The Relationship between the State and the New Media in Egypt: A Dynamic of Openness, Adaptation, and Narrowing

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Abstract
This article offers a new perspective on the extensive discussion of the role of new media in facilitating the 2011 Egyptian uprising by placing it within the historical context of how the state responded to new media in the previous decades. This article uses an archaeological analysis of state media to reveal how the state coped with the news media (newspapers, radio, television, satellite television) in the past to infer the present relationship between the state and the new media (the internet and social media). We discerned a recurring cyclical pattern characterized by a dynamic of openness–adaptation–narrowing, which sheds light on the media’s ability to challenge state authority and on the state’s ability to contain and limit new media. We suggest that the role of the internet and social media in the Egyptian “Arab Spring” should be viewed as being on this continuum, as an extension of processes of state–media relations that had developed in the preceding decades.

Keywords
Egypt, new media, Arab Spring, communications, revolution, 25 January uprising

Introduction
Over the last decade, considerable scholarly attention has been devoted to the role of the new media in facilitating the Arab uprisings known as the “Arab Spring” (Alexander & Aouragh, 2014; Farhad, 2020; Wolfsfeld et al., 2013).
Although initially, the uprisings were seen as evidence of the success of social media in overthrowing authoritarian regimes, the subsequent events have revealed the limitations of the new media in bringing about meaningful political change. Some studies have focused on the impact of the new media as a tool for framing the revolutions by giving them their meanings, purpose, and slogans (Hamdy & Gomaa, 2012), while others have examined wider contexts and factors, rejecting the crucial contribution at first attributed to the new media (Lynch, 2011). Focusing on the Egyptian experience, we seek to address the question of the Internet’s and social media’s contribution to the January 2011 uprising by posing the preliminary question of how Egyptian regimes met the challenge of the rise and growth of previous new media.

We utilize a perspective that sees the concept of “new media” not just to the Internet and social media, but to the most recent communications media available in every time period under discussion. Thus, every traditional communications media was considered “new media” once, when first introduced, and before newer technology came to the fore (Lister et al., 2009, pp. 1–4). We strive to dismantle the dichotomy between old and new media through an intermediate view that perceives the internet and social networks as yet another stage on the continuum of technological innovations throughout history, each of which required the state to reconstruct its relations with the media (Price, 2002, p. 18). As Walter Armbrust (2007, p. 533) has pointed out, the internet is “a new phase in a long evolution in hierarchies of authority,” and many features of the current new media can be analyzed as an extension of processes that began with the introduction of previous types of new media, all of which raised expectations for a change in the political, social, or economic order.

While we acknowledge the importance of various media genres and their potential to undermine the state’s authority and the regime’s legitimacy, we will address only how the regime reacted to the different genres of news media—newspapers, radio, terrestrial and satellite television, the internet and social media—all of which share a common nature, vocabulary or “media literacy” (Meyrowitz, 1998), with the exclusion of non-news media. We conceive the mainstream news media to be an inherent part of the power structure of elite groups and institutions, in line with Timothy E. Cook’s approach (1998), which stresses the news media’s political role. This analysis of the Egyptian state’s response to the new (news) media will be confined to the period ranging from Egypt’s recognition as an independent country up to the present.

We hypothesize that state–media relations in Egypt follow a cyclical process characterized by recurring waves of openness–adaptation–narrowing: The new media was initially welcomed by the state in each such wave. At first, the regime willingly opened up to the new media and allowed it to operate without constraints. However, when the regime became concerned by the news media’s potential to undermine its legitimacy, it took action to bring it under its authority and control freedom of expression in areas that might threaten the regime’s stability. Subsequently, following a learning process, the state managed to narrow the new media’s maneuvering space. However, the regime was constrained in its ability to fully determine the new media’s contours and behavior because these are also
influenced by social forces, norms, and the local scene. Hence, the new media still enjoyed a degree of limited freedom at the expense of the state’s dominance of the public sphere.

We will present this claim within the framework of the scholarship on the development of Arab media as a whole and specifically on the Arab media’s ability to challenge the state. To that end, the first part of this article will survey the prevailing approaches in the existing literature on this subject and their shortcomings, with a special focus on the rise of the internet and social media. We will then present the interpretative model of openness–adaptation–narrowing, based on a method of state–media archaeology designed to enrich this discussion with a historical perspective that is not often considered. The subsequent sections will illustrate this pattern by pointing to three such waves of openness–adaptation–narrowing throughout the history of state–media relations in Egypt, from the first quarter of the twentieth century to the period following the January 2011 uprising.

