Citizenship under Surveillance: Dealing with the Digital Age

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doi:10.1017/S0020743815000100

The world is not sliding, but galloping into a new transnational dystopia ... The Internet, our greatest tool of emancipation, has been transformed into the most dangerous facilitator of totalitarianism we have ever seen. The Internet is a threat to human civilization.

Cypherpunks: Freedom and the Future of the Internet, Julian Assange

Citizens living under police states generally harbor low expectations when it comes to their privacy. The generations of people who came of age under the authoritarian regimes that arose between the 1950s and 1970s in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) lived with the invasive and chilling effects of state surveillance. The extensive phone-tapping programs of Ministries of Communications were especially notorious. People learned to code their language, practice self-censorship, and evade phone conversations altogether to circumvent surveillance. As insidious as phone tapping was, it makes one almost nostalgic for the analog age. Surveillance in the digital age, as the revelations by Edward Snowden and others have revealed,[1] has entered entirely new horizons. The potential scope and breadth of surveillance confounds the minds of even the most imaginative and prescient thinkers.

The "Era of Technological Opening" (*ʿasr al-infitāḥ al-tiknūlūjī*) in the MENA began in the 1990s with promises of unparalleled economic growth. The "techno-optimists" or "techno-evangelists," those who believe in the unparalleled power of technology to "make the world a better place," presumed there would be causality between the penetration of information and communication technologies and rising levels of personal freedom, openness, and opportunity. Seen from a certain angle, they were right. Yet technology cannot by itself unleash more open and free societies; changes in the domain of freedom are always matters of intense political struggle. Even as authoritarian governments liberalized their economies and opened their media and communications sectors to competition, they never intended to curb practices connected to their surveillance regimes.[2] Despite their best efforts, government ministries in charge of monitoring citizens struggled with the breakneck pace of innovation and the short time it took for large swaths of the population to adopt new technologies.[3] Questions that have since been posed by a medley of communication scholars and political and social analysts have been: Are the growing ranks of tech savvy citizens who by definition are young, generally in the fifteen to thirty-five age group, emerging as a counterpower? Are these disgruntled and otherwise disenfranchised citizens finding ways to subvert and overcome the surveillance regimes and, in the process, charting a way toward more free and accountable societies?[4] For a brief moment in the early stages of the Arab uprisings, many answered these questions with a resounding "yes!"

With the inception of Arab revolutionary movements in December 2010, it seemed that the people had imbued digital tools and virtual platforms with emancipatory

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743815000100 Published online by Cambridge University Press

properties. In Tunisia, the first Arab country to revolt, social media and especially Facebook literally served as "revolution headquarters."[5] Citizens dispatched reports, uploaded photos and videos documenting what was transpiring in different parts of the country, and communicated with counterparts in other Arab countries to provide encouragement and advice. On the heels of the Tunisian uprising, and following the self-imposed exile of President Zayn al-ʿAbidin bin ʿAli, Egypt's social media spaces were ablaze with talk of revolution. The Facebook page "Kullina Khalid Saʿid" (We Are All Khaled Said), which had been incubating an Egyptian youth movement and a community that was constructing its own virtual culture, set up a Facebook fan page event called "25 January revolution."[6] Other youth movements housed on Facebook, including the April 6th Youth Movement, spread the call and coordinated online to offline mobilization. The revolutionary euphoria that unified people and groups across multiple lines of difference, and that capitalized on the perceived freedom of the new virtual communities, soon gave way to surveillance, polarization, and counterrevolution.

In Egypt, four years after the uprising, the populist military regime currently under the presidency of ʿAbd al-Fatah al-Sisi has returned full throttle to the surveillance state, but this time with eyes wide open to the vast capabilities of digital surveillance. In 2014 the Ministry of Interior (MOI) unveiled the "Social Networks Security Hazard Monitoring Operation," described in sanitized technocratic-speak as a "public opinion measurement system."[7] An official from the MOI explained that the surveillance program was necessary for the "protection of Egypt" since it enabled the government to track the conversations of Islamists and to look for people involved in "debauchery" and "homosexual acts."[8] He further revealed the sweeping powers the government was giving itself to digitally spy on Internet users across the board: "Unlike the traditional rules of criminal investigation, the surveillance system announced by the MOI will collect information and spy on the data and activity of all Internet users, whether suspects or not. This surveillance is also not limited to a certain time frame, and does not require a judicial order, and may be performed regardless of necessity."[9] The surveillance software and training was provided by the private company Systems Engineering of Egypt (SEE Egypt), whose sister company, Blue Coat, is based in the United States.[10] The program uses "Deep Packet Inspection technology that enables geolocation, tracking, and extensive monitoring of internet traffic."[11] It merits noting that these capabilities, as far reaching as they are, do not approximate the sweeping surveillance operations of the National Security Agency in the United States.

