The article by prominent blogger Hussein Ghrer is a sober examination of the role of social media during the uprising in Syria. It highlights the importance of cultural, social and political factors that affect how and why people use internet tools. It contrasts the use of social media in Syria with social media use in Tunisia and Egypt, reminding us again of the importance of context. Unfortunately Ghrer was arrested on 16 February 2012, two days after submitting his first draft to WPCC. Online journalist, and friend of Ghrer, Maurice Aaek, comments on the article a year later, in February 2013.

INTERNET ACTIVISM AND THE EGYPTIAN UPRISINGS: TRANSFORMING ONLINE DISSENT INTO THE OFFLINE WORLD

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This article aims to investigate the role of internet activism in the 2011 Egyptian uprisings. It suggests that the significance of internet activism in Egypt in this period was twofold: first, in its utility as a tool for activists to mobilize, organize and inspire Egyptians to take to the streets on 25 January 2011; and, second, in its use as a medium to document events in Egypt beyond the reach of the authorities. Particular attention is paid to the growth of the 'We Are All Khaled Said' (WAAKS) campaign on Facebook and its capacity to translate online dissent into the offline world. The transformation of protesters into citizen journalists through information and communication technologies, and Twitter in particular, is examined for its success in challenging the narrative set by Egyptian state media and in providing a window into events for the outside world.

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On 11 February 2011, Vice-President Omar Suleiman took to the stage to announce that Hosni Mubarak, Egypt's ageing autocrat, had resigned his post as president. Only three months earlier, such an outcome had seemed unthinkable, as Mubarak's National Democratic Party (NDP) celebrated an overwhelming victory in elections marred by widespread vote-rigging and repression. The intervening period bore witness to a remarkable mobilization, as first tens of thousands, then hundreds of thousands, and eventually over a million Egyptians took to the streets to demand his removal. Through the use of technology, and social media in particular, these events were brought into the living rooms of people across the world, enabling them to witness events in unprecedented detail and with unprecedented speed.

The growth of online political activism, referred to in the article as internet activism, has sparked a major debate between those who see it as a powerful new weapon in the arsenal of opposition activists in the Middle East and those who believe it overblown.[1] The resulting discourse has, however, led to a conflation of the motivations for political actions, and the tools activists use to carry them out, in a battle over causality. Yet this is a largely artificial debate, as the motivation behind the actions of activists was opposing the repressive system of government that Egyptians rose up to protest: internet activism was no more than a tool which activists used to get their messages across and coordinate their actions.

It is suggested here that the significance of internet-based information and communication technologies (ICT) in this period is twofold: first, in their utility as a tool for activists to mobilize, organize and inspire Egyptians to take to the streets on 25 January 2011; and, second, in their use as a medium to document events in Egypt beyond the reach of the authorities. Indeed, this ability to get people to the streets – rather than its ability to keep them there – was the primary success of internet activism in this period, and its significance was reduced once the momentum of events had reached the mainstream. However, without the initial call to arms online and Facebook's ability to get thousands – though not millions – into the streets, then the demonstrations might never have reached the mainstream majority of Egyptians, and Mubarak might have survived. At the very least, it is difficult to disagree with Ahdaf Soueif in positing that without internet activism the fledgling Egyptian revolution could not have happened in the way that it did, nor for that matter at such speed (Idle and Nunns, 2011).

Internet Activism and its Political Uses

Before embarking on a study of internet activism it is of course first necessary to define what is meant by the term. The one to be used here is the broad definition provided by Vegh (2003), who writes that internet activism is 'a politically motivated movement relying on the internet' using strategies that are either internet-enhanced or internet-based. Beyond this, we can divide internet activism into three categories.

The first is awareness and advocacy – also known as participatory journalism – which refers to the use of the internet as an alternative news source to counter the control of information channels opposed to the interests of the activists. The second category, organization and mobilization – also known as 'mediated mobilization' – is also pivotal to understanding the significance of internet activism in the Egyptian 25 January movement. This form of internet activism is used in a number of ways, but of most interest here are calls for 'offline' action, such as demonstrations, as was witnessed in Egypt. Finally, action/reaction activism – often dubbed 'Hacktivism' – is used to describe malicious attacks by activists to bring down or paralyse websites (Lievrouw, 2011). Hacktivism played a minimal role in the 25 January movement so little attention will be paid to it here.

Analysis of internet activism is a relatively new and fast-moving field due to the rapid development of the technologies in use on the ground by activists. Large gaps in our understanding inevitably remain. Thus far, academic literature in the field of communications has predominantly focused on the media landscapes of western societies and activists seeking the downfall of capitalism or mass media. On the other hand, many political scientists have heralded the importance of freedom of expression through the internet in the Middle East, though few tackle the specifics of how this may actually effect political change. This study aims to navigate between these two approaches to posit that the internet is indeed an effective tool for such a goal. While the current literature has its limitations, many of the applications of internet activism identified by communications theorists have proved to be perceptible in the Egyptian uprisings. For while the costs of opposition and problems of accessibility may be greater in an authoritarian context, the capabilities of new ICTs and processes of informational distribution are transferrable.

