers an alternative to the long established state-run publications, such as *Al-Ahram* (The Pyramids), *Al-Akhbar* (The News) and *Al-Goumhoreyah* (The Republic).

This trend can be attributed to the nagging pressure from Washington to "expand democratic freedoms following 9/11".²¹ In 2004, the Egyptian government granted a group of entrepreneurs the license to publish the country's first independent newspaper in half a century. *Al-Masry al-Youm* (The Daily Egyptian) and its ensuing success opened the door for other private financiers seeking licenses to publish their own newspapers.

Egypt's press has traditionally been characterized by heavy state-supervision and its "medial landscape is defined with a simple question: for or against?"²²

Hisham Kassem, the founding publisher of *al-Masry al-Youm*, speculates that they were granted a publishing license because the government never suspected that the newspaper would

²¹ Cooper, Kenneth J. Fall 2008, Issue 6. *Arab Media & Society*. "Politics and priorities: Inside the Egyptian press." Available at - http://www.arabmediasociety.com/topics/index.php?t_article=225 / Accessed on 4 June 2009.

²² Press Reference. 2007. "Egypt Press, Media, TV, Radio, Newspapers." Available at - <http://www.pressreference.com/Co-Fa/Egypt.html> / Accessed on 5 June 2009.

thrive and also because the regime wanted to please its allies in Washington,²³ but, in any case, the success of *al-Masry al-Youm* was a necessary stimulus for other independent newspaper ventures, which have since emerged and flourished (this will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4).

²³ Cooper, Kenneth J. Fall 2008, Issue 6. *Arab Media & Society*. "Politics and priorities: Inside the Egyptian press." Available at - http://www.arabmediasociety.com/topics/index.php?t_article=225 / Accessed on 4 June 2009.

3. Citizen Journalism and the Changing Face of the Egyptian Media

Inside the confines of a Cairo police station, a young man in his twenties is lying face-down on the floor, his hands are tied and he is naked from the waist downwards. He is screaming, pleading, “Please sir, enough! Please, sir!” Meanwhile, a man, whose face is hidden, is ridiculing him, insulting him and his family, as he sodomizes him with a broomstick. The young man screams louder, but to no avail.²⁴

The victim is 21-year-old Emad Mohamed Ali Mohamed, known to his friends as Emad al-Kabeer (*Emad the Great*). He is a minibus driver who was arrested by plain-clothes police after intervening to break up a fight between his cousin and the police. Al-Kabeer’s aggressor filmed the torture on his mobile phone and initiated its circulation among minibus drivers in al-Kabeer’s neighbourhood as a lesson not to obstruct the local police force.

The clip circulated beyond the circle of minibus drivers, however, and soon came to the notice of on-line bloggers, who published it on their web sites, giving the 40-second footage a life of its own. People gasped as the video spread nationally among mobile phone users and the public’s attention was stirred by al-Kabeer’s story, bringing police brutality into the limelight, as the issue had long been regarded as taboo, despite Egypt’s long-standing record of being a place where “torture is institutionalized”.²⁵ *Human Rights Watch* called torture in Egypt an “epidemic”, and the American *Central Intelligence Agency* (CIA) routinely uses Egypt as a hub for interrogating and torturing prisoners through the use of techniques that are deemed unconstitutional by the CIA’s own standards.²⁶

Al-Kabeer’s story made the national and international headlines. He was interviewed by satellite television stations, including *Al Jazeera* and Egypt’s privately-owned *Dream TV*, during which he vowed to bring the faceless men in the video to justice and win back his dignity. In mid-2007, the two men who administered his torture, Capt. Islam Nabih and Cpl. Reda Fathi, were each sentenced to three years in prison, which was an unprecedented sentence under the Egyptian legal system.

Needless to say, Emad al-Kabeer’s story proved a huge embarrassment to the Egyptian authorities, given the country’s long standing status as a role model in the region and its close

²⁴ Al-Kabeer’s torture video on You Tube.

Available at - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4iez20eP-ic> / Accessed on 10 January 2009.

²⁵ Pintak, Lawrence. 16 May 2008. “The Role of the Media as Watch-dogs, Agenda-setters and Gate-keepers in Arab States.” Available at - <http://ksghome.harvard.edu/~pnorris/Conference/Conference%20papers/Pintak%20Arab%20Media.pdf/> Accessed on 10 April 2009.

²⁶ *CBS News*. March 6, 2005. “CIA Flying Suspects to Torture.”

Available at - <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2005/03/04/60minutes/main678155.shtml> / Accessed on 20 January 2009.

alliance with the United States government. Human rights organizations finally had evidence to prove Egypt's poor record on torture, and it was all achieved via the blogosphere.²⁷ Up until this point, Internet bloggers had been a silent voice in the public arena and it was the public outrage incited by the assault on al-Kabeer that made the bloggers themselves realize the powerful role that they play in highlighting the key issues that the mainstream media had long brushed off as taboo. They also became aware of their role as activists and catalysts of public opinion who can draw both national and international attention to local issues.²⁸

Wael Abbas is an award winning Cairo-based blogger. His site, *Al Wa'ay Al Masry* (or *Egyptian Awareness*), despite being written in colloquial Arabic, has gained international recognition following his broadcast of police torture videos, starting with that of Emad al-Kabeer. Abbas said that someone has to stand up to the government:

“We know people get raped, beaten all the time. And who's going to stick up for a bus driver? But now it's public, and everyone is talking. The government has to do something. They've lost face”.²⁹

Abbas, who receives most of his video content through anonymous suppliers, later published two more police torture videos, one showing a man being vehemently slapped by a police officer,³⁰ and another of an alleged female murder suspect with her hands bound to her legs, being suspended from a rod hanging between two chairs,³¹ both incidents supposedly taking place inside Cairo police stations.

[A] Internet Accessibility in Egypt

Given the Egyptian government's ambitious launch of the Internet in the early 1990's, through embracing programmes such as the “Free Internet Initiative”,³² which later became a

²⁷ *Blogosphere* is a term describing interactive web journals, or *blogs*, which can take the form of a traditional news story but mostly tend to be written by ordinary citizens and express a personal view on a particular issue. Their format allows readers to participate through a commentary attached to each web log post. People who write blogs are referred to as *bloggers*.

²⁸ Hamdy, Naila. 2009. “Arab Citizen Journalism in Action: Challenging Mainstream Media, Authorities and Media Laws”, *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture*. 2009. (University of Westminster, London.)

Available at - http://www.wmin.ac.uk/mad/pdf/WPCC-Vol6-No1-Naila_Hamdy.pdf / Accessed on 9 April 2009.

²⁹ Azimi, Negar. 6 February 2007. *The Nation*. “Bloggers Against Torture”

Available at - <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20070219/azimi> / Accessed on 20 March 2009.

³⁰ Man being slapped inside police station.

Available at - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DG7ur9P8uHg> / Accessed on 21 January 2009.

³¹ Woman allegedly undergoing torture in Egyptian prison.

Available at - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VhQRFz65M6s> / Accessed on 21 January 2009.

³² The *Free Internet Initiative* is a programme introduced by the Egyptian government in 2002, whereby anyone with a telephone line and a computer could access the Internet at the price of making a local phone call [USD\$0.15 per hour / GBP£0.10 per hour].

model for other developing countries, and allowing people to purchase computers via a monthly installment plan, the implications that followed were ones that the government had not anticipated.