**Arab Media Research and the New Media Challenge**

An examination of the existing scholarship dealing with the media in the Arab world reveals that with some exceptions (Boyd, 1982, 1999; Rugh, 2004), it focuses mainly on two separate periods—one is the adoption of print journalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the other is the adoption of digital media from the 1990s onward. The study of the mass media in the Arab world hardly existed as a well-developed and independent research subfield until the 1990s (Armbrust, 2012, p. 156). With the emergence of satellite television and the internet, what was previously a marginalized area of study has become a vibrant field of research, accompanied by the growth of academic and professional institutions and journals focusing on the Arab media (Tawil-Souri, 2008).

Alongside studies that have discussed the relationship between the media and globalization, others have focused on the media’s potential to create diverse public spaces where different cultural and political identities are formed. This approach is reflected, for example, in *New Media in the Muslim World*, a volume edited by Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson (1999, p. 1), who claimed that “these increasingly open and accessible forms of communication play a significant role fragmenting and contesting political and religious authority.” The new media, which provided a new set of communications opportunities beyond state control, was perceived as enabling the development of alternative narratives that challenge the state’s hegemonic discourse. Some have linked this to concrete political developments and claimed that “the effect of new media on democratization is very much a work in progress” (Seib, 2007, p. 1).

Many such studies focused on the role of the Al-Jazeera satellite channel. Thus, for example, Mark Lynch highlighted Al-Jazeera’s role and provided an optimistic analysis of what he termed “the Arab World’s new Habermasian public sphere.” According to him, “The new media has asserted a claim to represent the authentic Arab voice to be the one free voice with the ability and the courage to speak out on behalf of the Arabs against both American power and against corrupt
Arab regimes” (Lynch, 2006, p. 25; Zayani, 2005, p. 2). In this respect, Naomi Sakr’s research (2007), which presented a complex economic analysis of the satellite stations and their ownership structure, emphasized the importance of the political and economic conditions in shaping their influence on society.

The penetration of the internet, along with its potential to undermine governments’ hegemonic control over the flow of information, increased the number of studies grounded in technological determinism that describe the internet’s potential in emancipatory terms. Even before the Arab uprisings, internet research focused on its potential to facilitate social and political change. The internet was perceived as an ideal medium to challenge the legitimacy of traditional authority structures, including the family, society, culture, and state, thus creating pressure for reform. Such optimism has led many scholars to question whether authoritarian regimes can still control the flow of information within their borders (Hofheinz, 2005, p. 93).

This is not to say that such studies have not presented a complex and cautious approach to these developments. For example, studies dealing with the online habits of internet users have pointed to the need to examine them concerning the local context. Others refrained from linking the new space for freedom of political speech with practical political change (Zayani, 2015, pp. 13–17). Still, many of these studies adopted the liberal narrative that presents the history of the media as “a story of progress in which the media became free, switched their allegiance from government to the people, and served democracy” (Curran, 2002, p. 7).

For a short period, the Arab uprisings reinforced this optimism, emphasizing the link between virtual networks and the collective activism that facilitated the uprisings (Howard & Hussain, 2013). Very few questioned the role of social media in these processes (Alterman, 2011). However, the initial wave of research on the role of the internet has revealed methodological weaknesses, particularly about measuring the effects of network activism (Nordenson, 2017). Few studies provided evidence of a connection between collective online networking and concrete political change (Eaton, 2013). Moreover, these studies have been criticized as West-centric and even as reviving the political agenda of the defamed modernization paradigm from the 1970s (Matar & Bessaiso, 2012, pp. 197, 202).

Later studies, written after the uprisings’ setbacks, were more pessimistic and questioned the ability of the media to bring about radical change or highlighted the state’s resilience to the challenge posed by new media (Harb, 2019; Hassan, 2015, p. 216). However, others avoided cyber-optimism or pessimism, introducing more balanced realistic approaches. Technology should not be treated as an independent variable separate from economic, political, and other factors. Rather, technology coexists with other forms of activism, so that it is an incentive that operates alongside others for substantive change, such as undermining the stability of the government (Elsayed, 2013; Herrera, 2015; Khamis, 2017).

This study seeks to bridge this dichotomous distinction between optimism and pessimism about the media’s ability to effect change and avoid technological determinism in general. Technological determinism and technocentric media theories assume that new technology has an autonomous power to change the society in which it grows while making society adapt to it (Kittler, 1999). On the
other hand, the social construction of technology (SCOT) approach sees social change not as the result of technological innovation in itself but of social construction, depending on the restrictions that are applied to the new technology by economic and political interests (Bijker et al., 1987). According to Brian Winston (1998), after a new communications technology comes into the world and spreads, “general social constraints coalesce to limit the potential of the device to radically disrupt pre-existing social formations.” He refers to these social factors as “the ‘law’ of the suppression of radical potential” (Winston, 1998, p. 11). However, while this “law” applies to business entities and other institutions that seek protection and preservation, we refer to the political regime’s constraining efforts to curtail the freedom of the new media, motivated by its own desire for survival.