In his 2000 work, *The Virtual Community*, Rheingold observed that through the use of technology, people are able to create networks of communication instantly as a result of their 'perpetual connectivity'.[2] Using the example of SMS distribution through mobile phones, Castells notes that, in a world of networked mass communication, 'one message from one messenger can reach out to thousands, and potentially hundreds of thousands' as it proliferates through the network society (Castells, 2009: 348). Buchanan has dubbed this the 'small world effect,' as access to each network offers the potential to reach a potentially infinite number of further networks should the receiver of information choose to further disseminate it to his/her personal network (quoted in Castells, 2009: 348).

For Castells, this form of networked distribution is key, because it means that, at every stage, the receiver identifies the information as coming from a known – and, crucially – trusted, source. This transforms the wireless communication network into a network of trust, in which the receiver is likely to show greater faith in the information.

According to his 'communication power' theory, these wireless communication networks and networks of trust evolve into networks of resistance, 'which prompts mobilization against an identified target' (Castells, 2009: 302).

It is suggested here that Castells' model of communication power through wireless communication is clearly apparent in the context of the conduct of internet activism in the Egyptian uprisings. Just as a mobile phone user would disseminate information to people in his/her phone book, a Facebook or a Twitter user's created content is disseminated to his/her 'friends' or 'followers'[3] who can then choose to comment on it or forward it, at which point the information is then transmitted to their networks. This permits the creation of networks of trust and, in the Egyptian case, the fostering a network of resistance against the Mubarak regime. This study therefore seeks to illustrate how the impact of online insurgent politics of the internet activists – in the form of mediated mobilization and participatory journalism – was multiplied through communication power to create the popular base for protest in the offline world.

Internet Activism and Political Opposition in Egypt

Before tackling the events of Tahrir, it is first necessary to briefly discuss the status of internet activism and internet use in Egypt prior to the demonstrations. Although the international newspaper headlines may suggest differently, the mass expression of dissent in Egypt's streets in January and February 2011 did not come from nowhere and the use of internet activism to express that dissent was also not something that was new. There had in fact been a steady flow of political dissent aimed at dislodging Mubarak, with internet activism at the forefront. By 2005, Egypt was home to a thriving and diverse blogosphere of committed and insightful political commentators who began to challenge the narrative of the state-run media, uncovering major stories that the state-controlled sector either couldn't or wouldn't run (Eaton, 2011a). This first generation of internet activists was also integral to the ground-breaking *Kefaya* movement ahead of the 2005 presidential elections in Egypt, where they would blood many of the strategies used in the build-up to the 25 January 2011 protests. Yet, as may be expected with any technology-enabled phenomenon, the patterns of activists' online behaviours shifted with developments in technology. The entrance on the scene of social media from 2007 onwards brought a new generation of internet activists to the fore (interview with Gamal Eid, 2011). These activists were less interested in the long treatises on political developments that the blogger community had tirelessly created and were instead quick to act, exploiting the capability of social media for mediated mobilization. The staging of protests in 2008, in part coordinated through Facebook, was a sign of things to come. By the lead-up to the 2011 demonstrations, internet activism had come a long way in Egypt, and it was expressed in many forms. Although it had not succeeded in reaching the mainstream of Egyptian society, it had laid the

groundwork for the future by establishing some isolated networks of resistance within Egyptian political society and developing tactics to maximize their impact through the diffusion of communication power.

The size and representativeness of such networks should not be overstated, however. Despite breakneck growth in internet penetration in Egypt, its use remained far from universal at the time of the demonstrations. In May 2011, official Egyptian government statistics concluded that there were over 25 million internet users in Egypt, inclusive of those who use the internet through their mobile – nearly a 60-fold increase since 2000 (MCIT, 2011). Nevertheless, the penetration of the internet remained, and remains, uneven and subject to socio-economic barriers. Research by BBC Media Action carried out in March and April 2010 found that 55 per cent of Egyptian non-internet users did not know how to use a computer and that 43 per cent could not afford a computer of their own (BBC Media Action, 2010). Such numbers support the views of many scholars who have advocated caution regarding whether internet activism could be the primary driver of revolution in the Middle East.[4] Nevertheless, internet activism formed a fundamental cog in the machine of the opposition, as the following case study seeks to illustrate.

The Prelude: 'We Are All Khaled Said' and Mediated Mobilization of the Protests

The brutal murder of 28-year-old Khaled Said at the hands of Egyptian police in Alexandria in June 2010 caused outrage. His death became a *cause célèbre* for internet activists. The official line that he had died while choking on a bag of drugs convinced no-one. Pictures of Said's severely beaten corpse published by the blogger Zeinobia showed his skull and jaw with clear fractures that left the police claim that he had died of asphyxiation untenable (Zeinobia, 2010). One thousand people attended Said's funeral in Alexandria, while activists protested outside of the Interior Ministry's offices in Cairo (Al Amrani, 2010).

