Social Media and Political Contention. Exploring the 'We are all Khaled Said' Facebook Page

A wide variety of scholars have highlighted the intense online activity that accompanied the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings of early 2011. While most of these scholars emphasize that offline protest communication and mobilization was ultimately more important for the success of the Arab revolts than online activity, they agree that social media functioned as essential components of the larger protest configurations. Castells (2012) and Bennett and Segerberg (2012, 2013) argue that the 'sharing' of easy to personalize ideas, images, and resources through social media platforms was at the heart of the protests. In turn, specifically focusing on the Egyptian revolution, Lim (2012) argues that social media, especially Facebook, helped to broker connections between previously disconnected groups, and to spread shared grievances beyond activist circles. Similarly, Gerbaudo (2012) sees Facebook as a key channel for sharing grievances about the Mubarak regime, and as a vital platform for 'constructing a choreography of assembly' to facilitate offline mobilization.

Although social media are considered important, relatively little research has been done on the actual content and dynamics of the social media protest exchanges. There are a few studies available that examine the Twitter communication around the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings (Lotan et al. 2011; Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliveira 2012; Poell & Darmoni 2012). However, much of this communication had a transnational character, connecting activists, bloggers, and journalists around the globe. Indigenous online protest communication, which especially took place through Facebook, decidedly remains underexamined. Beyond the discussion of a few individual Facebook posts, no systematic research has been done on the exchanges that were made through this platform.

This panel presents a project that pursues such research. It examines from different disciplinary perspectives the communication on the 'We are All Khaled Said' Facebook page, the most important and active Facebook page in the lead up and during the Egyptian revolution. All of the data exchanged during the lifetime of the page, from June 2010 until July 2013, has been collected through Netvizz, a data collection and extraction application (Rieder 2013). This data set, consisting of 14,072 posts, 6.8 million comments, and 30 million likes by 1,9 million users, not only allows us to gain insight into the contentious Facebook communication before, during, and after the revolution, but it simultaneously provides a window on the development of political sentiments during this turbulent period in Egypt.

Moderator:
Thomas Poell (University of Amsterdam)

Papers:

Studying Facebook Pages as Political Platforms
Bernhard Rieder (University of Amsterdam)

This paper addresses the question of how to use digital methods to study very large Facebook pages that function as platforms for political debate, mobilization, and coordination. Focusing on the Arabic language version of the "We are all Khaled Said" page, one of the largest cases in point, it proposes an approach that combines

the analysis of medium-specific markers, such as liking and commenting, with textual analysis, in order to characterize a political venue that received tens of millions of interactions from nearly two million users. Behind the desire to make sense of the particular case at hand lingers the question of how to gain a more in-depth understanding of the role Facebook pages can play for political movements through mixed method designs that combine quantitative and qualitative elements in different ways. The articulation between "close" and "distant" reading will receive particular attention. The computational analysis of user distribution, temporal patters, and textual data will thus be related to the selection and interpretation of individual items. The goal is to show how a nuanced and contextualized approach to a very large dataset can enhance our understanding of the actual political dynamics playing out on a Facebook page and inform our appreciation of the political significance of that platform.

Facebook Polls as Proto-Democratic Instruments
Rasha Abdulla (American University of Cairo)

The organizational skills of the We Are All Khaled Said page administrators played an important role in the Egyptian revolution before and during the initial 18 days. Over the course of several months, the page gained wide credibility, partly because the events it posted were always well organized, and the users' opinions were taken into consideration in planning them. The administrators polled their users, asking them to vote for their place or time of preference for the next protest. The polls were not always electronic; sometimes, they were in the form of an open-ended question. The thousands of responses would be read, tabulated, and the results provided by the admins. This presentation looks at the dynamics of interaction on such polls, and the role they played in teaching Democracy 101 to potential protesters.

Facebook in the Midst of Revolution
Thomas Poell (University of Amsterdam)

This paper investigates how the 'We are All Khaled Said' Facebook page was involved in the Egyptian uprising. While various studies have argued that the page played a crucial role, in the run up to the protests of 25 January, little systematic research has been done on the content of the page. This paper presents such research. It examines what kinds of messages were exchanged through the page, and how these messages aimed to contribute to processes of protest communication and mobilization. The research specifically focuses on the period from 1 January until 15 February 2011, covering both the weeks preceding the uprising and the revolt itself. For each day during this period, the three most engaged with posts, as well as the most engaged with comments on these posts, have been translated and coded. The analysis of this material shows that the page played different roles over the examined period. As recognized by various studies it functioned as a key platform for mobilizing protesters, strategically coordinating protests, and uttering grievances about the Mubarak regime. Moreover, the page constituted a crucial space for solidarity building among the opposition, and for discussion about government actions. Yet, as the analysis shows, it is also a space that can be easily hijacked by government supporters, in their efforts to undermine the protests. The particular functions fulfilled by the page in the different stages of the uprising, depended on the

interaction between the page administrator(s), the only one(s) who could send posts, and the mass of commentators.

Language and identity on Facebook: the case of Kullina Khaled Said
Liesbeth Zack (University of Amsterdam)

When writing on social media platforms such as Facebook, Arabic speakers have different options as to the language they use. In the diglossic situation of the Arab World, Standard Arabic was always the language of choice for written communications. However, with the advent of social media, which are considered to be more informal platforms, many users choose to write in their dialect, or in a mixture of dialect and Standard Arabic. Moreover, either the Arabic script, or the Latin script can be used to write Arabic. Some of the factors, which play a role in the choice of a language variety and script, are related to identity, such as the age and education of the author, the ideologies expressed in the posts, religion, and nationality. This paper explores how language use and identity interact on the Facebook page "We are all Khaled Said".

A page and its politics: Situating *Kullina Khaled Said* in Egypt's ideological landscape
Robbert Woltering (University of Amsterdam)

An important aspect of the contextualization of the data in this project concerns the extent to which the posts and comments reflect a certain ideological tendency. Throughout the page's lifespan its admin was accused of belonging to one or another 'trend' in Egyptian politics; some called him an agent of Western neo-liberalism, others made him out to be a Muslim Brotherhood 'terrorist'. But of course this page was more than its admin; any assessment of the page's orientation must look at its community of commenters and likers. An analysis of positions taken in the posts and comments in regard to domestic and international politics should tell us whether this was a broad platform that transcended ideological divides or whether it is justified to categorize this page in terms of political orientation. Vice versa the nearly 7 million collected comments provide a window on the rise and demise of political actors and the development of political alliances over the past years.

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