By the same token, this study aspires to refine the dichotomy between “liberation technology” and “repression technology.” While the former assumes that the new media will empower democracy activists and oppositionists and advance an anti-regime discourse and a more open society, the latter proposes that the new technology will serve to strengthen autocratic rule since the new media is not free of government interference, surveillance, and propaganda (Diamond, 2010; Gohdes, 2020). Referring to the Egyptian case study, we propose a more balanced model that does not see liberation media as separate from repression media and vice versa, but rather sees these two processes as interrelated within the cycle of openness–adaptation–narrowing, which we outline in the following section.

The Egyptian Case: A Pattern Model of State–Media Relations

In line with the logic underlying the research method of “media archaeology,” we wish to apply here an investigative technique of state–media archaeology. Media archaeologists read old media and new media in parallel lines and examine, for example, pre-cinematic technologies as a means to rethink the status of current audiovisual media. While media archaeologists excavate past new media (mostly from the nineteenth century and early twentieth century) “in order to understand what the newness of ‘new media’ means” (Huhtamo & Parikka, 2011; Parikka, 2012, p. 2), our intention is to specifically expose the past layers of how the state has addressed past new media in Egypt, in an attempt to explain the present relationship between the state and the new media.

While examining the development of the media in Egypt, we present a model for analyzing the relations between the state and the media as a cyclical process characterized by recurring sequences of openness–adaptation–narrowing. Our main argument is that Egyptian regimes have responded to the new media in recent decades in a similar fashion: they adopted the new communications technology for utilitarian reasons (openness). Then, upon realizing the threat the new media posed to their legitimacy and resilience, the regimes took action to subjugate the new media (adaptation) until it finally
managed to contain the new media’s challenge and subdue its political influence (narrowing), until the rise of a newer new media and so forth.

In most cases, media-related scholarly literature uses the term “openness” to refer to a regime’s willingness to open its borders to new media technology without taking protectionist measures against foreign cultural intrusion in authoritarian countries, especially Latin America (Chan, 2000, pp. 255–257; Hong, 2000, p. 306). In other cases, media openness refers to the existence of a decentralized, more pluralistic and autonomous media landscape, “with a corresponding decline of media instrumentalization and explicit biases” (Porto, 2012, p. 4). Finally, as Chappell Lawson (2002, p. 3) put it, media openness is “the process by which mass media become more representative of societal viewpoints and more independent of official control.”

We will refer to the openness phase as the stage when the new media is allowed to penetrate and spread without the regime exerting pressure to institutionalize its activities or put it under governmental oversight or regulation to direct media content or shape its discourse. In this phase, the new media is not subjected to official repression or state-sponsored censorship, whether out of indifference or as part of a deliberate policy. Openness does not necessarily refer only to the ability of the citizens to consume the local production of new media content but also to their exposure to unlimited foreign new media content.

The openness phase is followed by the adaptation phase, when the state acts to seize control of the new media and constrain it in areas threatening the regime’s legitimacy. Drawing from Andrew Chadwick’s account of *The Hybrid Media System* (2017), we are concerned with “how newer media… adapt and integrate the logics of older media practices (p. 4).” In this phase, the authoritarian state adapts the new media to the regime’s terms. While doing so, the regime takes experimental steps to seize control of the new media or at least limit it in areas that threaten its rule. These efforts aim to habituate the new media and discipline it to comply with the old pattern of authority in the relationship between media and state. As Christopher Walker and Robert W. Orttung (2014, p. 84) stress, “authoritarian regimes more aggressively pursue ‘convergence’—taming the new media as they have tamed the old.”

After the adaptation phase, comes a phase of curtailment of the new media, which we call the “narrowing phase.” This occurs when there is a reduction in the new media’s maneuvering space, usually accompanied by its subordination to state supervision in order to limit the new media’s potential to cause a revolutionary change. This happens after using what Ronald Deibert (2015, pp. 66–69) calls “second-” or “third-generation control,” which includes deepening and extending information controls in society through laws and regulations, surveillance, targeted espionage, intimidation, and other defensive and offensive steps aimed at policing the new media according to the state’s demands. At this phase, the regime strives to actively intervene in shaping the public discourse through the new media rather than to directly or blatantly block or censor content, which might evoke criticism and antagonism (Gunitsky, 2015).

Nonetheless, even though we emphasize the state’s ability to contain the new media, we also seek to avoid replacing technological determinism with authoritarian
determinism. Each wave of new media extends processes begun earlier by previous communication technologies and leaves its mark on the political, social, economic, and cultural arenas. Since the state is not the only element determining how the new media operates, from one wave of new media to the next, a wider space than previously existed in which to express opinions is carved out, at the expense of the state’s dominance of the public sphere. In the following sections, we will demonstrate this recurring pattern with an analysis of the history of state–media relations in Egypt and point to three such waves of openness—adaptation—narrowing from the 1920s to the period following the January 2011 uprising.