Following Said's death, Wael Ghonim, an Egyptian Google executive who was working on the Mohamed El Baradei campaign, established a Facebook 'group'[5] open for all Facebook members to join and campaign against police brutality. In doing so Ghonim sparked an online mobilization that ultimately led to the demonstrations in Cairo on 25 January 2011 and, eventually, Mubarak's ouster. The group's name in Arabic, *Kulina Khalid Said* ('We Are All Khaled Said' – WAAKS) expressed the sentiment perfectly, and soon caught on online. There were, and are at the time of writing, in fact two WAAKS pages: one in English and one in Arabic. The administrator for the English page was Mohamed Ibrahim, an Egyptian IT consultant, and Ghonim occupied the same position for the Arabic page, with assistance from Abdel Rahman Mansour, another activist who had contacted him through Facebook (interview with Wael Ghonim, 2012).

Both groups were open to all, but only Ghonim, Mansour and Ibrahim were able to clear postings to appear on the groups' 'wall'.[6] Although the independent website for the Khaled Said cause states that the administrators had never met before embarking on the campaign (WAAKS, 2010), the symmetry of the English and Arabic versions is remarkable. From the outset, the groups' founding in July, the WAAKS webpages remained consistent and focused upon building solidarity for the cause. On 2 August, Ibrahim wrote:

> Our cause is not just Khaled Said's brutal torture to death… We are standing up for the many 'Khaled Said"s [sic] who were and are still being tortured in Egypt… We will not rest until we succeed. Are you with us to the end? (WAAKS English, 2010)

From the beginning, WAAKS attempted to move its internet activism from the online to the offline world through mediated mobilization. In his recently released memoir, Ghonim noted that this was WAAKS' 'ultimate aspiration' (Ghonim, 2012a). It did so initially with some success, albeit not on a nationally significant scale: four silent protests were staged across Egypt, beginning late in July, decrying the actions of the police and security forces. Ghonim estimated that approximately 300 people participated in Alexandria although a much smaller number – around 20 – in Cairo (interview with Wael Ghonim, 2012). However, the cause rapidly proliferated throughout Egyptian Facebook networks. Only a month after the death of Said, the *New York Times* carried a story on the fledgling movement, reporting that the Arabic WAAKS had over 190,000 members (Fahim, 2010). By 3 August, Ghonim reported that the Arabic page had 250,000 members (WAAKS Arabic, 2010). In contrast, the English page reported that it had reached only 10,000 members in November (WAAKS English, 2010). The posts of the Arabic page therefore receive greater attention here.

Following the relative success of the silent protests in July, the groups retained their focus on the pursuit of the Khaled Said case through the Egyptian courts. Yet, as elections approached, the groups called for a 'Day of Anger' ahead of the presidential election. The campaign was, however, derailed as the WAAKS Arabic group was mysteriously deleted, presumably by the Egyptian security forces. The next day, 26 November, the group was resuscitated, albeit with the loss of all previous content (WAAKS Arabic, 2010). The protests went ahead, with hundreds – not thousands – taking to Cairo's streets (Associated Press, 2010). Afterwards, and throughout the elections, many pictures, video clips and news items were listed on the walls of the Arabic and English groups.

The campaign built steadily over the next two months, although it is unclear exactly

how and when the administrators chose 25 January as the date for protest. In his memoirs, Ghonim claims that Mansour mentioned 25 January as the potential date in late December. It was at this point that Ghonim decided to discuss the idea – still under the cloud of anonymity – on an online chat forum with one of the leaders of the 6 April movement, Ahmed Maher (Ghonim, 2012a). However, it took a further two weeks for 25 January – which is National Police Day in Egypt – to be set as the date for demonstrations on WAAKS. And when it was, it was not Ghonim, Ibrahim or Mansour that first called for them. Instead, on 14 January, a YouTube interview of a former Egyptian police officer living in exile in the United States, Omar Afifi, was posted on the WAAKS Arabic site in which he called for a demonstration to show solidarity with Tunisians; the resignation of Egyptian Interior Minister Habib Al Adly; and the repeal of Emergency Law in Egypt (YouTube, 2011b). In posting the video on the WAAKS Arabic wall, Ghonim did not seek ownership, writing clearly, 'Omar Afifi: calls on Egyptians to demonstrate on 25 January' (WAAKS Arabic, 2011). Even when Afifi's call was repeated on 18 January, Ghonim still made clear that this was Afifi's call and not WAAKS'. In the one major divergence between the English and Arabic sites, Ibrahim was already calling for demonstrations – without affiliation to Afifi – on 15 January.

