



GRAD STUDENT ASKS, CAN ONLINE DISSENT CHANGE REAL-WORLD POLITICS?

Virtual Activism

When doctoral student David Faris went to Egypt two summers ago, he was amazed to see the nation's turbulent reaction to the July 2006 war between Israel and Lebanon. He noticed that popular demonstrations were forcing the government to change its rhetoric on the war — a remarkable occurrence for a regime that imposed an ongoing state of emergency in 1981 and has long restricted public expressions of dissent.

Drawing on his experiences as a blogger and part-time journalist as well as conversations with activists, the student of political science found that blogs were a central organizing tool for coordinating the protests. Funded by a Foreign Language and Area Studies Fellowship for dissertation research from Penn's Middle East Center, he returned last summer to explore the impact of the Internet on the government's tight reign on political life in Egypt. "I'm trying to figure out if things happening online are migrating offline and affecting policy or putting pressure on the government to change its attitude about certain issues," he explains. After extensive interviews with bloggers and Internet users, he posits that the Web has inherent properties that allow people "to undercut the shackles of traditional authority."

The anonymous nature of online social interactions, for instance, may allow people to communicate across ideological lines. "In chat rooms on the Internet you'll see young people talking about religion and sex and other things they can't talk about in real life," Faris observes. "I want to see if opposing parties are coming together on certain issues via the Internet to put pressure on the government."

The instant nature of Web communication also curtails the ability of authorities to contain the spread of ideas, opinions and information. In one incident Faris studied, Web activists raised public awareness about a mass sexual assault on women during Ramadan. The resulting national and international coverage forced a response from the Egyptian government. In another incident, a cell-phone video of police torture was transmitted through blogs and e-mail. The news led to protests that forced the government to arrest and jail two police officers.

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Faris' research is still underway, but it has already yielded two papers. Last October, at the Association of Internet Researchers' annual conference, he presented one exploring the possibility that traditional modes of communication — print, film and television — favor the Egyptian government's strategies against secular and Islamist opposition groups, while the Web favors those opposing the regime. This spring, the Institute for Politics, Democracy & the Internet will publish Faris' other paper on how rumors (ultimately false) that Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak was dead had proliferated across the Web despite official propaganda denying them.

Faris cannot yet conclude whether or not Web activists are at the forefront of a social movement that could break government control of political discourse in Egypt, but his hypothesis speaks to his belief that modes of communication are an important and underrated force in politics. "I think the way people transmit information to each other is a neglected aspect of a lot of big historical changes in the world," he says. "The big question is, will digital technology, like the printing press and the telegraph, change how we do politics forever?" ■

—PRIYA RATNESHWAR