Old New Media and Past Waves of Openness—Adaptation—Narrowing

Ami Ayalon (1995) describes the period between the two world wars as “the liveliest and perhaps happiest period in the history of the Egyptian press” (p. 75) since much of the time, it was free politically. With the formal independence of Egypt in 1922, and the continued military presence of British colonialism, the print press enjoyed freedom and vitality, which enabled newspapers to play a vibrant and dynamic role in the changing political and social landscape. As a result, party newspapers became the most widespread and, in many ways, the most important journalistic endeavors of the period.

The 1923 constitution and legislation prohibited the preventive censorship, suspension and banning of newspapers. It allowed the government and monarch to outlaw newspapers only to protect social order, a reservation that was on occasion implemented in cases of attacks on the king. However, the press generally enjoyed a high level of freedom in an atmosphere of diversity and competitiveness and was able to criticize the administration and express a variety of ideologies and interests (Kelidar, 1993). The British, “whose hold on Egypt was more restricted than before World War I,” after the war, “tended to overlook the periodic outbursts by the press, and perhaps even welcomed them as a harmless channel for Egyptian political zeal, seldom interfering with the journalistic protest against their presence” (Ayalon, 1995, p. 80).

Radio broadcasting, introduced haphazardly in the 1920s, was allowed to operate with no restrictions at its inception. Egypt was a pioneer in adopting the radio, with over 100 amateur wireless stations operating freely, mostly in Cairo. About a decade after its introduction, the state began to adapt to this new medium and set its boundaries. The state viewed radio as a political tool and sought to maintain it under its control. Radio stations under private ownership were subjected to strict regulation to deny opposition elements access. In 1931 the state shut down all Egypt’s pirate radio stations, and in 1934—with the assistance of the British colonial authorities—the government established two official radio stations. Yet, due to the limited number of stations and the small audience size, the state was unable to utilize the radio stations for political purposes up until the Free Officers Revolution in 1952 (Boyd, 1999; Rugh, 2004).
This revolution, followed by Gamal Abdel Nasser’s regime, heralded a shift from private to nationalized and politically mobilized media, marking the beginning of the narrowing phase of the traditional media as a whole. From that point onward, successive Egyptian regimes used the media to mobilize the public and achieve political goals, each regime according to its ideology and agenda, using clientelistic tactics by making the editors and publicists economically dependent on the state. Nasser sought to exploit the media as a propaganda tool and as a means to convey to the public what he considered to be the proper values and ideas, thus instituting a policy of vertical media control in the name of “national development” (Dabous, 1993).

As a result of this narrowing process, all news media became state-owned. Already in 1952, the revolutionary regime established the Dar al-Tahrir publishing house and began publishing the *Al-Akhbar* daily. A year later, it banned party-affiliated newspapers and began publishing another official daily, *Al-Jumhuriyya*. In 1954, Nasser suspended the Journalists’ Union. Magazines were politicized. For example, the Marxist *Al-Tali’a* monthly was co-opted by Nasser, the *Roz al-Yusuf* weekly became an anti-imperialist voice, and even children’s magazines, such as *Samir*, were mobilized for indoctrination purposes (Gervasio, 2010; Millet, 1987).

Nasser’s regime significantly expanded the radio infrastructure and government control over it. The radio was a welcome popular alternative to newspapers in a largely illiterate society, and the Nasserist regime harnessed it to spread the ideology of the revolution (Abdulla, 2014). From 1953 on, the *Voice of the Arabs* radio program (*Sawt al-‘Arab*, later a radio station) became the regime’s mouthpiece. The station broadcast across national boundaries and blurred the distinction between local and regional politics (James, 2006). In 1960, Nasser nationalized the press, subjecting the four largest publishing houses to state control. Moreover, Egypt’s Ministry of Information was established for the first time in this period and placed in charge of systematic censorship (Rugh, 2004, pp. 149–151).

Television was first introduced into this narrowing media sphere in 1960, and it served Nasser’s ideology and politics, with no openness to private channels. As in the case of radio, television was also perceived as a tool that the regime could use to mobilize the masses and position Egypt as a regional leader, both culturally and politically (Abdulla, 2014). Thus, for example, when members of the Islamist opposition movement, the Muslim Brotherhood, were tried in 1965, their trial was broadcast on television for months (Rugh, 2004, pp. 188–189). About a month before his death in 1970, Nasser established the Egyptian Radio and Television Union (ERTU) to control all electronic media, a step completing the narrowing phase of the press, radio, and television, and the first wave of openness—adaptation—narrowing of the new media of that time, which is considered traditional media today.