Regardless, it was a recording by a young Egyptian woman, Asma'a Mahfouz, posted on WAAKS Arabic on 18 January appears to have tipped the balance. 'I am talking to you to deliver a simple message,' said Mahfouz. 'We want to go down to Tahrir Square, if we still want honour and to live with dignity, then we have to go down to claim our rights on January 25' (YouTube, 2011a). Later that day, a link to register for the protests was introduced on the WAAKS Arabic site. Facebook users needed only to list a contact email address to be provided with the information and instructions from the WAAKS administrators on the plans for the protests. If anyone wanted to express his or her own views, an online form could be found to do so (WAAKS Arabic, 2011). Incredibly, it was only 11 days before Egyptians took to the streets that the protests were first advocated by Afifi, and WAAKS started to register participants only a week before that. The mobilization in the coming period was unprecedented. Within two days of the announcement, Ghonim claimed that the news had reached 500,000 Egyptians online through the reposting of information on other Facebook pages, including the 6 April movement (80,000 members), Nizar Qabany (157,000 members) and the Egyptian Sugar Cane Juice group (250,000 members). By that time, 27,000 had already signed up to physically take part in the protest (Ghonim, 2012a). By 17 January the WAAKS English page was calling for worldwide demonstrations in front of Egyptian embassies. These started with New York, London, Madrid and Bologna, where protests took place on 23 January, a Sunday (Frenchman, 2011). Nevertheless, it would be misleading to suggest that there was any sense of what was to come following the initial hours of the protest on 25 January. Ghonim's post on WAAKS in the early hours of the day sounded hopeful: 'If 100,000 take to the streets, no one can stop us... I wonder if we can??'

(WAAKS Arabic, 2011). For the next two and a half weeks the world was transfixed by the demonstrations that eventually forced Mubarak out on 11 February.

Internet Activism During the Protests

The success of the internet in getting Egyptians into the streets in January 2011 is remarkable considering the known costs of opposition in Egypt. While WAAKS had hundreds of thousands of members – no agreed figure exists although Ghonim claims that 100,000 registered to participate (interview with Wael Ghonim, 2012) – it is unknown how many of them were in the streets on 25 January. Nevertheless, the tens of thousands that were in the square were a major increase over previous demonstrations. In fact, the determining factor of the demonstrations' success was the ability of the activists to attract people onto the streets – something that David Faris (2010) had identified as the fundamental failure the previous protests advocated online in Egypt. This was different on 25 January, as the demonstrations that started in different areas of Cairo picked up people as they went through the streets.[7] And the people that they picked up were from all walks of life: middle class and working class, educated and uneducated. This success highlights the pitfalls of much of the criticism surrounding the impact of internet activism in effecting political change; for once internet activism managed to begin to mobilize society on the streets in combination with more established political opposition movements, it achieved the popular base necessary for the conduct of communication power. The fact that organization may have been started by a somewhat elitist set of activists with access to computer-mediated communication (CMC) through the internet does not mean that the impact of internet activism was restricted to the online world.

The Egyptian government's unprecedented decision to cut off the internet on 28 January (see Figure 1) was a testament to the gravity with which it treated the threat of internet activism. But it also meant that the vast majority were unable to get online. It is important to note that WAAKS Arabic was no exception, going offline between 28 January and 2 February. While the government presumably hoped that activists would flounder once deprived of their means of communication, the opposite proved true. When the government blocked cell-phones people seemingly switched to a more traditional form of communication – word of mouth. In many ways the move appears to have enticed people from their homes down to the streets to see for themselves (interview with Sherif Mansour, 2011). Despite the blackout, many activists soon managed to find proxies to get back online, or simply sent their updates to friends and relatives outside of the country to post their updates online. Yet, the critical mass had already been reached. The argument put forward by some, that internet activism played little part in effecting Mubarak's ouster due to the fact the protests continued throughout the blackout, misses the point: the damage had already been done.

Figure 1: The internet blackout in Egypt on 28 January
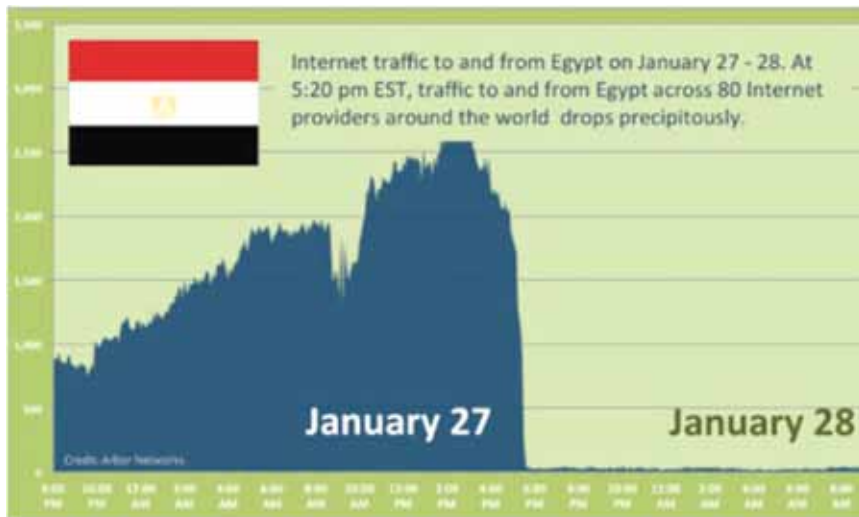
Source: Labovitz (2011).

