Social Change Will Be Tweeted—By a Select Few

While social media has had a drastic impact on social and political movements in the region, the dynamics of its algorithms and the financing models of the media still pose limitations on who is heard online

By Nadine El Sayed

Much like the introduction of most new communication platforms, the rise of social media conjured hopes that it would foster democratic conversation, but also skepticism on its limitations and shortcomings. Social media has minimal boundaries to entry; anyone who is literate and has a smartphone and an internet connection can sound off on social media with little mediation. But much like other public spaces and traditional media, while anyone can speak up on social media, not everyone will get heard. Social media empowers people to become storytellers with minimal technical skills and cost, but just whose voice gets heard online is far less simple.

While the internet and social media are in theory inclusive and provide room for the existence of plural voices, they still maintain some aspects of the exclusivity of traditional media, despite the far lower barriers to entry they present.

Who gets heard online is further complicated by the fact that most of the major social media platforms are owned by private corporations which control what stories get told and who tells them, depending on whether these narratives align with their commercial and political agendas. For example, the fact that Meta, which owns Instagram, is a private company gives it the right to moderate any content that it deems does not adhere to its community standards. Last year, during the conflict in Sheikh Jarrah (where Palestinians in an East Jerusalem neighborhood faced home evictions), users reported that Instagram removed and blocked pro-Palestinian content. This sparked debate on just how free social media content is from political pressures. Instagram claimed the posts were mistaken for content promoting terrorist organizations, but dozens of users argued their #AlAqsa-hashtagged posts were removed because Instagram mistakenly believed they were inciting violence or were part of dangerous organizations.

◁ In this photo illustration, silhouettes of mobile users are seen against a screen projection of Instagram's logo, March 28, 2018. *Dado Ruvic/Reuters*

Not only does ownership of social media platforms affect which messages will get censored, but their algorithms dictate that users who maintain a high level of activity are those who are noticed, which might not necessarily reflect the habits of the average social media users. This indicates that most users who do maintain an active profile on social media either aim to make profit off their content, which means they are subjected to commercial pressures, or are celebrities or media personalities who are already heard, both offline and online. This leaves no room for the average users, who wish to use social media as a platform for journalism and advocacy, to effect social change, or for their individual story to gain visibility on the internet.

> *Not only does ownership of social media platforms affect which messages will get censored, but their algorithms dictate that users who maintain a high level of activity are those who are noticed, which might not necessarily reflect the habits of the average social media users.*

The Transformative Effects of Social Media: A Historical Perspective

Since the birth of the internet, there have been utopian and dystopian views on the democratic potentials of Web 2.0. The discourse over social media as an agent of change and driver of democracy has been equally divided. Since the 1990s, there has been a significant body of literature arguing that the internet will bring a real information revolution that would free mass media from state and corporate controls and provide a space for everyone to speak and be heard. In Egypt and the Arab World, influential scholars like Mark Lynch wrote about the internet's potential for democratization and social change. Other scholars like Evgeny Morozov, for instance, argued in 2011 that the internet will replicate the offline model where only a handful of people will be heard and where state or economic constraints are inescapable. Morozov maintained that the idea of the internet favoring the oppressed rather than the oppressor is marred by what he calls "cyber-utopianism: a naïve belief in the emancipatory nature of online communication that rests on a stubborn refusal to acknowledge its downside".

Then the Arab Spring happened in 2011 and from it grew a body of literature arguing that "the revolution will be Tweeted." For the most part, the 2011 Arab uprisings were, in fact, Tweeted. Twitter and Facebook were spaces where online and offline activism converged and thrived. New media stepped in—where traditional media failed—and allowed for more visibility for different voices as well as mobilization, organization, and coverage of the demonstrations. Even before the Arab Spring, people revolted online before taking to the streets. New media, including both blogs and micro-blogging websites like Facebook, even sometimes pushed the limits of traditional media and forced taboo issues such as sexual harassment and police brutality into mainstream media agenda. In Egypt, it was bloggers, for instance, who broke the news of mass harassment

incidents in downtown Cairo on the eve of the *Eid* (feast) holiday in 2006. As a result, traditional media found no alternative but to report on such incidents.