Until the rise of another newer new media, the policy of nationalized media was eased under Nasser’s heirs due to their oscillation between authoritarian control and political and economic liberalization. However, despite their relaxation policy concerning the media, both Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak reapplied the “narrowing methods” and strict government control over the media to curb the opposition (Jacquemond, 2008; Kienle, 1998).
When faced with a new media in the 1990s—satellite television channels—Egypt saw a second wave of openness–adaptation–narrowing. The Mubarak regime reacted in keeping with this pattern, similar to the reaction of previous regimes to traditional new media. Satellite TV was a revolutionary novelty in the media landscape. The journalistic style of the newly established Al-Jazeera, which included fast, reliable, and balanced round-the-clock live coverage, opened the Egyptian audience up to the rest of the Arab world and the world in general, exposing it to information that until then had been blocked by the regime. Al-Jazeera dared to deal with subjects previously considered taboo, such as Islam and the state, modernity, democratization, government corruption and human rights violations, and criticize the Egyptian regime. It also constituted an outlet for oppositionists, including the Muslim Brotherhood and dissident reformists (Kraidy, 2002; Zayani, 2005). In retrospect, an analysis of Al-Jazeera’s political impact and democratizing effect shows that it resulted from technological determinism (Armbrust, 2012, p. 169). However, satellite TV did pose a new challenge for the regime in its ability to continue to control the content to which Egyptian citizens would be exposed, shape the media discourse, and prevent criticism and protest.

The reaction of the regime was twofold. First, the state showed openness toward this medium, as it did when faced with almost any other new communications technology in the past, out of acknowledgment of its benefits and the desire to be at the forefront of progress. In 1998, Egypt launched NileSat 101, thus becoming the only Arab country to have its own satellite system, maintaining its image as the leading Arab country in adopting media technologies. At the same time, the state attempted to adapt and subordinate it to the regime’s authority. The ERTU’s efforts to expand its activities against satellite television served both ends. In 1990, Egypt launched the first official Arab satellite television channel, the Egyptian Satellite Channel (ESC), to disseminate Egypt’s positions, particularly regarding the Kuwait crisis. This allowed Egypt to compete with the content of satellite channels produced outside Egypt, which remained available to the Egyptian viewer (Guaaybess, 2013, p. 57).

In the early 2000s, the regime allowed the establishment of private satellite channels, probably due to US pressure after 9/11 to encourage liberalization and reform (Webb, 2014, pp. 36–37). However, this did not necessarily signify the relinquishment of state control, as the line separating the state from the private channels was not always clear, reflecting a continued mixed policy of openness alongside adaptation. For example, in early 2000, Egypt extended the Media Production City (EMPC), established in 1997, to include a media-free zone to display openness and compete with similar projects in the region, such as in Jordan, and maintain state dominance over these channels. In addition, the regime guaranteed itself other means of indirect influence on these channels by using cooption and turning the state into a co-owner of a large part of the channels or through other owners who were cronies of the government (Fandy, 2007; Sakr, 2009). As Edward Webb (2014, pp. 36–37) describes it, “private broadcasters are subject to pressure through their reliance on state-owned satellites. The consequences for their editorial choices are fairly obvious.”
In addition, the regime used traditional measures to fight channels whose agenda was not to its liking, such as shutting down secular and Islamist opposition satellite channels through NileSat and exerting diplomatic pressure on their funding countries (Galal, 2015, pp. 70–71; Lahlali, 2011). Similarly, Abdalla F. Hassan (2015, p. 19) has noted that “while private Egyptian satellite channels have played a significant role in connecting with the man on the street, the government and its security agencies have had ways of pressuring producers and presenters, or more pointedly, the channel’s owners, who are businessmen with interlocking interests with the government.”

In conclusion, the regime managed to contain the challenge posed by satellite television channels and narrow their freedom of action. As Lynch (2014, p. 95) put it: “After the initial shock, states started to catch up and respond.” Yet, despite all the regime’s efforts to curtail their influence, these channels maintained considerable space for independent policy and activity compared to the state-owned press, radio, and television. The regime was no longer the sole owner of the media and the exclusive entity dictating the discourse and producing media content. The vertical media discourse that has been dictated from the top down until then, became horizontal, meaning a discourse with multiple participants, sources of information and opinions (Bernstein, 1999).