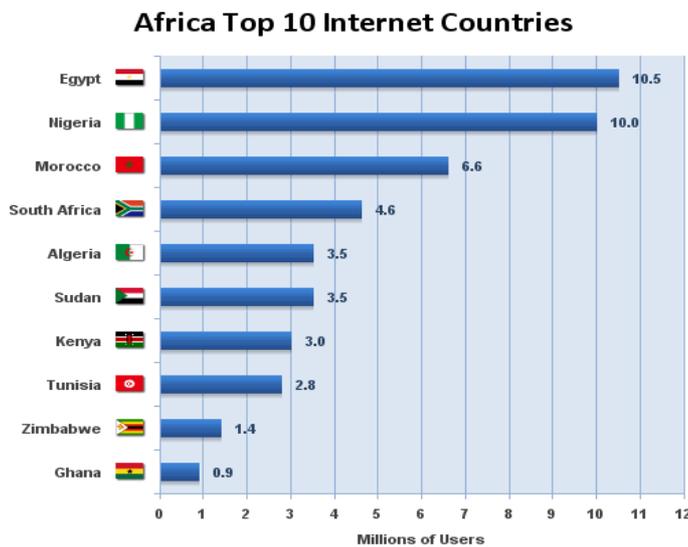
Despite the country’s almost 30 percent illiteracy rate, Internet statistics show that, during the year 2000, half a million people had Internet access, which had increased to nearly 11 million by the end of 2008, through personal computers, Internet cafés or universities and clubs. Today, almost 13 percent of Egypt’s population has Internet access, a seemingly small amount by European and American standards, but it is the leader with regard to Internet penetration among African and Middle Eastern countries (Figures 1 and 2).

Year	Internet users	Population	% Penetration
2000	450,000	66,303,000	0.7%
2006	5,100,000	71,236,631	7.0%
2008	10,532,400	81,713,517	12.9%

SOURCE – Internet World Stats, Egypt: Internet Usage and Telecommunications Reports, December 2008

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FIGURE 1



Source: Internet World Stats - www.internetworldstats.com - Dec. 2008
Copyright © 2009, Miniwatts Marketing Group

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FIGURE 2

³³ Internet World Stats. 2008. “Egypt Internet Usage and Telecommunications Reports.”

Available at – <http://www.internetworldstats.com/af/eg.htm> / Accessed on 22 April 2009.

³⁴ Internet World Stats Usage and Population Statistics. 2009. “Internet Usage Statistics for Africa.”

Available at – <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats1.htm> / Accessed on 22 April 2009.

Although access to digital communication has widely expanded since its initial launch in the early 1990's, it remains stifled by a poor infrastructure, such as feeble telephone lines and widespread poverty.

Broadband Internet access was first introduced commercially into Egypt in early 2000, under a limited plan serving only the major cities, such as Cairo and the coastal city of Alexandria. It has since spread to smaller governorates throughout the country.³⁵ Given that almost 40 percent of the country's population survives on less than 2 US\$ [£1.30] per day, the accessibility of broadband Internet has been a luxury, as its monthly price tag makes it conveniently attainable to a minor niche of Egyptian households, while others can only access it through Internet cafés.

ADSL³⁶ home packages, according to the rates posted by TE Data, one of Egypt's two largest Internet Service Providers, show that the average monthly costs of a limited ADSL connection vary from 45 Egyptian Pounds [£5.23] for a 256K connection to 200 Egyptian Pounds [£23.12] for a 2048K connection, which are clearly above the reach of the average Egyptian citizen.³⁷ In 2008, less than one percent of the population had a home broadband connection, while Internet cafés were scattered throughout the country, including in the urban slums and small villages, averaging 200,000 users per week.³⁸

Cognizant of this steady rise in the number of Internet users and the apparent threat posed by the free spread of information, the Egyptian government eyed the medium as a nuisance and identified the web's characteristic free flow of information as a challenge to its model of controlled democracy. This stimulated the founding of an Internet monitoring and regulation body, as early as 2002, in the form of the Department for Confronting Computer and Internet Crime, which functions under the umbrella of the Ministry of the Interior. The department's director, Ahmed Essmat, told *Al-Ahram* daily newspaper that his staff monitored the Internet in real time, and the department has been cited as having the capacity to block, filter and suspend any web sites deemed to be a threat to national security.³⁹

³⁵ The Arabic Network for Human rights Information. "The Internet in the Arab World A New Space for Repression: Egypt A False Freedom." Available at – <http://www.anhri.net/en/reports/net2004/egypt.shtml> / Accessed on 6 February 2009.

³⁶ ADSL refers to Asymmetric Digital Subscriber Line or DSL for short. It is a high-speed Internet access service that utilizes existing copper telephone lines to send and receive data at speeds that exceed conventional dial-up modems.

³⁷ TE Data ADSL monthly subscription fees. Available at – http://www.tedata.net/new/tedata_egypt/en/outer.aspx?secId=82 / Accessed on 3 May 2009.

³⁸ Freedom House. 2008. "Freedom on the Net: A Global Assessment of Internet and Digital Media." Available at – <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=384&key=200&parent=19&report=79> / Accessed on 10 March 2009.

³⁹ OpenNet Initiative. 2007. "Egypt." Available at – <http://opennet.net/research/profiles/egypt> / Accessed on 10 March 2009.

While experts cannot point to any evidence proving that the Egyptian government engages in widespread Internet censorship, most observe that the government does engage in “low-tech” methods of intimidation and bullying towards on-line political activists, some of which have developed into legal procedures, detentions or old school surveillance techniques.⁴⁰

In 2007, the Ministry of the Interior proposed an international initiative for combating terrorism on the Internet. Security officials, or the *Internet Police* as they have become known, monitor on-line traffic by filtering the content of e-mails, blogs and social networking sites. Internet cafés, which can be shut down if they are operating without a license from the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, have been instructed by security officials to keep information on all their customers and to record the numbers on the customers’ identification cards as well as the web sites that they visit.⁴¹

Topics such as the president’s health, homosexuality, Muslim-Coptic tension, the state of the Egyptian military, pornography, torture in Egyptian jails and the sexual harassment of women have all proven to be very touchy subjects that test the patience of the authorities and cross the red line established by the state. This has been observed in court cases launched against bloggers as well as the old-fashioned bullying tactics that the government’s security arm often uses against bloggers who use freedom of expression beyond the extent to which the government is currently willing to consent.

[B] The Bread Riots

On April 6, 2008, a group of young Egyptians came to the limelight after forming the *April 6th* movement, a pro-democracy movement composed of a cross-section of youths with the goal of instituting political, social and economic change. With their primary communication revolving around the Internet’s social networking sites, primarily *Facebook*, the group managed to garner sufficient support to stage a general strike throughout the country in protest against the high prices, low wages and shortage of bread, a staple food component among the Egyptian population. The *Bread Riots*,⁴² as the protest became known, illustrated the significance of the Internet as an instrument that can foster public opinion to rally against the regime. People in

⁴⁰ Freedom House. 2008. “Freedom on the Net: A Global Assessment of Internet and Digital Media.” Available at – <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=384&key=200&parent=19&report=79> / Accessed on 10 March 2009.

⁴¹ OpenNet Initiative. 2007. “Egypt” Available at – <http://opennet.net/sites/opennet.net/files/egypt.pdf> / Accessed on 10 March 2009.

⁴² The word *bread*, pronounced in colloquial Egyptian Arabic, means *life* and is a staple ingredient of the daily Egyptian diet.

three major Egyptian cities assembled simultaneously and turned out in mass for the demonstrations, which brought back blatant memories of the 1977 riots that broke out after President Anwar al-Sadat proposed cutting the government subsidies on a range of basic foods.

The 2008 riots highlighted the Internet as a powerful tool that the government has yet to comprehend. Twenty-seven-year-old Esraa Abdel Fattah Ahmed earned the nickname, “Facebook Girl”, after she managed to attract at least 70,000 members to the group she created on the popular social networking site, *Facebook*, where she called on people to go out and peacefully demonstrate against poor living conditions. The authorities arrested Abdel Fattah and said that the *April 6th* group that she had created was against the national interest because it incited people to protest in mass and posed a threat to national security.