Citizens/activists in Egypt were quick to respond to the surveillance program by fighting back on several fronts. Some filed a lawsuit against the MOI charging that the surveillance program was unconstitutional.[12] Others engaged in Twitter hashtag activism, or "hashtivism," via *#iḥnā mutrāqibīn* (We're Being Watched), which became a source of satire, venting, and resistance.[13] Furthermore, scores of Internet hactivist-anarchists bombarded the collaborating company See Egypt's website, causing it to go down for a period.

While digital citizen vigilantism is sometimes used against state power, it can also turn on itself and become a means for citizens to lurk online and inform on fellow citizens. Social media in particular has become a mammoth virtual panoptical. There is a growing catalog of cases in which private citizens expose and report fellow citizens for any number of presumed infractions such as being an atheist, a member of the Muslim

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Brotherhood, a homosexual, a prostitute, an enemy of the military, a traitor to Egypt or a critic of al-Sisi—the latter three of which are often mutually exclusive.

Citizenship is indeed under surveillance in the MENA as it is in the United States and elsewhere. The onus is on people and communities to be better informed about how surveillance regimes operate, whether perpetrated by states, companies, or individuals, and to practice vigilance and advocacy to ensure that the digital age does not lead us deeper into a dystopic *Brave New World*. Growing ranks of people from the MENA to the United States and beyond need to echo, with words and deeds, the clarion call of Edward Snowden: "I do not want to live in a world where everything I do and say is recorded. That is not something I am willing to support and live under." The very future of not only democracy, but humanity, depends on it.[14]

NOTES

[1]See Glen Greenwald, *No Place to Hide* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2014).

[2]Economic liberalization without political liberalization has been called the "dictators' dilemma." See Philip N. Howard, Sheetal D. Agarwal, and Muzammil M. Hussain, "The Dictators' Digital Dilemma: When Do States Disconnect Their Digital Networks?" *Issues in Technology Innovation* 13 (2011): 1–11, accessed 12 January 2015, http://www.academia.edu/2668609/The_Dictators_Digital_Dilemma_When_Do_States_Disconnect_Their_Digital_Networks.

[3]Linda Herrera, *Revolution in the Age of Social Media: The Egyptian Popular Insurrection and the Internet* (New York and London: Verso, 2014), chap. 1.

[4]Linda Herrera, "Youth and Citizenship in the Digital Age: A View from Egypt," *Harvard Educational Review* 82 (2012): 333–52; Mark Lynch, *Voices of the New Arab Public: Iraq, Al Jazeera, and Middle East Politics Today* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Howard et al., "The Dictators' Digital Dilemma"; Richard Norton, "The New Media, Civic Pluralism, and the Slowly Retreating State," in *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere*, 2nd ed., ed. D. Eickelman and J. Anderson (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1999), 19–28; Clay Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009).

[5]John Pollock, "Streetbook: How Egyptian and Tunisian Youth Hacked the Arab Spring," *MIT Technology Review*, 23 August 2011, accessed 12 January 2015, http://www.technologyreview.com/featuredstory/425137/streetbook/.

[6]Herrera, *Revolution in the Age of Social Media.*

[7]Ahmed Ezzat (trans. Amira Elmasry), "You Are Being Watched! Egypt's Mass Internet Surveillance," *Mada Masr*, 29 September 2014, accessed 1 October 2014, http://www.madamasr.com/opinion/politics/you-are-being-watched-egypts-mass-internet-surveillance.

[8]Ibid.

[9]Ibid.

[10]The Egypt-based company "See Egypt" won the bid for the MOI contract against the Israeli-founded Narus System and the British Gamma System. Sheera Frenkel and Maged Atef, "Egypt Begins Surveillance of Facebook, Twitter and Skype on Unprecedented Scale," *Buzzfeed*, 17 September 2014, accessed 10 December 2014, http://www.buzzfeed.com/sheerafrenkel/egypt-begins-surveillance-of-facebook-twitter-and-skype-on-u#.bpqdxOraj.

[11]Ibid.

[12]The case was filed as number 63055, judicial year 68, at the Administrative Court. At the time of writing, the final result was still pending.

[13]As reported by the advertising agency, Net Edges, on its Facebook page, the Hashtag was top trending in Egypt for a period of at least weeks. Furthermore, "Facebook Statuses, Tweets and even Comics have been heavily used to describe how people felt towards this declaration." Net Edges' Facebook page, accessed 12 October 2014, https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=808005422597304.

[14]Ewan MacAskill, "Edward Snowden, NSA Files Source: 'If They Want to Get You, in Time They Will,'" 10 June 2013, accessed 12 October 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/09/nsa-whistleblower-edward-snowden-why.

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