**The Third Wave: The Current New-Media and the State Follow the Pattern**

The proliferation of satellite television stations paralleled the introduction of the internet, which, unlike preceding communication technologies, enabled an endless flow of unfiltered information from both inside Egypt and beyond at a low cost. Like other authoritarian regimes, the Egyptian government acknowledged the potential contribution of the internet to socioeconomic development, the growth of the public sector and its ability to bring Egypt closer to the West and enhance its regional status. The promotion of the internet was also seen as having the potential to improve the régime’s image as open and more accepting of the social and political changes that the internet seemed to symbolize. Consequently, the regime supported its dissemination and development (Heydemann, 2007, pp. 20–23), and during the 1990s, the internet became available to the general Egyptian public (Mohammed, 2013, p. 131).

Compared to other Arab countries, Egypt was thought to have had a relatively high level of internet freedom at the time. In the early 2000s, the regime made no special effort to censor the internet, although it could be sensitive to similar information published in other media outlets (Kalathil & Boas, 2003, p. 123). In contrast to other countries in the Middle East, such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt had no strict method to control or filter internet connections (Mohammad & Gunter, 2013, p. 104). Except for isolated cases, such as blocking the website of the Labor Party’s newspaper *al-Sha’b* from 2000 to 2006 and the Muslim Brotherhood’s website in 2004, hardly any internet sites were blocked in this period (Isherwood, 2008, p. 10). This relatively liberal phase of the internet coincided with Egypt’s
political liberalization since the early 2000s, under the pressure of its allies in the West to remove some restrictions on political activity (Carothers, 2003, pp. 74–76). This included releasing books that had been banned for publication and documents proving election fraud. Thus, the internet served as an arena free of state censorship for oppositionists, especially the Muslim Brotherhood (Awad, 2016).

In the mid-2000s, the second generation of internet services, Web 2.0, came into being, enabling its users to produce independent content, share it quickly, receive responses and respond in return. This technology facilitated citizen activism and the sharing of opinions to an extent greater than ever before, as well as rapid communication between people and the ability to establish and locate communities with common interests. As one of the first expressions of this change, a significant virtual community of blogs evolved in Egypt within a few years, considerably impacting the public agenda (Mohammed, 2013, p. 132). Bloggers created “civic journalism,” meaning they became a news source of incidents that other media outlets did not publicize, such as sexual harassment, torture of prisoners and brutality of security forces. Breaking taboos, bloggers dared to harshly criticize the regime and expose its corruption and fraud (El-Nawawy & Khamis, 2014).

Bloggers played an important political role and became an integral part of political activism long before Facebook and Twitter became popular. The first generation of bloggers was influenced by Kifaya (Enough), a political movement that focused its attention on opposition to Mubarak. The online forums of activists before 2005 became blogs that initiated independent campaigns separate from mainstream Egyptian opposition (Lim, 2012, pp. 232, 237; El-Mahdi, 2009). The blogosphere that emerged at this time reflected diversity and cooperativeness, with Marxist and Islamist bloggers writing and protesting alongside one another (Isherwood, 2008, p. 4).

The introduction of Facebook in the mid-2000s enriched the open virtual discourse. It enabled young people, who had become accustomed to messages landing on them from sources of authority (parental, educational, governmental), to participate in discussions on important issues, to provide their feedback on government measures, and respond to statements by senior officials. As the surfers found online peers and realized that they were not alone in their desires, their demands and expectations from the regime became bolder. Kifaya and the 6 April Youth inspired online youth activism and were the first Egyptian groups to employ Facebook as an alternative tool for mobilizing dissent (Lim, 2012).

As these movements started translating online political activism into offline street protests—such as Kifaya’s protest in 2004 and the 6 April protest of 2008—the Mubarak regime reverted to a policy of de-liberalization, setting limits on freedom of expression, which included constraints on the new media space. Signifying the turn from the openness phase to the phase of adaptation, Hassan (2015, pp. 15–16) notes that “social media have become a free space for ideas and political debate in Egypt, but the security-minded state intervened when it became a means to organize politically.”

Thus, after about a decade of openness to the internet, the state began the adaptation phase, aimed at restraining the internet by taking over the companies
that provided the internet services and technology, taking the liberty to disrupt internet access or to bring down specific Web applications, and pursuing online opinion leaders and oppositionists through intimidation, arrests and abuse. These measures were backed up by state institutions and court rulings (Jayroe & Aman, 2013; Warf & Vincent, 2007, p. 9). However, the authoritarian tools used by the regime to cope with the threat posed by the internet and social media were outdated and ineffective against this type of new media, failing to control the online discourse and flow of information. Even if a blogger was arrested, another blog soon appeared with a similar message, as no longer was it a matter of just a few oppositionists writing against the regime, but thousands. In 2008, there were 160,000 blogs in Egypt, which accounted for 30 percent of the total number of blogs in Arabic (Elsayed, 2013).