In the days leading up to the strike, the opposition groups were sending SMS messages by mobile phone, encouraging people to join the street protests, dress in black and hang the Egyptian flag from their windows to show their dismay at the government’s policies and in support of the *April 6th* country-wide demonstrations.⁴³ Abdel Fattah was detained by the authorities, who claimed that she had masterminded the strikes, and she was only released after her mother had sent a personal appeal to President Mubarak, the First Lady, Suzanne Mubarak, and the Minister of the Interior, Habib al-Adly.⁴⁴

The manner in which Abdel Fattah was detained and her subsequent release from detention is evidence of the country’s failing rule of law, whereby she was initially held without judicial approval and was then released, also without judicial approval. If her mother had not appealed to the country’s highest authority perhaps her daughter would have been held for a longer period of time or disappeared behind bars. Is this enough evidence to assert that the country’s judicial system is controlled by the powers that be and that it has failed the Egyptian people in refusing to act as a balanced body to protect civil rights? Is this an extension of the government’s controlled democratic tactics, whereby the rule of law is only resorted to when it supports the regime’s interests?

Perhaps there is no better answer to these questions than the comments made by President Mohamed Hosni Mubarak as he spoke from the platform of the Supreme Constitutional Court on the occasion of its 40th anniversary in March 2009. Mubarak stated that the court “elevated status in the conscience of Egypt and the hearts of Egyptians as a lofty

⁴³ Saleh, Yasmine. 17 April 2008. *Daily News*. “Facebook Activist Detained ‘indefinitely’.”

Available at – <http://www.dailystaregypt.com/article.aspx?ArticleID=13175> / Accessed on 16 February 2009.

⁴⁴ Saleh, Yasmine. 21 April 2008. *Daily News*. “MB Chief Denounces Arrest of Facebook Activist; Mother Appeals to President Mubarak.” Available at - <http://www.dailystaregypt.com/article.aspx?ArticleID=13249> / Accessed on 16 February 2009.

edifice of justice and the rule of law and its esteemed judges who undertake their mission in faith and impartiality, upholding the Constitution and championing citizens' rights and freedoms".⁴⁵ In fact, the President's comments are in complete contradiction to the general legal practice in the country, where, as we saw in the case of Abdel Fattah, she was held and released without judicial approval, hence presenting an example of a recurring dilemma, whereby the country's legal bodies surrender to the regime's command.

The incidents surrounding the *April 6th* strikes, particularly the detainment of Abdel Fattah, incited widespread fear and anger in Egypt. The *Muslim Brotherhood* expressed grave concern over the proceedings and warned of the potential repercussions. Although the *Brotherhood* had stood on the sidelines throughout the campaign, the party's Supreme Guide, Mohamed Mahdy Akef, stated that the detainment of Abdel Fattah proved that "Egypt is a police state". "The Egyptian regime is in conflict with all sectors of the Egyptian society...If the situation remains as is, a public outcry will take place and its consequences will be completely unpredictable."⁴⁶

Al-Mahalla al-Kubrah, a city in the central Nile River delta of Lower Egypt, witnessed the most heated protests during the 2008 bread riots. The protestors burned banks, school buildings and shops. James Karl Buck, an American graduate student working on his master's thesis project, was detained along with his Egyptian fixer, while covering a demonstration by factory workers in Mahalla. Buck was released within a day, but his Egyptian translator, Mohamed Maree, was detained for nearly three months. The authorities were unable to confirm Maree's detention throughout the ordeal.

"The atmosphere that prevailed before and during the 1977 bread riots is similar to now," said Ammar Ali Hassan, director of the *Middle East Studies and Research Centre*. "Especially in that there is no confidence in the government. The desire to protest has overwhelmed a large sector of society."⁴⁷

Hassan explains that today's living conditions are much worse than was the case 31 years ago. In 1977, people were more highly politicized and the regime's "security grip" was more subtle. Given the current economic and social situation in the country, the average

⁴⁵ President Mubarak address the Supreme Constitutional Court on its 40th Anniversary. 7 March 2009. Available at – <http://www.sis.gov.eg/En/Politics/Presidency/President/Speeches/000001/04010502000000000397.htm/> Accessed on 6 June 2009.

⁴⁶ Saleh, Yasmine. 21 April 2008. *Daily News*. "MB Chief Denounces Arrest of Facebook Activist; Mother Appeals to President Mubarak." Available at - <http://www.dailystaregypt.com/article.aspx?ArticleID=13249/> Accessed on 16 February 2009.

⁴⁷ El-Sayed, Mohamed. 24-30 January 2008, Issue No. 881. *Al-Ahram Weekly*. "Memories of 1977." Available at – <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2008/881/eg5.htm/> Accessed on 20 February 2009.

Egyptian citizen has become fully consumed with the daily task of providing the basic necessities of life, so that the idea of going out to protest may be the last thing on anyone's mind. However, the bread riots in Egypt proved that people's patience was running out and the regime's security grip was put to the test.

The Bread Riots marked the culmination of a crucial chapter in recent Egyptian history. Some observers feel that the riots revealed an unprecedented form of clumsiness on the part of the state's decision makers, who used to deal with similar scenarios very efficiently. This was highlighted by the government's decision to deploy the army to suppress protestors during the riots.⁴⁸ At least seven civilians died in clashes between demonstrators and the state's security services, with two being stabbed during fights in the bread lines and the rest dying from heat exhaustion. In Mahalla, a 15-year-old girl was killed in clashes between protestors and the anti-riot police. Satellite news channels, on-line bloggers and the local television station covered the story but the state's security services eventually cordoned off the area and the official media representatives were prevented from entering it. The news managers of the prominent satellite stations, such as *Orbit*, *Dream TV* and *Al-Mehwar*, were warned by the regime to tone down their rhetoric and ensure that their talk shows featured a heavy representation of the government's viewpoint.⁴⁹

Once again, the blogosphere rose to the occasion, as low-resolution mobile phone footage showing graphic images of bloodied protestors being attacked by anti-riot police and demonstrators stamping on posters of the Egyptian President circulated on the Internet. The Egyptian journalist, blogger and activist, Hossam El-Hamalawy, stated that the sight of protestors stamping on Mubarak's posters signaled the end of the president's utopia.

"I mean, we've seen pictures of the Mahalla rioters bringing down Mubarak's big posters in the public squares of Mahalla, that triggered or echoed the bells of the toppling of Saddam Hussein's statue in Baghdad in 2003," El-Hamalawy said. "Except, in Mahalla, there were no American tanks and the photos were not staged."⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Abdel Baky, Mohamed. November 2008. *Carnegie Endowment For International Peace: Arab Reform Bulletin*. "A Historic Opportunity For President-Elect Obama." Available at – <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/arb/?fa=show&article=22396> / Accessed on 3 June 2009.

⁴⁹ Pintak, Lawrence. 16 May 2008. "The Role of the Media as Watch-dogs, Agenda-setters and Gate-keepers in Arab States." Available at – <http://ksghome.harvard.edu/~pnorris/Conference/Conference%20papers/Pintak%20Arab%20Media.pdf> / Accessed on 10 April 2009.

⁵⁰ *Democracy Now: The War and Peace Report*. 18 April 2008. "Egypt Opposition Leaders Sentenced in Military Court." Available at – <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vb0DIKUfdIA&feature=related> / Accessed on 6 June 2009.

[C] The Future of Egypt's Blogs

Based on government statistics, there are now at least 160,000 Egyptian blogs.⁵¹ Although the overwhelming majority of those blogs are non-political in nature, the impact made by the few that are has been notable. Blogs like *Egyptian Awareness*, *Arabist*, *Sandmonkey* and *Baheyya* have forced themselves on the public as an alternative source of news and as distributors of information relevant to the citizens. By exposing sensitive subject matter, such as human rights abuses through police brutality, sexual harassment against women and discussing political instability, corruption among government officials and organizing protest campaigns against the regime, the Egyptian blogosphere has proven to be a powerful contender and sometimes a vibrant compliment to traditional news outlets.