Figure 2: Main usage of Facebook throughout demonstrations
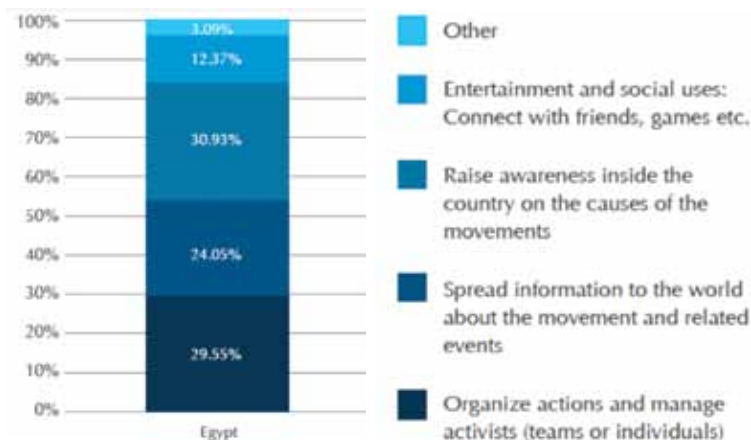
Source: Dubai School of Government (2011).

Nevertheless, the internet was not blocked for the entirety of the demonstrations: internet activism remained an important tool for the protesters. A survey by the Dubai School of Government (Figure 2) carried out in March 2011 found that Egyptian Facebook users believed that nearly 85 per cent of Facebook usage throughout the demonstrations was to promote and organize activism, raise awareness and spread information about events as they happened – the fundamentals of mediated mobilization and participatory journalism. Only 15 per cent of respondents believed that Facebook had any social or entertainment role throughout the protests (Dubai School of Government, 2011).

Twitter cannot be said to have had the same mass impact as Facebook. It had only around 130,000 members in Egypt, against Facebook's 7 million users in Egypt in May 2011 (Dubai School of Government, 2011). Yet, while it was not able to effect mass mobilization on its own, it was able to play a significant role in enabling mediated mobilization and participatory journalism through the facilitation of perpetual connectivity. Certain platforms lend themselves to specific tasks. As a tool for advocacy of a cause, Facebook was clearly most suited to a campaign against police brutality. Yet, while Facebook was most important in the build-up to the protests, Twitter was a far more effective tool for activists once on the ground, as they were often able to use the Twitter interface through their mobile phones . The following tweet from the well-known blogger Mahmoud Salem, sent on 11 February, offers a good example: 'Need more protesters on the salah salem side. There are only 1000 there with thousands on the roxy side. Pl retweet #jan25' (Idle and Nunns, 2011: 212). This short message is a perfect snapshot of the utility of Twitter. The update was sent to those protesting and following #jan25 on Twitter to communicate a weakness in the protest, circumnavigating the need for a chain of command and allowing the protesters to respond quickly to emergent threats. Moreover, the request to 'retweet' was heeded by 235 people, allowing the information access to 235 further networks of people. In this manner, just as through Facebook, information cascades through networks at high speed to provide activists information in almost real time.[8]

The 140 character limit micro-blogs on Twitter were far quicker than through the WAAKS Facebook interface, which required administrator approval of postings. Furthermore, while SMS messages of similar length could be sent, the time that it takes the phone to send will increase as the number of recipients multiplies. This does not affect Twitter: contact with the entire community is nearly instantaneous. As Figure 3 illustrates, the number of Twitter posts in Egypt under the hashtag[9] #jan25 – which became the WAAKS of the Twitter world – exploded either side of the internet blackout, and closely mirrors patterns of Twitter use in the whole of Egypt.

Figure 3: Daily Tweet volume and mentions of #jan25 in Egypt

Source: Dubai School of Government (2011).

Such practical information did not only come from protesters in Tahrir. Just as Egyptian internet activists had been vocal supporters of the Tunisian opposition's quest to oust President Ben Ali, their Tunisian counterparts returned the favour. Twitter acted as a base for knowledge sharing regarding a number of things, from advice on how to protect one's face from tear gas to messages of support from the outside world (interview with Gamal Eid, 2011). As a result, the impact of Twitter can be seen to be greater than its number of users, or even the number of tweets, as many users utilized the platform solely as a newsfeed (Dubai School of Government, 2011). This is not to say that Twitter did not become home to an outpouring of calls to arms: 'You want Mobarak out?' wrote Monasosh, '[then] stop whining, get off ur [sic] assess [sic] and join us in the streets #Jan25' (Idle and Nunns, 2011: 90). Indeed, many activists, taking advantage of their proficiency in English, used the platform to call for support worldwide. The well-known blogger Hossam el Hamalawy wrote: 'People around the world, plz [sic] picket #Egypt embassies tomorrow Friday in solidarity. #Jan 25' (Idle and Nunns, 2011: 55).