At this stage of adaptation to the new media, the popular uprising in January 2011, which led to Mubarak’s downfall, took place before the regime had managed to narrow the influence of the internet and social media. As many studies have already discussed at length, the demonstrations that erupted on 25 January 2011 were arranged and organized on Facebook pages; hence, the new media contributed to the breakout of events in the “first mover stage” as a catalyst and as auxiliary platforms (Nugent & Berman, 2018). Amid the 18-day mass demonstrations, the internet and social media leveraged internal and international pressure to overthrow Mubarak. On the internal level, the revolutionaries used the new media to define the goals of the revolution, disseminate its slogans, frame its demands, mobilize the demonstrators and provide evidence of what was happening on the ground, contrary to the distorted picture presented by the state (Hamdy & Gomaa, 2012). On the international level, activists conveyed a message to the entire world about what was happening in Egypt. Through it, they called upon Western countries, especially the United States, to pressure Mubarak to abdicate.

Perceiving the internet and social media as a threat to its survival, the regime shut down the internet and cellular networks throughout Egypt in the early days of the demonstrations (Howard et al., 2011, p. 217). This attempt to silence the new media failed to quell the protests, and the demonstrations continued and even further intensified, creating a dynamic on the ground that was difficult to control. The internet and social media played an important role in facilitating the uprising, as the state failed to reach the narrowing phase at this point and was unable to come up with relevant and effective methods to cope with this new media.

The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), which ruled Egypt in the interim period (February 2011–June 2012), initially raised hopes for greater freedom of expression and pluralism, as the media landscape witnessed an unprecedented growth of independent television stations, newspapers, and websites, and the Ministry of Information was abolished (Lynch, 2011, p. 90). However, the phase of adaptation to the new media continued under SCAF and under the subsequent regime headed by Muhammad Morsi (July 2012–June 2013). While it tried to curb online opposition, cyber-activism continued to pose a challenge to the regime, for example, by exposing and documenting violations of human rights committed by the authorities (Abdulla, 2014).
After Morsi’s removal from power in June 2013, the Sisi regime first continued to allow web activity relatively free of censorship (El-Issawi, 2014). As a result, the internet remained the only space available to express a position that differed from the dominant narrative or a voice that opposed both extremes—the regime and the Muslim Brotherhood—and exposed corruption, torture, forgery, and human rights violations. Since the regime had shut down all the Muslim Brotherhood’s media outlets in the country, the organization exploited the internet to challenge the state from exile, publishing embarrassing recordings documenting corruption among the ruling circles and inciting violence against state institutions. Similarly, other political activists used the internet to express criticism and dissent not heard on other media outlets (Awad, 2016).

In recent years, however—as a lesson learned from the 2011 uprising—Egypt has moved toward the phase of narrowing the space of the new media. In contrast to the outdated methods used until this point to deal with the threat posed by the internet and social media during the adaptation phase, Sisi’s regime is now acting with increased sophistication, using precautions and repressive methods that are more deterring as part of the re-entrenchment of authoritarianism under his rule (Brown & Bentivoglio, 2018; Yefet & Lavie, 2021). Journalists without Borders have termed this new mode of operation “media Sisification” (RSF, 2019), referring to the increasing state control of the media space—applied to both new and traditional media outlets.

As in many other countries, Sisi (and his opponents) have adopted tools to produce internet content, such as seminar users, human trolls, and automatic robots, to shape the online discourse on issues relevant to the regime’s stability (Darwish et al., 2017). For example, experts estimate that automated accounts were used for the Egyptian presidential elections in 2018. In these virtual struggles, the pro-regime trolls have the upper hand, controlling about 70 percent of the hashtags, compared to only about five percent controlled by Sisi’s opponents (Karan, 2018, p. 355; Zain, 2018). In recent years, monitoring and blocking of websites have also been prevalent under Sisi (Badr, 2020; Elazhary & El Taher, 2018; Herrera, 2015).

The state’s learning process of effectively dealing with the new media has also led to new regulations specifically designed to control the internet and social media activity. In July 2018, at the end of a two-year legislative process, three new laws regulating the official press, radio, and television were approved, including the Law on Regulating the Press and Media. On the face of it, this law heralded the establishment of an independent media body—the Supreme Media Regulatory Council (SMRC)—to oversee the media, but in effect, this law preserves state control over the media. This body has been delegated draconian powers to censor and ban the journalistic activity, monitor internet content, block websites and impose fines on them (Mamdouh, 2018a). One of the most controversial articles of the new law, known as the “Big Brother” article, enables the SMRC to block social network accounts, blogs or personal websites if their owners publish false information, slander, incite to break the law or call for extremism. This vague phrasing may serve as a basis for persecution and silencing (Mamdouh, 2018b).
According to Freedom House’s annual “Freedom of the Net” reports, internet freedom in Egypt has been consistently on a downtrend since 2016, while “digital authoritarianism” is on the rise (Shahbaz, 2018). Egyptians encounter obstacles when trying to access online sites and disruptions, mainly during anti-government protests, such as in September 2019. Limitations on content and violations of users’ rights have also been documented. Noha Fathy (2018) has found that the “tight grip of the government on the digital space” is manifested in both legal instruments and the “internet architecture,” using restrictive legislation, content filtering, censorship and surveillance of online discourse to the point that online activists self-censor and refrain from crossing red lines. In 2020, Egypt was ranked among the five countries where internet freedom is the lowest of the 65 countries surveyed (Freedom on the Net, 2020). It is, thus, evident that the Egyptian regime is making huge strides toward completing the contemporary wave of openness–adaptation–narrowing that characterizes the relations between the state and the new media.