Given that the average age of most bloggers is under 30, the question of the future of Internet blogging in Egypt and its long-term survival is a moot one. This is because, up until this point, the medium has remained legally unprotected, without any precedent or legislation upon which judges can base a reasonable decision. Gamal Eid, director of the *Arab Information Network for Human Rights*, an NGO promoting the spread of information on the Internet and an advocate for freedom of expression among journalists in the printed press and on on-line blogs, says that the problem is not only the lack of adequate legislation, but also the fact that most of the judges making decisions on these critical cases are unfamiliar with the use of computers or the Internet.⁵²

In an analysis of Arab citizen journalism and the challenge it poses to the authorities, the media laws and the traditional media, Naila Hamdy, of the *American University in Cairo*, points that, in cases where bloggers have suffered extreme repercussions for their opinions, this was usually due to a lack of adequate legislation to regulate the Internet as a medium for disseminating information and the government's continuing incapacity to adapt its laws to deal with the modern, fast-paced technology of the Internet.⁵³

Moreover, in its annual report on worldwide press freedom, released in April 2009, the *Committee to Protect Journalists* (CPJ), an international non-profit organization dedicated to

⁵¹ Abdel Baky, Mohamed. November 2008. *Carnegie Endowment For International Peace: Arab Reform Bulletin*. "A Historic Opportunity For President-Elect Obama" Available at – <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/arb/?fa=show&article=22396> / Accessed on 3 June 2009.

⁵² Youssef, Nelly. 2005. *Qantara: Dialogue with the Islamic World*. "Online Media Censorship in Egypt: Internet Police on the Nile."

Available at – http://www.qantara.de/webcom/show_article.php/c-476/nr-501/i.html / Accessed on 19 April 2009.

⁵³ Hamdy, Naila. 2009. "Arab Citizen Journalism in Action: Challenging Mainstream Media, Authorities and Media Laws", *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture*. 2009. (University of Westminster, London.) Available at – http://www.wmin.ac.uk/mad/pdf/WPCC-Vol6-No1-Naila_Hamdy.pdf / Accessed on 9 April 2009.

promoting press freedom around the world, identified Egypt as one of the ten worst on-line oppressors.

Based on a series of intimidations, repressions and arrests, the CPJ stated that the Egyptian authorities regularly monitor the Internet, given that all on-line traffic goes through the state-run *Egypt Telecom*. In 2008, almost 100 bloggers were detained; some were released after a short time, while others were held for extensive periods without any judicial ruling. In many cases, the bloggers were tortured during their detainment.

“Bloggers are in the vanguard of the information revolution and their numbers are expanding rapidly,” said Joel Simon, CPJ’s executive director. “But governments are quickly learning how to turn technology against bloggers by censoring and filtering the Internet, restricting online access and mining personal data. When all else fails, the authorities simply jail a few bloggers to intimidate the rest of the online community into silence or self-censorship.”⁵⁴

This defensive reaction by the Egyptian government to the Internet, and the blogosphere in particular, is an example of the government’s traditional “schizophrenic approach” towards the media.⁵⁵

Lawrence Pintak, director of the *Kamal Adham Center for Journalism Training and Research* at the *American University in Cairo*, describes Arab governments as traditionally enjoying what seems to be a mentally unstable relationship with the media, which explains why the Egyptian government has maintained its regulatory measures in an attempt to suppress the free-roaming voices of Internet bloggers, and, in so doing, impose its own perception of the role that the media should play in society.

“Media is power, nowhere more so than in the Middle East. By controlling the messenger, while fostering some perception of media independence, Arab governments can at least attempt to control the nature and pace of change.”⁵⁶

In a country where the powers that be are functioning under an umbrella of paranoia ensuing from years of political corruption, the idea the state is suddenly going to change its policies and embrace the blogging phenomena is highly unlikely, given Egypt’s record on the

⁵⁴ Committee to Protect Journalists: Defending Journalists Worldwide. 2009. “10 Worst Countries to be a Blogger.” Available at – <http://cpj.org/reports/2009/04/10-worst-countries-to-be-a-blogger.php> / Accessed on 18 March 2009.

⁵⁵ Pintak, Lawrence. 16 May 2008. “The Role of the Media as Watch-dogs, Agenda-setters and Gate-keepers in Arab States.” Available at – <http://ksghome.harvard.edu/~pnorris/Conference/Conference%20papers/Pintak%20Arab%20Media.pdf> / Accessed on 10 April 2009.

⁵⁶ Pintak, Lawrence. 16 May 2008. “The Role of the Media as Watch-dogs, Agenda-setters and Gate-keepers in Arab States.” Available at – <http://ksghome.harvard.edu/~pnorris/Conference/Conference%20papers/Pintak%20Arab%20Media.pdf> / Accessed on 10 April 2009.

detention, arrest and torture of bloggers (Figure 3), who were usually only freed following pressure from international human rights organizations.

While some Egyptian organizations fighting for freedom of expression have called for the institution of concrete guidelines for the use of the Internet in Egypt, so far, those demands have gone unanswered. As long as no such legislation is established, Egypt's bloggers and their suppressed voices of freedom will continue to fall casualty to the regime's temperamental application of the rule of law.

Blogger Arrests around the World 2003-2008

Blogging Activities	Total	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008 – 1 st Q
Using blog to organize or cover social protest	15	China (4)			Egypt, Iran	Burma (2), China, Egypt (4), Iran	Egypt
Violating cultural norms	14			Singapore (3)	Egypt, Greece, USA	China, Egypt (2), Hong Kong, India, Philippines	Egypt, UK
Posting comments about public policy	12		France	Iran (2), Tunisia	Egypt, Iran	Fiji, Malaysia, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Thailand	Syria
Exposing corruption or human rights violations	9	Iran				China (3), Tunisia	Burma
Other reason, or no reason given	8				Canada, China, Syria	China, Egypt, Fiji, Malaysia, Thailand, USA (2)	
Posting comments about political figures	6		Iran	Egypt		Egypt, Iran, Kuwait, Russia	
Total Number of Cases	64	5	2	7	10	35	5

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FIGURE 3

⁵⁷ World Information Access Project. 8 June 2008. "Blogger Arrests Around the World Report." Available at – <http://www.wiareport.org/index.php/56/blogger-arrests> / Accessed on 5 June 2009.

4. Crossing the Red Line: the Rise of Independent and Party-Owned Newspapers

In the early hours of November 2, 2004, a speeding vehicle comes to a sudden halt. Its passengers, four plain-clothed men armed with knives, step out and take a man hostage. They blindfold him and force him into their vehicle, then take him to the remote desert area of Muqatam, Cairo. They threaten to have him killed “so that [he will] stop talking”.⁵⁸ After an hour of kicking and beating their captive, the four men speed off in their vehicle, leaving the hooded man stripped of his clothes, naked in the desert.

This was not the first time that Abdel Halim Qandeel, a certified medical doctor turned journalist, had been forced to undergo such maltreatment by people whom he alleges to be members of the state’s security services. Qandeel has dedicated his twenty-odd year career as a reporter to investigating corruption in Egypt. In 2004, his public battle with the regime escalated, as rumours over a plot to transfer power from Mubarak the senior to his youngest son, Gamal, became widespread and the country geared up for its first-ever multicandidate presidential election. Qandeel waged a fierce and personal war of words against the country’s highest authority, President Mohamed Hosni Mubarak.

“There is no sovereignty for Egypt and no autonomy for Egyptians as long as Mubarak’s regime is in power because the very presence of Mubarak’s rule is the utmost disgrace for Egypt and the grandest assault on its self-sufficiency,” wrote Qandeel in an edition of *Sawt al-Um’mah*, an independently-owned newspaper.⁵⁹ This edition of the paper was banned from publication because of Qandeel’s article.

The 54-year-old’s professional curriculum vita reflects an erratic pattern of jobs scattered throughout his career. In 2006, he resigned as managing editor of *Al-Araby* (The Arabian) after he realized that government interference had caused the paper’s publisher and Qandeel’s personal friend to lose during the elections his seat on the People’s Council. Qandeel was told that Dia’a al-Din Daoud’s loss was the government’s way of reprimanding the publisher for ignoring at least 10 different requests by government officials to fire Qandeel. He had worked on the paper for six years. He was later banished from serving as managing editor of *Al-Karamah* (The Dignity) and *Sawt al-Um’mah* (Voice of the Nation) in response to immense and nagging pressure from government officials to have him removed.