Despite the emphasis on Facebook and Twitter, new technologies and web-based applications very rarely operate in isolation: their compatibility and ability to interact with one another is demanded by their users and is a key catalyst in the proliferation of communication power. Many elements of such crossover have already been mentioned,

from the embedding of Omar Afifi's YouTube video on WAAKS, to the uploading of pictures and posting of links to news stories and the use of mobile phones to access web-based platforms. This is a crucial element of the success of mediated mobilization in Egypt, and not one that appeared suddenly in January 2011. Facebook and Twitter had been used simultaneously by the administrators of WAAKS, with the first call for a Twitter protest going out only a day after WAAKS Arabic was set up. Indeed, the organizing sessions for the WAAKS Facebook group ahead of the January protests took place on Twitter under the hashtag #jan25. Activists were able to communicate directly with the organizers and each other using the '@' reply function (Idle and Nunns, 2011: 20).

Evaluating Mediated Mobilization on WAAKS
The importance of online petitions like WAAKS has been derided by many commentators. Slavoj Žižek has described them as a form of 'interpassivity' that actually reduces the likelihood of people taking 'real' action – that is, in the offline world – by allowing someone to create the illusion of doing something, when in fact nothing is being done (Hands, 2010a). In a similar vein Malcolm Gladwell (2010) declared that such petitions are mere 'clicktivism' and a distraction from the real drivers of protest on the ground. Yet, as Joss Hands illustrates, the 'clicktivism' thesis appears only to take into account immediately obvious forms of online practices, while CMC 'interlaces the online and offline worlds to the point at which it makes little sense to try and think of them as separate entities' (Hands, 2010b). In a liberalized autocracy such as Egypt, where political opposition often came at great personal cost, the act of supporting any cause that was critical of the regime – in any forum – should also not be underestimated. Of course, the cost was a great deal less in joining a group such as WAAKS, which required simply the click of a button. But the crucial element was that it provided access to Facebook members and their near-infinite personal networks of friends and contacts, an element which cannot be dismissed as inconsequential. Previous political campaigns using internet activism, such as *Kefaya* and the 6 April movement, may have succeeded in mobilizing a few thousand people, but Facebook's network society offered access to millions more. There was no physical opposition movement in Egyptian civil society to rival such access.

By engaging Egyptians on an issue, which they all understood – police brutality – WAAKS inspired solidarity in numbers, which enabled it to nurture an insurgent community. Journalist Jack Shenker believes this solidarity helped to cause the 'islands of resistance that were evident in Egyptian society to coalesce and explode into the mainstream' (interview with Jack Shenker, 2011). Indeed, since the major strike action in Al Mahalla in 2008, there had been a number of workers strikes in Egypt and growing discontent with the country's economic plight, but these islands of resistance had remained isolated. This was something in which the network society of social

media played a significant role. The call to arms unleashed an outpouring of emotion and solidarity with the community: responding to Ghonim's post on 18 January, Mohamed Issa wrote 'January 25th is the beginning, the days that follow will force the tyrant [Mubarak] to leave' (WAAKS Arabic, 2011). There are thousands of examples of similar sentiments; one such is shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Snapshot of WAAKS English, 20 January 2011

Source: WAAKS English (2011).

The flat leadership model also differentiated WAAKS from the attempts of other opposition movements to demonstrate. Such a model was made possible by the advancement of CMC, although it should be emphasized that this was also something that the organizers sought, not least for their own safety (Ghonim, 2012). In the past, many demonstrations were easily broken up due to the fact that they had easily identifiable leaders,[10] but this was not the case on 25 January. Ghonim was himself

apprehended on 27 January, and only came to the attention of most Egyptians when he gave his heralded interview on Dream TV on 7 February – he had remained anonymous while operating WAAKS for fear of arrest (Ghonim, 2012). His arrest did not cause the movement to flounder, as it was not reliant on one or indeed a few individuals to retain its momentum.

Thus, despite the emphasis of this article on the organizational qualities of social media, the flat leadership model of WAAKS determined that the demonstrations on 25 January were, at best, only loosely organized. Beyond instructing members to attend at specific locations at a specific time, no further strategic guidance was offered. This was a crucial departure from previous efforts, and a major strength in the authoritarian context. The threat was also one that the regime failed to comprehend, consequently rendering their traditional tactics of imprisoning leaders useless. Through the use of social media, WAAKS had created a movement that allowed all of its members to participate, comment and *act* within the realms of a loosely defined concept of freedom from state oppression. Rather than diktats filtering through a hierarchical organizational structure – previously the norm for both the government and the so-called 'liberal' opposition in Egypt – in-depth analysis of the posts on WAAKS illustrates that it sought to offer little more than general guidance to its members, who were largely granted autonomy to act as they saw fit.

Ghonim would later reflect that: 'This was a leaderless movement, there was no organization and no strategy' (2011). But in his memoirs, he does claim that he consulted with various other opposition personalities, including Mostafa al-Nagar, campaign manager for Mohamed El Baradei, as well as Ahmed Maher, a leader in the 6 April movement, and another activist, Mahmoud Samy, over the coordination of strategy (Ghonim, 2012). In fact, Ghonim claims that the other activists met several times to formalize their tactics, agreeing to start out in satellite locations where they would pick up Egyptians on the street *en route* to converging on Tahrir (Ghonim, 2012). No such strategy was apparent through the WAAKS page, and this perhaps illustrates that some of the more established opposition groups did follow a more organized path on 25 January.