However, the mass protests against Sisi’s regime that erupted in September 2019 following defamatory and inflammatory videos circulated online proved the inability of the Egyptian regime to completely immunize itself from the threat the internet poses to its legitimacy. The videos, posted by an Egyptian émigré, accused the army and Sisi of corruption and extravagant spending on high-end real estate projects (Sa’id, 2019). Despite the regime’s efforts to limit exposure and in the absence of alternative avenues to publicly criticize the regime and demand change, defiant content succeeds in penetrating the public arena, requiring the regime’s supporters and traditional media to respond to the online discourse and produce an alternative one. This is further evidence that media narrowing efforts do not completely curtail the new media’s freedom and that opinion and criticism expressed in the new media still pose a challenge to the state’s dominance of the public sphere. Notwithstanding the reduction in the maneuvering space of the new media that we are witnessing, the new media outlets are still succeeding in providing a platform for independent content in areas that are not perceived as a threat to the regime’s authority (Guaaybess, 2021; Harb, 2019).

**Conclusion**

This article has sought to offer an alternative perspective on the role of the internet and social media in the Egyptian uprising. Grounded in an archaeological excavation of past layers of the relationship between the state and the new (news) media in Egypt, from the first quarter of the twentieth century to the present day, we propose stepping back from the internet and social media to consider past news media as a larger category. Accordingly, we pointed to a cyclical pattern model of openness–adaptation–narrowing to explain the state’s reaction to the challenge that the current new media, that is, the internet and social networks, poses to its authority and legitimacy.
The state’s reception of new media outlets throughout Egypt’s history as an independent country, including the traditional news media, satellite television channels and the internet and social media, seems similar with certain variations in its conduct. The role played by the new media during the January 2011 events and in their aftermath ought to be placed on the continuum of the previous waves of new media in Egypt. Even though the regime’s stability was temporarily undermined under the influence of the new media at the phase of adaptation characterized by failing attempts to limit it using outdated repressive methods, the regime managed to recover, finally narrowing the ability of the new media to challenge its rule. The recurring pattern of the state’s response to contemporary digital media mirrors previous reactions by the state to traditional news media.

This characteristic reaction reflects both the inherent potential of the constantly developing media to challenge the state’s authority on one hand, and the tendency of the state to preserve its authority, stability and survival on the other, regardless of a specific period, particular state leader or his ideological orientation, or a certain media device. This observation refutes presuppositions that the media history is characterized by a progressive and linear process of liberation from the state and/or by a transfer of the media from the elites to the masses.

This model can also contribute to the discussion of the resilience of authoritarianism in Egypt. The implementation of the model exposes the various regimes’ adaptive capacity to the new media technologies that have the potential to undermine their power and authority. This pattern illuminates the regimes’ ability to reorder and reconfigure existing instruments of governance to maintain their hold on power in the face of changing circumstances. The pattern indicated testifies to the regime’s capability to adjust its control mechanisms and survival strategies to set the boundaries of political discourse in the face of the widening spheres for criticism, opposition, and protest provided by the new media.

However, to avoid authoritarian determinism, it is important to note that we do not dismiss the role of society in shaping the new media’s behavior and setting its boundaries. On the contrary, we recognize its importance, although this was not the focus of the study. The political sphere is not immune to the long-term effects of the new media on the perception of authority as it has been expressed in the dissemination of alternative concepts of faith and piety that challenge the official religious establishment, or in the challenge posed to patriarchal perceptions and norms by women’s online activism. Changing the perception of authority in these areas may also influence the perception of political authority in the long term. However, any future change will depend on the political, economic and social circumstances, as the media is not the only component in the complex array of circumstances that can limit or enhance its potential to facilitate change. Further research on society’s effect on adopting the new media and its adaptation to the existing social environment can complement this study and help overcome its shortcomings. In addition, further comparative research is also warranted to develop a more nuanced and comprehensive outlook on the subject of state-new media relations, as the repetitive pattern we have pointed to is not necessarily typical of Egypt alone and may apply to other countries too, whether authoritarian or democratic.
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