⁵⁸ International Freedom of Expression Exchange. 4 November 2004. “Newspaper Editor Kidnapped, Assaulted and threatened with Death.”

Available at – http://www.ifex.org/egypt/2004/11/04/newspaper_editor_kidnapped_assaulted/ / Accessed on 9 June 2009.

⁵⁹ Arab Unity Forum. 4 January 2009. “Final Edition of *Sawt al-Um’mah* Banned due to an Article by Dr. Abdel Halim Qandeel.” *Translated from Arabic*. Available at – <http://www.arab-unity.net/forums/showthread.php?t=3231> / Accessed on 10 June 2009.

In 2009, an edition of the independent newspaper, *Sawt al-Um'mah*, was banned from publication following an article in which Qandeel wrote, "Mubarak's regime is a disgrace for Egypt, and he [Mubarak] is the one who insults and humiliates its citizens and [allows] the national security services to quash the people under their heel".⁶⁰

Qandeel says that his inconsistent pattern of jobs is due to constant government involvement, whereby the authorities have taken a personal interest in ensuring that his professional career becomes paralyzed. "It appears that the attack launched against me by "The House of the Presidency" has taken the form of ferocious retaliation...I don't busy my mind too much with this," Qandeel said of the state's attempts to stifle his writing. "I am an individual who believes in fate, I don't seek anyone and the extensive attempts at horrifying and starving [me] have made me develop psychological immunity".⁶¹

Qandeel is one of a handful of journalists who have put their professional career on the line in order to push for greater freedom of speech in Egypt, where the press has traditionally been seen as a tool of nationalism and a form of expression that runs in the same direction as the government's political agenda.

"As such, freedom of opinion in the press is often considered to affect national security and the wellbeing of the state negatively. Past Egyptian administrators justify their control of the press on the grounds that the majority of the people are irresponsible," and that freedom of opinion would put the state in a position of danger.⁶²

Nevertheless, Qandeel bears the label of being the first journalist ever publicly to confront the country's highest authority proudly. "I won the ceiling on freedom [of expression] in this country," Qandeel commented. "Every single journalist who writes a single letter in connection with the President owes me because I am the first person to have written critically of the President."⁶³

Government tolerance of journalists who outwardly express their frustration with the regime has expanded visibly during the last few years. In the past, journalists would work strictly within the government's carefully marked red lines, but, in recent years, this pattern has completely changed, and now we see journalists like Qandeel outwardly expressing the deepest frustration with, and to a certain degree, deep hatred towards the country's leadership.

⁶⁰ Arab Unity Forum. 4 January 2009. "Final Edition of *Sawt al-Um'mah* Banned due to an Article by Dr. Abdel Halim Qandeel." *Translated from Arabic*. Available at – <http://www.arab-unity.net/forums/showthread.php?t=3231> / Accessed on 10 June 2009.

⁶¹ Al Jazeera Talk. 31 May 2009. Interview with Abdel Halim Qandeel. Available at - <http://www.also3ood.com/vb/showthread.php?t=1493> / Accessed on 13 June 2009.

⁶² Dabbous, Sonia. 2009. "Arab Press Penalties: Molding Laws to Manipulate Liberties." (Page 2)

⁶³ Ahl AlQuran. 18 March 2009. "Abdel Halim Qandeel: My Suspension came due to a Presidential decree." Available at – http://www.ahl-alquran.com/arabic/show_news.php?main_id=5318 / Accessed on 10 June 2009.

Humiliating the president has traditionally been at the forefront of taboos, and journalists did not dare to cross this line. It is a punishable offence under article 179 of the 14th chapter of the Egyptian Constitution and can land the writer or newspaper publisher a jail term or a hefty fine of between L.E.20,000 - 40,000 Egyptian pounds [£2,173 - £4,345].

[A] Egyptian Newspapers Past and Present

In a country that “likes to portray itself as the leader of the Arab world in all aspects of modern life, including the media”, the Egyptian government may be leading the rest of the Arab world astray when it comes to its interpretation of freedom of expression.⁶⁴

In Egypt, the first newspaper published was *Courier de l’Egypte*, published by Napoleon, with the intention of informing and instructing the French expeditionary forces. This was followed by *Jurnal al Khadyu* and *al Waqa’I’ al Masriyah*, published in 1827 and 1828, respectively. Both papers were published by the Egyptian government and contained “official government guidance and authorized editorials”, along with entertainment news.⁶⁵

Egypt’s first publication law was issued on November 21, 1881, and was later followed by another in 1936. In both cases, the laws allowed the private ownership of newspapers, but, in 1960, President Nasser nationalized all privately-owned newspapers under a new law, the *Journalism Regulation Law*, intended to prevent capital gain from controlling free expression and all previously privately-owned newspapers came under the control of the Socialist Union, the only ruling political organization in Egypt at the time. These newspapers became known as the *national newspapers*.

Following Sadat’s assumption of power in 1970, he proceeded to allow an “open door” policy, whereby the political parties were allowed to form and produce their own newspapers. In doing so, Sadat abolished the *Journalism Regulation Law*, replacing it with the *Journalism Authority Law* in 1980. In doing so, he allowed the national newspapers to continue to exist under state ownership but transferred their authority to the Consultative Council which, together with the People’s Council, forms the country’s two chambers of Parliament.⁶⁶

Today, there are at least 500 newspapers in Egypt, the vast majority of which are independently-owned, a trend that has prospered in recent years. Newspapers in Egypt can typically be divided into four categories:

⁶⁴ *BBC News*. 2 September 2005. “The Media in Egypt.”

Available at – http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/4199054.stm / Accessed on 10 June 2009.

⁶⁵ Rugh, William A. 1979. “The Arab Press.” (page 6)

⁶⁶ Nassar, Seham. 2009. “The President’s Health and the Imprisonment of Newspaper Editors in Egypt: How Information Control Fed the Rumour Mill.” (page 1-2)

- **State-Owned Newspapers:** are government loyalists, given that the state owns a “controlling stock” in the papers and the president appoints their managing editors. There are three newspapers that have traditionally been classified as state-owned: *Al-Ahram* (The Pyramids), *Al-Akhbar* (The News) and *Al-Goumhoreyah* (The Republic). The State Information Service does not censor these newspapers, since the president handpicks their editors, so they are expected to refrain from crossing the red line and remain within the government’s policies. *Al-Ahram* has been the largest of those papers and once enjoyed the largest circulation in the Arab world.⁶⁵
- **Political Party-Owned Newspapers:** used to be the primary opposition voice among Egyptian newspapers. Newspapers like *Al-Wafd*, *Al-Ahli*, *Al-Sha’ab* and, more recently, *Al-Ghad*, have established themselves as the voices of the opposition and have traditionally maintained this role. The papers also enjoy limited state censorship in return for a small government subsidy, which again hints that there is a degree of self-censorship on the part of the editors to compensate for the government’s financial support.⁶⁶
- **Domestic-Licensed Independents / Public Person Ownership:** are a small minority in the Egyptian medial landscape due to legal, financial and licensing obstacles that generally handicap private entrepreneurs from being able to launch such establishments. Publications seeking a license to operate under this category will fall to government bureaucracy in the form of licensing delays and hardships in being cleared by the security and intelligence channels in order to receive a licence to operate.⁶⁷
- **Private Person Ownership / Independent Press:** this is a new form of newspaper that emerged under the current government, whereby stock holding companies are formed. About 200 newspaper titles in this category are registered and published abroad, mostly in Cyprus. In doing so, the publishers do not have to submit to state rules and can bypass the bureaucratic hindrances in the process of obtaining a licence to publish. These papers tend to function under an anti-government slant, exploiting a margin of freedom that has been available since the time of President Sadat and, in

^{65 66 67} Press Reference. 2007. “Egypt Press, Media, TV, Radio, Newspapers.” Available at – <http://www.pressreference.com/Co-Fa/Egypt.html> / Accessed on 5 June 2009.

doing so, they have dealt with matters long considered taboo.⁶⁸ Examples of such publications include *al-Masry al-Youm*, *Al Sherouq* and *Al Dostor*.