When considering this question, it is worth pointing out that another key element of communication power was at play here, as Ghonim's network of resistance on WAAKS combined with the networks of resistance of the other more seasoned activists, boosting WAAKS' strength considerably. Such links had worked in an ad hoc fashion up to that point – with the duplication of information from WAAKS on other platforms in solidarity – but this appears to have formalized the alliances.[11] This is also further illustrative of the futility of trying to forge a distinction between the online and offline worlds. Maher, Samy and Nagar were communicating anonymously with Ghonim through CMC, but they were making decisions about activities on the ground. The activities of

WAAKS were never limited to networks of resistance on Facebook, but in fact offered a non-aligned hub for protest against the state. Hitherto unconnected networks were connected through WAAKS.

Nevertheless, few on 25 January appeared to have knowledge of any planning. None of the activists who took to the streets to protest on 25 January interviewed by the author knew anything of a plan to take over Tahrir Square. Mohamed Abdel Aziz, the Egypt coordinator of Freedom House, said that the organizers had only hoped for 10,000 protesters, and were surprised by the numbers that took to the streets (interview with Mohamed Abdel Aziz, 2011). It was only after the protesters had been able to repel the initial wave of police that the protesters realized their strength. Taking advantage of perpetual connectivity through mobile phones, Abdel Aziz reported how he then began calling activists protesting in other areas. Soon after, a somewhat spontaneous decision to march towards Tahrir was made. Abdel Aziz did not know where the decision had come from – certainly not from the WAAKS Facebook page – but he soon found himself in Tahrir Square. When asked about the organization at the demonstration, the prominent activist Mahmoud Salem said that he believed a 'collective consciousness' was fashioned in the streets that day, but knew of no real plan of action hatched anywhere (interview with Mahmoud Salem, 2011). Thus, despite the elements of planning that were apparently in place for 25 January, according to Ghonim, it is difficult to see how such a small number of activists could have provided such a large number of people with any detailed plan once boots hit the ground. In the end, it was numbers that were decisive. Gamal Eid, a leading Egyptian activist and head of the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights (ANHRI), astutely noted, 'You are talking about millions of people. You don't need a plan' (interview with Gamal Eid, 2011).

The Role of Citizen Journalism

'Trying to figure out what was going on [in Tahrir] was like playing with a jigsaw puzzle,' one Egyptian told the author. Indeed, the volume of information in circulation was unprecedented. Crucially, unlike in Algeria in 1991, almost any act of aggression that the Egyptian regime directed against its people found its way on to social media and TV screens around the world: the ability to bridge the gap between new media and traditional media was crucial. It was also not in any way accidental. From the outset, WAAKS encouraged citizen journalism among protesters, featuring a short video with the title, 'The camera is my weapon.' In it activists were encouraged to 'use cameras to capture every policeman who will attack peaceful protesters' (Frenchman, 2011).

Gamal Eid was quick to realize the potential of Twitter for the dissemination of information on the protests to the international media. Understanding that few western journalists would be able to read tweets in Arabic, Eid put a call out on Twitter for Egyptians who would be able to translate the updates of his ANHRI employees. Eid

was surprised to find that 35 Egyptians soon volunteered. One such translated tweet came from the ANHRI representative in Suez, where he reported that opposition protesters had been attacked by pro-government thugs on motorcycles. Acting on ANHRI information, the story went by telephone from Suez to the volunteer to translate into English, which Eid then posted directly to the foreign news correspondents' Twitter accounts by using the '@' function (interview with Gamal Eid, 2011). The story was later covered by *The Guardian* (2011). Meanwhile, the live blogs of the major international newspapers used tweets from activists on the ground in Egypt to inform their transfixed readers of developments.[12] Twitter provided such readers with some of 'the most riveting real-time coverage ever recorded' (Idle and Nunns, 2011: 19).

Citizen journalism captured moments of triumph and despair throughout the demonstrations: the YouTube video that showed a man walking in front of an armoured vehicle with a water cannon bore striking resemblance to the man who bravely defied a tank in Tiananmen Square (YouTube, 2011d). Likewise, a video shot on the mobile phone of a bystander that showed an unarmed man gunned down in the streets of Alexandria by security forces was pronounced Egypt's 'Neda' moment, drawing comparison to the YouTube video that had shown a young Iranian woman killed at a protest in Tehran in 2009 (YouTube, 2011c). Such images told a thousand stories and counteracted the propaganda that the Mubarak regime was spreading through state television. These images and videos were circulated as Nile TV informed its viewers that the protesters were foreign enemies, criminals or members of the Muslim Brotherhood (Abouzeid, 2011). There can be no doubt that the Egyptian state lost the propaganda war, which is in no short measure due to the participatory journalism of Egypt's protesters in Tahrir Square. This goal was present from the outset, and emphasized by internet activists.