Moreover, in 2007, it was through Facebook that activists called for a general strike in Egypt to oppose a wave of mass privatization of the public sector which left thousands unemployed. The 2011 uprising was similarly called for on Facebook and Twitter. Egyptians used these platforms to mobilize the masses, as well as to organize the demonstrations and communicate the needs of the demonstrators, from essential medical supplies to organizing protester meeting points and gatherings. They also resorted to them for the latest updates and coverage when local television stations in Egypt showed footage of a deserted bridge downtown and ignored the clashes between police forces and demonstrators a few meters away in Tahrir Square. During the earlier days of the Egyptian uprising, people turned solely to social media for credible coverage of events on the ground, and it was social media that eventually forced print and broadcast media to stop downplaying the street protests and report on the situation.

More recently, new media were able to push social boundaries and make way for an Egyptian iteration of the #MeToo movement in 2020, encouraging victims of sexual harassment to come forward. It started on a Facebook group for American University in Cairo students where one young woman came forward with her account of harassment by a fellow student, Ahmed Bassam Zaki. From there, dozens of women found the courage, and the medium, to come forward with their own testimonies. Social media provided women with a platform that was easily accessible through the touch of a button, anonymity, and a support network that was subsequently formed to provide legal and psychological aid, sometimes online.

But the Arab Spring and subsequent movements, including #MeToo, also opened up many questions regarding the limitations of these platforms to tell unheard stories. They raised the issue of whether they replicate offline divides and even the traditional media model whereby a few are speaking, and are heard by the many on the receiving end.

Many leading scholars, including Jurgen Habermas and Robert D. Putnam, argue that the media can feed readers large amounts of political information, creating the illusion of civic engagement, when in fact it promotes rather passive political and civic involvement. Social media has the power to destroy that notion, because it can easily promote a two-way conversation where the "traditional reader" has the space to become a content creator themselves. The reader has the tools, the space, and thus the power, to create content and tell their own story and share their opinion.

Historically, the discourse on social media has been more pluralistic than in traditional media, because the former allowed topics like sexual harassment or police brutality that the latter would not cover. This plurality has often even spilled over to traditional media.

Yet, much of the same offline limitations exist online and just who really gets heard online, especially on social media, becomes a tricky question.

Who Gets Heard Online?
In his 1989 influential work, German philosopher and sociologist Habermas discussed the emergence of a public sphere in eighteenth-century Europe as a space that is outside state control and where there is a liberal exchange of views. But Habermas argued that this public sphere was a bourgeois one, where entry requirements included education and property ownership. His work has since been criticized, adopted, and updated by others. Nancy Fraser, for instance, proposed in 1992 a post-industrial model of multiple counterpublics, alternative spaces for discussions away from mainstream platforms like traditional media. These spaces are formed by, and provide room for, voices excluded from the main public sphere. Various scholars have since drawn parallels between Habermas and Fraser's views of the public sphere and online communications platforms today. They looked first at blogs and now social media, arguing that they both present alternative spheres for dissident and excluded voices to be heard.

Fraser argued that for these counterpublics to contribute to democratic reform and social change, they need to be inclusive, operate independently of the state of the economy, and disregard the status of its participants. These three conditions, however, are not always met on social media channels.

For example, the #MeToo movement in Egypt, for one, was started by students of an elite university who are fluent in English. One of these students was Nadeen Ashraf, who sparked the movement by starting Assault Police, a page that provided a platform for women to speak up and come forward with their own stories of abuse. She was later named one of the BBC's "100 Women of 2020". Ashraf received a private university education which the majority of the population cannot afford, and is fluent in English. This gave her the advantage of being able to effortlessly sit for interviews with international media outlets. Even the social profile of the perpetrator affected how much attention the story first exposed on Ashraf's page received. Zaki, who was accused of assaulting over seventy women, ran in mostly privileged circles, at school, at university and even in the gated residential

Ashraf received a private university education which the majority of the population cannot afford, and is fluent in English. This gave her the advantage of being able to effortlessly sit for interviews with international media outlets.

compound where he lived. Consequently, his victims too came from similarly privileged backgrounds.

Subsequent stories or cases that gained traction, like the Fairmont case which brought to light the drugging and gang-raping of a woman in an upscale hotel in Cairo, involved high-profile names and country elites. That is not to say that this is the case with every single story, but the incidents of the #MeToo movement, the ones that received enough national attention to spark a movement, often included privileged actors. The strong English-language skills of the founders of the pages, or the women, allowed them to communicate their messages and ideas well, thus gaining press attention locally and internationally and expanding their reach. Their use and accessibility to social media meant that victims of sexual harassment that came forward were from a higher social class, which is also a strong factor contributing to who *wants* to be heard on that specific front online.