This research will not discuss state-owned newspapers, as the focus here is on the rising number of independent and party-owned newspapers and how they have altered the practice of free speech in Egypt. This is critical because, through the power of words, these papers have been able to reveal some of the regime's dirty secrets and, in doing so, have held the government accountable, a trend that has left the state feeling sufficiently discomfited to adopt *knee jerk* policies in the hope of silencing journalists like Qandeel.

Before delving into this, it is important to try to understand why independent and party-owned newspapers have continued to flourish in Egypt despite a prevailing climate of despair in the international newspaper market, whereby pressure caused by dwindling advertising revenues and dropping circulation has forced many newspapers to fold. This is particularly baffling when one looks at the country's almost 30 percent illiteracy rate and the huge gap between rich and poor which raises the dilemma as to who can possibly be buying any of the country's almost 500 newspapers?⁷⁰ What is the general make-up of the people who typically buy newspapers from among the 100 or so on display at newsstands everyday?

Newspapers have traditionally been a key starting point for conversation in Egyptian society. Across the low, middle and upper classes, large segments of society in the major cities, such as Cairo and Alexandria, have read a newspaper on a daily basis and kept up with the daily national and international happenings. Recent years have witnessed the introduction of foreign language newspapers, such as *Al-Ahram Weekly* and *Al-Ahram Hebdo*, an English language and French newspaper, respectively. Although a state-controlled institution publishes the papers, they enjoy a certain degree of freedom of expression, since their target audience is composed of foreigners living in Egypt, Egyptians living abroad or business travelers on short trips to the country. It is also notable that not all of the 100 newspapers available on the newsstands represent content that can be classified as hard news. In some cases, the papers cover entertainment news, sport, or accidents. There are also various international newspapers on sale on the newsstands, such the *International Herald Tribune*. Those papers are strictly aimed at

⁶⁸ Nassar, Seham. 2009. "The President's Health and the Imprisonment of Newspaper Editors in Egypt: How Information Control Fed the Rumour Mill." (page 2)

⁷⁰ The total number of newspapers circulating in Egypt as of a 2005 estimate is 500. On a daily basis, there are at least 100 newspapers available on newspaper shelves for people to buy, including Arabic language, English or French papers. Most of the papers are ones published in or about Egypt while others maybe international newspapers on sale in Egyptian newsstands.

foreigners living in Egypt and short-term business travelers as well as the affluent and well-educated top bracket of society.

In February 2009, the latest independent newspaper emerged on the newsstands under the name of *Al Sherouq* (The Dawn), which continues to be published and maintains a successful on-line web site, indicating that the newspapers in Egypt are now adopting a heightened level of sophistication and concern regarding the spread of the news that they gather.

Increasing newspaper publication can also be attributed to the US involvement in promoting democracy in the Middle East, as discussed in Chapter 2. In 2004, the Egyptian government submitted to pressure from Washington and granted a group of private businessmen the license to publish *al-Masry al-Youm* (The Daily Egyptian). The following year, another group of businessmen were granted the license to publish the English-language *Daily Star Egypt*, in partnership with the *International Herald Tribune* that was circulated as an insert within the *IHT*. The publication targeted a niche market of English speakers living inside and outside Egypt, as well as business travelers.

It has also been a residue of the *Al-Jazeera Effect* and played a massive role in encouraging the traditional newspapers to reshuffle and adhere to different standards of reporting. As discussed earlier in chapter 2, *Al-Jazeera* became the voice of the voiceless and, through its interviews with experts, political analysts, academics and even government officials, the channel allowed its audience to access a different side of the news, as Arab audiences had been used to hearing about corruption stories from everywhere else in the world apart from their own country, since such topics had been tightly proscribed by the state or excluded from publication by editors through a process of self-censorship.

[B] Challenges Facing Egypt's Press

Despite this leap towards increasing the freedom of expression in Egypt, there are still major setbacks within the system that journalists identify as major problem areas hindering their capability to work without having reluctantly to employ self-editing measures in order to avoid financially costly or professionally damaging repercussions.

A survey of 1,016 journalists working in 47 Egyptian press outlets, conducted between December 15, 2003 and February 15, 2004, found that most journalists identified three major problem areas within their work environment: the overwhelming majority of respondents identified the constitutional constraints placed on their right to gather information as the biggest

problem facing reporters. The threat of imprisonment was the second biggest concern, followed by the restrictions placed on the right to publish a newspaper.⁷¹

The Egyptian constitution technically advocates the autonomy of the press, promotes the freedom of opinion and prohibits newspaper censorship or the administrative closure of newspapers, but, in practice, those laws are insubstantial. In 1995, the government introduced a number of amendments to Chapter 14 of the Egyptian Constitution, which deals with the press in Egypt. There are a number of articles within this chapter that have been used to stifle free expression.

The *Press Assassination Law*, as it became known among journalists, or, more formally, Law 93, issued in 1995, imposed long prison sentences and expensive fines on journalists or publishers who used their right to free expression beyond the capacity which the state is willing to accept. The law introduced key amendments to articles 188, 302, 306a and 308.⁷²

Prior to the amendment, Article 188 stated that any publication of information which endangers or disrupts peace and public welfare would be penalized by a prison term for the publisher, a fine of L.E.20 minimum -- L.E.500 maximum [£2 – £54], or both. Following the 1995 amendment, the prison sentence became mandatory and the fines were increased to L.E.5,000 minimum – L.E. 10,000 maximum [£547 - £1,094].

The wide scope of the interpretation of this amendment and its consequent inconsistent application would later stir one of the greatest debates on the freedom of expression in Egypt, after a journalist published an article in an independent newspaper concerning rumours that President Mubarak was ill and may have died. This will be discussed in detail later in this chapter.

Also amended was Article 302, which had stated that publishers issuing any articles, editorials or op-ed pieces that defame a public figure could be imprisoned for between 24 hours and two years, or fined between L.E.20 and L.E. 200 [£2 - £22]. Following the 1995 amendment, the wording of the article changed, now stating that publishers who willfully intend to defame a public figure by publishing false material, such as completely false information, or who lack documentation to support their claim, face imprisonment of from one to three years, or a fine of between L.E.5,000 and L.E.15,000 [£547 - £1,642]. This became known as article 303, and is problematic for journalists because, while the constitution promotes free access to information,

⁷¹ Nassar, Seham. 2009. "The President's Health and the Imprisonment of Newspaper Editors in Egypt: How Information Control Fed the Rumour Mill." (page 5)

⁷² Dabbous, Sonia. 2009. "Arab Press Penalties: Molding Laws to Manipulate Liberties." (Page 4)

the state tends to employ obtrusive mechanisms to slow down the process or make it completely impossible for journalists to access the necessary information to support their claims.

Law 1995 also included amendments to Articles 306a and 308. Previously, anyone found to be defaming a woman's reputation under Article 306a would be sentenced to a month in prison and a fine of L.E.20 minimum – L.E.1,000 maximum [£2 - £109]. Following the new law, the prison sentence was raised to a year while the fine was kept the same. Article 308 was amended to state that anyone condemned of defaming a family's reputation would be sentenced to two years in prison and a fine.

In his report on US-based *National Public Radio* (NPR), Peter Kenyon described some of the hardships encountered by newspaper reporters in Egypt, given the climate of fear within which they have to work.⁷³

Former *Think Tank* analyst, Mohamed Sayed al-Saeed established *Al-Badeel* (The Alternative) newspaper, an independent Arabic language daily created with the goal of generating a new venue for free public debate and contemporary thinking about relevant issues in society and the country's future.

"The state has been really scaring all of the major independent papers for offences against, you know, the stability of the economy...the same type of totalitarian language related to press crimes," al-Saeed said. "So, we are now actually trying to hold together very well against the storm, or the scare, you know, unleashed by the various agencies of the state."