The Significance of Internet Activism to the Demonstrations

Insurgent politics conducted through internet activism multiplied the impact of social protest in Egypt. Yet revolutions do not come out of thin air, or for that matter, cyberspace: there would have been no revolution without a cause to bind Egyptians together. Thus, to simplify the events in Egypt as a Twitter or Facebook revolution would imply a blinkered view of the realities on the ground, ignoring many crucial factors. The role of organized labour and the urban poor was integral to forcing Mubarak out. Moreover, the Cairo-centric focus of this article, as a result of its emphasis on internet activism, also fails to do justice to the fact that protests were taking place not only in Cairo but all over Egypt. We should also bear in mind, however, that seemingly there was considerable interaction between internet activists and more established opposition movements in the lead-up to the protests. To consider internet activism in this period as a solely online phenomenon would equally be a mistake, as content created online was clearly disseminated offline.

Caveats aside, then, in seeking the significance of internet activism in the fall of Mubarak, we must look to its utility as a tool for internet activists to inspire, organize, mobilize and finally to document. Different platforms and technologies were used in different ways, but there is rarely a dividing line: most were used for more than one such function. Indeed, while the roles of Twitter and Facebook have been emphasized here, it is of course true that other platforms, such as YouTube and Flickr, and the availability of mobile phones, were also crucial tools for activists.

Nevertheless, important questions remain unanswered. The most significant of these relate to the impact of ICT on participation. While it may appear logical, even obvious, to suggest that WAAKS increased the likelihood of its members participating in the demonstrations, there remains a lack of concrete evidence. While the link between online communities and participation has been identified, work in this area has thus far focused on case studies conducted in the West, and with activities and goals that are largely confined to the online world. The need for a detailed study of events in an authoritarian context is acute and would be extremely valuable to scholarship in this area.

Regardless of such questions, it is apparent that many of the concepts of the communication power theory propounded by Manuel Castells were present in Egypt's network society. Through the spread of information online, internet activists were able to establish networks of resistance within Egyptian political society. And, despite the relative weakness of the ties between members of these networks, CMC emerged as an effective tool to facilitate collective action. Perpetual connectivity of activists enabled them to have access to an infinite number of networks of trust and multiply the impact of social protest through the creation of an insurgent community. Internet activism made political action easier, faster and more universal in Egypt. But it was not, of course, a panacea.

1.
For more detail on this debate, see below.

2.
That is, the ability of activists to be online constantly while on the ground. This is primarily through the use of internet-based mobile phone applications. It is also known as 'Mobile-ization'. Rheingold was referring to mobile phones, in particular.

3.
Accepted contacts on Facebook are categorized as 'friends' – the user must accept a request from another user to reach this status. On Twitter, a user can 'follow' the blogs of another user without permission, although they can be 'blocked' from doing so by the other user.

4.
Much of the scepticism surrounding the role of internet activism relates to the representativeness of internet users in Egyptian society. Khaled Hroub (2009) proposes that 'the hope that internet activity would be a principal agent of political and social change is one thing, the reality is another'.

5.
Facebook groups can be created by anyone with a Facebook account and can be created so that they are either open (any Facebook member can join) or closed (members can join only by invitation).

6.
The 'wall' is a feed of microblogs to which members of groups can contribute pending the authorization one of the group's administrators.

7.
This is something that Ghonim (2012a) claims was planned by Mostafa al-Nagar, Mahmoud Samy and Ahmed Maher.

8.
This view is proposed by Lustick and Miodownik (see Faris, 2010).

9.
Messages are organized into streams by their hashtags, e.g. #jan25, allowing users to follow conversations on a given topic from other Twitter users that are unknown to them.

10.
The demonstrations in Mahalla el-Kubra in 2008, for example, were known to have been organized by Ahmed Maher and Esraa Abdel Fattah. When Abdel Fattah informed her 6 April Facebook group that she would be arriving at a fast food restaurant and described what she would be wearing it was no great shock that the police had formed a cordon around the restaurant and arrested her before she even had the chance to protest.

11.
Ghonim claims that it was Maher who secured the agreement of the 'Ultra' football fans to participate in the protests: the Ultras would become a powerful vanguard for the activists throughout the clashes with Egyptian police and security forces (Ghonim, 2012a).

12.
There were many newspapers that did this. Two such examples are The Telegraph and *The Guardian*.

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THE 'KILL SWITCH' AS 'SUICIDE SWITCH': MOBILIZING SIDE EFFECTS OF MUBARAK'S COMMUNICATION BLACKOUT

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This article discusses the effects of the Internet communication blackout, or 'kill switch', unleashed by the regime of Hosni Mubarak during the first days of the 2011 Egyptian revolution. It argues that while the regime hoped that the blackout would stop the mobilization and disrupt the activists' internal coordination, this move ended up having more of a positive mobilizing effect than a disruptive one. This was for two main reasons. First, the 'kill switch' shattered the consensus in favour of the regime and the passivity of middle-class youth. Second, by excluding the possibility of a virtual distant connection with the protest, it forced many sympathizers to turn into supporters of the movement by physically joining the occupation in Tahrir Square. Reflecting on the implications of these findings the article concludes by asserting that the role of social media as a means of mobilization is highly complex and ambivalent, and that it has to be understood in complementarity with, rather than in opposition to, face-to-face interaction and street-level communication.

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