Similarly, a new social movement in Egypt has been gaining ground online to raise awareness about reproductive health and empower women to take control of their own bodies. Akin to the #MeToo movement, the main figures behind these initiatives, including its pioneer Nour Emam, come from similarly privileged backgrounds. Emam, for instance, has had a private education all her life that culminated with a master's degree from a university in London. Her education likely afforded her the knowledge and skills to lead an online movement that garnered more than 390,000 followers in two years, and various headlines in local and regional media outlets.

It is important to remember that the illiteracy rate in Egypt remains at 26 percent, and that 40 percent of its population live under the poverty line, making private education and even consistent high-speed internet access luxuries many cannot afford. Yet, it is not only a question of education and communication skills, but also about affording time to be active on social media, especially when first building an online presence when it is not yet monetizable. The power of financial stability provides the luxury of dedicating much time online and the cushion to "try out" being heard or creating content online without expecting immediate pay. One of the less-prominent bloggers I interviewed during past research, Loai Nagati, said that dedicating extensive time to be active on social media to gain followers and work the algorithms of social media to his favor for reach is "a luxury that is only available to very few people". Social media, in many ways, remains a sphere dominated by a few who were born into relative privilege and have the skills to communicate with the unheard many.

Monetizing Social Media
Social media offers unprecedented reach for content creators through unlimited access to new users who are actively online and scrolling through their feeds.

This gives content creators a steady follower base on the platform where they publish their content—if the gods of the algorithms favor them, of course. Algorithms determine what users will see as well as what and who will be heard, and consequently who can monetize their created content.

For someone to be "seen" by even their friends on Facebook, they need to be active, relevant and posting frequently. Different guidelines suggest various frequencies for optimum reach on social media, but most advise content creators to post once or twice daily on Facebook, three to five times daily on TikTok, and between five to thirty tweets a day and once or twice daily on Instagram. This frequency means that most social media users are rather passive receivers of content rather than active creators. This also means that the majority of those who are not able to maintain high online activity are most likely only reaching a handful of people when they post. To be noticed on most channels—and so to be able to make it financially sustainable through sponsors or advertisers—there needs to be more consistent activity than the average user can maintain.

Different guidelines suggest various frequencies for optimum reach on social media, but most advise content creators to post once or twice daily on Facebook, three to five times daily on TikTok, and between five to thirty tweets a day and once or twice daily on Instagram.

Those who invest time in creating content on social media often expect to monetize that investment eventually when they gain sufficient reach. Once they do, and they are able to get sponsors and create paid-for content, they fall under the same pressures and limitations which exist in traditional media: advertorial pressures to remain afloat. Financial sustainability of online content creators is key to their long-term existence, and with brands forecasting to spend up to $15 billion on influencer marketing this year, that sustainability is possible, but not simple. In Egypt, the earlier forms of social media, the blogs, saw their demise when most bloggers stopped being active as they found financial sustainability in mainstream media or grew more career-oriented and thus had less time to maintain their online activities.

Historically, free market constraints placed on traditional media to attract advertising in order to remain financially viable ultimately contributed to its demise. If we look at the history of the American Labor Movement press, for example, we can trace a similar pattern. In the nineteenth century, the Labor Movement attempted to circumvent mainstream media, which had traditionally denied access to dissident voices. In a bid to be heard, the Labor Movement created newspapers to cover news of the workers and echo their grievances. Ultimately, however, it was not state crackdowns that led to the censoring of labor newspapers, but rather, free market dynamics that led to the death of the

labor press. In a capitalist U.S. market of the nineteenth century, advertising was the only financing model available to newspapers. The labor press, however, did not provide content supporting corporations and capitalism, as they often criticized the state of workers and called for their rights. This meant that it was difficult to attract the same advertisers they criticized. As they failed to attract advertisers and achieve sustainable financial models, many of the popular labor newspapers had to shut down.

Similarly, creators on social media in Egypt who have more full-throated radical voices or stances—whose platforms push the boundaries on social or political issues—will unlikely find financial sustainability from advertisers and sponsored content. Rather, they likely have to modify or mellow their message to appease advertisers, or cater to the needs of a general audience for wider reach and more financial gain. This means that those who do not care much for monetizing their social media presence often go unheard because they lack the support that sponsorship would bring.

While it is generally acknowledged that social media created unprecedented potential for people to be heard independently of mainstream media, there remains a need to take a deeper look into how and whether that can practically happen. Not everyone has influence on social media, and those who do often find themselves on the wrong side of the algorithms and the financing and monetizing rules of the platforms they wish to be heard on. ⓡ