[C] The President's Health Rumour

This "scare" can be illustrated in the case of Ibrahim Eissa, an Egyptian journalist and the managing editor of *Al Dostor* (The Constitution) newspaper who, in 2007, was at the centre of a fierce controversy between the government and the press.

On July 21, 2007, a private newspaper published a photograph accompanied by the headline, "A Picture of Mubarak's Tomb Before his Death: Here is where Mr. President will be Buried". This initiated a wave of rumours throughout the country, most of which were reflected on the pages of the newspapers, including *Al Dostor*, which stated that the President suffered from cerebral ischemia, his health might be deteriorating and that he had fallen in a coma and was being treated in Paris.

By late August, and after a month-long period of silence from the government, the newspapers in Egypt and some of the neighbouring countries had speculated that the President

⁷³ Kenyon, Peter. *NPR*. 18 September 2007. "New Papers Defy Egypt's Harsh Media Climate." Available at - <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=14509731> / Accessed on 8 June 2009.

might have already died. *Al Dostor* was the first newspaper to bring the rumour of his possible death into the limelight in a column written by Eissa himself. Careful not to present the information as fact, Eissa attempted to break the silence on the issue in a way that questions its truthfulness.

“The President’s Health is like Arabian jasmine [very well]. Why are there Rumors about his Sickness or Absence?” is the headline that Eissa chose for his column, in which he proceeded to list a number of factors that intimated that the rumour may be true, such as the unusual activity spotted at a military hospital where the President’s doctors normally work and attempts by Gamal Mubarak to take control of the NDP. Eissa asked the President to reappear, requested the President’s office, his personal doctor or the health minister to issue an official briefing on the President’s health, especially since an interview published with the president had further escalated the rumour, since it did not contain any new information and the pictures were said to be old. Moreover, an attempt by the government and the state-owned media to deny the rumour by scheduling a visit by the President to Upper Egypt and subsequently canceling it without giving a reason was seen by the press as further cause for suspicion.⁷⁴

In her analysis, “The President’s Health and the Imprisonment of Newspaper Editors in Egypt: How Information Control Fed the Rumour Mill”, Seham Nassar studies how the Egyptian government’s concealment of information stirred the “rumour mill” and, in many ways, encouraged journalists’ speculation about the President’s disappearance for more than 10 consecutive days without any explanation to the press, which subsequently caused the escalation of the rumour from mere illness to death. Some newspaper reports noted the incidents surrounding the deaths of the Soviet leaders Brezhnev, Andropov and Chernenko, which were concealed by the authorities until they had executed the necessary measures to allow for a smooth transition of power.

“I think the rumours of Mubarak’s illness and/or death demonstrate the degree to which the government isn’t quiet sure how to cope in this new media landscape,” explained Lawrence Pintak, media analyst and director of the *Kamal Adham Center at the American University in Cairo* (AUC).

“These were rumours; they were reported and the government did essentially nothing. It sat back for a couple of weeks and, in this kind of a media landscape, you can’t do that. It used

⁷⁴ Nassar, Seham. 2009. “The President’s Health and the Imprisonment of Newspaper Editors in Egypt: How Information Control Fed the Rumour Mill.” (page 8-11)

to work when you had government mouth-piece media, but it doesn't work anymore and I think that's a microcosm for the challenges the government faces," he added.⁷⁵

At the peak of the media coverage of the rumour, the state-run *Al-Ahram* newspaper featured 101 journalistic pieces related to the story, varying from news reports, columns, essays or interviews. *Al Dostor* exceeded other publications in its degree of interest in the subject, on which it published 109 journalistic pieces, of which 23 were columns and 57 essays. Other newspapers covering the story included *al-Masry al-Youm*, also an independent newspaper, which published 52 articles and *Al Wafd*, a newspaper of the opposition *Al Wafd* party, that published 56.⁷⁶

The range of coverage selected by each newspaper is reflective of their underlined mission statement. The independent and party-owned papers relied on commentary and essays because of information control, which in turn caused the reporters from these publications to exploit the "rumour mill" in order to emphasise the importance of transparency and the free flow of information. These papers also concentrated on the incident in order to draw attention to the importance of nominating a vice-president in order to avoid creating a constitutional vacuum and squashing any intended scenario in which the presidency might be passed on to Mubarak Junior.⁷⁷

Most newspaper editors seemed to agree that the government's lack of response in this instance constituted a major flaw in the system and signaled an "important crisis". Ibrahim Eissa commented that his publication depended on news from reporters after his request to have an accredited reporter cover the presidency was denied and he was unable to obtain any comments from the Ministry of Health. He said that, if the rumours were, in fact, false, then why did the government not deny them? It was left to Suzane Mubarak, the first lady, to deny them in an interview with *Al-Arabia* satellite news channel, during which she also suggested that all of the newspaper editors involved in spreading them should be reprimanded.⁷⁸

Following Mrs. Mubarak's statement, the High State Security Prosecution investigated Ibrahim Eissa, accusing him of publishing false news about the health of the president, which harmed national security. Eissa was later sentenced to 6 months in prison and a fine of 500 Egyptian Pounds [£54].

⁷⁵ Kenyon, Peter. *NPR*. 18 September 2007. "New Papers Defy Egypt's Harsh Media Climate."

Available at - <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=14509731> / Accessed on 8 June 2009.

⁷⁶ Nassar, Seham. 2009. "The President's Health and the Imprisonment of Newspaper Editors in Egypt: How Information Control Fed the Rumour Mill." (page 9)

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Nassar, Seham. 2009. "The President's Health and the Imprisonment of Newspaper Editors in Egypt: How Information Control Fed the Rumour Mill." (page 21)

This naturally angered much of the opposition press in the country, who saw a contradiction between the verdict and the President's previous promise to abolish prison sentences for journalists.

"The President never uttered a word about it and said always that we want to maintain the freedom of our press," said Hossam Zaki, a government spokesperson, who insisted that Egypt's lively print media is a sign of democratic reform,⁷⁹ but others argue that the government wishes to maintain control over the content of the media.

"There's clearly a concerted effort on the part of the government to stifle conversation, whether that's in the media or the media reporting on other people's conversations," commented Lawrence Pintak.

"I don't think it's a concern about stability; it's a concern about succession and, clearly, all of the signals that we're seeing are that they don't want this issue of succession being debated," he added.⁸⁰

A number of newspapers launched campaigns protesting against the investigation of Eissa. *Al Wafd* newspaper defended journalists' right to report on the President's health and issued a statement in which it "rejected using journalism as a scapegoat". In the state-run *Al-Ahram* newspaper, Fahmy Howaidi described the investigation of Eissa as a new form of "terrorism against all journalists", while *al-Masry al-Youm* published a story stating that the *Syndicate of Journalists* in Alexandria and the *Committee of Liberties in the Cairo Syndicate* had denounced the investigation of *Al Dostor's* managing editor and announced their support for Eissa.⁸¹ International organizations also denounced the investigation and called for Eissa's immediate release.

"As an opposition writer, you are always under the threat of jail," said Eissa. "We are in a mute society. This is due to many reasons, so when you talk, you appear to some as courageous, others see you as foolish, while to others you seem a bogus hero – many others see you as a martyr," he added.⁸²

On September 28, 2008, the court of appeal supported the prison sentence against Eissa, but reduced the term from six months to two. The *Syndicate of Journalists* appealed to the Secretary General to quash the verdict, but it was not until October 6 of the same year, days

⁷⁹ Amos, Deborah. *NPR*. 3 June 2009. "Is There Freedom of Expression in Egypt?" Available at - <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=104859731> / Accessed on 8 June 2009.

⁸⁰ Kenyon, Peter. *NPR*. 18 September 2007. "New Papers Defy Egypt's Harsh Media Climate." Available at - <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=14509731> / Accessed on 8 June 2009.

⁸¹ Nassar, Seham. 2009. "The President's Health and the Imprisonment of Newspaper Editors in Egypt: How Information Control Fed the Rumour Mill." (page 26-27)

⁸² Eissa, Ibrahim. Profile Video of Ibrahim Eissa (English translation from Arabic) Available at - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jc3iLLwL0nk> / Accessed on 8 June 2009.

before the end of the Muslim celebrations of the feast, or *Eid al-Fitr*, that President Mubarak issued a republican decree pardoning Ibrahim Eissa.

Journalists welcomed the presidential pardon and thanked the president, including Eissa, who promised to continue working as an opposition journalist. The release of Eissa and the subsequent reduction of other journalists' sentences from being jailed to paying a hefty fine only, has been seen by members of the press syndicate as a hopeful sign that the regime intends to handle journalists in a more diplomatic way.

Meanwhile, Eissa's pen has not been stilled and he continues to work as an active member of the country's thriving opposition press.

"When we are told the Egyptian people are not mature enough to practise democracy or when the President says he will not follow public opinion or when the President's son says, 'Are we supposed to do everything the people demand?', who is insulting the other? So, if the people are asleep or oppressed, let me wake them up. I will wake them up for you. I will wake up the Egyptian people," Eissa commented.⁸³

Ayman Nour is another of the regime's casualties. An attorney turned journalist, his name was recognizable as a vehement opposition voice on the pages of *Al Wafd* newspaper. In 2005, given his apparent popularity and as leader of *Al Ghad* (Tomorrow) opposition party, he nominated himself as a candidate in the country's first-ever contested presidential elections. He one of about 25 standing against the country's ruling President, Mubarak.

But, soon, Nour's reputation was tarnished and he was jailed for four years due to allegations of committing forgery, a charge he continues to deny.

In 2009, soon after he was released from prison and while attempting to restart his political career, two assailants on a motorcycle sprayed his face with a liquid, presumed to be a chemical. This caused great injury to his face, although luckily his eyes were protected by his glasses. Nour commented that he was better off behind bars.

"I'm not allowed to work, I'm not allowed to touch my own money, I'm not allowed to travel unless I have a permit beforehand – I'm not allowed to talk to the Egyptian media."⁸⁴

⁸³ Eissa, Ibrahim. Profile Video of Ibrahim Eissa (English translation from Arabic)
Available at - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jc3ILLwL0nk> / Accessed on 8 June 2009.

⁸⁴ Amos, Deborah. *NPR*. 3 June 2009. "Is There Freedom of Expression in Egypt?"
Available at - <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=104859731> / Accessed on 8 June 2009.

Conclusion

When I first started this research, I was thoroughly convinced of the absolute lack of free speech throughout Egypt's media landscape. I had no concrete evidence for or against this view, but was certain that, given the country's record on torture and the maltreatment of journalists and bloggers, the mere consideration of the application of free expression seemed improbable.

As I delved into my study, my conviction became clouded with confusion – while, in some cases, the state seemed to rule with an iron fist, in others it appeared to give journalists the greatest degree of free speech that the country has ever experienced: a truly “schizophrenic approach”, as noted by the media analyst, Lawrence Pintak. It was then that I started to ask: is freedom of expression in Egypt valued and defended as a universal right or is it merely cited selectively and molded according to the political circumstances?

The evidence that I found during this study suggests that, under President Mubarak's rule, Egypt's media took a huge leap in the areas of technology and free expression. Much of the controversial subjects discussed in the country's newspapers today, such as the corruption of government officials, torture in police stations and the succession of the leadership, would not have been possible under past administrations. This would normally be seen as a definite sign of progress; however, this research is about the absolute freedom of speech and this can only be achieved when the agencies reporting the news do not suffer repercussions for simply executing their right to report freely – an entitlement that is extended to them by the Egyptian Constitution and under United Nations Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Egypt has added its signature. In that sense, it is fair to say that real freedom of speech “is still largely outlawed” in Egypt.⁸⁵

“As a free writer in Egypt,” says Ibrahim Eissa, Managing Editor of the independent *Al-Dostor* newspaper, “one must know that one will pay the price.” Eissa is one of the fatalities of the government's ambiguous interpretation of the concept of free speech and disproportionate application of the law in its treatment of journalists.⁸⁶ Like Eissa, there are many Internet bloggers who have suffered from the government's unpredictable application of the law, a trend attributed to the authority's failure to adapt the legislation to the new technology of the Internet as fast as it is spreading. This has been reflected in the government's adoption of imprudent

⁸⁵ Amos, Deborah. *NPR*. 3 June 2009. “Is There Freedom of Expression in Egypt?”

Available at - <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=104859731> / Accessed on 8 June 2009.

⁸⁶ Eissa, Ibrahim. Profile Video of Ibrahim Eissa (English translation from Arabic).

Available at - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jc3lLwL0nk> / Accessed on 8 June 2009.

policies and, in many cases, extreme measures for dealing with bloggers who are exercising their right to free speech beyond the government's toleration limit.

In many ways, the regime is functioning under an umbrella of paranoia. Mubarak's failure to assign a vice-president is said to be because he is afraid that he may be assassinated like President Sadat, when Mubarak was his vice-president, the second in command and the man to succeed him in ruling the country. The regime's paranoia is also noticeable in the application of the *Emergency Law*, which has been in effect since Mubarak took control of the country 28 years ago. Given Egypt's status as a fairly stable country in a characteristically unstable region, the *Emergency Law* is seen by some as an unnecessary measure and its application merely a tool for the state to silence the population and retain its control over the country. Another indication is the regime's intolerance of the opposition parties, its stifling of the country's only visible opposition group, the *Muslim Brotherhood*, and its tactic of tarnishing the reputation of any individuals or parties showing a flicker of popularity among the majority of people.

Therefore, as long as the government maintains its current philosophy towards the press, whereby it refused to apply a steady approach to free speech or establish a level of transparency with members of the press, free speech will remain unattainable in Egypt. As long as journalists' calls for an information law allowing the free and transparent flow of information remain unanswered, free speech will be unachievable, and, if the government succeeds in its attempts to adopt the *Arab Satellite Charter*⁸⁷ and a law to regulate the Internet, as is now being discussed, then free speech will remain thwarted.⁸⁸ As long as the state, through its security services and the Ministry of the Interior maintain a policy of heavy handling and intimidation towards journalists and Internet bloggers, free speech will remain impossible.

The outlook among journalists and bloggers in the field is as hazy as the environment within which they work. Some see the government's tolerance of certain boisterous journalists as a sign of a new dawn, but others see that a regime which has practiced the *Emergency Law* for nearly three decades and has continued to terrorize journalists and bloggers is one that will never change and one whose baby steps towards embracing democracy and freedom are a mere act to please its pocket money suppliers in the west.

In the end, it cannot be denied that the curtain against free speech in Egypt has noticeably been opened during President Mubarak's era. Journalists today are extended a degree

⁸⁷ Members of the *Arab League* adopted the *Arab Satellite Charter* in February 2008. Its actual application is pending but its vague language and adoption of some aspects of the Council of Europe's Convention on Transfrontier Television have attracted some criticism, and many fear that its implementation will stifle free expression instead of expanding it. Qatar and Lebanon abstained from voting on the charter.

⁸⁸ Price. Monroe E. March 2008. *Arab Media & Society*. "A Charter of Contradictions." Available at - <http://www.arabmediasociety.com/?article=650> / Accessed on 16 June 2009.

of liberty that their predecessors could have never imagined, and that is an achievement worth noting. If this is, in fact, a sign of the sincere resolve of the government, then they have only made the first step along the long road towards true freedom. If, however, this is merely an act of showmanship, as signaled by many indicators in this study, then the country is in a state of crisis. In 2009, as some nations are contemplating their next mission to the moon, doctors are creating artificial hearts and livers to save lives, inventors are devising self cleaning windows and ingenious minds are collaborating to manufacture virtual keyboards, it is hard to comprehend that a country with as critical a historical record as Egypt can still be struggling to institute a genuinely free press.

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